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# From Fieldwork to Research Theory on an Indian Pilgrimage

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## Abstract

Using as the example of the pilgrimage to Sabarimala (Kerala, South India), I propose here to explore the links existing between sources, research hypothesis and research theory in social sciences. The choice of research materials in the process of investigation, sources of knowledge about the studied object, is not mere random sampling; it is processed in accordance with the questions of the researcher. It inevitably assumes a selective dimension. After a critical reading of the sources used by Indian studies, I will highlight on the connections between the sources and the methodological tools on the one hand, and the major research hypothesis about pilgrimage on the other. The links between the data taken from the field and the legitimacy of scientific discourse on India will be examined at the end before providing some keys for the interpretation of Sabarimala phenomenon in South India during the contemporary period.

## Introduction

Using the example of the pilgrimage to Sabarimala (See Delage, 2004c),<sup>1</sup> I propose here to explore the links existing between research materials (what historians call

1. The pilgrimage to Sabarimala in Kerala is one of the most significant religious

sources), the research hypothesis and research theory in social sciences. The choice of research materials in the process of investigation, sources of knowledge about the object studied, is not mere random sampling; it is processed in accordance with the questions of the researcher. It inevitably assumes a selective dimension. After a critical reading of the sources used by Indian studies, I will highlight the connections between the sources and the methodological tools on the one hand, and the major research hypothesis on pilgrimage on the other. The links between the data taken from the field and the legitimacy of scientific discourse on India will be examined at the end before providing some keys for the interpretation of Sabarimala phenomenon in South India during the contemporary period.

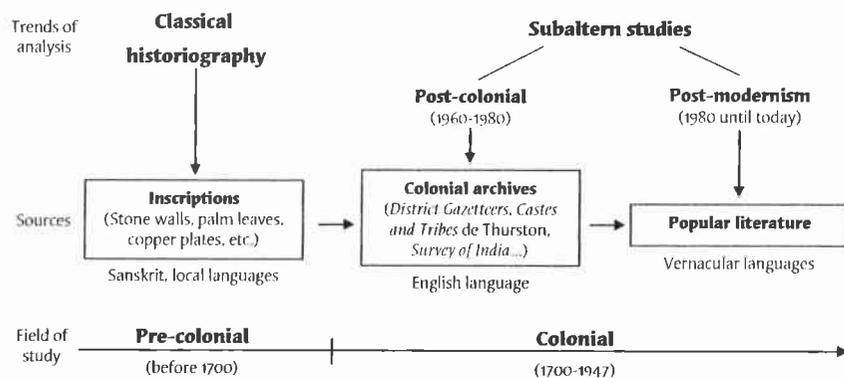


Figure 1. The evolution of sources used by Indian historiography (Source: Delage, 2004a).

## 1. A comparative analysis of research materials

First of all it must be stressed that this approach to pilgrimage is part of a wider intellectual method in social sciences, a hypothetico-deductive approach. The researcher puts forward a hypothesis based on either direct observation of the field or/and an exploration of the available bibliography about it. Then he chooses the appropriate methodological tools in order to check his hypothesis and he collects materials that might help him to find answers to his questions. The analysis of data enables one to set up explicative models and to underline and to rephrase the working hypothesis.

phenomenon in contemporary South India as it attracts several millions people originated mainly from the four southern states of India (Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka) during a two and a half month yearly season. It is structured around the cult of Aiyappa, an ambivalent deity who emerged from a marriage between Vishnu and Shiva. The Aiyappa (or śāstā) cult is mostly spread in the hills of the Western Ghats (Kerala and Karnataka).

