CHAPTER VIII

SHRINES AND RITUALS: THE PILGRIMAGE

In the preceding chapters we presented the interface of the domestic and public spheres in the way the Catholic rituals were conducted and indigenised. The analysis hitherto has been confined to a limited space, namely, clusters of villages. Moving beyond the narrow confines of a village, in this chapter we shall discuss sacred places to which people visit away from their own familiar surroundings to fulfil vows and perform a number of rituals to cope with the contingency of their everyday life. Such sacred places, which are often associated with some miracles, are known as pilgrim centres and people who visit them are called pilgrims (Turner 1987:167).

There are two types of shrines related to pilgrimage in Catholicism: one dedicated to the relics of the saints and the other to Mary. Shrines dedicated to Mary are places sanctified by the apparitions of Mary which are believed to have taken place in the past. The principal ones, in terms of the number of pilgrims visiting them, are the shrines of Our Lady of Lourdes in France and Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal (Sigal 1987:331). Our focus in this chapter is on the shrine that is dedicated to Mary (Maata) at Vailankanni, popularly known as the ‘Lourdes of South India’ due to the apparitions connected with the place (Sahay 1985:141).
THE SHRINE AT VAILANKANNI

Vailankanni is a panchayat, with a population of 5,000, situated a few miles south of Nagappattinam along the Coromandel coast of Tamil Nadu. It is home to the church of Our Lady of Health, a church that was founded on the basis of visions and miracles in the seventeenth century. Since then it has gradually acquired fame throughout India and, through the people of Indian origin, abroad, too.

According to a legend current among the people, Maata is said to have appeared to a lame boy who used to sell buttermilk on the roadside under a Banyan tree to help himself and support his widowed mother. One day, as he was seated, a woman of peerless beauty, holding a still more beautiful child in her arms, is said to have appeared before him and asked him for a cup of buttermilk to quench the thirst of her child, which he readily gave. She cured him of his lameness and asked him to inform a Catholic man living in Nagappattinam of this happening. When told, the Catholic man had no difficulty in believing the boy, having himself had a similar vision the previous night. Both reached Vailankanni and were favoured with the same apparition, and Maata asked for a church to be built in her honour. A thatched chapel was built with the co-operation of the people and a statue of Maata with the Infant Jesus in her arms was installed. In view of the miraculous cure of the lame boy and the subsequent cures that were reported to have taken place there, Maata came to be known as Our Lady of Good Health (Arockiamata).

Another local legend has it, that a little shepherd boy was carrying milk from Vailankanni for his master, a Hindu Vellala living in Nagappattinam, and on his way
near the village tank he stopped to quench his thirst. He then relaxed under a Banyan tree near the tank and soon fell asleep to be awakened by a bright vision of a beautiful lady holding a child in her arms. Both wore a celestial halo around their heads. The lady asked the boy for milk, which he gave, and soon the vision disappeared. The boy reported this to his master and asked to be forgiven, as the quantity of milk was less. To his great surprise, the master found the pot of milk was full as ever. The boy and his master immediately returned to the spot and they were favoured with the same vision. The tank is now called ‘Our Lady’s Tank’ and its water is used as holy water.

These two legends are significant from the point of view of indigenisation, as they contain a rich mixture of Hindu and Christian motifs. Mary’s apparition is related to the over flowing of milk, which is a familiar motif in Tamil temple history. We came across a similar narrative about the Nellaiappar temple at Tirunelveli: A man used to pass through the forest carrying milk for the king and invariably he would trip on a tree stump and spill the milk. On reporting the matter to the king some men were sent to clear the stump and while doing so blood gushed from the tree stump. It is said that the king and the people prostrated at the spot and built a temple there. When comparing this myth with the legend of Our Lady of Vailankanni we observe certain similarities in the manner in which Mary appeared to the boy in the forest and the gushing of blood that is related to the Hindu god.

