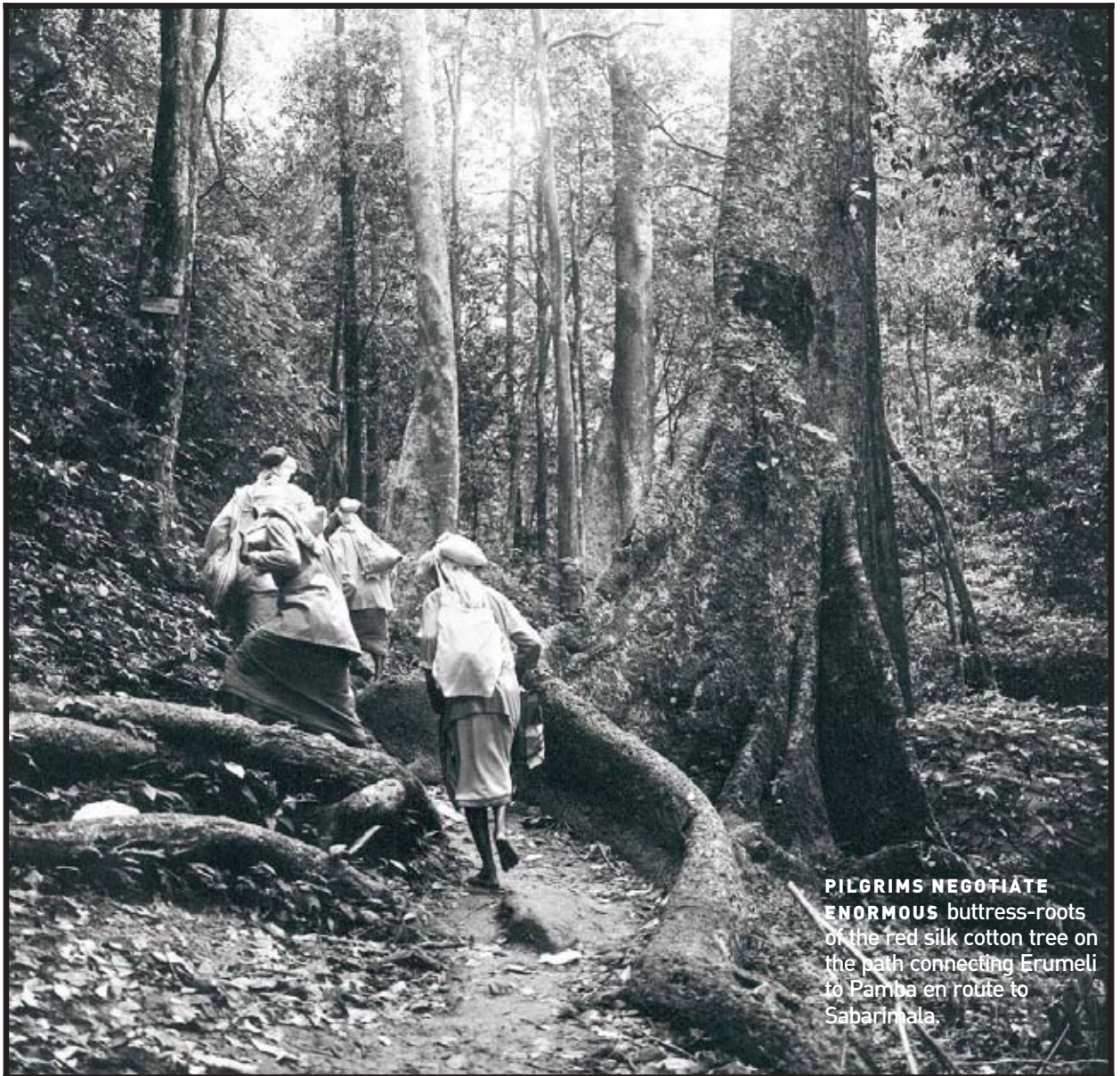


# The journey is the destination

On a trek to the Sabarimala temple as an observer intent on discovering the natural history, personalities and emotions of the pilgrim's path. TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAN LOCKWOOD



**PILGRIMS NEGOTIATE ENORMOUS** buttress-roots of the red silk cotton tree on the path connecting Erumeli to Pamba en route to Sabarimala.

My pilgrimage led me away from the temple, to the base at Pamba and then through the lower forests to the entry point at Erumeli. The Pamba area illustrates some of the serious challenges faced by such a large-scale pilgrimage in sensitive areas.

