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Women's Experiences in Religious Tourism: An Investigation into Women's Involvement in Sabarimala Pilgrimage, Kerala

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Preparations for the Sabarimala pilgrimage involves devotees observing a 41 day period of austerity (*vrata*) during which they practice an ascetic life. Women between the age of 10 and 50 do not visit the shrine at Sabarimala due to long-established customs. However, women do play an important role during the 41-day austerity observed by family members preparing for the pilgrimage, which could be described as a non-participant involvement in the pilgrimage. While there have been many studies on the spiritual and secular experiences of pilgrims, research on this unique form of non-participant involvement in pilgrimages is not found especially in the Indian context. This study explores the religious experience of female family members, who do not join the pilgrimage but participate by assisting family members going on the Sabarimala pilgrimage. The study aims to identify their unique experience from multiple perspectives such as personal, interpersonal, and societal through a constructivist approach. Adopting qualitative research methods, interviews were carried out among female members of Sabarimala pilgrims' families in the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh to get insight into their experiences and their involvement in the pilgrimage process. The findings of the study propose Sabarimala pilgrimage as a very important social process which cements and strengthens family relationships and togetherness.

Key Words: Sabarimala, pilgrimage tourism, Hinduism, women, spiritual experiences, religious experience

Introduction

Religious tourism and pilgrimage are the visible manifestation of people's faith and form a significant component of global mobility (Griffin & Raj, 2017; Singh, 2004). The changing paradigms in travellers' motivation have led to in-depth research in the academic community. The discourses led to a greater understanding of pilgrimage, which is no longer considered a polar opposite of tourism (Collins-Kreiner, 2018). Religion is an ancient concept, but the appearance of religious and quasi-religious movements accelerated the visits to the religious sites in the world (Raj & Morpeth, 2007). A pilgrimage site is a space that assimilates multiple cultural

traditions and acquires new meanings as conceived by pilgrims, which they carry back home (Dhali, 2020). Pilgrimage sites are thus part of the cultural landscapes (Duda & Doburzynski, 2019).

The concept of pilgrimage is found in different religions across the world. Devotees consider undertaking pilgrimages to sacred sites as part of life or essential at a particular stage of life. Hence, pilgrimage is an outcome of commitment to the religious traditions an individual belongs to. According to Pickering (1984), the structural-functional approach to religion, as suggested by Durkheim, proposes that religion provides social cohesion and social control, which invokes collective consciousness. Thus, a

pilgrimage is a form of mobility in pursuit of a spiritual purpose in which the pilgrim engages with the divine (Robinchaud, 1999; Barber, 1993). As a cultural activity, it has powerful impacts on political and socio-cultural systems (Collin-Kreiner, 2010).

Pilgrimage sites are sacred landscapes that embody spiritual, cultural and geographical elements (Singh, 2006). Visits to these sites provide an intrinsic religious experience that enriches an individual spiritually (Batson & Ventis, 1982). Sabarimala Shri Ayyappa Shrine, located in the Western Ghats in Pathanamthitta district in Kerala, draws millions of devotees every year. The pilgrimage season (locally known as *mandala kalam*) begins in November and ends in January as per the Hindu calendar. Following tradition, women between the age of 10 and 50 do not visit the shrine. The pilgrimage involves observing an austere life for 41 days before the journey to the shrine begins. After initiation of the pilgrimage process, family members voluntarily follow an ascetic lifestyle and extend all possible support to the pilgrim. Extant literature does not provide insights into the role of family members in Sabarimala pilgrimage, predominantly female family members, who actively assist the pilgrims and support the pilgrimage process. The contribution of female family members to the pilgrimage process is vital even though they do not join the pilgrimage. The female members of the pilgrim voluntarily assist the pilgrim in the rituals and prayers, follow the austerity during the period of *vrata* (a vow of austerity), but do not travel to the shrine. There have been debates over the religious rights of women, their role in religious practices and hierarchies, however, taking a different approach, this study is conceptualised around the religious and spiritual experiences of women, assisting family members embarking on the Sabarimala pilgrimage as non-participants.

Review of Literature

Different religions postulate pilgrimage as a means of the physical and spiritual refinement process. In other words, pilgrimages are journeys to sacred places as manifested by humanity to fulfil certain intrinsic motives. The functional aspects of religion have played a significant role in establishing the role of pilgrimage in the collective consciousness of society (Pickering, 1984). Barber (1993:1) defined pilgrimages 'as journeys resulting from religious causes, which is aimed at the visit of a holy site for internal transformation'. According to Collins-Kreiner and Kliot (2000), pilgrimage is a cultural

phenomenon rooted in different religious principles and has unique patterns. Thus, pilgrims are motivated by a wide range of factors attributed to the individual and community (Winkelman & Dubisch, 2005).

