Is Pilgrimage Too Dangerous?
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POINT-COUNTERPOINT

Is Pilgrimage Too Dangerous?

No: Disasters Can Strike Anywhere

In the wake of disasters during several major pilgrimages, two Hindu commentators debate whether we might better manage the hazards

By Rajeev Srinivasan
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It is unfair to claim India is more prone to pilgrim disasters than anywhere else. Huge gatherings bring their own risks. Despite the Indian disdain for public space as compared to private spaces, we are not more at risk. In fact, I would even say there are miraculously few deaths as a percentage of those going to dangerous mountain temples such as Amarnath, Vaishnodevi and Kailash.

Pilgrims are a somewhat unusual lot. Many old people go on pilgrimage. It is well known that the aged become more pious. Thus death rates for pilgrims will naturally exceed death rates for the average populace. Furthermore, some of the holiest pilgrimages are supposed to leave the person in a state of original innocence, and what better time to reach God than in that state? Some pilgrims even want to die in that holy

ecstasy.

Add to this the difficulty in funneling huge numbers of people through small or confined spaces in a short period of time. I have seen this first hand at Sabarimala, where the shrine is minuscule compared to the millions who come there to worship--and they all come at practically the same time, during the pilgrim season. The same holds true for Mecca, and likely other non-Hindu destinations such as the Guadeloupe in Mexico.

Even the well-financed Mecca pilgrimage (with $18 billion spent on setting up the infrastructure) has seen catastrophic failures in the last few years: stampedes and, in 1996, a huge fire that trapped and killed 343 pilgrims. I ascribe that simply to the huge numbers: two million people converging at one spot exceed the carrying capacity of the site.

You will notice that these are all Third-World spots; and that is so for good reason. Third Worlders go in very large numbers to pilgrim sites. Westerners, perhaps because of affluence, do not feel the need for the comfort of faith. Therefore they go in much smaller numbers on their pilgrimages. And when they do, their infrastructure and command-and-control systems are much better.

There are legitimate reasons for believing that many pilgrim centers will continue to risk disasters. Where India is especially at risk is in the low value placed upon human lives. When I first moved to the US, I was astonished at how much worth was

placed on one person's life there. Now that I have returned permanently to India, I am appalled at how little a person's life is worth here.

Yet, even in affluent countries, the sheer pressure of a huge human congregation places intolerable strains on the crowd management function. India just compounds the problem with its cavalier attitude to human lives. And, unlike in Mecca, Indian state governments typically take money from the pilgrim and put little or nothing into improving facilities for him.

By Rajeevan Kattil
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Every few months, we hear about a crowd-related disaster in India: overcrowded buses fall into ravines, trains collide, pandals on fire incinerate pilgrims; floods, mudslides, and snowfalls kill hundreds ... And though most Indians genuinely feel sorry for the victims, they shrug off the incident as yet another manifestation of the law of karma--which absolves anyone from doing anything about the problems.

In Detroit, where I live, we are building a new double stadium for football and baseball. Even before the stadium construction began, work started on roads, on sewer lines and water mains, fire and medical facilities for emergencies, and even facilities for law enforcement. All that before the main construction started. Compare that to India. Do you think anyone has an emergency response plan or an evacuation plan at any of our

pilgrimage centers?

Consider Sabarimala: 2.5 million pilgrims for the Makara Sankranthi festival. There is not enough water, not enough sanitation, and the temple was built to handle probably a hundredth of the number. We could easily build a Sabarimala village with all the infrastructure, have a train link to the temple and meter the number of people that can get through such a link, so the temple is not overcrowded. Charge a nominal toll to pay for these facilities. Privatize the effort as much as possible so the taxpayer does not have to shell out huge sums for horribly inefficient implementations.

City and facilities planning is a neglected field in India. I note it with some sadness; because even forward-looking institutions like my alma mater (IIT Madras) have not gotten into the act. There is no political will to create effective support organizations. Doling out disaster relief and having a picture taken while touring a disaster area gets much better press than actually doing something to prevent catastrophes.

I am reminded of this inattention to basic amenities every time I land at Sahar International in Mumbai, one of India's largest airports. The domestic airport is within the same compound; it would be simple to create a train link through the airport grounds. Yet, all of us come out, duel with the taxiwalas, and drive through the poorest parts of the city to make the connection. On a recent flight, I happened to sit next to a planning engineer for the City of Mumbai. I asked him why they had not done something about this. His answer? "Such things have very low political priority. As long as there is 'a

way,' who cares?"

Precisely. Who cares? Until someone with authority does, the deaths will go on. And we will blame karma--just like we used to attribute smallpox to Kali's displeasure at her offerings. It is time someone from the younger generation said, "These lives are important, let us find a way to save them."