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# INDIA'S *TĪRTHAS*: "CROSSINGS" IN SACRED GEOGRAPHY

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 *tīrtha* 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. *Saṃsāra*, 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]

[1] F. Max Müller, ed., *Rig-Veda-Sanhitā: The Sacred Hymns of the Brahmans, Together with the Commentary of Sayanacharya* (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1849–74); Śripad Sharma, ed., *Ṛg Veda Saṃhitā* (Aundha: Svādhyāyamaṇḍala, 1940), 4.28.1. Consultation with Ralph T. H. Griffiths, trans., *The Hymns of the Rig Veda* (1889; reprint ed., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973).

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-sariṇī*, "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 *tṝ/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 *tṝ* 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 *tṝ*, 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.[2]

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.[3]

[2] Julius Pokorny, *Indo-germaniches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Bern: Francke, 1948–59); Manfred Mayrhofer, *A Concise Etymological Sanskrit Dictionary* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1953–76); Jacob Wackernagel and Albert Debrunner, *Altindische Grammatik*, vol. 2, pt. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1954); Eric Partridge, *A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1966).

[3] For the temple/*tīrtha* homology, see Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple* (1946; reprint ed., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1976), pp. 3–17.

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 Dharmaśāstras.

### THE PLACE OF CROSSING: THE NOUN *Tīrtha*

From the various usages of the noun *tīrtha* in the Vedic Saṃhitās, 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

[4] Vishva Bandu, ed., *A Vedic Word Concordance*, rev. and enlarged ed. (Hoshiarpur: Vishveshvaranand Vedic Research Institute, 1976); G. A. Jacob, *A Concordance to the Principal Upanisads and the Bhagavad Gita* (1891; reprint ed., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971).

[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 Ṛg 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 Ṛg 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.

[8] *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa* (*Śaṅkhāyana Brāhmaṇa*), Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series 65 (Poona, 1911), 12.1; Arthur B. Keith, trans., *Rig-Veda Brāhmaṇas*, Harvard Oriental Series, vol. 25 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1920).

[9] Ṛg Veda 9.97.53.

[10] Arthur B. Keith, trans., *Taittirīya Saṃhitā of the Black Yajur Veda*, Harvard Oriental Series, vols. 18 and 19 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1914), 6.1.1.2–3.

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 [*taret*] the flood by the two *tīrthas*, so it is that he should offer at the twilight."[11] 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.[12]

In another hymn, the devout singer invites the Aśvins to mount the chariot which stands at the heavenly *tīrtha* on the shore of the lake of Soma, and he asks the Aśvins to cross over to this shore on a boat made of his own hymns.[13] 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."[14] "'Who here hath proclaimed the *Āpnāna tīrtha?*' 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."[15]

Structurally, one might view the entire sacrifice as a *tīrtha*,

[11] Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa 2.9.

[12] Albrecht Weber, ed., *The Çatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (*The White Yajur Veda*, pt. 2) (London: Williams & Norgate, 1855), 12.2.1.1.1–5; Julius Eggeling, trans., *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa: The Sacred Books of the East*, vols. 12, 26, 41, 43, and 44 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1882–1900).

[13] Ṛg Veda 1.46.7–8.

[14] Ibid., 10.114.7.

[15] Kauṣītaki 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 *tṝ/tarati*, to cross. In a few cases the verb takes its subsidiary meanings—to conquer, to subdue, to surpass. For example, Indra subdues Vṛtra;[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 Sadānīrā river. . . ." However, a great number of the usages of *tarati* in the Saṃhitās 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] *Taittīriya Brāhmaṇa of the Kṛṣṇa Yajur Veda*, Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series 37 (Poona, 1898), 3.1.2.1.
[17] Ṛg Veda 4.21.2.
[18] Ibid., 9.96.15.
[19] Ibid., 9.59.3.
[20] *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, with the Commentary of Sāyaṇa*, Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series 32 (Poona, 1896), 2.34; Keith, trans., *Rig-Veda Brāhmaṇas*.
[21] Aitareya Brāhmaṇa 4.13.

