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## Faith Tourism: for a Healthy Environment and a More Sensitive World

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# Faith Tourism: For a Healthy Environment and a More Sensitive World

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The domain of the 'religious' / 'spiritual' has become a significant source of revenue production for the tourism industry. Faith-based tourism seems to draw increasing numbers of people who wish to travel not just for leisure, or pleasure, but in search of personal meaning and fulfilment in a postmodern capitalist world.

Though undertaken as a physical journey, pilgrimage seems to be embedded in the traveller's wish for some kind of personal transformation. The journey is often distinguished from regular travel through its inherent call for a letting-go, be it of mental constructs, pathologies, personal and social conditioning, artefacts, logic or behaviour. Perhaps the faith-based 'tourist' sustains an attitude of veneration to the place and the path, and becomes sensitive to the environment as well as its inhabitants.

One could then ask: does the commercial appropriation of faith-based journeys by the tourism industry contribute positively to the industry and, in larger terms, to humanity in general? Can faith-based tourism lead to a crucial, empathetic shift in awareness, enabling humans to accept one another without prejudice? Can faith-based tourism help to build deeper and permanent trans-class, trans-racial, trans-ethnic and trans-religious connections? Can it transform the tourist from a consumer-voyeur to a responsible participant in the larger ideals of social equality and cultural / environmental preservation?

This paper suggests that pilgrimage tourism could in different ways sensitize pilgrim-tourists to ongoing social and environmental crises, and how tour organisers and administrators could promote this wider consciousness by illustrating the religious beliefs and sentiments of faith-based tourists.

**Key Words:** faith tourism, spirituality, transformation, sacred space, sacred time, bonding, pilgrimage, environment.

## Introduction

The essay is in six segments – the first elaborates the need for pilgrimage, its personal dimension based on the traveller's religious, cultural and/or social background, exploring the motivation behind faith travel; the second explores the meaning of pilgrimage; the third, looks at the mindset of the pilgrim; fourth, the social impact of the journey which calls for interactions and encounters with different peoples along the journey. The fifth examines the impact of the journey on the environment and conversely that of the environment on the mind, the significance of the place is brought out here and in the process leads to; the sixth segment which deals with the relationship between tourism and pilgrimage. The objective of the essay is to assess if there can be a role reversal. Initially it was

pilgrimage that gave an impetus to tourism and tourism related activities/industries, is it now possible for tourism to take on a responsible role by emphasising more the 'spiritual' aspect of it, thus impacting the mindset of the traveller, showing greater sensitivity to the culture and environment of the host destination. Rather than being overly theoretical, the essay draws upon stories regarding spirituality and nature from sacred texts. Some conclusions are drawn from the stories that are in fact self-elucidatory.

## Personal Dimension/Motivation

Nearly all cultures in the world have a concept of some kind of faith based journey, called pilgrimage in the English language, embedded into their fabric of beliefs. While at the deepest level, one could say, the

human quest in all communities is initiated by similar yearnings, motivations and needs - such as finding meaning in life, transcending limitations, seeking social and cosmological bonding, etc - its articulation is influenced and conditioned by the social, cultural, religious, ecological, historical, geographical and even technological particularities specific to a particular community. 'What people do is motivated by what they believe,' writes John Mbiti the renowned African philosopher, 'and what they believe springs from what they do and experience.' (Mbiti, 1971: 4)

The ideals and ultimate goals of any people are formulated by the beliefs upheld, and systematised over time, by those people. Traditionally the idea of pilgrimage was backed by some kind of ecclesiastical authority or diktat, the aim being to fulfil a religious injunction, or realise a soteriological goal projected by the particular religion. For Christians, especially in the Middle Ages, pilgrimage was one of the ways of earning remission from punishment in the life hereafter for sins committed on earth, as remarkably exemplified in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Islam, on its part, makes it mandatory for a particular pilgrimage to be performed at a particular time for the attainment of a full religious life on earth and in the hereafter. Others, like many Hindu traditions, see it as a desirable (though not mandatory) option for the fulfilment of religious prescriptions and/or for one's own spiritual evolution, and for gaining knowledge that enables the realisation of a person's innate non-difference with Brahman, the Supreme Consciousness - a realisation which is the final goal of the tradition.

