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## Theory and practice of Pilgrimage in Hinduism

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(Article begins on next page)

# Theory and practice of Pilgrimage in Hinduism

Introduction - The vedic roots

Epic and puranic sources

The treatises (nibandha)

Sacred fords (t rtha)

Mental sacred fords (m nasat rtha)

Fields (k etra)

Pilgrimage to sacred places (t rthay tr )

Replacement pilgrimage

Interior disposition

Macrocosm and microcosm

Preparation and goals

Meetings (kumbhamel )

Circuits (parikrama)

Introduction - The vedic roots

The vedic roots of the hind practice of pilgrimage are to be traced first of all within the gveda, where the keyterm t rtha is to be found in a certain number of occurrences, both with the general meaning "way", "passage", and with the specific meaning "ford", particularly "sacred ford", a place where a river can be waded across by foot, a natural place of meeting during seasonal festivals. This is probably the ancient origin of the practice of pilgrimage, the practice consisting in the meeting around the fords of rivers and creeks in order to celebrate a seasonal festival. In a monsonic climate the possibility to wade across a river is necessarily bound to the cycle of the seasons. The practice of merry meetings around the shores of rivers draws great crowds towards the rivers, being the source of rural subsistence, the source of the very possibility to earn one's own living. Within a sacerdotal text being bound to the gveda, the Aitareyabr hma a, we find an interesting aetiological myth explaining the origin of the practice of pilgrimage, the journey to sacred fords, t rthay tr . Says the Aitareyabr hma a (7, 33, 3, I quote from the old translation by Arthur Berriedale Keith, Harvard Oriental Series, London 1920): "Manifold is the prosperity of him who is weary, / So have we heard, o Rohita; / Evil is he who stayeth among men, / Indra is the comrade of the wanderer. [...] Flower-like the heels of the wanderer, / His body groweth and is

fruitful, / All his sins disappear, / Slain by the toil of his journeying. [...] The fortune of him who sitteth also sitteth, / But that of him who standeth standeth erect; / That of him who reclineth lieth down; / The fortune of him that moveth shall move indeed."

Indra, the Vedic god of storm and king of the gods, is often represented by his thunderbolt, the vajra. With it he breaks the dark clouds heavy with water, and lets the rain to fall upon the earth impregnating it. The celestial waters are personified by the asura Vatra, the asura Indra faces and defeats. Indra is also the symbol of the strength of the Aryas, the ancient indoeuropean invaders of the Indian subcontinent, he is the symbol of a nomadic civilization of cattle breeders, opposing to the sedentary agrarian model of the autochthonous civilization. It is not at all fortuitous that he is the ideal mate of the pilgrim, wandering through all different regions of India.

### Epic and puranic sources

One of the two main epic Indian poems, the Mahabharata, dedicates one of its minor books (3,36 crit. ed.) to the pilgrimage to sacred fords (tirthayatra) of the Pandavas during their exile in the forest. The other one, the Ramayana, contains within its main plot the account of Rama's long and dangerous journey across the peninsular portion of the subcontinent in order to reach the island of Lanka, where his wife Sita has been brought by Ravana who kidnapped her. But the importance of sacred places shows its real importance with the puranas, the ancient stories. Manifold are the references to pilgrimage within puranic literature. Perhaps the most important single source is the section about sacred fords (tirtha) within the Skandapurana (4,1,6). Even the functions of pilgrimage are manifold: for the individual, the pilgrimage is a purificatory practice, sometimes a way towards salvation. From the collective point of view, pilgrimage is a powerful tool for the unification of Indian cultural world, firmly pursued by a number of imperial Indian dynasties as a mean for cultural validation. The mature result of this geopolitical conception of the practice of pilgrimage will be the so called replacement or substitute pilgrimage. From the individual perspective, the substitute pilgrimage allows to reach the very same goals of a real journey, with evident savings in terms of economic expense and of personal risks (bandits along the caravan routes and so on). The political unification of Indian world is a dream that no imperial dynasty could ever really and effectively accomplish due to geopolitical reasons. But it could perhaps be possible to accomplish it in a symbolic, intellectual way. The multiplication and reproduction of sacred places, reciprocally recalling each other in a mirror's play (Kashmir, Uttarakashmir, Dakshinashankh and so on) establishes a dense net of relationships, with the result of the reinforcement of the cultural unity of the country through devotional practice.

