

Pilgrimage and Environment in South India: A Research of Compatibility Between Conflicting Ideologies

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Abstract

The thorough study of the spatial insertion of a huge pilgrimage, well known all over South India as *Sabarimala Yatra* in Kerala, in which the male members of the Hindu community form the core of the participants, provides exiting research material. A geographical analysis of this gathering 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 religious travel (pilgrimage) and the reflexive notions of territoriality and territory. Beyond the relevance of studying pilgrimage as a geographical ritual and phenomena, I propose here to deconstruct the pilgrimage through the analysis of the main discourses, which preside over the management of environmental issues and the refashioning of both cultural and regional identity. This presentation aims at bringing fresh inputs regarding the debate around nature and culture as each of these ideologies tends to favour one of the components of this dialectic or deny all of them. Let's remind that the Sabarimala temple, which is the final and central link of a long chain of ritual places to be crossed by pilgrims before reaching it, is located in the Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR) in Kerala, thus reinforcing tensions between the Kerala Forest Department and the TDB because the latter is constantly breaking environmental laws such as the Forest Conservation Acts (among many others) by cutting trees and misappropriating lands. The hidden objective of the TDB is to may their hands on more and more lands to build a new temple town contributing then to the destruction not only of the geographical and ritual networks of pilgrimage at the regional scale but also of the religious spirit which presides over this temple.

Introduction

As a reminder, the well known *Chipko Andolan* movement in Uttaranchal in the seventies and more recently, since the nineties, that of the *Narmada bachao Andolan* which has been vainly fighting against the construction of dams and the subsequent eviction of surrounding tribal population in Madhya Pradesh, have attracted widespread attention from the media and the intellectual elites around the delicate issue of economic development and environmental conservation. Since its independence, India has known an exponential economic growth and environmental issues are now the object of multiples social and political consideration. The Hindu pilgrimage has gone through an unprecedented expansion with the modernisation of transport infrastructure, the modification of the conditions of access to the site and the introduction of new modes of management of the temple space by the government.

In this regard, the pilgrimage to Sabarimala (« the hill of Sabari ») is one of the most significant religious phenomenon of the contemporary period as it attracts several million pilgrims to its abode located in a mountainous region of south centre Kerala during its two and a half months season. Structured around the cult of Ayyappa, an ambivalent deity emerged from a marriage between Vishnu and Shiva. this pilgrimage presents some original geographical and anthropological characteristics. It attracts essentially a population originating

from India's four southern states and the deity's territory is strongly structured through a hierarchicized network of sacred places. From a more anthropological point of view, the pilgrimage to Sabarimala stand out through its ritual initiation ceremony to the cult (*mala puja*), through its essentially male dominated-attendance justified by the preservation of the ritual purity of the site (pubescent women are excluded), and finally through the period of austerity (*vratham*) of 41-61 days (vegetarianism, piety and chastity) during which we have noted some important disruptions of domestic and village territoriality. On a sociological level, the promotion and diffusion of a message of equality through its openness to all levels of society and all religious affiliations, reinforces the unique character of this pilgrimage.

But the contemporary debate led by the media and intellectual elites in Kerala does not revolve around the religious and social values of this pilgrimage but rather around its impact on the environment and the health of the pilgrims, thereby unanimously condemning the *Travancore Devaswom Board* (TDB), a semi-governmental institution responsible for organising all activities in and around Sabarimala.

I – The Pilgrimage Site as a Privileged Nexus Between Nature and Culture

1) Holy Place and Pilgrimage in India: The Multiplicity of Meanings in Vernacular Languages

A pilgrimage site is generally defined by the Sanskrit terminology *tirtha* (« shore ») *sthalam* (« place ») and it is as such that Sabarimala partly designated. This place is often located at the confluence (*sangam*) of physical and mythical rivers or at the top of a hill (*mala, malai*), and less frequently on the coast. The criteria of localisation of a holy place reveal the notion of convergence and gathering, as it is the case in the village of Erumely, which is both a point of convergence of the processional groups and the point of departure of the traditional forest route which leads up to Sabarimala. It is also the case of the confluence of the rivers Pampa and Kallar, situated a few miles down the hill of Sabari. This sacred confluence is also attributed to Parasurama, the mythical founder of Kerala.

