

PILGRIMAGE: PHENOMENON OF PASSAGE

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1. Introduction

The month of December is a special season of pilgrimages. As I reflect on the topic, Islamic pilgrimage, *hajj*, is held in full swing with religious piety and gaiety in Saudi Arabia having had worldwide preparation and high-level organisation. Watching the scene in television is, indeed, spectacular and sacred, a moment of religious fulfilment for millions in white garb and a memorable movement of people around the stone in the holy city of Islam. It is food for senses to see great rivers of humanity flood into Arabia from every point of the compass overflowing the avenues of Mecca during the pilgrimage. The reason for such a mammoth gathering is obvious: “The holiest of all is in Mecca – there, in the centre of the sacred, forbidden city, is the terrestrial heart of Islam.”¹ Pilgrimage, *hajj*, is something obligatory for every Muslim (as it is the fifth pillar of Islam), of course, who can afford the journey.² “Night and day the dark-draped *Ka’bah* is the centre about which a vast, surging current of faithful perform the ritual circling, again surrounded, wave upon wave, by a sea of exhausted pilgrims lying upon the ground or seated or standing in attitudes of devotion and prayer.”³ At the same time, we watch the Indian media giving coverage to the scam on *hajj*. It is unfortunate to learn that the middlemen mismanage the money for a religious cause. In this case, it is important to take note of the instruction given to pilgrims: “And take a

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¹Ahmad Kamal, *The Sacred Journey*, New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1961, 4.

²See *Quran* 3:96-97.

³Kamal, *The Sacred Journey*, 4.

provision for the journey, but the best of provisions is right conduct. So fear me, O ye who are wise.”⁴

So also the *Ardhakumbhamela*, Hindu pilgrimage at *Prayag*, the confluence of rivers Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati, is underway. Millions of Hindus are making their pilgrimage to the confluence at Allahabad (culminating in a holy dip), in order to get rid of their sins and, thus, to obtain salvation. Undoubtedly, it is a marvellous and moving scene of witness to the faith of the people with great devotion, diligence, and dedication. It is to be remembered that the Bharatiya Janata Party had its national political gathering in the same city reiterating and rededicating themselves to reconstruct a temple at the disputed site of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya.

Observing a forty-one day *vratam* (vow) and putting on special *vastram* (clothing) devotees from all over India reach Kerala and climb the steps to the temple situated on a hilltop for a *darsanam* (vision) of Lord Ayyappan on Sabarimala and to have a *snanam* (bath) in the river Pampa. “The traditional route to Sabarimala begins at Erumeli and winds through the forest and hilly terrain to the foot of Mt. Sabari.”⁵ Today more pilgrims go to Sabarimala, but religious rigour is slowly vanishing due to the modern facilities *en route* and on site arrangements. For example, the access road built for vehicles to drive right up to the foot of Mt. Sabari⁶ has made the pilgrimage easy and cosy. These developments should be watched in the light of an important instruction: Pilgrimage “should not therefore be viewed as a picnic.”⁷ The recent row among the religious pundits of Kerala concerning the entry into the shrine at Sabarimala by an actress from Karnataka is to be read as religious intolerance and gender discrimination that are being perpetuated by the so-called holy *pujaris* (priests), who play nasty politics to enthrone and dethrone the high priest in the sanctum sanctorum of the temple.

Seen in the present wider context, pilgrimage seems to be a fascinating as well as a frightening phenomenon. With these updates on

⁴*Quran* 2:196.

⁵Radhika Sekar, *The Sabarimalai Pilgrimage and Ayyappan Cultus*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992, 60.

⁶Sekar, *The Sabarimala Pilgrimage*, 60.

⁷N. R. Menon, “A Journey to God: Aspects of Pilgrimage,” *Journal of Dharma* 12, 3 (July-September 1987), 312.

the latest pilgrimages in the country and outside, it is fitting to have a reflection on the concept and content of pilgrimage.

2. Pilgrimage as a Passage

Pilgrimage seems to gain greater momentum today on account of modern means of communication and conveyance. Organised pilgrimages are on the increase. Attractive package tour offers tempt the ordinary people to go for a pilgrimage. Slowly, it is slipping from religious aura and arena into the field of tourism; and it is becoming a booming industry today. So also it is given to understand that religious flavour and fervour of pilgrims are on the decrease. It is noticeable that following the trend of the time, pilgrimages are becoming more and more global and having no consideration for the sacred space and time at the local level.

