Religions are grounded in geography, so too the religions of India. Their ritual life takes place in homes, temples and on the streets, in cities and villages, and in a variety of landscapes. Their key mythological and historical events are often thought to have occurred in these landscapes and their sacred figures are believed to have travelled in them. A large number of places in India are associated with such figures and mythological and historical events, and many of these sites attract visitors from beyond the location itself and they have thus become centres for religious travel and pilgrimage rituals. Religious traditions in India have at least since the time of the growth of Buddhism in the centuries around the beginning of the Common Era, propagated the great importance of ‘salvific space’ and the ability of these types of spaces to remove different kinds of suffering and to offer rewards to those who visit them. Travel to these places has been associated with the granting of religious rewards such as the attainment of salvation, mokṣa, but also other rewards such as health, riches and rebirth in a wealthy family or in a heavenly world. Being present at the sites where the mythological or historical events according to the religious traditions have taken place may fulfil the religious longings of the pilgrims as well as confirm religious teachings and identities. Religious traditions of Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Muslims and Christians possess pilgrimage sites in India, and travel to them remains one of the main expressions of religion in contemporary India. One aspect of religion in contemporary India is that more people travel on pilgrimage probably than ever before.

One of the religions in India, Hinduism, is known to have a particular strong locative dimension (Bharati 1963, 1970, Eck 2012, Jacobsen 2013). One reason for the extensive sacred geography of Hinduism is that according to the Hindu traditions the divinities are present in the world and their powers are most strongly available, many Hindus believe, at particular sites, often marked by temples housing statues or icons (mūrtis) of gods and goddesses. These statues in the temples are not symbols, but the divine powers themselves are present in the material objects of worship (see Jacobsen et al. 2015). The objects of worship are thought of as living icons and the temples are the homes of the gods and goddesses with the priests as their servants. These places may become pilgrimage sites to which people from
outside of the locality travel to avail themselves of the salvific power. Other religions in India may have different views of the presence of the divine in statues, but those who identify with these religions may nevertheless also believe in the salvific power of pilgrimage places and they have strong pilgrimage traditions. Jainism and Buddhism have traditions of pilgrimage travel to places associated with their founding teachers of salvific liberation, the *tīrthaṅkara* s, *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas*, and other powers. Sikhism has pilgrimage traditions to the historical gurdwaras associated with their ten gurus from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh. Indian Roman Catholics perform religious journeys to places in India associated with their saints and places famous for visions of the Virgin Mary. Muslims travel not only on the Hajj to Mecca, but within India to visit dargāhs and other graves of holy persons. Contemporary India is a sacred landscape for several religions and these religions have separate imaginary religious maps with their own sacred sites. Some places are shared, and in India it is not uncommon for people to visit pilgrimage places devoted to sacred figures from different religious traditions from their own. I have frequently observed Muslims visiting the Catholic pilgrimage place of Velankanni in Tamil Nadu, and Hindus visiting the Muslim Dargāh of Nagore. The healing powers of these places attract large numbers of people regardless of their religious identity, and some also visit out of curiosity and for entertainment. That places are shared may in other instances mean contested (Sikand 2003). Claiming a place as sacred for one’s own religion can also be an attempt at land grabbing as exemplified by the Ayodhya dispute and may represent expansion of one religion or reflect changing relations of power in society (Jacobsen 2013, Nandi 1986, Nath 2001, Sharma 1965). The immense importance of pilgrimage places in India may historically have its origin in the competition between Brahman priests and Buddhist institutions for the economic resources of ritual clients. Pilgrimage was absent in the ancient Vedic tradition (Bharati 1963, 1970, Hazra 1940, Jacobsen 2013, Nandi 1979/1980, 1986, Vassilkov 2002), but played an important role in early Buddhism. Religious travel to the places that were considered significant in the life of the historical Buddha and to *stūpa* s with his earthly remains were, according to Buddhism, instituted by the Buddha himself. Some of the salvific power of the Buddha was thought to have remained in his relics and also at the places where the most important events of his life occurred, and they became sites of pilgrimage. They were often marked by *stūpa* s, monuments containing his relics and symbolizing his presence, with the promise to those performing pilgrimage to these places of benefiting from their salvific power. The number of *stūpa* s was expanded under the emperor Aśoka who used *stūpa* s as well as pillars and inscriptions to mark areas under the political control of his empire. The marking of space as belonging to Buddhist institutions probably caused some Brahmans to start placing statues of gods at some locations and make them available for worship. The worship at these sites by giving gifts to the Brahmans was important also for the development of the Hindu temple traditions. Pilgrimage is not mentioned in the Vedas, and the earliest text to promote pilgrimage as a Hindu practice is found in the great Hindu epic the *Mahābhārata*, probably only in its later parts, possibly written in the third, fourth and fifth centuries CE. This insertion of pilgrimage texts into the *Mahābhārata* and the transformation of the text probably reflected the economic interests of the professional narrators (Vassilkov 2002) as well as of pilgrimage priests (Jacobsen 2013). Pilgrims usually would stay for a few days at the pilgrimage places and perhaps the bards adapted the narratives to the length required by the pilgrims. The Vedic gods were placeless (Angot 2009), but the narratives of the Hindu gods and goddesses connected them to the geography of India. The most important genre of text of these narratives, however, is not the *Mahābhārata* but the Purāṇas, a genre which was used by the pilgrimage priests to promote sacred sites and the new Hindu gods (who...
Hindu pilgrimage sites and travel

