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Running: An inclusive approach to understanding the notion of pilgrimages

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This paper is anchored in the personal narrative of the author whose childhood interest in running was rekindled in adulthood. She prepared herself to run her first half marathon after practicing for a few years, despite a history of serious injuries. The paper offers observations and reflections of the author, as an amateur runner. In addition, insights and analysis are drawn from autobiographical accounts of elite runners like Indian ultra-distance runner Amit Sheth (2011) and North American ultramarathon distance runner Scott Jurek (2012). The paper examines the reasons for different runners to commence and continue to run in their adulthood. For those who are able to sustain, with passage of time, the act of running changes from being a physical and outward movement to a journey of inner transformation. For most scholars and pilgrims in India, pilgrimage has a traditional connotation. The contribution of this research lies in bringing to the fore a secular, contemporary, and interdisciplinary understanding of the notion of pilgrimage by connecting the practice of running with broader discussions in pilgrimage studies. Parallels are drawn between the running community and the ideas of a 'utopian' and 'deeply contested' *communitas* discussed by pilgrimage studies scholar George Greenia (2014). The ideas of scholars, Simon Coleman and John Eade (2004), on the topic of pilgrimage relating to embodied motion, sacralised movement, habitual social realms and kinetic ritual are applied to running, which is defined as 'religion in motion'. Running as a pilgrimage with spatial and temporal dimensions is also discussed. Moreover, concepts in pilgrimage studies such as process and structure, individualism and community, traditional and contemporary forms of pilgrimages, mundane and extraordinary, established and emerging forms of socialisation and identity, are considered. An encompassing definition of pilgrimage is offered where conceptual dichotomies are blended and pilgrimage is redefined as a way of being or a joyous and peaceful state of mind.

Key Words : running, traditional form of pilgrimage, contemporary form of pilgrimage, pilgrimage studies, cultures of motion, personal narrative, lived experience

Introduction

Different people explore and pursue different types of pilgrimage depending upon their emotional and mental abilities, and dispositions. There are various forms of pilgrimage such as internal and external, physical and spiritual, traditional and contemporary, religious and secular. These are not necessarily rigid categories as boundaries are often blurred. Pilgrimage is a continuous process for some but an occasional outing for others. Pilgrims undertake pilgrimage either once in their lifetime, or as an annual event, or once in every twelve years and so on. For runners, the act of running is a continuous form of pilgrimage, an integral part of their lives. This idea is reinforced by my own experience of running as much as by the seasoned long distance runners (that I discuss in the following pages) - all of whom are householders. The paper will explore running as a pilgrimage, which encompasses various forms within its ambit.

Dialogue Between Traditional and Contemporary Forms of Pilgrimage

The traditional understanding of pilgrimage was that 'they were, by definition, exceptional practices, irregular journeys outside habitual social realms' (Coleman and Eade, 2004:5). On the other hand, a contemporary form of pilgrimage such as running can be differently defined. Worldwide, there are elite and non-elite, professional and non-professional runners who run regularly; some run a few times a week, others run every day. Training regularly involves much preparation and a unique concoction of balancing running with demanding work and personal responsibilities. On the other hand, religious pilgrims whom I have accompanied on their pilgrimages or have interacted with, often seem to be taking pilgrimages irregularly. They are physically ill-prepared for strenuous journeys though they might be mentally and logistically well-prepared.

One can run alone, or with running groups, or run alongside other runners. Unlike other activities, running is an accessible form of sport and the possibility of meeting people across different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds is quite high. Running, requires stepping outside of one's home in many ways. Hence, running as compared to a traditional pilgrimage involves moving out of one's comfort zone, socially, spatially, physically and so on. Pilgrimage scholars Simon Coleman and John Eade point out that a pilgrimage is

a kinetic ritual [...where] the pilgrim returns to his former mundane existence, but it is commonly believed that he has made a spiritual step forward (Edith Turner, 1978:xii & 15, in Coleman and Eade, 2004:2).

For those who run religiously, running is a religion in motion. They run in neighbourhood areas and local running events but also travel to faraway lands to participate in running events throughout the year. They prepare at many levels for a running event such as practicing regularly, stretching before and after the run to keep the body flexible and injury free, delegating their responsibilities during their absence from work and home, planning the travel logistics, and keeping a close watch on their emotions, thoughts, diet, water, sleep, rest and exercise. Indian ultramarathon (a footrace longer than marathon length of 42.195 kilometres) runner Sheth (2011:171) writes that:

. . . the pleasure of training is equal to, if sometimes not more than, the pleasure one gets on the race day.

