

CONFERENCE / SEMINAR REPORT

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Report of the International Seminar on 'Pilgrimage and Complexity'



Kapila Vatsyayan addressing the delegates of the Seminar

Pilgrimage is understood as an uniquely egalitarian process in which spontaneous innovation produces high degrees of complexity in ritual, calendrics, and pattern of movement. Pilgrimage is the most complex and dynamic of all human activities - challenging, confounding, beguiling and tantalising. To highlight all these, a five days International Seminar on 'Pilgrimage and Complexity' was organised by the IGNC from January 5-9, 1999. The seminar was dedicated to Late Professor Makhan Jha who has contributed considerably to pilgrimage studies. Nearly forty participants from Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Nepal, Switzerland, U.K., U.S.A and India deliberated on the various dimensions of pilgrimage. The seminar developed around six aspects of the developing paradigm of complexity in terms of space, ritual complexity, symbolic complexity, complexity in time, social complexity, open and close system as applied to pilgrimage. The subject was discussed under twelve themes - concepts; inner and outer space; beginnings; evolution and continuity; the inner pilgrim; pilgrimage to the goddess; ritual spaces; ritual complexity; the language of movement; complex landscapes; urban pilgrimage and ceremonial centres and spiritual magnetism.

In her opening remarks Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan said, "the IGNC has been on a journey of holding international conferences ever since its inception. It took up the perennial themes of space, form, time, nature and rhythm. Through the seminar on mind, man and mask, it explored the various facets of man looking inward within himself. The seminar on Pilgrimage reflects yet another aspect of man and his universe."

J. McKim Malville's paper on 'Complexity and self-organization in Pilgrimage System' expressed that Pilgrimage systems may be viewed as natural and self-organizing structures wherein complexity develops through spontaneous and coherent movement of the people. B.N. Saraswati stated coherently in his paper, 'The Sacred Theory of Pilgrimage', "Pilgrimage is a deep mystery and a marvel. Religion had made it easier to believe, secular science has made it harder. The sacred science of nature defines pilgrimage as a reflection of relationship between human microcosm and universal macrocosm. Pilgrimage provides a pattern for the way of life to be lived."

S.M. Bhardwaj's paper 'Circulation and Circumambulation' mentioned Hindu pilgrimage *tirtha yatra* and *parikrama* as interlocked concepts. In another theme 'inner and outer space' he examined the

meaning of circulation in the disciplinary context of geography and application in the pilgrimage literature, highlighting the significance and close relationship between circulation and circumambulation. His paper interpreted the cosmological meaning of circulation and circumambulation of pilgrimage in the light of the principle of self-organization of the chaos theory. R.P.B. Singh and Masaaki Fukunaga's paper on 'Kashi as Cosmogram' stated that the most popular pilgrimage route, *panchakroshi* symbolizes the abbreviated form of the cosmic circuit. This circular route is a unique example of 'mesocosm' which meets with the devout consciousness or the miniatures representing the whole microcosm.

Kurt Behrendt on 'Early Buddhist Pilgrimage in India' examined some of the broad parameters that governed early Buddhist pilgrimage and discussed two categories, local and distant pilgrimage in order to understand some aspects of the ideological significance of this practice. Carolyn V. Prorok, 'On the Possibilities of Transplanting Pilgrimage Traditions', explored the constellation of factors that influence the degree of success that specific Catholic and Hindu communities have experienced in recreating circulation in their contemporary form.

Adrian Cooper explained how 'Meditation Diaries' can be analysed as a contribution to understanding the pilgrimage experiences of ten ecophysicologists whose research focussed on tropical forest canopies. This scientific enquiry interacted with varied spiritual beliefs of these ten individuals. The paper discussed the complex and dynamic interaction of pilgrimage and scientific themes within post-structuralist linguistic theory pertinent to the religio - scientific pilgrimage experiences. The paper further focussed on the methodology adapted in his research with the scientists' meditation diaries. It also explained major substantive themes contained in each diary.

