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# ***Economic Significance of Pilgrimage:*** ***A Focused Micro Level Study from Kerala, India***



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# ***Economic Significance of Pilgrimage: A Focused Micro Level Study from Kerala, India***

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## **Abstract**

Pilgrimage to any sacred or divine place is of great importance to express the socio-cultural sentiments of a person or society. This study attempts a focused approach of *Sabarimala* pilgrimage, by looking in to the involvement of a group of people. *Sabarimala* is significant not only as a renowned and well-visited pilgrim centre, but it is deeply attached to the very life of a group of people on the fringe and buffer zones of PTR. The economic dimension of the pilgrim season is quite impressive and the generated income has spin off effects. Along with its economic side, its environmental aspects are explored in the study.

**Key words:** *Pilgrimage tourism, economics of pilgrimage, Sabarimala, Lord Ayyappa, Periyar Tiger Reserve, eco-development, bio-diversity conservation, pilgrimage economics, Eco-development committees, grass-root democratic governance committees.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Pilgrimage to any sacred or divine place is of great importance to express the socio-cultural sentiments of a person or society. The idea of pilgrimage may be evolved, through history, as an articulation of devotion, loyalty or social solidarity to some faith or belief and from time immemorial it is rooted in the culture and tradition of every organized society. The transcendental experience of pilgrimage is of primordial in nature and it has an explicit inspirational and enlightening effect on the worshiper due to the grandeur of belief associated to the legend or folklore around which the holy trip persists. Pilgrimages that draw on considerable number of devotees have an impressive economic dimension, besides the socio-cultural auspiciousness observed for getting a divine favour. This paper examines the socio-economic aspects of a secular annual pilgrimage to a forest shrine situated in the south western part of peninsular India.

*Sabarimala* is the abode of Lord Ayyappa,<sup>1</sup> the main deity in the Forest Shrine situated in the south western part of Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR), Kerala, India. It is a prominent place of pilgrimage in South India, known for its secular attributes of devotees, who throng to the ‘sacred grove’, in millions, after observing penance in a non-compromising ritualistic way. The myth associated to the pilgrimage is an archetype of Hindu-Muslim religious harmony. The sanctum sanctorum of *Lord Ayyappa* is being visited by more than six million pilgrims within a short span of sixty days during mid November to mid January (*Mandala–Makara vilakku* season, hereafter the season). The visitation cross-section comprises not only Indian nationals, but foreigners. The temple and its adjoining forest tracts (*Poonkavanam*, the sacred grove of *Lord Ayyappa*) are prime importance to many an institution, and the pilgrimage season is a veritable example of the synchronized functioning of all those institutions. The temple is a prime concern to the PTR management, the apex specie in the protected area (PA) is tiger and it is the sacred vehicle of *Lord Ayyappa*. The PA owes its origin through the protection of tiger. In addition to its religio-cultural significance, the pilgrimage season is a source of livelihood to thousands of households living on the fringes of PTR, by providing refreshments and temporary shelters to the pilgrims. Various administrative organs of government work in tandem to extend support to the devotees.

The report has been organized as follows: the introductory part deals with back ground of the study, objectives and its methodology. First part of the report makes a synoptic outline of *Sabarimala* and EDCs.<sup>2</sup> Findings of the study are narrated in Part two. Part third of this report draws out observations and suggestions. The fourth part summarizes the study.

### **Background of the Study**

*Sabarimala* is significant not only as a renowned and well-visited pilgrim centre, but it is deeply attached to the very life of a group of people on the fringe and buffer zones of PTR. The economic dimension of the pilgrim season is quite impressive and the generated income thereof has spin off effects. The *Ayyappa* devotees spend good amount of money as part of their visit to the temple, as they have to undertake long distant strenuous journey on foot *through* undulating non-motorable forest tracts (traditional pilgrim routes) enroute to the temple. Hence

providing refreshments and temporary shelter facility to these far-off pilgrims offers ample opportunity to earn income. The season, in its dubious exploitative manner, had proved to be a lucrative business to many season vendors, who stooped down to capitalize the pilgrimage season. Till recently the fringe area community did not have much stake in the season business. The India Eco-development project<sup>3</sup> introduced in PTR in 1998 helped the fringe area community (Eco-development Committees, EDCs) to provide pilgrim amenities along two traditional routes (*Azhutha-Pamba* and *Uppupara*), by evicting the far-off vendors, who not only deprived the very sustenance of the local people, but meted out every possible harm to the forest eco-system. The EDCs have been playing a crucial role in the season business from 1998-99 onwards, with the legal back of the Hon'ble High Court of Kerala. The PTR management monitors the EDC activities along the designated routes for its better future management. This paper is the result of a monitoring study undertaken during 2006-07 pilgrimage season.

### **Objectives of the study**

The broad objective of the study is to make an overall review of the EDCs involvement in *Sabarimala* season business 2006-07 with special reference to its economic dimension. Hence the following are identified as specific addresses of the study.

1. To conduct a focused study and prepare an unbiased report on the EDC initiatives during the season business 2006-07
2. To examine the feasibility and effectiveness of group and individual businesses
3. To gather the minimum services required by the devotees during the pilgrimage

### **Period of study**

The study was undertaken during November 2006 - January 2007 (*Mandala-Makaravilakku* season 2006-07)

## Study area

Though the season business stretches out to far and wide areas, due to the domicile attributes of pilgrims, the present study confines to the places where in the EDCs run pilgrim service centres along the traditional routes as well as at *Sannidhanam* (sanctum sanctorum).

