

THE IMPORTANCE OF PILGRIMAGES

one experiences spiritual ecstasy when one worships at these holy sites.

Hindus regard the mightiest streams, from its source to the mouth, as the holiest sacred places to be worshipped with awe and reverence. It is said that at these holy sites pious devotees, like sages, can "SEE" eternally through time and space. It is this belief that attracts millions of pilgrims during the *Kumbh Mela* festivals held at the confluence of the rivers. Analogous to a river winding its way to merge with the Ocean, so too, Hindus believe that the individual souls seeks to merge with the Absolute.

The *Puranas* explain, that the river Ganges flows from the matted locks of hair of Lord *Siva's* head as He rests in his abode in the Himalayas. One of the sacred sites along this river is *Haridwar*, considered the gate way to visit the holy Temples of *Badrinath*, *Kedarnath*, *Gangotri*, and *Yamunotri*. Equally sacred is the confluence of the *Ganga*, *Yamuna* and *Saraswati*, at *Allahabad*. The banks of the river *Ganga* in *Benares* is said to be the most sacred for pilgrims seeking the bliss of salvation. Throughout India, from *Rameswaram* at the southern tip of the Indian Peninsula, to Mount *Kailas* on the Himalayas in the North, there are myriads of sacred places. The *Nataraja* Temple at *Chidambaram*, the *Meenakshi* Temple at *Madurai*, Lord *Venkateswara* Temple at *Tirupathi* and several other such sacred Temples are pilgrim centers, where devotees pray to overcome suffering and attain *Moksha*. In Hindu scriptures each holy Temple is glorified with tales of gods and goddesses who have attained *Moksha* after a sorrowful earthly life.

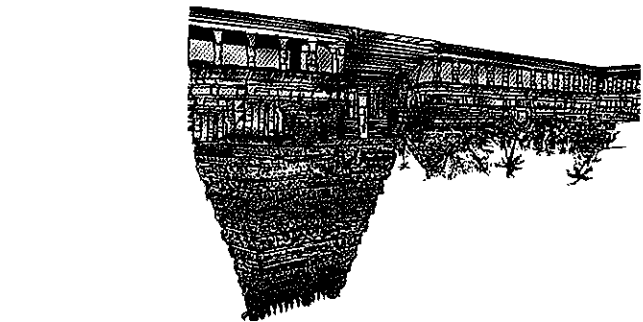
Before the advent of modern transportation, pilgrims journeyed to holy places by foot, on ponies, by 'dolls' and, by bullock carts. In contemporary times pilgrims travel by cars, railroads, buses and planes. Journey by such modern facilities does not in any way deter the theological beliefs of Hindus. In fact the convenience of modern transportation has made it possible for a large number of devotees to go on pilgrimages.

Going on pilgrimage is a soul stirring experience raising the spirit to heightened levels for intense prayer for *Moksha*:

*Asatoma Sadgamaya, Tamasoma Jyothirgamaya,
Mithyorma Amruthamgamaya,
Om. Santhi, Santhi, Santhi.*

*Lead me (through knowledge) from the
unreal to the real, from darkness (ignorance) to light
(enlightenment), from death (bondage and suffering)
to immortality (Liberation and Moksha).
Om. Peace, peace, peace.*

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The daily ritual worship of God amongst Hindus is primarily conducted in their home, where a particular room or a private space is set aside to enshrine a family deity or deities as sacred icons. Usually Lord *Ganesa*, the elephant headed son of Lord *Siva* and Goddess *Parvati*, who removes obstacles in one's life, is the central deity, surrounded by other gods and goddesses. Worship is also performed in local temples where priests conduct the Vedic rites of *Puja* on behalf of the families on certain auspicious occasions and, on special religious and festive events.

However, devout Hindus who yearn for intense worship to receive God's blessings, go on pilgrimages known as *Yatras*, to some of India's holy places considered sacred, because these places are associated with Mystical Powers for the growth of spirituality. Hindus believe that a pilgrim's process towards the union of the soul with the Absolute is through journey to worship at sacred places. Going on pilgrimages to sacred places is said to be a powerful means for crossing *samsara* and, to overcoming the transmigration of the soul. Pilgrimages to holy places, are also made to carry out special penance, to fulfill vows and to pray for specific boons.

During the pilgrimages, devout Hindus go through the process of *Vichara*, *Viveka* and *Vairagya*. *Vichara* is the process of questioning and seeking answers to the meaning of life; *Viveka* is the process of seeking Knowledge about the relation of the *Atma* with *Paramatma*; and, *Vairagya* is learning the significance of renouncing all desires for worldly materials goods and detachment from personal and family relationships. Contemplating on these concepts provides the pilgrims the opportunity to personally experience the Divine Realization that God the *Paramatma* is in all and all are in God.

Yatris (Pilgrims) take food and money to be given to the priests at the Temples and, to distribute it to the beggars who line the streets to the sacred places. It is believed that performing charitable deeds store up merits towards a peaceful life on earth and towards reducing rebirth. In order to control the desires and comforts of the flesh, pilgrims practice moral and ethical discipline. Because sacred places are the source of spiritually charged Divine Energy,