

Beyond Territory: The Process of Geographical Identification in the Context of a South Indian Pilgrimage

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Dialectics between identity and territorial concept discussed

The main objective of this presentation is to go beyond the common usage of the concept of territory, popularized but withered much by the discourses of western academics as well as by mediatic and political conceptions. It aims also to reintroduce territoriality as a fundamental basis of human existence, combining and revealing within itself the material and symbolic dimensions of spatial relationship formation. In fact, the idea of territoriality has a heuristic value for social sciences in the sense that it allows us to go further than the static definition of cultural regions (process of “naturalization” of socio-spatial forms) and of territory (a move towards geopolitics which is more defined by category of violence), the latter usually being associated with the idea of nation-state. What is of interest to us in the case of the Sabarimala pilgrimage is the manner in which an individual or a group, irrespective of its size, form a territorial link and endow themselves with a many-sided and “networked geographical identity” at different scales. By using categories of place and person as a single unit, body and space, identity and territoriality, as well as dialectics of internal and external factors, what we intend to demonstrate in the final part of this paper shall be the strong geographically-based attachments and claims emerging through the study of local dispute (even if wrapped within distinct cultural context of pilgrimage).

What is, in my opinion, one of the fundamental postulates of modern geography is the fact that there exist very clear relationships (conjunctions and disjunctions) between collective identity (result of effects shared by a social group through related processes of identification) and the two facets of the concept of territory, i.e., territoriality (the geographical basis of certain methods of space-appropriation) and the territory, which is defined by the play of influence on a given area thus establishing legitimacy. According to a retroactive process, one major geographical hypothesis would consider the territory as playing in turn a key role by

structuring spatial representations and mediating social relationships, by the influence of spatial identity on practice. We will come to this later.

Introduction of concept of “geographical identity” or “spatial identity”

However, the links between collective identity and the concept of territory are not always clear because there exists very rarely a perfect match or a direct relationship between a group of individuals and the space that surrounds them. In other words, a group does not identify itself solely to a part of homogeneous and compact space, but rather to a collection of more or less well-structured places, which constitute of what I will term “the networked geographical identity”. This could even have an essentially subjective dimension if one considers the first level of identification to a space, which is, the individual territoriality based upon social affinities of caste, sub-caste or even lineages. It could equally include a wider dimension when one attempts to define the identity of such and such a region in terms of another, referred to and regulated by acts of authority but also recognized as such by one or more groups. This attempt at a spatialization of identity by the means of a double approach, that is, a subjectivist and an objective one, should lead to a more comprehensive view of the facts and socio-cultural phenomena studied. In this perspective, the study of the spatial insertion of a huge pilgrimage in which the male members of the Hindu community form the core of the participants, well known all over South India as *Sabarimala Yatra*, provides adequate research materials. A geographical analysis of this gathering closely related to the cult of *Ayyappa*, an ambivalent deity typical of that area, sheds indeed some light on the nature of links entertained between the multifaceted phenomenon of pilgrimage and the reflexive notions of territoriality and territory.

Internal and external views on space and pilgrimage in South India

It is therefore possible to build a model of spatialization of the contemporary Sabarimala phenomenon in South India. There is indeed a tension triggered by the pilgrimage itself between the structured and hierarchical network of ritual places (the location of a territory centered around Sabarimala – internal perspective at micro-scale) and religious migrations (external movement and macro-scale analysis), that is to say, the totality of itineraries and routes of the pilgrimage which is continually structuring and temporarily altering the map of South India. This indivisible dialectic between the internal and external factors regarding

processes of appropriation and of identification to such far away spaces forms a constitutive part of any pilgrimage system.