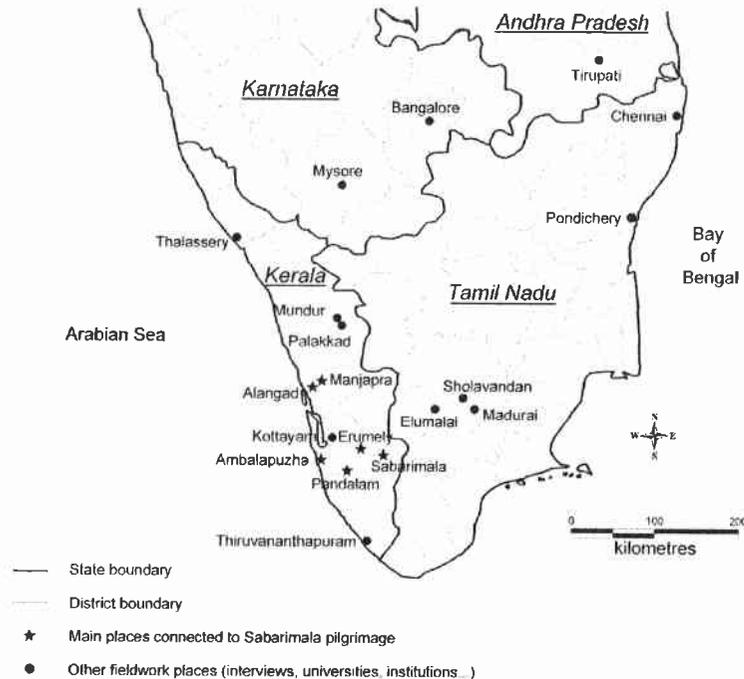
What now are the terms of the debate on the status of research sources in the field of Indian studies?

At first glance, it seems difficult, even hazardous, to classify the historical sources in a chronological manner, from the pre-colonial with inscriptions, copper plates, palm leaves (e.g., Karashima, 2001; Sastri, 1955; Stein, 1977, 1980 and 1984) to the colonial period with *District Gazetteers, Castes and Tribes* of Thurston, *Survey of India* (Achyuta Menon, 1911; Vellu Pillai, 1940) and finally down to the post-colonial (modern tools of communication and diffusion of information with the press, mass media, television, radio, Internet, cinema, and popular literature in vernacular languages). It would be also artificial to perform a comparative analysis distinguishing the sources used by the historians (pre-colonial and colonial productions) and the 'modern sources' collected, because they dated from the post-colonial era. This position runs counter to a distinction between an *internal* literary production by the royal family of Pandalam and the temple authorities of Sabarimala, and an *external* production of historical and territorial legitimacy over the pilgrimage using the popular literature in vernacular languages. We could consider this approach as embedded, since the end of the 1980s, in the second wave of the subaltern trend and post-modernism which changed perspective from 'the binary opposition elite/subaltern to the opposition western modernity/indigenous culture' (Pouchepadass, 2000). As Pouchepadass says, this shift is also characterized by a shift in the utilization of materials: more attention is paid to popular literature in vernacular languages than colonial archives in English language (see Figure 1). Affiliated to the historiographical trend with post-modernist accent is this 'importance' I attach to this register of popular literature, especially in Malayalam and Tamil.<sup>2</sup> From a methodological point of view, post-modern geography has revived the utilization of regional and historical sources (Lévy and Lussault [dir.], 2003: 732). Although I do use them, to pay too much credit to this popular literature is to run the risk of being led to an artificial essentialism; increased attention is paid to the 'indigenous culture' by setting up a collective identity quite distinct from other sources of identification. In addition, the subaltern trend in its political orientation does not conform with my own perspectives on politics.

The question of typology of research materials then arises. Instead of proceeding with a classical, analytical typology of sources, distinguishing non-written, written, oral, statistical and virtual sources, I chose to structure their thought in a more phenomenological move, in order to restore knowledge: to each theoretical argument and to each research hypothesis correspond unique combinations of materials.

2. The Malayalam and Tamil are respectively spoken in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

I present below the successive combination of axes of research on the Sabarimala pilgrimage in South India.



Map 1. Places surveyed around Sabarimala in South India (Source: Delage, 2004c).

## 2. Historical sources, mythological narratives and territoriality of Aiyappa cult

This comparative analysis of three major sources enabled me to redefine the geographical boundaries of Aiyappa cult in Southern India. The epigraphical text is located at the intersection of textual references and non-written sources<sup>3</sup> as it generally displays by its specific medium (mostly written on stone walls or palm leaves, rarely on copper plate) information about places and internal relations of pre-colonial society. These inscriptions, useful elsewhere in Kerala for tracking

3. The category of non-written sources gather together objects available on an archaeological site as well as visual sources such whether it be map or cinema. The images of a religious iconography such as the standardized one of Aiyappa cult belong to this category of visual sources. On the other hand the maps related to Sabarimala pilgrimage are rare and the geographical information is often scattered in tourist literature in the form of maps, not at scale and deforming the reality.

origins, are not available for Sabarimala. Thus opposing theories about the origins of the deity: one links Aiyappa to the Buddha (Alexander, 1949: 109–122)<sup>4</sup> and the other proposes Aiyappa as an extension of the Tamil deity, Aiyannar (e.g., Adiceam, 1967; Arunachalam, 1977; Clothey, 1982; Kjaerholm, 1991).<sup>5</sup> While the first theory has been abandoned, the second one is even more alive today as it reflects a debate on identity; demonstrating the preference of Tamils to appropriate the cult as a means of discussion for social cohesiveness rather than an historical issue.

