Outward Bound with Ayyappan: Work, Masculinity, and Self-Respect in a South Indian Pilgrimage Festival

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Abstract

The annual pilgrimage festival dedicated to the god Ayyappan has become immensely popular in the past sixty years. As many as fifty million pilgrims participate each year. This paper draws on interviews of pilgrims conducted in South India in 2012–2013. My fieldwork suggests that the increasing popularity of the event relates to the contemporary South Indian work environment, an environment in which traditional gender roles are being reshaped by the challenges posed by migration for work opportunities. Interviews of English-speaking pilgrims show that their interpretations of the pilgrimage festival highlight the complexities of manhood in a time of rapidly changing work roles for men and women. Specifically, my fieldwork demonstrates that pilgrims perceive Ayyappan as a source of aid for those who struggle to succeed as financial providers and heads of the family unit. Pilgrims anxious about the loss of traditional models of masculinity amidst rapid change find solace in the blessings the god Ayyappan yields.

Keywords

masculinity; gender identity; asceticism; pilgrimage; migrant labor; globalization.

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The Pilgrimage Festival

The Śabarimala pilgrimage festival dedicated to the Hindu god Ayyappan offers a rich case study that sheds light on the question of how religious

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festivals and holidays figure into the work lives of contemporary South Indians. In this annual event, changing concepts of what it means to work, to provide for others, and to be a man are acknowledged in a religious context of homosocial bonding with other men. The participants in the event are mainly men, although girls who are not yet menstruating and women who have ceased to menstruate can also participate in the pilgrimage Figure 1. Millions of men travel from locations all over South India each year. The pilgrimage has historically been a South Indian one. In recent decades, Indian men from northern states have begun to come south to participate. The annual event now also attracts some men of Indian descent living outside India. Travel from homes in North America and Europe is often organized by pilgrim-friendly tour companies. The pilgrimage to Ayyappan's mountain temple in Kerala has become extremely popular in the past sixty years. Between ten and fifty million pilgrims (Dalrymple 2010) participate each year in a pilgrimage that lasts up to two months, is physically difficult, and entails a veritable boot-camp of privations and abstentions. Writing about the pilgrimage festival over fifteen years ago, Paul Younger suggests that the Śabarimala pilgrimage festival is one of the largest anywhere in the world (Younger 2002: 23). The pilgrimage continues to be extremely popular, with one pilgrimage website listing it as

Figure 1: Photograph of a girl in the company of male pilgrims; photographed in Erumeli, © 2012 Mary Strubbe.

having the highest numbers of participants of any pilgrimage on which data has been collected.¹

Given that going to Ayyappan's temple entails a great deal of self-discipline, discomfort, and pain, what draws such large numbers of men to participate? One of the main appeals of the contemporary pilgrimage festival, I suggest, is the chance to prove one's manhood in the company of other South Indian men who come from different walks of life but nonetheless grapple with what it means to be a man in today's rapidly changing social landscape in South India. Men bond with other men, men of other religious communities and castes with whom they may not ordinarily associate in their home town, in an experience of collective suffering that is voluntarily undertaken in homage to a god who overcame obstacles in the wilderness to prove his manhood. The pilgrimage festival attracts pilgrims not only from a variety of Hindu sects but also Muslims and Christians as well. The intracommunal and intercommunal mixing offer participants a field of struggle for manly self-discipline with a safety net of male support for one's individual struggles. Pilgrims forego meat, sex, tobacco, alcohol, soft beds, shoes, and other creature comforts to reenact the masculine feats of the youthful god Ayyappan, tested in the mountainous wilderness of Kerala. On the pilgrimage, men not only mix with other men, but they do so in an environment of mutual struggle, privation, and sacrifice – the stuff of religious initiation and renewal. Added to this classic formula of renewal through collective suffering is the specific context of South India's economic transformation. Pilgrims bond together over the complexities of what it means to be a man in today's South India while sweating together and providing moral support for the difficulties of the road. This paper asks the question of how the pilgrimage festival speaks to men in a time of economic transformation. What benefits does the trek to visit Ayyappan's temple bring to the men who undertake the level of sacrifice required to visit? In my fieldwork, I found that in the process of bonding with other men, pilgrims often exploit opportunities to network, to pool information, and to form business alliances. Pilgrims whom I interviewed described the outcomes of the festival in terms of enhanced professional success and a more stable sense of themselves as men who can provide for others. They mentioned examples of pilgrims being blessed by the god with job offers, promotions, salary increases, and other measures of economic success. Thus I find that the Śabarimala pilgrimage festival offers insights into the meanings of manhood amidst the social dislocations of contemporary South India.