Despite the modern emphasis on rationality and science, when organised religion no longer exercises a monopoly over the human mind, pilgrimage still continues to not only engage human effort and mind, but is seeing a marked resurgence (Mahoney, 2003: 5). Even though the character of modern pilgrimage looks similar to that undertaken traditionally and in earlier times, the impulse that marks it may be somewhat different.

The postmodern world, as stressed by Roger Housden, is 'marked by uncertainty and unprecedented change' (1998:1). In the absence of religious certainties and security nets of family and social bondings there has arisen an individualised search for a sense of belonging - to something more than just oneself - leading, at times, to a return to the safe haven of religious moorings and dogma as seen among some societies and individuals. This may be because as Lutegendorf says in a different context, that when people are 'convinced that their way of life [is] in imminent danger of vanishing,' (1994: 370) there

arises anxiety about traditions. Lutegendorf goes on to say that, when

*a traditional order is threatened or destroyed, several responses are possible. One is to preserve or recreate it - the former might be termed 'conservative,' the latter 'reactionary.' Another is to mold (sic.) a new order and, depending on the degree of change between old and new, such an effort might be termed 'reformist' or 'revolutionary'* (1994:373-4).

He also states another, more fundamental, reason which has its roots in the belief projected by certain religions about the 'inevitability of vitiating and decline and of the unending battle to retain purity and potency,' (1994:371) such as demonstrated by beliefs in the onset of a 'Dark Age' in the Old Testament and of the 'Kali Yuga' in the Hindu faith. Alongside this, as Makarand Paranjape writes, with reference to the West, while the Enlightenment liberated Europe from the stranglehold of superstition and dogmatism, it imposed instead the tyranny of secular reason.

*In destroying the dominance of the religious, the salience of the sacred was also lost. ...From this impoverishment, the West is still struggling to find a way out* (2012: 49).

The symbolic significance of the sacred is something still being sought<sup>11</sup> and pilgrimage is one such symbolic activity. Somewhere, deep down, there is a recognition that without the poetry of the spiritual, the apparent orderliness of the world remains dull and lacks meaning. The renewed affirmation of religious mandates among certain societies also arises, perhaps more from a stance of defiance toward excessive modernity which is seen to undermine religious propensities. This turning to religion and adhering to its tenets, among which pilgrimage falls, could also be subject to the risk of making the tradition exclusive, tending to make it inwardly inclined, leading to excessive orthodoxy, preventing individuals from looking out and seeing that which is good in others.

Social and cultural modernisation which, Samuel Huntington expects should have led to the 'withering away of religion as a significant element in human existence,' (1996:9) actually did not lead to that outcome. Huntington himself quotes George Weigel, who stresses that the 'unsecularisation of the world... is

1 The loss of symbolic knowledge is no minor deprivation,' writes Marilyn Wilhelm, 'because, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge pointed out, *'An Idea in the highest sense of the word cannot be conveyed but by symbol.'* Symbols are extremely stimulating to the imagination, spiritual and scientific; for symbolic thinking is *visual thinking* --- expanding the development of intuitive knowledge, the ability to perceive *the Unchanging in the changing.*' See Wilhelm, p. 51.

one of the dominant social facts in the late 20th century.’ (see 1996:96) In such a scenario multiple civilizations and world views may be seen to compete in their quest for the purpose of existence (see Nigosian, 2008:206).

Other individuals and societies may be propelled by the need to find meaning in life when there is disillusionment with conventional religion and traditional sources of identity and authority on the one hand, and lack of satisfactory answers in rationality or science, on the other, causing individuals to construct their own agendas and seek their own answers. Answers may be gained through observing nature and rediscovering the human relationship with environment - a practice which has been lost due to excessive human intervention in natural phenomena and engagement with the material. Material wealth or spiritual quick fixes exchanged for money have not provided the certainty, safety and fulfilment that people seek. According to Sarah York (2001: 28), in times like these when:

*what we think of as home or ... the illusion of order we have created for ourselves [is disturbed, by inner questionings, that] our consciousness of a deeper longing for a sense of place in space and time [is stirred].*

This trend has given rise to a deep seated compulsion within to connect, with oneself, with other humans and with the environment by encouraging individualised exploratory forms of spirituality seeking new forms of stable communities, new subjectivities and new sets of moral precepts that would provide a sense of meaning and purpose to life.

Pilgrimage is one practise that is undertaken in an endeavour to satisfy this longing.

