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A Case study for Pilgrimage in India: Varanasi

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(Article begins on next page)

A Case study for Pilgrimage in India: Vārāṇasī

Introduction

The story of the dwarf

The story of the celestial river into Śiva's hair

The story of the purification of ashes

The story of Śiva's brahmanicide

The saint place of Vārāṇasī

The pilgrimage of the five leagues (pañcakrośa)

The four abodes (cār dhām)

The places of the five elements (pañcabh tasthanā)

The seven cities (saptapuri)

The sign (liṅga)

The twelve signs of light (jyotirliṅga)

The seats of the Goddess (śaktipīṭha)

Introduction

It is no easy to decide from where it could be convenient to start in order to speak about Vārāṇasī. We could choose to talk about the local geography of the site, framed at East by the inwards curved bow meander of the river Gaṅgā. On its western shore rises the city, enclosed at North and South by the rivers Varanāsi and Asi, two tributaries of the Gaṅgā that give the city its modern name Vārāṇasī, Benares in Anglo-Indian style, the old name being Kāśī, the shining one, the city of light. Or alternatively we could talk about the problems bound with the process of modernization of the city, starting with the observation that most of its temples have been destroyed twice, a first time during the XIIth and a second time during the XVIIth century, and variously and partially rebuilt in such a way that the actual map of the city corresponds only approximately to its most ancient descriptions. We could even go on touching upon the need to modernize and actualize the performance of funeral rites, through the introduction during the XXth century of the electric crematorium, with the resulting modification of timing and procedure for the incineration of the corpses. We could even close with contemporary attempts to repair the apparently irreversible increasing pollution of the water of the river Gaṅgā, with the solid risk of a severe decrease of its flow rate, due to the practice of water drawing upstream and to dams for electric and agricultural

use. However, the flow rate decrease is ineffective to prevent more and more severe periodic overflows, with disastrous consequences for the city and its residents.

I would like to try to begin neither with the physical nor with the symbolic space, but with some stories. These stories could possibly help us to understand the peculiar relationship existing between the city and the river Gaṅgā, and the reason why so many pilgrims come closer to the city with confidence and faith, above all in order to find there their calm and peaceful death. Relationship with the waters, relationship with death: these are the two elements that mostly strike a chord with the visitor, be he aware or not at all about the city's history.

To talk about stories relating to the city means specifically to talk about myths. In order to talk about Indian myths it is ever difficult to settle where exactly to begin with, because all the stories are interrelated, according to the very same narrative trend being active in the so called "continuity" of Marvel Comics Group. Therefore, in order to tell the myth explaining the reason why the waters of the Gaṅgā river are sacred, we must deal with a number of different mythical cycles, all of them being strictly mutually interrelated.

The story of the dwarf

The very first story is the story about the avatar of Viṣṇu disguised as a dwarf (Vāmana). An enemy of the gods (asura) named Bali had obtained, through a severe practice of asceticism, the domain over all the triple world (triloka), comprising earth, intermediate space and heaven. He reigned unmercifully, employing his power in order to destroy every chance of revival for both human beings and gods. The gods implore Viṣṇu to repair this situation. Viṣṇu then appears at the court of Bali disguised as a dwarf. A king seated on the throne cannot ignore a petitioner's request, and the dwarf asks the concession of the measure of space that he could be able to cover within the range of three steps. Rashly Bali concedes the requested favour, and immediately Viṣṇu regains his macrocosmic disguise: within the range of three steps he covers earth, intermediate space and heaven, in such a way to regain the triple world to celestial domain. But with his last step he misses the right measure, and with the big toe of his left foot he tears apart the shell of Brahmā's egg (brahmāṇḍa), the cover dividing the triple world from the external cosmic space surrounding our world. This event teaches that each and every act, including divine acts, entails some consequence. These consequences are not always entirely predictable; partially they could be unexpected. From the mythopoetic point of view, from the perspective of the process of making of myths, this is a good example of heterogenesis of goals (Heterogenie der Zwecke): a myth is always able to generate, even accidentally as it were, often as a kind of feedback, another myth. The mechanism of making of myths through heterogenesis of goals (Heterogenie der Zwecke) finds an ethical explanation in terms of theodicy, through the law of retribution of acts (karma), according to which to each and every ethically significant causal act inevitably follows a certain specific effect.