The pilgrimage itself is designated by the concept *tirtha yatra* (“voyage to the shore”) or *tirtha yatrium* in the Tamil terminology, which crosscuts the semantic fields of displacement, of circulation and voyage. Therefore the place of pilgrimage has a function of limit and of threshold to cross over. These limits are as many stages to overcome which way marks the itinerary of the pilgrimage. The concept of *tirtha yatra* also offers the basis of a spatialized

model of the pilgrimage, that is to say the equation between the network of places and the pilgrim's mobility structured by the choice of the itinerary.

Finally, the concept of *Kshetra* (skr.) or *Kshetram* (mal.) designates a territory delimitating the immediate sphere of influence of the deity over its environment. In Kerala, one speaks of Sabarimala *Kshetram* as the geographical area crowning the temple, over which Ayappa exercises his full sovereignty.

From these first few elements, it is possible to draw up a geographical definition of the pilgrimage and a holy place.

2) Geographical Definition of Pilgrimage in India

Given the multifaceted social landscape and the diversity of belongings represented along the roads which converge and unite in a specific location, a precise definition of place is called for. Following the theoretical propositions of a French geographer¹, the “place of social and territorial condensation” is peculiar as it symbolises both the value system and the history of a given society. It is a totality whose symbolic power reassures the collective and at the same time defines it by suggesting an even wider space of belonging. This formulation is well suited to the pilgrimage centre, whether it be old or more recent. The place of pilgrimage (*tirtha sthalam*) has at minimum a regional audience, which draws its pilgrims beyond their daily perimeters of circulation, and therefore participates in creating the identity of a space. Hence, today, the very name of Sabarimala opens on the representation of wider cultural territories largely spilling over the geographical and administrative limits of Kerala. In the same way, in an essay on the pilgrimage to Badrinath in Uttaranchal (formerly Uttar Pradesh), Jean-Claude Galey shows how the spatial inscription of the religious act of pilgrimage in the *tirtha* also signifies a “ritual condensation” of the whole Garhwali kingdom entailing that a figure of totality incarnates itself in the specificities of a place². But this place is also the expression of a system of values and beliefs as well as the result of a system of social and political intentions at a given point in time.

Furthermore, as demonstrated by Eck³, the Hindu sacred place has a value of exemplarity in the sense that all pilgrimage place, whichever it may be, is the exact replica of a religious conception of space. Each possess the same qualities and their localisation answer to the same geographical criteria of intersection between the horizontality of social networks and the verticality of the human and the divine, the “matériel” and the “idéel”, of the local and the

¹ Debarbieux, (1995).

² Galey, (1994).

global, etc. However, I would add that one can not quite consider the place of pilgrimage as a place of cult since there is no daily ritual in Sabarimala. It is in fact a place of voyage, which one goes to exceptionally.

From a geographical point of view, Sabarimala, such as many other pilgrimage places (*Char Dham* or « four divine abodes »), is a marginal space where the human density progressively gives way to the density of the forest located in a hostile environment, synonymous of danger and risk for the men willing to adventure through it. These places are all the more sacred that they are inaccessible, disconnected from the dominant flows, implying long distance travel in harsh conditions for the body. Crossing mountains and forests is the price to pay to obtain the blessing (*darshan*) of the deity. The distance and inaccessibility are geographical criteria which reinforce the value and experience of the pilgrimage.

A sketch taken from a short book in Malayalam (**figure???**), dealing with the forest route and the environmental stakes of the pilgrimage to Sabarimala, shows the « garden of Ayyappa » (*poonkavanam*)⁴ composed of 18 mythical mountains, 17 plus that of Sabari. The myth also states that if a devout climbs the 18 steps of the temple (*pathinetampadi*) while imagining that they represent the deities occupying the 18 mountains, he will be delivered from his former sins. These 18 mountains, which previously belonged to the king of Pandalam, were declared part of the “garden of Ayyappa”. The pilgrims enter this territory through the village of Erumely, point of departure of the traditional route through the forest. Today, a road has been built leading to the village of Pampa, allowing an important number of pilgrims to avoid the forest route, that is more than 30 kilometers long to be done by foot. Since 1978, “Ayappa’s garden” is for a large part located in the Periyar Tiger reserve, which explains the huge general discontent over the pressures exerted by the development of the pilgrimage over its immediate environment.