Skanda, the son of Shiva, is the god of war, representing the male vigour of the young man just sorted out of puberty. His alternative nouns are Kumara ("prince"), Karttikeya (son of the Krittika, the seven sisters, his adoptive mothers), Subrahmanya ("dear to priests"). In the South of India he is venerated with the name of Murukan. His weapon is the spear, his vahana is the peacock. To him is dedicated the most bulky of the puranas (a lakh of stanzas), the Skandapurana. It is not at all fortuitous that this very same purana contains a section devoted to sacred fords. In effect the male vigour of the warrior, the main feature of this god, appears also in occasion of seasonal marauds. Seasonal marauds or raids are, from the anthropological point of view, the aggressive alternative to the pacific practice of pilgrimage.

An important symbolic contrast is the juxtaposition during the siege to Laṅkā in the Rāmāyaṇa between a forest abiding group, refusing the comforts of urban life, and a refined urban community, represented respectively by the besiegers, the people of apes, and by the besieged, the inhabitants of the capital of Laṅkā, ruled by Rāvāṇa. The warrior impetuosity of the first group is doomed to conquer the decaying stability of the second one. Perhaps we have here a hint of a memory of the Vedic deeds celebrating the powerful advancement of nomadic Indo-Aryan tribes, devoted to cattle breeding and to war, against the urban sites, defended by agrarian and sedentary autochthonous groups. The prevalence of migrant people against sedentary people perhaps could eventually be symbolized in the very practice of pilgrimage, that is a programmed migration, focused on religious goals.

### The treatises (nibandha)

After the ancient renowned treatises (śāstra, mainly Gautamya-dharmaśāstra, Viśvāsmṛti, Arthaśāstra), the most important sources about pilgrimage are the late medieval treatises (nibandha), first of all the Kṛtyakalpataru ("Creeper of desires of what has to be done") by Bhāṇa Lakṣmīdhara (XIIth century CE), containing a specific section, the Tṛthavivekanakāśa ("section about the sacred fords"), the Tristhalisetu ("bridge to the three places") by Nṛṇya-abhaṇa (XVIth century CE), and the Vramitrodaya (section Tṛthaprakāśa, "Light of the sacred fords") by Mitramiśra (XVIIth century CE) and the Tṛtharatnākara by Anna-bhaṇa (XVIIth century CE). The glorification of sacred places, mahatmya, is expressed in the treatises in normative terms, and prescribed as a highly praiseworthy practice. A lot of aetiological myths are narrated, in order to trace the Vedic roots and the purificatory virtues of this laudatory practice. The enthusiastic descriptions of the purāṇas are organized into a systematic worldview, a general outlook well identifiable in the rich variety of its coexistent taxonomies. Further, we cannot overlook a number of sources alien to Hindu tradition, for example the travel memories by al-Biruni (XIth century CE) and by Abu'l Fazl (XVIth century CE). Finally an important category of sources is represented by a lot of anonymous booklets, easy to be found in any sacred place: they correspond to present day tourist guides, and are a precious source of informations about specific sites.

The nibandhas ("collections") are a series of late medieval treatises collecting the main and subsidiary rules of Hindu śmṛti tradition. The difference with the ancient treatises, śāstras, is as follows. Śāstras treat every aspects of civil and religious habits from a general perspective, whereas nibandhas treat specific aspects in depth, and above all are a precious source because they put in comparison a lot of normative ancient sources, many of them being lost in their original form.