The Social Context

Male and female gender roles are undergoing considerable transformation in today's South India. South India supplies a number of countries in the Middle East, Europe, and North America with nurses, child-care workers, and other forms of skilled labor in which women have traditionally specialized (Gamburd 2000; Hewamanne 2008). Women are working outside the home in unprecedented numbers, earning money in workplaces that take them outside the

¹ <https://greenpilgrimage.net/resources/pilgrim-numbers/> accessed 5-9-16.

home for many hours a day. In the case of women who serve as guest workers abroad, women are away from home for months or even years at a time. South Indian men have also been increasingly engaged in guest work abroad in recent decades. The state of Kerala, where this pilgrimage festival is centered, is physically close to the Middle East; migration to Persian Gulf countries in particular has profoundly marked the state's economy and society in the last forty years (Osella and Osella 2006: 77). As Kerala has transformed, so has much of South India. New work opportunities on Indian soil and guest work jobs abroad have radically changed the social landscape in South India. Expectations about who generates income and who cares for children and the elderly are not what they were in the previous generation. My research suggests that the Śabarimala pilgrimage festival gives men of this region resources needed to deal with uncertainties in the performance of traditional masculine social roles, especially social roles associated with vocation and financial success, in a time when what it means to be a man who provides for a family has been greatly altered by new economic opportunities that put in question traditional scripts for gendered role performance.

I have titled my paper 'Outward Bound with Ayyappan' to suggest an analogy with the Outward Bound organization, a provider of outdoor wilderness programs geared toward leadership training. What an Outward Bound program offers is the chance to be away from home for an adventure that teaches teamwork, discipline, and personal growth. It is an adventure that tests one's limits and transforms one's sense of oneself. A person who does such an adventure can then take the experience back home in the form of new skills and a new sense of self. Just as in the classic pilgrimage formula as described by Victor Turner (Turner 1969, 1973), one leaves home as a pilgrim to return as a new person with a new status, so the graduate of an outdoor wilderness program is, at least in theory, a new being. Undergoing ordeals and exploring one's limits of suffering with others changes a person.

Prior scholarship on the Śabarimala pilgrimage festival by E. Valentine Daniel (Daniel 1984) and Paul Younger (Younger 2002) give us much insight into how the annual event developed and why it has continued through the centuries. Both Daniel and Younger underscore the importance of homosocial bonding and status transformation in their analysis. However, both studies are somewhat dated, especially given the way that guest work abroad has transformed the economic landscape in South India in recent decades. Daniel published his study in 1984, before the information technology boom transformed South Indian cities like Bangalore into IT hubs and before large numbers of guest workers began leaving South Indian homes for countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The research reported in Paul Younger's article was conducted before the effects of the Information Technology boom and guest work on South Indian men and women had been analyzed in scholarly literature. Even the masterful analyses done by Caroline and Filippo Osella (Osella and Osella 2003, 2006) are in need of an update based on current trends in South India's labor migration patterns. The Osellas completed the fieldwork for their 2006 study in 2002. My research, conducted in South India in 2012–2013, reflects some of the recent changes in the socio-economic landscape of South India. The acquisition of wealth through employment in the IT sector and guest work abroad has had uneven consequences for South India's families and for various

castes, communities, and social classes. Women working outside the home lead different lives than their grandmothers did, and they leave children at home for others to care for – for long periods of time, in the case of female guest workers, and for shorter periods of time for women working outside the home in the IT sector. In this new economic situation, men and women are negotiating what it means to be male and female, what it means to be a breadwinner and what it means to be a caregiver. Gender roles are being contested, revised, reasserted, and in other ways reworked as families adjust to men and women pursuing job opportunities in the IT sector and abroad. With new masculinities and new femininities being forged in South India, the annual pilgrimage festival gives men an adventure that is also an initiation into ascetic modalities of masculine power. The youthful god Ayyappan offers male pilgrims a model of masculine self-control that reinforces traditional masculinity in an era characterized by the rapid transformation of traditional gender roles.

Research Setting

The deity's mountaintop temple is located on Śabari Mountain, southeast of Kochi in Kerala's Western Ghats. The Ayyappan shrine network is open during December and part of January, but the festival season has traditionally been from mid-November to mid-January. I observed this pilgrimage festival and conducted interviews of pilgrims in December 2012 and January 2013. As someone who has not completed menopause, it would have been problematic for me to undertake the visit to Śabari Mountain as a pilgrim. However, I immersed myself in the ethos of the pilgrimage festival. Although I did not participate in the pilgrimage myself, I did observe festivities that are celebrated along the way. I visited a number of towns in Kerala and Karnataka from which pilgrims left for Śabari Mountain and through which pilgrims from other states passed on their way to the holy site. I conducted interviews in English with five adult, English-speaking men who were participants in the pilgrimage festival that season. The interviews were conducted in the hill-town of Erumeli, a small town in Kerala, which is the site of a Muslim shrine that plays an important role in the liturgy of the festival. Two men interviewed were Muslim; they were residents of Erumeli but had lived abroad as guest workers for a time. Two of the men were Hindu; they were residents of the city of Chennai (Tamil Nadu state). One man was Christian; he was born in the state of Kerala but had been living in Bangalore (Karnataka state) for over a decade. My sample of interviewees, although small, included practitioners of three religions and representation from a variety of regions of South India, including the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka. I was particularly pleased that I could include among my interviewees those who had done guest work abroad and thus could contribute their thoughts on the changing economic landscape of South India. I was also very pleased to find that none of the pilgrims were put off by requests to be interviewed by a female. I tried to follow South India conventions for interaction with men and found that the response I received was a positive one. In addition to formal interviews, I toured temples and historical sites in Kerala and Karnataka that are popular with pilgrims on the festival circuit. In the course of my fieldwork, I met pilgrims from all over South India as well as the northern