Pilgrimages are conducted by strictly following the religious traditions, which were established over a period of time. Religious authorities play a dominant role in structuring the pilgrimage process and facilitating religious tourism by providing the physical and social infrastructure. The traditional view of the pilgrim-tourist polarity (Adler, 1989) was replaced by Smith (1992) who argued that pilgrimage and tourism are not opposites and instead were at each end of a continuum, and also who introduced the term secular pilgrim. Globalisation, commercialisation, and mass tourism have all made inroads to many pilgrimage centres (Slojan & Liro, 2020; Shinde, 2007), and many pilgrimages sites have developed pilgrim facilities to allow convenient access, accommodation, and other amenities.

India has a very ancient tradition of pilgrimages and the benefits of visiting holy sites are explained in ancient texts (Singh, 2006). Evidence of pilgrimage in Buddhism is available from archaeological findings and Buddhist inscriptions found in India (Behrendt, 2009). History, myths, and folktales can occasionally offer descriptions of sacred sites (*tirath/tirth*), which have been carried over from generation to generation. Indian religious texts mention pilgrimage sites as *tirthas*. *Tirthas* can be springs, riverbanks, the confluence of rivers, caves, sites at hilltops and mountains, and so on. Many *tirthas* have been modified as temple complexes and numerous such sacred sites can be found in India. The *Sanathan Dharma* (eternal duties of Hindusim) and other practices in religions such as Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism identify sacred pilgrim spaces throughout the country – for example, in Buddhism, devotees believe that pilgrimage to a range of holy sites will ease their path to salvation (Jutla, 2006).

Pilgrimage in the Indian context is deeply rooted at an emotional level and driven by the intense desire for a vision of God (*darshan*) in the form of the presiding deity of a temple. These pilgrimages often involve arduous journeys to the pilgrimage centre mostly by foot, renouncing material aspects of life, and observing rituals (Singh, 2004; Shinde, 2007). The intense urge to engage with the divine drives pilgrims to undertake long journeys on foot to the sacred sites and participate

in acts of renunciation (Shinde, 2008). During this arduous process, the pilgrim comes into contact with people from different places and different cultures. Under the guidelines of *Sanatan Dharma*, visiting *Char Dhams* (four divine abodes or shrines) was established by Adi Shankaracharya who was the proponent of Advaita Philosophy. Pilgrimages to the *Char Dhams*, 12 *vyotirlinga* sites (Lord Shiv) and 51 Shakti Peethas (shrines of Goddess Shakti/Parvati), are considered to be very auspicious by Hindus. Girnar, Shravana belagola, and Parasnath Hill are major pilgrimage sites of Jains. Sarnath, Kushinagar, and Bodhi Gaya are holy sites for Buddhists. The Golden Temple, Hem Kund Sahib, Patna Sahib and Paonta Sahib are popular pilgrimage sites of Sikhs.

Sabarimala Pilgrimage

It is believed that Lord Ayyappa (Ayyappa Swami); the presiding deity of Sabarimala (also known as *Shri Dharma Saastha*) had took birth to help people attain *Moksha* (liberation from the cycle of birth and death). According to legend, Ayyappa is believed to be the son of the divine couple Lord Shiva and Mohini (an impersonation of Vishnu), and the infant Ayyappa was found in the forest by the King of the Pandalam Kingdom. The child was adopted by the childless King. On being blessed with a biological son, the Queen and courtiers were worried about royal succession and wanted to banish young Ayyappan from the royal palace. They hatched a plot to send Ayyappa to fetch tiger's milk to cure the queen's ailment in the hope that he would be killed by wild animals. However, Ayyappa returned to the palace where his divine powers were recognised. The remorseful royals beseeched his blessings and offered him the Kingdom. Revealing his divine form, Ayyappa informed them of his intention to go back to the forest. Ayyappa left the palace forever, moved to the Sabari Hills for meditation, and is believed to be present as Lord *Sasthav* or *Dharma Sasthav* in the shrine. It is believed that Lord Ayyappan made a vow of celibacy, and to respect the tradition, women between the age of 10 to 50 restrain themselves from visiting the Sabarimala shrine.

Being one of the most popular religious centres in India, Sabarimala attracts millions of devotees during the annual pilgrimage season (Mandalakalam), which falls between November and January. The temple is situated in the Periyar Tiger Reserve (a tiger conservation project area) at an altitude of approximately 470 meters above

sea level. The trek route goes through a densely forested area inhabited by wild animals. As the pilgrims' numbers increased, facilities for pilgrims and their safety were added, and the wild animals are rarely seen during the pilgrimage season.

The preparation for the Sabarimala pilgrimage begins with a 41-days observation of *vrata*, during which the pilgrim leads an ascetic life. A small ceremony is conducted at the house of the pilgrim or in the local temple by the eldest pilgrim (or the leader of the group called *guru swamy*), to initiate the *vrata*, after which the pilgrim is addressed as 'Swamy', a term synonymous to 'God' indicating the reverence accorded to the pilgrim by family members, friends and other people. The pilgrim is seen and treated as a personification of Lord Ayyappa.

