

2011

Foreword, from *Holy Places and Pilgrimages: Essays on India*

Robert H. Stoddard

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, rstoddard1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/geographyfacpub>

 Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Human Geography Commons](#), [Other Religion Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Stoddard, Robert H., "Foreword, from *Holy Places and Pilgrimages: Essays on India*" (2011). *Geography Faculty Publications*. 36.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/geographyfacpub/36>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Geography Program (SNR) at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Geography Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

FOREWORD

Holy Places and Pilgrimages: Essays on India

Robert H. Stoddard

This collection of twelve articles continues a long and rich body of information about pilgrimages. Written materials in the form of pamphlets, guidebooks, manuals, itineraries, and treatises about pilgrimages date from antiquity (see, e.g. the discussion in this volume by Rana Singh about ancient epics, pp. 15-20). Travelling to places regarded by worshippers as having extraordinary spiritual power is a phenomenon permeating all religious traditions so it is logical that it appears in various literary forms.

Even though the term *pilgrimage* may apply also to an inner quest for a spiritual goal, comments here pertain to the physical journey to a sacred place as an act of religious devotion. This form of pilgrimage incorporates movement, which is always necessary for reaching the ultimate destination. This aspect of pilgrimage is significant in two ways. For one, the effects of distance involved with journeying to sacred places often contrasts with the ubiquitous travel to places having economic importance. That is, a major geographic principle states that most human movement between places close together tends to be much greater than that between widely separated places. Although this tendency for greater interaction between places in close proximity does apply to some pilgrimage movements, there is also evidence that numerous pilgrims regard the added hardship of travelling longer distances as a form of sacrifice that accrues greater merit. Thus, the travelling component of pilgrimage is itself an important ingredient in the religious experience.

The importance of movement *per se* is especially obvious in religious processions and circumambulations, where the goal is certainly not to arrive at some distant place. Although religious processions, often along designated sacred routes, may not necessarily involve a pilgrimage, they clearly demonstrate the role of movement as a form of religious devotion. Circumambulations that require travelling considerable distance around a sacred site, such as the Panchakrosi around Varanasi and the Chaurashikrosi around Vrindavana, do incorporate the concept of religious movement with pilgrimages.

Pilgrimage systems normally are characterized by the length of journey, the number of persons attracted to the sacred site, and the motiva-

tion for undertaking the peregrination. Consequently, true pilgrimages are differentiated from trips to local places of worship, and the term is seldom applied to travel to places visited by only a few individuals. Likewise, all who journey to a particular place may not be motivated religiously because some may be attracted to large assemblages of people for economic gain while others yearn to visit famous sights primarily as tourists. Difficulty in differentiating 'pilgrims' from 'religious tourists' is especially difficult because of the complexity of human motivations. Even though conceptually a purely devoted pilgrim may be placed at one end of a continuum and an entirely secular tourist at the other, in reality many who worship at pilgrimage sites can be considered both a tourist and a pilgrim. In spite of these definitional distinctions, this commentary refers principally to scholarly studies of the pilgrimage phenomenon as it is generally understood.

As is true with all attempts to understand human behaviour, numerous disciplines overlap and complement each other while bringing a distinctive perspective to the whole. Researchers in geography, anthropology, religious studies, art, architecture, and tourism have all contributed to recent studies of pilgrimage. This volume provides the reader with a broad mixture of these disciplinary viewpoints while also focusing on common themes, including debate on contestation and seduction.

A major theme running through several papers concerns the landscape setting and changes that have occurred as a result of pilgrimages. Sinha expands her approach to the landscape of Govardhan Hill as to how it is conceptualized, visualized, and inscribed in the body through circumambulating (*parikrama*), and proposed the reclamation of the Hill as an officially protected cultural landscape zone together with sustainable management practices for cultural and natural heritage conservation. Both Sand and Ghosal report on the impact of pilgrimages on a region, with Sand describing the huge annual attraction of Pandharpur and Ghosal explaining how a modest village was transformed into a vibrant pilgrim and tourist centre memorializing Sai Baba. Chauhan shows how the shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi affects and is affected by its environmental setting. An interesting variation on landscape modification is described by Shinde who discusses the transformations in Hindu pilgrimage to the sacred landscape of Braj in North India. Braj encompasses hundreds of sacred sites associated with the life of Krishna (a god in the Hindu pantheon), and observes that Pilgrims undertake a circuitous journey to experience a divine encounter with Krishna in the forests and lakes of the region.

Another theme expressed in pilgrimage studies concerns the characteristics of pilgrims and their motivations. This is typified by Ghosal

and Maity, who attempt to study the emergence, development and persistence of Shirdi, as a centre for religious tourism in India from cultural anthropological point of view. It examines the tourists, local people and associated cultural diasporas, vis-à-vis the impact of tourism on local people. Similarly, a behavioural study by Singh and Rana focuses upon tourists' perception of the religious landscape of Varanasi.

Although most scholars discuss the dynamic aspect pilgrimage as they evolve in popularity, meaning, site amenities, and similar elements through the ages, the information provided by Singh, Sinha, and Chauhan, especially emphasizes the temporal transformations. Shinde goes further to discuss sacred landscape in terms of mythic and sacred landscape and the performances attached to it, illustrating with Braj-yatra.

