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The Changing Landscape of Tirth Yatra: A Study of Pilgrimage Narratives Before and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The advent of COVID-19 created an unprecedented divide, forcing a radical re-evaluation of this centuries-old tradition. With the closure of holy shrines and strict social distancing protocols, the traditional narrative of physical pilgrimage became impossible. This led to a profound shift, giving rise to new concepts of spiritual practice. The pandemic accelerated the adoption of technology, giving birth to the "virtual pilgrimage," where devotees could participate in online darshans and live-streamed aartis. This decoupling of the spiritual experience from a physical location is a key change. Furthermore, the enforced isolation encouraged a focus on "interior pilgrimage," a more personal and introspective journey of faith.

This paper explores the contrasting pilgrimage narratives across these two phases: the pre-pandemic era, defined by physical presence and community, and the post-pandemic landscape, characterised by a hybrid model of spiritual practice. By analysing these narratives, this study aims to illuminate how Tirth Yatra has adapted, demonstrating the resilience of faith in the face of modern challenges and highlighting the new dimensions of spirituality brought about by connectivity, communication, technology, and introspection.

Keywords: Tirth Yatra, Pilgrimage, COVID-19, Virtual Darshan, Spiritual Narratives, Hybrid Faith, Indian Temples

Introduction

India, or Bharat, has always been revered as the "land of Tirtha Kshetras" (fields of pilgrimage), where spiritual journeys are viewed as one of the primary means to attain "moksha" or "nirvana" (liberation). India's unique contribution to the world lies in its spiritual wisdom, Yoga, and the deep-rooted tradition of pilgrimage. The Sanskrit expression Tirtha Yatra, meaning "journey to a crossing place," refers to the sacred act of moving beyond the cycles of worldly existence (samsara) toward spiritual liberation (moksha). For those unable to undertake rigorous spiritual disciplines such as meditation or ascetic practices, pilgrimage to holy places provides an accessible and profound path to spiritual elevation.

A. The Spiritual Meaning of Tirtha Yatra

The essence of pilgrimage is beautifully expressed in the Sanskrit verse:

नराणां कल्मषं हन्ति तस्मान् तीर्थानि गच्छति।
गत्वा तीर्थानि विमलं मनः कृत्वाऽपराजितम्॥

"One goes on pilgrimage to destroy the impurities of men. Having gone to the "tirthas", one's mind becomes pure and unconquered."

As art historian Stella Kramrisch explains, Hindu temples themselves are "tirthas"—sites of pilgrimage built as abodes for the divine. Regardless of their size, location, diety or longevity, all temples are founded on the same sacred plan, the "Vastupurusamandala", symbolising the dwelling of God within a geometrical and spiritual order (The Hindu Temple, 1946). Thus, pilgrimage and temple worship are inseparable in Hindu life.

'Tirtha Yatra' differs profoundly from conventional tourism. While tourism centres on recreation and material pleasure, pilgrimage is rooted in "tapas" (austerity) and self-purification. Pilgrims undertake vows such as fasting, walking barefoot, observing silence, and other rituals—not for leisure, but to deepen faith and inner discipline. As Swami Vivekananda noted, "Tirtha is a place full of holy things and holy men. Even if no temple exists, the presence of such souls makes it a Tirtha." (Swami Vivekananda Patrika). Similarly, Swami Ramdas emphasised that to experience true spirituality, one must travel—for the journey itself becomes a teacher.

Every nation contributes to the world in its own way: the Arab world through oil, America through innovation and commerce, Australia through sports; India's enduring gift is spirituality. "Tirtha Yatra" embodies this gift—it is the living expression of India's spiritual and cultural ethos.

