

Brief participant observation or ethnographic study

Sociology



18 October My Visit to the Kumbh Mela at the River Ganges Last year, I happened to go to the River Ganges while I was travelling through India. Every year, there occurs an increase in the water level of the Ganges River as the Himalayan snow melts in the spring season. The water is the fundamental source of the whole life-line in the vicinity of the river. It does not only satiate the birds and cattle of the local people, but it is also the cardinal source of water supply for the crop-fields near the river. This tendency of the river water is considered Holy by the Hindus who have faith in the water.

Hindus are polytheists. I interviewed a Hindu after he was done with bathing to know what the Hindus' beliefs towards this Ganges are. He said that Brahma puts soul into everything. The Brahma is thought to keep the souls alive after the death in the process called reincarnation. Hindus believe that every human being has a tendency to influence what he/she is born as in the next life. A person who does good deeds will enjoy a higher status in the next life while another who gets involved in evil deeds in one life gains rebirth as an insect or animal. The process of rebirths culminates into Nirvana, a state of eternal happiness or pain depending upon an individual's actions in the myriad of lives that he/she was given. The fact that the Himalayan snow melts to add volume to the Ganges water is interpreted as the Brahma's act of blowing soul into the river so that people could bathe in it and purify their souls. Hindus bathe in the Ganges River to get rid of their sins and purify their souls so that when they ultimately reach Nirvana, they end up being happy forever.

I had been to the Ganges River location of the Kumbh Mela. It is an occasion

for the Hindu pilgrims to take a collective bath at one of the four locations including the River Ganges. Every year, hundreds of thousands of Hindus make it to the Ganges River with an intention to take bath in it. I saw men, women, children and old people, all bathing in the River together. I observed that the Ganges River has lately become quite polluted. I had heard quite a lot about the spiritual powers of the Ganges River. I was quite motivated to take a bath myself. I was shocked to find the River contrary to my expectations in the look.

I was the most surprised to see the naked Sadhus, who happen to be the Indian saints. They were naked from head to toe without a single strap of cloth anywhere on their bodies. There were hundreds of them and they walked together to form the most prominent community at the place. A sense of nudity and pollution around upset me along with a sense of collectivism and spirituality that enlightened my mood. I had mixed feelings.