India's "Tīrthas": "Crossings" in Sacred Geography

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One of the oldest strands of the Hindu tradition is what one might call the “locative” strand of Hindu piety. Its traditions of ritual and reverence are linked primarily to place—to hilltops and rock outcroppings, to the headwaters and confluences of rivers, to the pools and groves of the forests, and to the boundaries of towns and villages. In this locative form of religiousness, the place itself is the primary locus of devotion, and its traditions of ritual and pilgrimage are usually much older than any of the particular myths and deities which attach to it. In the wider Hindu tradition, these places, particularly those associated with waters, are often called tīrthas, and pilgrimage to these tīrthas is one of the oldest and still one of the most prominent features of Indian religious life. A tīrtha is a “crossing place,” a “ford,” where one may cross over to the far shore of a river or to the far shore of the worlds of heaven. Hence, tīrtha has come to refer to these places of pilgrimage, where the crossing might be safely made. This is a study of the meanings of the word tīrtha in its Vedic and Sanskrit usages.
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and the elaboration of the notion of tirtha in the locative ritual traditions of Hinduism.

THE RIVER AND THE CROSSING

The river is an ancient and complex cultural symbol in India. India's oldest civilization was a river culture on the Indus, and in the hymns of the invading Aryans as well, this particular river, called the Sindhu, is highly praised. She is one of the seven “mother-rivers,” a group which has changed through time to include such rivers as the Gaṅgā and the Narmadā, but which in Vedic times referred to the Sindhu, the Sarasvatī, and the “Five Rivers” of the Punjab, all in the northwest. Crossing the great rivers of India, especially in their season of full flood, has long been a challenge to travelers, who have sought out the fords with their ferries and rafts to make a safe crossing. Samsāra, the ceaseless flow of birth and death and birth again, was likened to a river, and the far shore became an apt and powerful symbol of the goal of the spiritual traveler as well: the indistinct horizon of sure ground on the far side of the flood, beyond the treacherous currents.

The Vedic imagination produced two great images of crossing the river flood. First, since the universe is fundamentally three storied, with the heavens above, the atmosphere in the middle, and the earth below, one crosses over from earth to heaven or, in the case of the gods, from heaven to earth. The atmosphere (antarikṣa), extending as far up as the blue extends, is often described as a vast river of space to be forded in the communication between heaven and earth. The second image is related: India’s rivers are seen as originating in heaven and flowing vertically from the lake of divine waters in heaven, down through the atmosphere, and out upon the face of the earth. In the Rigvedic myth, Indra slays the serpent Vṛtra, who had coiled around the heavens and locked the waters inside, and frees the heavenly waters to fall to earth.

As your ally in this friendship, Soma,
Indra for man made the waters flow.
He slew the serpent and sent forth the Seven Rivers.
He opened, as it were, the holes that were blocked.\(^1\)

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This flow of life-giving waters which links heaven and earth becomes a means for crossing, for by those waterfall rivers one may cross from earth to the far shore of heaven. The Gaṅgā, for instance, is sometimes called svarga-sopāna-sarini, "the flowing ladder to heaven."

Since crossing to the far shore may be a crossing up as well as a crossing over, both the image of the ladder (sopāna) and that of the bridge (setu) are utilized in the symbolic vocabulary of transcendence. However, the term that is most elaborately developed in the language of the crossing is tīrtha.

The word tīrtha is from the Sanskrit verb tī/tarati, meaning "to cross over." The noun tīrtha means a ford, as well as any watering or bathing place. It sometimes means a path or passage more generally. The root verb tī includes subsidiary meanings—to master, to surmount, to fulfill, to be saved—as well as its primary meaning, to cross. The noun tāraka, also derived from tī, means a boat or ferry, as well as a pilot or savior. Tīrtha, with its many associations, is a word of passage. It refers not to the goal, but to the way, the path one travels. The word is especially interesting for developing a comparative vocabulary of "passage" because it belongs to a whole family of Indo-European cognates which are the great words of passage and pilgrimage in the West: through, durch, and trans, as prepositions, and all of the many passage words related to them, which in English alone include thoroughfare, transition, transform, transport, and transcend.

In India today the word tīrtha is associated primarily with those crossing places which are places of pilgrimage and which bring the traditions of the gods and goddesses, heroes, heroines, and sages to living embodiment in India's geography. Even the most famous tīrthas which attract pilgrims across linguistic, sectarian, and regional boundaries number in the hundreds. In addition, there are the countless local and regional tīrthas visited regularly by pilgrims from their immediate areas. No place is too small to be counted a tīrtha by its local visitors. In a sense, each temple is a tīrtha, especially consecrated as a crossing place between heaven and earth.


The phenomenon of pilgrimage to such charged places was firmly grounded in the ancient locative folk traditions of the yakṣas and nāgas. Only later do we find brahmanical traditions of pilgrimage to these places, that is, in the time of the Mahābhārata and the subsequent era of the early Purāṇas. And only then does the word tīrtha come to refer explicitly to these places of pilgrimage. By that time, however, the word complex tīrtha/tarati already had a considerable history. Uncovering some of the contours of the use of these words in Vedic and Upaniṣadic sources, through a kind of archaeology of the word, will enable us to see more accurately the force this notion of tīrtha brings with it when it comes to popular use as a place of pilgrimage in the epics, Purāṇas, and Dharmasastras.

THE PLACE OF CROSSING: THE NOUN Tīrtha

From the various usages of the noun tīrtha in the Vedic Samhitās, Brāhmaṇas, and Upaniṣads, one can outline the variety of things it did mean as well as get a clear sense of what it did not mean.4 It did not mean, for example, a place of pilgrimage. But it did have associations with purity and ritual which helped to shape the understanding of tīrtha in later times.

