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Submitted: Apr. 3, 2025; Accepted: Oct. 02, 2025; Published: Jan. 1, 2026

DOI: 10.62461/SJP100226

The Common Motifs of Popular Religiosity in Pilgrimages to Sabarimala and Malayattoor in Kerala: A Comparative Study on the Commonness of Religiosity in Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Since time immemorial people have undertaken journeys on foot to places deemed holy. Like many other countries, India is a land rich in pilgrimage sites for various religions. This research explores the common motifs of popular religiosity in pilgrimages to Sabarimala and Malayattoor in the Kerala State of India. Those two ancient pilgrimage centers belong to the Hindus and to the Syrian Catholics respectively. Pilgrims on those routes can appreciate its tranquility, as social, cultural and historical riches are set against the backdrop of the Western Ghats of Kerala. The study explains the legends and practices of popular religiosity associated with each center. It is followed by explaining the common motifs of popular religiosity experienced in pilgrimages. This study not only enriches the understanding of popular religiosity in a specific cultural context but also offers valuable insights into the influences of advancements of digital media in pilgrimages. Employing technological tools reduces the impact of pilgrimages on the environment while promoting increased connectivity, safety, security and sustainability. Thus, it provides the pilgrims with holistic pilgrimage experience.

Keywords: *popular religiosity, pilgrimage, Sabarimala, Malayattoor, Ayyappa, Muthappan, legend, myth, digital*

1. Introduction

Every year, millions of people around the world participate in pilgrimages. It is a universal phenomenon of popular religiosity that occurs in nearly every region of the world with nearly every type of people. Popular religiosity is how the common people live their religious beliefs and practices through their particular cultural expressions, often outside the structures of religious institutions. “Popular religiosity refers to a universal experience: there is always a religious dimension in the hearts of people, nations, and their collective expressions. All peoples tend to give expression to their totalizing view of the transcendent, their concept of nature, society, and history through cultic means. Such characteristic syntheses are of major spiritual and human importance.”¹

Davidson and Gitlitz define pilgrimage as a journey to a special place, in which both the journey and the destination have spiritual significance for the journeyer. Important components of a pilgrimage include the intention, the holy site, the journey, and the pilgrim. They illustrate elements for undertaking pilgrimages that may include spiritual renewal, healing, atonement and forgiveness, fulfilment of a vow, reaffirmation of religious or ethnic identity, witnessing a recurring miracle, reenacting a religious event, and test of spiritual or physical strength to undergo a rite of passage.² Pilgrims are a group on a journey to a chosen place to ask God or a saint or a deity at that particular place for help in a variety of concerns which the official religions fail to answer.³ Pilgrimage is extroverted mysticism with external actions carrying inner meanings as mysticism is called an introverted pilgrimage.⁴ Bharati argues pilgrimages in India have a strictly defined purpose and scope with a well prescribed procedure, especially in references to times, dates and exact astrologically auspicious moments.⁵

Pilgrims journey together in their newly formed group, strictly following prescribed and mandated pilgrimage activities and requirements. These actions are accorded myriads of meanings that pilgrims construct before, during, and after a pilgrimage. There are series of consistent steps and components commonly practiced in all

¹ Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, “Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines,” *Vatican Media*, last modified December 21, 2001: no. 10. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vers-direttorio_en.html

² Linda Kay Davidson and David M. Gitlitz, *Pilgrimage: From the Ganges to Graceland-An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, California: 2002), xvii-xxiii.

³ Kathleen Coyle, “Pilgrimages, Apparitions and Popular Religiosity,” *East Asian Pastoral Review* 38, no. 2 (2001): 171-76.

⁴ Jean Dalby Clift, Wallace Bruce Clift (*The Archetype of Pilgrimage: Outer Action With Inner Meaning* (Mahwah N.J.: Paulist, 1996), 22-28.

⁵ Agehananda Bharati, “Pilgrimage in the Indian Tradition,” *History of Religions* 3, no.1 (1963): 137.

pilgrimages. These practices include commitment to the journey, preparation, the actual travel or journey, preparation to enter the sacred site, the experience at the sacred site, completion of the journey, the return home, and the most challenging demand of continuing to live in the home environment that has remained mostly the same while the person has been transformed and revitalized.⁶ The preparatory phase may include abstinence from certain food, drink, and sex; donning special dress to imply as a people set apart from the ordinary, spending more time in prayer, self-reflection, and doing works of penance and almsgiving both individually and communally.

Turner and Turner classify pilgrimages into four types:⁷

- Prototypical pilgrimage: It is established by the founder of a historical religion or their first disciples, or by important adherents of the faith;
- Archaic pilgrimage: It is characterized by evident traces of syncretism with older religious beliefs and symbols resulting in the origin of various folk religions;
- Medieval pilgrimage: This type of pilgrimage is best known in the popular and mythical/literary traditions of the Middle Ages;
- Modern pilgrimage: This type of pilgrimage is marked by devotional practices and personal piety of the adherents.

A pilgrimage is a liminal experience, a threshold, a betwixt. It is a place in-between what was and what will be where the familiar falls apart and new is revealed for powerful transformation of individuals and groups. It is a space where we hold the darkness and light of the messy circumstances, loss, grief, and confusion from where we find a new way forward. The purpose of this paper is to explore the popular religiosity assigned to pilgrimage experiences, to evaluate the similarities between a Christian and a Hindu pilgrimage undertaken in Malayattoor and Sabarimala in Kerala, India, and to elucidate the wave of digital advancements in pilgrimage journeys.

2. Popular Religious Practices in Pilgrimages to Malayattoor

The name 'Malayattoor' is an amalgamation of three words, namely *Mala* (Mountain), *Arr* (River), and *Oore* (Place). So Malayattoor is a meeting place of mountain, river, and land in Ernakulam district in the state of Kerala in South India.

⁶ Davidson and Gitlitz, *Pilgrimage*, xxiii.

⁷ Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 18-19.