B. Pilgrimage Traditions Across India

From ancient times, India's geography has been sanctified through countless "Tirthas". Pilgrims have journeyed to riverbanks, seashores, mountains, and forests in search of god, gurus, holy men, and divine presence. Traditionally, devotees from South India aspired to visit "Kashi" in the North, while Northern devotees longed for "Rameswaram" in the South—symbolically uniting the two spiritual poles of Bharat. Adi Shankaracharya can be regarded as one of the earliest spiritual travellers of India—a visionary whose journeys across the subcontinent resembled the essence of pilgrimage. His travels were not merely physical expeditions but deeply philosophical missions aimed at uniting Bharat through the revival of Sanatana Dharma. By establishing four mathas (monastic centres) in the cardinal directions—Sringeri in the South, Dwarka in the West, Puri in the East, and Jyotirmath in the North—he symbolically and spiritually bound the nation into one sacred geography. He started the practice of appointing priests from opposite directions, such as South Indian priests at Badrinath and Western Indian priests in Puri Jagannath Temple, North Indian priests in Rameshwaram in the southern part of India, and Odiya priests in Dwaraka temple in western Indian Gujarat. This stands as a living testament to this unity in diversity across geographies across the nation. In this sense, Adi Shankaracharya can be seen as the first "spiritual tourist" and organiser—one who demonstrated that travel within the sacred landscape of India could serve as a means of both philosophical realisation and national integration.

Maharashtra alone illustrates the vibrancy of this tradition: the "Ashtavinayak Yatra", comprising eight temples of Lord Ganesha consecrated by Morya Gosavi; the twelve "Jyotirlingas" across India, from Kedarnath in Uttarakhand to Bhimashankar in Maharashtra; and the "Char Dham Yatra" and "Kailash Mansarovar Yatra", which continue to attract seekers from all walks of life. Participation in these pilgrimages is itself considered "punya" (meritorious), leading towards purification and grace.

Among the most notable mass pilgrimages is the "Kumbh Mela", where millions gather at the confluence of sacred rivers to bathe in sanctified waters. Another deeply devotional tradition is the Pandharpur Wari, observed during Ashadhi Ekadashi, which brings together lakhs of devotees who walk hundreds of kilometres chanting the name of Lord Vitthal. It represents Maharashtra's living heritage of collective devotion, where the spirit of equality and compassion unites people beyond social barriers. During "Ashadhi Ekadashi", pilgrims—known as "Warkaris"—walk for days from "Dehu" and "Alandi" to "Pandharpur" singing the names of Lord Vitthala. This centuries-old yatra embodies devotion (bhakti), equality, and community spirit, making it a cornerstone of Maharashtra's cultural identity. Similarly, "Shirdi", the abode of the saint "Sai Baba", evolved from a small village into a global pilgrimage centre through the power of his teachings and the faith of his devotees. Down south of India, there are various temples like Shabarimala and Guruvayoor temples in Kerala, as well as Palani and Madurai Meenakshi temples in Tamil Nadu, which are just examples of spiritual tourism that has been going on for generations.

Temples, both ancient and modern, thus continue to serve as centres of religious, cultural, and social life. With the integration of modern amenities, management systems, and digital outreach, many temples today have become hubs of spiritual tourism—preserving heritage while adapting to contemporary needs.

C. The Pandemic Divide: Before and After COVID-19

However, the world of pilgrimage was dramatically divided into two distinct phases—before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The sudden closure of temples, restrictions on travel, and enforcement of social distancing disrupted centuries-old patterns of pilgrimage. The idea of "safe pilgrimage" emerged, marked by sanitisation, limited crowds, and regulated rituals.

More significantly, a new dimension entered the pilgrimage narrative: "technology." The concept of the "virtual pilgrimage" became a reality as devotees participated in online "darshans", live-streamed "aartis", and virtual temple tours. This marked a historical shift—the "decoupling" of spiritual experience from physical location. For the first time, faith was mediated through digital connectivity rather than bodily presence.

For many, isolation also turned the gaze inward, giving rise to what may be called an "interior pilgrimage"—a journey of reflection, prayer, and self-realisation undertaken within one's own heart. Thus, while the outer world was restricted, the inner world of spirituality expanded, transforming the very definition of "Tirtha Yatra".