## Methodology

This study is entirely based on primary survey collected during the period of study, besides ethnographic methods. The research team undertook three personal visits along *Azhutha-Pamba* route during first, middle and last stretches of the season. In addition to the full stretch visits to the *Azhutha-Pamba* route repeated visits were undertaken randomly on many days at random intervals to *Azhutha-Kallidamkunnu* and *Cheriyonavattom-Valiyanavattom*. The methods used for obtaining primary data were Semi structured Questionnaire, Feedback analysis through Pilgrim survey, Participant and Non-participant observation, discussions with EDC members and forest officials on duty at *thavalams*.<sup>4</sup>

### Part 1

#### **SABARIMALA AND EDCs**

The *Sabarimala* pilgrimage season offers ample opportunity to engage in way-side vending of food, light refreshments and resting place to the devotees, by erecting makeshift tents and shops, on their way to as well as way back from the Temple. Thus time immemorial this economic activity has been there. As it is well known that the significance of the Temple is that it is a forest shrine, situated right in the typical Tropical rain forest, a well protected tiger reserve in the country, the *poonkavanam* (temple and its adjoining forest area) is noted for both its biodiversity and its religio-cultural significance. There are two traditional routes,<sup>5</sup> besides the motorable road till *Pamba* (4km proximity to the sanctum sanctorum). An appreciable portion of the devotees who flock to the Temple opt their way through dense forest of PTR, on bare foot, about 20km from *Azhutha* to *pamba* (first traditional route), 4km from *Pamba* to *Sannidhanam* (Sanctum Sanctorum of *Lord Ayyappa*) and 6km from *Pullumedu* to *sannidhanam* (second traditional route). A large chunk of devotees still opt for bare-foot walk through ‘the stony and thorny’

hill track as it is a ritual and their pilgrimage commemorates the mythological sacrifice of the main deity (the journey of an adolescent Boy – Lord Ayyappa – to jungle, in search of leopard-milk as a curative to His mother’s illness), though motorable road option is open till *Pamba*.

During the course of this trek to their Holy destination, the pilgrims need drinking water, food and resting place (*viri*<sup>6</sup> as it is called). Hence providing these facilities to the pilgrims open an avenue of income generation. It used to be that the entire temporary shops (‘pilgrim facility centres’) enroute to Sabarimala were auctioned out to big business tycoons from afar. Their ‘business’ along the traditional routes was not conducive to the forest eco-system and the livelihood security of the neighbourhood people, who were the health victims of season and its aftermath. Firstly, the fringe area people had only less or little stake in the opportunity. Moreover, the stake of local people confined to those who have good socio-economic status, sidelining the asset-less and marginalised communities. Secondly, ‘season business’ along the traditional path meted out colossal wreckage to forest ecology and its resilience. And, lastly, the ‘season business’ was nothing but a vicious ring of many influential groups. The things were changed when a participatory biodiversity conservation programme - India Eco-development Project – was initiated in Periyar Tiger Reserve during 1997-98. The project envisaged the conservation of forest and its biodiversity by ensuring the livelihood security of the fringe area people. Hence during the formation of village EDCs (local decentralized democratic governance for biodiversity conservation), the PA managers had assured that the deserved EDC members would be permitted to conduct the provision of pilgrim amenities along the traditional path during the pilgrimage season, with mutual obligations and responsibilities. Along with the village EDCs, there is a user group EDC named SAPP (*Sami Ayyappa Poonkavana Punarudharana*) EDC, whose members were doing season business at different *thavalams* along *Azutha – Pamba* route. In this regard, the forest shrine of Lord Ayyappa is significant not only as a world renowned pilgrim centre, but it is deeply attached to the very life of thousands of people on the fringes of PTR.

The EDCs have been playing a crucial role in the season business from 1998-99 onwards, with the legal back of the Hon’ble High Court of Kerala. The present year

also the season business along *Azhutha – Pamba* route and *Pandithavalam – 4<sup>th</sup>* mile route was exclusively conducted by the EDCs under the guidance and supervision of PTR management. This study was initially conducted as an evaluation exercise for monitoring, mentoring and fine-tuning the programme. It explores the economic dimension of transactions at pilgrimage centers from the angle of service providers along the traditional routes.

## Part 2

### FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

In this section we will present the findings of the field research that was conducted concurrently during the pilgrimage season 2006-07. As it has already been mentioned there are two traditional routes to the temple. Separate analysis was made for each route to understand the economic dimension of individual routes.

#### *Pilgrims centers along Azhutha – Pamba Route*

There are eight *Thavalams* (*Azhuthakkadavu, Kallidumkunnu, Vallithode, Vellaramchetta, Puthussery, Karimala, Valiyanavattom* and *Cheriyavattom*) along the route. There were about 223 pilgrim service centres and their extension counters, in addition to make-shift toilet blocks, along the routes. A detailed list of the service centres is presented in the figure 1 (see appendix 1).

The figure 1 discloses the relative position of group and individual establishments. It is clear from the figure that in *Cheriyavattom* and *Valiyanavattom thavalams* there are no individual shops. However, in *Valiyanavattom thavalam* one could see clearly segregated portion of *viris*. It was understood that each member in a group owns separate portions in the *viris* of their own and engaged their loyals to take care of it. This is because in this *thavalam* the only earning possibility is *viris*, as the place is ideal for watching ‘*Makarajyothy*.’<sup>7</sup> Majority of the group members remain in the group as they do not have any other option. The *Azhuthakkadava thavalam* has the largest percentage of individual centres (93%), and the lowest percentage is at *Karimala* (7%).

Though there were only 223 centres based on the number allotted to the EDC members, the actual number of centres is more than that. The total number of outlets (including extension counters) comes about 304.