THE Sabarimala temple in Pathanamthitta district of Kerala has long been revered as a sacred location and has been drawing increasing numbers of pilgrims year after year. The temple is dedicated to Lord Ayyappa, a deity closely associated with forest lore. Riding a handsome tiger, the youthful Ayyappa is revered as a protector of the forest. What could be more appropriate for a shrine located in one of India's 27 Project Tiger reserves? The temple is situated in dense, evergreen and moist-deciduous forests in the south-western corner of the 777-square-kilometre Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR).

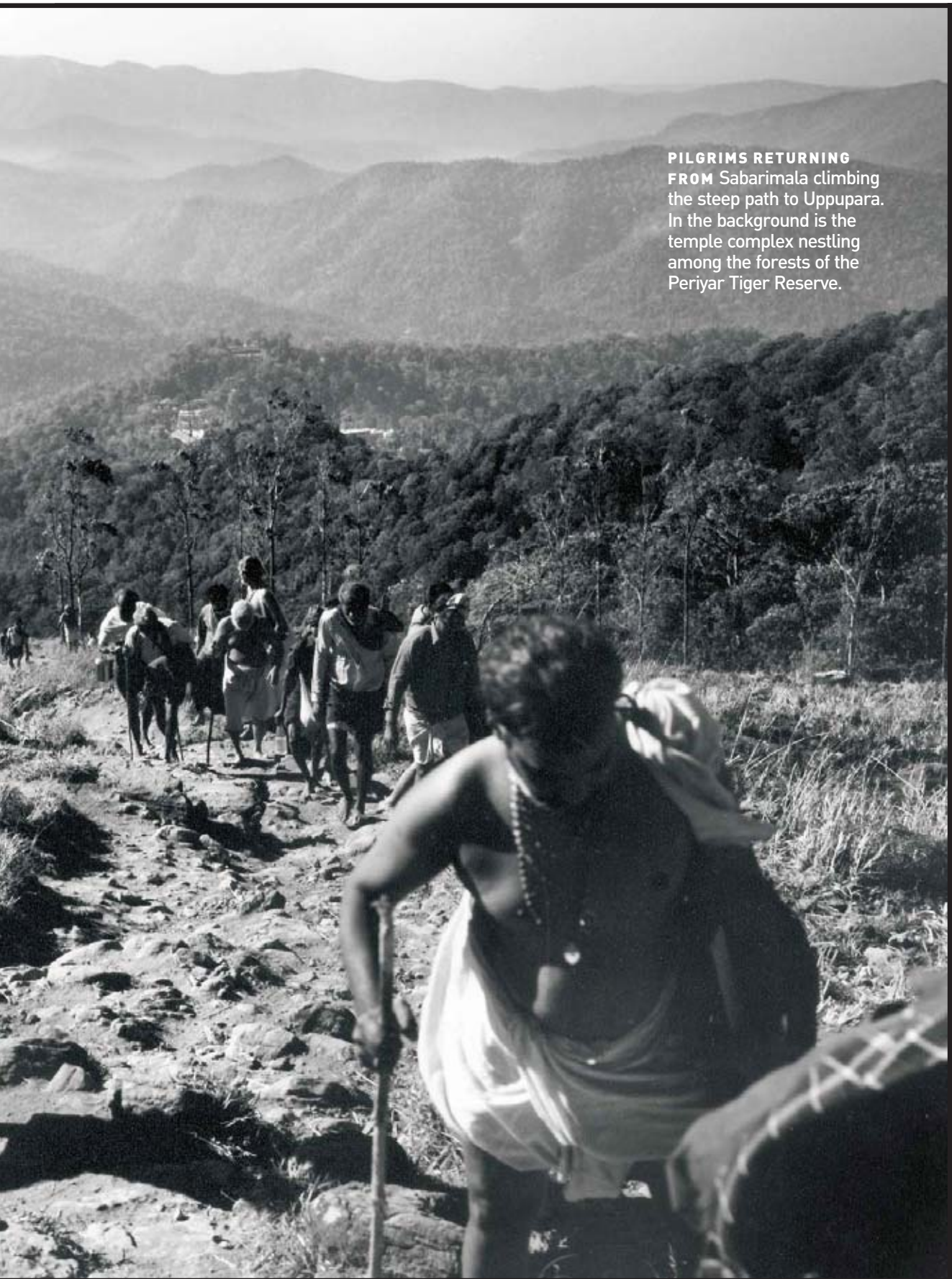
For generations of devotees a pilgrimage to the Sabarimala temple is a sacred journey into the heart of an untarnished area. Human wants are forsaken and pilgrims are treated equally irrespective of caste or creed. In days past, the temple was indeed very isolated and such a pilgrimage was no minor undertaking. Today much has changed, with new roads and increased communication. The temple has become immensely popular in south India and the number of pilgrims during the short three-month season is estimated to be about five million.