The end sought in pilgrimage is related to the position that one starts out from. Writing from within a Christian context sees a separation between the body and soul, and the body as something base, something to be transcended. York (2001) writes that the modern day pilgrim has an opportunity to travel a very different path. In former times (and perhaps even in many current pilgrimage traditions that continue to follow the traditional path), pilgrims sought to rise above their physical nature in order to live a more pure and holy existence. ‘Spirituality meant being in but not of the world’ (York, 2001:112, emphasis added). The belief was that the human soul needed to transcend the physical in order to dwell with God in heaven. This belief, being concerned with transcendence of the body did not concern itself with the welfare of the earth or the environment. As against this, York goes on to say that pilgrims of the 21st century, through their

journeys, seek to bring a harmonious relationship between the body and soul as also with other beings and with their physical surroundings in order to live a satisfying and full life in the world. This is because the human is not just matter but is made of spirit as well. Both matter and spirit have to be given their due for a harmonious life on earth. The aim, as such is not just related to life after death but to life on earth as well. In this quest, the welfare of others and of the earth is also of importance. Consequently, one’s relationship to traditions, like the Hindu, that believe everything on earth – human and non-human – is imbued with the Supreme Spirit, is sacred and Divine, call for respect and preservation. This resonates more with the modern individualised quest.

### Meaning

This brings us to the meaning and significance of pilgrimage, both as a ritual performance and as an individualised search for meaning. This may also give us an insight into why it has gained renewed popularity in a time when reason and rationality have been given a place of dominance in our day to day lives. A definition of a pilgrim according to the Oxford English Dictionary is: ‘one not at home . . . a stranger . . . a wayfarer, traveller, wanderer.’ A second definition says that a pilgrim is ‘one who journeys, usually a long distance, to some sacred place as an act of religious devotion.’ (as quoted in York, 2001:88) Both definitions stress important elements which are actually brought together in the act of pilgrimage. The second definition which stresses the element of faith is the major underlying feature of a pilgrimage. The word *sraddha* in Sanskrit (faith in English) is seen to be the basis of ‘right knowledge’ which subsequently leads to peace and serenity (see Venkatesananda, 1972:115, sloka 4.39) - the ultimate goal of life in the Hindu tradition. This faith is not a faith in something but is ‘the very essence of our being,’ (Paranjape, 2012:29); it is the core that seeks meaning which is other than just physical survival, since a human being is not just a physical being. It is the promptings of faith that lead a person to undertake exercises such as are given in the first definition of the word pilgrimage. To find meaning, faith compels a person to try out a life bereft of mundane comforts, of a worldly home, that soothe just the physical being with the aim of testing a ground that is other than just material.

During a recent conference, where I spoke about pilgrimage, one participant suggested that the concept of exile as projected in some spiritual and religious texts is not different from the concept of pilgrimage. The participant, giving the example of the Prodigal



Son from the Bible and drawing from John Alges' Historical Development of the English Language, pointed out that in the Old English (8th-9th century) translation, the Prodigal Son, is seen to be 'in exile' while in the Middle English (12th-13th century) he is translated as being 'in pilgrimage'.<sup>21</sup> In consonance with this idea, Hindu spiritual texts and epics (such as the Upanishads, Ramayana and Mahabharata) are replete with examples of both pilgrimages and exiles – undertaken either for the fulfilment of a vow or as some kind of a mandate from the Guru, all with the implicit aim of inner transformation for the gaining of higher knowledge. Within exiles the exiled ones often take up journeys that are consonant with the conventionally understood idea of 'pilgrimage'. Yet, each text, each exile, posits the end result of the journey to be within the goal projected by the particular spiritual or religious tradition. The goal may be redemptive in nature, in the sense of saving one's soul for eternal life; it may pertain to the attainment of self realisation by having 'darshan', direct contact, with a holy place, person or relic, for gaining ultimate knowledge; it may be the fulfilment of a mandated and prescribed set of scriptural rituals; or any other, in consonance with the tradition. The goal may even be a self-imposed turning away from the known into a larger totality in search of meaning, as is the case with many modern pilgrims.

