



SOCIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF FESTIVALS AND PILGRIMAGES

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ABSTRACT

Festivals and pilgrimages assumed great deal of significance from time immemorial and even today. Apart from providing opportunity to people for assembly and mutual interaction, festivals and pilgrimages bring economic prosperity and social prowess to the locality and the local community. This study attempts to highlight the positive and negative impacts of festivals and pilgrimages on the society.

Key Words: Festivals, Pilgrimages, Impact, Religion, Tradition.

1. Introduction:

Festivals and pilgrimages have become an integral part of our lives. A religious festival is a time of special importance marked by adherence to religion. Religious festivals are commonly celebrated on recurring cycles in a calendar year. Apart from religious festivals, there are also harvest festivals, seasonal festivals and national festivals that are celebrated all over the country in every nation with a lot of enthusiasm and vigour. All major religions have laid emphasis on the sacredness of certain localities and have insisted on pilgrimages to these localities. These places motivate religious faith and inspire believers to undertake journey and lead a religious life. A pilgrimage thus is a ritual journey with a hallowed purpose. It is a transformational journey during which significant changes take place and new insights are given along with attainment of

deeper insights. A pilgrimage is also seen as a journey in search of moral and spiritual significance.

2. Objectives:

The study attempts to explain different types of festivals and pilgrimages and identify their sociological significance. The positive and negative impacts of festivals and pilgrimages in our society are also weighed.

3. Research Methodology:

Preliminary literature surveys were conducted online and offline to know the current status of the subject. Information available from research papers and books were used to obtain general and more detailed views. A written session of about ten minutes duration was conducted for students in a professional college near Kochi. The students were asked to list down the maximum number of factors which they would consider relevant to the subject. The sampling methodology adopted was convenience sampling.

4. Scope of the study:

Preliminary studies were based on reviews of articles and research papers available in the subject. Besides, responses received from a sample population in the same locality were used for the study. The study can be extended by including more respondents from different locations. A structured questionnaire may be prepared and distributed to respondents to know the intended responses.

5. Limitations:

The study was based on the review of articles, research papers and reviews received from a convenient sample of population. Since convenience sampling was used, the responses may not exactly represent the entire population. Besides, respondents were asked to list down the factors on pen and paper within a limited time and no structured questionnaire was used.

6. Literature Review:

A good number of articles and research papers are available both online and offline in the subject, especially those related to Hindu pilgrimages in our country. Sri. Naresh Nayak et. al.^[7] analyses the socio-economic impacts of pilgrimage tourism with reference to Udipi Sri Krishna Temple in Karnataka. The paper puts forth statistical and numerical figures on pilgrim visits to the temple, the cultural changes that happened around the temple in the last ten years, people's view towards pilgrimage tourism, quality of life and standard of living around the premises and how pilgrimage has affected the traffic and the use of natural resources within the temple premises. In a case study conducted by Dr. Baby M D^[8] for the Centre for Development Studies, it was described at length with reference to Sabarimala Pilgrimage, how seasonal pilgrimage has led to employment generation, development in Erumeli Panchayat, income generation, absence of power failure and hartals. The basic facilities including transportation, water supply, accommodation and sanitation improved in the village, according to the study. As the study reported, traders and other agencies were benefited and their living standards improved. Dr. Nasreen Tahir Malik et. al.^[6] in their work on impact of Hajj on Muslims in Pakistan expressed the opinion that Hajj affects collective and individual beliefs and practices the spread of Islamic values. Sri. S Vijayanand^[2] in his work points out the direct and indirect impacts of religious tourism. In his paper, he has attempted to point out the positive and negative impacts of religious tourism. In his paper on pilgrimages, Michael A Di Giovine^[5] has tried to connect pilgrimage practices with Victor Turner's concepts of 'communitas' and 'liminality'. Rene Gothoni^[16] while attempting to critically analyse Turner's concepts has made a statement that a pilgrimage is the outer manifestation of an inner journey. Robert H Stoddard in his work has attempted to define and classify pilgrimages. Chihiro Koiso^[11] in his paper made attempts to evaluate the social implications of two Hindu Pilgrimages in Maharashtra. Koiso observes how festivals have led to development of tourism, transportation and pilgrimage in Maharashtra. Van Den Deer^[12] in his work tried to apply Victor Turner's concepts on pilgrimages to pilgrimage in Ayodhya, where people assemble to perform rituals including funerary rites on the bank of a river.