Though the number of service centres is very low comparing to nine years back, the Azhutha – Pamba route has excess number of shops. The devotees themselves opined that they never need such mushroom structures throughout the traditional route. The shops at Cheriyanavattom and Valiyanavattom were found mixing their business by engaging in many an activity like viri, hotel, stationery, provision & vegetable vending etc. The business people themselves have revealed that it might not be fully effective as it led to inefficient management.

### **Financial Analysis**

As it was observed by Preston (1992) every pilgrimage is associated with a field of economic exchange, due to the operation of some permanent or temporary marketplaces, linked to the provision of pilgrim amenities enroute and on site.

An attempt was made to collect and to bring out the financial aspects of the *thavalams* along the traditional route. *Cheriyavattom thavalam* was made a detailed analysis as the number of service centres was comparatively very low and it was practically possible to get detailed data that serve to the purpose. There are five service centres in the *thavalam*. The sources of receipts and expenditure channels of the centres are presented separately in tables 1 and 2 (*see appendix I*).

In addition to INR 5.635 million (*all currencies are expressed in Indian Rupees. INR 1 = \$ 0.022*) of sales receipts from shops, an approximate amount of INR 0.2 million was generated from comfort stations and tender coconut sales counters. Hence the total turnover of *Cheriyavattom thavalam* was INR 5.835 million.

The largest item of expenditure is for provision and vegetables. It is interesting to see that a considerable amount of expenditure has been disbursed as wage payments (INR 1.377 million). If calculate the total direct employment generated at *Cheriyavattom thavalam*, based on the minimum wage stipulation in the state (INR 140/- per day), it comes around 9839 man days. When we consider the indirect employment as part of *Cheriyavattom* initiative, the total number of generated employment will be quite impressive and bewildering. This is the case of *Cheriyavattom* alone. Since it is very difficult to know the statistics of employment from other *thavalams*, as they are predominantly individual or intra-group initiatives, we attempted *Cheriyavattom* alone.

The expenditures on items such as wage disbursements purchase of provision and vegetables, Erecting make-shift tents and miscellaneous elements during the season were compared with respect to the sales proceeds of the groups. It will disclose the manner in which they spend on various items in relation to their expected receipts. The result is presented in the following table.

It is clear from the above table that the group no. I spends relatively higher share on wage among the group. The principle of equity is also followed in the group no. I, as every member in the group have equal number of working days. The lowest percentage is shown in the group no. IV. With respect to the expenditure on provision and vegetables group V is cost effective (30.99%), but group IV had spent much on the item (43.44%) though they had the highest sale proceeds. Group no. I is seemed to be prudent spending unproductive items, as their expenditures on Shed building (2.44%) and miscellaneous items (1.63%) are comparatively low.

The trends in sales proceeds, wage payments, purchase of provision and vegetables, along with surplus generated, are represented in figure 2 (*see appendix I*). The figure shows that the centres I and II have somewhat uniform trend pertaining to wage payments, Purchase of provision and vegetables and surplus amount accumulated. Wage fund falls short of surplus amount only in the case of service centre IV. Wage payment once more crosses the surplus amount when it is the case of centre V. The relative position of each centre's sales proceeds and wage payment is shown in figure 3 (see appendix I).

On analyzing the comparative trends of sales proceeds and generated surplus of each service centres at *Cheriyavattom* as percentages to the *Thavalam*, certain underlying features can be found out. The most economically efficient unit at *Cheriyavattom* is none other than service centre IV. When its sales proceeds constituted only 28% to the total, its share of surplus in the *thavalam* was 44% to the total. This is the single most unit that has surpassed the others in acquiring more percentage surplus than the sales proceeds. Analogously, the least efficient unit is centre V, by getting only 2% in the total share of surplus, when their sales percentage is 11% of the total.

## **Analysis of Brisk Sales along the *Thavalam***

### ***a) Sale of Lemon Soda***

Lemon soda is a preferred item of devotees during the trek as it is ideal for recharging human energy. Learned from experience lemon soda vending units were put up in the maximum stretches in Azhutha-Pamba route. The manufacturing cost of one lemon soda is INR 3/- and INR 3.50/- depending on without and with sugar respectively. The earning possibility is INR 6/- and INR 7/- respectively, ensuring 100% profit. Even the big shops have extended their counters to key points in the respective *thavalams* for vending lemon soda, fruit slices and juices. These light refreshments are much demanded in Azhuthakkadavu climb, Kallidamkunnu, Karimala climb and Karimala downhill.

Soda making is a much profitable activity during the season. Except in Cheriyanavattom and Valiyanavattom all other *thavalams* make soda on site. Nobody has disclosed exactly how much soda they can sell during the season. Lemon-soda is the largest selling item in between Azhuthakkadavu and Manjappody in Valiyanavattom *thavalam*. In this regard a rough estimate is made based on the onsite production of soda.

Cylinder and bottle rent	INR 300/-
Refilling charge	INR 150/-
Transportation (Vehicle and head load)	INR 550/-
Wage of soda makers	INR 300/-
Total production cost/cylinder	INR 1300/-

Production capacity of one cylinder is 1250 to 1500 bottles (on an average 1375 bottles)

Price of one carbonated soda:

Direct selling INR 3/-

Shop selling INR 2.50/-

Profit:

Case A: Direct selling: (1375 bottles X Rs. 3/-) 4125 – 1300 = INR 2825/-  
per cylinder

Case B: Shop selling: (1375 bottles X Rs. 2.50/-) 3437 – 1300 = INR 2137/-  
per cylinder

Average profitability is **191%**

### ***b) Sale of Pineapple and Water Melon***

Slices of pineapple and water melon were sold throughout the *thavalams*. Sale of pineapple slice is another lucrative business. The average onsite (accessible by vehicle) price of one kilogram of pineapple is INR. 6/- to INR. 18/- . Around 15 slices can be made, '*with mathematical precision*', from one kilogram of pineapple. Each piece is sold out at INR. 2/-. Thus the total earning from 1kg of pineapple is INR. 30/- and hence an explicit profit of INR.18/- per kg on an average. Perhaps no other item will be this much profitable that offer a profitability of 150%.