There are a few other points that link Maata with the Hindu temple myth. The shrine at Vailankanni is associated with forest. Originally the church at Vailankanni was situated in a remote uninhabited kaaTu (forest). According to Mosse (1986:446), Mary, like the goddess who resides outside the village, cannot tolerate the pounding of the ural
(mortar) and ulakkai cattam (pounding and grinding sound), activities associated with village people and which carry 'an explicit metaphor for sexual intercourse.' The forest stands for renunciation both in Hinduism and Christianity. Even today we see in the shrine of Maata the image of a tree (see Photo 8.1). The tree, a recurring image in Tamil temple history, represents 'the vital link between the shrine and the transcendent worlds below and above,' and equally between 'the chaos of the wilderness' and its opposite, the order of settled village life over which Maata extends her protection. Since tree also represents the Tamil idea of localisation and fixity of the divine power into material objects (Shulman 1980:44-47), Maata's power appears to be localised beside the tree where she appeared.

The location of the church near the sea has close association with the Hindu temples that are situated near ponds, rivers and seas. Water is a symbol of life and purity. Catholics relate Maata to life and purity. Every pilgrim to Vailankanni bathes in the sea, which cleanses one in preparation for entering the sacred space. This has been an age-old observation among the Hindus.

The Catholics consider Maata as cakitti (power) which is again symbolised in the overflowing of milk in the apparition narration (Mosse 1986:446). The people narrate the power of Maata giving the example of the numerous miracles effected by her. Thus, the oral version of Maata at Vailankanni has the Hindu motifs inter-linked with its legend.

The first chapel built on the present site of the magnificent church of Vailankanni is also ascribed by local tradition to the direct benevolent intervention of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is said that sailors of a Portuguese ship bound for Sri Lanka from Macao prayed to Mary to save them from a storm in which they were caught and they vowed to
build a church in her honour wherever they landed. They were miraculously saved and on their landing were led by Mary to a near by thatched-roof chapel mentioned earlier. They built a church on the spot that Mary pointed to them. To their great wonder they saw that the statue from the chapel was transferred to the new church. On their subsequent visits, the sailors donated many objects to the church, among which are the rare porcelain plates now preserved in the new Basilica. The feast of Our Lady’s Nativity coincides with the day on which the miracle at sea is believed to have taken place, that is, the 8th of September (Santos 1993: 4-9).

In Vailankanni there are two important sacred spots: (1) The church in which the miraculous statue of Maata is enthroned. This is situated facing the sea. It is here that the individual votive offerings of the people are received. (2) The shrine located near a pond where Maata is said to have appeared, and is called Maata kuLam (Our Lady’s Tank). This is situated behind the main church about a kilometre away. This spot was originally a kaaTu (forest). The Holy Way that leads the pilgrims from the main church to Maata kuLam has thirty stations, which portray the birth, life, and death of Jesus and Mary. On this Holy Way people say the ‘rosary’ and the ‘Way of the Cross.’ Some walk bare foot at twelve noon on a hot summer day, while others go on their knees on this Holy Way to the shrine. Around Our Lady’s Tank is a concrete platform in the shape of a lotus and behind it stands the original chapel to Our Lady. The people fulfil their vows and carry out the ritual of penance at these places. The church and the icons in Vailankanni have a European style, but this seems to be of secondary importance to people, who mainly believe in their efficacy (Newman 1993:8).
Vailankanni draws thousands of devotees, many of whom come on tiruyaattirai (sacred pilgrimage on foot). Pilgrimage on foot is considered to be the highest form of tapas (austerity), and it is believed to be meritorious. There are three seasons during the year which attract a large number of people on tiruyaattirai: (1) during the kooyil tiruvizaa (feast of Our Lady of Vailankanni), which falls in the month of September, (2) during the Lenten season (a period set apart by the Church for fasting and penance in memory of the passion and death of Jesus), and (3) the month of May (a month dedicated by the Church in honour of Mary).