The Prodigal Son, for example, seeks a return to the 'house of the Father', a spiritual home from which he has been severed – even if due to his own acquisitiveness. His journey away from home teaches him the pain of severance from his real home. The journey to a 'far country' (Luke 15:13), into the wilderness, becomes a teacher that qualifies him to once again gain respected status in his original home. When the one who had strayed from the path finds his true path (as through this journey), there is jubilation. In Hindu spiritual texts, a person may be sent into the wilderness by their mentor with the aim that they may discover the organic interconnections that underlie the universe. Through that they find their own connection to the universe which is nothing other than the Brahman, the Source, from and in which the multiplicity of the universe seems to arise. Satyakam Jabala, in the Chandogya Upanishad, was sent off into the wilderness, by his Guru, with 400 weak and incapacitated cows which he, on his own volition vowed to tend till they increased to 1000 (see Gambhirananda, the story is given in Chapter IV,

section 4-9). In the solitude of the forest where he would have witnessed procreation and destruction, storms and cyclones as also periods of soothing calm, he saw the workings of Divinity through everything. The story narrates that, in due course, with his mind freed of the noise of day to day life, he was found fit to be given instructions by personalised forms of air, fire, ether and the life force (as, shorn of worldly conditionings he opened up to the elements and all of nature, to learn from whatever agency manifested itself before him). With this exposure, when he returned to the Guru's house he was found to be ready to receive higher knowledge as his mind had been purified by solitary rumination and sojourn in the wild, and subsequently by learning from the elements. Without living in nature as an observer participant and recognising its laws he may not have found it easy to access the knowledge he was seeking. Sages and Rishis, not satisfied with the knowledge they have gained, undertake long, arduous journeys to abodes of celestials or learned ones, where they are required to go through further disciplines before higher knowledge can be imparted to them. The epic Ramayana consists mostly of the story of Rama's exile and his sojourn through the sacred geography of India, learning from a number of indigenous peoples and sages who practised austerities and lived in close proximity with nature. The Mahabharata similarly, consists of innumerable episodes of exiles as well as consciously undertaken pilgrimages. In fact, the events of the epics seem to be constructed with the express aim of weaving in numerous journeys – be they in the form of exiles or as actual pilgrimages. Modern day pilgrims may wander through wilderness or places held sacred by different traditions to find and experience for themselves the meaning of sacred and their own relation to it.

The Sanskrit word Yatra, which stands for both a journey and a pilgrimage, also means 'that which is a support of life' (Apte, 1987; Chaturvedi and Tiwari, 1970). It does so by exposing one to a number of natural and sociological phenomena which one would not be aware of in the comfort of one's worldly home, and thus prepares the mind for higher knowledge. The parivrajaka, a wanderer, in the Indian tradition is still revered and supported by society at large as he/she is seen to be a seeker after Truth. Such a person may also carry the message of the scriptures to those willing to listen. A number of well known 'reciters' of scriptural texts have been known to have traversed the length and breadth of the country as a part of their own search as they enlighten other people. They are thus seen, in a way, to connect the worldly and the transcendent. While being in the body they are seen to renounce bodily comforts, seeking another, a more stable reality.

2 This interjection was made by James Doan of the University of Fort Lauderdale, FL, USA, at a conference on Religion and Spirituality in Society at Phoenix, Arizona in March, 2013.

They are, thus seen to straddle the gulf between the real and the ideal, the mundane and the transcendent, the lived life and the one aspired for. Through their recitations and talks these mendicants remind worldly people of their higher calling, thus helping to re-establish ethical and moral values.

Pilgrims may thus lead to a synthesis of self enhancement with a message that would help maintain order in the worldly domain by reminding people of their duties as also lifting the mind out of the routine humdrum of life. This applies to pilgrims and mendicants in various traditions be they Buddhist, Hindu or Islamic. We notice that in Islam, one who has performed a Haj pilgrimage is hosted by the people of his village or town for several days so that they may hear of the pilgrims' experiences and share their sense of transcendence, even if momentarily.