This *Poonkavanam* space is also differentiated itself from the sacred wood or “coppice” (*kaavu*), traditional location in the forests of the plains or the hills for the cult of Ayyappa, of the snake and of the Goddess. Oppositely, the concept of *devatayatana* is more concerned with a cult place administered by Brahmins, located on high mountain ridges. These two notions therefore hold a positive environmental value (conservation) unlike the “garden of Ayappa” which, according to some, is perceived as an object of gratification without any environmental

³ Eck, (1999).

⁴ This translation mixes English and Malayalam, the original title being “Ayyappa Mahatmyavum Vanayatrayum”, which means literally “Glory to Ayyappa and the forest pilgrimage”. *Poonkavanam* means literally “forest of flowers”, commonly translated as “garden”. The Sanskrit terms *pu* (“flower”) and *vana* (“forest”) are currently used both in Malayalam and Tamil.

value. This could help to explain its gradual destruction (water pollution, trash, etc.) by the pilgrimage today.

II – The Historical Background of Temple’s Management in Kerala (1350-2004)

1) Before The British Come: Pilgrimage and Territorial Organizations in South India

In south India, during the pre-colonial period and until the beginning of the first colonial incursions, temple space is at the heart of local and regional preoccupations as it is seen as the cornerstone of a political and territorial model of organisation. The ritual and administrative control of temple affairs was generally held by a royal dynasty whose power extended over a micro-region in direct cooperation with the leaders of local sectarian movements and dominant castes, whether they be merchants or priests (Nambutiri).

But far from being exclusively an economic pole, the temple also became a place condensing social realities and crystallising local stakes. Up to this day, the temple festivities are an occasion to demonstrate one’s status, to put on show the social prestige of the families involved in the rituals and, by extension, the place to (re)-distribute honours and privileges⁵.

2) The Take Over of Temple’s Administration During Colonial Period (1700-1949)

The intervention of the British administration marks a decisive turning point as they decided to take over the management of practically all the temples, that is the real estates of the temples (*devaswam*), the revenues produced and the expenses incurred by their maintenance⁶. The management of the temples was taken over, as of 1811-12, by Captain Munroe, named minister (*diwan*) of Cochin, and the real estate accruing to the temples were then considered property of the state (*sarkar*).

3) Today’s Model of Temple’s Management in Kerala (1950-2004)

Following Independence and the creation of the Travancore-Cochin state in 1949 (United States of Travancore and Cochin), the proclamation of the TCHRI Act led to the creation in 1950 of two centralised structures, the TDB and the CDB. It was only after the constitutional

⁵ Appadurai, (1981); Tarabout, (1986), (1991).

amendment of 1971, that the Guruvayoor Devaswom Board (GDB) was created in 1978, allowing the devaswam to emancipate themselves from the hereditary wardship of the rajas of Cochin. Therefore, after setting its definitive administrative limits in 1956, Kerala was then divided in terms of temple management into three geographic areas: the southern area dominated by the TDB, the centre by the CDB and the north by the GDB, whereas the whole Malabar region (north Kerala) was placed directly under the administration of the *Hindu Religious & Institution Department*. It is important to indicate that many small temples were not placed under the administrative control of these trusts as they remain privately owned, generally by single families.

Today, most of the activities of the Sabarimala pilgrimage are coordinated by the TDB. Despite a certain amount of cooperation with other types of institutions, whether governmental or non-governmental, the TDB is sole responsible in terms of development and redistribution of its territorial resources, and even sometimes of the reorganisation of the rituals and cult. However, its management of a pilgrimage that has been widely expanding over the past few decades, and whose revenue has wildly increased since the beginning of the eighties, has attracted strong criticism from Kerala's intellectual elite and elected representatives, aghast over the issue of health and environment. Given this situation, we have raised an eminently geographical hypothesis of a deterritorialising management of the pilgrimage by the TDB, which will lead us to conclude this second part on the definition of the new lines of authority and the reconfiguration of power relations.