### Sacred fords (tṛtha)

A tṛtha, etimologically a ford, is a sacred place being able to ferry the devotee to the other shore of the deep and swirling ocean of transmigration (saṁsāra), in order to reach the other side, that is the emancipation, mokṣa. Tṛthas can be divided in different categories, according to two different taxological principles. The first classification includes three main types: 1) "motionless" sacred places (sthavaratṛtha): sacred fords, sacred "fields" (kṛttras, grouping together a number of fords), sacred confluences and mouths of rivers, sacred lakes and mountains; 2) "mental" sacred

places (m nasat rtha), symbolic interior places (we will see some of them immediately after); and finally 3) "mobile" sacred places (ja gamat rtha), that is some people being so full of virtue that they represent a sort of mobile t rthas. The second classification includes 1) divine (daiva) t rthas, being derived directly from the initiative of Brahm , Vi u or iva (respectively Pu kara, Soman tha, K ); 2) demonic t rthas, derived from the conflict opposing gods and demons (devas and asuras) (for example Gaya, where Vi u defeated the asura named Gaya); 3) t rthas of the seers ( r a), derived from the austerities practiced by semidivine seers (for example the forest of Naimi a); and finally 4) human (manu a) t rthas, derived from the foundation of sacred places effected by the kings of one of the two main dynasties, the solar and the lunar dynasties. In the definition of a t rtha a great role is played by symbolic features, in order to delineate a sort of sacred mythical geography, only partially identical with physical geography (the same is true for the symbolic physiology in the ha hayoga schools, not at all identical with the medical physiology of traditional India medicine).

#### Mental sacred fords (m nasat rtha)

Some examples will be enough. A first typology is represented by physical places where the symbolic feature prevails over the geographical one. A second type is represented by entirely mental places, sites to be found only within our interior landscape.

Situated at the confluence between the Ga g and the Yamun , the city of Pray ga (today's Allahabad) is one of the most venerated Indian t rthas. The devotees believe that in this site a third underground and therefore invisible river flows, the Sarasvat : for this reason the site is known as the starting point of trive , the triple braid, the tress made by three threads.

The sacred place of Pu kara, on the shore of the namesake lake near Ajmer (Rajasthan) contains the only Indian temple consecrated to the cult of the divine demiurge Brahm . The reason why Brahm does not receive ordinarily any form of adoration is as follows: he is responsible of the manifestation of our world. From a gnostic perspective, he is an inferior deity, due to the fact that the world is far from being a perfect product. The burden of the heavy griefs of every sort of living beings is too hard, because the world is surely not a pleasant place to stay for its temporary inhabitants. Every wise man will try to escape from it, choosing some sort of religious life being able to ensure him a refuge from the dire straits of earthly existence, and to grant him a safe shelter within the atemporal eternity of the divine.

According to the aetiological foundation myth of Pu kara, in the old days Brahm was practicing austerities keeping in his hand a lotus flower (pu kara). Seeing the asura Vajranabha intentioned to put in danger the supremacy of the gods with his own austerities, the lotus fell from his hand, causing the death of Vajranabha. From this event the place took the name of Pu kara. As is easy to see, the myth does not refer at all to the demiurgic role of Brahm , this one being considered a negative feature, but to his ascetic practice, put in effect with the intent to hinder the everlasting effort of the asuras to win the supremacy over the gods. Brahm in effect obtains the privilege to receive adoration, and to found a site of pilgrimage, only because he forgots his own demiurgic function and adopts a behaviour more akin to his divine mission, that is to contrast efficaciously the evil represented by the asuras.

### Mental sacred fords (m nasat rtha)

Purity of heart (vi uddhir manasa ), truthfulness (satya), compassion (d ya), forgiveness (k ama), control of the senses (indriyanigraha), are all moral qualities considered as “mental sacred fords” (m nasat rtha), in accordance with the principle according to which neither pilgrimage nor any sort of other virtuous practices (such as gift, sacrifice, asceticism, study or ritual purification) could ever be fruitful if they are undertaken without faith ( r ddha), without the firm resolution (sa kalpa) to accomplish these virtuous acts according to the rules prescribed within the treatises. The purity of intention is the only effective guarantee that the ritual practice, accomplished according to outwardly prescribed rules, could ever be really efficacious. Purity of intention is the main mean to obtain the knowledge of the Supreme Lord, according to the devotional epistemology taught by K ā in the Bhagavadgītā. Within our daily behaviour, the purity of intention appears as the firm resolution, being able to dispel the paralyzing hindrance of the doubt. The reflections about the mental sacred places show the importance of the interior dimension for ethical life: the practice of pilgrimage reveals itself as only apparently an exterior behaviour. In effect the interior intention is its main feature, prevailing over the exterior praxis.