unlike the Vedic gods belonged to localities), and the promise of religious rewards to those who would visit and perform religious rituals at the places (see Nath 2001, 2007, 2009). Hindu pilgrimage is based on the belief that divine powers are present at particular sites, at some moments of time more intensely than others, and that by visiting these places when the powers are most strongly present, the pilgrims may fulfil vows and offer thanks for the fulfilment of wishes, gain or protect purity, overcome disease, obtain promises of riches, health, rebirth in Heaven and other salvific goals. For Hindus, travel to sacred sites is not a religious duty but a popular religious practice. In contemporary India, it is a favourite leisure time activity and has high entertainment value. It is likely that as many as 70 million pilgrims participated in the Mahākumbh Hamelā pilgrimage festival in Allahabad (Prayāg) in 2013, both to avail themselves of the opportunity offered by the combination of auspicious space and time and for entertainment and curiosity. But the large number of people participating in the Mahākumbh Hamelā is also an expression of contemporary changes in pilgrimage traditions in India. Current developments such as improvements in transportation and other infrastructures, economic growth and increased popularity of holiday travel, as well as the strengthening of religious identities and the use of religion in the competition for ideological hegemony have produced a peak in pilgrimage in India.

Infrastructure and technology

Travel is a normal activity in the modern world, and so is pilgrimage travel. The number of people travelling to India’s pilgrimage places has increased enormously over the last 150 years. The building and expansion of the railway system altered the patterns of pilgrimage throughout India (see Kerr 2002, 2006). Its continuous expansion and the development of the road system and improved quality of car and bus travel have provided easier access and safer travel, and resulted in not only an increase in the annual flow of pilgrims but also new patterns of pilgrimage. Easy access has created larger crowds. Crowds and easy access have further increased the magnetism of sites and the larger the crowds, the more people want to visit a place.

There are countless examples in India of the transformation of pilgrimage travel and patterns due to railway connections and improved roads. Places that before were accessible only after long walks can now be reached by bus. Good examples are the North Indian pilgrimage places of Hardwar, Rishikesh and Badrinath, which used to be reached by foot, but to which pilgrims now arrive by train (to Hardwar) and by bus. This has led to a large increase in the number of pilgrims and a change in their expectations. Even to those places which are not yet completely accessible by road, the distances that have to be walked have become shorter and more easily accessible. Services along the route and accommodation have improved, and the number of pilgrims has soared from a few thousand a year to millions in many places (good examples, also from North India, are Amarnath and Vaishno Devi in Jammu and Kashmir). Travel to Amarnath used to involve several days of trekking, but now one can walk from a comfortable hotel to the cave with the sacred liṅga and back in one day. Helicopter pilgrimage to Amarnath is also available, to avoid walking completely. The meaning of pilgrimage is then simply to have daśan at the sacred site. Travel agencies specializing in pilgrimages organize multi-site pilgrimage tours on which pilgrims may have daśan at a number of places on one trip (for a description see Gold 1988).

In South India as well, a number of pilgrimage places have been transformed by railway and road construction, and one such place is the pilgrimage centre of Shri Sailam in Andhra Pradesh. Before construction of the road, Shri Sailam was accessible only by difficult treks.
and had very limited services for the pilgrims who are reported to have suffered greatly from the lack of water and shelter. The contrast between the before-and-after infrastructure improvements is striking. In 1927 P. V. Hanumantha Rao wrote an account, ‘Report of the Pilgrimage to Sreesailam’, which gave a description of the difficult situation for the pilgrims. He started his report by stating:

The journey to Srisailam is most tiresome and difficult … No water is available for many miles to come, and in places where it is available, is only rainwater stored in small pools. … the [sanitary] arrangements are most unsatisfactory. They are not sufficient to meet the demand of so many thousands of pilgrims.