For runners, the process / journey and the event / destination are mutually inclusive categories. There is not much difference between training and running in the events, as they perceive both to be a source of personal transformation. Hence, they continue with regular practice even after the successful completion of the running events. This is in contrast to many religious pilgrims who take occasional pilgrimages. Pilgrimage studies scholars Coleman and Eade (2004:7) stress the point that:

mobility and change are chronic - or at least not unusual - conditions of many people's lives goes some way towards challenging dichotomies . . . between structure and process. . . . when mobility can be regarded as mundane, pilgrimage - as either metaphor or institution - is less likely to be seen as rigidly exceptional or set apart from society.

Therefore, running brings an element of sacredness to ordinary life and lends ordinariness to pilgrimage.

There are many runners in India, including me, that touch the running space (the earth) and then their heart with their fingers at the start and end of a running session as a gesture of reverence for the earth ('running temple'), which supports us in our sacred journey. Pilgrimage Studies scholar George Greenia (2014:8) points out that:

the micro-gestures of crossing oneself, touching one's forehead to the earth, raising arms all comprise a dense vocabulary of reverential movements which are not overshadowed by the decorum of the long walk [in a pilgrimage].

Runners have a set of sacred micro-gestures and macro movements that shifts their mundane act of running into a sacred pilgrimage, performed regularly.

Some people see themselves as pilgrims in a sacred journey of life where human existence itself is a pilgrimage of inner transformation amidst 'chaos and suffering' as Herman Hesse points out (Jurek, 2012:46). For most of us, our life is made up of a series of interconnected journeys that take place in our mind, body, and spirit. While some discover and progress on a chosen path or in a direction, others keep experimenting till they find one. In adult life, some reconnect with the joys of forgotten childhood journeys, while others find new journeys of peace and hope. Such journeys of self-discovery are potential pilgrimages of a lifetime.

One such journey began for me in childhood when I participated in school competitions, where I ran to maximal effort, unaware of appreciation or medals. Somehow, I always ended up in one of the leading positions, though I was not among the smartest, fastest, or fittest. I never practiced before the race day, it never occurred to me that one needs preparation for something as simple as running. Through a series of insights and coincidences, I resumed running again in middle age after having forgotten about it for nearly three decades. In hindsight, my life experiences and postural yoga practice prepared me to reconnect with my childhood interest. My first adult running event was a three kilometres walk for which I prepared for four weeks. This was a time when I had just recovered from serious injuries that had made me immobile and had compromised my fitness levels. Subsequently, I invested thousands of hours and hundreds of kilometres in running, combining systematic training with intuition. Despite the challenges, running in formal events and training sessions has become an integral part of my quest for a lifelong pilgrimage.

Traditionally, a pilgrimage is perceived to have a major payoff,

in terms of a cure, expiation of guilt or sin, inducement of a special divine favour like fertility or a bountiful harvest, protection from danger, salvation, or simply enlightenment (Greenia, 2014:8).

When practiced correctly and regularly with enthusiasm and humility, running becomes a kinetic ritual that affects various dimensions of an individual:

. . . when I am so thoroughly worn out that I feel I will collapse on the road; it is then that my mind breaks down. It is then that my mind falls silent because it is too tired to formulate thoughts. I am left in a profound silence and that silence for me is my small step towards enlightenment (Sheth, 2011:68).

The success and nature of rewards depends on the intensity and orientation of the practitioner but a religious pilgrimage and running as a pilgrimage provide an opportunity to take a 'spiritual step forward'. A pilgrimage offers rewards but there are pilgrims and scholars who believe that the tedious trek during pilgrimage involves:

discomforts and ordeals [that] are not just tolerated but may be welcomed and embraced as essential components of the quest (Greenia, 2014:5).

Discomforts are also embraced by serious runners. When the body is the centre of an experience, we move it, and we move with it, with much respect, and find the ability to push it but not beyond certain limits of pain. We find the ability to recognize bearable pain and discomfort that will strengthen us but also sense unbearable pain that can lead to injury and prevent practice.