The story of the celestial river into Śiva's hair

From the hole accidentally caused by Viṣṇu, the celestial Gaṅgā flows abruptly in, menacing to destroy the earth with the strength of her wild flow. The speed and flow rate of the celestial river is awe-inspiring, the solid risk is that the entire earth could be wiped out. In order to avoid the threat, Śiva agrees to mitigate the strength of the flow receiving the impetuous waters into his own hair, a mass of thick interlaced dreadlocks. This mass weakens the strength of the flow, that reaches the earth drop by drop. The flow loses its impetus losing into the interlaced locks, just like a river, losing its impetus from its high torrential flow when it reaches an ample and calm alluvial plain, fertilizing the earth, and finally reaching exhausted its end into a marshy delta.

The story of the purification of ashes

Due to the above mentioned mechanism of heterogenesis of goals, Śiva's role in the story is further useful for another different goal: the waters of celestial Gaṅgā, flowing over the earth up to giving birth to a new terrestrial river, serve as a mean of purification for the ashes of the sixtythousand sons of Śagara. These sons due to their faults had been reduced to ashes by the terrific gaze of the ascetic Kapila, disturbed by them when he was immersed in deep meditation, and were waiting in the afterworld that someone could assist them with a mean of purification. Their grandson Bhaguratha, due to compassion for the sad destiny of the restless spirits of his numerous ancestors, through his ascetic practice intercedes for them, obtaining that Gaṅgā will appear on earth, in order to purify the ashes of the deceased, that in such a way could eventually reach their intensely desired celestial peace into heaven. Precisely for this mythical reason the waters of river Gaṅgā are considered as being able to purify the ashes of dead, and from this aetiological antecedent on, to die on Gaṅgā's shore, and to obtain that one's ashes are dispersed into the river, is a guarantee for a good death and a postfuneral fate favourable to obtain the liberation from the cycle of rebirths.

The story of Śiva's brahmanicide

Upon the preceding aetiological myth finds its narrative way a further tale, the story of Śiva's brahmanicide and of its purification by the very same god. This is just another way to connect the site of Vṛkṣas with death and its related symbolic universe. Once upon a time Brahmā and Viṣṇu were debating the question about which of them two could be considered as the real supreme god. This debate was trudging through endlessly with no apparent solution, when suddenly in front of the two debaters a huge enormous pillar of fire arose. The two agreed upon the need to undertake the quest for its origin. The one who could be able to find the pillar's origin first, will be allowed to be the proud holder of the title of supreme deity. Viṣṇu assumed his avatāra aspect of the boar (Varaha) and tried to reach the inferior far end of the pillar, Brahmā assumed the aspect of his own animal vehicle, the wild goose (hansa), trying to reach the superior far end. Viṣṇu come back, humbly admitting that he had been unable to reach the pillar's inferior end. On the contrary, Brahmā boasted that he had been able to find the pillar's superior end, adding the testimony of a flower of ketak, claiming that she had seen the divine demiurge Brahmā when he reached the peak of the fire pillar. The testimony proved to be a false one, having been extorted with fraud and intimidation. What really happened was that Brahmā had seen a ketak flower falling