Fundamentally, pilgrimage is an epiphany of the life of faith and nature of faith of the people. It presents, projects, and proposes the concept and content of a religious ethos of the community. Pilgrimage is part and parcel of one's faith expression. It unpacks the vision and values hidden in the religious text and tradition. It is a vehicle of transmission of faith to the people of other faiths as well.

Pilgrimage is basically a movement; it is a movement from one point to another point, from a point of departure to a point of destiny. Unambiguously, movement is a sign of life. Movement could be physical, mental, or spiritual. Since these spheres are interrelated, pilgrimage presupposes a movement at every realm of life. As movement is necessary for birth, growth, and sustenance, so too pilgrimage – passage – is essential for religious life. The absence of internal or external movement of the body would mean that it is dead. Everybody moves; everything keeps moving. Movement could be a sign of progress or regress. As far as religious belief is concerned, pilgrimage expresses inner current and undercurrent of the belief-system of a particular religion.

The imagery of *marga* (path or way) is very popular and profound in the cultural ethos of India. There is *marga* for the attainment of anything or everything. Everyone has to follow the way to attain the goal. The way is about the *sadhana* (means) a *sadhaka* (seeker) should undertake in his life to attain the *sadhya* (end).

Pilgrimage is precisely being on the way. It is walking the way. It is to be on your march-set-go. Pilgrimage resets the focus of the way. It reminds about the focus of life. It describes the nature of faith and the path

towards its realisation. It is a step-by-step training programme for life. Pilgrimage gives coaching to people to walk the way – always walk the way – watching the track and following the path. It is, in this sense, a corrective measure as well. Pilgrimage might help people to put the derailed coaches back on rail for the rest of the ride.

The Sanskrit term for pilgrimage is *tirthayatra*. “A natural place where a symbolic crossing over from *samsara* to *moksa* takes place is [sic] also called *tirtha* – a place of pilgrimage. This devotion to *tirtha* and the journey made to such *tirtha* is called *tirthayatra*.”⁸ A *tirtha* is “a consecrated spot.” As it symbolizes “a crossing over to heaven, it could be a temple, shrine, river, mountain, cave, tree or a person.”⁹ *Tirtha* is associated with good water for drinking and bathing, i.e., pure running water. Bathing in a *tirtha* is an act of penance and purification. One who bathes and is purified becomes a *tirtha*, a crossing place for others.¹⁰

In this sense, *tirtha* could be a place or a person where the seeker undergoes an experience of crossing-over or passing from temporality to eternity. In this case, it provides an exodus experience to the devotee. It is the crossing over of the Red Sea. It is the passage from sinfulness to saintliness. It is a voyage to transcendence. It is the God-realisation. It is the moment of liberation and salvation. So *tirthayatra* (journey to sacred space or spot) is, in fact, *moksa yatra* (journey to liberation). This is the reason why many do not return from their *yatra*; it is their eternal journey and journey to eternity. This is the case with many Hindus who make their *yatra* to Varanasi or Kashi; they do not return home, but die and merge in Ganga.

Pilgrimage is a procession. It is an ongoing upward and forward procession. It is also going around and all around. It is ascending as well as descending. Pilgrimage is a progression in the right direction with proper orientation, provided it is being performed with due preparation. It is dynamic and not static; it is ever growing and evolving. It is a progressive progression. It is a progression to go beyond the boundaries – to march forward to the behind and the beyond.

⁸John Chakkanatt, *Tirthayatra: Pilgrimage unto Eternity*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1991, 14.

⁹Chakkanatt, *Tirthayatra*, 15.

¹⁰Chakkanatt, *Tirthayatra*, 16-17.

Pilgrimage involves an exodus experience. It is a passage from sinfulness to saintliness; it is a voyage from despair to hope; it is a crossing over from death to life; it is a movement from slavery to salvation; it is a move from exile to existence; it is a transfer from foreign land to motherland; it is a switching over from meaninglessness to meaningfulness; it is going over from here to there; it is a passing over from earth to heaven; it is an experience of immanence and transcendence at the same time.