Muscular pain and stiffness of the legs is a common feature which involves listening to my body's limits as much as sensing its potential. My physical, emotional and mental pain is a teacher. Most of the injuries, for me, have happened outside of running, which has been an even better teacher. In moments of pain, most runners prefer not to quit running immediately, rather, they change pace, or focus on breathing, or complete the remaining distance by walking. I have made lot of changes to my running rituals (before, during, and after the run) so as to manage my physical pain, without painkillers. A runner, whether an ultra-distance or the Tarahumara (Native Americans of Mexico):

. . . through running and living with great simplicity . . . [is] able to access a state of being, a zone, a 'sixth sense,' where they [are] in touch with the world in its purest form (Jurek, 2012:147).

This zone is momentary in nature and 'imperfectly glimpsed', but runners keep seeking it because this zone is the major payoff in their arduous but sacred journey. The traditional and contemporary forms of pilgrimage have different routes but they share the idea of reaching the spiritual aspects of our being through the vehicle of the physical movement. While a traditional pilgrim walks to a pilgrimage centre, runners keep running so as to find a zone of purity.

Unless one gets control over one's body, it's almost impossible to control the mind. Running for me, bridges the gap between the spiritual and material. After all, it has been said that every spiritual metamorphosis is preceded by a physical one [writes Sheth] (2011:63).

The Body as the Loci of Sacred Experience

Our understanding of pilgrimage remains rooted in body 'centeredness' as it involves taking an outbound journey, staying at a pilgrimage centre, and taking an inbound journey to reach home. Long distance running is an outdoor activity with an outbound journey from home to a running space, circumambulating the running space, and a return journey to home. Both, religious and running journeys focus on an outward, external, and physical journey that leads to a destination, but ultimately transforms the inward realm of the practitioner. A runner makes effort to cover a distance or cover a timeframe while a pilgrim walks to a sacred site. A runner and a religious pilgrim have in common the desire to reach a goal through the movement of the body, which is an embodied action that has the potential to commence a journey of self-realization. Coleman and Eade (2004:11) write that:

not only is walking [and I add running] a form of self-sacrifice involving endurance and austerity, it also allows 'pilgrims' to discover a sense of contact with the past.

Walking and running are ancient activities which were necessary for human survival, communication, and culture before it became a part of competitive sports in the first Olympics, or a worldwide urban phenomenon as one of the most accessible leisure activities in the post-globalized era. In modern times, the Tarahumara runners, since an early age, continue to follow the ancient practices of running and living 'with great efficiency', according to the observations of North

American ultra-distance runner Scot Jurek (2012:147). Therefore, they are disease-free, peaceful and healthy in disposition, and with high levels of stamina and strength.

Biologist David E. Liberman (2016) argues that the human body was designed to run, an ability we have progressively lost since the transition from hunter-gathering to settled agriculture stages. But, for the Tarahumaras, running continues to be an essential activity. Due to the proliferation of the global tourist industry, communication networks, and modern transportation:

[P]eople . . . are seeking to engage in bodily and temporal modes that subvert or transcend the rushing, mechanized world of modernity and postmodernity. They are choosing to move, but in a way that emphasizes a slowing down rather than a speeding up of life (Coleman and Eade, 2004:11).

Even though, running is a faster, flamboyant and more strenuous form of kinetic ritual than walking, its calming effects on the mind are by and large poorly understood.

In modern times, adults are choosing to run for various reasons such as fitness, overcoming health conditions, being outdoors, deliverance, enjoyment, awards, money, a form of upward mobility, an opportunity to socialize, and inculcate an affordable leisure activity. However, as discussed earlier in the paper, there are deeper reasons for continuing to run. I started running to develop a level of fitness that would enable me to have a better quality of life and also prepare me to climb mountains, which I am yet to accomplish. For me, reading an autobiography of an ultra-distance runner Amit Sheth, and another of a peak climber Bear Grylls whilst being bed-ridden due to injuries, rekindled childhood memories of running and a teenage dream of trekking in the mountains.

A few years ago, I was settling into a new work environment when I chanced upon an email by an old friend about a running event exclusively for women (Pinkathon), being organized in Delhi. I wanted to do the three-kilometres run but I didn't have enough time to train. By D-day, I mostly walked effortlessly but I jogged couple of patches too. Through someone I met

at Pinkathon, I came to know of a six-kilometres run at India Gate organized by the West Delhi Runners. I consulted my yoga teacher and physiotherapist for a strategy to slowly improve my stamina.^[1] In addition, Amit Sheth was kind enough to reply to my email and suggested that I should concentrate on completing the event without an injury and not focus on speed or winning a prize. I completed it by walking most of the distance but at regular intervals, I jogged for shorter distances.