D. Scope of the Study

This paper explores the transformation of pilgrimage narratives across three temporal phases:

1. The "pre-pandemic era" defined by collective and physical expressions of devotion;
2. The "pandemic period", marked by restriction, uncertainty, and digital adaptation; and

3. The “post-pandemic landscape”, where hybrid models of pilgrimage—blending physical and virtual participation—have redefined the sacred journey.

Through this exploration, the study seeks to understand how “Tirtha Yatra” has evolved while retaining its spiritual essence, reflecting both the resilience of faith and the adaptive strength of India’s sacred traditions.

E. Pre-Pandemic Pilgrimage Narratives: The Era of Physicality and Community

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a major disruptive force in the long-standing tradition of pilgrimage. With restrictions on public gatherings and the temporary closure of temples and holy sites, Tirth Yatra experienced an unprecedented pause. Although daily rituals and “nitya poojas” continued under strict health guidelines, the communal and physical nature of pilgrimage was lost. Interestingly, this period also revealed new possibilities—technology became a bridge for devotees who were unable to travel. Elderly or ailing pilgrims could now engage in “virtual darshans” and temple tours from their homes. Within two years, digital engagement transformed the devotional experience, altering the traditional motivations of pilgrimage. With the click of a button, Aarti’s and online Darshan of the “Istha Devatha”(personal God) would be witnessed. The joy of this Darshan was enough for a devotee at that time.

The Narrative of Physical Endeavour

The Tirth Yatra, literally “the journey that helps one cross over,” has always symbolised transcending the limitations of worldly attachment and comfort. Traditionally, this journey demanded both physical endurance and spiritual discipline. Pilgrims abstained from indulgences, maintained fasting, and endured natural hardships. Journeys such as the “Char Dham Yatra” or “Kailash Mansarovar Yatra” involved long treks, unpredictable weather, and high altitudes, testing both faith and resilience.

A quintessential example is Maharashtra’s “Pandharpur Wari Yatra”, observed during “Ashadhi Ekadashi”. Every year, lakhs of “warkaris” walk over 250 kilometres to Pandharpur, chanting bhajans and performing kirtans. The “palkhis” carrying the padukas (sacred sandals) of saints like Dnyaneshwar and Tukaram converge in devotion and unity. The legend of Pundalik and Lord Vitthal, where the Lord stands on a brick in response to the devotee’s service, embodies humility and devotion. The “wari” is an egalitarian pilgrimage - open to all castes and communities, where food, shelter, and medical aid are shared freely. It represents the pilgrimage of the common person, rooted in community spirit and faith.

The Narrative of Mass Congregation

Equally significant are the great congregational pilgrimages such as the “Kumbh Mela”, a living testament to India’s collective spirituality. The “Maha Kumbh Mela”, held every twelve years at Prayagraj, draws millions of devotees—ascetics, householders, and seekers—who come together for ritual bathing, fasting, charity, and communal prayers. The event transcends social hierarchies and fosters unity through the shared experience of purification. Beyond its religious importance, it is also a vast cultural gathering that rejuvenates social bonds and spiritual identity.

The Narrative of the Sacred Ecosystem

Pilgrimage also sustains the economic and social ecosystems of the regions where it thrives. Tirth Yatras boost local economies by supporting temple industries, hospitality, transport, and crafts. Shirdi, for instance, evolved from a modest village into a major pilgrimage centre due to the spiritual influence of Sai Baba. The Bhakti movement, which emphasised devotion over ritual, gave rise to numerous pilgrimage towns dedicated to saints and spiritual teachers. These sacred economies illustrate how faith can shape both material and spiritual prosperity.

F. The Pandemic and Narrative Disruption

The pandemic divided history into two clear phases—“pre-pandemic and post-pandemic”. With strict lockdowns and bans on public gatherings, the rhythm of religious life abruptly halted. Major festivals like Ganesh Utsav in Maharashtra and the “Jagannath Rath Yatra” in Odisha were cancelled or restricted. The famous “Pandharpur Wari” was suspended for the first time in centuries—the “padukas” of the saints were flown to the temple instead of being carried on foot. The once-vibrant landscapes of pilgrimage became silent. Concerns over infection and hygiene created a “narrative of fear and safety”, as devotees prioritised health and social distancing. The spiritual journey, for a time, became medicalised—defined by masks, sanitisation, and caution, elements once foreign to the pilgrim’s path.

