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Boundaries of Pilgrimage Tourism Enclaves: Purity Meets Pollution on the Shores of the Ganges

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Title: Boundaries of Pilgrimage Tourism Enclaves: Purity Meets Pollution on the Shores of the Ganges

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Abstract:

Kumbh Mela, the world's largest pilgrimage gathering, is a Hindu religious festival that takes place on the shores of the River Ganges. This water body is renowned amongst Hindu pilgrims for its sacredness and purity. Yet, consistent industrialization, urbanization, and modernization around Ganga are arguably turning this festival into a sort of "inverted" enclave: a pre-colonial inclusive space enclosed within a postcolonial country. Interviews and focus groups with pilgrims were conducted at the 2013 Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, which hosted about 120 million pilgrims over two months. Findings suggest boundary-work dynamics through which local and international pilgrims seek to protect the symbolic and material integrity of the festival's space from surrounding environmental and social pressures, including water pollution and tourism commoditization. International travelers presented significant differences in perceptions of pressures and boundaries in comparison to local pilgrims. Even though local pilgrims are aware of river pollution, discursive strategies allow decoupling this material fact from spiritual experience. Ancestral myths, ceremonies and religious identities provide a cultural boundary to isolate these temporary enclaves from material effect and cultural discourses of Western modernity and colonialism. We argue that exploring mass religious festivals as "inverted" enclaves, where the West is left outside, provides a counterpoint to well-established analyses of tourism enclaves as exclusionary spaces created by the global North in the global South.