Pilgrimage is for an encounter. It is a personal encounter of the divinity in humanity; entertaining the experience of heaven on earth; undergoing the experience of the past and the future in the present. It is an experience of being and becoming; it is a transforming encounter; it is a transmitting event. Pilgrimage is a prayer, a prayer that shapes the being and the behaviour of the person or the community. A pilgrimage of such an order is best exemplified in the hymn, “*asatomasatgamaya, tamasomajyotirgamaya, mrtiyorma amrtamgamaya*” (lead me from unreality to reality, from darkness to light, from death to life eternal).¹¹ This is the purpose of pilgrimage; so also it is the end of religious belief.

Though the ideal of pilgrimage is held high, there are, as in the past, different types of pilgrims and pilgrimages traceable around the world, and no religion in this respect is spared from the onslaught of contemporary trends of the society. As I contemplate on the mystery of the Incarnation in the light of the Infancy Narrative concerning the Nativity of the Lord, my attention goes to the different types of pilgrims and the diverse paradigms of pilgrimages recounted in the story. Otherwise, I discover certain resemblances of the present types of pilgrimages in the Infancy Narrative. The types of pilgrims and the paradigms of pilgrimage found in the Gospels pertaining to the birth of Christ are illustrative of the true and false pilgrims and pilgrimages ever old and ever new. Hence, a brief reflection on the different paradigms of pilgrimage as seen in the Infancy Narrative is in order.

3. Paradigms of Pilgrims

We notice at least three types of pilgrims in the Infancy Narrative of Jesus recounted in the Gospels.¹² In the first place, the angel of God announces the birth of Jesus to the shepherds keeping watch over their sheep. In fact,

¹¹*Brhदारanyaka Upanisad* I:3:28.

¹²Luke 2:1-20 and Matthew 2:1-23.

the shepherds were terrified at the message in the midnight. But taking heart in what they were told, they travelled to Bethlehem and met babe Jesus in the manger, together with Joseph and Mary. As a result of the encounter with the mystery of Incarnation, the shepherds went about proclaiming the glad tidings all over. There is a second type of the pilgrims in the same infancy narrative. It is on the basis of the communication given to the Wise men of the East. The communication was based on the positioning of the star in the firmament. Learning the importance of the star, the wise men set out to meet the Saviour. In consultation with the people of the land, they succeeded to pay homage to the newborn babe, the king of the world. The third type of the pilgrims in the narrative is constituted by the gang of priests, scribes, and the king of the land. They understood that the Messiah should be born in Bethlehem. In addition, there is an expressed desire of the king in the request to the Wise men to report to him all about the birth of the king, but with a different intention.

From the above analysis, there are three types of people going for pilgrimage. The first type is the weak – weak on some counts, but sound in many other respects. This is also the meek. This represents the working class. This type faces number of burdens, but for them await pleasant surprises and concomitant blessings. There are a number of insecurities that this type has to confront in life. But everyday this type meets newness in life, for this is one with the creation. In this sense, the weak are challenged in every moment of their lives, but they are privileged to count on the blessings as they move on and on. Their's is a life of pilgrimage – moving from place to place in search of greener pastures. There is no surprise in the narrative that the glad tidings of the Nativity of the Lord was announced to the shepherds keeping watch over their sheep out in the wide horizon.

The second type shall be called the wise, as explicitly mentioned in the passage. It is the wise who watch, wait, and walk for the truth, goodness, and beauty. It is they who search for liberation. Their occupation, or call it vocation, is the contemplation on, communication of, and communion with the Divine. They have the tools to uncover the signs of the times and to interpret it with wisdom for the liberation of all. These seekers always continue to partake in pilgrimage. They watch the changes, wait for the acceptable hour, and boldly walk the way to behold the vision. In the course of their pilgrimage they enter into a genuine

dialogue, a dialogue for discernment and decision-making. They march till they reach the destination. The wise men see the star and understand the significance of the constellations of stars. They set out to pay homage to the newborn Saviour. Indeed, they too succeed in marching towards the goal and meeting the king of peace. The second type of pilgrims, called the wise, also made the pilgrimage to the 'shrine' in Bethlehem.