The glorification of faith as an essential prerequisite of every devotional practice is contained in some famous passages from the Bhagavadgītā such as: yo yo y y tanu bhakta \ raddhay ' rcitu icchati | tasya tasy ' cal raddh \ t m eva vidadh my aham || “Whatsoever (divine) form any devotee \ with faith seeks to worship, | for every such (devotee), faith unswerving \ I ordain that same to be ||” (7,21, tr. Franklin Edgerton) and ye' py anyadevat bhakt \ yajante raddhay ' nvit | te' pi m m eva kaunteya \ yajanty avidhip rvakam || “Even those who are devotees of other gods, \ and worship them permeated with faith, | it is only Me, son of Kunt , that even they \ worship, (tho) not in the enjoined fashion || ” (9,23).

The Bhagavadgītā is the main devotional text of Indian tradition. Contained within the Mahābhārata, it exposes in 18 lectures (adhyāya), the same number of the books of the poem, the same number of the duration of the war that is the poem's main plot, the dialogue where K ā solves Arjuna's doubts. K ā persuades Arjuna that action is preferable to inaction, and that it is possible to act without being polluted by any negative effects of our acts, provided that we act only moved by a compelling duty, not by the longing to enjoy the fruits of our own deeds.

The tight bond existing between Arjuna the warrior and his divine charioteer K ā is evident since the very names of both heroes, meaning respectively “white” and “black”, they appear as reciprocally complementary: the one is inconceivable without the other. Their union resumes in it the whole universe, as is shown by their identification with the pair of twin peaks, just above the sanctuary of Bādarīnārāyaṇa, a well known site of pilgrimage. There they are venerated as Nārāyaṇa (Arjuna) and Nārāyaṇa (K ā), that is etymologically “man” and “man's shelter”.

### Fields (kṣetra)

The individual tṛtās are harmoniously included within more or less extended sacred complexes that take the name of “fields” (kṣetra), each of them containing with exact

environmental matching parts (such as the presence of a river, of a mountain or hill, of specific botanic or animal species) all different t rthas. A field is a replica on a wider scale of the sacred geography of the entire subcontinent. The mechanism is effected by the replacemente pilgrimage, according to which every single t rtha of a k etra is linked with all the others by a circuit or itinerary (parikrama), that pilgrims cover in a devotional mood, and that includes a ritual circumambulation (pradak i a) of the most sacred site of the complex, the goal of the entire journey. Each and every k etra has within it a number of alternative itineraries, limited in space and time, according to different physical capacities of the pilgrims, and to their spending capacities. The Bhagavadg t calls k etra the human body, because it is the object of knowledge of the individual conscious principle (puru a), the so-called "knower of the field" (k etrajña). The analogy between macrocosm and microcosm, between the exterior field of the pilgrimage and the interior field of consciousness, is so evident in the best way.

We may define as interior landscape this harmonious mixture within the sphere of the sacred of places, times, meanings, rites and behaviours, in the fully aware attempt to reach a total levelling between the interior dimension of human microcosm and the exterior dimension of macrocosm, provisionally individuated in the site visited by the pilgrim. This identification takes place through the careful practice of a series of symbolic equivalences between the two levels of existences (microcosm and macrocosm). The goal of the practice is to remove the split by recovering the original unity.