One constellation of tīrtha meanings is related directly to the river. It is a crossing place and, conversely, a landing place on the riverbank. It is associated with good waters for drinking and for bathing.

It is a tīrtha of good drinking water for which one hymnist entreats the Aśvins, the twin gods of the dawn: “Make a tīrtha, Lords of splendour, for good drinking!”5 Elsewhere the hymnist, praising Indra, says that the sacrifice invites him, awaits him, “as pleasure at the tīrtha invites one who is thirsty.”6

In the Vedic literature the good waters of the tīrtha are charged with the nourishing and purifying power which came later to be associated with the River Gaṅgā. After all, the seven rivers released from heaven by Indra are identified with Soma, the nourishing, intoxicating drink of the gods. The

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5 Rg Veda 10.40.13.
6 Ibid., 1.173.11.
ritual plant Soma, when it is pressed through the woolen filter, falls into the wooden collecting vat below. Falling, it is called Soma Pavamāna, the “Purifying Soma,” which is praised in a great number of hymns in the ninth book of the Rg Veda. The pressed Soma, flowing into the wooden vat, is likened to the swift-flowing Sindhu, running both with water and with milk.7 This homology of falling Soma, falling rivers, and falling milk is well known. In some hymns, it is not the divine rivers but the mother cows, yielding divine milk, who are released from the heavenly pen by Indra. Like milk and like Soma, tīrtha waters are called “strength and sap.”8 In one hymn, the Soma itself is said to flow with purity to the “famed tīrtha.”9 The shared symbolic structure of the tīrtha waters and the poured Soma is seen again, for example, in Rg Veda 10.31.3, where the Soma is poured and friends come to the wonderful drink “as to a tīrtha.” In sum, the heavenly streams which fall to become the rivers of earth are, in the Vedic imagination, the streams of Soma, pressed through the filter of heaven. The later myth of the descent of the river Gaṅgā clearly repeats this imaginative structure, and the Gaṅgā too is said to flow with milk and with amṛta, the nectar of immortality.

In addition to being a place of good drinking, the tīrtha was apparently a place of bathing as well. For example, in the Taittirīya Saṃhitā the priest of the Soma sacrifice is said to bathe in a tīrtha: “The Aṅgirases going to the world of heaven placed in the waters consecration and penance. He (the priest of the Soma sacrifice) bathes in the waters; verily visibly he secures consecration and penance. He bathes at a tīrtha, for at a tīrtha did they place (consecration and penance); he bathes at a tīrtha; verily he becomes a tīrtha for his fellows. He sips water; verily he becomes pure within.”10 Here bathing in the tīrtha is an act of penance and purification in preparation for ritual. This becomes a familiar theme in the later tīrtha tradition. Especially interesting in this passage is the fact that the one who is thus purified becomes a tīrtha for others. Here, as in the emerging Jaina tradition as well, the word tīrtha is

7 Ibid., 9.97.45.
9 Rg Veda 9.97.53.
used not only of a place but also of a person who may become a crossing for others.

A second group of tīrtha meanings emphasizes the nature of the tīrtha as limens: the threshold, betwixt and between, which links this world and the other. The liminal nature of the tīrtha is made clear in one hymn which compares time’s thresholds—the twin twilights of dawn and dusk—with tīrthas. When, it is asked, is the best time of the Agnihotra fire offering? “At the twilight should he offer. Night and day are the flood that takes all; the two twilights are the tīrthas of it; just as a man may cross [śāray] the flood by the two tīrthas, so it is that he should offer at the twilight.” In the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, the introductory and concluding rites of the year-long Soma sacrifice are called its tīrthas, the “steps” by which one enters the “ocean” of the ritual at its outset and leaves it again at its conclusion. In another hymn, the devout singer invites the Āśvins to mount the chariot which stands at the heavenly tīrtha on the shore of the lake of Soma, and he asks the Āśvins to cross over to this shore on a boat made of his own hymns. In sum, it is clear that the tīrtha is not only a riverside bathing and watering place, but a place where one launches out on the journey between heaven and earth. It is a threshold of time, or space, or ritual.

Finally, it is not surprising to find a cluster of tīrtha usages in the early tradition which have to do with the Vedic sacrifice itself. After all, the purpose of the sacrifice was, in part, to bring about the communication, the linking, of this world and the other. In this context, the tīrtha is the path which both the priests and the gods take to the uttaravedi altar for the drinking of Soma. It is called the āpnāna path and the “tīrtha of the gods.” Having approached the sacrifice by this tīrtha, they obtained all desires. Verily thus also the sacrificer by this tīrtha having approached the sacrifice obtains all desires. Structurally, one might view the entire sacrifice as a tīrtha,

11 Kauśitaki Brāhmaṇa 2.9.
13 Rg Veda 1.46.7–8.
14 Ibid., 10.114.7.
15 Kauśitaki Brāhmaṇa 18.9.
as a crossing place where all the elements of this world are brought together in symbolic microcosm for the vertical crossing of the sacrificer to heaven. The sacrifice is not directly called a tīrtha in Vedic literature, but it is clear that the symbolic syntax of the later tīrtha as well as that of the later temple share the sacrificial paradigm: the intensification and condensation of the constituents of this world in a powerful center, from which this world might be transcended and linked with the worlds of heaven.

THE ACT OF CROSSING: THE VERB Tarati

The meaning of the noun tīrtha in the literature under consideration is enhanced by looking at the uses of its verbal root tī/tarati, to cross. In a few cases the verb takes its subsidiary meanings—to conquer, to subdue, to surpass. For example, Indra subdues Vītra;16 the falcon surpasses the wind;17 or Soma overtakes adversities.18 Occasionally, the verb means “crossing” in a mundane sense, as in Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 1.4.1.14, where “the Brāhmaṇas did not cross the Sadānīra river. . . .” However, a great number of the usages of tarati in the Śaṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas and virtually all of its usages in the Upaniṣads have to do with crossing in a ritual or a spiritual sense.