states of Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. I also met a number of pilgrims who had come on the pilgrimage from Toronto, Canada. Their concerns were not, of course, identical to the concerns of Indian pilgrims, but it was useful to have access to those pilgrims who bring a transnational dimension to the pilgrimage festival.

Devotion to Ayyappan as expressed in the annual pilgrimage event entails imitation of the deity's austerities (Vaidyanathan 1978: 49–68). Beginning with an arduous pre-pilgrimage preparatory period, pilgrims unite with the god through their austerities and their ritual actions. The devotees undergo a preparatory period in which they give up meat, sex, tobacco, alcohol, soft beds, and other creature comforts for a period of forty-one days in honor of Ayyappan. This period begins at the moment when the pilgrim receives a *mala* or sacred necklace at the hands of a guru Figure 2. The individual who serves as a pilgrim's guru is not necessarily a priest or a learned man, but simply a man who has gone on the pilgrimage a significant number of times. As Paul Younger suggests in his discussion of the Ayyappan pilgrimage, this religious festival resembles other South Indian religious events in being relatively independent of priestly guidance. Its liturgies and narratives are transmitted informally, from one generation of pilgrims to the next, with very little reliance on priests and other official ritual specialists. The day that the pilgrim takes the mala, a special form of dress becomes the daily garb from until the end of the forty-one day period. The pilgrims wear special black, blue, or ochre colored garments, and the men grow their beards out and do not cut their hair Figure 3. In altering their appearance

Figure 2: Guru consecrating ritual items for pilgrims, photographed at an Ayyappan temple in Mysore on January 2, 2013.

Figure 3: Pilgrim visiting the Chamundi temple in Mysore; January 2, 2013.

in these ways, pilgrims take on a uniform appearance and set aside those things that give an individual a separate identity. Additional bathing is required; *bhajans* or devotional songs are sung in the evenings, and the person preparing to visit Ayyappan is to eschew ordinary pastimes and spend time in more exalted activities in the company of others who have taken similar vows. Cinemas and parties pose a problem for one who wishes to keep his mind away from sex and other pleasures. Whatever threatens abstinence is to be avoided; it is the renunciation of sex in particular that aligns the devotees with the celibate god. Once the pilgrimage begins, one faces an arduous trek that is traditionally done without shoes, in a jungle area where tigers and other predators were once common. In setting out on the journey up the mountain, purity ensures safety. During the rigorous climb up to Ayyappan's mountaintop abode, any violations of one's vows during the preparatory period are said to yield deadly consequences, such as being attacked by a tiger or drowning in a river.

Historical and Mythological Background

Younger (2002: 20–21) suggests that the roots of the pilgrimage festival are ancient, probably going back several centuries before the Common Era as an ancient initiatory ordeal in which a young man proved his valor by ascending a steep, heavily forested mountain known to be the haunt of dangerous beasts. To this early core, Buddhism may have added ascetic practices as empowerment techniques. Buddhism was influential in Kerala and other parts of South India in

the early centuries of the Common Era (Sewell 1932), and there are some indications that verbal formulas used by pilgrims today may have been influenced by this religion (Schalk et al. 2002). In the medieval period, Ayyappan takes on the role of a military hero providing protection for merchants. In order to defeat outlaws, Ayyappan received help from several men who are also now recipients of offerings on Śabari Mountain. One who is worthy of note is a Muslim named Vavar. Vavar is variously described as a Muslim teacher who migrated from the Middle East to India to spread the religion and as a pirate who looted and plundered along the Kerala coastline. In any case, he was won over by Ayyappan and became a key leader in Ayyappan's army.

