

Place Spirituality in the imaginary locus: How real is the nonreal?

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Abstract

This commentary on the target article underscores the need to examine the imagined trajectory of Place Spirituality, where person attachment and attachment to place through prior exposure are minimum or absent. Examples of such place attachment through sheer spiritual imagination or belief have been provided. It is further argued that while Place Spirituality may be complex, the exact developmental trajectory of Place Spirituality has not been investigated and requires future research attention. The model of transitional phenomenon and transitional space by Donald Winnicott has been presented as a possible explanatory model.

Keywords

Hindu, imagination, Place Spirituality, transitional phenomenon, Winnicott

The target article adds to the recent and rather undernourished stream of psychological thought on Place Spirituality (PS) (e.g. Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1993, 2004; Zapf, 2007). The authors have examined PS in the light of object relations theories in general, and of attachment theories in particular. The article argues that place attachment and divine attachment conjoin to form PS. Within the frame of attachment theory this is convincing, though there remains the question of whether the entirety of the phenomenon of PS can be explained through the lens of attachment. A second proposition is that PS is a developmental achievement; adults gradually gain the capacity of multiple attachments and diversified object relationship, without which PS may not be attained. Here the authors draw upon the transactional theory by Eric Berne. PS is viewed as a transactional relation characteristic of adulthood. In addition, there is a third assumption that spirituality is a kind of compensation or corollary for lost attachment object, thus restituting lost security and safety.

How do attachment to the Divine and attachment to the place interact? We may conceptualize two psychological pathways. One can start from childhood attachment to persons, which then

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attaches to the place associated with the person, and subsequently, owing to special life circumstances (perhaps looking for safety and security), the place becomes connected to the Divine. Alternately, one can begin from the divine attachment itself; in other words, the Divine may be the original object of attachment, and not any person or place. Subsequently the symbolic value of the place in connection to the Divine may generate PS. In the first pathway one moves from person to spirituality via the place. In the second pathway, one moves from spirituality to place. Here, cognition takes a different dimension from the beginning, imagination and core beliefs playing the crucial role. The target article keeps open both possibilities, but the examples (e.g. the terror attack in Paris in 2015) and elaborations indicate a greater emphasis on the first pathway. Another related implicit assumption in the article is that PS requires direct experience of the place, that is, the place of attachment must have been experienced in reality by the individual at some point of time. This assumption is not eloquently stated, but hinted at variously, although the symbolic and abstract value of spirituality in changing the meaning of place has also been cursorily mentioned.

In my rejoinder, I will elaborate the second pathway from divine attachment to place attachment. I draw from some secondary source material from Hindu literature, and Indian religious history and practices. My submission is that PS may take a symbolic and imaginary form without any real prior contact with the place or even any person, and that this dynamic trajectory requires explanatory effort from a psychological perspective. I present three categories of examples to support my argument. The first category refers to the spontaneous place attachment of famous spiritual leaders, who seem to be attached, almost intrinsically, to certain places owing to their spiritual valence. I shall present specific examples from the life of Shri Caitanya (1486–1534), the mystic saint, devotee of Lord Krishna, and the acclaimed pioneer of the Medieval *Bhakti* (devotion) movement in India about 500 years ago. The second category reflects the place attachment of mass devotion and vigorous action including violence: the cultural or political campaign about the religio-spiritual significance of the place renders the place as an object of attachment without any known personal association. A specific example from India may be that of the riots in Ayodhya in 1992. The third category of example refers to the pain and austerity undertaken by devotees during any pilgrimage; I will describe a personal experience from the Amarnath trek I made in 2014.

