



Circulating Bodies, Transforming Souls: A Phenomenological Analysis of the Role of Movement in Pilgrimage Journeys

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Abstract

Religion serves as the cornerstone of our belief system, shaping our values, guiding our moral compass, and providing a framework for understanding the mysteries of our existence. It offers a sense of purpose in our life, community we live in, and connection to something greater than ourselves, influencing how we perceive the world and our place within it. Furthermore, Rituals are integral to every religion that we perform, serving as expressions of faith, devotion, and connection to the divine. Every religion encompasses specific rituals that followers are expected to perform and practice. Although specific forms and purposes vary in every religion, many rituals share common themes across religions, such as prayer, fasting, sacrifices, offerings, and pilgrimage. Every ritual is essential to carry out, and carries symbolic significance to our beliefs. Some of the common rituals of every religion are Prayer, fasting, offerings and going on Pilgrimage. These rituals not only reinforce religious beliefs but also foster a sense of community and spiritual transformation among practitioners. This paper aims to study, explore, and uncover the significance of movement within the pilgrimage process, which begins with stepping out of one's comfort zone, leaving the familiarity of home, and embarking on a challenging path toward a sacred destination. The pilgrim had a profound experience of exploration and immersion in spirituality. This transformative process culminates in returning home, a step that has often been overlooked and remains largely unexplored in scholarly discussions. However, the act of returning is equally vital, as it provides an opportunity for introspection. It allows pilgrims to reflect on their personal growth, internalize the lessons learned during the journey, and integrate their transformed perspective into everyday life. This final step is crucial for sustaining spiritual and philosophical changes acquired through the pilgrimage experience.

Keywords: *Pilgrimage; Movement; transformation; Kumbh; Religion; Rituals; Collective Identity*

Introduction

Pilgrimage is a Universal Religious Phenomenon that represents a profound spiritual journey that transcends cultural, geographical, and religious boundaries, embodying a fundamental human experience of sacred movements and transformative rituals. Across diverse religious traditions—from Christianity and Islam to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism—the practice of pilgrimage emerges as a universal

anthropological phenomenon that symbolizes the spiritual quest, personal transformation, and collective religious identity.

In every religion, pilgrimage has profound spiritual significance, often requiring adherents to follow specific rituals to complete the process meaningfully. Among these rituals, the believers follow the rituals of prayers, fasting, sacrifices, and offerings and pilgrimage more importantly. We often have seen and practiced these rituals of our faith system to observe our Spirituality Prayer is practiced in various forms across religions, and prayer is a universal ritual. For instance, Muslims perform salah five times daily, while Christians often engage in individual or communal prayers. Fasting is another essential ritual observed in many faiths, as a means of spiritual purification and discipline. Muslims fast during Ramadan, Hindus fast on auspicious days like Ekadashi, and Christians fast during Lent.

Sacrifices and offerings are also a very significant part of rituals in every religion. Hindus perform puja, offering food and flowers to deities, while ancient Jewish practices include animal sacrifices at the temple. Muslims perform sadaqah, khairat, and zakat based on their wealth and earnings. Pilgrimage journeys and movements towards spiritual sites are crucial to discuss here, around which this study revolves. Many religions encourage pilgrimages of sacred sites. Muslims undertake Hajj to Mecca, Hindus go on pilgrimage to sites like Varanasi, Kumbh, Mathura, Rishikesh, and many other important sites, and Christians travel to sites like Jerusalem. Religious festivals are crucial and often involve rituals that commemorate sacred events. For instance, lighting the menorah during Hanukkah (festivals of light) is an 8 day celebration in the Religion of Judaism or performing aartis during the festival of Diwali in Hinduism, and there are many more rituals to bring from various religions with respect to their beliefs and ways of conduction to achieve this spirituality.

Though the act of circumlocation is very old and traditionally observed and performed in every school of faith, called circumlocution—ritualistic movement around a sacred object or site—stands out as a powerful symbol of devotion and unity. This act, practiced in various forms across different faiths, represents the cyclical nature of life and centrality of the divine in human existence. For instance, Muslims perform Tawaf by circling Kaaba during Hajj, while Hindus circumambulate temples or deities as a mark of reverence. Such movements are not merely physical acts but are deeply symbolic expressions of spiritual connection and humility.

The focus of this discussion extends beyond the circulation of sacred objects and delves into a more intricate pattern of movement: a journey that begins with departing from home, traversing through sacred spaces, and ultimately returning to the point of origin. This cyclical process allows individuals to internalize, reflect upon, and fully realize the spiritual transformations and changes experienced during their pilgrimage.