_Rao 1927: 1_

Rao emphasizes the great suffering of the pilgrims:

One who had occasion to visit that holy place will not forget the sufferings he had undergone throughout his life. The place is devoid of shade or shelter and the authorities have not made any arrangements for the stay of pilgrims. Each pilgrim gets a small shelter of twigs and cooks his food underneath it. The demand for water was so great that many pilgrims flocked to river Krishna a day previous to Sivaratri. The suffering of others that remained in Sreisailam (sic.) was indeed very great. The outer Koneru water was so dirty and yet people flocked to it. … Starting from Nagaluty no water is available as far as Pecheruvu and from Pecheruvu to Srisailam, a distance of 26 miles. … The way is hopelessly bad, slippery and narrow in many places. … If only pilgrims are aware of the great hardships and difficulties that are experienced, I am sure many would not venture to such a place.

_Rao 1927: 7–8_

The law and order situation was also a problem for pilgrims: ‘In addition to pilfering, decoities also took place. Men were beaten and their all was stolen. One cannot be sure of reaching home safe and sound after his pilgrimage to Srisailam’ (Rao 1927: 9). Rao concludes that unless something is done to improve the situation for the pilgrims, the officials should ‘emphatically prevent the pilgrims from going to Srisailam’ (Rao 1927: 9), and that ‘If such state of affairs continues for some years more the pilgrimage to Srisailam must be forgotten’ (Rao 1927: 8). The contrast between this description of an actual pilgrimage and the Māhātmyas (texts that tell stories about sacred sites and promote their salvific power) and Purānic propaganda texts promoting pilgrimage places is noticeable. After visiting the place, Rao changed his mind, from feeling a sense of pride that the pilgrimage place was in his district to shame. Rao asked the government to take responsibility ‘to do the needful to relieve the distress of pilgrims’ (Rao 1927: 2). He reports that 25,000 pilgrims came to Shri Shailam that year (1926), which he thinks was a record high (Rao 1927: 7). In contrast, three quarters of a century later, in 2002, the number of pilgrims for the Śivarātri festival alone was 600,000 (Reddy 2014: 189), the annual flow in the millions. It was after the building of roads in 1956–1957 that the situation changed. Reddy writes in her study of Shri Shailam:

The construction project marked a major transformation for Shri Shailam town as bus transportation services started immediately and eventually led to an exponential increase in the number of pilgrims visiting Shri Shailam throughout the year, particularly during annual festivals. This has in turn greatly stimulated the economy
of the pilgrimage center. … The road construction was the turning point for the temple … and it facilitated a link between Shri Shailam and major cities in the north, the south and the east by making travel for pilgrims much more feasible and safer than before.

Reddy 2014: 164

More pilgrims led to further economic investments:

Private developers are able to purchase land from the SD [Shrīshaila Devasthānam] and are allowed to build large-scale residential buildings equipped with amenities to accommodate a year-round pilgrim population.

Reddy 2014: 165

Reddy also mentions how Shri Shailam further developed into a centre of learning both with traditional schools as well as a branch of Telegu University, and a heritage museum and a tribal museum. Old sites of religious significance have been restored which gives the pilgrims a quite different experience. The places are grouped together as part of an established pilgrimage route, but now special bus tours are organized to transport the pilgrims between the places. Tour guides now guide pilgrims and the Andhra Tourist Department arranges boat trips, and a ropeway has been built and ‘sites that were previously ignored have become popular sightseeing places that any pilgrims enjoy during their visit to Shri Shailam’ (Reddy, 2014: 166). Prabhavati Reddy sums up the transformation in the following way:

Prior to the road construction, the sites . . . served as resting places, since pilgrimages were conducted mostly on foot. Older pilgrims had a deep emotional attachment to these places since they stayed there for a significant amount of time during their journeys. … For modern pilgrims these places are merely a set of tourist sites which can be seen and experienced in a matter of hours.