his hymns to the heavenly ocean, where the Sun tethers his horses. "May we cross over [*tuturyāma*] 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. Uṣas, 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, Sūrya, the sun, is called the bridge (*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 *tīrthas* in the later tradition, is also one who crosses back and forth, as is seen in this passage from the Taittiríya Saṃhitā:

> Homage to him of the ford [*tīrthyāya*] and to him of the bank.
> Homage to him beyond and to him on this side.
> Homage to him who crosseth over [*prataraṇāya*] and to him who crosseth back [*uttaraṇāya*].
> Homage to him of the crossing [*ātāryāya*] and to him of the ocean.[25]

The dynamics of these divine crossings of the gods from heaven to earth are elaborated in the post-Vedic era in the notion of *avatāra*, the divine descents. The word is formed from the root *tṝ* plus the prefix *ava:* to "cross downward." The descents of Viṣṇu, for instance, are well known. We shall return below to the significance of the interplay between *avatāra* and *tīrtha*.

In the Upaniṣads the verb *tṝ* 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 Ṛg 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 (*taranto*) all our troubles.

[22] Ṛg Veda 5.45.11.
[23] Ibid., 6.64.4; the verb in this verse is *tarasi*.
[24] Ibid., 10.61.16.
[25] Taittirīya Saṃhitā 4.5.8.

Similarly, Ṛg 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 Iśa Upaniṣad a person, passing over (*tīrtā*) death, gains immortality (*amṛtam*) by virtue of knowledge.[29] In the Muṇḍaka 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 *saṃsāra*. 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 (Śaṅkara indicates that the three are sacrifice, study, and almsgiving) crosses over (*tarati*) birth and death. Later on in Kaṭha 3.2, this "Naciketas 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 [*titīrṣatām*] to the fearless farther shore."

[26] Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa 3.12.3.4.
[27] Ibid., 1.2.1.15.
[28] Pandita Jagadīśa Śāstri, ed., *Upaniṣatsaṅgraha* (Delhi: Motilāl Banārsīdās, 1970); R. E. Hume, trans., *The Thirteen Principal Upanisads*, 2d rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931).
[29] Īśa Upaniṣad 11.14.
[30] Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 3.2.9.

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 [*taratah*] 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 Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa 11.4 the means of crossing is the breath and the holy mantra called the Praṇava: Om. "Breath is immortality; thus by immortality he passes by [*tarati*] death; just as one steps over a pit by means of a beam or a roller, so with the Praṇava he steps over; the Praṇava 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 [*tarati*] 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 Bṛhadāraṇyaka 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 [*tīrṇo*] 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 *jina*, a "victor," before long he became known as a *tīrthakāra* or *tīrthaṅkara*, a "ford maker," who has crossed the stream and reached the far shore. In the early Buddhist literature, the term *tīrthaṅkara*, having been claimed by the Jainas, is assiduously avoided as a synonym for *tathāgata*. Indeed, the term *tīrthaṅkara* 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 *tṝ/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] Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 4.3.22.
[32] Ibid., 4.4.22.
[33] V. Fausboll, trans., *The Sutta Nipāta: The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 10, pt. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1881), Pārāyanavagga 6.4.
[34] F. Max Müller, trans., *The Dhammapada: The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 10, pt. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1881), verse 348.
[35] *The Sutta Nipāta*, Pārāyanavagga 5.12.

destination of pilgrims, whose *tīrtha* tours (*tīrthayātras*) 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 *tīrtha* 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 *tīrtha* 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 *tīrthas* 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, mātṛikās*—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 *tīrthayātra* 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 (*darśana*) 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 *tīrthas* are in the cultus of the *genii loci* who reigned long before their places came to be called *tīrthas* 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 *tīrthas* 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 *tīrthas* is impressive. In this context, since we are seeking to understand the general notion of *tīrtha*, we can but sketch in outline some of the landscape of India's *tīrthas*.

The great rivers of India come first to mind as *tīrtha* waters: Gaṅgā, Yamunā, Godāvarī, 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-

kaṇṭaka and Tryambaka at the headwaters of the Narmadā and Godāvarī, respectively, and Śrīraṅgam on an island in the Kāverī, to name but a few. Some of these are fords in a literal sense. Vārāṇasī, 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 Śri Veṅkateśvara 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 Lakṣmaṇa are recalled in forest *tīrthas* throughout India. Most famous, perhaps, is the Naimiṣāraṇya in north India where sages recited the ancient tales to be recorded in the Epics and Purāṇas.