### Mindset

The mind of the pilgrim is conditioned by the contradictory pulls which are the natural constituents of human beings. Humans, by their very condition, straddle both the material and the spiritual worlds. They belong to the earth and to heaven at the same time. Though conditioned by this world they are not wholly of the world. Had they been mere earthlings material wealth and position would make them totally happy. But that is not the situation as, despite all wealth and material comfort, a part of the being, 'which lifts [the person] above the Earth, keeps [him/her] restless and unhappy.' (Krishananda, 2013: 28) The spiritual part, being non-sensual, is not always recognised, that is why a vague sense of non-fulfilment, a sense of something yet to be gained continues to haunt the human. This is what compels a person to strike forth into a somewhat unknown search, into a pathless path. To quote the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe:

*A longing pure and not to be described  
drove me to wander over woods and fields  
and in a mist of hot abundant tears  
I felt a world arise and live for me.*

(cited in York, 2001: 44)

The soul longs to connect with some other, an unnameable reality that is felt to nourish the root of life. Ironically, material wealth and prosperity, which so much effort is expended to gain, fails to provide this nourishment. Our training in the world does not teach us where to find that which the soul seeks, hence the need for individuated search in places which exude peace and quietude that make the mind calm and tranquil in the hope of plumbing one's own spirit. Interestingly, shedding the baggage of ordinary life

renders the mind transparent enough to act as a bridge between the 'minor truth of the seen [and] the major truth of the unseen' (Wilhelm, 2011:58).

A pilgrim mind, as such, is characterised by a voluntary renunciation of worldly comforts and, often, subjection to certain norms prescribed by religious rules. Christ, according to the Gospel of Mathew is supposed to have said,

*Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staff . . . And whatever town you enter, find out who is worthy in it, and stay with him until you depart . . . this was not a pithy aphorism or a wise piece of advice . . . [it] was a command from Jesus to his disciples to trust, travel humbly, and spread his word (Mahoney, 2003:3).*

While disciples of Jesus set out to spread the word of God, ordinary pilgrims travel similarly with the aim of finding meaning. Their mind engaged in that quest may act as a reminder to those along the way, of values that tend to get forgotten in day to day living.

As such, pilgrims voluntarily subject themselves to a reversal of values that define day to day life with the aim of opening up to the indefinable longing that calls out to be fulfilled. That is why

*pilgrimage becomes an event clearly demarcated from everyday life . . . Not only is it separated from the more mundane activities of the pilgrim's life, but it is characterised by a reversal of several of the values of daily life. Thus, [as already shown in the advice of Jesus] there are traditions which encourage the voluntary practice of poverty, chastity, simplicity in food and dress, and several other such restrictions (Paranjape, 2012:81)*

Dropping baggage and reversing routines unclutters the mind to render it receptive to the surroundings. York quotes Socrates who castigates ordinary travellers saying, 'Why do you wonder that globe-trotting does not help you, seeing that you always take yourself with you?' (2001:27) The pilgrim, having seen through the inadequacy of material acquisitions, and spiritual quick fixes, decides to try transcending them and open up to something that otherwise may go unnoticed.

*The paradox of pilgrimage is . . . that you . . . leave your comfort zone in order to explore the spiritual . . . edges that take you into a deeper level of comfort. You have to be willing to let go of security of your physical home in order to open yourself to your spirit's home (York, 2001:13).*

Furthermore, York says that the

*pilgrim knows that there is no growth without inner confrontation, no promised land without time in the wilderness, no mountaintop that can be reached without going through the valley of the shadow of death (2001:12).*

But one may add here that the sojourner does not always know what would be found at the end of the journey, as the journey is more a process of letting go, of opening up to the forces of nature and the surroundings without necessarily having any preconceived notion of what it may bring, except a faith that such an opening up may lead to a discovery of one's own true identity and its connection with the surroundings, or that it may give an indication of, or an insight into, one's purpose on earth. In this process the pilgrim mind reveres the path, the woods, rivers and the empty spaces that crowd the way as an indispensable part of the journey. The sanctity of nature may impress itself through the daily phenomena that otherwise go unnoticed.

The post modern pilgrim-mind may also be stirred to explore sites and places held sacred by different religions and faiths with the aim of exploring what the sacred actually stands for. The possibility of easy and organised travel and information helps in fulfilling this objective. The exercise plays an incredibly helpful role in not only expanding one's own understanding and wisdom but in opening up to other world views, showing that what seemed archaic or obtuse in others actually has its own logic. The modern enquiring mind may open itself to varied cultures enriching itself with traditions nurtured by peoples pursuing various faiths leading to a recognition that there can be many ways of perceiving the divine, of connecting to it, and that one way is not superior to the other. In fact one does not know which expression of it may transport one into an ecstatic vision, or understanding of the divine. It makes one think of Eck's statement with regard to Hinduism, which she says,

*is most distinctive for its refusal to make the one and the many into opposites . . . the manyness of the divine is not superseded by oneness. Rather, the two are held simultaneously and are inextricably related (1998:28).*

The polycentric and pluralistic presentations come to be seen as infinite expressions of the One divine at pilgrimage sites. The diversity that the modern day pilgrim mind can encounter would most likely unite rather than divide as it would be based on an opening up to difference. The pilgrim mind is, thus, a unique site on which to locate an interfaith understanding.