2.1. Legends and Myths

The St. Thomas International Shrine Malayattoor is one of the eight international Catholic shrines in the world. It is situated in Kerala, India. Tradition holds St. Thomas the Apostle landed in Crangannore, India in 52 CE. According to the local oral tradition, St. Thomas was greeted by a hostile crowd when he reached Malayattoor on his way to Mylapore. He sought refuge atop a mountain where he spent time in prayer and rest. During this time, he marked a cross on the rock with his finger. This place is now called *Kurisumudi* or the pinnacle of the hill. During his thirst in intense moments of prayer, he struck a rock for water. Miraculously, water burst forth from the rock. This spring water that flows even today is considered miraculous and holy. Pilgrims believe in its healing powers. The imprints of the saint's footprints and knee are found next to the spring. It signifies his time spent in deep prayer.

2.2. The Popular Religious Practices

Even today we could trace out the footprints of St. Thomas and the marks of his knees on the rock in the hilltop. Pilgrims flock to the *Kaalpadam* (footprint) to receive favors and miracle cures from the saint. The *Ponmkurisu* (the golden cross) is the place where St. Thomas is believed to have found solace in prayer and in communion with heavenly Father. A sixteen-foot-long cross was built over the golden cross to protect it from the wild animals. The miraculous pond on the mountain top is the place where St. Thomas quenched his thirst when he was in need of water. The wandering hunters called the *nayadis* or the *vedan* are believed to have seen this golden cross and gathered there for prayers and offerings. They found a divine light emanating from the hard rock and upon examining the source they found a golden cross. They later discovered the footprints of the great saint and when this extra ordinary piece of news reached the plains, people began to flock the hills of Malayattoor. With increasing numbers of pilgrims, it was the need of the time to build a church and thus in 900 CE, the present St. Thomas Church was built at Malayattoor, on the bank of the River Periyar near Kalady, the birthplace of Sankaracharya, the great Hindu *Advaitic* philosopher and mystic.

The locals began a practice of lighting an oil lamp on top of the mountain at the holy site and whenever the lamp gave in for the wind, a herd of goats came down wailing so that people would climb the mountain to light the lamp again. Pilgrims who climb the mountain even today carry with them sesame seeds to feed the goats, even though there are no more goats. Today sesame seed is offered as a sign of prosperity. At the footstep of the hill, there is the statue of St. Thomas erected in 1938, perched on a rock to protect it from the menacing trunks of wild elephants. The church at the hilltop today stands above the cross that St. Thomas had erected during his days of intense prayer. The church erected

at the top of the mount is believed to have been attacked by the wild elephants. Today this old church is called *Anakutthiyapalli* (the chapel struck by elephants).

It is the source of comfort for the millions who climb the hill with earnest devotion. Even though the principal feast⁸ commences eight days after Easter, people start flocking the *kurisumudi* from the beginning of the season of Lent which commences on Ash Monday for the Syrian Catholics. Beginning from Ash Monday, they abstain from eating fish, meat, and eggs. During the Lenten season, pilgrims climb the mountain in reparation for their sins, reciting the Way of the Cross along the way. The pilgrims carry large and heavy wooden crosses, wearing *kavi dhoti* (saffron devotional sarong) and *rudraksha* rosary (the seeds of the *Elaeocarpus ganitrus* tree).⁹ It is a custom among the newlyweds of Kerala to make a pilgrimage to Malayattoor on the first Sunday after Easter that follows their marriage for protection, prosperity and happiness. Some pilgrims climb up and descend the mountain on their knees, some with broomsticks on their heads, some with heavy stones, and some carrying their children high above their shoulders. It is the women who carry the brooms made of large coconut leaves. It signifies wishes to receive long hair which is a criterion for beauty among women in Kerala. Carrying stones symbolize penance. There is a custom among men followed from generation to generation of shaving hair and beard before bathing in the river. Shaving off hair symbolizes leaving the old life force to embrace the new life force as it grows back after the pilgrimage. Interestingly pilgrims climbing up and down the slopes invoke aloud St. Thomas, calling him, according to our customs *Muthappan*, i.e., Patriarch. “*Ponnumkurishumuthappo Ponnalakeyattam*” (O Patriarch of the Golden Cross! Climb we shall, this golden hill!) is the chant that pierces the otherwise a silent mountain. It is the chant that comes out from the lips of all pilgrims belonging to different religions who come from all over India climbing the mountain path, forgetting everything and concentrating on God, the Almighty through *Muthappan* meaning the patriarch, a title assigned to St. Thomas. The feast of St. Thomas is known as *Puthunjayar* (New Sunday), celebrated on the Sunday after Easter.

3. Popular Religious Practices in Pilgrimages to Sabarimala

Sabarimala literally means the hills of Sabari. This name derives from “Sabari,” a tribal woman who, according to legend, was a devotee of Lord Rama mentioned in the epic tale *Ramayana* and lived in the region of the 18 hills where the temple is located. The Sabarimala temple is located in the Periyar Tiger Reserve Forest in Pathanamthitta district of Kerala.

⁸ The feasts in Syro Malabar Rite precedes novena, hosting of the sacred flag three days before the feast, the actual feast and the closing ceremonies follow eight days later.

⁹ Both attires are typically Indian to denote asceticism and fasting in preparation of a pilgrimage.

The shrine of Sabarimala is one of the most remote Hindu shrines, situated 914 m above sea level in the forests of Western Ghats in Kerala. Yet it still draws well beyond five million pilgrims each year. The Village of Sabarimala is named after Shabari who did severe penance in order to meet Rama who granted her wish for devotion and faith during her penance. It is one of the most popular pilgrimage destinations in South India during the festival season in the months of November, December, and January. Pilgrimage to Sabarimala involves severe austerity, and a trek through the Western Ghats. Sabarimala enshrines Sastha or Ayyappan – Hariharaputran,¹⁰ the son of Shiva and Vishnu-Maya. Sastha is a popular deity in Kerala enshrined in several of its temples. Five temples dedicated to Sastha are of great importance. Kulathupuzha enshrines Sastha as a child; Aryankavu enshrines him as a young lad; Achan Kovil enshrines him as a householder with his consorts Poorna and Pushkala; Sabarimala enshrines him as his Vanaprasthasramam (retired state); and Ponnambalamedu (the golden shrine) enshrines him as the highest mystic. These five shrines represent the five stages of life as described by the scriptures. *Ponnambalam* is a spot on a hill where the *Makara Jyothi* (a particular star) appears on the day of *Makara Sankranti* (the zodiac movement of the earth's dial around the sun).