from a distance far higher, when Śiva's head (crowned with ketakī flowers) had been shaken by laughter, attending the show of the vainglory of Brahmā and Viṣṇu engaged in the pointless debate. From the middle part of the pillar (sthambh) suddenly emerges an aniconic form of Śiva (liṅgaśaivalī): the fire pillar is actually a igneous hypostasis of the signum of Śiva, the liṅga. The two gods immediately admit the absolute supremacy of Śiva upon both of them. In order to punish Brahmā's lie, Śiva appears in his terrific form as Bhairava, the tremendous, and with the nail of his left thumb he beheads Brahmā's fifth head, the superior head facing towards the zenith (whereas the other four heads face each of them a different cardinal point). This fifth head had immediately before appeared as a donkey head, precisely in order to declare his lie, being the source of the punishment. From this very moment on, the beheaded head of Brahmā strictly clings to Bhairava's hand. Bhairava has committed brahmanicide, the killing of a brāhmaṇa, and this fault is embodied in the female character known as brahmahatya, "killing of the brāhmaṇa". Bhairava, also known as Kṛtābhairava because even Time itself (Kālā) fears him, becomes now the bearer of the dried head of Brahmā, the skull, Kapalin, the divine archetype of a class of ascetics who observe tremendous vows, and who follow a disgusting ritual behaviour, using a human skull as a bowl for alms. Now Bhairava is necessarily entangled with the crime of brahmanicide: this fault follows him wherever he goes. Brahmā's head, dried and reduced to a skull, does not leave the palm of Śiva's left hand, his executioner: Śiva decides to become a pilgrim, wandering until he will find a place where his curse could leave him, and the skull could fall from his hand. After a number of different mythical vicissitudes (among them the encounter with the sanctimonious priests in the forest of pines, and his consequent emasculation), finally Śiva reaches Vārāṇasī: the sacred site where the skull falls from his hand is known as the "liberation of the skull", Kapālamocana, an event occurred on the eighth day of the month of Mārgaśīrṣa, the "head of the antelope", another myth bound with the deity Rudra, the vedic forerunner of Śiva, corresponding with November-December, the zodiac sign of Sagittarius, the archer. When the head falls from his hand, Śiva dances all around the sacred city, choosing this site as his own eternal future dwelling place. The site of Kapālamocana takes the name of the place "never abandoned" by the Great God, Avimukta: whoever reaches the city obtains the liberation from every fault, in effect the liberation from the cycle of rebirths, and the perennial union with Śiva.

The saint place of Vārāṇasī

A man should dwell in Vārāṇasī, after having broken his feet with a stone

Kāśīmapurāṇa

The ancient urban site of Kāśī ("the shining one", the city of light), whose citadel is known from late medieval times as Vārāṇasī, because it is encircled by the two tributaries of the Gāṅgā river, named Varanā and Asi, the city called Benares by the British, is certainly the most celebrated sacred place in India. It is the dwelling place of the great god Śiva, who is venerated there as Viṣṇu vantha, "Lord of the Universe". It rises upon the orographical left bank of the sacred river Gāṅgā, the other shore being considered as inauspicious. Along its flight of steps in front of the river, it harbours the crematory named Maikarīkagṛāha. Here the deceased obtains an immediate liberation from the cycle of rebirths, because Śiva himself whispers to his ear a salvation formula (tārakamantra, "effective to cross the ocean of transmigration"). It is one of the seven holy cities

(saptapuri), the seat of one of the twelve signs of light (jyotirliṅga), in a certain way the very center of each and every pilgrimage, the final goal of any pilgrimage, and even the final destination of the earthly journey of human beings. Everyone hopes to reach Kāśī at least one time in his own life. Due to the fact that to die in the city means to reach final liberation, we can now understand the real meaning of the exhortation from the Kāśīmapurāṇa: the pilgrim who reaches this site is invited to do his best in order to never leave it again. The city is now completely equated with the very same body of the god, a sacred body ideally identical with the pilgrim, whose terrestrial remains have been permanently purified.

In Vārāṇasī, the "field" (kṣētra) of Kāśī consists of the internal circuit of the "five leagues" (pañcakrośa) and of an external wider circuit (caurāṅśakrośa), both of them being based upon the site of Madhyamēvara. The external circuit links the urban pilgrimage within Vārāṇasī to a symbolism connected with the number 144, a figure deriving from a variety of different calculations (e.g. 12 zodiac signs multiplied for 12 months; 96 śakti "energies" plus 48 tutelār deities). The most interesting calculation links three different cosmic levels: 9 planets (macrocosm) multiplied for 8 space directions (mesocosm) multiplied for 2 parts of the 24 hour day (clear part, day, and dark part, night, microcosm).

The main mythical reason for choosing Vārāṇasī as the final goal of a pilgrimage must be traced in the episode during which Śiva, being guilty of brahmanicide for having beheaded Brahmā (who in contrast with Viṣṇu had refused to admit Śiva's supremacy during the manifestation of Śiva as the icon born out of the liṅga, Liṅgodbhavamṛti), drags himself in a draining pilgrimage, persecuted by his own crime: the beheaded and dried head of the god, that strictly adheres to his hand. When he finally comes to the holy city, the skull falls spontaneously to the ground, in the site that will be called Kapālamocana, "liberation of the skull". This site will be one of the countless sacred places sprinkling the urban layout.