Sabarimala lies in the heart of some of the most expansive rainforests in the Western Ghats and it was for this reason that I set out to walk the path of an Ayyappa pilgrim. For many years I had watched pilgrims walking barefoot on the hot roads of the south Indian plains on their way to Sabarimala. Clad in black lungis and carrying little more than a simple bag each, they travelled in small groups led by a guru.

My interest in observing the fusion of culture and natural history in the Western Ghats and good fortune finally led me down the Sabarimala trail. I went with cameras and a notebook and was not, strictly speaking, a pilgrim. I was rather a curious observer intent on discovering and recording the natural history, personalities and emotions of the pilgrim's path.

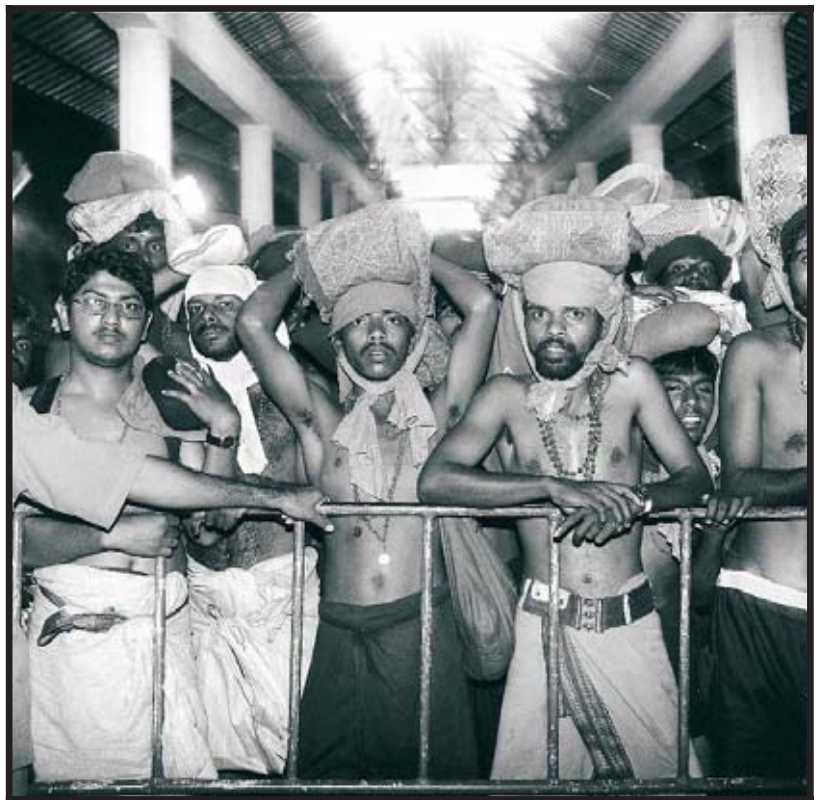
Surely the biggest challenge posed by the Sabarimala shrine is the tricky balance of preserving cultural heritage and pilgrimage traditions within a





**PILGRIMS RETURNING FROM Sabarimala** climbing the steep path to Uppupara. In the background is the temple complex nestling among the forests of the Periyar Tiger Reserve.





**THE FINAL WAIT** before entering the temple. (Top) At an EDC eatery at Uppupara, a poster depicting Ayappa astride a tiger, one of the most popular depictions of the deity. (Left) Periyar Tiger Reserve officers and guards chat with pilgrims in the forests between Erumeli and Pamba.





**PARKING LOT AT** Pamba, the focal point of all motor transport taking pilgrims. Large forested areas have been partially cleared to provide space for vehicles.

fragile natural habitat and sensitive ecological zone in one of India's two biodiversity hotspots. The job is not an easy one for the Kerala Forests and Wildlife Department officers. However, in the past decade several innovative ideas have emerged from the Periyar Tiger Reserve and these have been acknowledged as a remarkable conservation success story ("Vision From Periyar" by Ashish Kothari and Sujatha Padmanabhan, *The Hindu*, February 15, 2004).

The achievement of involving local communities in conservation measures through 'eco-development' is now well documented in the 'Thekkady model'. The efforts to manage pilgrim flow through the forest to Sabarimala were of particular interest to me as I set out on my walk from Thekkady.

