



International Journal of Yoga and Allied Sciences

journal home page: www.indianyoga.org//

Frontiers

Pilgrimage; Associated Value System in the context of Hinduism, Benefits for a pilgrim, Impact of COVID-19 and way forward

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Article history:

Received 2 Dec 2020

Revised 16 Jan 2021

Accepted 01 Feb 2021.

Keywords:

Pilgrimage, Hinduism, Benefits of Pilgrimage, COVID-19, way forward.

ABSTRACT

Pilgrimage also known as ‘Tirth Yatra’ as per Hindu philosophy & culture, refers to a long-journey by people to a holy place of spiritual significance. There are numerous holy places in India, perceived as sacred by the Hindus. It has been an old tradition in the country to go on pilgrimage. Thousands of Hindus visit holy places and perform rituals with devotion to gain spiritual benefit. Faith is central to all these activities associated with the pilgrimage. Out of so many pilgrimage events in India, Kumbh-Mela, celebrated alternatively in four different places i.e., Allahabad, Haridwar, Nashik, and Ujjain is considered to be the biggest event and attracts large crowds. Attending pilgrimage events influence the sense of well-being in a pilgrim by shaping his/her individual as well as social behaviour and thus needs recognition. Apart from physical benefits like improved cognitive skills and improved ability to cope in limited resources, people undergo a lot of mental transformation as well. People release their anger, sadness, frustration, disappointment, etc., and are able to self-restore themselves to face life situations.

Spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) has very adversely impacted pilgrimage, world wide and India is no exception. Pilgrimage sites are welcoming far fewer visitors than usual. Though the locals want cautiously to welcome the pilgrims back, to boost their economy, the concern is that the pilgrims may unwittingly bring coronavirus to the holy spots. However, people are seeking solace in their faith and want to get to their holy place at the earliest possible. With remarkable progress in the front of vaccination, a light of hope has arisen again that the worst is over or is going to fade gradually with time and the pilgrimage spots are soon going to regain the lost vigour.

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Introduction:

Referring basically to a human activity involving a journey with religious or spiritual connotation, the word ‘Pilgrimage’ has no universally accepted definition. For some, Pilgrimage is a

journey especially a long one, to a holy place of spiritual significance performed with religious sentiments and devotion (Sykes 1982,776) whereas for some it can be as simple as visiting the local shrine.

Whatever geographical distance it may be, it is well accepted that Pilgrimage involves three main factors, i.e., first-a holy place, second-the faith or attraction of a pilgrim to the particular place, and third-a strong motif, i.e., to have a spiritual gain (Bradon 1970, 501). A Pilgrimage-Event involves long journeys by a large number of people to a perceived holy place as a mark of devotion. For many others, apart from the physical and geographical movements, pilgrimage also involves 'interior pilgrimage', i.e., 'the journey of the inner-self'.

People of all religions have been traveling as pilgrims for centuries. The famous destinations include Jerusalem for Christians as well as for Jews, Mecca for Muslims, Bodhgaya, Sarnath for Buddhists, Amritsar for Sikh and Haridwar, Varanasi, Nasik, Ujjain, etc, for Hindus, just to name a few, In India pilgrimage began in the Vedic age. In this paper, we would be focussing on Pilgrimage in the context of Hinduism and its impact on the mental health and spiritual wellbeing of the pilgrim.

B. Value system associated with pilgrimage in the context of Hinduism?

As per Hindu doctrine pilgrimage is valued as an important event in one's life and every follower seek to go on a pilgrimage of his/her faith at least once in his lifetime. Each year, millions of Hindus across the world travel to different places of pilgrimage throughout India (Kaur 1982, 1985; Singh 2004). According to the philosophy of Hinduism or more appropriately 'Sanatana Dharma' pilgrimage is an auspicious event, a 'Punya Karma' that one seeks to achieve not only to overcome the mental burden of sins committed throughout life but also to have a better life in the next birth and to have a higher level of spiritual experience in the process of pilgrimage.

Hinduism has an ancient tradition of pilgrimage-travel, popularly referred to as 'Tirtha-yatra'. A 'Tirth' as per Hindu philosophy involves the entire process of pilgrimage, i.e., starting from conceiving the idea, planning, traveling to holy places, performing austerity during and even after the journey, taking baths in holy river or water-bodies as a symbolic purification ritual, visiting temples, performing 'Puja-Archana' (worship-rituals), donating to the poor and needy and to religious institutions at the pilgrimage spot, and upon returning home, arranging 'Shraddha' (a ritual in remembrance of or as a tribute to ancestors) and feasts for the poor and needy. All these activities are valued as very auspicious and are looked upon as a process for one's spiritual development. Faith is central to all these activities associated with the pilgrimage 'Tirth' of Hindus.