During her fieldwork, the researcher had the opportunity of observing and interviewing the devotees on tiruyaattirai during the feast days and the Lenten season. The pilgrims revealed that they undertake pilgrimage for more than one reason. Many go to fulfil a vow or as an expression of thanksgiving for favours received. Some go in the hope of experiencing miracles in their own lives, and still others to obtain inner peace. For most it is a form of penance and purification, and a prayer for abundance of life in the world.

In the first part we enumerate the rituals carried out during the course of the pilgrimage, and in the second part we shall enumerate the individual vows. While doing so, we propose to view the impact of cultural influences on the practices of Roman Catholic pilgrims in Tamil Nadu.
tiruyaattirai TO VAILANKANNI

tiruyaattirai being the most prominent aspect of popular religiosity in which many indigenous elements are found, the researcher adopted a participant observer approach to gather accurate and detailed information on pilgrimage. In April-May 2001 she joined a group of 320 people who went on a tiruyaattirai (journey on foot) to Vailankanni from Devakottai in Sivagangai District.

The tiruyaattirai by this particular group was initiated by Thiru Sellam (a Catholic), a bus conductor. As a conductor he had opportunities of being on the route to Palani, a pilgrimage centre of the Hindus in Tamil Nadu. Seeing the Hindu pilgrims going to Palani, he was inspired to start one to Vailankanni. He went on tiruyaattirai along with two of his friends in the year 1980. After undertaking this journey for three consecutive years, he invited others to join in and started with seventeen pilgrims in the year 1983. The year the researcher joined the group, the number had swelled to 320 including both Catholics and Hindus.

Our tiruyaattirai is named Annai Vailankanni Maata tiruttala punita tiruyaattirai (Pilgrimage to the Holy Shrine of Our Lady of Vailankanni). Thiru Sellam was talaivar (the leader) of this group. The talaivar is not a full time spiritual master, but a person with leadership qualities, experience of pilgrimage, and spiritual maturity. Incidentally, our talaivar also has the power to exorcise persons under demonic possession. The talaivar not only provides leadership on the actual journey to the shrine but also helps people spiritually. While the Catholics address the leader as talaivar, the Hindus address
him as caami\(^1\) (Lord) as they do to any person on the pilgrimage, and the young fondly use the term appa (father).

**Rituals in tiruyaattirai**

Turner (1987:167) views pilgrimage as a ‘social process’ involving a series of actions which he calls the ‘sequence of social drama.’ With reference to tiruyaattirai to Vailankanni we can identify five sequential stages, with specific rituals marking each stage. The preparatory stage begins from the day the pilgrim wears the dress and the maalai (‘rosary’) around her/his neck. This ritual, known as the maalaipotutal (wearing the ‘rosary’ beads), is held nineteen or forty-one or three days before the actual journey depending on the convenience of the pilgrim. The pilgrim sets herself/himself apart from others by wearing a dress having an unusual colour,\(^2\) though the most common colour is black, blue, green, and kaavi. We wore a dark blue, which, according to Beck (1969:571), is a colour associated with black and black is an important colour in repelling evil influence. Our informants connected the colour with the protection of Maata on the journey. Similarly, the ‘rosary’ beads are worn as a protective charm.

The maalaipoTutal ritual takes place in the church: After the Mass the priest blesses the ‘rosary’ held out by the prospective pilgrims, which then is placed around their neck by the talaivar.\(^3\) This is akin to the kurucaami putting the maalai for the Aiyappan pilgrims, which is also carried out in a temple.

Preparation for the pilgrimage involves the observance of certain vows of austerity from the day the individual wears the maalai. These include (a) uLLa cuttam (clean at heart): the avoidance of sexual relationship and losing of one’s temper, and saying the ‘rosary’ and attending the Mass. (b) uNavil cuttam (eating food that is pure): the
avoidance of non-vegetarian food and intoxicating beverages. (c) uTaLil cuttam: keeping
the body clean with a daily bath. Apart from these, some go barefoot, sleep on the floor,
and fast on Tuesday and/or Friday or give up one meal a day. In brief, the pilgrims lead a
life of a sanrnyaasi (an ascetic) for the days they wear the maalai. All this is akin to the
self-discipline expected of Aiyappan pilgrims.