Despite the absence of inscriptions attesting the historical existence of the Sabarimala temple, the origin myth of Kerala (*kēralōlpatti*) in the few narratives transmitted by Brahmins (dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth century) do give historical/mythological background on Sabarimala. The origins of the temple are attributed to the creative work of Parasurama (Nagam Aiya, 1906: 53).<sup>6</sup> This theory is more than questionable because it uses this history by Brahmins based on a process of recognition of the social and religious order during the pre-colonial period. Almost all the deities of their temples administered by these Brahmins were incorporated in the Hindu pantheon quite late (Alexander, 1949: 122). The historical writings (mal. caritram) on Sabarimala are relatively recent if we compare them with Sanskrit myths of *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana* whose historical background deals with the pre-Christian era. The lack of historical sources left certainly a gap, but the recent (1970–80s) spread of Sabarimala pilgrimage has encouraged scholars to explore the social history of Kerala as well as the history of the pilgrimage. Nonetheless one founder narrative titled *Bhūtanāthopākhyanam* (sub-part of the life story of Aiyappa)<sup>7</sup> was written during the nineteenth century by Rama Varma Raja of the royal family of Pandalam.<sup>8</sup>

4. See especially the chapter about the analogies between Aiyappa and śastā cult in Kerala. The location of inscriptions related to the Buddha along the coastline of Kerala invalidates this theory whereas all the śastā temples are located in the hills of the Western Ghāts where there are no inscriptions related with śastā cult.

5. As a deity protecting the village space in Tamil Nadu Aiyannar would be the ancestor of Aiyappa according to some defenders of Tamil identity.

6. The *kēralōlpatti* ('Origins of Kerala') recounts in chronicle form (in Malayalam) the history of great dynasties and chiefdoms, lineages and clans, religious practices and cults, etc., in order to establish a Brahmanical vision of Kerala society. Some of the versions itemizing temples of Kerala include Sabarimala in the list.

7. *bhūtanātha* means Aiyappa: *bhūta* ('sub-god') and *nātham* ('Lord' or 'Master'), so Aiyappa rules the world of sub-gods. Then *upākhyanam* means 'sub-narration'. There is also another story called *bhūtanāthobavam* ('origins of Bhutana', that is Aiyappa).

8. Apart from these limited sources, the previous king of Pandalam told me during an interview in 2001 that his family was still in possession of a wide range of texts in Sanskrit and Malayalam written on palm leaves (mal. *ḍala*). These documents recount episodes of Pandalam history that have not yet been translated.

To retrieve other historical descriptions of places related to Aiyappa cult and Sabarimala pilgrimage I also refer to the colonial literature, manuals on historical and regional geography, such as the *Cochin State Manual* and the *Travancore State Manual* (e.g., Nagam Aiya, 1906; Achyuta Menon, 1911; Vellu Pillai, 1940). Close to the format of *District Gazetteers* these rich compilations (archaeological data and inscriptions, British literary critics, land and temple administration, communities, etc.) were written by learned persons belonging to local and regional bourgeoisie, experts in Sanskrit, Malayalam and English. This unique source enables us to enter into the multiple aspects of social and cultural life from pre-colonial down to contemporary India. Two manuals, dating from the twentieth century, provide precious information about two chiefdoms related to the pilgrimage: Travancore in the southern part of Kerala and its relations with the chiefdom of Pandalam; the kingdom of Cochin in the centre along with the chiefdom of Alangad.<sup>9</sup> These literary productions belong to the colonial category of historical archives; they are hybrid writings and the result of collaboration between Indian and British scholars.