Post-Pandemic Pilgrimage Narratives

The pandemic prompted temples to integrate digital technology—live-streaming rituals and aartis—allowing devotees to participate remotely. This digital extension of sacred presence redefined darshan in the modern context. The once physically inaccessible sacred spaces were now visible through virtual screens. The concept of “darshan”—traditionally a sacred act of seeing and being seen by the deity—found new meaning in digital form. While viewing the deity on a phone could not replicate the sensory richness of temple experience—the sound of bells, scent of incense, or the collective chanting—it still provided solace and continuity for countless devotees.

The Narrative of *Inner Journey*

Isolation during lockdowns inspired a turn inward. With temples closed, seekers began exploring the “inner temple” through meditation, introspection, and home-based rituals. This gave rise to the “narrative of interior pilgrimage”—a deeply personal spiritual journey emphasising inner peace over external travel. This aligns with Swami Vivekananda’s assertion that a “Tirtha” is not defined merely by geography but by the presence of holiness and purity within individuals and communities.

“The Narrative of the Resilient and Tech-Enabled Pilgrim”

In the post-pandemic world, a hybrid form of pilgrimage emerged. Devotees now participate both physically and virtually. Many temples stream live “aartis” while also welcoming devotees back in person. The “Pandharpur Wari” once again witnessed vast crowds walking barefoot, singing bhajans, and reviving the community’s spiritual rhythm. Simultaneously, digital participation remains integral for those unable to travel. This dual approach reflects the modern pilgrim’s resilience and adaptability—merging ancient faith with contemporary convenience.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point in the history of global pilgrimages, compelling a profound rethinking of faith practices. The study reveals a transformation from a model rooted in physical presence and collective ritual to one characterised by hybrid spirituality, combining technology, reflection, and resilience.

Before the pandemic, the essence of pilgrimage lay in physical endeavour and mass congregation, as seen in the Pandharpur Wari and Kumbh Mela and other pilgrimages. The pandemic, however, introduced the narrative of fear but ensuring safety, halting centuries-old traditions and prompting introspection. Out of this disruption arose two new paradigms: the Virtual Pilgrimage, enabled by digital technology, and the Interior Pilgrimage, emphasising personal spiritual growth.

Today, a “Hybrid Model” has become the norm. Physical yatras have resumed, but with digital accessibility as a permanent companion. The post-pandemic pilgrim is both “tech-enabled” and “self-reflective”, embracing tradition while adapting to modern realities. This evolution underscores not a decline in religiosity, but rather the remarkable resilience and flexibility of faith. Ancient motivations for purification and liberation continue to flourish, now harmoniously mixed and intertwined with the digital age—proving that spirituality, like life itself, evolves to survive and thrive.

Human beings across generations have faced various challenges. But the strength of the human race is to adapt to changes and move forward. From time to time, innovations have been solutions to various disruptions. Science and technology have helped us to go beyond immediate challenges to create a better future. Adapting to changes using scientific development and keeping tradition alive is the strength of the human race. Integrating ancient customs and modern technology is here to stay forever.

The pandemic has demonstrated that humanity, though spread across diverse countries and continents, is in essence one interconnected family sharing a common destiny. The crisis reminded us that spirituality transcends geography, religion, and ritual boundaries. Even the sacred quest for inner peace and happiness — traditionally sought through pilgrimages — has shown remarkable adaptability to modern challenges. Whether through virtual darshans or quiet introspection at home, the spirit of Tirth Yatra endures. Though we may each face individual struggles, the true path to healing and renewal lies in collective understanding, empathy, and the shared pursuit of spiritual growth.

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