First, in the ritual context, this verb of passage is aptly associated with the sacrifice and its crossings both hither and yon, from earth to heaven or, in the case of the gods, from heaven to earth. Soma, for instance, is entreated to come, bringing cows, wealth, and progeny; to come from the waters, the plants, and the pounding boards; to cross over (tara) all trouble, and to sit upon the sacrificial strew.19 In the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, the wind Vāyu is said to cross (tarati) the whole universe, like a runner carrying the offering to the gods.20 Elsewhere, the hymns of the sacrifice are called the two ships which carry the sacrifice to the other shore. By them the sacrificers cross over (taranti) the year, just as one crosses a river.21 Similarly, another poet wishes to ascend by means of

16 Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa of the Kṛṣṇa Yajur Veda, Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series 37 (Poona, 1898), 3.1.2.1.
17 Rg Veda 4.21.2.
18 Ibid., 9.96.15.
19 Ibid., 9.59.3.
20 Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, with the Commentary of Śānya, Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series 32 (Poona, 1896), 2.34; Keith, trans., Rīg-Veda Brāhmaṇas.
his hymns to the heavenly ocean, where the Sun tethers his horses. "May we cross over \( \text{\textit{tutury\text{\text{"a}}ma}} \) safely with this hymn," he asks.\(^{22}\)

The gods are the ones who most frequently make the crossing from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven. Both Soma and Agni descend and ascend, manifesting their divine presence in both heaven and earth. Soma, the milk of heaven, is present on earth in the milk of rivers and in the sap of plants. Agni, the fire of heaven, descends to earth in the sacrificial fire. U\( \text{sas, the dawn at the threshold of night and day, is also a crosser by nature, reaching out daily with the rays of her own radiance, crossing the waters and touching the hills.}\(^{23}\) Likewise, S\( \text{\text{"u}}\)rya, the sun, is called the bridge (\textit{setu}), since his rays span the sea of space between heaven and earth.\(^{24}\) Rudra, who more than any other becomes the lord of the \( \text{\textit{\text{"u}}\text{\text{"r\text{"h\text{\{"a}}}}}} \) in the later tradition, is also one who crosses back and forth, as is seen in this passage from the Taittiriya Sam\( \text{\text{"h\text{\{"\}}}}\)it\( \text{\text{"a}}\):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Homage to him of the ford [\textit{\text{"u}}\text{\text{"r\text{"h\text{\{"y\text{"a}}}}\text{"a}}\text{"a}} and to him of the bank.} \\
\text{Homage to him beyond and to him on this side.} \\
\text{Homage to him who crosseth over [\textit{prataran\text{"a}}\text{"a}}] and to him who crosseth back [\textit{uttaran\text{"a}}\text{"a}}].} \\
\text{Homage to him of the crossing [\textit{\text{"a}}\text{\text{"r\text{"y\text{"a}}}}\text{"a}}] and to him of the ocean.\(^{25}\)
\end{align*}
\]

The dynamics of these divine crossings of the gods from heaven to earth are elaborated in the post-Vedic era in the notion of \textit{avat\text{"a}}\( \text{\r{a}}\), the divine descents. The word is formed from the root \( \textit{t\text{"a}}\) plus the prefix \textit{ava}: to "cross downward." The descents of Vi\( \text{\text{"\text{"\text{"n\text{\{"}}}}\text{"u}}\) for instance, are well known. We shall return below to the significance of the interplay between \textit{avat\text{"a}}\( \text{\r{a}}\) and \( \text{\textit{\text{"u}}\text{\text{"r\text{"h\text{\{"a}}}}}}\).

In the Upani\( \text{s\text{"a}}\)s the verb \( \textit{t\text{"a}}\) is used almost exclusively to refer to the spiritual crossing from the realm of birth and death to immortality, from ignorance to knowledge, from darkness to light. This usage is not without precedent in the earlier Vedic literature, however, where occasionally "crossing over" means leaving behind this world of trouble, old age, and death. In Rg Veda 10.31.1, for example, the poet opens with a prayer that the benedictions of the gods may come near and that by these benedictions we may cross over (\textit{taranto}) all our troubles.

\(^{22}\) Rg Veda 5.45.11.  
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 6.64.4; the verb in this verse is \textit{tarasi}.  
\(^{24}\) Ibid., 10.61.16.  
\(^{25}\) Taittiriya San\( \text{\text{"h\text{"\text{"a}}}}\)it\( \text{\text{"a}}\) 4.5.8.
Similarly, Rg Veda 10.27.21 speaks of those who cross beyond (taranto) this realm of old age to a place of glory where there is no sorrow. The Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa speaks of the purified man who crosses over (tarati) sins and prays that we, purified by that man, may likewise cross beyond (tarema) sins.26 Elsewhere in the same text the sacrificer prays that he may cross beyond (tarāmi) death.27

The act of crossing in the Upaniṣads is a spiritual transition and transformation from this world to what is called the world of Brahman, the world illumined by the light of knowledge. It is a crossing which must be made with the aid of a guide, a guru, and by means of the knowledge he imparts. The Praśna Upaniṣad 6.8, for instance, ends with the students' praise of their guru Pippalāda: “You truly are our father—you who lead us across to the shore beyond ignorance [param pāram tārayasi].”28 In the Isā Upaniṣad a person, passing over (tīrtā) death, gains immortality (amṛtam) by virtue of knowledge.29 In the Ānanda Upaniṣad, sorrow and sin are crossed over to reach immortality. The knower of Brahman, it is said, becomes Brahman. “He crosses over [tarati] sorrow. He crosses over [tarati] sin. Liberated from the knots of the heart, he becomes immortal.”30