Reddy 2014: 166

The state (Endowments Department of Andhra Pradesh [EDAP]) has both administered the centre and been agent of the religious programme and implemented the changes in the physical geography and the temple complex. It also played a significant role in the revival of the religious culture with the establishment of temple traditions and daily practices, and special religious programmes and annual festivals.

The history of the transformation of Shri Shailam due to improved infrastructure has been documented in detail (Reddy 2014), but a large number of Indian pilgrimage centres have experienced or are experiencing similar or even greater expansions; notable examples are Vrindavan and Hardwar. As pilgrimage tourism, now often called ‘heritage tourism’, has become an important area of investment, and many pilgrimage places are being selected as ‘mega tourist destinations’, pilgrimage sites are being transformed into ‘tourist friendly places’.

The Internet and mobile phones also play a role in the contemporary transformation of pilgrimage rituals, creating new ways of organization. An example is found in Siddhpur in Gujarat, the place for śrāddha for mothers, and a place of cremation, and an important place for worship of the Kapil muni avatāra (see Jacobsen, 2008a). When I did fieldwork in Siddhpur in 1999, the priests performed śrāddha rituals individually for each family. Each priest sat with a few persons in a circle around him or just opposite. When I revisited Siddhpur in 2012, not
only was the Kapil Mandir being renovated and expanded because of a government grant to increase its attraction for pilgrims, but the priests had started to utilize mobile phones as well as the Internet to organize the clients of their śrāddha rituals in a different manner. The priests were using email to organize people so that they arrived on the same day and performed the śrāddha together at the same time in one common ritual event. Between fifty and one hundred pilgrims were now sitting in rows like in a classroom and the priest led the ritual from an elevated platform (see Figure 23.1) and had them all perform the details of the ritual with the material items in front of them and repeat the mantras together at the same time (see Figure 23.2). While the sequence of the śrāddha ritual was the same, the experience had become different, as it now had become a collective ritual for a group of more than fifty participants and was no longer an individual family ritual. In 2012 Siddhpur had become part of a Gujarat state project of infrastructure development to promote ‘heritage tourism’, leading to further changes. The railway station at Siddhpur was also rebuilt to attract pilgrims. In the Tourism Corporation of Gujarat document seeking developers for the project, cultural heritage, as well as the connection between the economy and preservation of cultural heritage, were emphasized. Here the concept of pilgrimage was replaced by the secular concepts of ‘tourism and cultural heritage’, and preservation of the cultural heritage was seen as urgent due to economic growth and urbanization threatening this heritage.

**Economy**

In the above descriptions it becomes apparent that there is a close relationship between pilgrimage and the economy. Pilgrimage in India has probably always had a strong economic dimension. Economy has influenced the growth, development and decay of pilgrimage places.
Competition for ritual clients and their economic resources lies at the foundation of the dynamics of pilgrimage and has been important for the rise and fall of pilgrimage places. The exaggerated claims of salvific rewards said to be granted to those who visit the places, which are a feature of the texts and persons propagating the pilgrimage places, have to be explained in the context of this competition for clients and their economic resources. Pilgrimage places are economic institutions that often depend almost totally on the economic resources of the pilgrims and they compete with other pilgrimage places for these economic resources. Pilgrims are most often aware of the exaggerated nature of the claims of the pilgrimage places and the greed of the pilgrimage priests, but they nevertheless do perform the journey and participate in the rituals. However, the pilgrimage priests, the paṇḍās, have the lowest status among Brahmans in India and are considered greedy and rapacious (Lochtefeld 2010: 131). Paṇḍās, writes Lochtefeld in his study of Hardwar as a place of pilgrimage, ‘have clear incentives to seek the largest possible gift, whereas clients have clear incentives to offer less’ (2010: 131). Gifts transfer inauspiciousness from the clients to the priests, and this inauspiciousness/impurity adds to the paṇḍās’ low status. Today paṇḍās can have other jobs and act as paṇḍās in their spare time. They have adapted to the growth of tourism to the pilgrimage places and expanded their business to include hotels and shops and so on, which is not that different from their previous work.