If there is a death in the family, the pilgrim calls off her/his tiruyaattirai by
removing the maalai. Unlike their Hindu counterparts, the Catholics do not view death
as pollution, but as a taTaMkal (hindrance). taTaMkal is interpreted in two ways: either
the individual has not taken the preparation seriously or the time has not yet come for the
fulfilment of the intention for which the tiruyaattirai is undertaken.

The Journey to Vailankanni:

After the maalaipoTutal ritual at 4 p.m. on the 18th of April we started our
tiruyaattirai on the 2nd of May. After the priest blessed us in the church we set out. The
family members, relatives and friends blessed us by drawing the sign of the cross on our
foreheads. In turn, some of the family members took the blessings of the pilgrims in the
belief that such blessings brought them grace (tiruyaattirai pooravaMkaliTam ciluvai
vaMkuvatu naLLatu).

In five days during which we traversed the rough roads for 210 km the body was
submitted to hard and voluntary discipline in terms of food and wayside relaxation. The
rhythm of our daily journey was set out collectively, with prayers said by the leader and
repeated by us in the mornings and evenings.

The tiruyaattirai on the whole is viewed as a form of penance. The often heard
verses were ‘naaMkal paavikal eMkal paavattirkku itu oru vazi’ (we have sinned and so
we suffer and the suffering could be averted through penance) and ‘uTalai varutti keeTTaal Maata kanTippaa koTuppaarkaL’ (through our physical pain we want Maata to work a miracle).

**Holy Stopovers:** On the way to Vailankanni, the pilgrims visit a few sacred sites - a church, memorial or grave. The sacred site that we visited is a gravesite of a Catholic girl known as Marithiammal kallaRai. The local tradition has it that this is the grave of a young girl who died of smallpox while returning from pilgrimage to Vailankanni many years ago. As Burton (quoted in Turner 1979:121) says, ‘Those who die on a pilgrimage become martyrs...the ghost departs to instant beatitude,’ and this young girl came to be regarded as a holy person. Since the girl was a kanni (a virgin), the place is perceived to be all the more powerful.

Another factor that adds to the sanctity of the site is that the girl died of smallpox. The Hindus view smallpox as the visitation of the goddess Mariamma herself. The person dying of smallpox is considered to be on par with the goddess. Though the Catholics do not refer to Mariamma, they regard this affliction as enhancing the sacred quality of the person; one hears people saying ‘ammapaattu cettu poccaam’ (died at the sight of mother). To die of smallpox is to die a holy death, is what they believe.

Women in their menses do not enter this site, lest they incur the wrath of the kanni. This is as if the Catholics identify the source of the negative aspect of female power as residing in sexuality (Mosse 1986:446). Proscription of women in their menstruation entering the shrine is a uniquely native norm which is alien to Catholicism. The Church does not restrict entry of persons on the basis of bodily pollution, and this belief and the related practices are in contravention of the official teachings of the Church. Since
traditional Hinduism considers woman impure during the menstrual period (Sekar 1992:42), we see the influence of Hindu beliefs on the practices related to this gravesite.

The significance of this sacred site became apparent when we reached it on the fifth morning of our journey. Two women who had shown signs of possession earlier ran towards the grave and began to dance the peeyaTTam (devil dance). The talaivar performed the rites of exorcism (see Chap. 6).

All the pilgrims took the ritual bath in the pond nearby and entered the site in wet clothes. The talaivar blessed the pilgrims at the grave by applying kuMkumam on their foreheads and gave them flowers and ash from the grave (see Photo 8.2). Thus, the entire ritual at this shrine runs parallel to the practices observed in the Hindu temples.