Over the past decade, significant research has been conducted on this essential ritual of pilgrimages, and numerous studies have explored its various dimensions. A deep study on the idea of movement in pilgrimages has been conducted by many researchers. The context is as follows.

Scholar Robert H. Stoddard Out and E. Morinis have performed considerable work on religious pilgrimages and mobility. They found that mobility is an inherent action tied to the process of pilgrimage. According to their studies, pilgrimages involve traveling, which symbolizes transformation. They focus on the fact that the pilgrimage is not just reaching the, but moving through space, an action much needed by the pilgrims for their deeper engagement and faith, which eventually leads to the transformation. However, their study did not discuss how the culmination of this journey is as crucial as the beginning of the movement in the pilgrimage journey. Culmination provides an opportunity for introspection, allowing pilgrims to reflect on personal growth and transformation and how to integrate in post-pilgrimage everyday life.

Another related study was done by N.Collins-Kreiner in 2010, about pilgrimage as population mobility and a process of continuity and transformation which emerges as one of the world's oldest social and cultural practices. He states in his findings that cyclic movements create a pattern that impacts both pilgrims and communities. His findings suggest that the concept of mobility is important for fostering social interaction and cultural integration.

An additional study in the near past in 2018 was conducted by a group of scholars from Jagiellonian University, Krakow, who talks about the process of movement in pilgrimage and looks at the idea of movement as a geographical change of the pilgrims' life and their influences on the surrounding area. This study highlights the interplay between sacred places and human mobility. Therefore, this research only helps to understand and develop a relationship between pilgrims and their impact on spatial surroundings.

Another important study provides an understanding of the idea of movement by Victor Turner and Edith Turner, who are given credit to introduce the concept of liminality in pilgrimage studies. Their studies described movement as a transitional phase in which pilgrims leave their ordinary lives behind to enter a sacred journey of pilgrimage, symbolizing a shift in the social or spiritual status of their existence.

After reviewing extensive research on pilgrimages, it is evident that movement plays a central role in the transformative experience of pilgrims. Studies highlight how the act of traveling—whether walking, engaging with nature, or participating in rituals—facilitates spiritual growth, self-reflection, and identity reorientation. Pilgrimage is often described as a journey of transformation in which physical mobility is intertwined with mental and spiritual changes. These studies emphasize the therapeutic effects of walking, the communal bonds formed during travel, and the shifts in values and priorities that many pilgrims experience upon reaching sacred destinations.

However, two critical aspects remain largely underexplored, which this paper aims to address: the concept of movement in Indian pilgrimages, and embracing the Spiritual transformation at the culmination of this journey at the final stage—returning home.

Research Gap

A critical gap remains in this body of research: while much attention is given to the journey itself and the immediate post-pilgrimage transformations, there is little exploration of how returning home impacts long-term introspection and integration of these changes into daily life.

The process of re-entering one's regular environment and reflecting on how the pilgrimage reshapes one's worldview, relationships, or habits is underexplored. This final step of movement—returning home and reconciling the "pilgrim self" with the "everyday self"—is crucial for understanding how transformative experiences are sustained or fade over time. This study addresses this gap by examining how individuals navigate this reintegration phase and its role in solidifying or evolving the transformative impacts of their pilgrimage journey.

This study aims to address the limited scholarly exploration of pilgrimage circulation, with a specific focus on Kumbh Mela as a quintessential example of a ritualistic movement and spiritual transformation. The research field Kumbh Mela, in Prayagraj Uttar Pradesh, offers a compelling research field to study the importance of movement in the pilgrimage process in India for many crucial reasons.

The Kumbh Mela is one of the largest gatherings in the world where millions of pilgrims travel every year from different parts of India and abroad to take holy dip in Sangam. Devotees cover this movement through diverse modes of travel, including the foot. Training and other means that clearly reflect the spiritual commitment of the pilgrims, who journey hundreds or even thousands of kilometers to

experience this transformative experience of this crucial phenomenon of movement by the pilgrims, provides an insight into how this physical movement fosters spiritual and collective identity.

Second, the Kumbh Mela is deeply rooted in symbolic acts of movement, led by many processions such as ritualistic bathing at the Sangam (Triveni), where the confluence of rivers is believed to cleanse sins and grant liberation. These acts embody the essence of pilgrimage as a journey towards spiritual transformation. This return journey is a vital phase for any pilgrim, as it allows them to reflect on their transformative experience, internalize its spiritual impact, and prepare their mind to revisit the pilgrimage destination in the future to relive and deepen their spiritual connection.