In a nut shell, the status of temple properties evolved since the arrival of the British but it was not until Independence, and the first land tenure reforms that the former system of imbricate tenure (*janman / kannam / inam*) was abolished. Today, the TDB is responsible for land management, the revenue it generates and the expenditure it entails. These land reforms, initiated in the 1950s with a first law passed in 1959, will only become operational with the Kerala Land Reforms Act in 1963, which brought to an end the former system of large brahmin landowners, by limiting access to property and giving social protection to direct and intermediary land tenants. These reforms had an impact on temple economy and participated in the redefinition of the power relationship both at the local level (between castes and groups) and at the regional level (between institutions and political parties). The forest development reforms disrupted the development of the activities of the TDB in Sabarimala since the temple is a real estate enclave within an area now protected (PTR) by conservation laws such as the

⁶ (August 1990), *Report on Travancore and Cochin Devaswom Boards*, The High Power Commission appointed by The Honourable High Court of Kerala, 94 p.

Wildlife Protection Act (1972, amended in 1983, 1986 and 1991) and the Forest Conservation Act (1980, amended in 1988). Relations with the Kerala Forest Department are tense as the TDB regularly breaks its laws with frequent encroachments on the forest, supplying themselves in sand for construction thereby destroying of the Pampa river (also forbidden), etc; The absolute sovereignty of the TBD has been put into question and the power balance over Sabarimala becomes more and more obscure.

The TDB is not the only institution participating in the activities of the Sabarimala pilgrimage, even though it is all powerful in terms of management and redistribution of territorial resources. The division of power can be done on a simple basis, with on the one hand all that relates to state control (administration, judicial, legislative and political), and on the other hand all that belongs to the ritual and symbolic sphere (priests, royal family of Pandalam and processional groups). Even though the power layout and the hierarchy of authority are rather difficult to visualise, this chart is sufficiently clear to enable us to locate not only the conflicts internal to the processional groups and the ideological competition in terms of managing the environmental impact of the pilgrimage, but also to question the capacity and the effects of the TDB's management of the pilgrimage today.

III – The Contemporary Politics of Pilgrimage Towards Environment

1) Realities and Artefacts of Regional Discourse: Sabarimala as a Locus of Debate

Since the fifties, the modernisation of the pilgrimage's infrastructure has led to an increase of attendance, rising from several thousands to several million pilgrims today. The population concentration occurs mainly during the high season, especially during the month of January. Some even say that a million and a half people share the hill of Sabari on the day of the miraculous apparition of the divine light east of Sabari. The report by Gurukkal and Raju (2001) on the handling of the relation between the expanding pilgrimage and the environment (here the Periyar forest reserve) made a big splash in the press of Kerala, thereby discrediting the leaders of the TDB. This study evaluates the impact of the pilgrimage over its immediate environment in Sabarimala whilst underlining the sometimes conflictual relationship between the Forest Department of Kerala (KFD), the TDB and the local administration of some of the village panchayats. Furthermore, the situation is sometimes ambiguous given that the village of Pampa is located outside the reserve and Sabarimala inside, the forest route is mostly inside but the 18 symbolic mountains which crown the temple are not all inside this same reserve. The aim of the study conducted by these researchers of the University of Kottayam, was to

demonstrate the impact of the overall pilgrimage's activities, whether taking place inside or outside the protected area, on the Periyar reserve.