3.1. The Legends and Myths

Various legends explain the birth of Ayyappa.¹¹ One begins with Shiva roaming the mountain kingdoms of the Himalayas. There he sees a lovely maiden and, overcome with desire, he makes passionate love with her. But the maiden is married to another man, a tribal chieftain who vows revenge on the god. The tribal chieftain retires to an ice cave in the high mountains and practices austerities for a thousand years. Through these austerities he gains great psychic powers and goes forth to punish Shiva. From the heights of Mt. Kailash, Shiva sees the tribal chieftain approaching. The chieftain looks like a terrible demon and Shiva, in fear calls on god Vishnu for assistance and protection. Vishnu manifests himself as a beautiful damsel, seduces the demon chieftain, and destroys him. But then Shiva, once again overcome with sexual desire, sees the radiant damsel (who is merely Vishnu in another form) and mates with her. Out of this union comes a baby boy named Ayappa. Embodying the qualities of Vishnu and Shiva, Ayappa is an avatar (divinity in human form) born into the world to battle the demons of the hill tribes of Kerala. Shiva tells the magical child of his dharma-life (a life of service) and leaves him upon the bank of a mountain stream where he is discovered

¹⁰ According to the ancient myths of Kerala, Lord Ayappa was born out of Vishnu and Shiva. Another legend says, Lord Shiva was enamored by the charms of 'Mohini', in which form Vishnu appeared at the time of churning the mythical Ocean of Milk in order to lure the 'asuras' or the demons). Lord Shiva succumbed to the beauty of Mohini and Hariharaputra – son (putran) of Vishnu (Hari) and Shiva (Hara) - was born out of the union.

¹¹ These myths are handed over orally. They have been converted into films and into story in printed form.

by a childless tribal king. Brought up by the king, Ayappa does many miracles, is a great healer and a defeater of demons. After fulfilling the purpose of his incarnation Ayyappa entered the inner sanctum of the ancient temple upon sacred Mt. Sabari and disappeared. During his mythical life, Ayappa kept the company of tigers and leopards. Mystics living in the deep forests surrounding the Sabrimala Mountains have reported seeing Ayappa riding through the jungles upon a majestic tiger.

There is also another popular myth in our tradition. The story goes that Shiva gives a gift an asura (demons) that allows him to merely touch a person on his head, and he will fall dead. The asura then thanks him and wants to try out the boon on Lord Shiva himself. In fear, Shiva runs and calls upon Lord Vishnu for help. Lord Vishnu in the guise of the beautiful maiden Mohini, which literally means “enchantress” or “seductress”, approaches the asura. She questions him about why he is chasing Shiva. The asura tells her how he has received this boon and wanted to test it on Shiva himself. Mohini tricks the foolish asura by telling him that the boon was really ineffective and Shiva did not want him to know that. If he wanted, he could test it on himself. The asura placed his hand on his own head, believing her, and he falls dead. Shiva is very grateful towards Vishnu but is enchanted by his female form. Ayyappa was born from this union. They have the child Ayyappa to satisfy the demigods’ plea to save them from the torments of the demon Mahishi. Ayyappa is then raised by the King of Panthala, Rajashekharan, who was childless. Right after adopting the child Ayyappa, whom he called Mani Kanda, meaning “one who wears a bell around his neck” (for the child was found wearing a small bell on a chain around his neck that attracted the king’s attention who was out on a hunt with his men), the king took the child as his own. When Ayyappa was about to reach age, the queen feared that her own child would lose his right to the throne, so with the minister of the court, she schemed to murder Ayyappa. She faked being ill saying that her stomach was in unbearable pain. The minister bribed the court physician to say that the only remedy would be a female tiger’s milk. Ayyappa, willing to do anything for his mother, goes on the dangerous mission alone to get the milk. Instead, he meets Mahishi and slays her. The gods in happiness and joy assume the form of tigers and accompany him back to the palace to give the so-called needed milk remedy. Upon seeing this, the queen confessed her schemes and begs forgiveness from the young prince. Ayyappa forgiving his mother takes the vow of celibacy and leaves the palace to reside on Sabarimala. Women are not allowed to go to the temple, not in fear that Ayyappa might leave the shrine, but that women will desire and fall in love with the beautiful celibate god. They are allowed after they have reached menopausal age.¹²

¹² The myths were compiled from information available at www.ayyappa.ldc.com, www.templenct.com/kerala/sabari.html, www.pta.kerala.gov.in/sabari.html, www.in-diavarta.com/religion/sabarimala.html

3.2. The Popular Religious Practices

Before beginning the multi-day walk through the mountain jungles to get to Sabarimala, the pilgrims prepare themselves by wearing the black dhoti and undertaking 41 days of fasting, celibacy, meditation and prayer. Every pilgrim is supposed to observe 41 days of continence or '*brahmacharya*' starting with the *Maladharan* ceremony, when the prospective pilgrim adorns a garland of '*tulsi*' (holy basil) or '*rudraksha*' beads. The pilgrim maintains austerity of mind, body and speech and spends his time visiting temples, praying and attending religious discourses. During the pilgrimage period of mid-November to the end of December, the devotee wears colored clothes like blue, black or ochre, and grows a beard. The pilgrim virtually leads the life of an ascetic, and he is expected to consume only *sattvic* (plant based) food as explained in the Bhagavad-Gita [17:8-10] and abstains from meat, intoxicating drinks, and intoxicants. A significant aspect of the pilgrimage is that all the pilgrims address fellow pilgrims as Ayyappa (the name of the deity himself) irrespective of one's caste or economic status.