The second holy stop-over was Neermulai kebi, a Christian grotto where the Crucifix is placed on an artificially built mountain. The proximity of the site to Vailankanni (about 20 km) has bestowed it with importance. Here the pilgrims offer candles as a thanksgiving in anticipation of reaching Vailankanni. Most of them believe that from here the tiruyaattirai gets easier.

Purificatory Bath: The belief in bodily purity is very much explicit in the behaviour of the pilgrims. Since Maata 'resides' in Vailankanni, not just in the church built in her honour, bathing at the entrance to Vailankanni becomes a precondition for entering the sacred sphere. In our wet clothes we proceeded to the shrine saying the 'rosary.' As we entered the shrine holy water was sprinkled on us by the talaivar and all knelt before the image of Our Lady as the talaivar prayed on behalf of the group. On coming out of the church each pilgrim was blessed by the talaivar and the maalai was
removed. Once the *maalai* is removed the pilgrims are no more bound to the group and are left free to carry out their individual vows.

As part of the individual vow every pilgrim makes it a point to bathe in the sea and pray in the shrine (see Photo 8.3). In addition, the pilgrims carry out numerous votive offerings as thanksgiving for the favours received or pray for a favour (A detailed list of these rituals is given in Appendix 8.1).

The return journey is psychologically different: Once the promised vows are fulfilled the pilgrims become tourists (Turner and Turner 1978:22), and our group was no exception.

The re-incorporation of the pilgrim into the community is simple. The family members receive the pilgrims with reverence, for they are now considered holy. The younger pilgrims take the blessings of the elderly by kneeling down and the elders bless them with the sign of the cross on the forehead. The elderly pilgrims bless the younger members of their family.

The pilgrims to Vailankanni generally carry back such sacred objects as holy oil, holy water, ‘rosary’ beads, holy medals, *pori kaTali* (puffed rice and grams), candle, and flowers which have touched the feet of Maata. As in the Hindu tradition (see Sekar 1992:87), the Catholics also consider it auspicious to receive such sacred objects from one who has completed the *tiruyaattirai*.

The entire ritual observed by the members of the *tiruyaattirai* is charted out by the *talaivar*. The *talaivar* has drawn the ritual of *tiruyaattirai* from those observed in the pilgrimages to Palani and Sabarimalai and has merged them with the Christian practices. The *tiruyaattirai* is one situation where the Catholics have autonomy to express their
culturally-rooted religiosity, and this is precisely the reason that the entire pilgrimage is coloured by the rituals of the Hindu pilgrimage. The role of the Church is limited to celebrating the Mass, absolving sins and blessing the people on *tiruyaattirai*.

Certain parallels can be drawn between the *tiruyaattirai* of the Catholics and that of the Hindus. This is particularly so with regard to such ascetic practices as fasting, walking bare foot, and wearing black, blue, green or *kaavi*. Thus, apparently there is unity at the level of external or material aspects. But the adaptation of the Hindu practices by the Catholics is partial. For instance, the predominant colour chosen by the Catholics is blue, a colour associated with Mary. Similarly, while the Hindus wear ‘*rutraaksa maalai,*’ the Catholics wear a string of beads known as ‘*rosary.*’ At the level of meaning, however, there is a pre-existing unity in the beliefs of both the Catholics and the Hindus. Both feel the need to wear special garments at the time of penance and purification. This is an important aspect of indigenisation.

*neertikkaTan (VOWS AND VOTIVE OFFERINGS)*

Often the explicit purpose of visiting a shrine is to make a request. The shrine offers one the advantage of being in the presence of the divine. There is also a beneficial atmosphere (sacred space) which will aid the prayer of the devotee. It is believed that the benefits of the visit to a shrine are further enhanced when the devotee has observed the rules of appropriate conduct, that is, observing all the rituals enjoined on pilgrims.

The visit to the shrine to make a request often precedes the making of vows. It is implied that on fulfilment of the vow the devotee takes appropriate offerings to the
divine. The diverse rituals practised by the people at the shrine are more or less individual devotions combined with vows.