Methods and Materials

This study aims to investigate how each step of the pilgrimage journey brings spiritual transformation to the pilgrims visiting Kumbh Mela and uncovering the impacts of this transformation on their lives further they return back. It also prepares them mentally to revisit the future to rejuvenate and find solace again. Surprisingly, no research has addressed this issue in the extensive literature on pilgrimages. The work presented in this paper fills this research gap.

The main empirical basis of the study is a survey of respondents who made the Kumbh Mela Pilgrimage 2025. The study used a qualitative survey method, and the tool was an interview questionnaire consisting of a number of open-ended and closed-ended questions. Respondents could choose to provide explanatory answers to the given questionnaire. The respondents selected for the questionnaire were staying in Kumbh Mela as Kalpwasi and had stayed in Kumbh Mela as Kalpwasi. The period of study was of about 22 days (including all the three major bathing days) beginning, from 14th of January as the first Shahi Snan, the second Shahi Snan was on 29th January and the third Shahi Snan was on 3rd February 2025. In-depth interviews are considered one of the most important and widely used tools in qualitative research. The focus during the interview was on the respondents in detail, ensuring that the responses were not distorted by any personal perspective.

Profile of the Respondents/Participant

The study involved approximately 200 male and female participants who were engaged in Kalpwasi during Kumbh Mela. These respondents represented a diverse mix of backgrounds and hailed from various locations, including nearby and neighboring districts such as Mirzapur, Varanasi, Prayagraj, Jhansi, Meerut, Kanpur, Fatehpur, Lucknow, and Rajasthan. Additionally, a significant number of participants traveled from states farther away, including Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and Jharkhand. This wide geographical representation underscores the immense appeal of Kumbh Mela as a unifying spiritual event that draws people from across India to partake in its profound religious and cultural significance.

The participants who participated in the questionnaire represented a diverse mix in terms of both gender and age. A significant majority, accounting for 75% of the respondents, were aged > 50 years. The remaining 25% of the participants were younger, falling within the age bracket of 45 years or below. This distribution highlights a predominantly older demographic among respondents, with a smaller proportion representing younger age groups.

Results

During Kumbh Mela, pilgrims participate in two distinct ways to seek spiritual fulfillment. On the one hand, many devotees visit only specific auspicious days for Shahi Snan (Royal Bath). This sacred

ritual involves taking a holy dip in the Ganga, particularly at the Triveni Sangam, where the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati Rivers converge. Shahi Snan is believed to have cleaned sins, liberated ancestors, and brought about spiritual purification. These pilgrims often returned home after performing this ritual.

However, some pilgrims stay for an entire month to undertake Kalpavas, a period of intense spiritual discipline. These individuals live in temporary shelters near riverbanks and dedicate themselves to daily rituals, fasting, meditation, and listening to religious discourse. The pilgrims who stay for an extended period of one month, known as Kalpavasis, dedicated themselves to living an austere life for the entire month of Magh. This period, called "Kalpavas," involved residing in temporary tents near the festival site, abstaining from worldly pleasures, and engaging in intense spiritual practices. They follow strict routines, which include Daily Rituals such as bathing in sacred rivers at dawn, believed to cleanse sins and aid in attaining moksha (liberation from the cycle of rebirths), fasting and living with simplicity during their stay. Many Kalpavases eat only one meal per day or practice full fasting (vrata).

Kalpavasis tries to engage in religious discourses (pravachan), devotional singing (kirtan), and participating in community prayers and debates on Hindu doctrines (shastrartha). Some pilgrims are also observed doing Charity and Service by participating in or benefiting from anna-dana (food charity), where meals are provided to monks and the poor.

It has been stated that the significance of Kalpavas is deeply rooted in Hindu tradition, symbolizing self-purification, penance, and devotion. It reflects a commitment to spiritual growth, detachment from materialism, and alignment with cosmic energies during this auspicious time. Kalpavasis immerse themselves fully in this spiritual practice to attain deeper religious experiences and self-purification. Both practices highlight the transformative powers of faith and devotion during this grand festival.

The respondents who participated in the study were Kalpavasis only. When respondents were asked about the frequency of their visits to Kumbh Mela or the number of times they had attended the event, the findings revealed a varied pattern of participation. Among them, 75% reported that this was their third time attending Kumbh Mela, showcasing their continued engagement with this significant religious gathering. Additionally, 45% of participants mentioned that this was their second visit, indicating a growing connection to the event. Interestingly, the remaining 80% were first-time attendees who experienced the grandeur and spiritual essence of Kumbh Mela for the very first time. These statistics reflect a blend of seasoned participants and newcomers, highlighting both the enduring appeal and a fresh interest in this sacred event.