The lack of inscriptions and narratives forced me to go further and posit the hypothesis of a process of historicization of origin myths that had been highly Sanskritized beginning in the eighteenth century. The mythological narrative written by the royal family of Pandalam fixed the ritual places in the geographical space and ancient history of Kerala. During the season of pilgrimage the balance of power between kingdoms and local chiefdoms still structure the course of events such as the intervention of processional groups. However, the combination of absence of historical 'truth' and the presence of alternative versions make it possible to combat the dominant version of thinking about the history of Sabarimala pilgrimage in terms of kingship. Today two movements are contending for the historicized narrative of Pandalam: on the one hand, tribal voices claim the tribal origin of Aiyappa in a series of articles published in popular Malayalam literature and on the other hand, the Sourashtra community based in Madurai (Tamil Nadu) proposes another historical version of Aiyappa cult in the temple of Aienkavu.<sup>10</sup> The multiplicity of sources and points of view about the historical origins of the deity allow us to redefine the geographical boundaries of Aiyappa cult on either side of the Western Ghâts: the kingship in the fertile hills of Kerala (West), the tribal culture located in the forest

9. The processional groups of Alangad and Ambalapuzha converge to Sabarimala during the high peak of the season in mid-January, at the same time of the procession of ornaments carried out by the royal family of Pandalam.

10. Arienkavu is a temple wherein śāstā deity is represented in its form of householder (skt. *gārhasthya*) whereas in Sabarimala the deity is an ascetic (skt. *samnyāsi*). This classical opposition in Hinduism is thus incarnated here in the space of pilgrimage.

mountains of the Ghâts (Centre) and the Brahmin community of Sourashtra in the semi-arid plains of Tamil Nadu (East).

### 3. Press, official literature and public space in Kerala

The official documentation on Sabarimala pilgrimage is easily accessible in English at the Legislative Assembly in Thiruvananthapuram (administrative capital of Kerala). The juridical texts and law projects since the 1950s give information about the evolution and the actual state of temple legislation in Kerala.<sup>11</sup> For instance, the High Court of Kerala published two reports criticizing the management of the temple's activities by the Tiruvananthapuram Devaswom Board—TDB (Chandrasekhara Menon, T. [Justice], 2000; *Interim Report on Sabarimalai*, 1990). Other reports on the environmental impact of pilgrimage had been written by academics (Gurukkal and Raju, 2001) and diffused by press agencies (Pathanamthitta Press Club and Periyar Tiger Reserve, 1999; Malayala Manorama, 1995). Apart from these official publications, the regional press is very active<sup>12</sup> during the season; all the daily journals in vernacular languages (Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu) and English, are easily available in the village of Pampa, down the hill from Sabarimala. The wide media coverage of Sabarimala activities led by the intellectual and political elites in Kerala has facilitated the setting up of a wide public sphere, revealing internal conflicts and social contradictions of pilgrimage. Throughout the season the pilgrimage provokes indignation and criticism as well as a collective praise of the message of equality propagated among pilgrims. But just as it unites the pilgrims, it also divides the institution of pilgrimage. Sabarimala is a topic of conversation that can't be ignored in public spaces of the village or towns as well as in the media and in the legislative assembly. The media exposure of issues concerning the environment and ecology in Kerala, sanitary conditions of pilgrims and financial management of the pilgrimage by the TDB has revealed to the public various conflicts and controversies. Do these criticisms by journalists, intellectuals and researchers regarding the modes of management, reflect a regional sensibility of Kerala towards religious institutions and the

11. *Madras Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act, 1951; The Travancore-Cochin Hindu Religious Institutions Act, Act 15 of 1950; Travancore Devaswom Manual, 1956.*

12. Everyday a dozen of articles in English and vernacular languages present, comment and criticize the course of events. See Anderson for a pioneer work on the connections between capitalism, printing press and nationalism in Indonesia. The argument of Anderson has been much criticized since it posits the advent of press as the major cause in the rise of nationalist feeling. See also Jeffrey for an approach of the role played by the press in the reinforcement of political identity and formation of public space in contemporary India.

environment inherited from colonialism? As everywhere else in India, in the South the role of the Kerala press is an ambivalent one; simultaneously a powerful channel for critical and constructive expression and also a major tool for contesting institutions of power. Through the advent of printing press in vernacular languages, two complementary processes are at stake here, those of standardization leading to reinforcement of national feeling, and of affirmation and claims of regional, linguistic and cultural identities (Anderson, 1983; Jeffrey, 2000).

The exploration of materials such as the press and the official documentation led me to a clearer understanding of the conflictual and ambiguous links existing between the ritual sphere incarnated by a family of priests with hereditary rights and the royal family of Pandalam, and the political sphere incarnated by the TDB and regional government of Kerala, this whole interface being extremely visible during the season through a dilated public space.