There is the third type, let us call it the wicked, for their design was evil from the beginning to the end. They did neither receive the announcement of the birth of the Saviour nor did they recognise the sign of salvation. They have the money and the muscle power. They have the might, but do not follow the right. It is the king, priests and scribes of the Infancy Narrative who belong to this third paradigm. They too came to learn the good news from the Scripture. The king expressed his desire to pay the new king his homage. He did not want to wander around in the wilderness, woods or on the hillside of Judea. The king is not ready to take risk and accept challenges on the way to the sanctuary. Hence, he was deprived of the *darsan* (gaze). He is furious and wants to do away with the newborn king, for to his estimation, the newborn is a threat to the throne. His evil designs become obvious in his declaration to kill all the infants in the township. It is typically the so-called politicians, who want to maintain the status quo and eliminate all who are on their way. They have their wicked designs and ways to show that they have great regard for a particular religion, the so-called politicians would donate huge sum of money or give favours in order to canvas the masses with an eye on political mileage through the vote bank of people of particular religious beliefs. The Herod of the narrative is not very difficult to be found in our society, though they are numerous presenting themselves as different *avatars* (incarnations). Their ways are unknown and untoward. They also go for pilgrimage. More than anyone, these politicians pull huge crowds in the temple.

A noticeable similarity with the narrative is traceable with the present institutions of pilgrimage: the three types or paradigms of pilgrims, namely, the weak, the wise, and the wicked are typical of our times as well. This reminds us of the perennial problems attached to pilgrimage all over the world and in every age. At the same time, there is a lesson to learn for personal and communal enlightenment and enrichment. Who are the blessed ones in the pilgrimage become evident from the narrative. So

also it teaches the dispositions a genuine pilgrim should entertain and foster in one's life.

What is important to learn from the meaning and practice of pilgrimage is that it is undertaken in view of the liberation from the limitations of this world. It is an experience of 'Passover'. It is an encounter of the Sacred. It is for the *darsan* of God. It is to liberate people from all the worldly entanglements. Confronted with the vicissitudes of life, people on pilgrimage are in a privileged position to experience closely and dearly the accompanying presence and the transcendence of God. The Israelites wandering in the wilderness experienced the intimacy of Yahweh. So also people on pilgrimage are exposed to experience the presence and blessings of God. It is pedagogical, in the sense that it instructs the faithful regarding the true nature of faith and genuine nature of life, that is, it is an eternal and everlasting walking the way, a forward and upward movement, until we reach the end, the God of creation, liberation, and celebration.

Just as there are different types of pilgrims, pilgrimage has different faces through which it retains its force in the society. In one way or other all are pilgrims. Pilgrimage is fundamental to life, be it at the level of physical, mental, or spiritual journey. It is, therefore, invaluable for the present study to examine pilgrimage as a perennial phenomenon.

4. Pilgrimage as a Phenomenon

True to the term, pilgrimage is a phenomenon. Since it is a "pan-human phenomenon,"¹³ it is equipped to take in the vicissitudes of space-time. As already remarked, pilgrimage is on the increase, though reasons are varied. Pilgrimage is a movement of people in the moment, and it is an event. For the movement to be alive and active, it has to be open to the changes and challenges set in by the course of history. Pilgrimage, to be of lasting value, has to strain all the nerves to maintain a balance between the trend and tradition, or to remain at its roots in order to bear fruits. Discernment of the genuine exercises of pilgrimage at regular interval, therefore, is in order.

It has been found that "modernisation has direct impact and influence even on the institution of pilgrimage and in the performance of religious

¹³Sabita Acharya, *Pilgrimage in Indian Civilisation*, New Delhi: Manak Publications, 1997, 9.

acts.”¹⁴ In what follows, therefore, there are certain observations in view of some of the modern trends associated with pilgrimage.

4.1. Global versus Local

On the one hand, the world is becoming more and more global, and on the other, there is the rediscovery of the local. As far as pilgrimage is concerned, the trend of globalisation is affecting the institution of pilgrimage. In a highly competitive world, it is really difficult for the little traditions to survive. Great traditions of global nature are swallowing the little ones. So also what was found only in the limits of a locality is made a national or international phenomenon. As a result, the *tirtha*, *tirthayatra*, and *tirthastan* of locality become negligent, if not extinct. In order to make the pilgrimage at the reach of people, there is the copying of the original or the duplicating of the renowned/established pilgrim centres all over. In addition, there remained a to-and-fro approach between ordinary and extraordinary pilgrimages. They were mutually complementing and enriching each other. Today there are larger crowds for pilgrimage, but with no lasting impact on daily living. Pilgrimage becomes a watertight compartment in the life of people, having no continued flow of the spirit in their daily living, which is equally a pilgrimage.