The pilgrim undergoes a well-disciplined life during the pilgrimage. The daily routine includes taking bath in the early morning and evening, worship of Ayyappa and reciting prayers, known as '*saranam vili*' (special way of praising the god for fulfilment). Maintaining the purity of the mind and body is an essential part of the '*vrata*'. It is believed that if the pilgrim fails to follow the strict ascetic life during the *vrata*, it may invoke the wrath of Lord Ayyappa. The pilgrim wears black clothes, *rudraksha* (seeds of *Elaeocarpus Ganitrus*) and leads a very humble lifestyle. On conclusion of the pilgrimage, the devotees remove the *rudraksha* and return to their normal attire at their local temple. Sabarimala pilgrimage and the pre-pilgrimage austerities prepare a pilgrim to assimilate thoughts and actions to realise the powerful truth of oneness with the universe as preached by Sri Adi Shankaracharya in Advaita Philosophy (Bindu, 2015:210). Joseph (2019) in connecting Sabarimala *Shri Dharma Saastha* Temple with the Indian knowledge systems states.

The Chaitanyam (the divine spark) is such that the aspect of Brahmacharya permeates the place and that is why Ayyappa devotees have to raise themselves through strict austerities to be able to remain in his presence (2019:92).

When a pilgrim initiates the Sabarimala pilgrimage, the all family members and relatives get involved in different ways to support the pilgrim emotionally, physically and spiritually. The family members have a great role during the *vrata* period. Though female family members may not be the pilgrims who take up the initiation to visit

Sabarimala, they are part of this pilgrimage process and are fully involved and engaged in maintaining the devotional environment at home. Women in the family who support their family members do not travel to the shrine and have a *darshan* of Lord Ayyappa unless they reach the permissible age, however they experience changes in their life during the *vrata* period, which reinforce their faith and form a source of their own spiritual upliftment. In this paper, the authors describe this process of women's engagement in the Sabarimala Pilgrimage as non-participant involvement in religious pilgrimage.

As stated earlier, the overall aim of this study is to explore women's role and religious experience during *mandala vrata* (austerity observed from November to January) as a non-participant pilgrim. The study seeks to analyse and relate women's unique religious and spiritual experience while assisting their family members in annual Sabarimala pilgrimage through the lens of personal, family, interpersonal and spiritual aspects.

Methods

The epistemological assumption of the present study is constructivism. Unlike positivism, constructivism involves developing knowledge through the cognition of the world beyond the subject (Flick, 2010). According to Patton (2015), reality is captured from different perspectives that in turn create a meaningful narrative through conceptualisation as the core idea behind social constructivism. Qualitative research methodology has been used to conduct the study as it allows researchers gain a holistic insight into the study domain and understand the participant's views and perspectives (Farber, 2006; Cresswell, 2012). The present study employed in-depth interviews to gain an insight into the non-participative involvement and subsequent religious and spiritual experiences of women family members of the Sabarimala pilgrims. Interviews were conducted during the months of August to October in the year 2020. A semi structured interview schedule, containing questions surrounding women's experience of the Sabarimala pilgrimage was used to gather the required data. Purposive sampling was employed and respondents were selected from the South Indian states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. The respondents were selected based on following criteria:

- (a) should be a leading female members in the family,
- (b) involved at least once in supporting/ facilitating Sabarimala pilgrimage,
- (c) female members who volunteered their support to pilgrims from their family during the pilgrimage,
- (d) women who are a close relative of the pilgrims such as mother, wife, sister, and daughter.

A total of 50 respondents were interviewed during the data collection stage. Saturation stage was reached after completing 40 interviews and many subsequent responses turned out to be redundant.

Interviews were administered in local languages such as Malayalam, Tamil, and Telugu, and the transcripts were translated into English.

Ten open-ended questions were used to explore participants' experience while facilitating or supporting their family members' Sabarimala pilgrimage. These encouraged respondents to share their experience during the *vrata* period and their post pilgrimage recollections of the experience. All ten questions answered were subject to concurrent refining, and coding was done for each response after it was transcribed from the local language. Consistency and reliability of the responses were ensured while coding the responses (Miles *et al.*, 2014; Saldana, 2013). Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stages coding method: familiarisation with data; generating initial codes; searching for themes among codes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the final report. The responses were further examined in the context of various dimensions of human experience in a spiritual environment and the findings are presented in the following section.