Value added items are sold as juices in a few places.

### ***c) Sale of tender coconut***

Tender coconut is yet another notable item that the pilgrims make a beeline for it. It is sold at various prices at various places, INR.10/-, INR.11/-, INR.12/- and INR.15/-. It is interesting to see that two adjacent counters in a particular *thavalam* (Valiyanavattom) sold it for INR.12/- and INR.15/-, that itself was sans displaying price. One tender coconut will cost an average of INR. 5.5/- on site, plus head load charges depending on the places of vending. Head load charge will vary from INR 1/- to INR.1.50/- as per the distance of transportation. It is estimated that an average of INR.6.5/- can be earned as profit from selling tender coconut.

## ***Uppupara Route***

There are nine service centres along the Uppupara route: four centres at *Pullumedu* and five of its kind in the *Poonkavanam* upto *Pandithavalam*. The EDCs in the Vallakkadavu regions are engaged in the provision of services along the route and all of them are group initiatives. The *Thavalam* has comparatively smaller share of the season business as the route becomes live towards the close of the *Mandalapooja* season. However, during the last four days of *Makaravilakku* many of the EDC members from *Vallakkadavu* can be seen vending pilgrims' requisites from fourth mile to *Poonkavanam*.

By engaging in the season business this year, a total number of 2820 man days of direct employment were generated for the EDC members from *Vallakkdavu* region, from *Uppupara* route. Out of it 2380 man days are of group members and 440 man days went to the other members or the respective EDCs. There is no uniformity of wage to the group members. It ranges from INR. 125/- to INR. 283/- this year. The wage fund constitutes the surplus generated from the shops. But the workers are paid INR. 150/- uniformly.

### ***Sannidhanam***

The PETS EDC (Periyar West) provides resting places to the pilgrims who throng to *Sannidhanam* for *Makarajyothy Darsan*. The Earning during the season constitutes a comfortable share of their supporting income throughout the year. In the previous years watchers from *Vallakkadavu* Range also joined for season initiatives at *Sannidhanam*. But this year the initiative was exclusively given to the watchers from the West Division.

### **Biodiversity benefit of LPG Use**

As part of the mutual obligation and commitments, the SAPP EDCs have agreed to use LPG in all possible *thavalams*. Due to practical difficulty of transportation, the *thavalams* except *Cheriyavanavattom* and *Valiyanavattom* do not use LPG. This year 951 commercial cylinders were used in these two *thavalams*. It implies that fuel wood equivalent to the LPG would have been burned here otherwise. Hence an attempt was made to estimate the total quantity of fuel wood that was saved by using LPG in these two *thavalams* as per the calculation of ANERT.

One commercial cylinder contains 19.2 kg of LPG

Hence, the total quantity of LPG used is  $951 \times 19.2 = 18259\text{kg}$

As per the ANERT<sup>8</sup> estimate, 1 kg of LPG is equivalent to 7.7 kg of fuel wood

Therefore,  $18259.2 \times 7.7 = 140595.84$  kg of fuel wood

That is, 141 mt fuel wood, approx, was saved by SAPP EDC by using LPG

In addition to being used for cooking in the service centres, LP is sublet to pilgrims for cooking purpose when they are staying in the *viris*. The benefit of using LPG is not only limited to avoiding fuel wood, but extends to not discharging toxic

gases, avoiding wastage and expanding mutual benefit by purchasing LPG from *Pamba Jyothy* where the EDCs have the stake of share capital.

It is also known that LPG sale of domestic cylinders at *Pamba Jyothy* had increased during the season.

### **Pilgrims' Feedback**

*Ayyappa* Devotees were also contacted for getting their feedback regarding the season management. Around 25 groups were selected at random from different *thavalams* in three days. The samples were selected on observation method that covered devotees from all geographical locations. The pilgrims expressed that they really did not want more number of shops along the traditional path that posed disturbance to their religious trek. To them price level was affordable and quality was enough. They were pleased with the system of displaying price list and billing system. Many expressed their dissatisfaction that this year they were not provided free drinking water at par with their requirements and they were charged differently in a particular *thavalam* for bottled drinking water. What they need during the Holy trek are drinking water, resting place and gruel. Pilgrims have made requests regarding the provision of drinking water and more latrine facility along *Azhutha – Pamba* route.

As part of the study the perceptions of the pilgrims pertaining to two hypothetical scenarios were gathered. The first scenario is to sell a portable water carrier at *Azhuthakkadavu* and at *Kuzhimavu*, the points where the devotees enter the PTR, and medicated drinking water will be sold at different places by charging moderate prices. It is expected to eliminate the long run complaint of pilgrims that drinking water supply is not up to the mark and it also can eliminate disposable water bottles from the route. Pilgrims of small group have whole heartedly agreed to this. Whereas large groups, numbering ten and above, raised suspicion regarding its practicability when they need to buy more number of bottles. The second scenario is to collect a moderate lump sum amount on behalf of the SAPP EDC at the entry points and provide them free requisite services along *Azhutha- Pamba* route. Majority of groups from outside the State, especially large groups, agreed to the proposal. But devotees from Kerala side had a skeptical look on the opinion.