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 Jaina sanctuary and the birthplace of Lord Kṛṣṇa; Hardvār, where the Gaṅgā enters the plains of India from the mountains; Vārānasī or Kāśī, the eternal city of Lord Śiva on the Gaṅgā; Kañcī, 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-*

*tirliṅgas*, "*liṅgas* of light"; the several great cultic centers of Kṛṣṇa; and the beloved places of the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas.

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 Śiva, 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 Lakṣmaṇa are especially suited to this kind of local subscription, as is the myth of the dismemberment of Satī. 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 *avataraṇa* 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 *tīrthas* 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 (*pūjā*), almsgiving (*dāna*), 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 *srāddha* rites for the dead. Although such rites may be performed at many *tīrthas*, the north Indian group called the Tristhalī—Prayāg, Kāśī, 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 *tīrthas*. On their pilgrimage, they visit the various *tīrthas* 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 Dharmaśāstras and Purāṇas, such ritual equations of *tīrtha* with sacrifice are common. For example, the famous Dasāśvamedha *tīrtha* 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 *tīrtha*. Given the understanding of "crossing" which both the sacrifice and the *tīrtha* share, this is not at all surprising. The outset of the Tīrthayātra Parva makes the equation of sacrifice and *tīrthayātra* 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 (*tīrthayātra*) excells even the sacrifice![36]

Thus, it is not what one does in the *tīrtha* which is transforming. It is going there and being there. The *tīrthayātra* 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 *tīrtha* is not only less expensive than the elaborate rites of *brāhmaṇas* and kings, it is also less restrictive socially. The *tīrtha* might be seen, therefore, as a place where one crosses the ordinary boundaries of caste and sex. The way of the *tīrtha* is open and accessible to all, particularly to *śūdras*, outcastes, and women, who are excluded from brāhmaṇical rites. *Tīrthayātra* was the *mahāyāna*, the "great path," of the Hindu tradition. At times in the Dharmaśāstra digests (*nibandhas*) the liminal status of the *tīrtha* beyond the boundaries of conventional life is emphasized. For instance,

[36] Vishnu S. Sukthankar et al., eds., *Mahābhārata*, 19 vols. (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933–59), 3.80.34–38; my translation.

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 Purāṇic 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 Purāṇic 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 Vārāṇasī, 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-

[37] Mitra Miśra, *Vīramitrodaya: Tīrtha Prakāśa*, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series 239 (Benares, 1917), pp. 21–23. This discussion is in the part of his introductory section concerning those who are "qualified for pilgrimage": *tīrthayātrādhikāriṇaḥ*.

[38] It is particularly in the *dharmaśāstra* sections of the Purāṇas that *tīrthayātra* is treated, and the *māhātmyas* of specific *tīrthas* claim large sections of the major Purāṇas. The *nibandhas* are digests of Purāṇic and Dharmaśāstra verses on diverse topics of *dharma*. Many of these *nibandhas* have entire volumes devoted to *tīrthas*, such as the *Tīrthavivecana Kāṇḍa* of Lakṣmīdhara's *Kṛtyakalpataru* (twelfth century); the *Tīrthacintāmaṇi* of Vācaspati Miśra's *Smṛticintāmaṇi* (fifteenth century); and the *Tīrtha Prakāśa* of Mitra Miśra's *Vīramitrodaya* (seventeenth century). Also important is Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa's *Tristhalīsetu* (sixteenth century).

ous Brahmā, Śiva roamed throughout all the *tīrthas* of India, the skull of Brahmā clinging to his hand, until he came to Vārāṇasī, 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 (*pavitṛ*) 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 *pravrājakas* (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 *mānasatīrthas*, "*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 Gaṅgā 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 *mānasatīrthas*, see Mahābhārata, Anuśāsana Parva, 111.2–21. This passage is quoted at the outset of the *Tīrthavivecana Kāṇḍa* of Lakṣmīdhara (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 Prakāśa*, pp. 8–10. The *Kāśī Khaṇḍa* of the Skanda Purāṇa (6.31–45) and the *Uttara Khaṇḍa* of the Padma Purāṇa (237.11–28) repeat the Mahābhārata version almost verbatim.