The Tamil term neertikkaTan means both 'vow made to the deity and offering in fulfilment of a vow' (Tamil Lexicon). It is formed from two roots, namely, neer, meaning that which is appropriate and straight, and kaTan, meaning a debt which is cleared when the vow is fulfilled. At times of crisis persons promise to do something appropriate to the divine: Examples include offering a coconut sprout or a cradle to the divine when a hitherto barren woman is blessed with a child, and vowing to stay for a week or more at the shrine (vaarattukkuiruttal) by a person suffering from a disease.

The difference between a request and the fulfilment of a vow is not always clear. Offerings in the shrine are in the form of silver or wax replicas of a cradle or parts of the body. They are offered to Maata as reminders by some or as thanksgiving by others. The more general offerings at the shrine denote both the request and thanksgiving and consist of candles and flower garlands. Close to the Maata kuLam scores of the replicas of cradles are hung and saffron thread tied on the trees as reminders to Maata for the help expected; the cradle denoting the need of the devotee for a child and the saffron thread denoting the need for a bride/bridegroom.

Thus, neertikkaTan brings out the reciprocal relationship between the individuals and the divine. The devotee not only makes the vow but also offers something appropriate for the favour received. The divine accepts the votive offerings of the devotees, and in return confers grace (aruL) and blessing (aacirvaatam) on the devotee. The aruL and aacirvaatam may be received by the devotee through the various objects in
contact with Maata such as the oil from the lamp burning near the altar, salt and pepper on the altar, and flowers adorning her become the medium of arul and aacirvaatam.

While, generally, neertikkaTan is an individual choice, the type of neertikkaTan and its use are learned from one's culture and is often particular to a region. Thus, for instance, in the shrine of St. Thomas, in Dindigul District, persons affected by boils and pimples offer a broom to the saint as a request and thanksgiving. This practice is peculiar to this region and it is not observed in other Catholic shrines. A list of neertikkaTan and the manner in which they are carried out in the shrines by the Tamil Catholics is provided in Appendix 8.1.

Animal Sacrifice

Blood sacrifice is common among the Catholics and the Hindus of this region. Though a typical native practice, the way Catholics carry it out differs markedly from the practice of the Hindus. Among the Tamil Catholics sacrificial offering to the saint is known as caamikkku kiTaaiveTTutal. After saying prayers in the church, holy water is sprinkled on the goat three times. If the goat shakes its body and head it is taken as a sign that the saint has accepted the sacrifice (namma veenTutalai eeRRukonTaar). If not, it is considered that the saint is not pleased with the offering of the devotee (see Photo 8.4). When they get the sign of approval, the goat is killed. A portion of the meat offered to the priest as part of the ritual. After the cooking is over the priest is requested to celebrate the Mass and to bless the food. Some times a elderly person brings holy water from the church and sprinkles it on the food or requests the kooyilpiLLai to do so. The food is first served to the poor and then the relatives are invited for the votive offering.
Among the Hindus the animal is sacrificed in front of the deity and the blood of the animal is poured into the mouth of the deity or the puucaari drinks it while he is in a trance. The cooked meat is offered to the deity (paTaiel). The Catholics do not sacrifice the animal inside the church but in the church compound. The Saint notionally receives the life of the animal. A share of the meat is given to the priest. It is important to note that the saint is disassociated from the act of killing, as unlike the Hindu deity, the saint is not viewed as the one who needs to be appeased with the blood sacrifice.

According to Shulman (1980:91), the common factor in animal sacrifice among the Catholics and the Hindus is the notion of exchange. The devotees bring to the sacred sphere an offering that is returned to her/him in a new form through the ritual. The one who sacrifices is ultimately identified with her/his gift; in other words, the person sacrifices herself/himself in order to win the reward of the saint/deity. The reward here refers to more life in the form of health and material increase. From the point of the view of divine, the saint offers himself in order to bring blessings on the devotees. This is the underlying theme in the Tamil myths. ‘The deity offers up his own life in order to be reborn from the sacrifice’ (ibid. 92). Thus, the one offering sacrifice identifies oneself with the sacrificial act of the divine.

