

## Pilgrimage

There are a large number of people that travel across India every year on pilgrimage in order to celebrate and develop new sense of spiritual awareness. There are specific pilgrimages for the devotees of Krsna and others who follow the god Rama. Each set of followers travel to distinct destinations that are specific to a particular deity. Other pilgrimages are done in order to visit sacred sights and temples, some for religious purposes and others for more leisurely reasons. These journeys can be done for reasons of celebration, while others have more profound and sacred motivations behind them. Pilgrimages can be undertaken alone as an solitary journey to find oneself reconnect with a special form of self-awareness. Other journeys, however, can be taken in groups as fun adventures. There are a remarkable number of differences found in pilgrimages within Hinduism.

The Sanskrit word for pilgrimage is *yatra*, and one undergoes this in a process of observance or *vrata*. Some who take on a pilgrimage will do so because of a motivation to travel and see other parts of India. For some, the practice has a more spiritual meaning. The idea of journeying may be an attempt to reach perhaps a temple or holy site in the hopes of receiving forgiveness. Others may decide to take on a pilgrimage in order to find a path of self awareness, and understanding. Whatever the reason may be behind the pilgrimage there are numerous options to any traveler. Another common type of traveler found on a Hindu pilgrim is a new married couple, perhaps using a pilgrimage as a honeymoon. Pilgrimages relating to new marriage can also be tied to traditions connected with goddesses that hope to bring fertility and prosperity. ("Village Daughter," Sax, 498) Many who choose to go on a pilgrimage do so in the hopes of

being able to travel from the reality found in everyday life to a more centered and holy place (an *axis mundi*). The ability to travel into this realm comes from crossing a *tirthas* or a crossing place. This crossing allows the traveler to be able to make the journey across reality to a holy place. Jean Rémy argues that, "Popular religion, particularly seen in the pilgrimage, is thus supposed to lend greater importance to the individual with his personal problems and at the same time to favour participation in collective undertakings." (Remy, 41) Some pilgrimages brought about through tragedies such as a death, such as the *sraddha* ceremony for those who have died. (Bharati, 138) This ceremony is linked to the holy site of Gaya. Family members will carry the ashes of the deceased family member, which have been preserved till the pilgrimage, and deposit them in Gaya. (Bharati, 139) Other pilgrimages are more festivals in order for people to gather and celebrate. The Kumbha Mela is a festival that takes place every three years but is held in four different locations. Not every location is held in the same regard, which is made evident through the much larger gathering at Prayag (Allahabad). This location holds the festival every twelve years and millions travel there. Popular rituals for worshippers at this location are bathing in the Ganga and Yamuna rivers. The idea of bathing is to purify oneself and because of the belief that bathing in a holy place will allow the pilgrim to also become holy. (Sax, 54) A vast number of travelers visit this festival making it very popular.

Other popular pilgrimages are ones in which those devoted to a certain deity set out in a journey of worship. Individual deities have separate destinations for worship that travelers can visit. For Krsna-*bhaktas* a journey to Mathura or Dvaraka is a popular choice while Rama-*bhaktas* will journey to Ayodhya. A very popular holy site is the

temple of Sri Venkatesvara that is dedicated to a form of Visnu. It attracts thousands of visitors each day and is a very wealthy temple. While some pilgrimages are marked by a journey to a natural landmark such as a river or a mountain other journeys take one to a manmade temple. The hopes of awakening self-awareness are apparent in some pilgrimages, and some devotees begin their journeys because of personal failure. Furthermore, it is obvious that some pilgrims set out clearly to honour and worship their own personal deity. Often times the option of pilgrimage is determined depending on location, as pilgrims are often restricted due to location, time, and the financial constraints of undertaking such a task. While there are many pilgrimages in West Bengal they are often restricted to those living in the region of Bengal because of the time needed to travel to the location. (Morinis, 12) In order to compensate for the amount of time needed to travel on a pilgrimage, some pilgrims take part in a shorter pilgrimage, often taking part in the journeys culmination. (Sax, 47) For some the practice of a pilgrimage can be the journey to a festival, a journey to a temple, holy site, or an attempt at spiritual awakening. *Sādhus* or holy men participate in pilgrimages in the Himalayas; there they challenge themselves by travelling barefoot on demanding paths. While some Hindus see pilgrimages as simply a chance to travel, while others regard pilgrimage as a difficult challenge in order to become stronger in personal faith.

It is impossible to make sweeping conclusions about pilgrimages in Hinduism due to the fact that they occur for such a multitude of reasons. However, due to the vast number of travels being undertaken by pilgrims they offer a fascinating study not only to those interested in studying Hinduism but also anthropology and geography. Part of what makes pilgrimages important is not only the importance to Hindus but also the fact

that it is an ongoing journey which provides detailed information. (Rutherford, 143) One of the most important elements for a pilgrim is the idea of contemplation. One may be a follower of Krsna, Rama, or is simply looking for an adventure, yet a pilgrims claim to seek some sort of personal gain. That gain may be trying to find a deep understanding, a surreal realm, or an attempt to find balance in life. Hindu pilgrimages occur for many different reasons and therefore are fascinating for those reasons. Scholars are able to seek out numerous different questions when trying to understand this very diverse tradition. It is this diversity which so uniquely defines Hinduism.

### **Bibliography**

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### **Suggested Terms:**

*Yatra*  
*Vrata*  
*Gaya*  
*Kumbha Melas*  
*Prayag (Allahabad)*  
*Ganga*  
*Yamuna*  
*Krsna-bhaktas*  
*Rama-bhaktas*  
*Mathura*  
*Dvaraka*  
*Ayodhya*  
*Sri Venkatesvara*  
*West Bengal*  
*Vishnu*

### **Suggested Websites**

<http://www.pilgrimage-india.com/hindu-pilgrimage/>  
<http://www.colorado.edu/Conferences/pilgrimage/papers/Bhardwaj.html>  
<http://www.pilgrimagetourinindia.com/hindu.htm>

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