Hindu Pilgrimage Essay, Research Paper

The following essay addresses that of the Hindu pilgrimage as to why

pilgrimage is an important aspect of Hindu religion? Firstly, the essay

focusses on points which support pilgrimage as a fundamental and key

aspect of the Hindu community.

Secondly, a perspective denying pilgrimages have any significant role

for Hindu and their religion is discussed. It does seem though, to me,

that without the aspect of pilgrimage, the Hindu religion would still

function quite noramally because although the pilgrimage sites give

darsan, they do not seem to be able to assist people with their day to

day problems, whereas holy men do.

First though we need to know exactly what darsan means to Hindus.

Darsan means seeing in Hindu religion and when people go to a temple,

they say they do not go to worship but rather for darsan – they go to

see the image of the deity. The pinacle act of Hindu worship, is to

stand in the presence of the deity and to look upon the image with their

eyes, so as to see and be seen by the deity. The deity is believed to

actually be within the image, and beholding the deity image is a form of

worship where through the eyes one gains blessings.

A pilgrimage is a religious journey; people undertake pilgrimages so

they can worship at special places which are connected to their

religion. Journeying to holy places of pilgrimage are generally carried

out as acts of faith and devotion in accummulating religious merit or to

atone for sins. Pilgrimages are also regarded by Hindus as a religious

duty from which darsan can be attained.

There are thousands of pilgrimage sites – tirthas (sacred, fords or

crossings) in India, where many places of pilgrimage are renowned for

their divine images. And it is the darsan of these divine images that

are sought , because the darsan is believed by Hindus to be far greater

and significant than that which can be granted and given by holy men

i.e. sadhus. It entails then, that holy places of pilgrimages are an

extension of additional darsan, of which can be given and received by

travelling on a pilgrimage.

For example, pilgrims go to the sacred hill of Tirupati for the darsan

of

Sri Venkatesvara, an ancient icon believed to be a form of Visnu.

According to legend, the Lord came to bless a particular devotee who was

faithful in his duties towards his parents. The devotee took no time

out from his duties to greet the Lord properly, and so threw a brick

for him to stand on which impressed Krsna, and so Krsna has stood there

ever since.

It is important, however, to understand that Hindus do not only travel

as pilgrims for the darsan of divine images but also seek thedarsan of

the pilgrimage places themselves, which are believed to be the natural

places of where gods have dwelled. For instance, the river Ganga also

known as the Ganges is said to have flowed in heaven before she agreed

to come to earth.

Siva caught Ganga in his tangled hair to break her fall, and from his

head she flowed down through the Himalayas, so legend goes. And this is

why in Hindu hymns, the Ganga is praised as a liquid form of Siva’s

divine energy. The Ganges is the holiest river of all , where all

Hindus desire to bathe in this river, for it is believed by Hindus to

wash away all their sins.

No sin is too heinous, and no character too black to be washed away by

the waters of the Ganges. Essentially, all water used in rituals by

Hindus is symbollically transformed into sacred water by summoning the

presence of Ganga and other sacred rivers. Every great river is

supposed to hold the divine essence, and its waters held to cleanse

people from all moral guilt and contamination. On the whole,

pilgrimages are very significant to Hindus due to being able to, by and

large, eradicate all their sins and wrong doing by bathing in the water

of holy rivers.

There are difficulties that have to be endured when undertaking a

pilgrimage, however, Hindus believe it is well worth it. As an extreme

example, for hundreds of years some tirthas were the final goal of many

pilgrims, who committed suicide there in order to be released from the

cycle of rebirths. Hinduism generally considers suicide a crime, but at

certain places, it can become an act of liberation, though this is not

the norm for pilgrims.( Klostermaier , K , 1989 , p 312 )

A Hindu pilgrim may journey barefoot, dress scantily in cold weather,

and fast, which is all very distressing, but the idea is that the

pilgrims have to forget being comfortable , where through their

suffering they will be able to realise and understand other less

fortunate and oppressed peoples’ suffering aswell. In this sense,

pilgrimages enable pilgrims, especially the very powerful and rich to

relate to the very poor, sick, and needy-bringing them closer together .