## Social Impact

Psychological transformation caused by a powerful experience like that of a pilgrimage cannot but have larger ramifications in the sense of having an impact on the society that a person inhabits. The journey which takes no account of the social position or status of the pilgrim, except his/her faith, resilience and determination proves to be a great social leveller. In the openness to an unburdened Whole the pilgrim begins to recognise not only the beauty of the environment but the humanness of the other, as a sojourner along the same path, allowing bonding at a deeper unconditioned level. York sees this as the arising of a sense of *communitas*.

*Communitas is what happens when a whole group of people cross a threshold and together enter liminal time and space . . . In that threshold space, they experience a bond, and it is not like any bond they may experience in their ordinary, structured lives . . . In communitas, there are no social roles, status, or hierarchical structures. Everyone is equal. Even more significant., everyone feels what it is to be equal and feels the potential for who we can be as a human family (2001: 127-8).*

This is because the barriers created to separate one from the other are removed in the process of unloading oneself of social baggage which either is a precondition or becomes a part of the pilgrim mind as s/he journeys along. Persons from different ethnic backgrounds, different castes, even different religious affiliations may find themselves rubbing shoulders only to realise that the barriers that ordinarily separate them dissolve when faced with the elements, and the difficulties along the path and, perhaps, a calming vision at the end. All that matters is the resilience of faith and the determination to realise the goal. They may find that the support they get from another is irrespective of their social distinctions. A new recognition of human worth and friendship may arise. Anonymity of one's own small being and oneness with the larger surrounding, through which one moves, give rise to connections that are independent of human-made structures and institutions.

In the Indian context peoples of different economic classes and castes who may otherwise remain segregated in separate domains rub shoulders at pilgrimage sites without thought of their social differences. Similarly, Malcolm X is stated to have become more open to the human condition after a Haj performance, due to the unimportance of a person's ethnic, religious background (see York, 2001: 149).



Another area of mental freedom caused by pilgrimage is the recognition of how little material is needed to actually live and enjoy life more fully. While travelling from Santiago de Compostella in a coach full of returning pilgrims, in the year 2005, I found some of them recognising with some surprise that they needed so little to live life and how the shedding of extra material possessions freed them to enjoy and connect with nature and the surroundings. Some even wondered how they would adjust to the routine of life in their crowded and structured urban homes. Besides, the being 'away from home' had enabled them to be at home in the world, it had even opened up the gates that normally prevent the inflow of goodwill and grace that the universe is repository of. Actually, the pilgrim mind can become a part of any journey that a person undertakes, it need not be specific to a place associated with pilgrimage. It only calls for a shift of focus. One wonders if contemporary efforts to preserve the environment by making tourists conscious of the significance and sanctity of a place are not a call to create a pilgrim mind in the heart of an ordinary tourist.

### Place and Environment

Pilgrimage is mostly associated with a particular place or a geographic location. The place may be made sacred by some event, an epiphanic happening or by identification with a religious relic. It can be a place where a person may have gained enlightenment or a sage may reside. Even though located on external ground, pilgrimage places are, more often than not, constituted by the pilgrim heart. It has been seen that certain places gain or wane in importance during certain historical phases. Places are not always those prescribed by a religious doctrine or dogma or religious authority, they gain status by the energy of the faith brought to them by the seekers. As such, the place is both interior to the pilgrim as also located in an external physical space. The same place may seem to be dreary desert to one while it may send another into divine ecstasy. Such was the case with Mount Kailash, a holy mountain in Tibet. A Jesuit priest, Ippolito Desideri, in the eighteenth century saw it as a 'most horrible, barren [desert] bitterly cold' with nothing to commend it for higher pursuits. The same place to Lama Anagarika provided the highest spiritual experience as he felt in 'harmony with heaven and earth, freely float[ing] in the blue sky from horizon to horizon' (see Peters and Bangdell, 2010:22).