The near shore left behind is characterized by the distinctions of good and evil, birth and death, hunger and thirst, day and night—the dualities (dvandvas) of samsāra. The far shore (pāra) is without these dualities. In the Kaṭha Upaniṣad 1.12, Naciketas, in his conversation with Death, describes the world of heaven as a place where one rejoices, having crossed beyond (tīrtvā) both old age and death, hunger and thirst. Death teaches the deepest meaning of the fire sacrifice to Naciketas and explains that whoever kindles the triple fire and performs the three acts (Śankara indicates that the three are sacrifice, study, and almsgiving) crosses over (tarati) birth and death. Later on in Kaṭha 3.2, this “Naciketa fire” is called “the bridge [setu] for those who sacrifice” and is described as the “highest imperishable Brahma for those who seek to cross over [tīrṣatām] to the fearless farther shore.”

26 Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa 3.12.3.4.
27 Ibid., 1.2.1.15.
30 Ānanda Upaniṣad 3.2.9.
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This sense of crossing beyond the distinctions of this world is also found in Sanatkumāra's teaching to Nārada in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad 8.4. The teacher proposes the image of the ātman as the bridge (setu) which separates the worlds: "Over that bridge there cross [tarataḥ] neither day nor night, nor old age, nor death, nor sorrow, nor well-doing, nor evil-doing. All evils turn back therefrom, for that Brahma-world is freed from evil... Therefore, verily, upon crossing [tīrtā] that bridge, the night appears even as the day, for that Brahma-world is ever illumined." Here the tīrtha, the crossing place or the bridge, is the ātman itself. Like a bridge, it both separates and joins the near shore of dualities and the far shore in which those distinctions do not exist. It is the means for the crossing, and the crossing is an interior one.

The language of interior crossing is also used in the context of interior or yogic disciplines. For instance, in the Kauśītaki Brāhmaṇa 11.4 the means of crossing is the breath and the holy mantra called the Prāṇava: Om. "Breath is immortality; thus by immortality he passes by [taratī] death; just as one steps over a pit by means of a beam or a roller, so with the Prāṇava he steps over; the Prāṇava is holy power; verily thus with the holy power he continues the holy power." In 14.2 of the same text we find: "Therefore without drawing in breath should he pass over; breath is immortality; thus by immortality he crosses [taratī] death." Similarly, in the Maitri Upaniṣad 6.21, the crossing is that of the yogin who ascends by means of the breath and the syllable "Om" through the channel of the subtle physiology called suṣumnā: "After having first caused to stand still / The breath that has been restrained, then, / Having crossed [tīrtvā] beyond the limited, with the unlimited / One may at last have union in the head." The Upaniṣad goes on in 6.22 to compare the yogic ascent with that of a spider ascending by means of his own thread to free space. Finally, in 6.28, the yogin, having slain the doorkeeper called egoism and "having crossed over [tīrtvā] with the raft of the syllable Om to the other side of the space in the heart," enters the hall of Brahman.

In the Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, the one who is united with Brahman is described as in a dreamless sleep, where the categories of this shore are left behind. There, it is said, the father is not a father, the thief not a thief, the ascetic not an ascetic. "He is not followed by good, he is not followed by evil, for
then he has passed beyond [tīrṇa] all sorrows of the heart.”31 The one who knows the ātman as “not this, not this” crosses beyond [tarati] the world of duality.32

It would take us too far afield here to explore the ways in which these words of passage, tīrtha and tarati, have been used in the Jaina and Buddhist traditions. However, even a cursory survey of their early literature confirms that these terms were used to express profound spiritual transition. Although the earliest Jaina literature refers to the enlightened teacher as a jīna, a “victor,” before long he became known as a tīrthakāra or tīrthankara, a “ford maker,” who has crossed the stream and reached the far shore. In the early Buddhist literature, the term tīrthankara, having been claimed by the Jainas, is assiduously avoided as a synonym for tathāgata. Indeed, the term tīrthankara was so thoroughly identified with the Jaina sages that it most commonly means “heretic” in the Buddhist context! Nevertheless, the Buddhists, without utilizing the term tīrtha, developed and enriched the spiritual image of the far shore as the goal and the language of the crossing as the way of spiritual life. The Buddhist use of tī/tarati as verbs of passage closely corresponds to the way in which these words are used in the Upaniṣads. The following few examples could be multiplied a hundredfold from the early Buddhist literature: “. . . When thou hast learned the best Dhamma, then thou shalt cross [taresi] this stream;”33 “Give up what is before, give up what is behind, give up what is in the middle, when thou goest [taresi] to the other shore of existence; if thy mind is altogether free, thou wilt not again enter into birth and decay;”34 “And he is a wise and accomplished man in this world; having abandoned this cleaving to reiterated existence he is without desire, free from longing, he has crossed over birth and old age, so I say.”35

CROSSINGS IN THE SACRED GEOGRAPHY OF INDIA

In the later Upaniṣads, the Epics, and the Purāṇas, the word tīrtha comes to common use as the spiritual ford which is the

31 Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 4.3.22.
32 Ibid., 4.4.22.
35 The Sutta Nīpāta, Parāyanavagga 5.12.
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destination of pilgrims, whose tirtha tours (tirthayātras) come to increasing prominence in the religious life of the emerging Hindu tradition. It is important to remember that the term comes to be used as a pilgrim tirtha in a context in which the symbolic language of the river, the ford, the crossing, and the far shore had already been developed and elaborated with great subtlety and richness.