After the urban decay in ancient India from the third century CE (Sharma 1987), caused by economic changes, some cities survived or recovered as urban centres by redefining themselves as salvific cities claiming to possess inherent salvific power and thus securing an income from pilgrims. The idea of salvific space and the practice of pilgrimage were of great importance for the Hinduization of India. The promotion texts of many Hindu pilgrimage places are found in the Māhātmyas that typically exaggerate the salvific rewards, and the texts

Figure 23.2 The pilgrims sitting in rows with the material items of the śrāddha ritual in front of them
Source: Knut A. Jacobsen
are in reality advertisements. The Māhātmyas were often written by pilgrimage priests, who harvested the economic benefits of the pilgrims and made a living from offering services to them. An important aspect of the texts is the promotion of gifts to the Brahmans and a variety of rituals were invented to increase income. One example from Hardwar tells how every pilgrim was obliged to throw a small piece of gold into the Ganges, without which the bathing would not be efficacious. As one might expect, this gold did not simply fall to the riverbed, but provided a rich harvest for the functionaries there, who would either retrieve it before it hit the bottom or use small flat baskets to sort through the debris. Timur mentions this in his brief description of Hindu practices, and it continues to this day.

Lochtefeld 2010: 66

As this example illustrates, the economy is at the core of the institution of pilgrimage and probably was so from early on. The texts promote the view that the sites have salvific power and grant that pilgrims will get rewards, and encourage them to buy the ritual services of the Brahmans. Hindu pilgrimage texts focus most typically on the sites, and much less on the travel to the sites (Jacobsen 2013). The transport to the sites does not seem to have been an important part of the economy and could, it seems, be more or less eliminated without the sacred power of the place becoming eliminated. An exception is the loss of merit from travelling by ox cart to Prayāg, asserted in the Māhātmyas about this place, but which may also be economically motivated due to an unwillingness of the paṇḍās to share any of the economic resources of the pilgrims with ox-cart drivers.

The origin of pilgrimage as part of the Brahmanical tradition was probably an imitation of Buddhist pilgrimage rituals in order to compete with Buddhist institutions for the economic resources of the pilgrims. The Māhātmyas were incorporated into Purāṇas, and this Purāṇization of pilgrimage traditions ‘was a successful ancient Indian marketing device that contributed to the transmission of sacred geography’ (Reddy 2014: 105). As Ian Reader has noted:

Pilgrimage is located in and operates through the marketplace, and it is through the mechanisms of the marketplace that constructs such as the sacred are materialised and successful pilgrimage sites emerge. ... If pilgrimage is about faith, miracles and worship, it is also about marketing, promotion, invention, entertainment, material consumption, the buying of goods and sightseeing.

Reader 2014: 195

Reader suggests that marketing is the central issue of pilgrimage that needs to be addressed to understand how and why pilgrimage comes about and attracts clientele. Hindu pilgrimage succeeded not least because of successful marketing. The social system of pre-modern, and to some degree modern Hindu India, was based on caste, a hierarchy legitimized by an ideology that claimed that most people were inherently impure. Caste ideology was obsessed with impurity, and so was the ideology of Hindu pilgrimage. The priests at the pilgrimage places promised removal of impurity (pāpa) but at the same time they promoted an ideology of its omnipresence. The idea of impurity secured their own social status as well as their economic well being. In recent years more emphasis has been placed on pilgrimage as heritage tourism and celebration of identity, but the idea that by visiting pilgrimage places one washes away impurity persists.
One reason for the current peak in pilgrimage travel is that the religious and economic institutions have a shared interest in the growth of pilgrims and both participate in marketing the places. Buddhadeb Chaudhuri researched how the idea of sacredness of the pilgrimage site Bakreshwar (a śakti pīṭha) in West Bengal was transmitted in order to attract pilgrims in the 1970s (Chaudhuri 1981). The main temple in Bakreshwar is a Śiva temple devoted to Śiva as Bakranāth. Another important attraction is its hot springs that were believed to have healing powers. Chaudhuri investigated the increase in the number of pilgrims. How was it that the number of pilgrims continued to grow despite secularization of society? Bakreshwar gives several reasons. The Sanskrit school attracted students from a wider area and they ‘played an important role in propagating the cult of Śiva of Bakreshwar’ (Chaudhuri 1981: 49). The Brahman priests have usually had a jajmānī relationship to pilgrim families, and members of these families have moved to a wide area for education, marriage and work, and have propagated the sacredness of the place. The priests have also used modern ways of communication associated with tourism to attract pilgrims, such as distribution of pamphlets and postcards describing the sacredness of the region and the powers of the hot springs in the area to cure diseases. While sādhus (ascetics) wander and spread the word about sacredness as well as the food and gifts offered to them at the places of pilgrimage, other persons who also have material benefits from the pilgrims, such as shop owners, also propagate the place’s sacredness ‘out of their own economic interests’ (Chaudhuri 1981: 50). The annual fair attracts shop owners as far away as Kolkata and also beyond the state of West Bengal to set up shops. Even the beggars, noted Chaudhuri, ‘have abiding interest in the perpetuation of the sacred myth of Bakreshwar which would attract more and more visitors to the sacred area and fetch them more money’ (Chaudhuri 1981: 52). Chaudhuri counted 606 shop owners in the annual fair of 1974 with around 20,000–25,000 pilgrims. Chaudhuri also noted that modern media such as newspapers and radio, improved transport systems and tourism have contributed to spreading the religion of Śiva at Bakreshwar. The Brahmans distributed pamphlets at the site about the sacredness of the place. It was also notable that the sacredness of the place was advertised in newspapers in Kolkata by the Tourist Department of West Bengal thus encouraging pilgrimage tourism.