4.2. Pilgrimage versus Picnic

There used to be a particular day and date for pilgrimage. Today in a world of haste, everything has to be in a hurry. Pilgrimage addressed the whole human person in totality and integrity. *Tirthayatra* “does not mean only physical act of visiting the holy/sacred places but also implies the mental and moral aspects [*sic*] of human beings.”¹⁵ But these different aspects woven into the fabric of pilgrimage are slowly disappearing on various counts. It is becoming a physical impossibility for people to go for pilgrimage, for they are out of station or live in far away places. In such situations, what is preferable for many is to go to the shrine, when it is convenient for them. Unfortunately, it often ends up in a picnic. Either they drive in on their own vehicle or hire one in order to fulfil a promise or pledge. There is no time to observe the prescriptions of the pilgrimage proper.

¹⁴Acharya, *Pilgrimage*, 254.

¹⁵Acharya, *Pilgrimage*, 9.

4.3. Spiritual versus Material

“As per Hindu religious literature, pilgrimage is an act of holiness.”¹⁶ It is the same with other religious literature as well. It is evident that the spiritual dimension of pilgrimage is dwindling day by day. A sense of sin and the need for grace are becoming old fashioned. *Papa* and *punya* are no more words of appeal to the modern generation. Hence, there is no necessity for repentance on one’s sin. Holiness is an outdated term. ‘Enjoy life or enjoy life by all means’ is the buzzword of the day. Pilgrimage, therefore, has almost lost its spiritual appeal and significance. Attachment to the material benefits is the primary goal of the vast majority. Detachment or renunciation has a role in life. If at all people flock to shrines, majority of them go for material gain. Spiritual aspect, which was the primary concern of a pilgrim, is either absent or insignificant. It is true that “From the most ancient civilisations, to the present time sacred centres have exerted a powerful pull on the believers.”¹⁷ But as the spiritual aspect of *tirtha* is losing its ground, such powerful pull on the believers is also on the vain. It is important to remember that pilgrimage is not “a pleasure trip, a business tour or a geographical exploration. It is primarily a spiritual discipline, a pursuit of purity of heart, an attempt to realize the eternal longing of a devotee to encounter the Divine.”¹⁸

4. Harmony versus Disharmony

Pilgrimage used to be an occasion to experience the sacredness, rhythm, and harmony in the nature by diving deep into the Divine presence along with the co-pilgrims on earth. But this is fast disappearing, due to the modern services and amenities provided in *tirthastan*, which radically alter the geographical settings, social fabric, and the interaction and relationship among the pilgrims. Devotees moving in a single direction with the same disposition and aspiration gave an impressive and inspiring scene where all were considered and understood as equals making the pilgrimage to the end. Due to the modern outfit, there is deprivation of beautiful Mother Nature, the company of the co-pilgrims and the sense of the sacred, which robs the rhythm, order, and harmony.

¹⁶Acharya, *Pilgrimage*, 163.

¹⁷Acharya, *Pilgrimage*, 2.

¹⁸Swami Prabhananda, “Sri Ramakrishna’s Pilgrimage to Navadvip,” *The Vedanta Kesari* 83 (March 1996), 87.

4.5. Liberty versus Slavery

Tirthayatra is undertaken in view of liberation or salvation. *Yatra* was always refreshing and reinvigorating. *Tirtha* instilled in the pilgrims a sense of direction and it inspired them to commit themselves totally and joyfully. In the present scenario, it is given to understand that more and more people become slaves of the *tirtha*. On the one hand, the experience of the pilgrims is not long lived and, on the other, they are unable to transport something from the *tirtha* onto their everyday life in the ordinary context. As a consequence, these pilgrims fail to accomplish their responsibilities. They are being tied down to the person or place. In the absence of the familiar *tirtha*, the pilgrims find themselves helpless and hopeless. Spiritual *sadhanas* shall not enslave people but should set people free to move along with others to the end.

4.6. Costly versus Cosy

Pilgrimage used to be very demanding and equally rewarding. It meant taking the trouble; walking the way to the *tirtha*; brining blessings back home. Remark of a priest concerning the pilgrimage to Nandadevi is to the point: "This alone is the difficult pilgrimage – where else is it difficult? In other places, buses go... [N]earby pilgrimage places had been ruined by motor roads and commercialisation."¹⁹ Today pilgrimage is made very easy. Somebody will drive you to the *tirthastan*. There are number of comfortable hotels in the place of *dharmshalas*. People are willing to pay any amount of money for comfort and many are not in a mood to spend time in nature, with the neighbour and the Other. Consequently, the pilgrims have no lasting memory of the mystery which can keep people going in their different walks of life.