In this context it is interesting to note that, unlike in the Hindu temples, in the Vailankanni shrine the coconuts brought to the church are not broken. Though coconut is an important object of ritual offering among both the Hindus and the Catholics, the form of offering the same to the deity/saint differs. The Catholics burn a wick in the coconut.

The response of the Church to religious practices of the lay Catholics has been ambivalent. In some cases, e.g., toTTil kaTTutal, the Church ignores the practices all
together. In other cases, e.g., receiving the offerings brought by the people in the shrine, it co-opts them with its official practices. From our observations at Vailankanni it is clear that the Church has used the popular religious practices as a means to sustain the people’s faith in Jesus. Moreover, the Church receives the offerings inside the church.

In still other cases, e.g., animal sacrifice, tonsuring, etc., the Church has allowed, if not incorporated, their performance by providing a place outside the church. The Catholic priests now view the rituals carried out by the individuals at the pilgrim centres as a continuity of the existing cultural practices.

From the interviews conducted among the Catholics it was revealed that the native rituals help them express their needs and devotions. At the same time the institutionalised forms of prayers become a spontaneous way of praying while carrying out the native rituals. For example, on *tiruyaattirai* the pilgrim says the ‘rosary’ and on reaching the church the pilgrim takes part in the Mass. As the pilgrims put it, ‘*kaTavuLiTam enteevaikalai collimuTitapiraku, jabam collukayil parolakatil iRukinTRa yeMkal tantaye and aruL nirainta mariye, evaikal taanae enakku teRintta jabaMkal*’ (we are familiar with institutionalised forms of prayers and when we stand before Maata with the coconut sprout or any offering the spontaneous prayer that we say are ‘Our Father and Hail Mary’). Thus, at the pilgrim centre, the Catholics express a set of Christian religious ideas while at the same time continuing with their native cultural practices. The sacred sphere the church is the place where the *neerttikkaTan* is carried out by the Catholics, though the Church herself does not prescribe them. This underlies the fusion of two modes of worship, namely, the official (Church) and non-official (indigenous) in the sphere of the church at Vailankanni and other Catholic pilgrim centres.
Summary and Conclusion

Pilgrimage, and the rituals accompanying it, throw up a number of interesting strands of indigenisation. It is striking that in the evolution of the Catholic pilgrim centre, such as for example Vailankanni, the course of actions and rituals are similar with the Hindus.

The origin of the pilgrim centre is a myth or a set of myths. The locale of such myths is in the proximity of a water body like a lake, river, or sea. The course of the pilgrimage begins with a period of preparation during which the pilgrims abstain from items of pleasure and observe practices disciplining the body and mind. Considering the type of rituals observed during and at the end of the pilgrimage, one finds a good deal of resemblance between the Hindus and the Catholics.

It must be emphasised, however, that the striking similarities are only at the surface level. A closer look at our data reveals different dynamics of indigenisation. In the choice of myths and the locale of pilgrim centres the Catholics place themselves very close to the Hindus. In the course of the pilgrimage, they walk along a parallel line in the sense that they follow the same ritual proceedings of the *tiruyaattirai*. In all this the Catholics have christianised the *maalaipoTutal* by wearing the ‘rosary’, praying with the ‘rosary,’ invoking the name of Jesus and Mary, having the ceremony in the church. Finally, carrying out the *neertikaTan* in the church.

We should note that a popular pilgrim centre like Vailankanni draws not only Catholics, but also a large number of Hindus. It is possible that initially only the Hindus ‘transport’ the practices followed in Hindu pilgrim centres, such as the offering cradle, tying of saffron thread, etc., which are familiar practices found in the Hindu shrines. A
Catholic, who is familiar with the meaning of these symbols and associated practices, follows the same when he or she is faced with similar needs thus endowing them a Christian character.