In the late medieval period (from the 7th to the 12th centuries) supplements to the core story gave Ayyappan a Hindu pedigree in keeping with the needs of devotees, the majority of who now worshipped Hindu deities. Ayyappan is identified as the son of Śiva and Viṣṇu in Sanskrit narratives. According to the *Bhūtanāthopākhyānam*, a key Sanskrit source on Ayyappan, after the buffalo-demon Mahiṣāsura died at the hands of the goddess, his sister Mahiṣī vowed to avenge her brother's death.² So she undertook intense austerities and won a boon from Brahma that she could be killed only by the offspring of two men. Feeling invincible, Mahiṣī ran amuck. Threatened with defeat at the hands of this powerful buffalo-demoness, the gods convinced Viṣṇu and Śiva to become lovers. Viṣṇu took the form of Mohinī, the Enchantress, made love with Śiva and conceived his child. Viṣṇu gave birth to the infant and left him on the banks of the river Pampa in Kerala. The divine boy was discovered and adopted by a childless king who raised the boy as his own. In due time, the king determined that the child should succeed him as king. But the queen, who in the meantime had given birth to her own son, had plans of her own. She conspired with the court physician to get the young Ayyappan out of the way. She claimed to suffer from an illness that only tiger's milk could cure. The young prince Ayyappan, although only twelve years old, volunteered to obtain the milk and set off for the forest. There he defeated Mahiṣī, and from her dead body emerged a young woman who thanked him for liberating her from a curse that had turned her into a buffalo demon. The young woman explained that she had been cursed by a husband: he wished to renounce the world as a celibate ascetic, but she wanted only to spend more time with him as husband and wife. She told Ayyappan that his reward for liberating her from her husband's curse was the right to marry her. Being committed to celibacy, Ayyappan declared that he could not take a mate, but he did tell the young woman that if first-time pilgrims should cease to come to Śabarimala, then he would marry her. From that time, the young woman has been known as Māṇikappuruttammā (literally, 'the mother who resides outside the mansion').

While in the forest, Ayyappan was shown his divine identity by the gods. The divine child then rode back to the palace on the back of a tigress followed by a pack of tiger cubs. Everyone who saw him realized immediately that he was no ordinary child, including the conspiratorial queen who fell to her knees and begged Ayyappan's forgiveness. Ayyappan instructed the king to build him a temple (shooting an arrow into the forest to indicate where it should be built) and returned to the abode of the deities.

² On the *Bhūtanāthopākhyānam*, see Vaidyanathan (1978) and Thomas (1973).

Pilgrims act out these narratives, merging with Ayyappan through their austerities and their ritual actions. Pilgrims embody the god, live out the story, and continue it into the present. An indication of the identification between deity and devotee comes at the beginning of the pilgrim's period of preparation. After an initial ceremony in which the pilgrim is invested with the sacred mala, given by the guru, the male pilgrim is addressed as Ayyappan and the female pilgrim as Māṇikappuruttammā, the consort of the god. Male pilgrims (who far outnumber female pilgrims) wear paper crowns ornamented with tigers depicting the mythic moment when the young god rode back to the palace on the back of a tigress. The very act of pilgrimage continues the story in the present tense: new pilgrims are needed every year to prevent the boy-god from having to marry his consort. Māṇikappuruttammā waits for a time when no more pilgrims come for the first time to the mountain shrine. Each year, she is disappointed. There is an annual event in which Māṇikappuruttammā's icon is removed from her shrine – which is only 100 meters away from his – and taken out to check for the presence of wooden arrows deposited by first-time pilgrims (Thomas 1973: 46–47) Figure 4. This ritual reenactment in particular connects past and present, continuing the narrative into the present.

Figure 4: Wooden arrow purchased in Erumeli, December 30, 2012.

The Ritual Sequence

The festival season dictates the dates of the pilgrimage. The season lasts about two months, from mid-November to the second half of January. Before the advent of modern transportation, pilgrims would set off from home at the beginning of the season and make the long journey to Śabarimala on foot. Now, the pilgrims can make the majority of the journey in hired coaches and minibuses. The departure is marked with a formal ceremony in which the guru fills a pilgrim's bag with food for the journey and items to be offered to Ayyappan. The most important item is coconuts that have been emptied of their milk and are filled with ghee and plugged – these are reminiscent of coconuts that the boy-god carried into the forest on his trial. They will be offered to the god at his temple. At the end of the leave-taking ceremony, pilgrims show reverence to the feet of senior family members, take the special bags on their heads, and depart the scene walking backwards into the courtyard. Taking whatever vehicles they have selected for the journey, pilgrims travel to the town of Erumeli, which is reportedly where the tusk of Mahishī landed during her battle with Ayyappan. There is a Muslim shrine or *darghāh* dedicated to saint Vavar as well as a small Ayyappan temple (the Petta Sri Dharmasastha Temple). Pilgrims are to worship at both. In this town, the removal of social barriers is fostered by a high-spirited, fast-paced ceremony called the Petta Thullal in which the pilgrims strip down and colored powder is put on their bare chests and faces (Thomas 1973: 33–35) Figure 5. For this ceremony, pilgrims take on regalia appropriate for the jungle in which the young man proved his power and dominance in a wild and lonely setting. Pilgrims hold stalks of vegetation and wear paper

Figure 5: Pilgrim adorned with green powder at the Petta Thullal ceremony, photographed at the Petta Sri Dharmasastha Temple in Erumeli, December 30, 2012.

crowns bearing tiger images; they process rapidly around the shrine of Ayyappan at the Petta Sri Dharmasastha Temple Figure 6.