It is known that a devotee will spend, on an average, INR. 45/- to INR. 60/- during the *Azhutha – Pamba* trek, in case the trek is completed one stretch without taking a night shelter at mid *thavalams*. When the trek extends to two days the average expenditure will go up to INR. 100/- per head.

### **Financial Sustainability of SAPP EDC**

The SAPP EDC has set to show the symptoms of its internal weakness. They are up in arms to any casual reference or any suggestion against their will. In a prejudicial manner they have formed a wall around their chosen alliance. And they will not allow other to enter into that alliance. Draining out of community development fund (CDF)<sup>9</sup> is formidable. Hence the financial sustainability of SAPP EDC is felt to be morbid, in case the current pattern of fund utilization continues in future. Fund grabbing was observed on examining the money circulation during the pre and post season periods. Almost all amount of fund is exhausted, on the eve of the season, by disbursing personal loans to the members. They are not used to repay it to the CDF during the season or immediately after the season. They wait for, it is said, the next season to come and the conditionality that nobody will be allowed to do business without setting off their past dues has become precedence. Without having any other option they arrange money to repay the debt, provided they will be issued loans afresh within days. As a result the fund is not growing as years pass by so as to make good the falling value of money when time is running up.

The office records of the EDCs concerned do not show the evidences of sound financial practices. A general trend observed is that fund is growing steadily up to 2004. It is understood that the EDC people would rather repay the loans obtained from money lenders and from bank, than from EDCs. When they borrow from the money lenders the interest varies from 3% to 5% per month. If it is from nationalized bank, the monthly interest is 1.25%. But they need not pay any interest for the money they can facilitate from CDF, if and only if, there is sufficient fund availability. Even though it is the fact, a paradoxical affair pertaining to the financial accommodation from the EDC is that they will neither interest nor the principal. The principal is paid only under coercion. This is because they have not yet owned the CDF. There is a minority group in the EDCs (general phenomenon of all EDCs) who are trying to enrich the CDF. But they cannot resist or withstand the

concerted move of the majority. Hence the inevitable result is that the financial position of the EDCs will face a doomsday. And, since finance is the king pin of this social upheaval, it will disintegrate.

When it was pointed out as unsustainable practice, the EDC members interpreted it otherwise. They expressed that the money was disbursed to the EDC as grant and the Department is frantically speaking of bank balances. Hence the people keep the money at hand for long as a surety against certain decisions, which are unwelcome to them, taken by the Department. For example, some members are adamantly against forming group ventures. They motivate others not to repay the loan until the next season.

It is also found that some members are used to the habit of spending lavishly and blow out the monetary benefit earned during the season. After the formation of the EDCs, their credit access has widened. The credit sources like commercial and co-operative banks, inter EDCs, private money lenders are easily accessed to them now. It is understood that some chairmen unnecessarily lag the repayment of loans within the stipulated time. Even when the individual members repay their share of the loan, the chairmen either keep the money for long or will not remit the money to the bank altogether. These facts resound the practice of an unhealthy financial system. The SAPP EDC confederation is getting weakened not only financially but socially also.

Since all power is vested with the “SAPP general”, the *thavalams* wise executive committees have only negligible role. Regarding the necessity of an apex body like “SAPP general” there were contradictory versions. It may be ideal that the SAPP confederation is a sub group of Periyar West confederation, only an ad hoc arrangement for the season and self dissolve after it. This is because of two reasons. Firstly, the financial utilization of SAPP confederation is not seen sustainable. Secondly, unhealthy practices were observed, overtly this last year, as part of the election of the executive committee members, on the premise that it is a regular set up. Even though such unhealthy practices are sporadically there in the case of village EDCs, they are not so detrimental. Moreover, the SAPP confederation was a necessity in the absence of a federated body to co-ordinate and represent the small fragmented groups of season business men. Now we have a higher representative



body, West Confederation, and there by a withdrawal strategy of SAPP confederation may be thought of. When forming an ad hoc arrangement, the general body must consist of the entire members of the executive committees of the EDCs concerned for a wider representation.

### **Group Vs. Individual Initiatives**

Except in *Cheriyavattom*, the service centers in all other *thavalams* are against group initiatives. For many reasons group shops are suitable to traditional routes. The advantages of group shops are said to be discipline, mutual benefit, group cohesion, equity, philosophy of participatory initiative etc. Large groups, range from 8 to 14, are ideal for *Cheriyavattom*, *Valiyanavattom*, *Karimala* and *Puthussery thavalams*. Initiatives of groups, numbering 2 to 3, maximum 5, are ideal for *Azhuthakkadavau*, *Kallidukunnu*, *Vallithode* and *Vellaramchetta*. The former four *thavalams* have more prospective than that of the latter groups.

It was also attempted to disclose the subtlety of animosity to group shops. The study shows that two extreme groups (powerful & mighty and deprived) stand against group initiatives. The powerful and militant group opposes it as they are not ready to share their comparatively better earning. They have accomplished to have suitable locations to do the business. The deprived group is afraid of joining the group ventures as they are fearful of being deprived further, through cheating, when the powerful among them take over the others. When the powerful group wins over the deprived group during opinion gathering, together they form majority and there by defend the notion against group idea.

Even the celebrated group initiatives at *Valiyanavattom* and *Karimala* a clear cut intra-group fragmentation can be seen. The unnecessarily stretched out extension counters challenge the real spirit of group initiatives.

### Section 3

### **OBSERVATIONS**

This part of the Report figures out the certain notable elements observed during the period of study.

1. A notable element of equity principle could be seen in some of the pilgrim service centres. Every member in the group has equal number of working days

during the season. It has been decided that, they said, no member will be given leave during peak times. However, if the circumstances warrant so, it will be the responsibility of the member concerned to make an alternative arrangement. Moreover, every member is eligible for five days paid leave during the lean period of the season. When the number of working days of the group members ranges from 31 to 93 in other units, every member in the centre one is fortunate enough to have 95 working days during this season.