4.7. *Tirthayatra* versus *Rathyathra*

"Pilgrimage is considered as a sacred act."²⁰ But this is an era of politicisation and secularisation. It has not spared the institution of pilgrimage in India. Unfortunately, the holy *tirthayatra* is being replaced by so-called *rathyatra* (chariot tour) in this country. It succeeded to a great extent in pulling the crowd and mobilising the people to vote for the hidden agenda. The question of Rama-*mandir* (temple of Rama) in

¹⁹William S. Sax, *Mountain Goddess: Gender and Politics in a Himalayan Pilgrimage*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, 54.

²⁰Acharya, *Pilgrimage*, 2.

Ayodhya is still a burning issue, which divide people on the line of religious belief. This is the trump that some politicians play to retain or to regain political power. In the recent past, the same political figure went on a *bharatyatra* (India tour) to attract the masses and mobilise the vote bank for the party, which was a total flop. It seems that the people of India have come of age to distinguish the importance of *tirthayatra* and the vengeance flared up by *rathyatra* and *bharatyatra*, etc.

4.8. Sanctuary versus Armoury

In the institution of pilgrimage spiritual and moral decadence is visible at every realm. “It is found that in comparison with ancient days, the present day priests of temples are not so much sincere and devoted towards their services.”²¹ Unfortunately, some of the sanctuaries are converted into armoury. Since sacredness is attached to places of worship, and under this banner some of the sanctuaries are being used to store up weapons of destruction. The *tirthastan* known for peace and serenity is made into a battlefield of violence and enmity. So also sanctuaries have become safe havens of militants and terrorists. Atrocities and crimes, though sporadic, happen in the premises of *tirthastan*.

4.9. Pilgrimage versus Tourism

It is obvious that there is an increase in the number of people coming to shrines of great importance. But most of them, as mentioned earlier, do not make their pilgrimages on religious motives. They come as tourists or visitors. More people go for pilgrimage “because of modern means of mass transportation which made it possible for large number of individuals to undertake pilgrimage more conveniently.”²² Naturally, to cater to the needs of these tourists and to make money, various private companies and government provide added facilities in the vicinity, which, in turn, spoil the nature and its beauty. Along with tourism, every kind of business and trafficking is found increasing. But in the beginning “the nature and spread of the pilgrimage is found in the *Rgveda* where it has been suggested that in order to wash ‘evil’ or ‘sin’ people used to undertake journey to the sacred rivers for purification and redemption from sin.”²³ Thus, the primary purposes of pilgrimage, like, desire for identification

²¹Acharya, *Pilgrimage*, 253.

²²Acharya, *Pilgrimage*, 3.

²³Acharya, *Pilgrimage*, 9.

with the sacred order and accumulation of merit and the removal of sin,²⁴ are being forgotten or gradually abandoned. Pilgrimage is and should be undertaken “to fulfil the desire of obtaining *punya* (grace) and to get rid of *pāpa* (sin).”²⁵

5. Conclusion

Pilgrimage is a phenomenon; it is a pan-human phenomenon; it is a reality while it remains a mystery to many who are not initiated into it; it is a communal and personal phenomenon. Pilgrimage goes on uninterruptedly. The *tirtha* may be different depending on one’s religious and cultural background. It might be a person or a place, where the devotee experiences salvation or liberation. People move to the cave of the heart, to the beautiful high mountain peaks towering the skies, to the bank of a river, to the valley of Himalayas, to the heights of Jerusalem, to the city of Mecca, to the snow clad Hemkund, to the confluence of rivers at Allahabad, to have a dip in Ganges at Haridwar, to the woods, to the valley of flowers, to a holy shrine, to Mount Calvary, to the Promised Land, to the heavens, etc. This is the sign of the sincere search of the seeker for the Sacred and the significance of life. It gives the direction to encounter the behind and the beyond in the Being. It expresses the incessant search of human being for God, the Source, Strength, and Summit of life. This is beautifully illustrated by Saint Augustine in his *Confessions*: “you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”²⁶ It summarises the religious significance of pilgrimage.

In the mystery of Incarnation, there is a pilgrimage of God to his people in order to make them godlike. Saint Paul traces the decisive disposition of a pilgrim in the person of Jesus Christ:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who thought he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death

²⁴Surinder Mohan Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India: A Study in Cultural Geography*, Delhi: Surjeet Publications, 1989, 148.