"The one who always bathes in earthly *tīrthas* as well as in the *tīrthas* of the heart goes to the supreme goal!"[40]

The notion of interior *tīrthas* plays a perpetual counterpoint to the vast proliferation of geographical *tīrthas*. The refrain of the great poem on Kāśī attributed to Śaṅkarācārya insists: "I am that Kāśī, whose real form is wisdom!"[41] However, the valuing of the *tīrthas* of the heart does not replace the journey to the *tīrthas* 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 *tīrtha* is an internal as well as an external crossing and that the *tīrtha* to which one journeys is also close within.[42]

Finally, although most journeys to the *tīrthas* are related to specific vows or directed toward specific fruits, there are a few *tīrthas* 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*, "bestowers 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 Kāśī or Vārāṇasī is the most important of these seven. In any case, it is true that Kāśī is famous for death and for *mokṣa*. The greatest of Kāśī's praises is "*Kāśyām maranam muktiḥ*"—"Death in Kāśī is liberation." Here we begin to glimpse the way in which India's great *tīrthas* inherit the wisdom traditions of crossing: crossing beyond birth and death, crossing from darkness to light, crossing from ignorance to knowledge.

In Kāśī, 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 Kāśī, the "Luminous") and ferried across to the far shore, never to return. In the *Kāśī 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

[40] *Skanda Purāṇa, Kāśī Khaṇḍa*, Gurumaṇḍala Granthamālāyā 20, vol. 4 (Calcutta, 1961), 6.45.

[41] Śaṅkarācārya, *Vedāntasamuccaya*, ed. Brahmarṣi Harerāma Śarma (Bombay: Nirṇaya Sāgara, 1915). For a discussion of the authenticity of Śaṅkara's authorship, see Robert E. Gussner, *Hymns of Praise* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1974).

[42] Lakṣmīdhara in the *Tīrthavivecana Kāṇḍa* 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."[43] 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 *Kāśī Rahasya* while showing his beloved place to Parvatī: "Look dear! Look at Kāśī—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."[44]

### 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* (*tīrthabhūtāḥ*) themselves, are the ones who make the *tīrthas* into *tīrthas* (*tīrthīkurvanti tīrthāni*) by embodying the presence of God there."[45] 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 *saṃsāra*. 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*

[43] The *Kāśī Mokṣa Nirṇaya*, also called the *Kāśī Mṛti Mokṣa Vicāra*, is attributed to Sureśvarācārya and quotes, in this matter, the Jābala Upaniṣad 1–2. See Pt. Ambika Datta Upādhyāya, Hindi trans, *Kāśī Mokṣa Nirṇaya* (Gorakhpur: Śrī Gaurīśaṅkar Ganeṛivālā, 1931); or Gopināth Kavirāj, ed., *Kāśī Mṛti Mokṣa Vicāra*, The Prince of Wales Sarasvati Bhavana Text no. 67 (Allahabad: Government Printing Office, 1936).

[44] *Kāśī Rahasya:* Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa Pariśiṣṭa, Gurumaṇḍala Granthamālāyā no. 14, vol. 3 (Calcutta, 1957), 3.21.

[45] C. L. Goswami, trans., *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*, with Sanskrit text and English translation (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1971), 1.13.10.

has long been associated primarily with boons and blessings, such as health, longevity, and fertility. For others, the *tīrtha* is the place where brāhmaṇical rites and observances are to be performed. And for a few, the *tīrtha* 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 brāhmaṇical traditions of *tīrthayātra* have utilized the notion of the *tīrtha* 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 *tṝ* 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*. *Saṃsāra*, 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."

[46] See Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series 61, 2d ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 227 ff.; see also *Kāśī Mokṣa Nirṇaya*.

[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 *saṃsāra* itself, may be transcended in the crossing.

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[49] Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom;* Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series 76 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964), esp. chaps. 8 and 13; see also Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy, "The Perilous Bridge of Welfare," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 8, no. 2 (August 1944): 196–213.

[50] Vaman Shivram Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Poona: Prasad Prakashan, 1957).