Whether the sacred space is a construct of the individual mind or one upheld by religious prescription, the effect is similar. Mahoney, on noticing

the zeal of pilgrims to a shrine of the Virgin at Tinos in the Aegean Sea says,

*I am not . . . awed by the miraculous powers of the Virgin Mary, but I was awed by her pilgrims. It wasn't their religion that interested me so much as their faith, that palpable surge of the soul* (2003:2).

York observes that 'sacred landscape' offers

*the tonic of wildness because it invites us into a relationship of kinship and trust with the natural world and stirs a deeper consciousness of our place in it* (2001: 118).

Certain places gain pilgrimage status because the natural elements there combine to exude a certain purity, an unsullied power, that fills the body and soul with energy. This may be because the pilgrims who visit these places bring with them a sense of deep devotion and positive energy that gets congealed and has an impact on the elements, and through them gets radiated back to the visitor. Bron Taylor, citing Mircea Eliade in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Nature* states that

*[a] sacred reality exists [and] is different from everyday, 'profane' realities, and that it manifests itself at special times and places, usually through natural entities and places. Indeed, for Eliade, the sacred/profane dichotomy was at the centre of all religious perception. Moreover, for Eliade [says the Encyclopaedia], the recognition of the sacred has something fundamental to do with what it means to be human* (2005: pp. xiii-ivx).

In Sanskrit, a pilgrimage place is called tirtha, a place of 'crossing', from one plane of consciousness to another. It forms a subtle bridge between spirit and matter, where the distinction between material and spiritual is rendered porous. A place where the heart opens up to the macrocosm because the spirit behind the human heart and that behind the physical universe is felt to pulsate with the same energy. Distanced from the clutter, frenzy and structured activity of day to day life the place helps to transport the mind to a plane where the spiritual renders itself transparent to human experience, where the 'veil between the seen and the unseen is [rendered] thinner . . . [where] invisible spirituality and visible reality meet' (York, 2001: 81, 84). It may just be a quiet place in a desert, a forest, a remote monastery or temple, or it may be a well established place of pilgrimage associated with some religious event/s or miracles.

While travelling to a sacred place the pilgrim moves into a time and space where things are generally turned upside down, confronting him/ her with a reality



contrary to usual experience. The fifteenth chapter of the Bhagvata Gita, (see Venkatesananda, 1972: sloka 1 -2) a favourite spiritual text of the Hindus, uses the metaphor of an inverted tree for the universe, a tree whose roots are up above and the downward multiplicity of growth, fruits and decay, manifest as the visible universe. Plato uses a similar metaphor.<sup>3</sup> The metaphor is a reminder of the oneness of the universe even as it shows its spiritual origins. A pilgrimage place tends to transport the pilgrim mind to plumb the depths of the root which nurtures its multifarious projection, even as s/he is nourished by the same singular power - moving from a world of material multiplicity to one of spiritual bonding. What is labelled as sacred or profane, superior or inferior may cease to have the clearly defined division that the mind in ordinary course of life has been trained to sense. Polarities tend to get connected as they are seen to be sustained by the same spiritual root. The image of the nurturing spiritual root helps one to perceive the universe as made of distinct realities, having their small identities, which are yet not separated – for they belong to the same tree.

### Tourism and Pilgrimage: Role Reversal?

Ironically, it is pilgrimage that gave the initial impetus to the tourism related industry to begin with. For, despite all its spiritual association and search, faith travel has never been far removed from money making and worldly considerations. Speaking of the Middle Ages in England when Chaucer's pilgrims wended their way to Canterbury, Hoy and Stevens cite how businesses flourished around the faith travellers. They write:

*A great deal of money was to be made out of these tourists of the Middle Ages, not only at the shrines themselves, but by the souvenir sellers and innkeepers along the routes; for the poorer pilgrims charitable guilds set up hostels. Manuals, which would vie with any of the modern travel brochures, gave practical advice on how one should conduct oneself on a pilgrimage, the kind of clothing to be worn, the foods to be avoided and helpful hints on money matters and rates of exchange. Some pilgrimages, particularly those to foreign shrines, were extremely hazardous, involving the penitent pilgrim in great hardships and discomfort,... The wealthy would sometimes*

*bequeath money for pilgrimages to be carried out on their behalf after their death...in this larger-than-life portrait one can detect [a] boastfulness that typifies the modern tourist who returns to brag about the number of countries visited (1969:3).*

Money also flowed freely into the pockets of Chaucer's Summoner and Pardoner as pilgrims sought to buy atonement for sins during the course of the journey.