Refashioning South Indian map through categories of space and circulation

The large geographical audience of this pilgrimage which creates, albeit temporarily, new limits and boosts historical axes of circulation throughout South India (entering to Kerala through various passes of the Western Ghats such as Palghat, Shengottai and Kumily), calls for a reversal of perspective and invites a shift of scale. One could posit the double geographical assumption of redrawing the map of South India by the major thoroughfares. On the one hand, an alteration of the map brought about by the itineraries, ebb and flows of pilgrims (south-south relations), which are firmly fixed in the field of cultural representations of the space. On the other hand, a redrawing of the South Indian map as opposed to the North Indian (figure 1) based on the specific « Dravidian » nature and spectre of the Sabarimala pilgrimage in contrast to the pan-Indian nature of the temple of Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh (south-north divide).

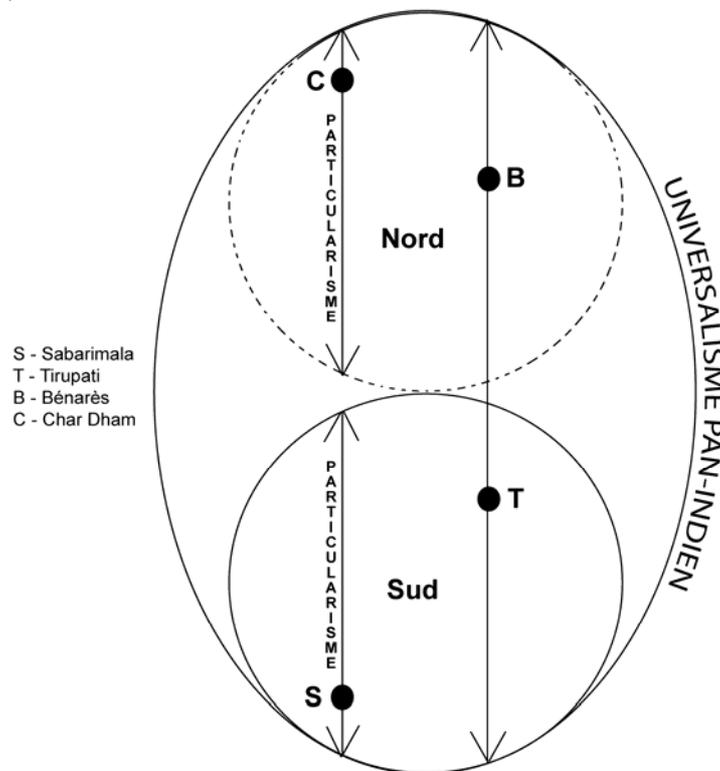


figure 1: The traditional division (south-north) of Indian map reactivated by the pilgrimage to Sabarimala

When “geographical identity” is redefined by social representations on pilgrimage

It seems convincing that the Sabarimala pilgrimage phenomenon began in the 1950s within a wider ideological context of revolt against the tendency to control and dominate from North India, that is an attempt to enforce Hindi language standardization. Furthermore, though “Dravidian” political movements were prior to the 50s, the constant reference in popular literature to a so-called “Dravidian” ideology reinforces the identity parameter of a phenomenon, which is in nature more social and religious. Despite a lot of theories that have been developed to explain the boom of Sabarimla phenomenon in the last decades, I still believe that the universal nature of the message conveyed today by the different values of this pilgrimage (equality among all groups irrespective of caste feelings, of religious and geographical origins) leads to a renegotiation of the relation to social alterity and entails redefining identities and geographical consciousness.

In other terms, the geographical models outlined above yield a hypothesis of pilgrimage conceived as a social phenomenon, which participate in the cultural re-composing of regional identities. The coming examples at micro scale will shed new light on what I have stated.

Indeed, from a micro level point of view, the territorial expressions of the Sabarimala phenomenon can be seen right from the micro level, by a partitioning process of the space into specific places along with a notorious disruption of the village and domestic territoriality. The expansion of the territory shows, indeed, how the space multiplies itself in particular places. Such is the case for instance of the *Brahmacharya* period (at least 41 days of austerities before the trip to Sabarimala), during which we can examine the revamping of territorialities pertaining to the household and village.