The report's final conclusion have shown that air pollution (linked to XXX, coconut combustion and fireworks) and the water of the Pampa⁷, related to the absence of an efficient treatment of waste (defecation, plastic, trash, etc.) have reached high records directly affecting the hygiene of the pilgrims and the environment⁸. Despite the presence of paying public sanitariums, most pilgrims go to the toilet wherever they find a little bit of space, more often by the water, on the banks of the river Pampa. The problem is that the Pampa has a low flow at the time of the pilgrimage's peak season. To curb this problem, a dam was built a few 100 meters upstream in order to provide sufficiently deep water. In and along its banks, trash accumulates and when the water of the rainy season submerges the site, all thus gets mixed together without cleansing of the riverbanks. In parallel to the water and air pollution, the progressive deforestation of the site (whether by XXX on the forest) also has an impact on the biodiversity⁹ in the immediate environment of Pampa and Sabarimala. The forest regeneration capacities is dwindling, protected animals such as tigers and wild elephants are losing part of their natural habitat and are being pushed further into the heart of the reserve due to the strong noise pollution¹⁰ during the high season.

So in parallel to the noble aspects of the religious ideology which preside over the pilgrimage of Sabarimala, resting on the strict respect of criteria of ritual purity and austerity, the aspects we have just mentioned relate more to a regime of horror and disgust, of trash and pollution. However, in order to understand Kerala's particular sensitivity to environmental concerns, these issues have to be reframed back in the colonial context of political and sanitary control of religious gatherings. Several authors have examined the relation between medical power and colonial power through an analysis of the political and social history of medicine¹¹. Some authors have studied the relationship between the medical controls implemented by the British authority in the 19th century in the temple town of Puri (Orissa) or the fear cholera epidemic during the festival of Pandharpur (Maharashtra) in the 20th century¹². Far from being restricted to mere scientific and medical enhancements, the involvement of the British in the

⁷ Dr. Sathesh, (1990).

⁸ For instance, the rate of coliforms measured in different locations along the riverbanks is 10 to 100 times above the authorized levels, even more if we believe the results provided by the State Pollution Control Board.

⁹ E. Kunhikrishnan & M. Amruth, (2001).

¹⁰ Some audio recordings show a constant noise between 65 and 70 decibels, throughout the day and the night. In Pampa, the uninterrupted circulation of vehicles and the loudspeakers are the major causes while at the top of the hill, in Sannidhanam, the crowd is responsible of the noise along with fire crackers activities, which are part of the ritual. In a forest reserve, in which these disturbances can frighten the wild animals, the limits have been crossed.

¹¹ Biswamoy & Harrison, (2001).

medical field was another way of controlling the movements of the population during these gatherings and thereby consolidating and confirming the sovereignty of their control. Mark Harrison (1992) has demonstrated how the intense debate around the quarantine imposed on the pilgrims heading off to Mecca and Medina (*Haj*), in relation to the cholera and plague epidemics in the 20th century, reveals internal tensions in the British governance and external tensions between the colonial regime and the indigenous elites¹³, especially the Muslim entrepreneurial classes of Bombay.

2) The Territorial Development's Projects Reflecting Opposed Ideologies

a) 'Rudranam Project' (1995): the urbanisation of the site against environment

This project, initiated by the TDB proposes to set up, some 70 meters east of the temple, a small town in order to satisfy the lodging needs of some 200 000 pilgrims. To implement this project, they need to recuperate more than 100 hectares of the Periyar Forest Reserve and some 15 more for a road leaving from Pampa¹⁴. The environmentalists and the KFD are naturally opposed to this project since the impact of the Sabarimala temple already concerns some 65 square kilometres of the forest. This is exactly what the central government in Delhi, via its ministry of environment, refuses to allocate to the TDB. A study of feasibility demonstrated that the forest of Sabarimala has already greatly suffered from the pilgrimage. The so-called promises from the TDB to replant the equivalent surface of forest to be destroyed by the implementation of the project on a tea plantation bought for this purpose have not convinced the authors of this report who differentiate between an "original and old" forest and a forest replanted by man. The controversy between partisans of an anarchic development and the environmentalists has forced the government to name an independent comity (legislative sub comity) to evaluate once again the feasibility of the project. Against this project, perceived as an "ecocide", the authors propose an alternative urbanisation of the hill of Sabari, with a base camp in Nilackal.

b) 'Sabari Railway Line Project': an additional factor of pilgrimage's expansion

The idea of developing a railway line connecting Sabarimala to its main ritual satellites was taken up in the 90s. This 150 crores projet originally proposed to link Kottayam, the original

¹² Biswamoy, (2001); Kamat, (2001); Amna Khalid, (2004).