When questioned about their reasons for attending the Kalpavas during Kumbh Mela, approximately 25% of the respondents expressed that their primary motivation stemmed from a desire to deepen their spiritual and religious awareness. This group highlighted the importance of spiritual growth and connections as the driving factors behind their participation. The remaining respondents, however, indicated that their visit was driven by a simpler purpose: to perform darshan (sacred viewing) and seek the blessings of Ganga Maya, the holy Mother Ganga, symbolizing purity and divinity. This distinction underscores the varied motivations among attendees, ranging from profound spiritual pursuits to devotion-centered acts of reverence.

Gautam Lal, a 58-year-old resident of Gaya, said, "It is the holy call of Mother Ganga to me—a spiritual calling. Everyone in my family has visited me many times, but my visit has always been postponed. This time, I firmly believed that I would definitely pay my visit to the Mother Ganga. No one can visit without her calling, and I was fortunate enough to be a part of this divine place."

A British Scholar Guy Hayward in his life time experience gathered during his personal experience of Mahakumbh (2025) states that:

The feeling of the procession was the most masculine force towards an objective I had ever experienced, and the penetrative release of all those people into the mother of the waters felt like. It is the world's largest metaphysical fertilization. Millions of individuals joined their way to reach the wound of Ganga in time.

All these performed processions by the people, pilgrims, devotees, sādhus, nagas, or the common believer create a celebratory atmosphere at Triveni Sangam. The pilgrims immerse themselves completely in the performing rituals of bathing, an act that cleanses their sins and purifies them as the water turns on this auspicious day of snan or bathing into Amrit or nectar.

When asked about their aspirations and experiences during their stay in Kalpwas in Kumbh Mela, the responses revealed profound spiritual motivations among the pilgrims. Approximately 60% of the participants expressed their desire to immerse themselves in this grand religious ceremony, seeking inner fulfillment by renouncing worldly desires and attractions. It seems that the pilgrims want to become deeply immersed in living all the rituals of the period and want to embark on a new journey from within. A 65 year old Resident of Kanpur Raja Ram Sonkar and his wife Aarti Devi have been participating in kumbh for the last six years, and the couples eagerly wait for this auspicious occasion. Their main aim is to focus on spiritual liberation and detachment from the materialistic pursuits of society and worldly boundaries. Meanwhile, 30% of the respondents shared that their primary goal was to attain spiritual awakening and enlightenment, emphasizing their quest for a deeper understanding and connection with divine power. These pilgrims' responses clearly highlight the transformative nature of Kalpwas, in which pilgrims aim to transcend everyday life and embrace a higher spiritual experience.

In response to asking the respondents how did attending Kumbh Mela influence your thoughts and perceptions about life and spiritual practices after returning home?

Before I discuss the opinions and responses of the pilgrims interviewed for this study, I would like to present the findings of a survey conducted on Kalpwas by academics and researchers from nine universities in India and the UK. A survey carried out at around 400 Kalpavasis stayed during Kumbh in 2010 and 2011, and the results drawn from this study focused mainly on the increase in people's mental and physical well-being as compared to those who did not attend Kumbh.

The increase in mental and physical health among pilgrims participating in Kumbh Mela can be attributed to several interconnected factors that facilitate their observation and understanding. First, the spiritual and communal atmosphere of events in the Mela area plays a significant role in enhancing the mental well-being of pilgrims. Pilgrims engage in rituals such as bathing in holy rivers (snans), which are believed to cleanse sins and purify the soul, fostering a sense of spiritual fulfillment and emotional relief. This collective faith of devotees creates a powerful psychological impact on them, reducing stress and promoting resilience physically and mentally. Additionally, one more factor is the simplified lifestyle during Mela that devotees follow, often including minimalistic living conditions and a disciplined routine, contributing to physical health improvement. Despite eating just one meal a day, participants exhibited better overall health due to reduced exposure to urban stressors and increased physical activity, such as walking long distances, socializing with fellow pilgrims, and reflecting on the complete process.

Social interactions during the Kalpwas also played a vital role in the mental health enhancement of pilgrims. They experience a sense of belonging and solidarity within the massive gathering, alleviating feelings of loneliness and strengthening social bonds. Interestingly, even traditionally stressful factors such as high noise levels in the Mela area, in the midst of the crowd, attendees perceive all of this with positive affirmations of their faith, further reducing stress-related complaints such as headaches and body aches. Moreover, the healthcare infrastructure established during Mela ensured timely medical attention for participants, effectively addressing potential health risks. These combined factors—spiritual practices, communal support, simplified living, and accessible healthcare—create an environment that holistically

nurtures both mental and physical well-being for those attending Kumbh Mela compared to those who do not participate.