Yet again, it was through someone I met at a West Delhi Runners race that I found myself participating in a ten-kilometres running event in the small but ancient town of Tanjore, near Chennai. It was a fresh morning with fine weather, a lush green countryside, warm and welcoming local villagers, and an inexperienced but dedicated team of organisers. Covering ten-kilometres was an inexpressible joy. I was alternating between walking and jogging but at the five-kilometres marker my right knee started hurting badly. I decided to walk from thereon as I wanted to reach the finish line without losing my sense of fun. I was the last person to complete the event! But, I was determined to train systematically so as to run consistently in future running events. After returning to Delhi, I connected with veteran runners and found my running coach Ian Ladbrooke from whom I learned how to run better! In the process, I also learned to live life better!

I began my running journey with walking three-kilometres, graduating to walking and jogging intermittently, followed by jogging complete distances of 5-18kilometres, and then mostly jogging but also walking short distances during the half marathon (21.09 kilometres), organized last year in Delhi by Airtel. I waited for years before I could participate in the half marathon as each time something adverse would happen - from an event cancellation to major injuries to poor health to a change of spirit to other pressures - which meant I was insufficiently prepared. I could not force progress upon myself, instead I just focused on training honestly and participated in the same or another event by jogging a shorter distance. Finally, I took the plunge to complete the half marathon, though I did not run my best.

My performance does not disturb me as I am happy that I was able to participate and complete the run without any injuries. I am better placed for next time as I have an understanding of the level of challenge involved in completing it.

So for almost nine months you train with passion and dedication for one event, taking

1) I was fortunate that both of them were capable of giving sound advice and their consultation fee was nominal in comparison to West, where private consultation can be very expensive. In Delhi, it's more reasonable and accessible.

small steps at a time without ever knowing how you will fare on race day. If this does not teach you patience, I doubt anything else ever will (Sheth, 2011:171).

My progress has been slow and my patience has been tested. It took me six months to hit my first steady paced jog of 60 minutes in the summer with temperatures soaring to 40-45 degrees centigrade. During the monsoons, it was hardest to train because of the unbearable humidity, but also one of the most incredible experience of running is in the rain. In this season, I managed my first long run of 80 minutes. In early mornings, during winters which were covered with thick fog, I ran my longest runs of more than 120 minutes. Running is cultivating my patience and translating it into other spheres of life.

Runners tend to share many told and untold reasons for continuing to run despite a challenging growth curve. Sheth (2011:61) writes that:

now after five years of running, I ask what motivates me to run. I can give you a million reasons why I run - some can be articulated, others just experienced personally. Helen Keller said, 'the best and the most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart.' The experience of bliss while running is one of them.

I have similar reasons to run; I run to neutralise the negative effects of sedentary lifestyle that bring pain and stiffness in my body. As Scott Jurek (2012:150) says:

our bodies crave big, varied movements that originate at the core of our body. Imbalance comes when we spend all day doing small, repetitive actions like typing, scanning groceries [etc....]. Much of the purpose of structured training, therefore, is compensatory. It's not so much that we learn to run per se, as need to unlearn bad habits and correct imbalances wrought by modern lifestyle.

I continue to run as it gives me an excuse to be outdoors, connect with the harmony of nature, and share the enthusiasm of fellow human beings who are regulars in the running spaces. Despite having a schedule of a medium paced run, a fast paced run, and a long distance slow run every week, each run is a different and a fulfilling experience which simultaneously challenges and heals me. Training is far from boring and rigid, rather it is fun and designed according to the needs and abilities of a runner. The slow long runs and medium paced runs allow me to

have a sense of the surroundings but in the fast paced runs, everything around me gets blurred. The effect of the runs on the remaining day is marked by a sense of happiness and self-awareness. Since I started running, I have become conscious of eating sensibly, keeping a good level of hydration, and taking sufficient rest. Running in all the seasons has made me aware of the impact of environment on my body and has taught me to look after it (the 'temple of our soul') better. Most runners, including me, run in different seasons, spaces, times of the day, and duration, bringing variety to the experience of running. In addition, advanced runners choose very extreme terrains and difficult weather conditions as well, involving higher levels of sacrifice and self-effacement. Such variance in running patterns, brings an appreciation of the gifts of nature and endurance in handling the fluctuations of daily living. I always feel like a winner after a jog.