The pilgrimage starts with the *Kettunira* ceremony, the filling up of the sacred bundle of two folds (*Irumudi*), conducted either in one's house or in a temple. *Irumudi* is a cloth bag of two compartments, in which the front portion is meant for *puja* (ritual) articles and offerings, and the rear portion for storing the personal requirements for the holy trek. The main offering to the Lord is the ghee-filled coconut and the *irumudi* is balanced on the head while trekking. Once the *Kettunira* ceremony is over, the pilgrim is ready for the pilgrimage. With the relentless chanting of "*Swamiye Saranam Ayappa*" ("Lord Ayappa Our Refuge"), pilgrims reach the holy forest abode of Lord Ayappa atop Mount Sabari. After seeing the deity, many pilgrims will complete a vow called *Shayana Pradikshanam*.¹³ This devotional practice is done not only in Sabarimala but also in other temples and churches in Kerala. There are 18 steep steps coated in *panchaloba* (five metal alloy) leading to the deity. It is a sacred place known as *pathinettampadi* (18 steps). In fact, only those devotees carrying an *irumudi* are allowed to enter the temple premises.

Pilgrims reach spiritual ecstasy at the very sight of the 18 golden steps. The devotee, after the hazardous 6 km trek on the forest road from Pamba, breaks a coconut carried in the *irumudi* before stepping on to the *pathinettampadi*. Breaking of the coconut is in itself a spiritual act. The shell of the coconut represents the material body and kernel, the immaterial. The water represents the soul. When the devotee breaks the coconut and steps on to the *pathinettampadi*, he breaks the physical barrier and blends with the Ultimate. A devotee on his 19th pilgrimage carries with him a coconut sapling which he plants near the temple. This again underscores one more magnificent facet of the pilgrimage: The symbiosis between human and nature.

¹³ In the Malayalam language of Kerala, *Shayana Pradakshinam* means "revolution with the body."

There are many theories about the significance of 18 steps in the pilgrimage to Sabarimala. It is believed that the steps represent 18 mountains surrounding the temple. On each step, the deity of the corresponding mountain has been installed. So, when the devotee climbs the 18 steps to reach the sanctum sanctorum, he attains the *punya* (grace) of visiting all 18 hill gods. During the *padipuja* (rituals at the steps), deities of these 18 mountains are propitiated. The significance of each of the 18 steps reflects the inner challenges a devotee must navigate on the path to final enlightenment. The first five steps symbolize the call to transcend the five sensory perceptions. Steps 6 to 13 correspond to inner negativities such as lust, anger, greed, attachment, jealousy, pride, envy, and hypocrisy. The following three steps represent the fundamental qualities of human nature: purity and wisdom (*Satva*), passion and action (*Rajas*), and ignorance and inertia (*Tamas*). To progress toward enlightenment and liberation, a spiritual seeker strives to cultivate *Satva*, balance *Rajas*, and minimize *Tamas*, as every human being embodies these three qualities in varying degrees. The final two steps signify the ultimate call to choose knowledge and enlightenment (*vidhya*) over ignorance and illusion (*avidhya*), leading to divine realization.¹⁴

The significance of the number 18 can be traced back to the Vedic age. The first Veda (the oldest religious text in Hinduism), believed to be protected by Lord Brahma himself, had 18 chapters. Later, Veda Vyasa divided it to create the four Vedas: Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharva Veda. Each of these Vedas had 18 chapters. Veda Vyasa also wrote 18 *puranas* (major narratives) and 18 *upa-puranas* (sub-narratives). The *Bhagavad-Gita* has 18 chapters and the Kurukshetra war lasted 18 days. Women, unless they are younger than six or older than sixty are not allowed to come to Sabarimala. It is said that during the pilgrimage periods, no tigers are found along the forest trails leading to Sabarimala. This is explained as resulting from Ayyappan's power over tigers. The secular aspect of the temple is best exemplified by the existence of the '*Vavar Nada*' in honor of a Muslim saint in close proximity to the main temple (Ayyappa Swami Temple) at Sabarimala by the side of Holy *Pathinettampady* (18 steps). The pilgrims also pay homage in the mosque enroute to Erumeli as a part of their pilgrimage. At the end of the journey, the devotee, before entering his house, breaks a coconut, lies prostrate before the family deity, and takes down the garland, thus breaking the continence. The pilgrimage is symbolic of the transformation of the individual self, or in other words, a journey from '*Jivatma*' to '*Paramatma*' (from self to SELF).

¹⁴ Bhakti, Tarani, "The Sacred 18 Steps of Sabarimala: The Pathway to Divine Realization," *DharmikVibes* (blog), Feb 23, 2025. <https://blog.dharmikvibes.com/p/the-sacred-18-steps-of-sabarimala>

4. Common Motifs of Popular Religiosity in Pilgrimages to Malayattoor and Sabarimala

4.1. Religiosity of the Body

The most common motif of popular religion as the religiosity of the body denotes the hazardous paths undertaken to reach the divine. There is sweat, body odour, aching bones, and blistered feet as the pilgrims trek along the mountainous terrains of Kerala. They experience hunger and thirst as food intake is restricted to simple vegetarian meals and water. *Shayana Pradishanam*, or revolution of the body (a form of worship done by rolling on the ground), walking on the knees, carrying the *irumudi* and heavy wooden crosses, stones on the head, etc., are examples of ‘difficulty of access’ motif in operation. The underlying principles of these exterior body movements are the expressions of one’s own sense of ignorance, unworthiness, and sinfulness to receive the grace one wishes. It means conversion and growth happens when one works hard by leaving the familiar self and the world to the unfamiliar and gruesome. The Jungian expression calls this inner journey of growth and development as “the path of individuation,” which is a lifetime journey with difficult tasks. The exterior journey in pilgrimages as a practice of popular religiosity is an expression of the inner journey for encountering the divine to transform the self. Terreault underscored religiosity of body in pilgrimages specifically as “a cluster of performative practices of movement through time and across space, originating and substantiated in the lived flesh of pilgrim bodies-in-the-world.”¹⁵

4.2. Religiosity of the Many

People go on pilgrimages not as individuals but in groups. Pilgrimages are an embodiment of a collective journey the community undertakes in a multigenerational, multi-status, and multi-affiliation society. Sommerfelt emphasizes the transcendence of different boundaries in shared humanity by narrowing the distances between divisions created by social prestige hierarchies and differences of economic classes, kin and non-kin, urban and rural, strangers and family, and between living kin and departed ancestors.¹⁶ The pilgrims to Sabarimala, called *Ayyappas*, wear special clothing, usually black or blue attire, until the pilgrimage is completed. The pilgrims to Malayattoor these days wear *kani* (saffron) dhotis as their distinct mark. Both are typical ascetical costumes of the Kerala culture. They follow a particular path, or way, in communion with other pilgrims walking the same route. This path is considered sacred. The prayers and rituals are

¹⁵ Sara Terreault, “Introduction: The Body is the Place Where Pilgrimage Happens,” *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* 7, no.1 (2019): 1.