After Erumeli, one can either proceed on foot or take an access road built in 1960 that takes you right up the foot of mount Śabari. If traveling by foot, hilly terrain and forest provide challenges for pilgrims to deal with, but there are certain rituals along the way that provide some relief while giving the pilgrims ceremonial breaks in their upward movement. Once one reaches the Pampa river, the goal of the pilgrim's efforts is near. One bathes in the river (said to cleanse one of all sins and cure all diseases) before embarking on the last leg of the journey, an eight kilometer push uphill. Pilgrims climb the final ascent with a great deal of liturgical chanting as they climb. The guru of each pilgrim group leads his men in recitative chanting of praises to Ayyappan (Daniel 1984: 263–266). A kilometer away from the summit, first-time pilgrims stop at a large banyan tree and leave there the small wooden arrows that they have purchased at Erumeli. Upon reaching the summit, pilgrims crowd the area and the chanting becomes loud. Pilgrims make offerings to Vavar and other key disciples (Vaidyanathan 1978: 104ff.). Pilgrims enter the temple and take their ghee-filled coconuts to a special counter where the priests collect the ghee for anointing the image. Once in front of the image, pilgrims engage the sacred gaze of the icon and make offerings of cash and gold ornaments there. The offerings are made at

Figure 6: Pilgrim wearing a paper crown; Erumeli, © 2012 Mary Strubbe.

such volumes during this time that the temple administration has installed a conveyer belt to carry the offerings downstairs for sorting.

Huge crowds of pilgrims gather on the day that memorializes Ayyappan's birthday. One this day, a bright light reportedly appears on top of one of the hills near the temple and a bright star appears in the sky, indicating that Ayyappan is pleased with the proceedings. Later that evening, the image of Ayyappan is taken to visit the nearby shrine of Māṅkappuruttammā, whose image has also been adorned with ornaments. But when the procession reaches her shrine, it is forced to turn back without seeing her due to the fact that the goddess is said to have started her menstrual period (Osella and Osella 2003: 732). The temple is the site of activity for the next seven days, including an occasion in which Vavar and other minor deities process to Ayyappan's temple. At the end of the seven-day period, there is a mock blood-sacrifice capping the events of the week, and then the pilgrims disburse.

Gender Dynamics

Caroline and Filippo Osella (2003: 743–748) have argued that the exclusion of women is integral to the achievement of manhood both in the core Ayyappan narrative and in the experience of pilgrims. To their astute observations, I would add that where female figures are present in the mythology, these figurations of the feminine are ambivalent. Predatory females are domesticated by the austere male god whose self-control allows him to overcome feminine wiles. Once domesticated by the youthful god, the females of the mythic narratives serve as sources of power. Thus the queen who wished Ayyappan dead later regrets her actions and begs his pardon. Likewise Mahiṣī fights Ayyappan but later wishes to marry him; as Māṅkappuruttammā, the female counterpart of the god, she provides a source of *śakti* or feminine power at the pilgrimage site. In the same vein, the tigress that was to be the instrument of Ayyappan's death becomes a vehicle for him to ride. On the mythological plane, then, the situation of women is ambivalent: they are included as sources of empowerment (*śakti*) for Ayyappan, but they are not permitted the linkages with the deity that they desire.

On the human plane of participation in today's pilgrimage, males vastly outnumber females. Women of childbearing age are excluded due to the risk of ritual pollution posed by menstruation as well as the overall concern with celibacy and the desire to avoid the distractions that women might present (Osella and Osella 2003: 739). In addition, the exclusion of women is explained as something necessitated by the rigors of the jungle. Not only are women said to be less strong, but it is also suggested that lions and tigers are extremely sensitive to the smell of blood. Thus a menstruating woman would pose a risk to the entire party of pilgrims with whom she traveled. Since the construction of new roads makes the pilgrimage shorter and less arduous and the presence of wild animals is much less a problem these days, the argument about the rigors of the pilgrimage has less traction than in earlier times. Challenges to the temple's exclusion of menstruating women are now common, and temple authorities have been asked to allow all women of all ages to participate in the pilgrimage and to enter the temple. In 1996 the matter was 'put to the deity' in the form of an astrological investigation of Ayyappan's wishes (Osella and Osella 2006: 168).

It was found that the deity wished to continue the practice of excluding women of childbearing age. In November of 2015, reporters asked the newly appointed president of the Śabarimala temple's governing board if he would consider lifting the ban on women aged ten to fifty. His response was to suggest that if a machine capable of detecting the presence of menstrual blood was available, temple authorities would modify the age-based ban and replace it with a ban that would prohibit individual women having their periods: 'The day there will be a machine to detect if it's the "right time" for women to enter temples, that day they will be allowed . . .' (Pandey 2015). A student activist who goes by the alias Nikita Azad ('Azad' means 'free') responded to this statement by writing an open letter to temple authorities and creating a Facebook campaign calling on women to post images of themselves holding objects such as sanitary napkins and placards saying 'Happy To Bleed' to protest gender discrimination at temples like Śabarimala (Pandey 2015). Despite the insistence of temple authorities that women of childbearing age be excluded from the annual event, one nonetheless sees an occasional exception to the rule. Radhika Sekar (1999: 39) observed a woman in her thirties on the pilgrimage in 1986 and 1987; when she asked others about this, she was told that the woman had had a hysterectomy.