Pilgrims’ gesture as geographical ritual

Besides such a statement based upon what an outsider may observe clearly, the pilgrimage could be also understood as a gradual transition through several frames of spatial consciousness. The various trajectories of pilgrim’s act or gesture could be thus studied from the point of view of the strong emotional charge contained in that geographical ritual in order to comprehend the nature of distance established by the individuals or groups *vis-à-vis* each experienced portion of the space. By taking into account the way the pilgrims approach and use the “cultural territory” they are entering into and temporarily integrating, a more sociological conception of the pilgrimage does not only help to understand how the bond that

exists amongst people is discussed and dealt with, but also how the different parameters of geographical identity are being rebuilt during this specific time. The tents that are temporarily set up give us a good example of such nodes, in which the pilgrims exchange amongst themselves their own experiences of the space, talk about daily events and recall the stories of the places through which they have passed. In another example, as the pilgrims usually go barefoot to the top of *Sabari* hill, they subconsciously re-experience their immediate environment. We should consider also the effects of such practices and experiences after returning home while re-integrating the conformity of global social order.

To summarize the general model adopted here for the study of pilgrimage, I am tracking back now to a comparison between Sabarimala (South Kerala) and Tirupati (southern Andhra Pradesh) by focussing on sociological differences in terms of investment instead of geographical distinction. The bond existing between the pilgrims and the place itself (*tirtha*) is as we have shown in the case of Sabarimala, much more geared towards experience. Whereas in the case of Tirupati, the bond tends to be material and financial (loans and gifts to banks *in situ* and Tirupati Devasthanam Board) in the sense that the pilgrims are just dropped in front of the temple without experiencing the difficulties of the route.

The evolution of internal structures of Sabarimala pilgrimage

The theoretical background of our geographical approach has been partly drawn up. What can we say now about internal structures of Sabarimala pilgrimage? The (micro)-territory of Sabarimala is located at the intersection of four districts of Kerala and settled at the confluence of many spaces. To understand the nature of such a set of territories, which Sabarimala consists of, not only must we take into consideration the village-temples of Pampa (an ephemeral village situated just at the foot of Sabari hill) and of Sabarimala itself (Pathanamthitta district). The locality of Erumely (Kottayam district), located at some 42-85 km far from there (respectively traditional forest route and concrete road built in 1963), must also be considered. Whereas Erumely village represents a major point in the network of ritual places connected to *Sabarimala Yatra*, through which most of the pilgrims must pass through, it appears that some processional groups alongside with localities such as Pandalam (Royal family, Pathanamthitta district), Ambalappuzha (Alappuzha district) and Alangad (Thrissur district), transcend the supposed borders of that “cultural territory” (figure 2). In it, we can observe at first glance during the peak season (from mid November to the end of January)

interesting spatial variations at micro and regional scale, inviting us to elaborate different models of both festive and pilgrimage territoriality, which are discontinued in time and space.

Let's focus specifically on the case of the processional groups coming from the outside of Sabarimala territory¹. All of them, that of the Royal Family of Pandalam and these of the villages of Ambalapuzha and Alangad, participate in the shaping of the pilgrimage by converging to Sabarimala at the peak of the season in mid January. Out of them, the two groups of Ambalapuzha and Alangad have a mixed historical and mythological legitimacy in leading ritual processions because of the intimate links they had in the past with the locally or sub-regionally based Kingdoms and Royal families such as the ones of Chembakaseri and Pandalam in South Kerala.

This Royal family had until the independence the ownership of the Sabarimala temple (private right) and authority in managing all the rituals conducted there. Since they have been dispossessed from all their rights following the proclamation of the *Hindu Religious Institution Act* in 1950, the shift of authority to the *Travancore Devaswom Board* (public right) is partly redefining the religious system in terms of ritual practices. Alongside these developments, we can observe an ongoing process of de-territorialization, which affects partly the geographical foundations of the pilgrimage, through the implementation of new rituals whilst reinventing temple connections with Sabarimala and constructing new itineraries for pilgrims.