Findings

Demographic profile of the respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents and illustrates a range of ages, education and employment across the three geographical regions. In addition, the table highlights the depth of experience of the respondents in terms of the number of pilgrims and pilgrimages that the respondents have supported.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variables		Kerala	Tamil Nadu	Andhra Pradesh
Age	Below 25 years	1	1	2
	Between 25 to 50 years	12	11	10
	Above 50 years	3	4	6
Education	Below Matriculation	3	6	10
	Between 10 th to 12 th standard	8	9	8
	Graduation and above	5	1	-
Employment status	Employed	2	3	9
	Unemployed	14	13	9
Average no. of pilgrims from the family	One	9	1	-
	More than 2	7	15	18
No. of pilgrimages by family members so far	Once	8	1	2
	Two to five times	6	4	4
	More than five times	2	11	12
No. of times involved in the pilgrimage process	Once	8	-	2
	Two to five times	6	9	3
	More than five times	2	7	13
Number of respondents		16	16	18
<i>Total number of respondents (N)=50</i>				

The study revealed the unique experiences of women who play a significant role in the family in organising the pilgrimage. The analysis of the data identified core themes that explain the experience of women during the pilgrimage process that are categorised into personal, interpersonal, family and spiritual experience.

Personal experience

Emotions are integral to religious experiences (Ferran, 2019). Many responses indicated how deeply respondents' emotions are attached to religious sentiments. The personal experiences of women reveal several dimensions of their inner thoughts and experiences. It is out of their devotion that women take the voluntary initiative of organising the household and participating in the *puja* (worship) as part of the family member's *vrata*.

In the morning, I wake up, take a bath, clean the premises, light the lamp in puja griha, prepare the food in the kitchen. Food is served to the person who is taken the vrata (pilgrim) first. After the pilgrim finishes the food, the rest of the family members have food (R2, 42 years).

I light the lamp in the morning and evening, recite the prayers, clean the house and premises. Such daily activities are the spiritual and psychological requirements during the vrata period (R14, 44 years).

It is found that devotion leads to a transformation in behaviour. The inherent reverence towards God influences women at the subconscious level and helps them to control negative thoughts. The transformation endows them with feelings of munificence to help their fellow beings financially and emotionally.

Being in full devotion, I think only spiritual things, speak only good words, never hurt anyone with words and never scold anyone (R6, 48 years).

I help the Sabarimala pilgrims financially and emotionally, though the person who plans to visit Sabarimala is my relative or neighbour or friends (R12, 41 years).

It is found that an array of preparatory actions lead towards the creation of a spiritual ambience before initiating the Sabarimala pilgrimage. This is often considered as a prerequisite for enforcing personal discipline and gaining an understanding of the self.

It is a good motivator to understand me while abstaining from all worldly, materialistic actions (R35, 65 years).

The spiritual ambience created during mandla vrata, I wish it should sustain for a longer period. In case when I break the vrata, I feel guilty (R22, 63 years).

Reinforcing the importance of adhering to religious rituals and customs is found as an integral part of such voluntary compliance. It has been found that observation of *vrata* following the traditional guidelines is very common during the 41 day period of the pilgrimage preparation process (*Mandala vrata*). The respondents were cautious about the consequences of any deviation or non-compliance of the ascetic practices followed during the *vrata* period.

Abstain from any unnecessary visit to the neighborhood where young women are present (R35, 65 years).

Ensure that there is no disturbance during saranam vili when such rituals are held at home. I also take bath before entering the house whenever I go outside to maintain the sanctity and purity of the vrata (R18, 48 years).

Another point to be noted here is that women are conscious about physical changes in the body. They believe that during the menstrual time, they should keep themselves away from the pilgrim and rituals.

If it is the menstrual time, we stay away from the Ayyappa (pilgrim) for seven days (R14, 44 years).

The women in the family selflessly support other members. The following responses indicate that women never felt that their own interests were sacrificed because their family members initiated *vrata* for Sabarimala darshan.

I never felt that my interests were sacrificed due to the Sabarimala trip of my relatives or family members (R12, 41 years).

I never desire for any special facilities during the mandala vrata period. ... I respect everyone and never even think of hurting anyone consciously and unconsciously ... (R16, 52 years).

The responses also demonstrated that the annual pilgrimage generates a strong desire in the minds of women to get a darshan at Sabarimala.

When the pilgrim explains experiences at Sabarimala and darshan at Sabarimala, a sadness arises in mind that I could not go Sabarimala during my childhood. Then, I console myself that I can visit Sabarimala in my older age (R12, 41 years).

Interpersonal experience

The study also aimed to assess the interpersonal experience of women during the *mandala vrata* period. The responses indicate that this pilgrimage also creates a sense of responsibility to fellow human beings, to help the needy and poor. This also invoked a feeling of community orientation and fellowship which motivated them to join prayers offered at community prayer halls during the *vrata* period.

We organise annadanam (offer a free meal to the needy) and group prayers during the vrata period and treat everyone as Swamy, with utmost respect and care (R8, 30 years).