Pilgrimages also have a unifying effect in terms of bringing together

Hindus, not only from around India, but from all around the world. The

journey of a pilgrimage gives Hindus an opportunity to come together,

and to relate to one another as well as strengthen their faith. Through

the contact between Hindus resulting from journeys to pilgrimage sites,

faith can be made stronger due to being around and in touch with those

who seek the same goal- the release from the cycle of death and

re-birth.

Pilgrimages are also associated with myths where there are many tirthas

associated with the great events of the mythological tradition. The

tirtha is the counterpart of the avatara, the word used to describe the

divine descents of the gods. Avatara means, to cross down precisely at

those places where the gods have crossed down into this world, where

avataras are the tirthas – places where earthly pilgrims are able to

make their spiritual crossings. (Eck, D, 1985, PP 67 – 68) .The essay

now will focuss on the opposite perspective – a discussion that attempts

to justify that pilgrimages are not, and should not be of importance to

Hindus.

Although darsan of temple images and sacred places are sought by Hindus,

Hindus also value the darsan of holy persons, such as sants (saints),

sadhus (holy men), and sannyasins (renouncers). Since Hindus are able

to attain darsan from holy people,then there is no need for pilgrimages

as it suggests that pilgrimages are unecessary and therefore should not

be an important aspect of Hindu religion .

Hindus seek the darsan of sadhus and sanayasins; the term sadhu is

translated as “holy man” or “ascetic”, though in broad terms sadhu means

“good man” or virtuous man”. A sadhu is a man endowed with high

spiritual learnings, and holding high religious values. Essentially,

those who lead a saintly life, realise their goal in the shortest

possible time may be called sadhu. a saintly life is a means to proceed

directly to the ultimate goal of salvation.

In this sense, a sadhu is someone who has been initiated into an ascetic

sect, devoting himself to achieving release from the cycle of death and

relbirth. Some sadhus describe themselves as sanayasis or renouncers.

The way a person lives their life is sannyas; you can only become it

because you cannot give it or take it. Therefore, Sannyas occurs from

within – on the inside. Sannyas entails a symbolic death whereby all

personal ties and possessions are renounced as they must devote

themselves to the inner self. ( Aylett , L , 1992 , p 31 )

Sadhus are believed to live between the living and the dead – living in

a state between the world of illusion, of which we live in and the world

of reality, of which gods dwell and reside in. Essentially, sadhus are

regarded as being dead and are a means by which to link the living to

the dead.Sadhus believe experience is far more important than knowledge

when assuming the role of a spiritual practitioner. Many sadhus accept

disciples, regardless of caste and are expected and obligated to accept

people whether they are rich, poor, powerful or powerless .

So what does the sadhu give to the people? A sadhu is a diety, and the

diety of the sadhu gives darsan, and the people take darsan. The

worshipper cannot initiate the act of seeing, therefore, the deity

enables itself to be seen in its image. The contact between the

worshipper and diety, is thus, carried out solely through the eyes.Since

sadhus are able to given people darsan, it seems then, that pilgrimages

in reality are unnecessary because one can attain darsan without having

to incur all of the strenuous problems and hardship associated with a

pilgrimage and without having to leave their place of domicile .

If pilgrimages are an important necessity for Hindus to undertake, and

if the darsan received from pilgrimage is far greater than that which

can be obtained from a sadhu, then it deprives, and places of those

Hindus that tdo not have the means and ability to go on a pilgrimage -

the paralysed and physically sick, at an unfair disadvantage. Simply

put, they would not be able to get as close as they could, to becoming

released from the cycle of death and rebirth, as a result of not being

capable of journeying on a pilgrimage which is totally unfair .

Therefore, pilgrimage should not play a major role within the Hindu

religion. By placing great importance and significance on pilgrimages,

a bad message is transgressed to and adopted by Hindu. For they will

believe that through physical means of travelling on a pilgrimage, they

will attain additional darsan and that their sins can be completely

washed away. However, if I was a Hindu who did not have the means by

which to go on a pilgrimage then this would not bode well for me. I

could be a Hindu who lives a saintly life, compared to a pilgrim that

sins time after time, and yet receive less darsan than a pilgrim that

sins to a far greater extent than i , as long as pilgrimages are

regarded as being a significant aspect Hinduism.