#### 4. Popular literature, mass media and diffusion of Sabarimala phenomenon in South India

Up until the 1950s, some ten to fifty thousand of persons originating from the Malabar coast and the Tamil neighbouring districts of Kerala used to travel frequently up to Sabarimala. According to various contemporary estimates five to seven million pilgrims visit Sabarimala every year. How can one explain the rise of such a keen interest for this pilgrimage since the 1950s? The role played by the channels of diffusion of information, of communication and of transport since independence must be analysed without neglecting the impact of particular events in the promotion of the pilgrimage. For instance, two pilgrims have played a major role in boosting the popularity of Aiyappa in Tamil Nadu. After the fire, which destroyed the temple of Sabarimala in the early 1950s, an initial devotee promoted the figure of Aiyappa by undertaking processions throughout Tamil Nadu for nine months in 1952. A second devotee did the same by promoting the cult of Aiyappa in Bombay as well as in the towns of Varanasi and Haridwar in Uttar Pradesh (Clothey, 1982: 47-48).

At first the popular literature in Malayalam and English allowed me to link it with the royal and colonial sources of information about the origins of the deity. I have included in this genre the daily journals (mal. *dinapatram*), the weekly (mal. *vārika*), monthly (mal. *māsika*) magazines and other journals (mal. *patramāsika*), articles (mal. *Lekhanam*) as well as pamphlets (mal. *laghulekha* or *ceriya pustakam*, 'booklets'). The authors of these booklets printed by specialized publishing houses in the field of religious literature provide the public with their entire knowledge of Sabarimala pilgrimage. Note that this kind of literary production experienced a real success since independence because the state of Kerala has a high level of education

and literacy.<sup>13</sup> In Kerala and other states in South India there are many readers fond of this literature. One of these booklets in the English language provides a wide range of information and is very popular in Kerala (Vaidyanathan, 1992). A second one, in a Malayalam pamphlet (mal. *laghulekha*), relates the historical origins of the relation between the processional group of Alangad and the royal family of Pandalam (Balakrishnan Nair, 1992). Written in an emphatic style with long sentences and many arguments, this booklet represents a complementary source of information to the interviews I conducted with the two leaders fighting each other for the leadership of the processional group of Alangad. This booklet was brandished by one of them as a source of legitimization, as a tool for reinforcing his authority at the local level. A third Malayalam source is exceptional. It contains a series of eight articles (mal. *lekhanaparapara*, 'serialized articles')<sup>14</sup> published in a popular daily journal in Kerala, *Kalakaumudi* (Venugopal, 2001 and 2002). The journalist reproduced a long series of interviews he conducted with a strong personality residing in a tribal colony nearby the village of Erumely, a major transit point to Sabarimala.

Apart from popular literature there is a very different, powerful channel of diffusion, the Internet. Among the many web sites I will just mention two – that of Pandalam family's site ([www.ayyappa.com](http://www.ayyappa.com)) and that of Namputiri priests officiating at Sabarimala and at other śāstā temples in south Kerala ([www.sabarimalathanthri.com](http://www.sabarimalathanthri.com)). The latter could be considered a modern format of those printed journals magazines published by Brahmins in Kerala (cf. *kēralōlpatti*). The website of the association ABASS<sup>15</sup> ([www.saranamayyappa.org](http://www.saranamayyappa.org)) is one of the most informative concerning activities of this pilgrimage. Though those websites take the form of texts, written sources, the instable and elusive nature of websites bestow on them the status of 'virtual' sources. There is always some doubt about the origins and the intentions of their authors. If the Internet is useful for gathering various types of information, it does not yet constitute a tool for acquiring knowledge accessible for the pilgrims selected in my sample. Contrary to the mass media (press, radio, television, and cinema) and popular, vernacular literature, the Internet is not yet capable of playing a role or modifying the collective memory and imagery of Sabarimala pilgrimage.

To draw a parallel with the modernization of transportation and the modifications of accessibility to pilgrimage sites since independence (Kerr, 2001: 326),<sup>16</sup> the

13. According to the provisional results of Indian census 2001, the literacy rate of Kerala is around 90.9%.

14. *lekhanam* means 'article' and *parapara* is a set of things, of events, of persons sharing common aspects, organized in a precise order and often in a sequential manner.