Although the tirtha traditions of the rising classical Hindu tradition built upon the ancient sacrificial vocabulary or crossing back and forth between heaven and earth and the Upaniṣadic wisdom vocabulary of crossing to the far shore, the many specific tirthas of India's vast sacred geography are also well grounded in yet another tradition: the non-Vedic tradition of indigenous India which, despite its many areas of obscurity, was most clearly a tradition of life-force deities associated with particular places. It was a locative tradition in which genii loci under a variety of names—yakṣas, nāgas, gaṇas, mātrikās—were associated with groves and pools, hillocks and villages, wielding power for good or ill within their areas of jurisdiction. Many of the deepest roots of India's traditions of pūjā and tirthayātra are here in this place-oriented cultus. Although the myths associated with these places have changed, layering one upon the other through the centuries, pilgrims have continued to come with their vows and petitions, seeking the sight (darsana) and the token material blessings (prasāda) of the deity of the place. Whether it is Mathurā or Vārāṇasī, Purī or Tirupati, the ancient roots of today's great tirthas are in the cultus of the genii loci who reigned long before their places came to be called tirthas and long before their influence began to be co-opted by the emergence of Śiva, Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa, and the Goddess.

Let us now turn to the consideration of these tirthas of the earth which have inherited both the ritual and wisdom traditions of ancient Vedic India as well as the locative traditions of her indigenous piety. The array of India's tirthas is impressive. In this context, since we are seeking to understand the general notion of tirtha, we can but sketch in outline some of the landscape of India's tirthas.

The great rivers of India come first to mind as tirtha waters: Gaṅgā, Yamunā, Godāvari, Narmadā, and countless others. On their banks are some of the greatest of India's sacred crossings: Prayāg and Vārāṇasī (Kāśī) on the Gaṅgā, Amara-
kanṭaka and Tryambaka at the headwaters of the Narmadā and Godāvari, respectively, and Śrīraṅgam on an island in the Kāverī, to name but a few. Some of these are fords in a literal sense. Vārānasī, for instance, has been located for over 2,500 years at that ford where the ancient east-west road across north India crossed the River Gaṅgā. So closely associated is the tīrtha with pure, running river waters that in South India the word tīrtha has come to mean sacred waters.

Among mountain tīrthas the Himālayas are supreme, and their high sanctuaries, such as Badarīnāth, Kedārnāth, and Amarnāth, are sought by countless pilgrims during the summer months when they are accessible. Other mountains are tīrthas as well, such as the Vindhyas of central India or the isolated hilltops of Rājasthān crowned with temples of local goddesses, or the seven hills of Śrī Venkatesvara in Āndhra Prādesh.

Along the seacoast are such tīrthas as Purī in the east, Cidambaram and Rāmeśvaram in the south, and Dvārakā and Somnāth in the west. The circumambulation of the land of Bhārata includes these seacoast tīrthas.

Forests, too, have been places of crossing and transition. They are places of testing and trial for travelers and, since they contain the retreats and hermitages of sages, they are also places of learning and education. Both of India’s great epics involve their heroes and heroines in periods of forest exile, and the adventures of the Pāṇḍavas or of Rāma, Sītā, and Laks̩maṇa are recalled in forest tīrthas throughout India. Most famous, perhaps, is the Naimiśāranya in north India where sages recited the ancient tales to be recorded in the Epics and Purānas.

Among city tīrthas the cycle of the seven mokṣa-giving cities is acclaimed: Ayodhyā, the ancient capital of Lord Rāmā; Mathurā, the old Buddhist and Jain śa sanctuary and the birthplace of Lord Kṛṣṇa; Hardvār, where the Gaṅgā enters the plains of India from the mountains; Vārānasī or Kāśi, the eternal city of Lord Śiva on the Gaṅgā; Kaṇcī, the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva city of Tamilnādu; Ujjain, the site of the great liṅga of Mahākāla in central India; and Dvārakā, the capital of Lord Kṛṣṇa in western India.

Finally, in addition to rivers and mountains, seacoasts, forests, and cities, there are the countless cycles of sites special to various sectarian groups: the fifty-one Tantric and Śāktā pīṭhas or “benches” of the goddesses; the twelve Śaiva jyo-
tīrṇas, “liṅgas of light”; the several great cultic centers of Kṛṣṇa; and the beloved places of the Śrī Vaiśṇavas.

The whole of India's sacred geography, with its many tīrthas—those inherent in its natural landscape and those sanctified by the deeds of gods and the footsteps of heroes—is a living geography. As such it has been central for the shaping of an Indian sense of regional and national unity. The recognition of India as sacred landscape, woven together north and south, east and west, by the paths of pilgrims, has created a powerful sense of India as Bhārat Mātā—Mother India. Pilgrims have circumambulated the whole of India, visiting hundreds of tīrthas along the way, bringing water from the Gaṅgā in the north to sprinkle the liṅga at Rāmeśvaram in the far south and returning north with sands from Rāmeśvaram to deposit in the riverbed of the Gaṅgā.

In the thousands of particular tales which attach to tīrthas everywhere and which are recounted in the māhātmyas and sthala purāṇas of each place, one finds repeatedly the theme of the appearance of the divine, whether as Siva, Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa, or the Goddess. Often, in its māhātmya, a local tīrtha will subscribe to the larger all-India tradition by linking its sanctity to the great events of the Epics and Purāṇas. This might be seen as the geographical equivalent of Sanskritization. The forest sojourn of the Pāṇḍavas or the adventures of Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmana are especially suited to this kind of local subscription, as is the myth of the dismemberment of Sātī. In this way countless local tīrthas claim their part in a larger tradition. And in each case, the stories told recount not a generalized sense of divine presence at the tīrtha, but a very particular sense of the circumstances, the crisis, the place, and the person involved in the appearance of the deity there. Every tīrtha’s tale is of hierophany, the residents of heaven breaking in upon the earth.