Previously, I felt that the day when I would complete the first ten-kilometres or the first half marathon, my sense of achievements would wash away the deep wounds of the past and would provide a befitting answer to unnecessary negativity that comes my way. After I completed such runs, these feelings and thoughts escaped my consciousness and what remained was a deep sense of peace, freedom and gratitude. I feel that the longer one runs, spatially and temporally, the more profound is the experience. It is akin to the moment of transformation for a pilgrim who has set out on a religious journey, or to a zone of emptiness and freedom experienced by Tarahumaras, or to a moment of great calmness and clarity for a postural yoga practitioner - in such a moment, running transforms from a mere physical activity to a sacred pilgrimage.

Each run is a journey of unique moments that absorbs the instabilities of daily living. There have been moments where I wanted to give up, but pleasing and unpleasing memories accompanied with wise words of mentors kept me going. There were moments when I could keep running without stopping for food, water, and rest. There were also moments of grief and loss as well as clarity during the runs. On an early winter morning, I was running longer than usual in a beautiful park when I started to experience flashes of events from my whole life. It was very disturbing, but the more they came, the more determined I was to keep going and then a point came when the memories did not bother me anymore and I ran effortlessly. I was able to see all which had held me from being free.

Runners speak of feeling absorbed in the Universe, of seeing the story of life in a single weed on the side of the road (Jurek, 2012:137-138).

Running is a mirror, a companion that exposes my limitations and gives me the necessary insights and confidence to realise and accept my truth, my uniqueness. As Sheth (2011:223) writes:

running has dared me to live a life of adventure as opposed to one of social conformity. . . . Running has caused me to think as an individual . . . Running gives me the freedom to act, speak, and think differently than I ever have.

Because of running, I would leave my home very early in the morning and drive long distances in order to train. I began to enjoy the rituals of packing and preparing before the session and returning home, unpacking and preparing for the remaining day. I began to travel and participate in running events, independently and some times with acquaintances, though running independently happened in phases. After six months of training, for the first time I independently jogged short distances but I needed a fellow runner when the session required changing speed several times. The next step was to jog long distances on my own. This involved making a lot of adjustments related to running spaces, running surfaces, sleeping, eating and drinking routines, and running timings that taught lessons in flexibility and most importantly cultivated the art of living in the present moment.

It took me some time to appreciate both the joy of running alone and as member of a group. When I jogged on my own, I focused on my run and the surroundings and while jogging in a group, I enjoyed the company but had to be mindful of not getting carried away with group energy, over-stretching or injuring myself. But, when motivation or confidence is low, a running group with similar running speed and goals is helpful. Equally, running with someone better improves us too. In the early phase of my training, when my coach was out of town, I would run with one of the highly motivated but underprivileged groups of young runners that he coached for professional competition. Their presence in the running space and our interactions, paved the way for a great learning experience. After completing my first long run, I celebrated with my young running companions over a banana party. We celebrated the fact that I had stuck it out, instead of running away. I had found something

that I was not merely dabbling in, but something that was fast becoming a special part of my life.

Intersection of Secular Space, Magical Time and the Running Community

Group running is becoming increasingly popular and a common feature noticeable in running events is the participation of thousands of runners who line up before the start line and patiently run together:

The air is electric. It is like an army getting ready to go to battle, a battle each would fight only against himself and no matter what the outcome, each one would be victorious, and each one of us a hero. I wish all wars were fought so (Sheth, 2011:49).

Most of my practice sessions are solitary endeavours. But waiting in the holding area before the start line and running with the community of runners in the medium to long distance running events, fills me with a feeling of togetherness, bonding, kinship, and a sense of an even playing field. Each running event is an

experience of [a] pilgrimage [which] is seen in advance as capable of creating an enduring memory one returns to in later life (Greenia, 2014:5).

The memories of a running event motivate me in times of distress. The communal run is a journey of interiority where I develop self-reflection and also soak in the quiet connection with everything around me. In the running events, there are serious runners and non-serious walkers, young people who are unfit and people with health conditions such as cancer, heart disease, and diabetes who are fit. There are men and women of all shapes, sizes and professional and socio-cultural backgrounds, who connect temporarily, but without any expectations of each other. Urry refers to such gatherings as an indicator of:

globalization of intermittent co-presence . . . as small social worlds [that] are periodically reconstituted of those who otherwise live in geographically dispersed locations (Urry, 2002:264 in Coleman and Eade, 2004:7).