2. Pilgrims along the tradition route is on the rise every year. Moreover, they were seen trekking venturing the night and there was inflow after the season along the traditional path.
3. Waste management at *thavalams* was found fairly better. Cleanliness is more with respect to service centres than with respect to *thavalams*. In a particular *thavalam* it could be observed that the premises of certain centres were filled with garbage, but in certain other shops garbage was disposed off effectively.
4. The staff on duty at *thavalams* tried their best to make the effort a grand success. The EDC members assertively agreed that the force behind the success of season business was the sincere co-operation of the department staff who was engaged in the supervision of *Thavalams* and shops.
5. The practice of updating cash book was better than the previous year. Those groups/individuals, who are skeptical of the requirement of disclosing the transaction details deliberately lag tendering the cash books. In the group ventures the influential people overwhelm and this creates problems quite often. Majority of centres, except in *Cheriyavattam*, had not updated cash books up to *Mandalapooja*'
6. Many service centres, generally late starters, did not get bill books/token on time. Moreover, unnecessary bill books were seen given to service centres. For eg., lemon juice shops were given bill books of gruel, curry, coffee, tea etc.
7. Some shops, especially inside *thavalams*, were seen not displayed price list. When it was asked why so, it was told that new prices were yet to be determined for certain items. Hence an initial confusion was there pertaining to the prices.

8. Operational guideline was not communicated this year in *thavalams*. It used to be read out during the pre-season meeting of *thavalams* and reached a consensus in the previous years.
9. Those ladies, who have been proscribed due to their age, were seen occasionally in *thavalams* like *Azhuthakkadavu*, *Kallidamkunnu*, *Vellaramchetta* and *Vallithode*.
10. The service centres did not serve drinking water, free of cost, fully to the genuine requirement of the trekkers. The pilgrims were asked to buy bottled drinking water instead. However, we cannot put them on blame for this. In majority centres in the inside *thavalams* water shortage was acute, and they had to spend pretty good amount for fetching water from afar. Moreover, most pilgrims from other states use the water for purposes other than drinking at the very vicinity of service centres. Though comfort stations were provided in almost all *thavalams* on affordable pay and use manner, the pilgrims from other states generally do not use it and make filth every possible water sources and accessible spaces as a ritual.
11. There was no uniform rate for bottled drinking water even in a particular *thavalam*, except *Cheriyavattam*. It was decided in the pre season SAPP Executive Committee to sell water at INR.15/- per one litre of bottled water. During the course of all visits we personally found that one litre water was being sold at INR.14/-, INR.18 and INR.20/- depending on person-situation characteristics. It was also heard that water was sold at INR.25/- at *Kallidamkunnu* and INR. 30/- to INR. 40/- at *Valiyanavattom* during the last two days of *Makarajyothi*.
12. Many service centres had erected more than two separate counters in the same *thavalam* to have maximum possible reach to the pilgrims. This practice raised the actual number of centers than what was permitted in a particular *thavalam*.
13. It was explicitly understood that there were two service centres in *Puthussery thavalam* they were not run by those persons on whose name they were allotted. Similarly, at *Azhuthakkadavu* two service centres were run by one person.

14. Two young boys aged 13 each were seen selling refilled drinking water at *Karimala 5<sup>th</sup>* landing during one of the field visits. It was known that they hailed from *Kalaketty* EDC.
15. It is felt that power politics and acquaintance with higher ups in the Department enable some EDC members to fritter away the mutual obligations and responsibilities. It was observed that they could easily challenge any officer and were able to realize their goals by cutting across the local officers or through political patronage. Affirmatively, 'capacity building' (empowerment) has attained, but not in the desirable, nor in the emulative level generally. This practice is not good for the EDC concept in the long run. The dissatisfied and demotivated staff may withdraw their overarching protective cover to the EDC initiative.
16. Certain disorderliness and indiscipline were observed at pretty good number of shops, especially extension counters, except *Cheriyavattom thavalam*. Tendency to discard uniforms, not displaying identity marks, not displaying price list in visible manner, smoking in public, not giving free drinking water, variability of prices of packaged drinking water even at one *thavalam* etc. were the undesirable practices observed during the visit. The staff on duty was expressed to be tired of managing them.
17. The discrete practices observed from certain shops/ *thavalams* may, ultimately, lead to the phenomenon of the 'Tragedy of the Commons' (Hardin, 1968). It is a situation in which each actor in a group enjoys the full positive result of its action, while the negative utility of the action is shared. Because this incentive structure, the actors individually take actions that advantage them in the short run, but that are destructive both collectively and to the individual in the long run. We have instances that when one shop/ *thavalam* over charges the devotees, the whole EDC initiative is paraded as money squeezing entities. The chaotic affairs followed by the elephant trampled death of pilgrim at *Valiyavattom*, two years back, was a clear cut pointer to this phenomenon.
18. The extension counters (*thattukada*) were supposed to for vending fruit slices and juices. But, in practice, they were transformed to be petty shops that lent the passer by congestion of shops along the route. Moreover, the extension counters

did not have serial numbers that led to the confusion of unauthorized shops along the *thavalam*.