The contemporary developments of religious landscape in Kerala regarding administrative management of cults and temples have been reflected here by the tension created by conflictual territorial ideologies between the actual temple authority (and its more

¹ *Sabarimala Kshetram*: I will tell now about an anecdote which happened twenty years ago in the vicinity of Sabarimala temple in order to define what is called *Sabarimala kshetram* (derived from sanskrit word, *kshetra*) in keralian religious landscape conception. A granite cross had been discovered by some christians not far from Sabarimala temple. Immediately after, these christians claimed that the cross is as old as Saint-Thomas himself (the one who spread christianity in Kerala by the beginning of the previous millenium) and that they consequently planned to build a church to honor it. Alongside this, a opposition group lead by the VHP and followed by some 15 hindu organizations was built up (Nilackal Action Council) arguing that the granite cross was part of the *Poonkavanam* (literaly, "the garden of Ayyappa") delimited by 18 mythical hills. Even if only some of these hills are of real nature and locatable in the forest landscape, needless to say that this *Poonkavanam* is a symbolic territory or the geographical sphere of influence of Ayyappa people of Kerala may refer to as *Sabarimala Kshetram*. Despite the setting up of a strong *Nilackal Church Action Council*, a piece of land has been attributed to them 15 km away from this inner sanctuary in order to solve the territorial dispute between Christian and Hindu factions. Quoting here Vaidyanathan from his famous and popular book on Sabarimala pilgrimage (1978), this territorially-based conflict can be seen as prefiguring the Ayodhya dispute with the difference that it has been solved peacefully, reinforcing and preserving thus the communal harmony prevailing in the case of Sabarimala pilgrimage from external treats.

commercially oriented logics) and the religiously informed logics of space of the Royal family of Pandalam.

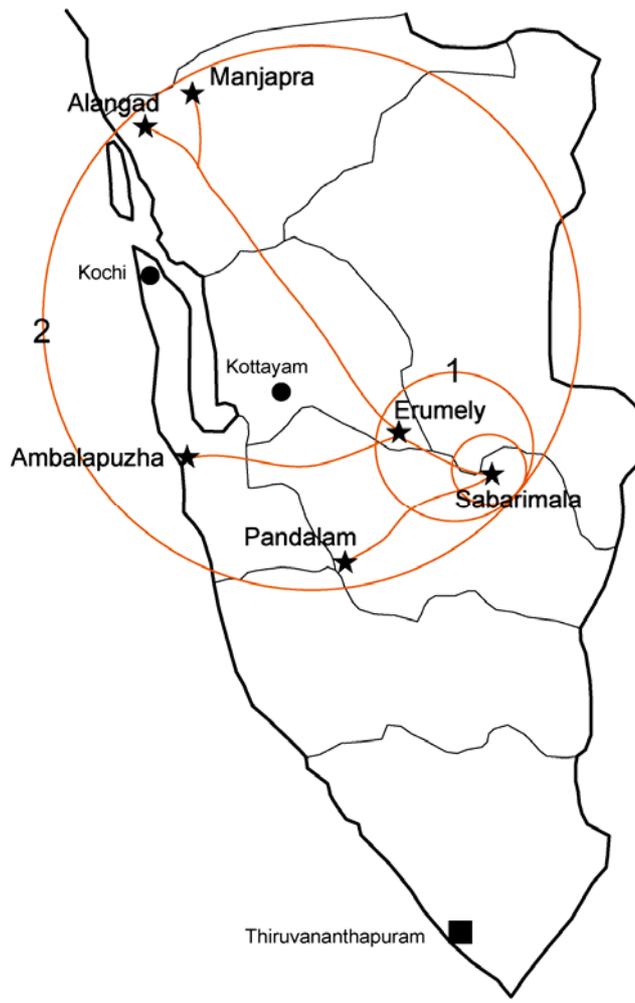


figure 2: A sketch showing the main places connected with Sabarimala pilgrimage in Kerala

Study of territorially based conflicts within the pilgrimage context of Sabarimala

A tentative essay of analysis of conflictual situations may reflect now the instability of constantly changing internal structures of the pilgrimage. The micro-level conflicts we are going to pinpoint is, in first analysis based on feelings of rivalry between persons or group leaders, but we will show that they are in final examination based upon differences of place

and territorial legitimacies. What are of great relevance to us here are the arguments used in the speech of pilgrims and protagonists involved in these territorially based conflicts.