Hindus value the pilgrimage places as very auspicious and worth visiting because of associated faith or belief that these places were visited or established by great 'Rishis & Munis' who had performed great 'Tapasya and Sadhana' around these places in the past and in the process had attained higher spiritual experiences. As such, these places including the soil, the water, the whole atmosphere there is considered to be full of positive energy and the belief goes that for a mundane pilgrim, a mere visit to these places shall elevate the spirit and wellbeing and open the doorway to heaven or help transform oneself to a better life in terms of spirituality. The various places of pilgrimage for Hindus in India, have since ancient times been visited by many sages and thousands of pilgrims have spiritually benefited which has further strengthened the aura of each place. (Bhardwaj 1973; Sharpley and Sundaram 2005). (Sax 1991:13).

According to many followers of Hinduism, pilgrimage is a spiritual desire which acts

as a guiding force and helps to unify oneself with the divinity; it is a search for the true inner-self for experiencing wholeness. The geography, landscape and sacredness of the pilgrimage generate a faith that includes both tangible and intangible elements to associate humankind's identity with the universe. As per Hindu beliefs, after the pilgrimage, one gets transformed and begins a new life. Pilgrimage is valued as a physical and mental process to heal the body, mind, and the soul. Out of various religious practices observed by Hindus, pilgrimage is considered to be the most important and meritorious ritual. Hindu pilgrimage is performed in three stages: first being initiation at an early age, i.e., when the quest is supposed to begin, second- the physical and associated mental journey, and third-the homecoming. (Singh 2005).

The word 'Tirtha' encompasses four connotations in ancient Hindu literature: (1) the route of the journey (Rig Veda, RgV 1.169.6;1.173.11), (2) the place where one can dip in the water as a rite of purification (RgV 8.47.11; 1.46.8); (3) the sacred place which has the power of manifestation (RgV 10.31.3); and (4) places believed to have witnessed divine happenings (Satapatha Brahmana 18.9).

C. Significant places and events of pilgrimage in India.

Hinduism being a polytheistic faith that reveres several gods and goddesses who have control over various elements of creation, life conditions, and nature, the number of popular holy places in India, perceived as sacred by the Hindus, is really large. As a tradition, pilgrimage across the country is very common and the pilgrimage spots are spread throughout. As such the entire country can be said to be a vast sacred land. (Bhardwaj 1973: 7).

As per Indian mythology, the entire country is perceived as auspicious, full of

pilgrimage places having different customs and rituals. Many spiritual thoughts and deep-rooted beliefs associated with a variety of customs exist in India and hence the country is perceived as incredible. Starting from Ladakh in the north to Kanyakumari in the south, Saurashtra in the west to Silchar in the east i.e., every part of this country has significant pilgrimage sites. Performing a pilgrimage is believed to boost mental strength, bring in peace of mind and as such is considered by Hindus as a lifetime achievement.

Kane (1974) for the first time presented an exhaustive and annotated list of approximately 2000 Hindu sacred places and shrines. Other descriptive works on Hindu holy places include Dave's 4-volume work (1957-61), Gita Press's Kalyana Tirthank (1957), short and many popular short-essay books and narratives on holy places of India. As per a list published by Kalyana Tirthank approximately 35% of the sacred places are related to Lord Shiva, followed by 16% places related to Lord Vishnu, and 12% places related to Goddess Parvati or Durga. After independence i.e., since the 1950s pilgrimages regained its importance in India and became more popular. As per statistical data from The Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India, it is evident that out total domestic travels in India, more than one-third is for a pilgrimage.

The pilgrimage places in India are numerous. There are many sacred cities including- Ayodhya, Dwarka, Haridwar, Kanchipuram, Mathura, Ujjain and Varanasi just to name a few. Similarly, the 12 important places associated with Lord Shiva, which are also known as the 'Jyotirlingas' include Kedarnath, Kashi-Vishwanath, Baidyanath, Bhimshankar, Omkareswar, Mallikarjuna, Somnath, Maha-Kaleshwar, Trimbakeswar, Nageshwar, Ghreshwar, and Rameshwaram. The four pilgrimage places also known as 'Char-Dhams' include

Badrinath in North, Rameswaram in South Jagannathpuri in East, and Dwarka in West. Apart from the above, there are approximately around 52 special sites related to the Goddesses 'Parvati' which are believed to be places where dismembered parts of the goddess's body lie.