Ros Derret^[3] in his work explores how community based festivals grow over time to reflect values, interests and aspirations of residents. He explains how festivals develop and

manage tensions generated by different communities. Michael Whitford et. al.^[4] are of the opinion that festivals and events deliver socio-cultural benefits to host communities and destinations. Kukoyi Ibrahim et. al.^[13] have observed that festivals contribute to the host community both economically and socially and many participants of the festivals are of positive perceptions about the festivals. In the paper, the authors draw upon the concepts of Social Exchange Theory put forward by George Homans to explain sustainability of tourism in a community. Lee et. al.^[14] in their work provided an analytical and timely perspective on the role of multicultural festivals in building multicultural societies. In his paper, Prof. Edward Rodrigues^[15] attempts to explain the impact of rituals, pilgrimages and religious festivals upon commodification of religion. Purchase of commodities as offerings to God will bring economic prosperity to the people in the locality, as he observes. Prof. Rodrigues is of the opinion that market plays a key role by advertising the occurrence and importance of rituals, pilgrimages and festivals and attracts more pilgrims and tourists to the destination. Besides, a good number of literature are available in the subject both online and offline.

7. Major Findings:

Apart from literature survey conducted both online and online as many as 127 student respondents chosen through convenience sampling methodology were asked to generate maximum number of factors which they feel are relevant to the subject within time duration of ten minutes. Studies made it clear that festivals and pilgrimages create both positive and negative impacts in the society though respondents were keener to project positive impacts. Some of the positive impacts pointed out to by the respondents include the following:

- (a). Festivals bring us closer to religion and tradition.
- (b). Festivals promote harmony.
- (c). Festivals carry the messages of past generations to the present and future.
- (d). Festivals promote unity and communal harmony.
- (e). Festivals helps one to know about different religions and remove one's misconceptions about other religions.
- (f). Festivals help preserve culture and tradition.
- (g). Festivals bring opportunity to gather around and spend time with dear and near.

- (h). Festivals help relieve from stress and monotonous routine work schedules.
- (i). Festivals bring happiness and calm mind.
- (j). Festivals promote charity and giving.
- (j). Festivals promote exchange of cultural views.
- (k). Festivals build social relations and promote social communications.
- (l). Festivals permit people to have a taste of traditional cuisine.

Festivals have different classifications; some are traditional, others are religious while some have national importance. Celebrations, irrespective of their spread, play give us opportunity to gather and break out of routine chores and enjoy together. Some of the happiest moments in life happen through participation in festivals. Festivals lead to mutual interaction among people belonging to different spheres and communities. Relationships develop through mutual interaction. Festivals thus serve to remove misconceptions and enmities among people and convey divine messages to all participants and visitors. They help pass on culture and tradition to generations. As more and more people from different walks of life come forward to organise the event, festivals help build team work, enthusiasm and social capital within the community.

Festivals are celebrated with so much vigour and joy that they tend to take away our mental tensions and relieve us from stress. People spend time relishing sweets and their favourite dishes. Many religious festivals are associated with myths, stories and beliefs and are accompanied by prayers and rituals that help improve our concentration and calm our minds. Festivals promote a sense of charity and a feeling of giving out to the Almighty as well as the weaker sections of the community. Again, festivals permit exchange of goods and services and bring economic advantages to the nearby community. It promotes seasonal employment and generates income. Shop keepers and restaurants will have a nice time during a festive season. Artisans and artists will be busy showcasing their skills during a festival occasion. Decorations and lighting systems bring more surprises to visitors. Seasonal and harvest festivals remind one of the harmony between man, nature and the society. Again, festivals reveal the culture and identity of a locality or a community. Some festivals bring emotional and social security to every individual in the community.

However, festivals are not without negative impacts. Festivals attract vandalism and antisocialism to the spot. Pick pocketing and begging are common phenomena found in many festival spots. Again, festivals generate loud noises which include noise generated by firing of crackers. Misuse of resources, pollution and littering are other issues that cause discomfort to neighbouring communities. Too much religion may lead to fanaticism and social unrest. Some incidents are now being reported from Sabarimala these days where several questions are being raised regarding the entry of young female devotees into the temple. Many newspapers have reported degradation in standards of religious tolerance in the past in some places of pilgrim interest in our country.

Fire breakouts were reported from a festival spot near Puttingal in Kollam District, Kerala some years back, injuring and killing several people. Lighting and decoration are of course attractive but electrical short circuits can destroy the fun and happiness of a festival. Elephants are good to watch during a festive occasion, but they should not be stretched beyond limits. Overcrowding can lead to stampedes, which may also result from cruelty to and extended use of animals.