Here the tīrtha is clearly the counterpart of the avatāra. The avatāra “crosses downward,” opening the doorways of the divine in this world so that these thresholds might be crossed in the other direction by humans. The place of avatāra is the tīrtha, for there the crossing might be readily and safely made. For instance, because the Gaṅgā descended in its avatāraṇa it becomes a means of ascending as a tīrtha.

Although the particularities of tīrthas—their myths and legends, their special times and powers, their special attributes
—are of great significance for those who visit them, their structural similarities as crossings are more significant for us in the context of this study. In what ways do these tirthas of the earth function as crossings or fords?

First, the tīrtha māhātmyas frequently claim that the tīrtha is a good place for the performing of rites. Since it is a place of powerful and direct communication between this world and the other, the acts one does and the prayers one utters at a tīrtha are many times more beneficial and swift of fruition than they would be elsewhere. In part, of course, it is because the tīrtha, reached only after a long journey, is difficult of access (durlabha) that its rewards are multiplied. For instance, the sight (darśana) of Amarnāth, high in the Kaśmīr Himālayas, is enhanced by the sheer effort of the long trek, an effort which is rightly compared with the tapas of the ascetic. In part, however, it is the power of the place itself which is transforming. Ordinary acts of worship (puja), almsgiving (dana), and listening to the ancient lore (śravaṇa) are charged by the extraordinary power of the place and its deity. So significant is this power that it is sometimes claimed that the place transforms even the inadvertent visitor.

On the whole, the rites performed at the tīrtha do not differ from those performed at home; it is the journey and the place itself which make the ordinary extraordinary. A few places, however, are known for distinctive rites. Especially important are those tīrthas famous for pitṛ tarpaṇa and sraddha rites for the dead. Although such rites may be performed at many tīrthas, the north Indian group called the Tristhali—Prayāg, Kāśi, and Gayā—is famous for these rites. It is because the tīrtha is a good ford between this world and that of heaven or between this world and that of the pitṛs that it is the right place for ritual performances. Here the tīrtha inherits some of the ritual meanings of crossing from the era of the Vedas and Brāhmaṇas.

Second, it is affirmed that tīrthas are not only those places where rites and sacrifices, well performed, will yield bountiful blessings, but also that tīrthas are those places which may replace the performance of rites and sacrifices. The pilgrimage to a tīrtha, therefore, becomes a substitute for other ritual activity.

The first major Hindu treatment of tīrthayātra is in the Tīrthayātra Parva of the Mahābhārata, where the Pāṇḍavas,
during their forest sojourn, undertake a circuit of the many tirthas. On their pilgrimage, they visit the various tirthas of rivers, mountains, and forests. A great number of these are described as bestowing the benefits of some particular sacrifice, such as the aśvamedha, the rājasūya, or the agnihotra. In the later Dharmashastras and Purāṇas, such ritual equations of tirtha with sacrifice are common. For example, the famous Dasāśvamedha tirtha in Vārāṇasī is the place where one bath bestows the fruits of “ten aśvamedhas.” Of course, many ritual actions in the later tradition came to be described in terms of the sacrificial “equivalents,” but none so prominently and clearly as the pilgrimage to a tirtha. Given the understanding of “crossing” which both the sacrifice and the tirtha share, this is not at all surprising. The outset of the Tirthayātro Parva makes the equation of sacrifice and tirthayātra quite clear in a passage which is quoted repeatedly in later centuries, both in the Purāṇas and in the digests of the medieval nibandhakāras:

The fruits of sacrifices, completely and accurately expounded in due order by the sages in the Vedas, cannot be obtained by the poor man, O King. Sacrifices, with their many implements and their many various requisites, are the province of princes, or sometimes very rich men, but not of single individuals who are deficient in means and implements and who do not have the help of others. But hear, O King, of that practice which is accessible even to the poor, equal to the holy fruits of sacrifice. This is the supreme secret of the sages, O King: the holy practice of pilgrimage (tirthayātra) excells even the sacrifice!86

Thus, it is not what one does in the tirtha which is transforming. It is going there and being there. The tirthayātra is the rite; the place is the power. In Vārāṇasī, for instance, it is said that even sleep is yoga, and even casual conversation is the repetition of the mantra.

Third, pilgrimage to a tirtha is not only less expensive than the elaborate rites of brāhmaṇas and kings, it is also less restrictive socially. The tirtha might be seen, therefore, as a place where one crosses the ordinary boundaries of caste and sex. The way of the tirtha is open and accessible to all, particularly to śūdras, outcastes, and women, who are excluded from brāhmaṇical rites. Tirthayātra was the mahāyāna, the “great path,” of the Hindu tradition. At times in the Dharmashastra digests (nibandhas) the liminal status of the tirtha beyond the boundaries of conventional life is emphasized. For instance,

at a tīrtha the caṇḍāla, the śūdra, the woman, and the brāhmaṇa all bathe in the same waters. At the tīrtha the usual restrictions of touching and not touching are left behind.\(^{37}\) Although in practice the egalitarianism one finds in the texts has not invariably been upheld, it remains the ideal of the Dharmaśāstra tradition.