Chaudhuri concluded that the most distinctive feature of Bakreshwar was not the dominance of Śiva worship, but ‘the presence of numerous ritual styles, sects, faiths, temples and shrines’ (Chaudhuri 1981: 86). This plurality is a function of the marketplace. The economic incentive is to offer as varied products as possible and to include everyone. The more varied the religious traditions, the more people will come and contribute to the economy. Chaudhuri notes that the commercially oriented attitude of the Brahman families is quite conspicuous: ‘The economic implications are often more emphasized, sacred contents are becoming less meaningful’ (Chaudhuri 1981: 91). However, the phenomenon of Hindu salvific space at pilgrimage places has throughout history aimed to attract as many devotees as possible and to promote the belief that all the goals of religion are easily attainable for everybody. Hindu salvific space at pilgrimage places includes everyone. No one is excluded and even the worst criminal can easily attain mokṣa just by taking advantage of the salvific power of the pilgrimage place, according to the Māhātmyas. An important reason for this attitude is economic, as a means to attract as many pilgrims as possible. Pilgrimage in India therefore tends to promote inclusiveness and a welcoming attitude towards all. The web pages that advertised the 2013 Mahākumbhamelā in Prayāg read like a commercial: ‘This is the only time and place in the world where you can unburden your sins and achieve “Nirvana” from the vicious cycle of birth and rebirth.’ The same web page states: ‘Kumbh
Mela is not just a mere festivity like Diwali and Holi, but ‘this event gives them [the participants] a golden opportunity to liberate themselves from the miseries and sufferings of life. It enables them to take a holy dip in the sacred water and wash away all the sins they have committed in the past’. It is easy and nothing other than contact with the water is needed: ‘taking a holy dip in water paves the way for attainment of Moksha’. The increasing number of pilgrims at the Prayāg Mahākumbhamelās indicates to what degree the idea of salvific space and pilgrimage is thriving in contemporary Hinduism and of its economic importance for the groups who profit from it.

Identity and conflicts

Pilgrimage in India is to a large degree a local and regional phenomenon, an expression of local and regional patriotism and identity. The promotional literature of pilgrimage places can be understood also as a form of local patriotism. Among Hindus there is no agreement on a single pilgrimage site being more important than all others, but in the regions some pilgrimage places have been important for the development of its religious identity (Bhardwaj 1973, Jacobsen 2013). Examples of such regional sites are Pandharpur in Maharashtra, Sabarimala in Kerala, Tirumala and Shrisailam in Andhra Pradesh, Amarnath and Vaishno Devi in Jammu and Kashmir, Varanasi and Allahabad in eastern Uttar Pradesh. One reason the Mahākumbhamelā in Allahabad is attended by the largest number of people is that it is situated in the middle of the Ganges Valley, which is densely populated; the population in Uttar Pradesh alone is more than 200 million. In other words, the large majority of the pilgrims of the Mahākumbhamelās come from the region itself. Uttar Pradesh is often thought of not as a region but as the centre, however, the state is in fact culturally and linguistically divided into several regions. This is not denying that many visitors come from other states as well as from abroad for the Mahākumbhamelā. The blending of the pilgrimage industry and tourism is typical of contemporary pilgrimage, and some sites have been able to attract international tourists. Varanasi, often promoted as the pilgrimage centre of Hinduism, is also just a regional centre, enthusiastically promoted by its own pilgrimage industry, and the promotional texts about Varanasi, several of which have been written by Western scholars (for a good example see Eck 1982), contrast greatly with the views of those Indians who do not share the belief in the city’s sacredness or participate in its ideology of local patriotism. Writes the Indian sociologist Dipankar Gupta:

> For most Indians who don’t live in Varanasi, though many local residents would disagree, it is a stinking, dirty pile of earth and bricks, with temples at every street corner that are equally filthy.  