Social Benefits	Social Concerns
Community Benefits	Quality of Life Concerns
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Community Celebration ▪ Enhanced Community Identity ▪ Enhanced Community image ▪ Enhanced Community Cohesion ▪ Increased Community Well Being ▪ Increased quality of community life ▪ Increased pride through participation ▪ Shared ideas among community ▪ Enhanced leadership and organising skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased crime/vandalism ▪ Unacceptable increase in traffic ▪ Overcrowding and Stampedes ▪ Littering/ecological damages ▪ Reduced privacy ▪ Disruption to normal life routine ▪ Unacceptable noise levels ▪ Overuse of community facilities ▪ Fire outbreaks and other disasters
Cultural and Educational Benefits	Community Resource Concerns
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Experience of new activities ▪ Participants learn new things ▪ Event showcases new ideas ▪ Development of cultural skills ▪ Exposure to new cultural experiences ▪ Strengthen community friendships ▪ Lasting positive cultural impact ▪ Achievement of common community goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased disagreement within community ▪ Event is all work, no play ▪ Excessive demand on community human resources ▪ Highlights cultural stereotypes ▪ Unequal sharing of event benefits ▪ Weakened community identity ▪ Excessive demand on financial resources ▪ Potential Sense of failure within community

Table 1: Social impacts of community festivals

Pilgrimages too have great significance in our society. The contribution of pilgrimages to social and cultural integration of people is noteworthy at various levels. Pilgrimages cut across the borders and promote international, national and regional integration. Pilgrimages preserve and strengthen values and ideals held by the pilgrims. Again, pilgrimages reinforce social relationships. They serve as an important source of education, experience, information and cultural awareness for pilgrims. This includes preservation of traditional knowledge, its cultivation and transmission of traditional knowledge including arts and performing arts, culture and heritage to the next generations. People living in distant areas get to know about other regions, their life styles and customs. Temple worship helps promote sculpture, painting, music, dance and folk arts some of which depict great epics as well life of Gods and Goddesses. Pilgrimages spread material culture through exchange of ideas and goods among pilgrims belonging to different regions. Opportunities exist for entertainment industry as well. Arrival and departure of pilgrims in place of pilgrimage gives impetus to growth of tourism and business activities in the area. Small and greater needs of pilgrims appear in a variety of marketing arrangements at the spots of pilgrimage. Pilgrimages have often led to development of infrastructure, transportation and essential communication facilities in the localities, like that happened in Sabarimala and Sri Krishna Temple at Udupi.

8. Results:

As many as three feedback sessions were arranged for students belonging to a professional college in Kochi. The samples were chosen at convenience. Around 127 respondents participated out of which 57 were male respondents and 64 were female respondents. 6 respondents declined to reveal their identity (See figure 1).

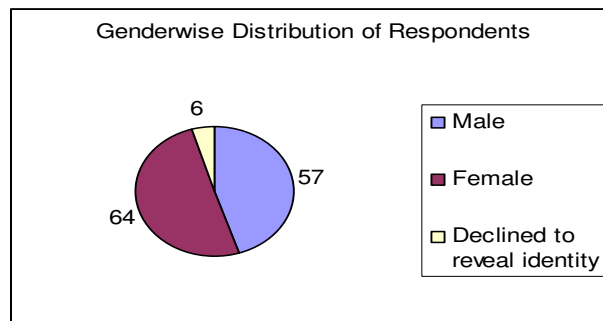


Fig 1: Gender wise Distribution of Respondents

The respondents were asked to identify the factors that reveal sociological significance of festivals and pilgrimages based on their experience. Duration of ten minutes was allowed for each respondent. Respondents were successful in identifying 20 positive and 7 negative impacts (See figure 2) based on their knowledge and experience. Respondents expressed a feeling of attending a brain storming session.

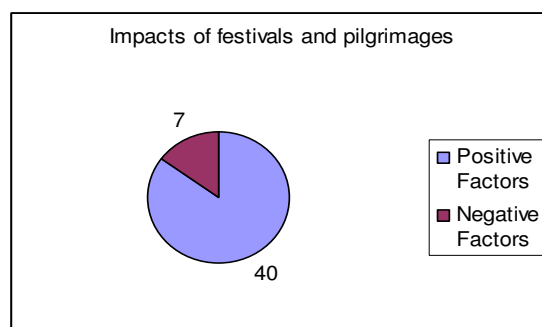


Fig 2: Respondent identified impacts of festivals and pilgrimages

Table 2 lists down the positive impacts of festivals and pilgrimages as identified by the respondents.