19. There were centers that conducted business only for the last four days of the season. When contacted it was told that season business was a ritual to them, rather than a profit making initiative.
20. There is ample prospect for linkages of various EDCs through economic activities associated with season business.
21. The employment potential of the season business is quite impressive, as around one-third of the total expenditure constitutes wage payment on an average.
22. Only very few members are ready to participate in the affairs other than 'business'. This year post season cleaning has not been done so far (February mid, 2007), throughout the *thavalams*. The EDC members left the *thavalam* as soon as the 'business' was over. Even after repeated contacts, it was heard, of the staff they did not turn up. This is against the sole philosophy of EDC initiative.
23. Majority of the shop runners are seen enjoying the benefit of 'free riding'. They will voluntarily participate in no activity, that is non-monitory and fro a common cause. They are on the rush for 'business', but not for post season cleaning, EDC meeting or to turn up from a common benefit programme. This group is appeared to be pillion riders of a few in the forefront.
24. There was no uniformity in the pattern of wage distribution and the amount of wage paid to the group members. Along the *Azhutha-Pamba* route the wage of group members and the imputed wage of owner occupied centres range from Rs. 200/- to Rs. 250/-. When some shop uniformly fix wage either Rs. 200/-, Rs. 225/-, or Rs. 250/- throughout the season, the others set it as Rs. 200/- during less peak period and Rs. 250/- during peak period and shop construction time. Whereas at *Uppupara* route the surplus amount of a particular shop constitutes its wages fund, and it is divided equally with the total number of man days of that group. Hence for the group members along the *Azhutha – Pamba* route have both wage and dividend (as the case may be), but for them along *Uppupara* has dividend-embedded wage.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The evaluation of the business after the season has made it clear that only the group establishment was a grand success – economically, institutionally and ecologically. In many *thavalams* like *Puthussery* and so on it was found that the shops on either sides of the route encroached major portion of the pathway. Moreover, the shops were seen too big for its practical purpose. Such matters are to be monitored properly and discouraged on time in future. The spatial sizes beyond requirement should be brought down for shops, and thereby let the unutilized area be regenerated naturally.

It was through a series of concerted fight that the EDCs got exclusive space to season business along the traditional route. Now it has almost become their right. The external environment is felt not conducive for the EDC initiative. Sabarimala pilgrimage and the associated business opportunity are not of recent origin. The Kerala Forest Department heralded the EDC concept and some part of the benefits of the season business is made available to the local people. But the initiatives and guidelines of the Department are opposed vehemently, when they are against the personal interest of a few mighty. But the PA people cannot leave it half way, since the biodiversity impact of the programme is commendable. Moreover, the EDC initiatives along the traditional route are thought to be an “eco-rational path method.” It represents a straight forward practical procedure to integrate two dimensions: an economic dimension and an ecological one. Hence the reformative steps should continue in future also. Since it needs a comprehensive positive social change, it will take time to take root in the society. But we must show the will to have a positive change. Therefore, let the initiative continue with optimism.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> To know more about Sabarimala visit <http://www.sabarimala.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Grass roots democratic governance committees with entitlement and empowerment to implement community decisions on sustainable development.

<sup>3</sup> A pilot project for participatory forest management programme initiated in PTR with World Bank and GEF support. The programme envisaged to address the issue of trade-off between bio-diversity conservation and livelihood security of the people in and around forest.

- <sup>4</sup> Temporary resting places (base camps) in the forest, where the pilgrims seek refreshment, food and shelter on their trek to the holy shrine.
- <sup>5</sup> The routes that are preferred ritually by the devotees. In this case they have to undertake tedious and strenuous trek through the dense, stony and undulating forest tracts.
- <sup>6</sup> The temporary shelter space offered to pilgrims.
- <sup>7</sup> A celestial star appears on the eastern side of Sanctum Sanctorum of Ayyappa temple registering the end of the pilgrim season. For more details visit [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Makara\\_Jyothi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Makara_Jyothi)
- <sup>8</sup> Agency for Non-conventional Energy and Rural Technology (ANERT): A nodal agency for the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, Government of India, to carry out central programmes in Kerala. The agency is responsible for promoting, developing and implementing non-conventional, renewable and alternate energy devices and technologies in the state. For more details visit <http://anert.gov.in>
- <sup>9</sup> Community development fund is the self managed internal fund of an EDC that can be utilized as seed money.

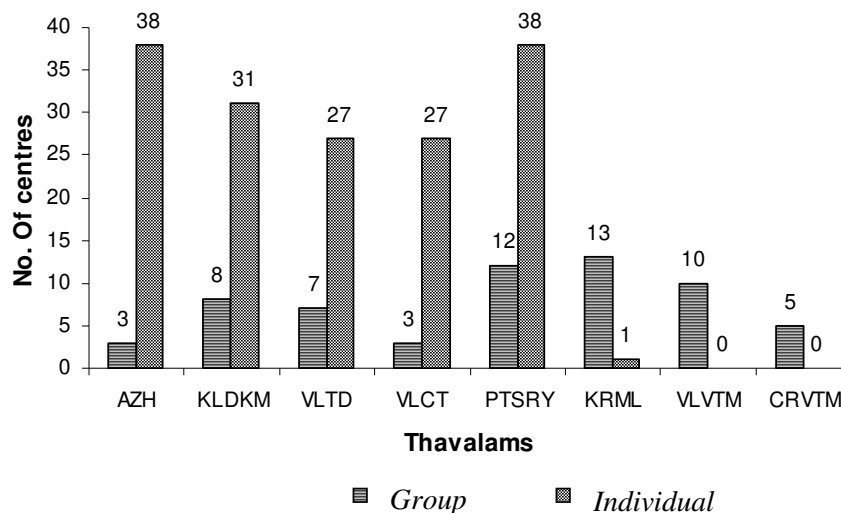
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## Appendix I

**Figure 1: Number of Service Centres in Thavalams**



AZH - Azhuthakkadavu, KLDKM - Kallidumkunnu, VLTD - Vallithode, VLCTD - Vellaramchetta, PTSRY - Puthussery, KRML - Karimala, VLVTM - Valiyanavattom and CRVT - Cheriyavattom  
 Source: Primary Survey