Further, such support goes beyond family and is extended to friends or neighbours who need support. It was found that food distribution (*annadanam*) and donations were a common method of extending such help. Such practices generate a common understanding, fellowship and solidarity among community members which goes beyond *Mandala Kalam*. Pilgrims and family members often support others in the form of donation or free food as a spiritual gesture.

Practicing mandala vrata gives us spiritual belongingness while complying with the nature of kala chakra (wheel of time) and reorganising our body and mind in such a way that the problem of tridosh (three fundamental energies of human bodies on the physical and emotional level) could be minimised to an extent (R40, 58 years).

I help financially and emotionally, though the person plans to visit Sabarimala is my relative or neighbour or friends (R12, 41 years).

I visit the nearby temples and mathas (community prayer hall) where prayers take place. As part of my vow, I offer food to hungry people (R 13, 58 years).

Another noticeable fact is that this temporarily disconnects the women from social life as they restrict their movements outside, but involve themselves more in spiritual activities. By taking part in all these activities, they are able to control their physical desires.

... reduce interaction with the public, spend more time in spiritual activities and visit sacred places, pilgrimages sites (R7, 44 years).

I see the swamy as the reflection of Lord Ayyappa.... even if one person in the family initiates the vrata, all other members serve the swamy as the swamy's servants (R13, 58 years).

There is a strong urge throughout the neighborhood to get united and there is an increase in community spirit during the pilgrim season as the members of the family often visit nearby temples as a part of *mandala vrata* along with other members in the family, with neighbours and with friends.

Partaking in the pilgrimage is considered as a spiritual achievement for all of us in the family, friends and neighbours (R32, 60 years).

In case of an emergency, I do support other fellow members and family in preparing food and related work and also We visit the nearby temple to complete the vrata every day, or as part of the vrata (R45, 49 years).

Maybe my family members can establish a spiritual attachment while visiting Sabarimala and a more cohesive relationship among friends and neighbours (R39, 52 years).

Family experience

The pilgrimage induced environment boosts family member's interpersonal relationships and family cohesion. As indicated in the respondents' profile (Table 1), most of the time more than one member visits Sabarimala and facilitating them requires a high level of family commitment to abstinence and to following a religious lifestyle. This leads to a more harmonious environment within the family during the *mandala vrata*, with each family member becoming proactive in supporting the pilgrims. Moreover, they help each other during this period to create a supportive environment within the household.

As articulated in the responses below, the family experience of women shows that family bonding increases during the Sabarimala pilgrimage.

Along with the person who plans to visit Sabarimala, all members of the family have the same spiritual feeling (R2, 42 years).

If a family member initiates vrata for Sabarimala pilgrimage, the house seems to be like a temple. Happiness prevails always. That reflects in their behaviour and leads to treating everyone lovingly and respectfully (R14, 44 years).

During the mandala period, all people at home including wife, mother, children take part in vrata as done by the pilgrim ... (R3, 40 years).

When the pilgrim is at Sabarimala, the family members keep the portion of the food for the pilgrim separately at home. This indicates that though the pilgrim is physically away; their presence is felt at home by the family members (R9, 46 years).

Pilgrimage to Sabarimala keeps family members more exuberant (R20, 58 years).

Post-visit, when the pilgrim shares their experiences, it creates a feeling of spiritual joy among the family members as though they themselves had a visit to Sabarimala.

We feel that every person in the house had a darshan at Sabarimala. Because everyone at the house has taken the vrata and feels at one with the pilgrim (R8, 30 years).

There is spiritual learning which is both directly and indirectly inculcated among family members. Often other devotee's experiences are shared with family members to reinforce the importance of *vrata* and the spiritual significance of Sabarimala *darshan* among family members.

We often get more information from those who already visited Sabarimala and their experience, most often such discussion happened during mandalakala vrata (R31, 48 years).

Maintaining a clean and hygienic environment is mandatory during the pilgrimage and accordingly the entire surrounding of the house is kept pollution-free. Several such actions were found to be part of the preparatory actions of pilgrimage.

We remove old and unused stuff from the house, clean the black dress and shawl worn by the pilgrim in previous years, keep all utensils used last year for cooking and pooja (ritual) and ensure personal hygiene before wearing mala (R39, 52 years).

The enhanced role of women during the pilgrimage is often less noticed in other pilgrimages. However, in the case of Sabarimala, women are proactive in almost all preparatory work and other chores enabling male members to have a hassle-free pilgrimage.

I inform the priest and other associates and also approach guru swami with son and or husband. Accompany them while seeking the blessing of parents and other old members of both families (mine and husband) (R45, 49 years).

Sometimes we plant flowering plants for pooja as we may not get sufficient flowers for performing pooja on a daily basis. We do it in advance; we also arrange special rooms for swamis at home if they are not staying outside. Sometimes I may have to arrange it for the other pilgrims in the group as well (R23, 60 years).