### Pilgrimage to sacred places (t rthay tr )

Pilgrimage to sacred places (t rthay tr ) in our time of secularization takes the name of religious tourism. It is a complex practice, with multiple meanings; it involves risks and dangers; it has at least in principle to be accomplished by foot, or in a mood of self-sacrifice; it is a journey through space, through time (it is marked by a lot of mythical references), within the interior landscape of one's own soul: the pilgrim sorts out of it deeply transformed. If it is organized in occasion of the main crowd meetings, it involves the relocation of masses of millions of individuals. Motivations to undertake a pilgrimage are various, they encompass the fulfillment of a vow, the simple desire to contemplate personally a famous icon within a sanctuary. It has as its first solid prerequisite the firm intention (sa kalpa) to accomplish the journey according to the prescribed ritual rules. When the pilgrim reaches the goal of his journey, he effects the expected ritual acts, bestows a gift to the keepers of the sanctuary, fully aware that a worship done within a sacred place is able to increase its intrinsic merits. From an interior perspective, the t rthay tr is a serious and deep process of transformation of the pilgrim. At the end of his journey, the pilgrim has effected a real rite of passage, passing through three different main stages: initiation (the purpose to undertake the venture), liminal state (the journey with all the risks involved in it), and reaggregation (the return to home, enriched with the experience due to the transformation involved).

The pradak i a or ritual circumambulation is a round course, effected keeping the object of devotion to one's own right, clockwise, with reference to the sancta sanctorum, the "home of the embryo" (garbhag ha) of a temple, or to a sacred place (t rtha), or to a cultual icon (m rti), or to a personality deign of veneration, for example a spiritual master (guru, term that etymologically means "heavy", because the master has a relevant role in the life of his disciples).

Pilgrimage is always related to ascetic practices, and we may even say that in a certain sense it is an alternative form of ascesis, more popular, less technical than the severe practices attested in the domain of yoga.

Pilgrimage is different from ascetic practices properly said, because it is mainly a collective activity, involving such behaviours as collective prayers, recitations and chants of hymns and so on. On the other hand, ascetic practices are strictly individual: even though the trainees are collected in one and the same place, each one of them is concentrated in his own specific activity, be it a position (śāna) or a meditative practice (dhyāna).

### Replacement pilgrimage

Replacement pilgrimage is a practice not unknown to Western Christian world. With the institution of the various Sacred Mounts (a replica of the Calvario) in the Counter-Reformation period, the practice of replacement pilgrimage arises from the temporary inability for Christian pilgrims, for historical and political reasons, to visit the holy land of Palestine under Islamic rule. In India it has perhaps more ideal reasons. No ancient Indian dynasty ever succeeded to build a real panindian empire, keeping a strict military and political control all over the subcontinent. A satisfactory political alternative was the choice to equate on the symbolic level the estates of a minor dynasty to the principal exotic sacred places being under the control of far more powerful dynasties. So we assist to the proliferation of nearly homonymous sacred places. In such a way from Kāśī arise one or more Uttarakāśīs (northern Kāśī) and one Dakṣiṇakāśī (southern Kāśī). All the main epic tīrthas are replicated on the territory giving life to a series of circuits more and more limited and circumscribed, and more and more relevant for popular devotion. The pilgrim who is not able to do his journey to a panindian circuit, due either to the risks of the travel or to economic reasons or both, will be able to ripen the same karmic fruit through a substitute itinerary, a travel replicating on a lesser local scale the same journey of the real pilgrimage on panindian scale. The classical example of this typology is the pañcakrośa, the pilgrimage of the five leagues (we will come back on this theme), but it is possible even to delineate a second grade replacement pilgrimage (we will see how this happens).

Second grade replacement pilgrimage consists in two main typologies. The first is a physical one: the pilgrim who is not able to complete a panindian circuit will follow an alternative local circuit, for example the pañcakrośa one within the urban complex of Kāśī. The pilgrim who cannot cover the pañcakrośa circuit will visit the Pañcakrośa temple (XIXth century CE), a sanctuary whose icons represent in a lesser scale all the one hundred and eight stations of the circuit. The second type is an ideal one: the pilgrim who accomplishes the ritual circumambulation (pradakṣiṇā) of his spiritual master (guru) ripens the same fruit as if he had accomplished the physical journey to all the sacred places he desired to visit. Finally, it is even possible to put in effect a replacement pilgrimage simply evoking in one's own mind the name of the place one intends to visit.