**Table 1: Capital and Expenditures of Centres at Cheriyavattom (INR.)\***

<b>Capital</b>							
Sl. No	Particulars	Service centres					Total
		I	II	III	IV	V	
1	Members' share	57250	6775	48500	45000	44500	<b>202025</b>
2	Sales receipts	1428665	1075475	967484	1516630	619341	<b>5607595</b>
3	Personal Loan	20000	100000	18000	75000	0	<b>213000</b>
4	Bank loan	100000	100000	100000	100000	100000	<b>500000</b>
5	Others	0	0	9703	248040	0	<b>257743</b>
Total		<b>1605915</b>	<b>1282250</b>	<b>1143687</b>	<b>1984670</b>	<b>763841</b>	<b>6780363</b>
<b>Expenditures</b>							
1	Wage	382980	275570	255990	324282	138600	<b>1377422</b>
2	Grocery & Vegetables	485512	368928	351260	658819	191960	<b>2056479</b>
3	Erecting of shed	34820	38983	39432	46058	76595	<b>235888</b>
4	LPG (cooking fuel)	139960	113300	113030	147920	84810	<b>599020</b>
5	Electricity	36259	34970	12520	26720	15120	<b>125589</b>
6	Repayment of Bank loan	102507	102507	102507	102507	102507	<b>512535</b>
7	Repayment of personal loan	20000	112000	18000	73310	0	<b>223310</b>
8	Repayment of business share contribution	57250	6775	48500	45000	44500	<b>202025</b>
9	PWF contribution	14000	14000	14000	14000	14000	<b>70000</b>
10	CDF contribution	5000	5000	5000	5000	5000	<b>25000</b>
11	General Expense	16765	16765	16765	16765	16765	<b>83825</b>
12	Misc. Expense.	43331	31401	45466	70130	51894	<b>242222</b>
Total		<b>1338384</b>	<b>1120199</b>	<b>904184</b>	<b>1530511</b>	<b>741751</b>	<b>5635029</b>
Surplus amount		267531	162051	239503	454159	22090	1145334

Source: Primary survey

\* All currencies are expressed in Indian Rupees. INR 1 = \$ 0.022

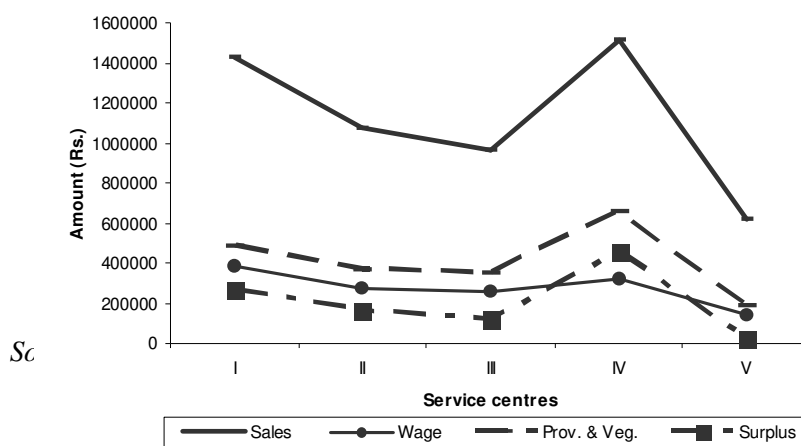


**Table 2: Relative position of major items of expenditure (INR)**

Service Centre	Sales proceeds	Exp. on major items as a % of sales proceeds			
		Wage	Prov. & Veg.	Shed building	Misc.
I	<b>1428665</b>	26.81	33.98	2.44	1.63
II	<b>1075475</b>	25.62	34.33	3.62	2.92
III	<b>967484</b>	25.46	36.31	4.08	3.70
IV	<b>1516630</b>	21.38	43.44	3.03	4.62
V	<b>619341</b>	22.38	30.99	12.37	7.57

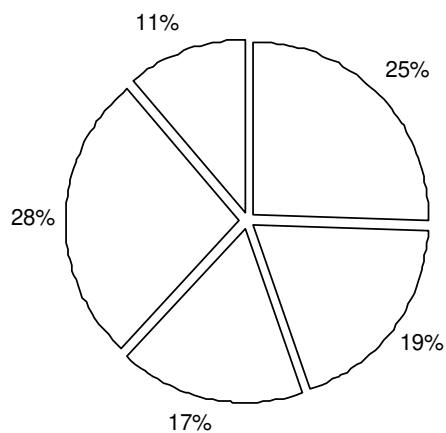
Source: Primary survey

**Figure 2: Trends in sales receipt, wage, provision and Veg. and surplus of Service centres at Cheriyanavattom.**

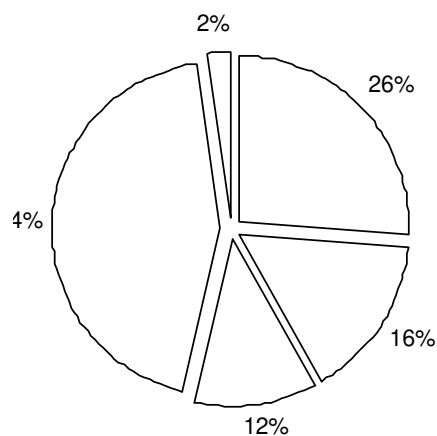


**Figure 3: Shares of Sales and Surplus of each establishment in Cheriyanavattom**

% share of sales at Cheriyanavattom



% share of Surplus at Cheriyanavattom



Source: Primary Survey