Spiritual experience

Though women are not directly involved in the visit to the shrine, it has been observed that the spiritual ambience created in the household as part of the preparations for the pilgrimage and women's involvement in facilitating the *vrata* enhances their spiritual experience. It was found that the mandala *vrata* period promotes devotion, which leads to the spiritual progress of women in the family. A spiritual rejuvenation process takes place among the women who engaged in the *vrata*.

A rejuvenated feeling (psychological and physical) that we get by following 41 days of vrata, motivate one to conduct a trip to Sabarimala (R9, 46 years).

... with a pure mind and abstinence ... an environment of devotion is created (R12, 41 years).

The mandala kala it is a spiritually fulfilling time, like prayers, devotion and spirituality are everywhere (R3, 40 years).

Several actions were taken by family members to create a more conducive spiritual ambience in the family. The entire family is closely involved in creating the spiritual ambience, in which women play an active role and are major beneficiaries.

I will not create any disturbances to the pilgrim and also don't allow others to create any disturbance ... try my level best to ensure the sanctity of the ritual (R46, 56 years).

I try to avoid probable situations of any conflict during mandala vrata to maintain the sanctity of the occasion (R41, 52 years).

This experience helps me teach the younger family members on the dharma(duty) of compliance with the societal norms and values for improved wellbeing (R19, 52 years).

The pilgrimage process also helped women to benefit psychologically and generate positive energy that enhances their emotional and spiritual well-being.

I felt positive energy during the vrata period, I could get rid of the Ahankar (feeling of prudishness) through devotion (R7, 44 years).

A rejuvenation and awakening of spiritual feelings happens. It gives confidence and strength to the mind (R9, 46 years).

The non-participant spiritual experience of the woman

Pilgrims' spiritual experience is quite common in spiritual discourses. However, the spiritual experience of the non-participant is yet to be explored in pilgrimage tourism literature. This study proposes the concept of the non-participant spiritual experience of women. The Sabarimala pilgrimage allows women to observe *vrata*, by supporting the pilgrim, but they do not visit the shrine when they are between the ages of 10 and 50. The extended preparations and the unique pilgrimage process associated with a visit to Sabarimala provide a unique non-participative spiritual experience among women family members of the Sabarimala pilgrims.

The finding revealed many instances of such non-participant spiritual experience.

When Swamys leave for Sabarimala from home, we also join them invisibly through our thoughts. It cannot be just explained through words (R15, 41 years).

A rejuvenation and awakening of spiritual feelings happens to me even though I am staying at home. It gives confidence to self (R9, 46 years).

When the Swamys return home after the pilgrimage and share the experiences, women undergo a vicarious experience of pilgrimage.

When the pilgrims explain their experiences, we also have the same inner feeling of taking bath in Holy river Pampa, hiking the hill with the irumudi (packed items which are offered at different points in Sabarimala), and after completing the 18 auspicious steps to reach Sannidhanam to have darshan of Lord Ayyappa (R3, 40 years).

When I hear the experiences, I get a feeling of internal spiritual fulfillment. I sincerely pray to Ayyappa to allow me to get darshan at Sabarimala (R12, 41 years).

Thoughts of visiting the Sabarimala shrine, getting darshan after 56 years flashes in my mind frequently (R2, 42 years).

Many respondents appear to experience a form of non-participant spiritual upliftment during the post-pilgrimage recollection of the pilgrim's experience, facilitation of which was made possible by the contributions made by women family member, who did not participate in the journey to the shrine.

Yes, of course, we feel delighted to hear about Ayyapa and the pilgrim's experience on the way to the shrine. The post-pilgrimage recollection is very pious and we listen to every aspect of the pilgrimage. We feel it enrich our spiritual wellbeing (R45, 49 years).

After listening to them talking about Sabarimala and various shrines they visit enroute, we feel spiritually elevated and find we have more information about those places than our neighbourhood (R41, 52 years).

The findings of the study provide a clear insight into how Sabarimala pilgrimage enhances the spiritual development of not just the pilgrims, but the non-participant women who support it. The non-participant engagement leads to a deeper engagement with one's faith, strengthens family bonds and community cohesiveness.

Discussion

The above analysis demonstrates the role of women, who support their family members in taking up the annual pilgrimage to Sabarimala and how they indirectly become part of the entire pilgrimage process. In Indian society, 'the family' plays a significant role in important decisions such as marriage, pilgrimage, and so on. Although the patriarchal system exists in society, in southern India, leading female members of the family have an important role in the day-to-day management of household activities, supporting children, and taking care of elderly members in the family.