### Interior disposition



Interior disposition is the essential component of pilgrimage, often it is even more important than the selected goal of the journey. The preparation of the travel is mostly studied in order to reinforce in the pilgrim the firm resolution and the complete awareness of the correct mental and spiritual attitude useful for the journey. Sometimes the very choice of the destination has the aim to strengthen the firmness of mind. For example it is possible to choose willingly a very far sanctuary, a site difficult to reach for environmental reasons, for the risks and costs of the itinerary, in order to show one's firm determination to undertake the venture. Another important feature of the interior disposition of the pilgrim is the peaceful acceptance of the loosening of all the obligations bound to the caste segregational system. During the travel it will simply be unrealistic to respect all the bounds of the varṇa and jāti system, the system of the social groups hierarchically ordained. On the contrary, during the travel all the temporary links between the travellers will be naturally reinforced. For a tacit agreement the pilgrims will get together in a multi-coloured crowd in occasion of the mass meetings such as the kumbhamela. During these mass meetings, involving millions of people, promiscuity is unavoidable, and even temporary cohabitation and sharing of meals. The obsessive will to preserve segregation in order to avoid reciprocal contamination between different social groups is simply no more possible within the context of pilgrimage: people are no more separated, they must temporarily mingle.

Both cohabitation and sharing of meals are a common practice during pilgrimage. Both are strictly in contrast with the practice of segregation usual in ancient Indian society, obsessed by the need to avoid the mixing of social groups, in order to preserve the natural purity of the superior ones from the contamination arising from any contact with the impurity of the inferior ones. So perhaps we may guess that one of the goals of pilgrimage is exactly to loose at least temporarily some of the tensions deriving from the segregation. A temporary interruption of the segregatory rigidity could be obtained in different contexts, for example during periodical festivals, such as the merry promiscuity usual during the spring festival named holi, the so called feast of colours, celebrated with the throw of coloured powders.

Humility is the main mood of interior disposition. This mood is best revealed in the behaviour consisting in prostration. The pilgrim's body bows down to earth while proceeding in his way, and the journey consists in an uninterrupted series of prostrations, using his own body to measure the distance towards the goal of the travel. The foot are put where in the preceding moment the front was situated, and so on and so on. Interior disposition finds its way in an exterior mode of behaviour.

### Macrocosm and microcosm

Our concepts of macrocosm and microcosm correspond moreless to Indian concepts of brahmanā and pīṇā. Brahmanā, the "egg of Brahman", is the iconological representation of the cosmos in an embryonic stage, enclosed within a shell containing in it the whole of the world. Pīṇā, the "egg made with food", refers to the sacrificial bolus, pīṇā, a sort of vegetarian meatball made with pressed cooked rice, used as the main offer during funeral rites, in order to allow the deceased (preta) to become an ancestor (pitṛ) in the hereafter. To call the human microcosm pīṇā means to make reference to the lasting link binding together the living and the dead (through the practice of funeral and postfuneral rites), but even to the fact that human body is

made with food (and ancestor body is made with funeral offer), and to the fact that the original prenatal form of the body, the embryo, is an undifferentiated mass of flesh, from which different limbs will evolve in the due course of time, the egg shape of the indistinct embryonic mass.

Just within the body of the yogin a number of correspondences can be traced with sacred places, with divine and semidivine beings, and with the subtle elements of the exterior world. So the axis mundi, the Meru Mountain in the exterior world, corresponds in the human body with the spinal column, the seven worlds (loka) correspond with seven wheels of energy (cakra), the earthly rivers correspond with the channels (nāḍī) where vital breaths flow, starting with prāṇa, the seven circular continents (dvīpa) of puranic cosmology correspond with the seven bodily tissues (chyle, blood, flesh, fat, bone, marrow, and lastly sperm in the male and menstrual blood in the female). Lastly, to the cosmic conscious principle in the macrocosm, the so called "golden embryo", Hiraṇyagarbha, corresponds within human body the individual conscious principle, the puruṣa. The difference between the ordinary people and the yogin is simply this: the yogin has full awareness of all these correspondences, ordinary people doesn't have it.