¹⁶ Tone Sommerfelt, “Politics of Shared Humanity: On Hospitality, Equality and the Spiritual in Rural Gambia,” *Anthropological Forum* 34, no.1 (2024): 55.

performed collectively. Among the pilgrims, there is a growing awareness of a shared humanity and collective connection with the divine, transcending religious, social, and economic differences.

4.3. Religiosity of Rituals without Priests

There are numerous popular rituals that characterize the pilgrimages. They are carried out in utmost precision and reverence by the pilgrims themselves without a priest compared to general practices of official religions that are priest cantered. The pilgrims in Sabarimala reach out to connect themselves with Lord Ayyappa through *darshan* (to see and to be seen by the deity). Physical connection either by kissing or by touching is the popular religious practice at Malayattoor. Practices such as the revolution of the body (*shayana pradikshanam*) to reach the presence of the deity, circumambulation of the temple, and the veneration of the sacred cross and the statue of St. Thomas are also widely observed. Circumambulation is a unique popular Indian ritual practice with the deeper meaning of symbolically honoring all the corners of the cosmos before approaching the center to revere the deity. It is usually performed three times, symbolizing the Earth's threefold motion: spinning on its axis, orbiting the sun, and moving outward through space with the rest of the solar system. It is practiced barefooted by both the Hindus and the Christians.¹⁷ In the Ayyappa temple, pilgrims ring the bells before entering, as devotees believe the deity is asleep and must be awakened. The ringing also serves as a symbolic announcement of one's arrival, reflecting the desire to enter into direct contact with the divine. Women take the lead in guiding the group through the Way of the Cross, devotional singing, and recitation of the Rosary and other prayer forms. Both pilgrim centers are situated in the high mountains with two great rivers of Kerala, the Pamba and Periyar flowing at its feet. Water from the holy streams in the upper hills is drunk as sacred water. The pilgrims also bathe themselves as a symbol of purification in those rivers. In Indian spiritual culture, rivers are deeply revered as sacred. The pilgrims call upon the names of their deities and saints using local names until they reach their presence on the mountain top. Notably, none of these accompanying rituals require the presence of a priest to fulfil.

4.4. Religiosity of Giving and Receiving

Rodrigues highlights one distinct goal of pilgrimages (*thirthayatra*) in the Indian context as developing the mutuality of horizontal relationship for greater equality and sharing.¹⁸ In Sabarimala and Malayattoor the pilgrims leave

¹⁷ Going barefooted is a sign of respect for the sacredness of the place and asceticism. The common practice before entering churches, temples, mosques and houses is to remove the shoes as a sign of respect for the sacredness of the place.

¹⁸ Edwin Rodrigues, "Pilgrimage in the Jubilee Year 2025," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 89, no. 6 (June 2025): 5-6.

something for the deity. Coconut is the most common offertory in Sabarimala where the pilgrim breaks it at the foot of the sacred 18 steps symbolizing his own self. The broken coconut is later used in the sacrifice (*boma*) where it is thrown into the ritual fire. A strong liking for sweets is a common factor of all Hindu Gods and Ayyappa is no exception. *Appam* (a kind of pan cake) and *aravana* (a dessert made of rice, ghee, and sugar) are the *prasadams* (sacred food) of the Lord. In Malayattoor, the pilgrims leave sesame seeds and black pepper as offerings to obtain prosperity. The sacred food is carried back home to be shared with family members and friends who could not join the pilgrimage, allowing everyone to partake, directly or indirectly, in the sacred journey. For Catholic pilgrims, undergoing the Sacrament of Reconciliation and receiving Holy Eucharist on the mountain top chapel is a widely done practice. Through these, along with various acts of penance and rituals, the pilgrims symbolically leave behind their sins.

4.5. Religiosity of Negotiation

Pilgrimage sites are avenues of inherent divergent and pluralist expressions of negotiations with the deity in popular folk styles. Dhali explains the negotiations in pilgrimages are for gaining religious merits and seeking solutions to their mundane everyday problems. Furthermore, visits to folk deities are powerful expressions of socio-cultural identity by subalterns and subordinates of the Indian society who consider the deities as their local heroes who address their immediate needs and safeguard their identity.¹⁹ Underlying motivation for most pilgrimages lies in negotiating with the deity for pardon and for favors such as healing, fertility, prosperity, and happiness. At the heart of many pilgrimages is an endless list of material blessings, often sought in fulfilment of a vow. Many feel that such blessings and miracles are not experienced through the routine observances of prescribed religious practices. For others, especially those wearied by the monotony of daily life, the pilgrimage offers a break from sameness and an opportunity for inner renewal. Among young people accustomed to material comfort, annual pilgrimages have become an almost inevitable practice for personal transformation. Frequently, once a petition has been granted through these negotiations with the deity, pilgrims return to fulfil their promises, offering acts of gratitude. In doing so, the pilgrimage experience deepens their sense of life and makes it profoundly more meaningful.