This brief summary of the articles in this text perpetuates a long tradition of imparting knowledge about pilgrimages in India. However, the more secular analyses of this human activity are comparatively recent and reflect more diverse disciplinary examinations than the earlier treatises. To gain a sense of these contemporary emphases, the reader should note the following list of publications on the geography of religion in general and, in a following section, on pilgrimages in particular.

Most academic studies of the geography of religion and belief systems written in English commenced in the 1950s and 1960s. Noteworthy was the *Geography of Religions* by David E. Sopher (Prentice-Hall, 1967). Others who led the way with research about religion from a geographic perspective were the following: *Religious Communities in the Indias: A Regional Survey* by H.A. Gleason (Author, 1946); *Areal Pattern of Religious Institutions in Cincinnati* by W. Hotchkiss (University of Chicago Press, 1950); 'Religions, Their Distribution and Role in Political Geography' by E. Fischer (*Annals of Association of American Geographers*, 1956); 'Geography and Religion' by G. Kuriyan (*Indian Geographical Journal*, 1961); 'An Approach to the Religious Geography of the United States: Patterns of Church Membership in 1952' by W. Zelinsky (*Annals of Association of American Geographers*, 1961); 'Patterns of Church Distribution and Movement' by G. Myers (*Social Forces*, 1962); 'Influence of Religious Belief on the Geographical Distribution of Brahmins in Bengal' by J. M. Datta (*Man in India*, 1962); 'Fundamental Questions in the Geography of Religions' by P. Fickeler in *Readings in Cultural Geography* (edited and translated by P. Wagner and M. Mikesell, 1962); 'Religious Composition of Population in India' by C. B. Mamoria (*Modern Review*, 1963); *Religious Geography and the Geography of Religion* by E. Isaac (University of Colorado Press, 1965); 'The Distribution of Selected Castes in the North Indian Plain' by J.

Schwartzberg (*Geographical Review*, 1965); 'Religious Composition of Punjab's Population Changes, 1951-61' by G.S. Gosal (*Economic & Political Weekly*, 1965), and 'The Religious Composition of India's Population: A Spatial Analysis' by G.S. Gosal and A.B. Mukerji (*Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 1970).

The development and expansion of this academic field after these first couple decades can be obtained by reviewing five publications that summarize previous works: 'Geography and Religion' by D.E. Sopher (*Progress in Human Geography*, 1981); 'Geography and Religion: Trends and Prospects' by L. Kong (*Progress in Human Geography*, 1990); *Sacred Worlds: An Introduction to Geography and Religion* by C. Park (Routledge, 1994); 'Geography of Religion and Belief Systems Specialty Group,' by R. Stoddard and C Prorok, in *Geography at the Dawn of the 21st Century*, eds. C. Willmott and G. Gaile (Oxford University Press, 2003); and *The Geography of Religion: Faith, Place, and Space* by R. Stump (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

The development of a body of literature concerning the geographic aspects of pilgrimages closely resembles that of religion in general with most of the analytical studies coming in the last half century. Although E. Rutter published a short paper in *Geographical Journal* in 1929 on 'The Muslim Pilgrimage', most of the earliest publications first appeared in the 1960s. Three that set the stage for subsequent spatial analysis of pilgrims, sacred sites, and other attributes of pilgrimages were the following: 'An Analysis of the Distribution of the Distribution of Major Hindu Holy Sites' by R. Stoddard in *National Geographical Journal of India* in 1968; 'Pilgrim Circulation in Gujarat' by D.E. Sopher in *Geographical Review* (1968); and *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India: A Study in Cultural Geography* (University of California Press) by S. Bhardwaj in 1973. Three other studies during this initial period, which are more descriptive, were these: 'Pilgrims to Badrinath' by F. Watson in *Geographical Magazine* (1961); and 'Tourism and Pilgrimage in Varanasi' by K.K. Dube in *National Geographical Journal of India* (1968).

Like the papers of this volume, the publications on the geography of pilgrimages vary considerably and merge into ones having the perspective of other social sciences as well as those with an emphasis on tourism. A sample of these include 'Single Religion Shrines, Multi-religion Pilgrimages' by S. Bhardwaj in *National Geographical Journal of India* (1987); 'Emerging Hindu Pilgrimage in the United States: A Case Study' by S. Bhardwaj and M. Rao in *Geographia Religionum* (1988); *Christian Pilgrimage in Modern Western Europe* by M.L. Nolan and S. Nolan (University of North Carolina Press, 1989); 'Development of Pilgrimages

in Poland: Geographical-Historical Study' by A. Jackowski in *Pilgrimage Studies: Text and Context*, eds. L. Gopal and D. Dubey (The Society of Pilgrimage Studies, Allahabad, 1990); *Sacred Places and Profane Spaces: Essays in the Geographics of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, eds. J. Scott and P. Simpson-Housley (Greenwood Press, 1991), and 'Non-Hajj Pilgrimage in Islam: A Neglected Dimension of Religious Circulation by S. Bhardwaj in *Journal of Cultural Geography* (1998).