In this perspective, in order to fulfill a pilgrimage is not strictly necessary to move from the place where one is situated, and for the ascetic it is not strictly necessary to move out of himself. All is literary and symbolically within oneself, in one's own body. The practice of pilgrimage can be read as a sort of interior journey aiming to the discovery of one's own interior self, through such practices as the mystical superimposition (nyāsa). Nyāsa is a tantric meditative practice consisting in the ritual establishment of different meditative supports or tutelary deities within the very same body of the adept. The devotee may use the names of the single deities, or in place of them a series of corresponding formulas consisting in syllables (akṣara, varṇa) from the Sanskrit syllabary, or even a series of lists of temples and sanctuaries, in order to allocate the different potencies (śakti) invoked within the desired areas of one's own body. So in the tantric milieu the meditation on the body replaces the practice of pilgrimage, because the strict net of equivalences between macrocosm and microcosm makes the pilgrimage simply unnecessary: what is outside is equated with what is within.

### Preparation and goals

The preparation of the pilgrimage tends to underline the pilgrim's interior disposition. Pilgrimage's goals may be as various as possible. For example it may represent the remedial action of a damage (illness either of the pilgrim or of one of his relatives, infertility of the pilgrim's wife or daughter, a modest entity ritual transgression); the fulfillment of a vow (healing from an illness, unhoped conception after a lot of unsuccessful attempts). The distance of the sanctuary chosen for the pilgrimage is directly proportional either to the import of the damage or to the importance of the grace received. The main preparatory practices involve the ritual shaving of the head, representing the temporary equation of the pilgrim with the renouncer (śaśnīsin), the purificatory practice of the fasting; the firm resolution to reach the goal of the journey only travelling on foot, avoiding as far as possible all sorts of more comfortable and swift means of transport.

The ritual shaving of the head represents for the pilgrim the acceptance of an exterior mark that will make him perfectly recognizable as an individual engaged in a severe path of purification.

The shaving of the head equates temporarily the pilgrim with the renouncer, the *śānyasiṇ*, who has definitely renounced to the world and to the whole of worldly values. The pilgrim will come back to the world after the pilgrimage has been completed.

### Meetings (kumbhamela)

Mass meetings (up to twenty millions of pilgrims) are one of the most famous features of Indian pilgrimage. One of the most important mass meeting, surely the most famous in Western countries, is the "meeting of the pot", kumbhamela, referring to the myth of the churning of the milky ocean in order to obtain the liquor of immortality (*amṛta*). During the churning of the ocean four drops of *amṛta* fell on the surface of the earth. In each one of the places where the drops fell arose a sacred city, respectively Prayāga (today's Allahabad), Haridvār (today's Hardwar), Nāsikā (today's Nasik), Ujjayinī (today's Ujjain). The meeting is an itinerant periodical one, and it is held every twelve years in Prayāga in its full (*pūrṇa*) form, every six years in Haridvār in its halved (*ardha*) form, according to an irregular periodicity following complex astrological calculations for the minor editions being held in Nāsikā and Ujjayinī. The organization of this event is delicate but uncompromising, in charge of a designated committee, working in accordance with municipal authorities. An imponent tent city is mounted, with all sorts of services (drinking water, sewers, electricity and so on). The main problem is how to regulate the afflux of the pilgrims to the river, because the privilege to enter in the flow before any other group is a sign of the greatest distinction, hardly debated between the different sects of ascetics; the lay people enter only after the last group of ascetics has completed the ritual bath.