(Chaduri , N , 1979 ,p 153 )

Sadhus are essentially regarded as walking temples that are believed to

carry the sacred fire within their being, and of which fire is signified

as the messenger of God that depicts purity and salvation. Since sadhus

are believed, by Hindus, to be walking temples, it seems that there is

not really a need for pilgrimages. Sadhus expound blessings though they

have the added advantage over pilgrimages , in that they teach, advise,

guide peoples’ lives, and can be turned to, in times of desparation,

trouble and despair .

Sadhus act as spiritual advisors, councillors, and psycho therapist, all

wraped in one. On the whole, sadhus give people a sense of security in

the form of offering psycholgical assurance. Pilgrimage sites may give

darsan, however, they cannot speak to Hindus, or give them sound advice

and which road or path in life to travel. Sadhus do a great deal more

for Hindus than pilgrimages do and in actual fact pilgrimages have lead

to great despair, through the rigours of journeying on pilgrimage

sites, and in many cases has, as a result, led to many deaths.

Pilgrimages seem to be very detrimental to livelihood of Hindu people

in comparison to the sadhus who can directly assist Hindus in the flesh

- physically. On this note, I see no reason or justification to say

pilgrimages are more significant thn sadhus because sadhus are temples

themselves. And based on this, the Hindu religion would in no way be

dramatically affected if pilrimages were emphasised less than they are

today. However, because of all the activities sadhus carry out for

people, it would be extremely detrimental for the Hindu religion as a

whole if sadhus had no recognition because Hindus would have to deal

with obstacles and problems in life without the aid of sadhus.

Brahmans are attached to the locality of pilgrimage sites, who exact

fees even from the poorest and receive large sums of money from the

richest people. This implies or suggests that pilgrimage sites are

stamped with a scared character primarily so as to attain money. for

example, the river Ganges and the city Benares occupied a position far

greater than all other rivers and other sacred cities , but the

brahmans became jealous of the monopoly enjoyed by those in Benares.

(Narayan , K , 1989 , pp 65-68 )

What happened was that, the development of free trade in the inventing

of myths for the consecration of particular places was introduced, where

place after place was claimed to be sacred ground. It seems very

deceitful in leading Hindus to believe many places are sacred, when they

are not, just so as to attain large sums of money.

It occurs to me that many pilgrimage destinations are sort of marketed

if you like , in no way dissimilar to the way holiday destinations like

for instance, hawaii are marketed to attract tourists and their money .

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, i have argued from both sides of the coin ,so-to-speak .

what we know is that Hindus accord pilgrimages with great importance. A

pilgrimage is believed to be a way by which Hindus can atone for their

sins and even to eradicate them. Without a doubt, millions of Hindus

around the world recognise pilgrimages as being the pinacle of their

religion, for they feel and believe the darsan that can be gained from

journeying as a pilgrim and experiencing a pilgrimage from the holy

place, or from the divine image of the deity exceeds, by far, darsan of

that which can be given by holy men, such as sadhus. However, sadhus

themselves are walking temples and are regarded as divine deities as

well. Why go on a pilgrimage ,in the quest for darsan , which is

extremely arduous , when you can remain within your place of domicile

and attain darsan from a sadhu? Are we to believe then that the most

prolific sinner will gain more darsan than the person who acts as, and

has the heart of a saint ? Yes , we are , If we are to accept that the

pilgrimage is an extremely important part of Hinduism, though, this

should not be the case.

Sadhus offer more in the way of giving Hindus sound advice, and

generally guiding followers onto the appropriate path in life in

comparison to the pilgrimage. Also , wherever there is a pilgrimage

site, there is a brahman that collects offerings and sums of money from

pilgrims suggesting that some or many of the sites are in a sense

marketed like a holiday tour destination primarily to extract money even

from the poorest of the poor. Rather , the poorest should not have to go

through increased hardship by paying a collection fee just to go to a

pilgrimage site, it should primarily be the rich that pay ,and what may

i ask do the brahmen use the money for ,of which they collect? I suggest

,soley for themselves.

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