Out of so many pilgrimage events in India, Kumbh-Mela is considered to be the biggest event. It attracts large crowds. It is celebrated alternatively in four different places i.e., Allahabad (also called as 'Prayaga'), Haridwar, Nashik, and Ujjain on the banks of holy rivers. The 'Triveni-Sangam' also known as 'Prayaga' is at the confluence of River Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati. Holy rivers associated with Kumbh Mela include River Ganga near Haridwar, River Godavari near Nasik and River Shipra near Ujjain. The 'Ardh Kumbh Mela', is organised every six years and 'Purn Kumbh' is organised every twelve years. 'Maha Kumbh' is organised after 144 years at Allahabad. 'Kumbh-Mela' is symbolized by a large-scale gathering of Hindus, holy baths on river banks, and performing various rituals. It has deep-rooted beliefs. As per Hindu belief, these are the places where 'Amrit' (nectar) fell from the pitcher (Kumbha) subsequent to Samudra Manthan. The next Kumbh Mela is planned to be held in Haridwar during February-March, 2021.

D. Benefits of Pilgrimage

Though pilgrimage events with large crowds may pose health risks associated with communicable diseases, there is increasing evidence that these events benefit the pilgrims for well-being, which needs recognition. Attending such pilgrimage events influence the sense of well-being in a pilgrim by shaping his/her individual as well as social behaviour. As such, we need to reconceptualize how mass gatherings impact individuals. A pilgrim having attended the event feels

rejuvenated, feels better, and has a sense of fulfillment in life. He gets recognition in society as well and develops a sense of satisfaction and containment in life. Studies in past, related to social and psychological research have indicated that participation in group-related activities have a positive impact on the well-being of an individual [Shruti]. Studies carried out by Shruti et al revealed that those who actively participated in a mass event reported an improvement in their well-being as compared to those who did not participate.

For most pilgrims, their faith and religious beliefs help them exercise their cognitive skills and encourage meditative practices during the life-time events and help improve ability to cope up [4], [5]. [6]–[11]. The more one participates in a team event more he feels a part of the team a develops a feeling of acceptance and sense of well-being [12], [13]. If one is able to follow one's religious beliefs and practice religious rituals, he is likely to have identity-affirmation which contributes to his sense of well-being. [36].

The various tangible and intangible benefits arising out of pilgrimage can be summarised as given below;

i. Develop Physical Awareness

The hardship associated with pilgrimage, i.e., traveling itself to a distant crowded place, living there with limited resources, adhering to the routines and rituals, etc., helps develop a sense of self-consciousness and a different outlook of life. It motivates people to be humble towards life and encourages one to trust in one's ability. Away from the comfort zone is like purifying, strengthening, and unifying the body-mind, and soul. Various studies indicate that during the spiritual journey with the group having the same mental framework, pilgrims develop the quality of adjustment with life situations.

During the journey, a positive atmosphere is created which has a positive impact on mental status and thereby have a positive impact on cardio-vascular and cardio-muscular system of the body.

ii. Mental Transformation

Out of all benefits a pilgrim may have out of a pilgrimage tour, the most important and profound benefit is the mental transformation he/she undergoes in the process. There is a tremendous sense of mental satisfaction to have physically attended the spot of his/her dream and faith. Being able to see the holy places with one's own eyes, being able to touch and feel the objects of dream induces a hope in the mind of the pilgrim for blessings and forgiveness from the supreme power. Some people tired of life-situations and struggles, like to believe in some supernatural power associated with the pilgrimage, which they believe, can do miracles and change their life altogether. Many people hope for forgiveness and have a strong belief that pilgrimage to a holy incredible place can help not only to get rid of their own 'past karma' but also of their ancestors. Thus, people who have done the pilgrimage develop a sense of mental satisfaction which subsequently leads to their physical wellbeing. They develop a feeling to have approached something special, and this experience away from their mundane day-to-day routine gives them happiness, satisfaction, and peace. People can release their anger, sadness, frustration, disappointment, etc., and can self-restore themselves. Some people also feel motivated to go on pilgrimage to initiate the process of inner-journey and ultimately to have self-realization. The physical and mental nourishment along with spiritual well-being gives satisfaction to the pilgrim. (Christen,1983; Gitelson et al, 1995; Frohlick,2005, Gursoy et al, 2006; lea,2006, Karlson and Brandstorm,2008; Liang et al,2008; Lim et al, 2008)

All the five senses of a pilgrim are actively involved during the pilgrimage involving large crowds, which not only develop awareness but feeding the inner mind continuously. Experiencing a routine quite different from the normal routine of a pilgrim, living in a charged ambiance at the pilgrimage, the pilgrims can forget at least for some time, their day-to-day problems and sorrows.

iii. Spiritual Transformation

Going on pilgrimage is an important aspect of the spiritual life and is one of the deepest spiritual needs of people across the world. It is a common human experience through a journey to the place of belief and faith, in which one looks for fulfilling a ritual duty out of devotion, get rid of their past sins, experience higher spirituality, and get blessed.