For the women who stay behind while men of their households participate in the pilgrimage festival, there can be additional labor and cost. The event can last up to two months. Men who participate contribute less to household tasks during their preparatory period. They spend their evenings singing *bhajans* or devotional songs, and they require a special diet and additional bathing provisions. So there is a real benefit for men in visiting Mount Śabari: men gain a sense of increased autonomy and respect. But women provide the labor and time that make it possible for men to change their lifestyle and achieve these goals.

Homosocial Male Bonding

The convivial association of men from diverse backgrounds is one of the most noteworthy features of the annual event. Pilgrims stress the unity and common humanity of all men. One interviewee stated it this way: 'With the Lord in our hearts, we are all brothers. Caste and religion mean nothing here. There is no difference.'³ In the quaint language of P. C. Alexander, all the pilgrims belong to a common Ayyappan 'fraternity where there is no place for any invidious distinctions' (Alexander 1940: 112). Just as the deity, as the son of Viṣṇu and Śiva, unites in brotherhood two major Hindu sects, so too there is a distinct sense of unity among Hindu pilgrims of various caste and sectarian orientations. The pilgrimage festival has an ecumenical feel; caste and class boundaries are de-emphasized. Daniel (1984: 171–172) tells of traveling with a finicky Brahmin who claimed that he could tell a person's *jāti* (subcaste) from that person's odor. This man suspended his caste prejudices during the pilgrimage; the Brahmin announced that when bathing in a river filled with excrement from thousands of fellow pilgrims, he did not smell a thing. Likewise, there is unity among

³ Interview conducted in Erumeli, December 29, 2012.

pilgrims who do not belong to the same religion. Ayyappan's relationship with Vavar underscores the importance of ties with other men, regardless of religious differences. In joining with other men, one enters an army of righteousness like those men in the past that fought with Ayyappan and Vavar to overcome tyranny. Most participants in the pilgrimage are Hindu, but it's not unusual for Christians and Muslims to participate. I interviewed a Christian man on his third pilgrimage.⁴ This man reported that he had gone to Śabarimala twice in the past in the company of Hindu friends. He spoke of the festival's entertainment value as well as the chance to have an adventure with his friends.

In considering the egalitarian nature of the Ayyappan movement, some observers see it as more the rhetoric of the pilgrimage than the reality. Lars Kjaerholm (1986: 132–133) found that most of the Tamil pilgrims that he observed returned to the hierarchical status quo immediately upon their return from the pilgrimage. Kjaerholm also questions how absolute the suspension of caste prohibitions is, giving the example of a pilgrim group consisting of vegetarian castes that refused the request of a boy from a meat-eating caste to join their group (1986: 132–133). I would agree with Kjaerholm that the pilgrimage experience might not obliterate caste distinctions entirely or permanently. But even if the permanent elimination of caste distinctions does not occur as the outcome of the pilgrimage experience, the temporary and partial suspension of caste prohibitions can be a sufficient step in the direction of identity-transformation, especially if what is at stake is an expanded sense of solidarity and friendship possibilities.

Migration, Dislocation, and Anxiety over Masculinity

Having given this overview of the pilgrimage, we can now ask what it means to those who undertake it. What rewards do pilgrims seek in undertaking this arduous trek? We can start with the most general level of outcomes expected. Pilgrimage in India is said to burn off the consequences of past misdeeds (Eck 1982). Pilgrims expect to be purged of bad karma and the afflictions that come with it, leading to hope for future wellbeing. The Śabarimala pilgrimage festival is more strenuous than most; the austere preliminaries and the sheer physical effort required to ascend to Ayyappan's abode are said to bring proportionally greater rewards than less strenuous pilgrimages. Pilgrims speak of a wide range of blessings granted by the youthful god. Ayyappan empowers those who suffer with and for him. Pilgrims identify with Ayyappan and his feats of valor in the jungle, and say that Ayyappan gives them the strength to carry out their vows of austerity in the preparatory period and to accomplish whatever difficult tasks the trek requires. One Hindu man I interviewed put it this way: 'The walking is hard, and then at the end of the day we must cook and find lodging. In many cases, especially in the old days, the toilet facilities are not good. It's all very tiring and my feet hurt all the time. It is physically difficult for everyone. But no one complains since it is for a purpose. Ayyappan gives his blessing to those that keep their vows.'⁵ Pilgrims interviewed by William Dalrymple reported in 2010

⁴ Interview conducted in Erumeli, December 30, 2012.