4.6. Religiosity of Inter-religiousness

Indian society is very inclusive in general where no one and nothing gets lost. Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and the minority groups of Jews and Sikhs coexist in Kerala. Temples, mosques, and churches stand side by side in Kerala with no

¹⁹ Rajshree Dhali, "Perspectives on Pilgrimage to Folk Deities," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* 8, no.5 (2020): 25.

communal fights and tensions. During the seasons of pilgrimages everyone helps the pilgrims who usually travel barefooted irrespective of their religious identities. They are held in high respect as sacred people on a holy journey. Gupta brings attention to these shared cultural, religious and economic underpinnings of pilgrimages in India with profound impacts on community narratives and lives that foster a spirit of inclusivity, interfaith-dialogue and community engagement.²⁰ Opposite from the main temple complex in Sabarimala, there is a smaller temple for the Muslim saint called Wavar, who is a friend of Lord Ayyapa. Signifying religious tolerance and harmony of the olden days, the devotees pay obeisance to Lord Wavar, on their way to the main temple. The Catholic pilgrims traveling to Malayattoor church often visit the town of Kalady, the birthplace of Shankaracharya, a world-renowned Hindu mystic philosopher who propounded the *Adviata* School of Philosophy. On their journey, pilgrims show respect and reverence for all holy places, regardless of religious differences. It is common, for instance, to see Hindu pilgrims enroute to Sabarimala dropping coins into the treasury boxes of churches or lighting candles before crucifixes. In doing so, the pilgrims actively construct a pluralist community of interdependence, honoring the sacredness of one another's right to be different—a respect that fosters greater collaboration. In this way, popular religiosity expressed through pilgrimage becomes a positive and creative effort by ordinary people toward mutual peaceful coexistence at the interreligious level. At the heart of pilgrimages and processions lies the building of inclusive, interreligious community.

4.7. Religiosity of Celebration

The pilgrimage season is a time of vibrant celebration, where people of all religions and walks of life come together in shared sacredness. Rogério and Da Silva highlight pilgrimages as religious mega-events of celebrations that generate complementary influences between pilgrimage and tourism, resulting in the promotion and production of fluid boundaries of celebrations of post-modern popular culture.²¹ The crowded streets, bustling markets, inexpensive food stalls, and colorful displays of indigenous merchandise form an inseparable backdrop to the spirituality of popular religion. The resonant beat of the *chenda melam* (traditional group drumming) instantly awakens the festive spirit intrinsic to pilgrimage. Played by multicultural and interreligious ensembles, these traditional folk percussion instruments embody the communal rhythm of celebration, inviting pilgrims to feel and absorb the collective joy that accompanies the feast.

²⁰ Vinay Gupta, "Pilgrimage Perspectives: Exploring the Realm of Religious Tourism In India, *Journal of the Institute of Oriental Studies* 3, no. 3 (2025): 29-30.

²¹ José Rogério Lopes and André Luiz da Silva, "Religious Mega-Events and Their Assemblages in Devotional Pilgrimages: The Case of Círio de Nazaré in Belém, Pará State, Brazil," *Journal of Global Catholicism* 5, no.2, Article 5 (2021): 90-92.

4.8. Religiosity of Intuition

Popular religiosity is always ruled by a flow state of intuition rather than rational logic. It is a place of epiphanies and realizations. Kochappilly argues that pilgrimage is fundamentally an epiphany of the life and nature of faith, and basically a movement of the people, a progression of inner current and undercurrent of the belief-system of a particular religion.²² The prayers and actions performed are feeling-based and affective with a deep sense of God. It may not be always in consonance with the fixed rubrics and rituals of an institutional religion. In its content and expression, it is very different from the spiritual activities of those who are initiated more thoroughly, such as the clergy and *brahmanic* priests. The need-based prayers are murmured spontaneously in the presence of the deity. They are often uttered in the frame of mind of one who does it. It is known to him/her alone. One's real-life situations are the raw materials for prayer said with great spontaneity and improvisation. The faithful seek God's response to their concrete human needs for protection, healing, blessings, and grace—and approach the divine through various rites, symbols, and particular devotions. Sala highlights that the content of such prayers is influenced by context holding the creative dimension of expressing something one that has never been said before as such prayers emanate from the heart and are not stored in the head. Those prayers are often said in varying voice pitch and modulation with accompanying gestures, thus becoming a mixture of persuasion and command.²³

4.9. Religiosity of Cultural Ethos

Popular religiosity expressed in pilgrimages is an expression of the cultural ethos of people of Kerala. The practices of popular religiosity contain the indigenous cultural patterns of Kerala as a state. During worship most pilgrims squat on the floor, touch the flames of holy fire with their palms, and touch the statues and sacred places with their palms and bring the palms to their foreheads and hearts. In diverse ways, it carries the marks of the ascetical and spiritual traditions of Indian society. This cultural energy is expressed in their power to be somebody. In Indian society where the status of people is graded in caste systems, embracing Christianity and joining Christian movements and pilgrimages always provide a different higher ranking social identity. Unlike other states of India, Kerala has no rigid caste system. Popular religiosity in pilgrimages is an expression of the embodiment of faith in the cultural traits of Kerala, which while very diverse, contain some basic commonalities. Being an agrarian state, its closeness to the earth is expressed in the mountainous character of the pilgrim sites with

²² Paulachan Kochappilly, "Pilgrimage: Phenomenon Of Passage," *Journal of Dharma* 3, no. 3 (2006): 321.

²³ Sala M. Bonaventure, "The Performative Aspect of Spontaneous Prayers in Cameroon: A Study in Evasive Media in Interactions," *British Journal of English Linguistics* 10, no. 2, (2022): 2.

sacred rivers at its foothills. The offerings are agricultural products such as coconuts, black pepper, sesame seeds, ghee, native bananas, etc. In one way or the other, attention and respect is paid to the five elements—water, air, fire, earth, and ether—in various rituals and worship forms undertaken during a pilgrimage. Kerala with its 100 percent literacy level has a large number of educated youths facing high unemployment and records the highest suicide rate in India.²⁴ The state has no major industries. The strict labor laws put forward by the successive communist governments cause investors to shy away. This cultural energy is seen in the collective identification and solidarity with one another in the footsteps of the pilgrim path hoping for a better future. In pilgrimages, cosmic elements and the human species become one creative inter-related reality as opposed to the institutionalized religious practices, which are often sterile. The popular religious practices performed are the root cultural paradigms unique to Kerala culture.