Sl. No.	Description	Frequency of Response
1	Bring national unity and communal harmony	90
2	Strengthen bonds and friendships and permit family reunion	89
3	Bring sense of joy and happiness	46
4	Preserve history, tradition, culture and heritage	87
5	Motivate to lead a good life	8
6	Impart human values to society	13
7	Calm mind	42
8	Impart caring values to the society	8
9	Relieve negative thoughts, impart positive thoughts	11
10	Promote arts, culture and livelihood	10
11	Bring respect to elders	3
12	Convey part of locality's identity	12
13	Offer feasts and feed the poor	12
14	Relieve us from stress and tension	20
15	Give opportunity to show faith and devotion to God	24
16	Purify Soul	4
17	Promote use of traditional costumes	2
18	Promote moral, social and ethical values of life	21

Sl. No.	Description	Frequency of Response
19	Promote tourism	40
20	Relieve us from the monotonicity of life	24
21	Strengthen religious belief and spiritual well being	20
22	Promote harmony with nature	15
23	Bring economic benefits to surrounding people	34
24	Permit cultural integration as different cultures experience each other	17
25	Help remove misconceptions about other groups	6
26	Make people feel more respect for other groups	7
27	Act as a source of inspiration	1
28	Show diversity for each country	8
29	Help improve social equality, social harmony and social sustainability	21
30	Encourage people to be more socially active and responsible	8
31	Bring out social symbiotism	2
32	Provide inter-generational equity	2
33	Open up international boundaries	2
34	Give time to think about oneself and one's self introspect	9
35	Create beautiful memories	6
36	Bring enlightenment and clear thoughts	2
37	Promote secularism	4
38	Permit volunteership and improve organising ability, leadership and team work	5
39	Promote resources and increase availability of resources	2
40	Provide opportunity to enjoy the beauty of architectural marvels	1

Table 2: Positive Impacts of Festivals and Pilgrimages

About 71% of the respondents think that festivals and pilgrimages promote national unity and communal harmony. 70% of the respondents are of the opinion that festivals and pilgrimages strengthen bonds, cement relationships and provide opportunity for reunion with kith and kin. 68.5% of the respondents feel that festivals and pilgrimages preserve our rich tradition and culture. 36.2% of the respondents are of the opinion that festivals and pilgrimages bring joy and happiness to the participants. 33% of the respondents say that festivals and pilgrimages calm our minds. 31.5% of the respondents believe that festivals and pilgrimages promote tourism. 26.8% of the respondents are of the opinion that festivals and pilgrimages bring economic benefits to the surrounding people. 18.9% of the respondents experienced relief from monotonic life during a festive occasion. Again, 18.9% of the respondents think that festivals and pilgrimages provide opportunity to show faith in and devotion to god. 16.5% of the respondents

agree that festivals and pilgrimages promote moral, social and ethical values of life. 15.7% of the respondents experienced relief from stress and tension during a festive occasion.

Though positive impacts outweighed in number, a few respondents did not hesitate to point out the negative impacts of festivals and pilgrimages including possibility of pollution. Altogether 7 numbers of negative factors were identified by the respondents (See Table 3).

Sl. No.	Description	Frequency of Response
1	Promote groupism and disintegration based on caste	1
2	Pollute land, water, roadways and waterways	3
3	Misguide youth and promote religious fanaticism	1
4	Spread superstitions	1
5	Animals and birds slaughtered in the name of festivals	1
6	Permit wastage and overspending of money and other resources	1
7	Create traffic problems, road blocks and traffic jams	1

Table 3: Negative Impacts of festivals and pilgrimages

9. Conclusions and Recommendations:

It is not surprising to see that respondents hold more positive views regarding the social significance of festivals and pilgrimages. Apart from providing opportunities for national integration, communal harmony, friendship and get together, festivals permit a multitude of other merits. But there is a darker side which should never be ignored. Pick pockets and vandals seek greener pastures during a festival occasion and in pilgrim spots. Law and order situations are not uncommon in festival sites including traffic jams and hostile interaction between visitors and controlling personnel. Littering and polluting the premises and the neighbourhood must be taken care of by the concerned authorities and must invite appropriate penal action. Festivals make sense of religious beliefs, but too much of anything may lead to fanaticism and communal tensions, which is undesirable if a nation must progress. But when positives and negatives are weighed on a balance, the number of positives is found to far outweigh the number of negatives. Hence in a communal set up, festivals and pilgrimages are deemed acceptable. Over crowding, stampedes, short circuits, fire outbreaks and disasters steal the joy and happiness of the participating community. Slaughter of animals and birds and the use of fire crackers should be regulated through awareness as well as skilful and timely policies and practices. Elephants and

horses are wonderful to watch during festival occasions, but they should not be stretched beyond limits.

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