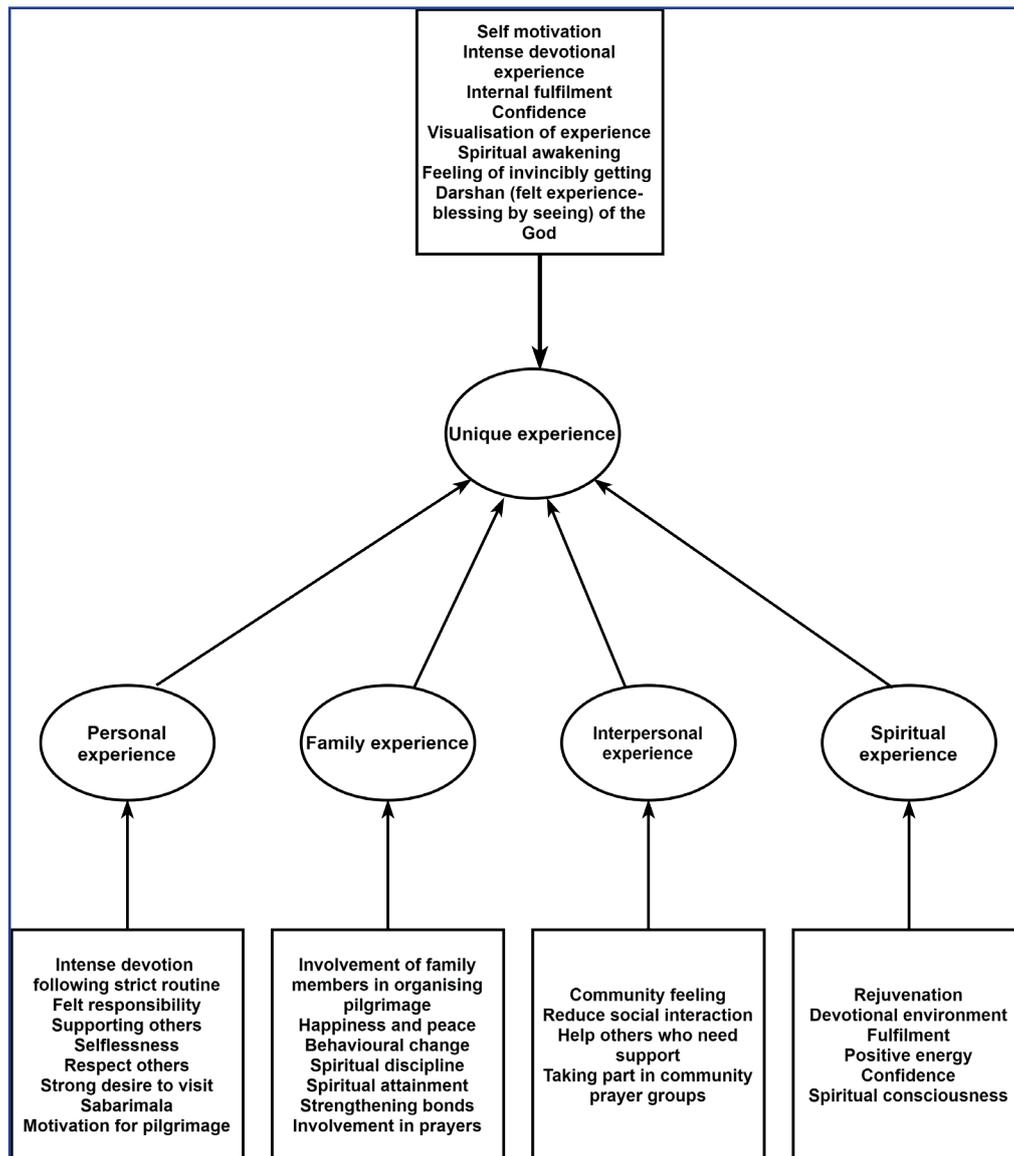
This study reveals the inner feelings of women regarding this pilgrimage, the devotional feelings that occur and sometimes act as the motivating factors of the pilgrimage, while investigating the role of leading female members of the pilgrim's family who actively contribute to the pilgrimage process. This motivation is derived from their understanding of Sabarimala pilgrimage and the spiritual upliftment they experience while supporting pilgrims in all possible ways - making necessary arrangements at the house, involving themselves in the rituals and prayers along with the pilgrim and their intense feeling of devotion. They gain a unique religious experience during this process.

The findings of the study show that women's non-participant involvement in Sabarimala pilgrimage provides them with religious experiences that can be categorised as personal, family, interpersonal and spiritual, and a unique way of experiencing the pilgrimage as a non-participant, which the authors describe as the Unique Religious Experience of Women (Figure 1).

Deep religious sentiments are common among women in India, but in the context of Sabarimala, it is an indirect experience that they receive. As pointed out by Avishai (2008) religiosity is shaped by the logic of one's religion, and women who voluntarily participates in the pilgrimage process follow traditions that they learned from their family. This results in developing a sense of intense devotion, willingness to accept responsibilities to make arrangements for the pilgrimage without any hesitation, and following the strict routines as observed by the pilgrims.