Despite the temporality of the grouping and the event, there is a culture in the running community where seasoned runners voluntarily mentor and act as pacers leading a band of runners so that they may reach the finish line in a timely manner, without injuries.

A veteran of many marathons [a race of 42.195 kilometres] the pacer is supposed to run consistently, not too fast and not too slow, but

at just the right speed for the whole distance. Running alongside the pace setter helps novice runners to pace themselves and achieve their own goals (Sheth, 2011:197).

In contrast to the competitive world in which we function, this gives the more accomplished runners an opportunity to connect and contribute to the sport and the community. For instance, top finishers are known to stay at the finish line to greet runners slower than them:

Staying at the finish line and greeting those runners, I could pay tribute to pain and doubt, fatigue and hopelessness, that I imagined they had pushed through. Staying there allowed me to acknowledge the strength they had needed to summon, to congratulate them on setting their sights on an important goal and achieving it (Jurek, 2012:101).

Running along with the community inspires me to look after myself, become a better runner, a happier person, encourage aspiring runners, and connect with the positivity of elite runners. However, one cannot ignore the ruptures in the idea of the 'idealized community' or 'utopian *communitas*' (Greenia 2014:1) where:

bands of pilgrims engage in a complex and even hotly contested negotiation of class, personal identity, and purity of intention (Coleman and Eade, 2004 cited in Greenia, 2014:1).^[2]

Unlike this critical perspective, ultra-distance runner Jurek has different ideas about the community. He believes that top ultrarunners are pursuing

. . . the same exercise in self-sacrifice and pursuit of transcendence . . . we are all chasing that zone where we are performing at the peak of our abilities . . . - even the fiercest competitors - . . . [grow to love] not only the sport, not only his fellow ultrarunners, but people in general. We all struggle to find meaning in a sometimes painful world. Ultrarunners do it in a very distilled version (Jurek, 2012:119).

Running, like many other modern activities that are emerging in the globalized world is becoming an avenue for new forms of socialisation, thereby weakening the traditional forms of identity classification that are based on caste, gender, region,

2) Besides the runners, running spaces are used by organizers, sponsors, media persons, families and friends of the runners and a large number of working class people who participate in creating, cleaning and dismantling such spaces. The varying experiences of these different stakeholders also challenges the idea of the idealized space and community.

religion, race etc. Running offers new forms of social interaction and kinship. This activity creates communal and individual memories that shape the collective identities of people, cultures, and human civilisation in general.

Runners grow to love not only people but spaces, surfaces, and the environment they run through.

When you run on the earth and with the earth, you can run forever (Jurek, (2012:66).

Those who run with an appreciation of a sacred space, both within and outside the body, find that running is a 'sacralized' movement - a term used by Coleman and Eade (2004:18), as a verb to:

emphasize the often partial, performative, contested character of appropriating something or someone as 'holy'.

Besides the very act of running, its spatial and temporal dimensions are also sacrosanct. Runners move on varying surfaces that take them through stadiums, water bodies, beaches, mountains, cities, villages, deserts, forests and agricultural fields. Running on the earth in the midst of other natural elements is akin to circumambulating the sacred. In the same vein, for Tendai Buddhist monks 'the sacred is everywhere' as they take extensive daily running pilgrimages or *kaihogyo*:

through the mountainous terrain that encompasses hundreds of remote shrines, sacred peaks, stones, forests, glades, and waterfalls (Jurek, 2012:114).

There are moments when the runner, running space, running surface, and running event breathe in unison; in such moments, movement becomes effortless and sacred. Moreover, running as a body centric movement is intertwined with a specific geography, it is an 'embodied motion' which is:

inherent within pilgrimage practices, combined with the sacred geographies and architectures that provide the material and symbolic background to such motion (Coleman and Eade, 2004:18).

Running through such landscapes leads to experiencing what others have already experienced. But also feeling something extraordinary that is beyond our mundane existence; experiencing divinity, holiness, spiritual light, universal energy or for some, God and godliness:

Being present at a site that others have designated as significant for non-material reasons: being there is transformative and enriching, and connects one to values beyond

the normal reach of the individual (Greenia, 2014:5).