There are three ways, one can move on a spiritual journey. A simple physical journey, for the sake of attainment of some desire of the external world. Second, is the internal journey, whereby, one tries to find more meaning to life, and to know the higher truth. The third one, involves both the external and internal journey, where one travels, not for the sake of external quest, but to reach the stage, where one can attain a higher level of consciousness.

iv. Socio-cultural interaction benefits

Travels give people exposure to different environment, cultures, and thought processes can be safely assumed to have shaped personality, religion and societies. Travels have helped people to understand themselves, this world better. Studies in the past have pointed out that social interaction plays a positive role in our physical and mental well-being apart from other benefits of reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, Alzheimer's, hypertension, alcoholism and depression.

In a study by Holt-Lunstad, J, Smith, TB, Layton, JB. in 2010, on the negative impact of social isolation, it was revealed that social isolation is bad for mental as well as physical health. Pilgrimage gives the opportunity to travel to different and distant places and gives exposure to interact with people of different culture and geography. This gives a broad view of life and the world. Pilgrims learn to respect and accept different social norms. They feel to be a part of greater society and this gives satisfaction. Also, by adhering to community norms, one realizes benefits of co-existence, living in harmony and showing solidarity to others. (Greenwood,1972; Buck,1977; Heenan,1978; Ritche,1984; Cohen 1988; Eder et al,1995; Pritchard et al, 1998; Dwyer et al, 2000; De Bres and Davis,2001; Xiao and Smith,2004; Snowball and Wills,2006a; Rooney-Brown,2008)

E. Impact on Pilgrimage due to COVID-19 and way forward:

In 2018 about 60% of tourists in India travelled for religious purpose (Alphons, 2018). (Vijayanand, 2012). Trends of religious tourism in India during 2019, indicated that pilgrimage would continue to grow in coming years. However, since the outbreak of the pandemic COVID-19, starting from late March-2020, pilgrimage travel has been almost negligible. Spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) has very adversely impacted the pilgrimage, tourism, and hotel industry as a whole worldwide and India is no exception. COVID-19 has almost devastated the economy. With people becoming jobless, purchasing powers reduced, modes of commuting stopped, restrictions imposed on social gatherings all these have brought pilgrimage to a halt. There is a fear of catching the disease. The calamity of the COVID-19 pandemic is a new biological

war that is being experienced by the whole world and the pilgrimage is one of the major victims of this pandemic outbreak. We are in the middle of a crisis and a testing time for all of us.

Haridwar, one of the holiest places for Hindus, is welcoming far fewer visitors than usual. The lack of pilgrims to Haridwar is compounding the uncertainty felt by many. Some owners are cautiously welcoming the pilgrims back because the local economy is to a great extent dependant on the pilgrims. However, the concern is that the pilgrims may unwittingly bring coronavirus to Haridwar. Though the temples along the banks of Ganga have fewer visitors than usual, pilgrims still are seen to give offerings and touch the holy statues. Putting restrictions at the temples is a difficult task. But even with so much uncertainty and fear surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic more and more people are seeking solace in their faith and wanting for the occasion to get to their holy places. With remarkable progress in the front of vaccination, a light of hope has arisen again that the worst is over or is going to fade gradually with time.

F. Conclusion

Pilgrimage has a special relevance in people's life. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, religious Indian destinations have already witnessed crises arising out of natural disasters in the past. However, such disruptions did not last long and people's faith in their tradition and culture overtook the fear of such calamities. Good number of pilgrims visited the spots with renewed enthusiasm. All grim situations in past have phased out with time and so will the present pandemic. Indian pilgrims too have shown great support in all post-disaster phases and have revisited the sites with great enthusiasm. This has been revealed after the Kedarnath tragedy of 2013. Within next few years, the

Kedarnath-Yatra regained its vigour. In addressing this pandemic, crisis-management protocols, maintaining social distancing must be followed. This will prove to be extremely effective. The steps being taken by the government, local administration, the fighting spirit of the people to beat the pandemic, enthusiasm of pilgrims, is bound to help pilgrimage regain the vigour in near future.

One positive aspect of the pandemic is that it has brought people closer, made people re-think and have a re-look at the life and societal-values, reinforced spirituality. It has helped reinforce the faith pilgrims had in our ancient tradition and culture. Pilgrimage is expected to bounce back since for many people, it is going to act as a driving force and inspiration for recovery.

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Cite this paper as: **Dr. Parinita Singh**, Pilgrimage; Associated Value System in the context of Hinduism, Benefits for a pilgrim, Impact of COVID-19 and way forward, *International Journal of Yoga and Allied Science*, Volume: 10, Issue: 1 ; Jan-June 2021(63-71)