The difficulties presented for thinking about meaning in relation to spatial environments was explained by Pradeep A. Dhillon in her paper 'Pilgrimages as Representations of Spatial Complexity', "different cultures developed the practice of pilgrimage, suggests a persistence in the awareness of the significance of spatial complexity in the making of meaning for the self as well as difficulties of representing such complexity".

Thomas Barrie in 'The Basilica of La Madelline, Vezelay : Spatial and Symbolic Narratives in the Medieval Western Christian Church' explored the entry path sequence, and sanctuary of sacred architecture often symbolizing the spiritual path and its goal. He also focused on shared mythic and architectural themes which intends to broaden the boundaries of architectural research and includes a self-organizing system.

Robert H. Stoddard in 'Sacred Geometries in Contemporary Pilgrimages' examined the merits of patterns of sacred geometries as they pertain to the perceptions of potential pilgrims journey with special reference to a set of sacred sites in the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal. According to him, pilgrimages generate complex spatial patterns, and usually defy uni-dimensional explanation.

Axel Michael's paper '*Deshakalasmrti* : The Determination of Time and Place in Rituals' elaborated on a subrite essential to almost all rituals following *dharamashastric* rules, namely the exact determination and mentioning of time and place of the participants of rituals, especially *yajamana*. This subrite is regarded either as preliminary act or as a formal decision for any ritual or vow including pilgrimages, i.e. the *samkalpa*. He also underlined two modern developments in this regard; a) the politicization of the sacred region by incorporating phrases like *Ramarajya* or *Hindusastra* in the *deshakalasmrti*; b) the linguistic aspect when many modern priests modify the formulas by mixing Sanskrit with *vernaculars*, thus creating an idiom which could be characterized as 'modern priestly Sanskrit'.

Kim Gutschow's presentation on 'Fire and Flowers : The Pilgrimage at Sani, Zangskar, India' argued how a pilgrimage historically maintains social integration or solidarity and to what extent it resembles a self-organizing system by illustrating an example from the pilgrimage at Sani, Zangskar, which involves a two day festival on the full moon of the 6th Tibetan lunar month. She also explained how gender, village origin, and individual motivation are factors in the pilgrimage process and the category of women requires

a revision of theories of liminality and *communitas* within the pilgrimage process.

Aditya Malik's paper 'Open Systems and Cultural Complexity : The Pilgrimage Centre of Pushkar' explored, "a correspondence or homology established between *yajna* and *tirtha* and how this permeates different levels - ritual, textual, topological, and social - of the pilgrimage centre, which provides a framework for inclusion and continuity that in turn serves to create the multilayered, into the multifaceted cultural and religious complex of Pushkar as an example of an open system that has flourished for over two thousand years."

Vivek Nanda on 'Kashi on the Kaveri: Ritual Topography, and Pilgrimage at Kumbakonam' provided insights to the status and integrity of Kumbakonam as a centre for pilgrimage in Tamil Society. The paper focused on the embodiment and reciprocities of Kumbakonam's ritual topography as a phenomena of mediation through pilgrimage, manifest in the wider landscape.

Shrivatsa Goswami's paper on 'Vraja-Vrindaban : The Krishna Pilgrimage Complex', explained that Vraja *mandala* geography has the geometrical pattern of a lotus which is also the pattern of movement of this large pilgrimage covering roughly 365 kms. or more. If Vraja is the lotus, Vrindaban is the centre with a circulation of ten kms. The journey of this pilgrimage follows the logic of *cintya-bhed-abheda*, where seemingly opposite categories of spiritual and physical, the spontaneous and predictable, the continuity and change dance together along the way. This Complex also demonstrates the textual and contextual rituals which is a destination and shelter not only to the 'existed' God but also to a phenomenal number of uprooted and widowed devotees. The pilgrimage calendar contains the activity of Krishna and his devotee alike.

The seminar was successful in establishing an understanding of the interconnection of the humanities and sciences, the historical dimension of pilgrimage and the movement of the pilgrim in space and time. The seminar was complimented with slide shows on Mount Kailash and the holy lake Mansarovar.

Ramakar Pant