15. Akhila Barathya Ayyappa Seva Sangam.

16. The first method of mass land transportation to be introduced in South Asia, began

wide-spread diffusion of a popular literature in vernacular languages certainly helped to popularize the figure of Aiyappa, its origin myths as well as its ritual prerequisites. A deeper analysis of the roles played by modern channels of communication, including popular literature, Internet but also press, radio, television (Lutgendorf, 1990: 128),<sup>17</sup> theatre (Clothey, 1982)<sup>18</sup> and cinema, would need to be embedded in the prolific field of research of the effects of standardization of social and religious values in contemporary India (Anderson, 1983; Tarabout, 1997). Tarabout has highlighted the importance of these changes introduced by modern means of communication in the diffusion of a 'general attitude of piety' (Tarabout, 1997: 141-44). An industry of recorded devotional songs in regional languages<sup>19</sup> has arisen since the 1990s; in the same way as the impact of transport modernization on participation in pilgrimage, the mass diffusion of cassettes made available to everybody a sense of the cultural and religious diversity of India. It has also, and this is important to notice, led to the standardization and depersonalization of ritual practices (Manuel, 1993: 129). Neglected by social science research on India, this popular and religious literature is a cultural object, a tool of communication and of diffusion of religious ideals. Beyond the primary effects of that literary production on the wider public, researchers should pay attention to the use of these new literary genres in the general context of reconfiguration of power relations at the local level: political claims, legitimization of social groups, reaffirmation of authority, rewriting of caste histories and their inscription in the regional and national history, etc. Finally the issue of popular literature in vernacular languages must be inscribed in any general thinking about social change in India. Popular literature is a place of expression which facilitates social and cultural diversity of opinions and reinforces democracy through the recognition of local and regional identities.

Before ending this chapter about mechanisms of diffusion, surprisingly there is a channel that is even more powerful than textual, visual or virtual sources: that is,

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operation in 1853 and quickly affected pilgrims and the temporal and spatial flows of pilgrim traffic.'

17. The diffusion of a serial putting in images the mythological narrative of Ramayana witnessed a success during the late 1980's by drawing attention of dozen of millions of TV viewers absorbed by the program offered by the national channel *Door Darshan*. Similarly, Aiyappa and the pilgrimage to Sabarimala have been given special care by film-makers all over South India.

18. The diffusion of a new-made play of theatre during the early fifties also contributed to the rise of popularity of Sabarimala pilgrimage among Tamil people.

19. Apart from origin narratives there is a register of folk songs dealing with the origins and historical activities of Aiyappa, orally (mal. *katha*) transmitted in the mountainous districts of the Western Ghâts. The contents of these songs are often repeated in devotional cassettes.

the grapevine. According to a process of diffusion by contagion (Sopher, 1967; Park, 1994; Delage, 2004c) at work in a local area or a neighbourhood, the oral and inter-generational transmission of pilgrim stories is without any doubt the main factor in enrolling new candidates on the pilgrimage. It is also the only one that cannot be traced!

## 5. Statistical sources, data representativeness and legitimacy of geographical discourse

There are two statistical repertoires to help understanding the connections between sources and the dynamic of geographical knowledge on contemporary India: the census and the questionnaire. The census of India was a colonial practice, a decennial classification of population dated from the end of the nineteenth century, more precisely since 1872 (Cohn, 1987). The institution of the census has published special books on temples, useful for locating places and their history (Jayashanker, 1987). Some historians such as Burton Stein have even used statistical analysis of geographical distribution of temple inscriptions in Tamil Nadu and South India (Stein, 1977). Apart from these specialized volumes the government of India publishes provisional results soon after the census and the final data some years later in the form of dense compilations on CD-Rom. The census website provides results and population maps at district level.<sup>20</sup>

The census data represent a dense research material for statistical analysts and other adepts of quantitative geography. Numerous geographers have used these data to map the distribution of religions in India, religion being a variable of census since the beginning. Apart from the state of Jammu and Kashmir, the six main religions (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain) are represented while other religions are not identified by the census typology.<sup>21</sup> Since 2001 the census has provided a wide range of data on demographic aspects of religion at the scale of the district and the state.<sup>22</sup> The interest of this specific data for geographers is not great as it only enables one to map more or less stable and fixed repartitions since independence, but not their social processes. The census publishes also topographical maps at the scale of 1:50000 centred around Sabarimala. Unfortunately, the diffusion of maps

20. [www.censusindiamaps.net/states/kerala.htm](http://www.censusindiamaps.net/states/kerala.htm)

21. According to census of 2001, India is composed by 80.5% of Hindus, 13.4% of Muslims, 2.3% of Christians, 1.94% Sikhs, 0.76% Buddhists and of 0.40% of Jains. The other religions and unclassified religions represent respectively 0.39% and 0.05%.