⁵ Interview conducted in Erumeli, December 29, 2012.

that the youthful god grants all wishes: 'Whatever you desire, Lord Ayyappa[n] will make it happen' (Dalrymple 2010: 9).

Fieldwork by others and myself demonstrates that men who visit Ayyappan leave home for an extended time, but do so with the hope that their domestic situations will improve. Many men told the Osellas that they expected outcomes that would improve life for their families: for example, job promotions, enhanced fertility, and easy births for their pregnant wives (Osella and Osella 2003: 747). Such outcomes index a man's traditional worth as the head of the household and source of family wellbeing. It may seem puzzling that an extended period of celibacy undertaken in honor of a bachelor god would lead to increased fertility as an outcome, but Ayyappan's father Śiva has been described (O'Flaherty 1973) as an erotic ascetic who is a better family man for the many months that he spends away from his family practicing meditation in remote locations. Like the god Śiva returning home after months in the forest, pilgrims expect to return home with renewed potency. Osella and Osella (2003: 748) note this connection between the father Śiva and son Ayyappan. They also draw on scholarship (2003: 743–747) that shows the reciprocity between the socio-cultural roles of celibate ascetic and sexually active householder that makes both of these roles available to Hindu men in India. The renunciation of creature comforts and the association with other celibate males makes it possible for an individual man to return home with a sense of increased agency in the householder sphere of life. During my fieldwork, I was told of men who got raises and promotions at work as a result of their participation in the pilgrimage festival. I was also told of men who were unhappy with their jobs and were rewarded with enhanced vocational opportunities such as job interviews as a result of going on the pilgrimage. Three interviewees claimed to know such men personally. One pilgrim put it this way: 'You cry when you first see the Lord . . . he gives so many blessings. He has a heart for those in need. I know a man whose wife was going with another man because he could not provide for her and the children. But the Lord blessed him with a job as soon as he returned home. The family is together and happy now.'⁶ Although pilgrims attributed the success of men like this to the beneficent agency of the Lord Ayyappan, one can surmise that some job opportunities that pilgrims enjoy were facilitated by contacts made while on the pilgrimage. Pilgrims travel along what was historically a major route between the west and east coasts of South India (Younger 2002: 20) and mingle with men from all over South India. The association of men from many South Indian states would give pilgrims knowledge of work conditions and work opportunities in other places.

Pilgrims' expectations appeal to traditional masculine codes in an era where received ways of being masculine are threatened by dislocation, immigration, increased female earning power and increased female autonomy. With South Indian women working outside the home in unprecedented numbers, earning money in Indian workplaces as well as in guest work abroad, women sometimes bring in the lion's share of a family's earnings. Men are often required to help out at home, doing work (such as child-care and elder-care) that their grandfathers might have regarded as women's work. In the face of such challenges to their masculine dignity and potency as authorities in the home, the

⁶ Interview conducted in Erumeli, December 30, 2012.

example of Ayyappan as a divine male helps South Indian men to secure a stable sense of masculinity. Participation in the Śabarimala pilgrimage festival helps men by modeling authoritative male agency in a confusing world where economic opportunities can be fleeting and women sometimes exercise authority traditionally reserved for men. In the ways that Ayyappan negotiates his relationships with female figures, he provides a divine example of how to respectfully but firmly establish one's autonomy in the face of female demands and female power. When the queen arranges to have Ayyappan go to the forest to die, he proves his manly courage and returns home riding triumphantly on the tiger that was meant to kill him. Ayyappan likewise gains *śakti* or feminine power by staying in proximity to Māṇikkappuruttammā, the young woman cursed to take the form of a buffalo-demon. But Ayyappan does not submit to Māṇikkappuruttammā's wish to marry. Imitation of this austere hyper-manly deity provides a source of masculine empowerment for men who struggle to assert the uniqueness of what it means to be a man in a world where women have traction in the workplace, make financial decisions, make sexual overtures, and do many things that were typically the privilege of South Indian adult males.

Pilgrims report that the privations suffered in visiting Śabarimala counteract the excesses of modernity. Younger (2002: 25) was told by pilgrims in the 1990s that austerity is good for modern people where things come too easily sometimes. It counteracts the excesses that plague us in a culture full of temptations. Pilgrims whom I spoke with echoed this theme of voluntary suffering to counteract the ease of modern, urban lifestyles. Most salient, for the men I spoke with, is the voluntary restrictions a pilgrim places on his personal freedoms. He gives up things like meat, tobacco, alcohol, soft beds and other creature comforts. He avoids the kinds of entertainments that would awaken lust. Lessons about masculine self-control are particularly relevant for those men returning from work abroad: these men are under greater surveillance than other men when it comes to matters of earning and consumption. They are coming back to India after access to the personal freedoms and commodities available in urban environments such as Dubai. For such a man, especially a man returning to a village or small town, there are eyes everywhere. His activities are observed. His expenditures are noted and judged. It is considered all right for a young man to spend some cash on nice clothes and other transient goods for himself. But a fully-grown married man who indulges in this sort of thing would be regarded as immature (Osella and Osella 2006: 77–98). Two of the pilgrims that I interviewed had spent time as guest workers in Persian Gulf countries. For these young Gulf-returnees, the Śabarimala trek and the company of other men was an important step of reentry into Indian life. One spoke of the discipline that the pilgrimage guru exacts from novice pilgrims as the most difficult but also the most rewarding part of the experience for him:

