

Xavier University Bhubaneswar
University Dialogue Series (UDS)

Date: 28 February 2018

Time: 03.00 pm

Venue: Class Room 129

Marketing and marketization of religion- an exploratory study of the servitor system

Speaker:
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Religion, religiosity and spirituality have found a new momentum in twenty first century life. Search for meaning and identity has led to the increasing global demand for spiritual experiences, pilgrimage, meditation (Rinallo, Scott & Maclaran, 2013; Higgins & Hamilton, 2014; Husemann, Eckhardt, Grohs & Saceanu, 2016). This growing global interest has led to marketization of religion and spirituality, creating a marketplace of various products, services and experiences. (Arvidsson, 2014; Izberk-Bilgin, 2012). Markets fuel further consumption which in turn leads

to market expansion and consolidation. Consumers, marketers and spiritual leaders are all part of this process of facilitating consumer experiences (Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry, 1989; Husemann et al., 2016). Redden's (2016) recent work clarifies that commodification of spirituality needs deeper understanding of socio cultural and economic factors of the spiritual marketplace.

While consumption and consumers of spiritual products and experiences have found a place in marketing literature (Rinallo et al. 2013), the focus so far has been on the 'why' of consumption and conversion of the mundane to sacred (Muniz & Schau, 2005) The consumption process (how) is much less explored in terms of beliefs, rituals, values and community (Mathras et al, 2016). The process of consumer engagement for consumption of spiritual goods and experiences need to be explored to understand how market and commerce mediate spirituality. Moreover, existing literature is skewed towards specific geographies (developed western economies) and religion (Christianity and to some extent Islam). There is a need to examine how capitalist relations of social production intersect with religious orders to invigorate each other. This research addresses the existing gap in understanding how markets and Hinduism coincide to produce certain religious practices in India. From a critical perspective, this study examines how structures of power and commercial exploitation are reproduced in a setting that is expected to transcend these features of materialism.

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The 800+ year old Jagannath culture and temple in Puri, Odisha is taken as a case for this study. Recent years have seen multiple forms of conflict around servitors, administration and devotees getting reported in print and electronic media. In the context of these conflicts, this working paper studies how religion is being marketed at Puri and marketized across centuries and what influences and mediates the spiritual consumption process. Using critical studies approach, it examines the interrelationship among temple management, local administration, state government, servitors and devotees in the process of mediating spiritual consumption. Through secondary data, in-depth interviews (in-progress) and field observations it outlines and examines the marketing contours of religion and religious explorations as often designed and mediated by servitors.



Early findings of this work in progress show that Puri and the Jagannath temple have attracted millions of devotees over the last eight hundred years through organized efforts to attract and retain pilgrims. It had become a utopian mix of consumerism and religious liberation to the common peasants and traders who not only enjoyed the experiential journey but also marketed their own goods and services whenever convenient. At a time when transport facilities were scarce or non-existent, servitors (Panda-s) played the role of a marketer, seller, contract makers as well as service providers. They maintained documents, entertained pilgrims and recruited clerks for documentation, organization and pilgrimage facilitation. In return, servitors enjoyed landed properties in various parts of the countries and a relationship that transcended generations. During both pre-colonial and colonial times, large amount of tax was a bone of contention among various rulers who wanted to benefit from the large flow of pilgrims. Post colonial times have seen the market and marketing of religion getting both fragmented (partition/ independence) and consolidated (servitors selling their rights to serve pilgrims to other fellow servitors) and the increasing influence of the state government. From the mid-eighties (live telecast of Rathayatra), the increasing reach and influence of the electronic media has heightened the stakes and tension among various stakeholders. The pilgrims are no longer pilgrims but tourist-pilgrims who bring in a new set of demand, disposable income, and orientation. A new service scape emerges leading to heightened pilgrim expectations, increased number of reported conflicts and market dominated and globalization mediated spiritual consumption process that originally promised liberation from all things material.

Keywords- Marketization, consumption, spirituality, marketing

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