22. In India, the taluk is an administrative sub-district, the district being a subdivision of the regional state. This precision of data in the census had caused important political tensions at the moment of publication in September 2004. See also Roy, 1987, for a better understanding of the debate on religion and census.

showing a strip of coastline within 50 kilometres is restricted. As the totality of ritual places connected with the pilgrimage in the state of Kerala is mostly located in this strip of land, the locations are not available on maps.

Any deep sociological and geographical analysis of the pilgrimage should necessarily use a wide scale survey by questionnaire in order to get precise figures on the pilgrimage (Bhardwaj, 1973; Morinis, 1984). Our survey, which was prepared in the six languages commonly spoken at Sabarimala and diffused toward 900 pilgrims, required a whole crew of researchers originating from all the four southern states of India. It was conducted during the season 2001–2002 in the village of Erumely not far from Sabarimala. Apart from its sociological profile, this ambitious project notably permitted us to draw maps of geographical origins and itineraries of pilgrimage between the residences and Sabarimala while taking into account all the major places visited *en route*, whether it be of ritual or recreational importance (Delage, 2004b). The intense circulation of Sabarimala pilgrimage tends to distort the South Indian map and thereby renews geographical discourse on South India. There are three levels of analysis confirming this.

First of all, we need improved questionnaires. With the 900 pilgrims interviewed during the survey, I thought that the sample would be representative of the South Indian population, both from a sociological and geographical point of view. In fact, this issue of data representativeness led me unwittingly to a problematic of the legitimacy in producing any geographical discourse without statistical material adequate to produce a discourse at the South Indian scale. I was indeed in possession of four samples, each one being representative of the population of the four southern states, since the samples had been set up at random at the time of the survey. However, for several reasons, I cannot claim representativeness for my sample at the scale of South India. First of all, the sample has been stratified with an objective of 250 pilgrims by state. Thus it is not representative of the differentials of population between the four southern states. Then the global sample does not include either the internal variety of geographical origins or the participation, even if negligible, of other states (south of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh and Orissa). To be clearly representative at the South Indian scale I should have set up another sample while interviewing at random one thousand pilgrims at the moment they got the benediction (mal. *darśanam*). This method is impossible to realize from a practical point of view. The data aggregation of four samples being not possible, the interpretation does not allow the production of a discourse at the scale of South India but, beyond expectations, the debate appears to be even much more complicated than the simple representativeness of geographical data.

At a second level of analysis, the construction of an artificial category called 'South India' can be tracked back to the first orientalist works dated from British

colonization. Drawing up a hyper-selective historical geography, territorially poly-centred on specific narrative episodes and dynasties (Cholas, Vijayanagara empire, etc.), this geography is representative for their authors of South Indian space as a whole (Raju, 2002: 196). Furthermore, this space is neither a homogenous unit from a natural and geographical perspective nor from a linguistic and political point of view. When the orientalists created the concept of 'Dravidian India' in the nineteenth century, they designed an opposition between the northern Aryans and the southern Dravidians, the latter slowly shifting to a new category called 'South India'. This new category of analysis has lost its legitimacy in anthropological and geographical discourse. Although my own sample survey does not lead us to produce a discourse at the scale of South India, the sum of our research materials combining ethnographical data with the analysis of discourses produced by different actors of Sabarimala pilgrimage led me to another South Indian reality. A territorial analysis of this pilgrimage tends to strengthen the definition of the category of 'South India' beyond the linguistic categorization of 'Dravidian India' and its political uses by the Tamil intelligentsia at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Even if imprecise because of the weakness of my sample survey, the geographical limit of diffusion of Sabarimala pilgrimage is linked with the four southern states. And this limit is not to be confused with administrative boundaries of South India, even if the hypothesis of an opposition between the south-Indian particularism of Sabarimala, and for example, the pan-Indian universalism of Tirupati<sup>23</sup> in Andhra Pradesh is valid. As Radhika Sekar wrote in the only scholarly book published about Sabarimala, we should not forget that Sabarimala pilgrimage has been boosted by a context of opposition between a still active 'Dravidian' ideology and a north-Indian desire to enforce the Hindi language in the south (Sekar, 1992: 92). It is in the context of the early fifties that the universal values of egalitarianism, of equality and of brotherhood started to spread all over South India by the new-born temple authority of Sabarimala. However, the so-called 'Dravidian' ideology has lost its strength since the eighties and the dialectical opposition should be interpreted today in terms of culture rather than in terms of a 'so-called' historical difference of civilization. This is the main contradiction between the ideology of the universality of Ayyappa cult diffused by the temple's authority and the reality of the spatial covering of South India by the pilgrimage. South India remains a valid self-encompassing category.

