


## Chapter 8

# Comparative Study of Marian Pilgrim Sites of Velankanni and Poondi in Tamil Nadu, India and Lourdes, France

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### ABSTRACT

*Pilgrim tourism across the world has attracted visitors from far and wide, irrespective of the orientation of religion. Be it the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes in France or the Sanctuary of Our Lady of the Rosary of Fatima in Portugal, Mecca, and Medina for the Believers in Islam, the Char Dham (four abodes) Badrinath, Dwarka, Puri, and Rameswaram in India or even the Chota (smaller) Char Dham of Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath, and Badrinath in the Indian State of Uttarakhand, or Jerusalem, which the Semitic Religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam consider to be Holy and are often visited by travellers from afar. The current research is an engagement of the authors having visited the Marian Destinations of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes in France, which attracts more than five million visitors annually. The chapter compares the way the two Marian Pilgrim destinations in the state of Tamil Nadu, India; Basilica of Our Lady of Good Health, Velankanni, and Madha Basilica, Poondi, can learn and unlearn from the Lourdes construct and become world renowned destinations.*

### INTRODUCTION: CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA

It is believed that Christianity in India dates back to the earliest followers of Jesus in the first century C.E. Today, there are millions of Christians in the country, although they make up just 2.4% of India's massive

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population. South India is home to about half of the Christians in the country, and Christians make up a relatively large share of people in India's more sparsely populated Northeast, where most Christians belong to tribal communities (Salazar, 2021). When one does a deep-dive into the History of Christianity in India, the name of Saint Thomas, one of the apostles of Lord Jesus comes into perspective. St. Thomas travelled to India as early as 52 C.E. making India among the earliest places in the world where Christianity spread (Storytrails, 2021). The apostle is believed to have landed in Kerala (Payaloor) and the religion took root there. He then walked across to Mylapore in present-day Chennai, spoke of a new God in a new land, and left his footprints on the sands of time. The population of Christians of all affiliations in India is about 32 million as per the census (Findeasy, 2023). From the affiliation's perspective, the Protestants are the largest in number, followed by Roman Catholics, Orthodox and Christians of other denominations. Table (1) clearly enumerates the affiliations and the population estimates of all segments:

Keeping in the estimated population in a context, the paper has focussed on the Marian/Catholic destinations of Velankanni and Poondi Churches in Tamil Nadu and tried to understand the construct of Lourdes, France as a Pilgrimage site, which attracts visitors from far and wide.

## **THE TOURISM PRODUCTS AT THE MARIAN DESTINATIONS, THE FEASTS**

### **Velankanni**

Located on the East Coast of India, Velankanni is well connected by all modes of transport, from Bangalore (444 Km), Chennai (325 Km), Coimbatore (360 Km), Madurai (245 Km) Tiruchirapalli (156 Km) and other cities in India. Pilgrims travel, by rail, road, and air (Tiruchirapalli being the nearest airport). Though tucked away in a far corner of Tamil Nadu, the easy accessibility ensures that pilgrim travel to Velankanni for pilgrimages throughout the year.

Ramakrishnan (2019) speaks of the eleven-day event from August 29 to September 8 which attracts pilgrims in the million from far and wide. Sehgal (2018) mentions, the feast that commemorates the Lady of Good Health, to whom the shrine is dedicated. The origin of the festival dates to the sixteenth century and since then, it is organised each year with great aplomb. The feast is organised on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August every year, kick starts with flag hoisting. The flag is hoisted continuously for the next 9 days as well, till the closing of the feast. The feast plays host to more than 3 to 3.5 million pilgrims who come from all over the country. Speak to Puthota Leon (Leon, 2023), a Manager, Hotel Dravidar ([www.hoteldravidar.in](http://www.hoteldravidar.in)), which overlooks the Church complex, he says, "it is the fervour that is exhibited by

*Table 1. The church affiliations in India and the population*

	<b>Affiliations</b>	<b>Estimated Population</b>
1	Protestants (Including the Church of North India and Church of South India and other denominations)	18,860,000
2	Roman Catholics	10,570,000
3	Orthodox (Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church, and Malabar Independent Syrian Church)	2,370,000
4	Other Christian denominations (Mormons: Community of Christ and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints)	50,000

(Findeasy, 2023)

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