When Shri Caitanya left his home as a “*sannyasi*” or a religious mendicant, he was visualizing and almost experiencing the love between Krishna, the supreme God for the Vaishnava sect, and his consort Radha in Vrindaban. This love story is a religious myth illustrated in the Vaishnava texts, interpreted variously from the angles of mundane illicit sexuality to deep spiritual and intellectual meaning. At that time, Vrindaban was not a regular place of pilgrimage and the places in Vrindaban mentioned in the texts depicting life events of Krishna and Radha were not identified. Caitanya was so keen to visit Vrindaban, the abode of Krishna and Radha, that he practically lost all sense of reality. After a number of failed attempts, he reached Vrindaban, pining for the place throughout. He also sent the most knowledgeable six *goswamis* (stalwart followers) to Vrindaban. Caitanya and his *goswamis* are said to identify, through intuitive meditation, the secret and sacred places of Vrindaban (Swami Prabhupada, 1975). The reading of the life of Shri Caitanya, written by his contemporaries and later by the Vaishnava scholars, indicates his intense attachment to Vrindaban, which he had never visited except in his mind’s eye (Ghosh, 1950). So place attachment may come through sheer imagination of a place associated with one’s devotional object. Sarbadhikary (2015) presents narratives of modern devotees, illustrating the psychologically intense significance of attachment to the secret and sacred Vrindaban (whether in person or in imagination) among the Vaishnavas up to the present.

Throughout the history of the world, people have killed and have been killed for a place imagined to be of transcendental significance. We may take, as an example, the relatively recent and inglorious Hindu–Muslim riots in Ayodhya, whose repercussion still reverberates in Indian

politics. An old controversy was re-raised regarding a mosque in the name of the Muslim ruler Babar in Ayodhya. A section of the Hindus believed that the mosque was built above the place where Rama, the Hindu icon of Lord Vishnu, was born about 7000 or more years ago. The common people, who had perhaps never consciously bothered about the *Ramjanambhumi* (the birthplace of Rama) but identified with a certain religio-political idealism, flocked in from all over India to rebuild the Rama temple in that very place through *Kar seva* (voluntary service). There ensued uncontrolled violence, and the episode resulted in demolition of the existing mosque, death of a number of men, and the aftermath of many subsequent riots and massacres, thus contributing a potentially vicious issue to Indian inter-religious relations. Of course, mob psychology and the sheer political intention of a handful of persons, as revealed by later investigation, were involved in the riot process. But my present intention is not to highlight the political motives, rather, in connection with place attachment, I want to focus on the motives and decision process of the common people to come all the way via all sorts of transport and even on foot to Ayodhya, a place which they have never visited, to donate their labor and, if needed, life. For the politically naïve but nonetheless rioter *Kar sevaks*, the symbolic value of Rama's birthplace was made intense through their imagination and belief system.

The third example comes from what I witnessed in 2014 during my own trek to Amarnath, a famous Shiva temple situated in Jammu and Kashmir, high up in the Himalayas (3888 m above sea level). The *Shiva lingam* here is made naturally from ice. It is a moderately difficult 2–3-day trek of about 31 km, with vast stretches of big boulders to be crossed in places and the last 6 km often being covered with slippery snow. There I saw a young person around his 30s, carrying his crippled old mother on his back. Upon my query, it was revealed that at some early stage of her life the lady had pledged to visit Amarnath, but could not fulfill her promise. It was now a family decision that she must visit the place before she died, and the son was simply helping her to do what she must do. This young man was not a local accustomed to walking on the mountains, but came from the plains. Yet he had so far survived this feat of walking on the rugged mountain slopes and snow and then up the 300-odd steps to the temple with his mother on his back. The strong sense of sacredness of the place and the conviction that the vow to visit the place could not be broken enabled him to go beyond his body's normal ability, and his mother also felt that a visit to this place was more important than her son's troubles.

In all the above instances, PS was not associated with attachment to the place through prior exposure, nor was it a palpable example of safety and security per se. In none of the above examples can one see the initial special attachment to a person, or subsequent loss of a special person. The second and third examples are essentially culturally endorsed phenomena. The first example is also discerned among many saints of other religions. On the basis of these examples, I submit that we need to critically consider those cases where imagined attachment to a specific form of Divine being and belief in a place being associated with that being results in unusually intense PS, often resulting in apparently irrational and passionate behavior. I may further venture that this inversion of perspective requires looking at "imagined" experiences with a Divine being, and the resulting attachment to the imaginary locus of the same Divine being (Krishna, Rama, or Shiva in the above examples), as a subjective phenomenon equally as "real" as the experience and attachment to an objectively real person and place.