¹³ Harrison, (1994).

base camp of the pilgrimage, to Kanjirappally, Erumely, Pathanamthitta and Punalur, before joining the major rail axis of Madras and Quilon¹⁵. This 132 km long rail journey which included a second portion between Erumely and Sabarimala has since been given up as it went against the general ethos of the pilgrimage, which consist precisely of reaching the temple by foot. The preliminary surveys led by a comity of experts (2001-2004) had to face a strong resistance led by the local population opposed to this anti-environmental project. Kerala's legislative assembly finally ratified the project on the condition that the Angamali-Sabarimala line should end at the entrance of the forest reserve.

c) 'Sabarimala Master Plan' (1998...): a model for the management of pilgrimage/environment issue

This is precisely a cornerstone of the global development project of Sabarimala proposed by the members of the Environmental Legislative Comity headed by Thamarakshan¹⁶. Following a visit to Sabarimala in 1997, and a survey conducted in 1998 amongst a sample of representative actors of the pilgrimage, the team's mission was to establish the terms of a real development project of the site (Sabarimala Master Plan – SMP) which would allow both to handle a maximum number of pilgrims in decent conditions and at the same time to minimise the impact of the pilgrimage on the environment. An interesting feature of the project is the authors' source of inspiration, the temple of Thirumala in Thirupati (Andhra Pradesh), which offers characteristics similar to those of Sabarimala (35000 et 50000 pilgrims and roughly 230 crores of annual benefit, 16000 employees). The interest of this model of organisation is its delocalisation of the pilgrim's lodgings in the nearby town of Tirupathi, some 15 kilometres down the hill. In parallel to the development of new satellites and resting areas along poorly frequented pre-existing roads, the project has also taken inspiration from the Tirumalai-Tirupathi Devasthanam's modes of crowd management, which has established an elaborate system of circular queues, facilitating the access to the temple for the darshan whilst reducing the waiting time.

The three projects studied above express two overall tendencies. On the one hand, a determination to commercialise to the extreme the pilgrimage, with a project of urbanisation of the site against the preservation of the environment and an even stronger attraction of

¹⁴ Paristhi Samiti, (1995), *Sixth Report on Rudranam Project*. Kerala Legislative Assembly, Thiruvananthapuram.

¹⁵ (1995), *Seminar on Sabarimala Development*. Organized by Malayala Manorama, 15th of October 1995, Kottayam, pp.10-11.

¹⁶ Thamarakshan, (1998), *Master Plan for Sabarimala*. Thiruvananthapuram, pp.27-70.

population to the site with the help of a new railway connection. And, on the other hand, the governmental project inspired by Thirupati, whose pan-Indian audience seduced the authors of the project whilst privileging the environmental, sanitary and logistic dimensions of management. However, the implementation of the global scheme of management of Sabarimala (SMP) has collided into a major conflict between the TDB and KFD.

3) An impossible development? The ideological opposition between the Travancore Devaswom Board and the Kerala Forest Department

The regular conflicts between the TDB and the KFD are frequent both before and during the festivities in Pampa and Sabarimala. When the TDB starts the construction of concrete buildings, it violates with impunity the environmental protection and conservation laws by extracting large amounts of sand from the banks of the Pampa, close to the parking lots under the cautious eye of pilgrims and the forest department agents. These repeated practices, which are generally reported by the press, says a lot about the commercial ideology of the TDB's leaders. The latter are unconcerned by the sacred character of the Pampa river, whose banks risks being displaced from its natural course, by the pilgrims ritual bathing and ancestors commemoration. The three poles of conflict over the use of the pilgrimage space are found here represented by the TDB, the KFD and the High Court of Kerala. This permanent tension, which some say constitutes the major hinder to the development of the site, reflects a tension between the commercial ideology of the TDB (urbanisation and privatisation of space, search of profit) and the environmentalist ideology (conservation of bio-diversity) promoted by the KFD, certain NGOs but also a large number of Kerala's intellectuals. The third judicial pole acts both as a mediator, naming outside expert commissions, and attempts to act for the pacification and resolution of the conflict. Despite the project of a new law proposed jointly by the TDB and the government of Kerala, requesting the amendment of the forest conservation act (2000) in order to legally obtain more land from the forest, the Environment Ministry has so far always turned them down. The Ministry, most probably attached to the global management project (SMP) which decentralises the pilgrim population to better delocalise the anthropogenic pressure on the environment, is proposing a more rational mode of management of the pilgrimage's activities much to the displeasure of the TDB.