Gupta 2009: 22

The quote, which contrasts totally with the promotional texts about Varanasi, not least those written by Western scholars, illustrates the importance of local patriotism in the admiration of pilgrimage places. And Gupta notes the role of Westerners in the transformation of the image of Varanasi:

Yet, as foreigners are crowding this place many Indians have begun to find virtues in Varanasi. They too come to this city as tourists and not as they used to earlier, just to die by the Ganges and go straight up without further mediation.

Gupta 2009: 22
Followers of religions may claim places as theirs by arguing that mythological events supposedly took place there. Human-built structures such as stūpas, temples and statues on these sites can be markers of ownership and expressions of power. The erection of giant statues of the Buddha and of the Hindu gods Hanumān (Lutgendorf 1994) and Śiva (the world’s largest is apparently in Kathmandu, Nepal and is 43.5m high, completed in 2010) that can be observed at many places in contemporary India is a way of claiming space as belonging to one’s own religion. Giant Buddha statues have been built and more are being planned in Sarnath and Bodhgaya (Jacobsen, 2010). A new Hindu temple, Chandrodaya Mandir, to be built in Vrindavan will be the tallest temple structure in India. It will have a height of about 210 metres, and be perhaps the world’s tallest temple.8 President Pranab Mukherjee laid the foundation stone for the temple on 16 November 2014. Statues of Ambedkar are found in a large number of villages and cities in India, and Ambedkar is often claimed to be the person of whom there are the most public statues. Currently the Indian government is making a statue of Sardar Vallabhai Patel, one of the founding fathers of India, which will be 182 metres high, making this the largest statue in the world according to the website that promotes the project,9 reflecting the current power of the Bharatiya Janata Party, and larger than the Buddha statues promoted by the Bahujan Samaj Party when it was in power in Uttar Pradesh (Jacobsen 2010).

The conflict of sacred space in India that has received most attention is the place considered by many Hindus to be the birthplace of Rāma: the city of Ayodhya (but see Sikand 2003 for a number of other disputed places). The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rallied support around the supposed birthplace of Rāma as a strategy to mobilize a political constituency in order to win national elections in the late 1980s and 1990s. The strategy was to rally Hindu voters by focusing on identity issues. The difficulties experienced by Hindus wishing to worship at the birthplace of Rāma was used as a symbol to propagate the view that religious pluralism in India had a negative impact on the Hindus. The mosque Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was used to symbolize a postulated neglect of the religious interests of the Hindus by the Indian government. Hindu nationalists argued that the Babri Masjid was built on an earlier temple that marked the birthplace of Rāma. Hindu nationalism here used traditions of pilgrimage and salvific space to mobilize Hindus politically. Procession pilgrimage that conquers space as it moves onwards (Davis 2005, Jacobsen 2008b, 2009), the idea of the divine as weak and threatened by contemporary human impact on the pilgrimage sites, the identification of the materiality of the salvific site with the salvific power as such were used for political purposes. The political movement managed to mobilize religious organizations and individuals and led to the forceful destruction of the mosque on 6 December 1992. This was followed by communal riots in which several thousand people were killed, the majority of them Muslims. The High Court of Allahabad ruled on 30 September 2010 to divide the property in three equal parts – one part to Hinduism, one to Muslims and one part to the Hindu organization Nirmohi Akhāṛā.10 The lawyers appealed against the judgment and the issue has not been resolved. The conflict demonstrates that both religious and political powers are concerned with places of pilgrimage and illustrates the way expansion of pilgrimage space can be a way to secure land for one’s own religion.

The ideology of a homogeneous Hindu nation used geography and Hindu sacred spaces to affirm a Hindu essence, its Hinduness, hindutva. The use of processions to claim land was combined with the issue of Ayodhya, claiming that the ground under the Babri Masjid was Hindu sacred ground; that it was the space on which the god Rāma had manifested. The court verdict of 30 September 2010 confirmed this interpretation, the peculiar Hindu view of connecting geography and mythology, that spaces are divinities, as absolutes that even the
gods must obey. The case of Ayodhya shows that the postulated timelessness of sacredness is an efficient promotion device, and indicates the connection of pilgrimage space to the desire of political dominance. Sites can be contested and thus gain increased importance as they become symbols of power. Political conflicts over pilgrimage places highlight the paradox that the material pilgrimage site is not only the immanent form but also a transcendent salvific power, and emphasizes the question of to what degree are contemporary geographical places to be identified with the salvific sites of the sacred narratives (Jacobsen 2013). Hindu sacred narratives are often presented as describing events of previous yugas involving ideas that are removed from contemporary conceptions of history.