Ritual nakedness is considered as a symbol of eminent purity and austerity in contrast to ascetic orders accepting the use of dresses: so the naked ones (*nagnas dhu*), recognizable as devotees of *Śiva* by their emblems (the trident, *triśūla*, and the necklace of seeds of *Elaeocarpus ganitrus*, *rudrākṣa*) generally enter the flow before every other sect. After the ascetics the lay people have access to the river in order to complete the ritual bath. All the inconveniences of the pilgrimage (the hard travel, the cohabitation in the tent city, the difficulty to obtain food and drinking water and so on) are cancelled by the culmination of the pilgrimage experience, consisting in the sacred bath in the flow of the sacred river. This occasion is very rare, because it corresponds to a precise astrological moment, in which all the stars, planets and lunar houses are aligned in order to ensure the most propitious result of the practice. The imponent mass of human beings seems a spontaneous flux to an external observer, but as a matter of fact it is strictly regulated by appointed authorities, and incidents are sporadic.

According to tradition, in Prayāga three rivers merge, two of them being visible, the *Gāṅgā* and the *Yamunā*, the third one being invisible because it flows underground, the *Sarasvatī*. In effect the site has the name of *triveṇī*, the triple braid, the tress made by three threads. The symbolic meaning addicted to the original meaning of the term involves the coordination of the three attributes (*guṇa*) constituting the pure object principle (*prakṛti*), that is brightness, dynamism and stasis (*sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*, these being bound respectively to the symbolic colour white, red and black), or the interlacing of the three channels (*nāḍī*, term that etymologically may mean *inter alia* "river") where the vital breaths flow giving life to the body (*idā* and *piṅgalā* interlacing on both sides of the spinal column, represented by the central channel, *sūśumnā*).

## Circuits (parikrama)

Each and every "field" (kṣetra) or sacred complex contains within itself each and every sacred place of India, through a mechanism of replacement pilgrimage, a mechanism not at all theoretical or abstract, but really with specific environmental correspondences. For example a modest elevation may recall and symbolize, so it may stand for, a huge mountain range; a creek may evoke, and so it may stand for, a river, and so on. In such a way a real replica of all the sacred geography of the subcontinent takes place in a single site. The single replacement truths within a kṣetra are linked together by a circuit or itinerary (parikrama), covered by the pilgrim with the full awareness that he is sharing a wider path, not a local but a panindian route. The circuit is organized in such a way to represent a real ritual circumambulation (pradakṣiṇā), a circular route covered clockwise, keeping every sacred site at one's own right side. Most extended fields involve even alternative itineraries, varying according to the number of days of the travel, to the difficulties of the route, to the different sacred sites being replicated in the path, and so on. The pilgrim will choose the itinerary most fit to his own economic and physical attitudes and capabilities.

The mythical archetype of these itineraries is represented by the circuit of the sacred fords effected by the five Pāṇḍava brothers during their year of exile in the forest, narrated in the third major book of the Mahābhārata. On the other hand, the theological archetype is represented by the triumphal circuit in the four cardinal points (digvijaya), covered by a spiritual master who has defeated in a series of public dialectical debates his opponents, members of rival schools. Every defeated master has to follow the guru who has defeated him, bringing with him his own disciples, who become all members of the winning school. So the digvijaya is really a sort of triumphal march, during which the parade of the new and old disciples becomes more and more numerous. The classical example is the digvijaya of the guru of absolute nondualistic vedānta (kevala dvaitavāda), Śaṅkara (Śaṅkara, a śaṅkarācārya, active between VIth and VIIth century CE).

Amongst the many places visited by Śaṅkara during his digvijaya we may count the seats of śaṅkarite coenobia (maṇḍala) founded by the master: Dvārakā, Badarīnātha, Pūrī, Kāñchī. Every center of spiritual life is linked to a specific disciple of the master (except for Kāñchī), and to a specific meditative formula, a "great dictum", mahāvākya, respectively tat tvam asi «thou art that» (Chāndogya-upanishad 6,8,7), ayam ātmā brahma «this very self is brahman» (Māṇḍūkya-upanishad 2), prajñāna brahma «brahman is knowledge» (Aitareya-upanishad 3,5,3), ahaṁ brahmāsmi «I am brahman» (Bṛhadāraṇyaka-upanishad 1,4,10), and we may add as a fifth oṃ tat sat «yes, that is reality» (Bhagavadgītā 17,23).

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