Found from the responses in this research it is evident that women never felt any kind of gender discrimination

Figure 1, Conceptual Framework of Unique Religious Experience of Women (UREW)



in the pilgrimage process. During the interviews, respondents never expressed such thoughts - they were prepared to follow the customs without any reservations. This validates the observation of Byng (1998) that actors construct a social reality based on their own experiences and perceptions, which in this instance do not suggest any form of gender discrimination. It is also found that the women (who assist the pilgrim during the *vrata* period), take part in discussions about pilgrim’s experiences of the Sabarimala shrine post pilgrimage. This in turn generates intense devotion and a sense of spiritual upliftment among them.

Taking part in the Sabarimala *vrata* helps women experience peace and selflessness (Srikant & Manoj, 1998). In Sikh religious traditions, Gurudwaras act as

the shared spaces which are used for exchanging local knowledge and community bonding, which women find as spaces of peace (Arora, 2020). In the Sabarimala pilgrimage, all family members are actively involved in the *vrata* and they experience peace, happiness, and a sacred ambience at home and in the community. After the *vrata* starts, woman in the family restrict their movements and social interactions. Instead, they take the initiative to organise *annadanam* (free food to poor and needy), offering alms to the poor, financially supporting poor pilgrims, and taking part in *bhajan* (prayer meetings) at community prayer halls. These acts are based on the belief that such good deeds will result in achieving ‘*Punya*’ (blessings of God).

Spiritual experiences are derived from all good deeds,

devotion, and the disciplined life that the participants lead during the *vrata* period. Respondents agreed that their observation of *vrata* and involvement in the pilgrimage process leads to a transcendental experience, which gives them confidence and positive energy. According to Russo-Netzer and Maysseless (2014), spiritual experience is subjective and an experimental process that is led by the quest of an individual.

The most significant finding of the present study, is the unique religious experience of women (UREW) who are non-participants in the pilgrimage. The collective spiritual experience of women (family members of the pilgrim who initiate *vrata* for pilgrimage) who take part in the pilgrimage process at various levels, augments devotion and dedication to the religious purpose. This enhancement of the spiritual discipline they practice leads to a supreme transcendental experience can be called as UREW in this context. In Indian traditions, women have a great role in building the family and strengthening the bonds among family members. Women in the family play a vital role in continuing the traditions practiced over generations. Though traditions prohibit women of a certain age visiting the Sabarimala shrine, it is accepted as part of the religious conventions by and large. Hence, the contribution of women in the family to completing this pilgrimage which is as important as that of the pilgrim, and the benefits that they gain in the form of spiritual upliftment and a vicarious form of the pilgrimage experience. In a faith-based religious context, a rational explanation may not be possible for religious practices and conventions, especially those that impose restrictions on sections of the society. However, the study shows that it is possible to achieve shared spiritual experiences despite restrictions imposed by traditions and customs and UREW is a construct that has to be analysed further to understand women's religious and spiritual experiences in traditional religious practices.

Conclusion

The present study examined the experiences of women, who support their family members in undertaking the annual pilgrimage to Sabarimala. In-depth interviews were conducted with female family members of Sabarimala pilgrims, who reflected on their experiences of Sabarimala pilgrimage as non-participants. The study revealed that woman have an important role in the family in organising Sabarimala pilgrimage for their family members and in observing the 41 days *vrata*. Their

experiences are broadly classified into five segments in the conceptual framework derived in this paper, which are personal experience, interpersonal experience, family experience, spiritual experience as antecedents, with unique experience as a latent construct. The study also revealed that this pilgrimage process transforms the life of a woman as it brings spiritual discipline, enhances spiritual consciousness, and spiritual upliftment.

The study proposes the non-participant spiritual experience of women as a unique religious experience of women (UREW). We found that the participants of the pilgrimage acquire this transcendental experience through the complete cycle of the pilgrimage; women at home indirectly achieve the spiritual benefits of the pilgrimage. The present study also proposes that Sabarimala pilgrimage cannot be viewed just through the lens of gender, but from a larger perspective that respects existing traditions, local knowledge, and belief systems. In many religions, traditions signify more than logic and rationale, which can be viewed as unacceptable and archaic by some sections of society. This does not account for the fact that the *sanathan dharma* is more a way of living than a means of following the rule books of religion and many traditions originated and flourished in different regions based on local knowledge systems.

One limitation of the study is that it was conducted among women who were devotees of Lord Ayyappa, hence the opinions received may not be free from bias. However, the present study opens windows for further research in various regions in India, where a patriarchal system is very common. A heterogeneous population can give diverse observations which may apply in a different context. The present research will help academics and researchers to understand the traditional approach to Sabarimala pilgrimage and understanding the perspectives of women who are part of the pilgrimage but do not visit the shrine. The study will also help social scientists to examine how a particular system is accepted by society over a period of time, and becomes an integral part of the community's traditions and customs.

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