Firstly, I would have to recall some of the anthropological specificities of Sabarimala pilgrimage to get a better understanding of these quarrels. One of these features is the necessity to get integrated within a group only after being accepted by the leader named *Guruswamy*. This leader is the only person to have experience and knowledge of whatever is required to conduct this kind of religious journey: knowledge of rituals, of places and routes, stories and legends, *bhajans*... There is thus a culture of leadership and of social prestige which is typical of those undertaking this pilgrimage to Sabarimala.

Getting back to our territorial disagreement, the case study of Alangad group is of great significance because of its recent split into two groups, Alangad and Manjapra (figure 3). The fact is the group named *Alangad Yogam* has been led for dozen of years by a senior person originated from the nearby village of Manjapra. Today, one dissident of *Alangad Yogam* originated from Alangad locality itself claims that the position of group leaders must be attributed on criteria of territorial belonging that is to say a man of experience and knowledge originating of Alangad village proper. To which the actual leader of *Alangad Yogam* responded that the hereditary right of his family to conduct such a procession has been stated by the King of Pandalam himself, recognized by government and approved by the *Travancore Devaswom Board*. Beyond the other criterias set forth as ultime arguments in front of the High Court of Kerala, such as possession of ritual instruments, the difference of opinion is in final analysis relying on geographical background of the participants. In my opinion, the central locus of the conflict lies in the two cultural categories of space put forward by each leader. The dissident group argues that the territorial unit which is at stake in both cases is the *kara* that is the sub-part of a given area or locality in Kerala; in opposition to this, the original group has a wider conception which does not include outsiders as in the case of the dissident group but which exclude people originating outside of such a set of territorial units. The hight Court of Kerala is still handling the case.

This brief case study can yield several types of informations. The contemporary changements regarding local system of social interactions (in terms of kinship, caste and lineages) have been most probably refashioning considerably categories of status and power amongst these ritual groups. The particular context of Sabarimala pilgrimage, wherein social differences are cleared up in the name of equality and universalism, reveal however internal

contradictions refracted here by distortions within social order, thus reinforcing tensions between historical territorialities exposed through this struggle for power.

Conclusions: Towards a social theory of pilgrimage formation in contemporary India

Reaching the conclusion of this presentation, and as I have told you at the beginning, I have focussed on specific issues and had to put aside quite a few but crucial questions, for instance the gendered uses of space and the restrictions of women to access the temple space, or the debate around Victor Turner's theory on Christian pilgrimage by using such categories of analysis as these of "communitas", "liminality" of space and "social drama".

Anyhow, taking into account that the cultural spaces studied here are under a huge stream of private interests, it would be worthwhile to analyse the role played by the *Ayyappa* movement in the composition of a large public sphere for debate, through the spread of social values through various channels of communication such as media, stereotyped literature and territorial iconography. The regional media in particular tend to emphasize in the contemporary Kerala all these social contradictions while focussing on mismanagement of pilgrimage by temple authority. At the same time, these media play a major role in spreading modern social values, which are one of the causes of uniformization of Hinduism in India today.

As final conclusive remarks, I would say on the one hand that the pilgrimage is of metasocial nature in the sense that it emphasizes and expresses symbolically social representations and fantasies. On the other hand, I would add that the territoriality based on categories of place and person, and the territorial formation, is of reflexive nature in such a way that they both condense social values whilst mediating collective representations of space and social relationships.

Reasoning in terms of meta-structures underlying such pilgrimage phenomenon and ritual processions which reflect collective representations of society in Kerala and beyond, the outlined disruptive territorialities studied here or in a wider perspective, the attention paid to disjunctions entertained between collective identity and the concept of territory and of territoriality, would have heuristic value for social sciences.

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