In India, the first attempt on this subject was produced as a festschrift volume honouring David Sopher, i.e. R.L. Singh and Rana Singh (eds.), *Trends in the Geography of Pilgrimages* (1987, NGSI); that volume consists of ten essays, including essays related to India like message of place, Kumbha Mela, pilgrimage mandala of Varanasi, and a detailed bibliography along with a short introduction. This anthology also consists of two essays that describe pilgrimage traditions in Nepal (Singh and Poudel; and Stoddard). After passing twenty-three years no similar companion volume has yet been published; thanks to Rana Singh that he again took the lead to produce such an excellent anthology.

Rich sources of numerous additional articles on the geography of pilgrimages are found in the series published by Dietrich Reimer (see below); the book edited by R. Stoddard and A. Morinis, *Sacred Places, Sacred Spaces: The Geography of Pilgrimages* published by Geosciences Publications in 1997 (see more below); and the numerous articles and collected works by Rana Singh (see more below, & pp. 43-44 of this vol.). The relevant works printed by the German Verlag are *Pilgrimage in World Religions*, eds. by S. Bhardwaj and G. Rinschede (1988); and *Pilgrimage in the Old and New World*, eds. S. Bhardwaj, G. Rinschede, & A. Sievers (1994). Typical papers in *Sacred Places, Sacred Spaces* that refer to India are 'The Goal of Indian Pilgrimage: Geographical Considerations' by D.E. Sopher; 'Sacred space and pilgrimages in Hindu society' by Rana Singh; 'Role of pilgrimage priests in spatial organisation within Hinduism' by Anita Caplan; 'Jain ascetic as manifestation of sacred' by Thom McCormick; and 'Patterns of Pilgrimage to the Sikh Shrine of Guru Gobind Singh at Patna' by P.P. Karan. Illustrative of the prolific writing by Rana P.B. Singh are 'The Geography of Pilgrimages in India: Perspective and Prospects (*National Geographical Journal of India*, 1992); 'Sacred Space and Pilgrimage in Hindu Society: The Case of Varanasi' in *Sacred Places, Sacred Spaces*, eds. R. Stoddard and A. Morinis (Geosciences Publs., LSU Press, 1997); 'Sacred Journey and Faithscape: An Experience of the Panchakrosi, Varanasi (*Pennsylvania Geographer*, 1998); 'Pilgrims to Kashi: Self-Organized Patterns in Space and Time' with J. McKim Malville in *Sociology of Pilgrims* ed. by P.K.

Choudhary (Kalpaz Publications, 2004); 'The Geography of Hindu Pilgrimage in India: From Trend to Perspective' in *Geografia I Sacrum: Festschrift to Prof. Antoni Jackowski*, eds. B. Domański and S. Skiba (Institute of Geography and Spatial Management of the Jagiellonian University, Kraków, 2005); 'Pilgrimage in Hinduism: Historical Context and Perspectives' in *Tourism, Religion, and Spiritual Journeys*, eds. Dallen Timothy and Daniel Olsen (Routledge, 2006); and chapters (on holy places, Gaya, Banaras, and issues of contestation and seduction) in this volume.

A more comprehensive survey of materials on the geography of pilgrimages can be obtained from three printed bibliographical sources: 'Geography and Pilgrimage: A Review' by S. Bhardwaj in *Sacred Places, Sacred Spaces: The Geography of Pilgrimages*, eds. R. Stoddard and A. Morinis (Geosciences Pubs., Louisiana State University, 1997); the references accompanying the article by J.S. Scott in *Sacredscapes and Pilgrimage Systems*, ed. Rana Singh (Shubhi Publ., New Delhi, 2010: pp. 47-94); and Rana Singh's 'Holy places and Pilgrimages in India: The emerging trends and bibliography' in this volume (pp. 7-56). In addition, the ongoing website maintained by the Geography of Religions and Belief Systems (gorabs.org/geographyofreligionbibliography) encompasses numerous references to pilgrimages.

As evident from this brief review, the abundant research on the geography of pilgrimages, especially on India, during the last half century has provided readers with a variety of viewpoints; and when extrapolated to other disciplines, it is apparent that this field of study in totality has a rich body of literature. This volume continues this scholarly tradition with a set of well-researched articles on the pilgrimage systems and associated sacredscapes, illustrating different cultural regions of India.

— **ROBERT H. STODDARD**

[Emeritus Professor of Geography, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, USA]

Contact at: # 3500 Faulkner Drive, D-204, Lincoln, NE 68516. U.S.A.

Email: bob.stoddard@windstream.net

§ Bob Stoddard was a pioneer in the geographic study of pilgrimages. He commenced his focus on the geography of religion with a Master's thesis on the locations of churches in a Nebraska county (1960) and a Doctoral dissertation on Hindu holy sites in India (1966). He was co-editor of *Sacred Places, Sacred Spaces* (1997) and the GORABS chapter in *Geography at the Dawn of the 21st Century* (2003). His visits to many holy places in India have included the Himalayan sites of Kedanath and Gangotri.