The most significant question posed to the Kalpwasis (respondents) was what compels them to return to Kumbh Mela, undertaking the arduous journey again despite the discomfort and challenges involved. If a single pilgrimage is sufficient to provide spiritual enlightenment and satisfaction, what motivates them to repeat this cycle of devotion and austerity year after year?

The question was quite profound, aiming to grasp the desired outcome of the pilgrimage journey for the pilgrims. The term "pilgrimage" implies a deeply religious and divine journey undertaken by pilgrims to a destination, where they seek transformation through the spiritual essence of the shrine or temple. This contrasts sharply with a tourist who seeks pleasure from the place and views it within a limited timeframe. The movement of pilgrims is fundamentally different from that of tourists, with entirely distinct goals. Many respondents, who were attending Kalpwas for another time, replied that their motivation was primarily a spiritual calling.

Ghanshyam Kunwar, 56, Meerut came for the third time with his wife Shanti Devi 50 and son Manoj 38. He said that "I felt an intense spiritual calling to revisit the Kumbh for Kalpwas. The experience of my previous visit had left an indelible mark on my soul, and I felt compelled to return and deepen my spiritual practice."

Another couple respondents Shiv Kumar Ojha (47) and Renu Ojha (40) from Meja (Interior area of Allahabad districts) were observing Kalpwas for the consecutive third year Seeking Healing and Renewal primarily "The Kumbh's sacred waters and spiritual energy have healing properties that I believe can help us overcome physical and emotional challenges. Revisiting the Kumbh for Kalpwas is an opportunity for me to seek healing, renewal, and rejuvenation."

Manoj Kumar Gaud, 45, from Karchana (Prayagraj), says, "I eagerly await the Kumbh Mela to be part of this spiritual saga and wish this journey would never come to an end. I was very excited to come again to Kumbh 2025." He expresses his emotions passionately: "This is an amazing journey that begins with leaving our home and comfort to reach here, overcoming all odds. Even after the Mela concludes, I don't want to go back because the new identity I gain after a month of spiritual life transforms me into a new person. I realize its significance even more after returning home and eagerly await the next Kumbh."

This cyclical journey—the movement from their everyday domestic environment to the sacred site and their subsequent return is not merely a physical act of travel but a crucial framework for a profound process of personal transformation. It provides a distinct temporal and spatial context that facilitates several key elements of this transformative process like Reflection on Experiences gained by Staying, participating and immersing completely in Kumbh. The stay in Kalpwas is crucial to deviate the devotees from the distractions of daily life and contemplate the significance of their interactions, observations, and emotional responses during the pilgrimage.

Conclusion

Pilgrimage journeys involve both physical movement and spiritual transformation, as pilgrims embark on sacred travels that engage their bodies and souls. The act of moving through space towards a meaningful destination creates opportunities for profound inner change and connection to the sacred. The legend of Samudra Manthan profoundly shapes the rituals and spiritual essence of the Kumbh Mela. This myth recounts the cosmic churning of the ocean by the Devas (gods) and Asuras (demons) to obtain Amrit, the elixir of immortality. The process involved immense effort, symbolizing the hardships and sacrifices required to achieve divine rewards. Drops of Amrit fell at four sacred locations—Haridwar, Prayagraj, Ujjain, and Nashik—infusing these places with spiritual significance.

The culmination of a pilgrimage journey is as significant as the journey itself, serving as a transformative phase where the pilgrim resumes daily life with a renewed spiritual perspective. Pilgrimage is not merely about reaching a sacred destination; it is a profound movement that involves physical effort, emotional endurance, and spiritual reflection. This movement symbolizes the hardships and sacrifices required to attain divine connection, emphasizing renunciation of worldly pleasures and immersion in the vision of the divine.

Upon returning home, pilgrims often reflect on their experiences, integrating the spiritual essence they encountered into their everyday lives. This phase marks a critical transformation where the lessons learned during the pilgrimage—humility, devotion, and a sense of unity with the divine—begin to influence their actions and thoughts. Unlike tourists who seek temporary pleasure, pilgrims aim for lasting spiritual enrichment, carrying forward the wisdom and serenity gained during their journey.

The movement inherent in pilgrimage underscores its importance as a dynamic process of transformation. It is through this movement—both physical and spiritual—that pilgrims achieve a deeper connection with their faith, enabling them to envision life through a lens of divinity and spirituality. The culmination of this journey is not an end but a beginning, as pilgrims return to their routines with a heightened sense of purpose and an enduring commitment to spiritual growth.

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