I went as a *kanniswami* [first-time pilgrim]. At first it was hard to take orders from my *guruswami* [pilgrimage guru]. I wanted to please him, but I wasn't used to such discipline. In Dubai, on my days off I would sleep half the day away. On the trek, if I weren't up before the sun, *guruswami* would be very angry. One morning I made myself get up before the rest of the group and clean up the campsite. That day I felt very proud.⁷

⁷ Interview conducted in Erumeli, December 29, 2012.

This pilgrim's comments accorded with the statements of many pilgrims who indicated that Ayyappan provides a model for the process of dealing with one's own desires. But for this pilgrim, public enactment was key. It was being seen by the others in the morning that turned his emotions from shame to pride. The public act of exercising self-discipline was a grounding experience for this Gulf-returnee. Placing himself under the authority of a leader enhanced this man's sense of competence and potency after the lack of discipline that characterized his days off in Dubai. The display of self-control on the trek made it easier to reacclimatize in the village-like setting of his Erumeli home after life in urban Dubai. I would surmise that for others returning to India after guest work in urban locales abroad, the publically suffered privations of the pilgrimage trek could speak to their particular situation of being under intense scrutiny and wanting to show themselves to be mature, self-disciplined men. Such an ordeal would help a man to prove himself, to show that he can handle his earnings and negotiate the demands of commodity consumption in an atmosphere of surveillance by elders and other decision-makers in one's home community.

Sanjay Srivastava has shown the appeal of traditional images of masculinity offered by sex-clinics and footpath pornography⁸ in contemporary urban India, citing the particular appeal of such images for the dislocated male, who finds in them 'the promise of relocation at a time of dislocatory anxiety' (Srivastava 2004: 367). Images of Ayyappan astride a tiger – images that are ubiquitous on the pilgrimage trail – strike me as an apt image of the promise of relocation that draws socially dislocated pilgrims to Ayyappan's mountaintop refuge. The youthful god riding a predatory animal offers the viewer a heavily masculinized image of power in the face of dislocation and homesickness. The image of Ayyappan astride a wild beast is heavily freighted with the mythic symbolism of forest and jungles in Indian sacred narratives: these are wild places where those who are destined to rule as kings discover their authority. For example in the epic *Ramāyana*, Prince Rama must leave the throne he was promised and suffer years of exile in the forest in order to discover the tools needed to wield authority as king. Although tigers in today's Kerala are mostly restricted to nature preserves, the symbolism of the pilgrim facing down deadly ordeals in the wilderness is one that carries a great deal of symbolic weight for pilgrims. Before the construction of roads and the popularity of vans and buses as a means of getting to Śabari Mountain, it was not unheard of for a pilgrim to get lost in a dense patch of forest. For those who have been unwavering in their preparatory vows, Ayyappan is said to come to the rescue of the imperiled pilgrim, whether the pilgrim is lost or threatened by a wild animal. For today's pilgrim experiencing dislocation in a globalized world, Ayyappan striding through the wilderness far away from home and family offers a powerful image of help for dislocatory anxiety. Travel and dislocation are sources of anxiety for many South Indian men, but travel is also therapeutic when organized as a structured pilgrimage. Joining Ayyappan in the wilderness is the first step to getting the help one needs to summon a stable sense of manhood in the churn of dislocation and rapid social change.

⁸ 'Footpath pornography' refers to inexpensive, cheaply made Hindu language publications that are sold in make-shift book-stalls that crowd the footpaths that crowd the busiest urban transit areas. Usually the women represented in footpath pornography are Western or Westernized Indian women.

Conclusion

The great appeal of the Ayyappan pilgrimage festival is its focus on a traditional image of male competence and power in an era when men are not only experiencing the dislocation of migration for the sake of work, but also competing with women for the role of breadwinners and decision-makers in the household. Participation in the Śabarimala pilgrimage festival helps men by modeling self-discipline in a social world in flux, a new world where men are sometimes required to help out with work traditionally regarded as women's work. In the face of such challenges, the example of Ayyappan as a divine male who politely but resolutely shows male authority in the face of female demands helps men to secure a stable sense of masculinity. For men experiencing changes in gender role expectations and increased policing of their behavior as men in the midst of uncertainties of today's life in South India, Ayyappan really is a godsend. Thus it is no surprise that millions of contemporary Indian men are drawn to make the sacrifices required to visit Ayyappan on Mount Śabari.

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