#### **TO THE SANCTUARY**

My journey to Sabarimala started in the early hours of a winter morning at the Kumily bus station near the headquarters of the Periyar Tiger Reserve. My initial destination was Uppupara, the elevated roadhead leading to Sabarimala from the east via Vandiperiyar. It was still dark when I boarded one of the tomato-red State transport buses that services Uppupara during the pilgrimage season. It was moderately full with shopkeepers and several pilgrim groups.

The bus crossed over the Periyar river and then headed into the heart of the tiger reserve's western borders. Here there are expansive grasslands intermixed with neglected eucalyptus plantations and patches of evergreen rainforest. Uppupara is little more than a line of shacks along with a forest checkpoint, set amongst stunning grasslands. It was bustling with activity as shopkeepers geared up for the groups of pilgrims going to or returning from the temple, about half a day's trek away.

I stayed overnight at Uppupara since I wanted to enjoy a full day's time to descend slowly to Sabarimala. I was interested in meeting and photographing groups of pilgrims and the

unique grasslands landscape. I was also on the lookout for the rare broad tailed grassbird (*Schoenicola platyura*), an endemic Western Ghats species that is found in such mid-altitudinal grasslands. In the end I had more luck with the pilgrims than the grassbird and was also rewarded with the sighting of a very shy sambar stag on an adjoining hill. At night the temperature fell and I was happy to have shelter at the forest department checkpoint.

The next morning I walked leisurely down to the temple, through grasslands and then dense forests of mixed evergreen and moist deciduous vegetation. The morning was gloriously clear. At the edge of the upper plateau I had a commanding view of the temple and the adjoining valleys of forest. Numerous groups were making their way down the path and soon we were met by a steady stream of pilgrims on their way to Uppupara.

Pilgrims going towards the temple carried the conspicuous *irumudi* offerings on their heads. Chants of "Swamiye Ayyappa" mixed in with the mournful call of a pair of crested serpent eagles (*Spilornis cheela*) circling above. The path entered the forest edge abruptly and I was happy to have the shade on this very bright day. *Terminalia* species and other large trees cast deep shadows over the broad pilgrim's path. Bright coloured scarlet minivets (*Pericrocotus flammeus*) flittered in the high canopy, unmindful of the many humans moving like large ants on the path.

Sprinkled along the path are a string of shops for pilgrims, facilitated by the Kerala Forests and Wildlife Department and run by "eco-development committees" (EDCs). This involvement of local communities as stakeholders in conservation has been one of the most successful aspects of the Thekkady model. The EDCs have been involved in activities such as guided nature walks near the visitor centre at the Periyar lake. Reformed poachers and arrack brewers have been incorporated into the EDCs to lead adventurous treks to the heart of the reserve. In all of these models the

EDCs have directly benefited from conservation-based tourism. A dividend has been the far decreased incidence of poaching and illegal wood-cutting.

Historically, the shops on the Sabarimala path were tightly controlled by the temple authorities (Travancore Devaswom Board). Shopkeepers had to pay large fees to run their operations and making a meagre profit was difficult. This often meant illegally cutting firewood from the forest or leaving behind large quantities of waste. Their interest was in recovering the fee.

The eco-development scheme treats the EDCs as stakeholders who are key players in protecting the fragile forest habitats. Firstly, their members are drawn directly from villages surrounding the Periyar forests. They include several groups of Adivasis who lost ancestral land when the Mullaperiyar dam (1895) and later the tiger reserve (1978) were established. Secondly, the EDCs do not pay any annual or seasonal rent for the privilege of setting up their shops. They are, however, expected to be guardians of the forest and to use sustainable resources for energy. They help keep their path areas clean and use forest department-supplied rubber trees for fuel rather than the natural forest biomass.

I stopped at several EDCs on my way down to the temple. Mainly I quenched my thirst with large glasses of buttermilk, but there were hot meals being served as well. At one stop I gazed at the steady stream of devotees as several noisy Malabar grey hornbills (*Anthracoceros coronatus*) cackled in the tree above the shop.

The pilgrim groups were mainly composed of men, since women between 10 and 50 years of age are not allowed into the temple. Many family groups had brought along young girls, and there were older women on the pilgrim path. As the path approached the temple the sounds of drums and chants drifted up through the forest. At certain points there were small breaks that allowed a glimpse of the temple with its gleaming gilded roof set amongst a concrete island of build-

ings and a few lonely trees.