²⁵Acharya, *Pilgrimage*, 2.

²⁶St. Augustine, *Confessions* I:1.

– even a death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name.²⁷

It is in *kenosis* that we have the fullness, wholeness, or holiness, which is the purpose of pilgrimage. Every pilgrimage presupposes this emptying in order to be fulfilling. In every sense pilgrimage is a passage – a passage from darkness to light, from *avidya* (ignorance) to *parajnanam* (wisdom), from evil to goodness, from death to life.

Pilgrimage possesses immense absorbing capacity and everything in life could be understood in terms of pilgrimage. Religious pilgrimages were means of national integration as well. In the introduction of pilgrimage to four shrines at the four corners of the country, which according to the tradition was instituted by Sankaracharya, the great teacher and revivalist of philosophic Hinduism,²⁸ involved an implicit, if not explicit, programme for national and cultural integration. Scholars are of the opinion that the institution of pilgrimage “plays an important role which ultimately strengthens the solidarity of entire nation.”²⁹ It is likely that the modern Hindu Nationalist Movements have learned lessons from the institution of pilgrimage to spread their wings far and wide.

Pilgrimage is a celebration of life, celebration of the life of faith and ethos. In this celebration of faith, pilgrimage projects publicly the ethos as well as ethics of a community. It is a blueprint of life. Whatever is reflected in the practice of contemporary pilgrimage has something to say about the present approach to life in general. One may be able to see a number of parallels between the institution of pilgrimage and marriage, for the latter is also a pilgrimage – a lifelong pilgrimage of husband and wife to wholeness, fullness and holiness. One mirrors the other, for both marriage and pilgrimage are celebrations of life; we are living in a World-Wide-Web of relationships, where everything is interrelated. “The concept of *tirthayatra* summarises the whole of Hindu attitude to life.”³⁰ This holds true in the case of any faith, for the life of faith is a journey, a journey into God, the Creator, Saviour, and Sanctifier. The Catholic Church understands herself as the pilgrim Church.³¹ The Christians, therefore, are pilgrims on earth. Hence, pilgrimage is fundamental to

²⁷Philippians 2:5-9.

²⁸Acharya, *Pilgrimage*, 247.

²⁹Acharya, *Pilgrimage*, 3.

³⁰Chakkanatt, *Tirthayatra*, 81.

³¹*Lumen Gentium*, §48.

every Christian – a pilgrimage one is engaged in twenty-four hours of the day. Generally speaking, pilgrimage “may be seen as a life long occupation and a fulltime pursuit. It is not possible to be a pass-time pilgrim because it is an attitude to life, to the world and to God.”³² It is a revelation of the person or the community. Each movement is important and significant of the daily pilgrimage, which determines the eternal pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage is an all-encompassing phenomenon. What is important is to have the light to walk the way, the way of pilgrimage. In our motherland we speak of different *margas* (paths or ways) leading to liberation or salvation according to the taste and temperament of the devotee or disciple. *Marga* implies a movement and pilgrimage; it is a *sadhana*. It is vital to discern the way and follow it freely, faithfully, and joyfully. Jesus Christ said: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”³³ At another occasion, He taught his disciples: “You are the light of the world.”³⁴ Evidently, every human being is endowed with intelligence, the light of knowledge and wisdom. To walk the way is central to pilgrimage. This aspect of walking the way towards the end should be the characteristic mark of human existence and every enterprise. The need of the hour is to have a wider horizon with a comprehensive vision on pilgrimage in order to integrate the thrust and spirit of pilgrimage into every realm of human life, including academic pursuits. Sincere search for truth, goodness, and beauty is, indeed, a pilgrimage. Every genuine academic endeavour is truly a pilgrimage. It illumines the mind and enlightens the path of the pilgrim to walk the way of true life; it helps to discern the truth in the process of the passage, to decide for the truth, and dedicate to it wholeheartedly. “Thus scholarship itself is a ‘pilgrimage’ to unfamiliar areas in pursuit of better knowledge of the treasures of our faith. The journey is within faith and toward faith. ‘Lord, I believe; help my belief’ (Mark 9: 24) is still generally considered a legitimate and admirable prayer of the true believer.”³⁵

³²Chakkanatt, *Tirthayatra*, 81.

³³John 8:12.

³⁴Matthew 5:14.

³⁵Robert North, “Biblical Scholarship as Pilgrimage,” *The Bible Today* 43 (January-February 2005), 308.