In considering Dharmaśāstric and Purānic statements about the accessibility of tīrthas to the lower and poorer classes, it is important to remember that, to a large extent, pilgrimage originally was the tradition of these same lower classes. They certainly did not wait until pilgrimage was proclaimed the equivalent of sacrifice before taking to the roads to seek out the groves, hills, and rivers of their locative vision. One might more accurately say that the brāhmaṇical tradition adopted and brought its own interpretive framework to the phenomenon of pilgrimage which already existed. Śūdras and, very likely, women as well were already veteran pilgrims. The brāhmaṇical treatment of tīrtha and tīrthayātra, however, brought the subject into the realm of dharma, and indeed tīrthayātra became the single most broadly elaborated subject in the Dharmaśāstric and Purānic literature as well as in the later digest literature.\(^{38}\)

Fourth, it is commonly said of tīrthas that they are places for “crossing beyond” sins. The destruction of sins, perhaps the sins of a lifetime or of many lifetimes, is ascribed to tīrthas great and small, calling to mind some of the Vedic and Brāhmaṇic associations of the word tīrtha with purification. The purifying waters of a tīrtha wash away one’s sins, or the very dust of the place may be purifying. Entering the boundaries of a great tīrtha, such as Vārānasi, scarlet sins are said to tumble out of one’s body and burn like puffs of cotton in a blazing fire. Thus, visiting the tīrtha is a kind of penance (prāyaścitta) for sins. The tale of Śiva’s own wandering penance is relevant here. Having sliced off the fifth head of the slander-
ous Brahmā, Śiva roamed throughout all the tīrthas of India, the skull of Brahmā clinging to his hand, until he came to Vārāṇaṣi, which was powerful enough to destroy even the worst of great sins, brāhmaṇa slaying. There the skull fell off. In sum, the power of a tīrtha to purify sins (pāpa) is the concomitant of its power to bestow measureless blessings (punya). In India, where the pure (pavitr) is the closest equivalent of what we call the “sacred,” the purifying power of the tīrtha is very significant indeed.

Fifth, the journey to the tīrtha is both an interior and a geographical journey and the crossing is, in part, within. The pilgrim way is modeled on the paradigm of those perpetual pilgrims of India, the ascetics and renouncers. The tradition of wandering forth and leaving behind one’s attachment to the stable life of household and village is the ancient way of the Hindu sannyāsins (“renouncers”) and the Buddhist pravṛṣjakas (those who have “gone forth”). On the move and unsettled except for the four months of the rainy season, these wanderers are prototypical pilgrims. In their constant visitations to the great tīrthas of the tradition, they add their own luster to that of the place itself. The lay pilgrim becomes a sannyāsin of sorts, leaving the household behind and taking up the privations and hardships of the road. The rules prescribed for the pilgrim in the Purāṇas and the medieval digests make it clear that the pilgrim life is an ascetic and disciplined life.

Going to a tīrtha is not only a matter of the feet, but also a matter of the heart. The mānasātīrthas, “tīrthas of the heart,” are as important as the geographical tīrthas.39 The notion of these tīrthas of the heart is elaborated in the Mahābhārata as well as in the Purāṇas and nibandhas: truth, charity, and patience, self-control, celibacy, and wisdom—these are the tīrthas in which one must bathe to become truly clean. If water alone were enough to purify, then the water leeches and fishes of the Gāṅgā would all be transported to heaven. It is by bathing in the tīrthas of the heart that one may truly “cross over.” The tīrthas of the earth are not to be neglected, however:

39 For the mānasātīrthas, see Mahābhārata, Anuśāṣana Parva, 111.2–21. This passage is quoted at the outset of the Tīrthavivecana Kānda of Lakṣmidhara (K. V. Rangaswami Aiyangar, ed., Gaekwad’s Oriental Series vol. 98 [Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1942]), pp. 6–8, and also at the beginning of Miśra, Tīrtha Prakāsa, pp. 8–10. The Kāśī Khandā of the Skanda Purāṇa (6.31–45) and the Uttara Khandā of the Padma Purāṇa (237.11–28) repeat the Mahābhārata version almost verbatim.
"The one who always bathes in earthly tirthas as well as in the tirthas of the heart goes to the supreme goal!"\(^{40}\)

The notion of interior tirthas plays a perpetual counterpoint to the vast proliferation of geographical tirthas. The refrain of the great poem on Kāśi attributed to Śaṅkarācārya insists: "I am that Kāśi, whose real form is wisdom!"\(^{41}\) However, the valuing of the tirthas of the heart does not replace the journey to the tirthas of the earth. Rather, the Indian tradition balances the pilgrim's faith in the sheer transforming power of the place itself with a persistent reminder that the tirtha is an internal as well as an external crossing and that the tirtha to which one journeys is also close within.\(^{42}\)

Finally, although most journeys to the tirthas are related to specific vows or directed toward specific fruits, there are a few tirthas which promise the highest goal of which the Upaniṣads speak: the great crossing over to the far shore of Brahman. The seven cities mentioned above are mokṣadāyakāh, "be-stowers of mokṣa," and Hindus affirm that those who die within their borders will be liberated, never to return to the shore of birth and death. Many would say that Kāśi or Vā-rāṇaṣi is the most important of these seven. In any case, it is true that Kāśi is famous for death and for mokṣa. The greatest of Kāśi's praises is "Kāśyāṃ maranam muktih"—"Death in Kāśi is liberation." Here we begin to glimpse the way in which India's great tirthas inherit the wisdom traditions of crossing: crossing beyond birth and death, crossing from darkness to light, crossing from ignorance to knowledge.

In Kāśi, it is said, Śiva as guru speaks the tāraka mantra, the "ferryboat" mantra, into the ear of the dying. By its power, one is illumined with the light of Brahman (which is also the light of Kāśi, the "Luminous") and ferried across to the far shore, never to return. In the Kāśi Mokṣa Nirṇaya, the city is not only the luminous crossing place on the Gaṅgā, it is also known as the threshold between heaven and earth and


\(^{42}\) Lakṣmīdhara in the Tīrthaṅvivecana Khaṇḍa of the Kṛtyakalpataru is especially concerned to balance the interior and the ritual aspects of pilgrimage; K. V. Rangaswami Aiyangar, ed., Gaekwad's Oriental Series vol. 98 (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1942).
the crossing place within, called the ātman. It is said to be located "where the nose and eyebrows meet." The radical spiritual crossing expressed by the use of tṛ/tarati in the Upaniṣads has clearly become a part of the later tradition of tīrtha and tīrthayātra. As Śiva exclaims in the Kāśi Rahasya while showing his beloved place to Parvatī: "Look dear! Look at Kāśi—a boat set for the crossing, a motionless refuge, set just above the earth, a boat not of wood and nails, but the illuminer of all people, whom she carries across the sea of being."