4.10. Religiosity of Self-realization for Integral Transformation

The phrase inscribed atop of the Sabarimala Sree Ayyappa Swamy Temple '*Tatvamasi*' encapsulates the essence of pilgrimage to Sabarimala. Meaning "You are That," it is the self-realization of recognizing the divine within and the unity between the individual soul and the universal spirit. Here one will realize that what you seek is seeking you. This impels a person to recognize the divine in others and the universe by practicing compassion and justice. Prayers and rituals help to internalize its meaning in order to realize the divine potential in everyone beyond all human limitations.

Pilgrimage to Malayattoor is a call to realize the divine within. Jesus insisted that Thomas touch his wounds, after which Thomas exclaimed, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28). "Look deep into the wound of a wounded person and confess, *my lord and my God!* this is Christian contemplation. Get involved in the initiatives of integral liberation and feel, *God is with us*- this is Christian commitment."²⁵ Pope Francis elaborates on the positive impact of popular piety on society as a whole as an authentic faith is not a private affair, but committed to promoting "human development, social progress and care for creation." He emphasizes that popular piety fosters "constructive citizenship" among Christians, enabling collaboration with secular, civil, and political institutions "in the service of each person, beginning with the least among us, for an integral human growth and the care of the environment;"²⁶ (It was Saint Paul VI who changed the name in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* from "religiosity" to popular "piety").

²⁴ Kerala State Youth Commission, *Youth Mental Health: A Study on Suicides* (KSYC Report, 2025), 43-52.

²⁵ Sebastian Painadath, *The Spiritual Journey* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2006), 97.

²⁶ Francis, "La Religiosite Populaire En Mediterranee," *Vatican Media*, last modified December 15, 2024; para. 11.
<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/december/documents/20241215-ajaccio-congresso.html>

4.11. Religiosity of Hope

A pilgrimage is a journey of hope in our moments of greatest need, amidst the messy, painful, and difficult situations of life. Even when hope seems absent, we long for it, despite not knowing what the future may bring. Pilgrimage opens a seeker to authentic and unexpected encounters with the Divine, experientially offering glimpses of hope. In the Catholic Church, the 2025 Jubilee is centered on the theme “Pilgrims of Hope.” Pope Francis writes that setting out on a journey in pilgrimage is traditionally associated with our human quest for meaning in life, rediscovering the value of silence, effort, and simplicity. It encourages and sustains hope as a constant companion that guides our steps toward the goal of encountering the Lord Jesus.²⁷

5. Digital Influence in Pilgrimages

In recent times, traditional pilgrimages are evolving into spiritual tourism, also known as religious tourism, sacred tourism, or faith tourism. Pilgrimage is a subset of religious tourism that specifically involves journeys to sites of religious significance within a particular faith tradition. On the other hand, spiritual tourism goes beyond religious contexts, incorporating educational tours of different religious sites, participation in meditation-yoga retreats, wellness retreats, and ancient healing practices and alternative therapies such as Ayurveda. Digital platforms in the pilgrimage centres are significantly providing pilgrims with easy access to essential information like accessibility, pilgrimage-related tasks, accommodation, mode of transport for safer journeys, pricing, weather and crowd management, and giving physically-challenged pilgrims access to holy places through virtual spiritual experiences. In India, many pilgrimage sites integrate various digital tools such as AI, blockchain, drones, VR, and digital communication channels for handling complex event management logistics, pilgrim satisfaction, security and safety. The following section demonstrates how technology is utilized to enhance pilgrimage experiences, and to improve related services and practices.

5.1. Selection of Pilgrimage Destinations

Information and Communication Technologies are increasingly used in the pre-travel phases to access necessary information on pilgrimage sites from the narratives of pilgrimage bloggers. This includes reviews, recommendations, booking, videos, and photos. For example, the Sabarimala Sree Ayyappa Swamy Temple has introduced Virtual-Q system to enhance convenience and safety

²⁷ Francis, “Spes non Confundit, Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025,” *Vatican Media*, last modified May 9, 2024: no. 5, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/20240509_spes-non-confundit_bolla-giubileo2025.html

through effective crowd management, particularly during peak seasons. Pilgrims can book worship slots online, with a daily capacity of 70,000, which requires mobile number verification and government-issued ID. Additional benefits include accident insurance and free tickets for sacred food (*prasadam*).²⁸

5.2. Emergence of the Virtual Pilgrimage Experience

The Virtual Pilgrimage experience is an alternative for those with mobility issues, for those with travel restrictions, or those who are just looking for a different way to connect with the sacred. Programs include live streaming of religious ceremonies, 360-degree virtual tours and the ability to engage in online spiritual practices. YouTube channels educate and engage seekers unlocking new dimensions of exploring virtual pilgrimages. Tran and Davies propose a hybrid authenticity framework which emphasizes the consumer-congregants' development of perceived authenticity of virtual pilgrimage as it provides an inclusive and transformative experience than a bodily pilgrimage journey for those experiencing health issues, people on the margins such as members of the LGBTQIA+ community, etc. This approach views virtual pilgrimages as part of a broader social and cultural transformation characterized by postmodernity.²⁹

5.3. Pilgrimage Promotion and Marketing

Various stakeholders utilize digital platforms such as websites and mobile applications to promote pilgrimages. It promotes online marketing and distribution of religious products and services to the global community. It significantly enhances pilgrim experiences by providing detailed information on event schedules, bookings for special rituals, accommodation, food and transportation options, medical facilities, insights into nearby tourist attractions, and online-digital banking such as Google Pay and Quick Response (QR) codes. Pilgrims can easily access online donation facilities such as 'e-kanikka', (an electronic hundi or money transfer option). Platforms such as Tripadvisor, Google Maps, GPS, and site-specific maps facilitate travel. A recent study on the impact of social media on spiritual tourism in promoting the economic development of temples in the Indian context reported that social media significantly boosts pilgrimage-based spiritual tourism. The most influential portals were Instagram (20.3%), Facebook (19.8%), television programs (11.2%), Moj (7.8%), YouTube (7.5%), Josh (6.1%),

²⁸ KPMG, "Faith and flow Navigating crowds in India's sacred spaces," *KPMG. Make the Difference* (August 2025): 12.