Shared sacred space is not an unusual phenomenon in south Asia and it can be a source not only of conflict but also of the development of a composite culture (Sikand 2003, Jacobsen 2009). The composite culture of India has meant that many Hindus worship at Muslim sacred places, especially Sufi shrines. A famous case of a tīrtha that is shared by several religions is the Ayyāppan pilgrimage to Sabarimalai which combines the worship of the Muslim Vāvar at the foot of the Sabari Hill and the Hindu god Ayyāppan at the top. The shrines of Vāvar and Ayyāppan provide, according to one observer, ‘a place where all distinctions, including religious ones, are broken down’ (Daniel 1984: 252). Sikand has observed that in the Muslim dargāh Hindus revere the Muslim saints ‘in a purely functional sense – powerful beings endowed with considerable śakti or power, capable of granting their wishes, of providing sons to barren women or a cure to a deadly disease’ (2003: 18). The composite culture is a practice supported by traditions, but not by doctrines. Sikand argues nevertheless that shared religious traditions defy the preconception that religious communities are sharply divided from one another, homogeneous and neatly defined. They point instead to ways people can come to terms with multiple religious identities and suggest the possibility of finding truth in a multiplicity of religious contexts and represent a critique of religious hierarchies and orthodoxies, and perhaps also ways to share places of pilgrimage. But the Ayodhya conflict illustrates that the shared religious traditions of the Hindu–Muslim composite culture, which was a dominant phenomenon in Indian religious culture, have lost much of their strength during the last hundred years. Sikand has argued that the quest for social ascension translated into assertions of a more orthodox ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ identity and ‘upwardly mobile sections within these communities fiercely attacked the shared religious traditions that had once characterized them’ (2003: 14). This led to the transformation of sacred space and pilgrimage places were used to confirm religious identities.

The growth of pilgrimage travel in contemporary India is influenced by the mobilization around regional and religious identities but probably even more by the rapid improvements of infrastructure and the growing market economy. Economic interests and power are often found expressed in sacred geography. However, the focus of Hindu pilgrimage in contemporary India seems to a certain extent to be on happiness and auspiciousness and leisure time entertainment, similar to the idea of travel promoted by the tourist industry, and less on the discomfort of travel and the reward of mokṣa. Improved infrastructure and improved economy are transforming Hindu pilgrimage.

Notes
1 For the concept of ‘salvific space’, see Jacobsen 2013.
2 Mass pilgrimage to many places started only with the economic, political and technological changes of the British. The neutrality of British colonial power with regard to religious issues favoured the consolidation of Hinduism. The pilgrim tax was abolished in 1833, but even before
this abolition the number of pilgrims had grown. Pilgrimage had become a status ritual that spread from aristocratic families to the recently ennobled zamindars and to the emerging business and service class (Entwistle 1987). From the late eighteenth century, aristocrats and merchants began to restore the old ghāt in cities such as Mathura, Vrindavan, Ayodhya and Varanasi, and many new ones were built throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Entwistle 1987).

3 For the concept of ‘magnetism’ in relation to pilgrimage, see Preston 1992.


5 http://kumbhmela.co.in/kumbhmela1.html [accessed 1 January 2012].

6 http://kumbhmela.co.in/kumbhmela1.html [accessed 18 January 2012].

7 The idea of Varanasi as a sacred city and a site welcoming and rewarding pilgrims was important for the re-establishment of Varanasi as an urban centre after the period of urban decay and the disappearance in the first centuries of the Common Era of Varanasi’s ancient settlement of Rajghat near the confluence of Ganga and Varana, today on the northern outskirts of the city. The increasing number of Indian and international tourists visiting Varanasi has led to the establishment of new rituals and festivals in order to satisfy the tourists who expect to experience religion as part of their visit.


9 See ‘Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel’, http://www.statueofunity.in/statue-of-unity-sardar-vallabhbhai-patel.html [accessed 28 December 2014]. It is called a statue of unity, according to the website, because Patel ‘was determined to unite 562 princely states with the mainstream India after the British Raj came to an end’.

References