THE Tīrtha AS SYMBOL

Traveling to the tīrthas is one of the most prominent forms of popular piety in India today. The past century of modernization has served further to stimulate pilgrim travel, enabling Indians by the millions each year to take to the pilgrim road by buses and trains. While all of India’s tīrthas are no longer “difficult of access” (durlabha), it would be safe to say that they are more popular and, in a sense, more powerful than ever before. As Yudhiṣṭhira once said to the wise Vidura, who had returned from a tīrthayātra, “Devotees like you, who have become tīrthas (tīrthabhūtah) themselves, are the ones who make the tīrthas into tīrthas (tīrthākuruṇti tīrthāni) by embodying the presence of God there.” With their great numbers and the power of their cumulative devotion, India’s pilgrims are continually making their tīrthas into tīrthas.

The significance of tīrthas in India may be understood, as I have attempted to do here, by taking account of the many strands of the Indian tradition which have converged in the tīrtha: the popular locative traditions of folk piety, the sacrificial and ritual traditions of crossing between heaven and earth, and the wisdom traditions of crossing to the far shore of the river of samsāra. Since tīrthas have accumulated all these traditions, they are sought by people with wide-ranging religious aspirations—from healing to mukti. For some, the tīrtha

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43 The Kāśi Mokṣa Nirṇaya, also called the Kāśi Mrī Mokṣa Vicāra, is attributed to Suresvaraścārya and quotes, in this matter, the Jābala Upaniṣad 1–2. See Pt. Ambika Datta Upādhyāya, Hindi trans, Kāśi Mokṣa Nirṇaya (Gorakhpur: Śrī Gaurisānkār Ganepīvalā, 1931); or Gopināth Kāvīrāj, ed., Kāśi Mrī Mokṣa Vicāra, The Prince of Wales Sarasvati Bhavana Text no. 67 (Allahabad: Government Printing Office, 1936).


has long been associated primarily with boons and blessings, such as health, longevity, and fertility. For others, the tirtha is the place where brāhmanical rites and observances are to be performed. And for a few, the tirtha is the place where one leaves behind all desires and all rites and sets out for the far shore of mokṣa. Even those who have placed little value upon brāhmanical traditions of tirthayātra have utilized the notion of the tirtha to refer to interior crossings, and the Gaṅgā, the Yamunā, and Kāśī have been given mystical locations in the subtle physiology of the body.46

The river, the crossing, and the far shore have formed an important symbolic complex in the Indian imaging of transition and transcendence. While the word employed in speaking of such passages may not always derive from the tṛ root, the specific image of fording the river flood to the far shore remains a key image and is utilized in a variety of contexts. For example, the dead are said to cross the river Vaitaraṇī to the world of Yama, or the sacrificer crosses to the world of heaven on the “ships”47 of sacrifice, or the seeker crosses on the raft of dharma to the far shore of nirvāṇa. Saṁsāra, the stream of life and death and life again, entails one crossing after another. Indeed, in one of the creation accounts of the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, no sooner has the creator Prajāpati emerged from the primordial egg to begin laboring over creation, than he sees the far shore (pāra) of his own life, “as one might see in the distance the opposite shore” of a river.48 The pāra, the “far shore,” may be simply the “other” or the “opposite” shore, whether that is the world of heaven, or the realm of death beyond the Vaitaraṇī. However, pāra also means the “farthest limit” or the “fullest extent,” the ultimate. To have crossed over to that shore is to have gone as far as one can go. Thus, for some, the far shore is not death, nor heaven, but the land described as mokṣa or nirvāṇa. In both the Advaita and Mādhyamika schools of philosophy, one sees, from the perspective of the far shore beyond duality, that it is not different from “this shore.”

47 See, e.g., Aitareya Brāhmaṇa 1.3.13 and Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 4.2.5.10. for references to the sacrifice as a “ship.”
48 Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 11.1.6.6. and, similarly, when the gods are born, 11.1.6.15.
While the goal is the pāra, variously conceived, the means of crossing over may be the tīrtha, the ford, or it may be the ladder (sopāna) or the bridge (setu). Especially the ladder image vividly reminds us that the symbolism of crossing is also the symbolism of ascent. As the work of Mircea Eliade on yoga and shamanism has so clearly demonstrated, the mystical crossing may be imaginatively described as an ascent “upward” on a ladder to heaven, or a crossing “over” on a perilous bridge, or it may be described primarily in terms of the interior ascent of the yogin through the worlds of the inner cosmic landscape.49

From its common usage in India today, it would be tempting to call the tīrtha a “sacred” place. Indeed, in later Sanskrit, the adjective tīrtha is sometimes given as “sacred,” and the verbal form tīrthi + kṛ is said to mean “to sanctify.”50 However, “sacred” is surely a conceptual category which needs some serious rethinking in its applicability to the Hindu universe. This study of both the ancient and modern implications of the term tīrtha has shown it to have dynamic and transitive connotations more accurately conveyed by “ford” or “crossing place.” As such, the term tīrtha may be useful in building a comparative conceptual vocabulary for pilgrimage and passage. The understanding of India’s “sacred” places may be enlarged and enriched by seeing them, not as destinations, but as fords, where caste and sex, sins, sickness, and death, and even samsāra itself, may be transcended in the crossing.

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