The gradual process of mixing and integration of native elements can be explained in terms of the types of pilgrims who visit the shrine. Almost from its origin a shrine attracts people of different faiths. Though the shrine of Vailankanni is explicitly Christian in its origin, the pilgrims belong to different faiths and come with their own specific religious expressions. Gradually, the boundaries that mark the different forms of worship (as in neerittikaTan, for instance) get blurred and the pilgrims acquire certain degree of ease in accepting and adopting different forms of worship.

Catholicism, though well organised with regard to its worship and other life-cycle rituals, seems to yield to this process of mixing and integration specifically in the pilgrim centres. Monitoring and regulation would mean censuring the people who visit the shrine, which would be incompatible with the universality the Church attaches to the faith in Jesus.

The origin and development of a pilgrim centre is usually the result of individual initiative. The Church may acquire control over the shrine only at a later point of time. By that time the centre would have acquired a character of its own which is invariably native in orientation. That is how locale of the pilgrim centre and the myths that provide sanctity to the locale are often native in character. The choice of seashore and the myth of apparition of Our Lady to the shepherd boy, as in the case of Vailiankanni, bear close proximity to the native pilgrim centres at the ideational level. Thus, the absence of the Church in the origin and initial development of the shrine could be yet another reason for
the felicity of mixing and integration of the native elements. Thus, the pilgrim centres, pilgrimages and votive practices present themselves as a terrain in which indigenisation of Catholicism takes place intensely.

**Endnotes**

1. The Hindus going on pilgrimage to Sabarimalai and Palani are addressed as *caami*. In the course of time these individuals form a group and one among them functions as a leader addressed by others as *kurucaami* (the chief). Among the Aiyappan pilgrims only a person who has gone on a pilgrimage to Sabarimalai at least three times can be a *kurucaami* (one who initiates the pilgrim). However, this is not the only criterion. The person has to be recognised by others as a *kurucaami* (Sekar 1992). From this account we find a parallel between the *talaivar* and the *kurucaami*. Though the Catholics do not address the pilgrim as *caami*, they exhibit the same respect for the persons on *tiruyaattirai*.

2. Leach (1976:58) has argued that colours make 'convenient makers' of role reversal in religious ritual when they are employed to indicate the differences between religious roles and secular ones. According to the pilgrims, the colour sets them apart from others and it is also a sign of austerity.

3. The year the researcher joined the *tiruyaattirai* the ritual of *maalaipoTutal* was carried out on the 18th of April 2001. The Hindus who join the *tiruyaattirai* follow certain rituals to deal with their adherence to two religious traditions. Prior to the *maalaipoTutal* in the church they visit the shrine of their *kulateivam* (family deity) and make offerings. Once they wear the *maalai* (rosary) they do not visit the temple or participate in any of the *pooja* (worship) till the *tiruyaattirai* is completed. They further explained their action saying 'we neither want to incur the wrath of our god nor that of the Christian god whom we approach in need.'

4. The shrine of St. John de Britto (Arulanandar) in Oriyur in Ramnad District is popularly known for animal sacrifice. St. Britto was beheaded at Oriyur in 1693. The
shedding of his blood is believed to have sanctified the place and localised his power there. The animal sacrifice narrated here was observed in this shrine.

5. For most people this has become not only the fulfilment of a vow but also a time for the reunion of families. Whenever a family makes a vow to offer a goat or cock they inform the relatives to take part in the offering and share the caami caappaaTu (sacred meal). If an invitee fails to turn up without a satisfactory reason it is taken as an offence. In the same way, if someone closely related is not invited, it is also taken as an offence.

6. The animal sacrifice among the Hindus was observed in Karai a village in Sivagangai District.
8.1 Maata Appears to a Milk Boy

8.2 Blessing the Pilgrim at Maritiammal kallaRai
8.3 Bathing in the Sea

8.4 Animal Sacrifice