The running geographies are accessorized with running flags, markers, aid stations, portable toilets, medical aid stations, and cultural performances to boost the morale of the participants. They are given a sacred meaning in the same way that

pilgrims eagerly accessorize their sites and trails . . . and create sacred space on top of routes that were often created to serve [other purposes] as cattle trails or commercial highways (Greenia, 2014:10).

Running through different landscapes (urban and rural, natural and manmade, easy and tough) connects the runners with the rhythms of various life forms which move and grow (animals, air, water, plants and trees, stars, moon, sun and human body including breathing patterns) at different speeds. Running allows runners to celebrate and participate in these rhythms of existence.

Early morning time for training and running events is also significant. The longer I have run, the earlier I have been able to get up. I have not only been humbled and nourished by this magical time, but felt that I have been able to live the day better than I used to. It is in the quietude of the early morning hours that I have heard the whispers of my heart and found my answers:

I have never come close to discovering my soul, but I think that if one is to discover anything about oneself, beyond the merely physical, it has to be in a magical place [forest] and time [early morning] such as this (Sheth, 2011:92).

When I run, I feel the fresh and crisp air and softness of the earth beneath me. I see changing seasons, sundown and sunrise. I seek comfort in the steadiness of the old trees and the sounds and sights of chirpy, and colourful birds. In the early morning, sun and sky erupt into different shades. There is both silence (no human or machine traffic) and sacred music. There is a 'symphony of sounds' of leaves, wind,

. . . birds, small animals, lizards, crickets, and other insects. It is almost as noisy as a traffic jam . . . except that this is noble music (Sheth, 2011:91).

For us runners, nature itself is a temple and the morning hours are the sanctum sanctorum where we can breathe deeply and smoothly while running. Breathing efficiently helps to generate positive energy, which can be used wisely to run better and live in a state of balance rather than being harmful to ourselves and others in the subtlest or crudest ways.

Running quickens my heart rate, makes me sweat, and tightens my muscles, while another body practice that led me to running i.e. postural yoga (which I have practiced for longer) compliments it by regulating the breathing pattern and loosening the muscles. Running is practiced outdoors and postural yoga is performed indoors, but both move me inwards by strengthening the body and emptying the mind, lending responsiveness rather than dullness or tension. I have always felt and often heard fellow runners share that whenever they run, they feel alive. Sheth (2011:113) writes that

. . . the elation I feel is a vibrant surge of purity that I consider godly. I feel that silence in my mind is god's speech.

Running as a sacred pilgrimage is a profound experience which is

. . . shareable in some way, and both the subject of reflective conversation and necessarily inexpressible. And most such acts that yield enlightenment are repeatable without being degraded or made routine (Greenia, 2014:5).

This somewhat explains why runners continue to regularly run irrespective of the challenges they encounter in their adult life.

Running can be meaningful in itself but can also become a stressful exercise when done against time and distance.

When you create a goal then fear is created - the fear of losing the goal - and at the same time, if you attain your goal then you create your ego, for having achieved something. And then you set yourself another goal. You miss the present by always looking at the future (Sheth, 2011:148).

Yet, running with the correct but relaxed approach can generate moments when there is a sense of timelessness and an unadulterated connection with everything that breathes in the cosmos.

Conclusion

Running has taught me to take setbacks in my stride, accept disappointments, and be open to alterations in goals and yet not lose my focus. It has taught me to respect my deeper self rather than my superficial thoughts and flamboyant desires. Above all, it humbles me as after every run, I simply feel peace in my body, stillness in my over-active mind, and healing in my heart and spirit.

In my sacred journey, as I write, I am at a point where running has been suspended for nineteen weeks due to a foot injury and other personal reasons. However, I have registered for a three-kilometres running event in less than four weeks in the peak of summer. I started my adult running with a three-kilometres walk and currently, I am looking at resuming once again with the same distance, but with a different approach. A journey that started as a loose interest of childhood has transformed from being a sport, a hobby and a form of exercise into a sacred journey, a pilgrimage, and a way of being as an adult.

As discussed in the paper, running as a pilgrimage, encompasses the inner and outward journey, the everyday and the extraordinary, and traditional and contemporary forms of sacralized movement. In running consistently, individual and community, process and structure, secular and religious, physical and spiritual, have all become entangled leading me towards the centre of the pilgrimage that rests within all of us. This space of pilgrimage is a state of being which can be reached and sustained through various routes and sacred journeys of a lifetime.

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