About a kilometre from the temple the forest abruptly gives way to a clearing. The temple complex is quite vast given that it sits amongst remnant rainforests. A few tall silk cotton trees (*Bombax ceiba*) stand sentinel over the arrays of shelters built for pilgrims on the outskirts of the temple. During the pilgrimage season the magnified sounds of the temple and pilgrims drown out the calls of the forest. The scent of burning coconut envelopes the area and it is hard to imagine that you are actually in a tiger reserve.

## A few tall silk cotton trees stand sentinel over the arrays of shelters built on the outskirts of the temple.

I spent a night at Sabarimala and explored the different approaches to the temple. Photography is strictly prohibited in the temple premises and I focussed my energies on the pathway. A steady stream of devotees wound its way up from Pamba and down from Uppupara to the central temple through the night. The climax came as they waited in long queues and then climbed up the final 18 steps to the temple.

### PILGRIM'S PATH

My pilgrimage led me away from the temple, to the base at Pamba and then through the lower forests to the entry point at Erumeli. The Pamba area illustrates some of the very serious challenges faced by such a large-scale pilgrimage in sensitive areas. Here parking lots of jeeps, buses and camped pilgrim groups crowd the spaces below large buttressed rainforest trees. Masses of people mill around

during the season and an army of policemen are employed to help things run efficiently.

The Pampa river suffers from severe contamination below the sacred bathing spot at the Pamba crossing. In the nearby forests the strain of such numbers on the fragile forest habitat is telling. Most of the large animals migrate out of the temple forest areas during the December to February season. Newspaper articles report plastic waste showing up in elephant faeces. In recent years there have been calls to improve further the road access to Sabarimala. There has even been a proposal to put in a rail line. The Kerala Forests and Wildlife Department is under pressure to denotify parts of the tiger reserve as well as the adjoining reserve forests to facilitate more pilgrims.

On the path leading out from the temple I followed the Pamba river to Erumeli with S. Sivadas, then the senior tiger reserve officer in charge of managing the EDCs and other initiatives. Sivadas is not an ordinary forest officer. With a generous beard and a contemplative look he could easily be mistaken for a sanyasi in khaki uniform. He speaks with his staff and the EDC members in an empathetic yet deliberate manner. He is as comfortable discussing J. Krishnamurti's take on nature as he is gleaning insight from Edward O. Wilson or other modern biodiversity apostles.

He represents the high commitment, sincere interest and outright passion that is exhibited by a generation of officers in the Kerala Forests and Wildlife Department. I had first met him in a lonely bungalow on the edge of the Eravikulam National Park when he was the assistant wildlife warden there in the early 1990s. Now, nearly 10 years later, I am tagging along as he makes his rounds on foot in the sacred forests of Lord Ayyappa.

The 17-kilometre hike to Erumeli from Pamba leads through impressive tropical rainforest. Gigantic trees with canopies nearly 50 metres high tower over the river and path. There are signs of degradation on the edges of the





**IN THE TWILIGHT**, a lone pilgrim returns from the temple and in the backdrop are the grasslands and gentle hills of the Periyar Tiger Reserve.

pathway but this is the best-preserved forest that I have seen on the trek. A troop of Nilgiri langurs (*Semnopithecus johnii*) and a lone Malabar giant squirrel (*Ratufa indica*) are feeding on fruit and leaves high above us. I am on the lookout for great pied hornbills (*Buceros bicornis*) and happy to encounter a feeding flock of birds with babblers, drongos, trogons, sunbirds and treepies.

We moved quite fast since Sivadas wanted to survey as many EDCs as possible and see how they were progressing in their preparations for the flow of pilgrims on the climactic *Mak-*

*aravilakku puja*. I followed in his footsteps, pausing only briefly to photograph pilgrims and trees. Between stops we discussed the challenges of balancing conservation with religious traditions and the large numbers of pilgrims. Despite the pressure on the Forest Department to release more land for the temple, Sivadas remained cautiously optimistic that this tricky balance could be achieved through the use of community-based conservation models.

My pilgrimage came to an end at Erumeli, a curious settlement where Ayyappa devotees visit a Muslim

shrine of Vavar Swamy on their way to Sabarimala. This fusion of religious ideas seemed to be emblematic of the very positive spirit of the Sabarimala pilgrimage. Balancing these ideals with the reality of such large numbers of 21st century pilgrims in a tiger reserve is an enormous challenge. The Kerala Forests and Wildlife Department, with its innovative EDCs, has shown how to provide for pilgrimage in a way that benefits pilgrims, local communities and the habitat.

Surely, Swamy Ayyappa, astride his tiger, would be pleased with these initiatives to protect his abode. □