In modern times the domain of the 'religious' and 'spiritual' has become a significant source of revenue production for the tourism industry. Tourism is avidly attracting faith-based travellers who wish to travel not just for leisure, or pleasure, but to find personal meaning and fulfilment. Faith travel is a voluntarily undertaken enterprise by people who seek mental/psychological transformation. The ease of travel and dissemination of information about different places that lend themselves to such transformative experiences have encouraged travellers to try new paths irrespective of their traditional affiliations with specific cultures or religions.

What distinguishes the tourist from a faith traveller is the mindset, the spirit in which the journey is undertaken.

*It [a journey] is sacred if it sensitizes the individual to the deeper realities of his own being and of the world about him – if it brings together the inner and outer worlds, the physical landscape serving as a mirror for the inner one (Housden, 1998:3).*

A pilgrim is not just an observer from the outside, a voyeur out to consume an experience of a different culture or destination. A pilgrim is a committed participant who seeks to become one with the place and what it has to offer in terms of rendering the spiritual more perceptible. For this reason

*Pilgrims display greater sympathy to the land travelled to and to its people; their attitude is one of deference, even reverence, quite unlike the instrumental, predatory approach of conquerors, traders or even scholars . . . Pilgrims . . . subscribe to a different set of values than secular travellers . . . The attitude of the pilgrim is different because their world view often entails a reversal of the normal system of values in which the material always takes precedence over the spiritual (Paranjape, 2012: 101, 103).*

3 Plato sees this Divine connection in terms of the human being when he says: 'Man is a Heavenly plant, an inverted tree of which the roots rend Heavenward and the branches downward to Earth.' – See Wilhelm, p. 2.

He states, ‘pilgrims, by the very nature of their enterprise, are traditionally less aggressive, less wasteful, less egocentric and less destructive than tourists.’ (Paranjape, 2012: 81) While journeying in a physical environment the pilgrim is also aware that s/he is observing and discovering the landscape of the soul, the emphasis being on finding the self and its linkage to the surroundings, the linkage between the spiritual invisible and the material visible.

Traditionally, religion propelled faith travel gave impetus to tourism related activities. But today when tourism itself has emerged as a major industry it can perhaps become a catalyst by engendering ‘pilgrim minds’ among travellers thus becoming an agent for environmentally friendly and culturally sustaining travel. By promoting the faith based side of travel and encouraging travellers to be sensitive to the environments they move in, at times even reducing their usual material comforts that tourists tend to replicate, tourism could help promote cultural, ethnic and religious understanding while making humans less predatory towards the planet they inhabit. One wonders how far tourism as a popular industry that has a powerful impact on millions of minds can take on such a role and help save places sacred to many peoples while yet generating enough money to sustain itself. One could then save the likes of Mount Everest and Kailash and also many aboriginal sites from mindless adventurism so that they may continue to be enjoyed and venerated by posterity. One also wonders to what extent tourism, as a trans-national activity, can save the powerfully motivated pilgrim mind from state enforced obstacles like excessive obsession with permits, visas and other formalities. One wonders if in this post-modern age, tourism as an industry can somehow play a role in reducing phobias and prejudices that arise from within certain religious traditions preventing spiritual seekers from entering into and experiencing sacred sites that could enhance understanding of traditions that appear to be exclusive.

Tourism, by taking on a responsible role could turn voyeuristic tourists into responsible/participant travellers who take back experiences that open up new insights with regard to places, peoples and themselves. In this manner, perhaps tourism could not only help save sacred sites from desecration but become an agent in their preservation. For this, tourism may have to look at its commercial aspects and itself in new and creative ways.

The urge to create a pilgrim mind can be seen asserting itself here and there, in the midst of high level commercial transactions. One simple signboard in the upmarket Laguna Beach area in California states: ‘This

gate hangs well and hinders none. Refresh and rest then travel on.’ At other places small non-denominational chapels raised in exquisitely beautiful natural surroundings invite people to open their eyes and minds to the place and connect with themselves. The post-modern world makes room for such secularly spiritual spaces.

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