²⁹ Mai Khanh Tran and Andrew Davies, "The Hybrid Authenticity of Virtual Pilgrimage," *Marketing Theory* 25, no. 1 (2025): 143-144.

Snapchat (5.6%), ShareChat (5.1%), MX TakaTak (3.7%), Chingari (4.5%), and Twitter (3.5%).³⁰

5.4. Digital Community of Like-minded People

Social media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, JoinMyTrip, and Facebook allow like-minded individuals to connect and share their experiences and spiritual insights. These platforms have become popular channels for pilgrims today to connect with like-minded individuals, particularly among Millennials and Generation Z to build virtual communities. Smartphone apps such as Google Translate and Duolingo help pilgrims to overcome language barriers. Manikandan and Chauhan posit that communal broadcasting apps prioritize gathering like-minded devotees. Among them, 40.6% preferred package-based trips, 20.3% preferred trips without packages, 27% preferred group trips with friends, relatives, or family, and 12% preferred independent trips only.³¹

5.5. Installing Crowd Management Apps

The widespread use of CCTV and drone technology surveillance systems is two safety- and security-related tools widely used at pilgrimage centers, enhancing overall monitoring and security of wildlife, people, and property. The WhatsApp-based chatbox named 'Swami,' a multilingual AI, helps provide details on crowd status, weather, medical help, food, bookings, rates, emergency assistance, bus schedules, and more, ensuring smooth crowd flow during festive days at Sabarimala. A recent research study on the largest religious gathering on earth, known as Maha Kumbh 2025, explored how digital integration of AI, drones, blockchain, and immersive media can balance technology and tradition to promote safety, engagement, and efficiency. It employed 2,760 AI cameras with 98% accuracy in facial recognition for improved safety; its AI chatbot handled over 100,000 queries daily; its portal, known as the Maha Kumbh 2025 app, had 5 million users; a cybersecurity team consisting of 56 experts was deployed; drones were employed for safety; Facebook and Instagram drove 50% of digital engagement; YouTube live attracted over 10 million views; and X (Twitter) contributed 30%, highlighting the impact of hashtag campaigns. For real-time updates, WhatsApp and Telegram groups accounted for 10%. Therefore, Maha Kumbh 2025 has set a benchmark for future religious festivals and pilgrimages in India and worldwide.³²

³⁰ P. Manikandan and Karishma Chauhan, "Impact of Social Media on Spiritual Tourism in Promoting Economic Development of Temples from the Indian Context," *The Bioscan, An International Quarterly Journal of Life Sciences* 20, no.1 (2025): 373.

³¹ Manikandan and Chauhan, "The Impact of Social Media," 376-377.

³² Aditya Krishnan and Swati Agrawal, "Digital Transformation of Religious Events," *Journal of Marketing & Social Research* 2, no. 2 (2025): 536-538.

5.6. Introduction of Extended reality (XR)Technology Apps

Digital technologies keep evolving, and new ones continue to emerge. Many pilgrimage centers are adopting both Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) technologies. Virtual Reality (VR) is a fully immersive digital environment created with computer-generated imagery and sensory feedback, whereas Augmented Reality (AR) overlays digital elements onto the real physical world. Mixed Reality (MR) is beginning to take shape, providing a view of the real physical world with digital overlays where physical and digital elements can interact. All these technologies are part of an open Extended Reality (XR) continuum³³ that is evolving at a rapid pace.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to explore the commonalities of religiosity in pilgrimage experiences between a Christian and a Hindu pilgrimage undertaken in Malayattoor and Sabarimala in Kerala, India, and to illustrate the incorporation of information technology advancements in pilgrimage journeys and sites. By understanding the legends and myths, as well as the popular religious practices that impact the inner life of pilgrims and the emergence of social media platforms, we gain a deeper appreciation for the role that popular religiosity in pilgrimages has continued to play throughout history. Thus, pilgrimage is not only a spiritual journey of self-discovery and personal transformation but also a cultural phenomenon that connects and forms individuals and communities, fostering greater purpose and meaning in life across religious beliefs and practices.

However, due to the difficulty in accessing adequate validated resources, the dissimilarities between the two respective pilgrimages are not sufficiently explored in this study. For consolidation, further research on these differences would be worthwhile, as it could contribute to the identification and clarification of both commonalities and dissimilarities. In the future, another area for exploration would be the alignment of in-person and virtual worlds of pilgrimage as expressions of popular religiosity, each complementing and nurturing the other. A meaningful way forward is to pursue this path—both physical and virtual—in interconnectedness and interrelatedness rather than in isolation. In the long run, the digital conceptualization of the metaverse³⁴ is on the near horizon. The metaverse blends our physical and digital worlds by integrating cutting-edge technologies to deliver real-time, genuine sensory experiences of sight, smell, touch, and even mind, enabling closer real-world interactions. In this new digital

³³ Laia Tremosa, “Beyond AR vs. VR: What is the Difference between AR vs. MR vs. VR vs. XR?” *Interaction Design Foundation*, CC BY-SA 4.0. Last modified March 24, 2025.

³⁴ “Know, now edition 3 - Metaverse special.” Nokia.com, last modified March 10, 2025, <https://onestore.nokia.com/asset/212271>

metaverse, which recreates the real world, pilgrims can immerse themselves by moving through and participating in any pilgrimage center across continents, experiencing hyper-realistic spiritual encounters from the comfort of their own living spaces.

In both pilgrimage centers, despite various technological advancements, challenges such as structural limitations, absence of structured zoning for rest and recuperation, health and hygiene challenges, inadequate safety and crowd management measures, lack of training in multilingual interactions, infrastructure and logistical constraints, increased environmental impact, and multiple gaps in coordination measures persist. Thus, this paper presented narrative descriptions of two examples of popular religiosity: that of Malayattoor and Sabarimala, examining the common motifs of popular religiosity. It highlighted the perspective and understanding of the vast culture and tradition of religiosity in Kerala where pilgrimages remain an integral part of its culture and many religions.

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