23. Tirupati temple was until the 1950's a religious and territorial symbol of South Indian identity, as Sabarimala seems to be today, Tirupati has become certainly a pilgrimage center with a pan-Indian audience because of Vishnu Balaji, a deity incorporated in the noble Hindu pantheon. Despite the fact that it has been severely sanskritized by values of ascetics and renouncement, the ambivalent and locally based deity (Ayyappa) presiding over Sabarimala temple is in my opinion a constraint on the expansion of the pilgrimage to the North Indian side.

## Conclusions

The debate opened up by a territorial analysis of Sabarimala pilgrimage is fruitful, as it brings to the centre of the academic stage of South Indian studies fundamental principles of analysis and of fieldwork practices. Several levels of discourse are required to apprehend the reality of pilgrimage phenomena: one is provided by individuals who experience the pilgrimage, one by the institutions and one by the researcher. The first two are obviously interpretations of reality, whereas the third one is an interpretation of the former two visions and experience of reality.

If I voluntarily omitted to mention in this presentation the person as a major source of knowledge about pilgrimage, it was in order to conclude my demonstration with the discourse and the life story, by the interview as methodological tool. A systematic campaign of interviews carried out in Kerala and Tamil Nadu with ordinary pilgrims corresponds to a double objective. If the series of interviews with religious leaders led me to a better understanding of how the processional groups have been set up throughout the time, and unintentionally to the study of internal conflicts, on the other hand, a second series allowed me to understand the way the pilgrims perceive the pilgrimage, its myths and history as well as its values, and how they integrate the hierarchized network of ritual places. With the interview as a tool I became more interested in the individuals, taking into account the context of enunciation, the content and formulation of meaning of discourse in the formation of popular forms of knowledge. Interviews are tools, which portray the geographical subjectiveness of individuals by extracting from discourse the narrative thread of real experience before, during and after the pilgrimage. To understand the location of individual discourse on Sabarimala pilgrimage I must identify *a priori* the sources and registers from which the individual has drawn information in a selective manner according to their own special level of education, social background and personal interest, to build up his own discourse about Sabarimala. The fact that the grapevine is the main channel of diffusion of religious innovation in South India must be embedded in the wider debate on the status of individuals and life stories among anthropologists. The interpersonal relations through which the processes of joining with new religious ideals and practices have their roots cannot be traced by the fieldworker in social sciences. The fluid realities of setting up social and geographical identity in the context of pilgrimage can only be tracked through the life story; the only, but not the least, interpretation or particular discourse stuck between the only approachable reality and the discourse of the researcher.

On the level of method, I will add a final working hypothesis. The intense circulatory regime of pilgrimage produces a homogenization of religious values and practices of Hinduism in South India. This hypothesis speaks to a diffusion of universal values of Sabarimala pilgrimage by the play of channels of information such

as the television and cinema. I have shown on the one hand that the pilgrimage is in the process of identifying South India as a geographical and cultural pole of identification. The modern means of communication diffuse the popularity of the pilgrimage at the four corners of South India but not beyond. To conclude I would argue that South India takes its unity from its diversity without being reduced to the arithmetical sum of its parts. This principle works both for an anthropological, sociological and the statistical approach of a social phenomenon in the location. Secondly, I would say that from the point of view of various religious and political ideologies of Indian space, the Sabarimala pilgrimage refers to South India as a social and cultural whole. As I have shown earlier the assumption that the north has always encompassed the south without ever being encompassed by the south is no longer true. In conclusion the geographical identity of contemporary Sabarimala is defined by the constant play between internal (oriented towards its own diversity) and external boundaries (oriented towards the rest of the country) of South India.

This opens a debate on the regionalism of culture in contemporary India.

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