However, the current position of the central government seems a little paradoxical if we widen our time frame. The diversion of the Alkhnanda River in Uttaranchal, between Badrinath and Joshimath, had been imitated by the new BJP regional government in order to supply more

villages in electricity. The deforestation of the new state by governmental and private organisations, also linked to the large Hindu pilgrimage centres, and the modernisation of the road infrastructures is a neo-Hindu policy. It does seem that the Hindu political parties are largely unconcerned by the environment, even if some projects were actually elaborated before their coming to power. It is therefore a third ideological pole in terms of environment (VHP), which would constitute the fourth pole of conflict, deforming somewhat our three-summit model of analysis.

4) The Hindu Right Wing and Religious Environmentalism in Contemporary India

The neo-Hindu movement incarnated by the VHP and the BJP constitutes the third ideological force acting directly on the pilgrimage development project in their environmental dimension. For the past ten years, many Indian environmentalist researchers¹⁷ have been defending the idea of a conception of Hindu religion as traditionally attached to environmental issues, taking example on the existence of “sacred woods” or “sacred groves”, located on the margin of village society and generally considered as unique sites of conservation of biodiversity. Yasushi Uchiyamada (2002), building on his thesis research (1995), demonstrates the process of institutional manipulation and progressive hinduisation of the Kurava lineage temples (*kaavu*) by the dominant agricultural and planters’ castes in south Kerala (Nayars, Ilavas and Syrian Christians). The author shows in particular the intimate ties between the Kurava tribe from the plains, its ancestors and the environment in order to reflect the capacity of the *kaavu* to articulate life and death, plants and places. Uchiyamada concludes of an internal reorganisation of the Kuravas into more discreet social and family units, an essential condition of sanskritisation of these places of local and ancestor cults. The article by Marine Carrin (1992) proposes a detailed ethnographic analysis of the role played by a “religion of the sacred grove” in the reinvention movements of identity among the Santal tribe, since the 19th century up to the creation of a new state of the Indian Union, the Jharkand (*jhar* « grove », *khand* « country ») in 2000, under the political regime of the BJP. The narration of the genesis and the reinvention of a tradition through the creation of a written script (in the 50s and 60s) as well as of a village theatre (in the 70s), transmits an ideology of social and religious reform which has allowed the Santals to gain a form of cultural autonomy leading, according to the author, to the “invention of a citizenship (...) which is intended to leave aside essentialist values in order to negotiate new identities capable of opposing fundamentalists”. Unlike Uchiyamada, Marine

¹⁷ Freeman (1994); Kalam (1996); Chapple & Tucker (2000).

Carrin integrates the political/religious dialectic to the issue of identity in a context of neo-Hindu ideological take over of this tradition of sacred woods, erected as a Hindu religious symbol of the preservation of the environment and bio-diversity. Indeed, the enhancement of the value of sacred woods in Indian scientific production does not quite hide this ideological stance which values indigenous environmental forms of knowledge suiting all too well the political programs of the BJP, unconcerned as much by the environment as cultural and religious minorities.

Conclusions

This study of these conflicts based upon sharp ideological differences between the partisans of capitalism (TDB), of environmentalism in the western sense (incarnated by government agencies) and of religious environmentalism (VHP), which is another way of interpretation of the relation between nature and culture. It is striking to note that recently in May 2003, the international leader of VHP, Ashok Singhal, launched a campaign of agitation in Kerala in order to destabilize the regional government and the management activities of Sabarimala pilgrimage. Aiming at ending the government administration of temples, they designated Sabarimala as the point of departure of their campaign in South India, Andhra Pradesh being the next target given the important income of the temple of Tirupathi.

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