Scannell and Gifford (2010) presented the tripartite model of place attachment, including person, process, and place. Personal characteristics for place attachment are discussed in terms of individual versus collective. Process characteristics are constituted of affective and cognitive aspects. In terms of place characteristics, emphasis is put on the social and physical dimensions of place. Other authors have emphasized aesthetic or architectural aspects of the place of attachment (Birch & Sinclair, 2013; Najafi & Mustafa Kamal, 2014). The three categories of examples

presented above may be re-examined to highlight another place characteristic that enables the intense place attachment. Apart from the social and physical dimensions, certain places in all religions have a potent imaginary sacredness and believed association with certain mythical or historical events. This sacredness, transmitted through generations and transformed into a powerful symbol, may facilitate PS in individuals or in the mass.

Arguing on the psychological validity of the imagined, I would further comment on the generalizability of the claim in the target article that PS is indeed the representation of a higher developmental stage. I agree with the authors that PS is more complex than perhaps the simpler bond formation of the infant; but the target article does not clearly illustrate what level of cognitive development is needed to form the complex association between place and spirituality. Reading about the lives of exemplary devotees and leaders of all religions, it seems that at least for some of them, PS developed in early childhood. One possibility is that PS is a specific cognitive-affective experience that starts quite early—the mother's lap, the home, the place for personal or group worship, or the motherland being examples of such transcendental space. Sacredness is, indeed, an integral part of such attachment (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1993, 2004). Theoretically speaking, the sense of sacredness may be viewed as a part of the child's moral development, and may appear in its rudimentary form as soon as goodness and evil can be conceptualized by the child. Indeed the sense of sacredness is considered under the moral foundations theory (Graham & Haidt, 2012). However, as the child acquires greater expressive skills and the ability to differentiate between possible situations, the PS may be further elaborated, differentiated, and woven into a complex pattern. As the authors of the target article underscore, the developmental study of PS may be one extremely interesting domain of further research. Such study needs to be conducted with both real and imagined places.

One can consider drawing upon Donald Winnicott's notion of "Transitional object and transitional phenomenon" (Winnicott, 1953) in connection with the spirituality of an imagined locus. Winnicott argued that the infant gets attached to some symbolic object, like a teddy bear or a piece of cloth, which becomes the zone of comfort for the child. However, the role of the transitional object is far beyond such comfort; the same transitional phenomenon becomes closely associated with self development, especially in the context of symbol formation and attachment to symbols. In Winnicott's understanding, transitional objects function as a mediator between the subjective and objective worlds, and may be utilized during engagement of the self in play, religious experiences, and different sorts of grey areas between the real and the nonreal, between the "me" and "not me" (Winnicott, 1971). Ambiguities can be tolerated well in the transitional space, and symbolism, pleasure, ecstasy, and constructive movement away from the defined reality is possible within this space. Thus in one sense, it is a developmental stage; in another sense, it is the source of transcendental pleasure in life in the form of play, creativity, and love.

I wonder whether the place imbued by spirituality may be conceptualized as a transitional space, where the self can give free rein to the imagination. The healthy use of transitional space may be creative, and the opposite may be pathological. Indeed, we may observe that plenty of passionate good and evil activities have taken place in the world in the context of one imagined place of intense attachment: the place is called heaven.

However, although we have suggested that Winnicott's views may be applied to explain PS, we must keep in mind a fundamental difference between any Western tradition and the Hindu tradition. This relates to the juxtaposition of attachment and detachment. In the West, attachment is viewed as a developmental/clinical phenomenon, tied to everyday experiences of the infant and the growing child. In the Eastern perspective, attachment is a phenomenon that is a step to a deeper detachment. Attachment is, in different Hindu traditions, a state of mind sometimes to be avoided

(e.g. in Vedantic tradition), and sometimes to be cherished to reach a complete unification (e.g. in Bhakti tradition).

We need to understand with deeper engagement the multiple nuances of experiences beyond the everyday reality in order to include the most sensitive corners of PS.

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