It is remarkable that the sacred space of Vārāṇasī is not exclusive property of Hinduism: near Kapālamocana we find a muslim cemetery: islamic graves are interposed with hind monuments.

Proceeding towards South from Kapālamocana we find two more sites being bound with śaiva mythical cycle of liberation from brahmanicide: Pānamocana ("liberation from debt") and Pāpamocana ("liberation from guilt").

The flight of steps granting the access to the river, the ghāṭ, is essential for religious life. The most famous of them, the Maikarīk ghāṭ, is situated in front of the bent forward temple of Śiva: here corpses are cremated. The monopoly of cremation is in charge of a group of untouchables, the dom, a clan feared and respected.

Each and every sacred place on the bank of a river presents one or more series of flight of steps (ghāṭ), granting the possibility to accomplish the ritual baths along the shore, practically in every moment of the year, except during excessive overflow and severe drought times. Along the flight of steps baths are effected, but even a number of different activities, e.g. the selling of sacred ritual accessories, the teaching of subjects connected with the cult, the funeral rites and so on, including the selling of the firewood for the pyres.

The acme of the pilgrimage to the holy city consists in the internal circuit of the pañcakro , called vi ve vara antarg ha y tr , “the journey of the interior embryo of the Lord of the Universe” (“Lord of the Universe” is the epythet of iva in the form in which he is venerated in V r as). The journey must be effected in one out of three prescribed periods (February-March, October-November, November-December), but preferably during the mah ivar tr , the “great night of iva”, the thirteenth day of the dark half of the lunar month between February and March.

The pilgrimage of the five leagues (pañcakro)

Starting from Madhyame vara draw a straight line till to Dehal Vin yaka, then rotate it in every direction, until you will create a circle. The sacred field included into the circle is what the Veda call K , famous for liberation.

Tristhalisetu

K , the city of light, the ancient name of the historical nucleus of today’s V r as , is surrounded by a sacred ring-shaped way, the pañcakro , way of the five leagues, with reference to the measure of the radius of the circle formed by it. Its ideal center is the temple of iva Madhyame vara (“Lord of the middle point”), destroyed by muslims, actually attested only by a number of li gas plunged into the ground, along the northern shore of the river Mandakin (today the site of the Maidagin garden). According to some sources the city center is the adjacent temple of K ttiv se vara. The actual center of the city, a little far away towards South-East, is the temple of iva Vi van tha (“Lord of the Universe”), and it goes back to the enlargement of the ancient nucleus of K to actual V r as . Dehal Vin yaka is the name of one of Ga e a’s hypostases, the god with elephant head being one of the tutelar deities of the city. The distance between the two temples (iva Vi van tha and Dehal Vin yaka) corresponds moreless to five leagues, 16 kilometers. The pilgrim covering the ring-shaped way ideally completes a pilgrimage including 108 panindian sacred sites, each of them punctually indicated by specific votive niches. The circumambulation of the way of the five leagues includes four main stops, where the pilgrim finds hostels and rest opportunities, and it is supposed that it could be completed within five or six days.

A sacred stop particularly relevant within the circuit of the pañcakro is dedicated to the five P āva brothers, the main characters of the Mah bh rata. The five brothers during their year of exile in the forest have accomplished the same pilgrimage circuit, leaving as a testimony five li gas, each of them consecrated by one of them. The pilgrim is invited to travel through again the very same circuit established by the ancient epic heroes, in such a way to reactualize the myth, giving it new life, and simultaneously to transform his own contingent reality into a myth, in a prodigious symbolic mirror’s game.

The Pañcakro Temple (mandir) in K includes an icon very important for the understanding of the mechanism of the substitute or replacement pilgrimage: the li ga dedicated to iva Dv da e vara, the “Lord of the twelve [signs of light]”. This icon simultaneously includes within it the twelve li gas of light (jyotirli ga) being present in the circuit of the signs of light within K , circuit that on urban scale replicates the panindian circuit of the signs of light all over the subcontinent. From the symbolic point of view, the pilgrim who accomplishes the visit to the Pañcakro Temple, has accomplished a real pilgrimage all over the whole of India.

The four abodes (cār dhām)

The four abodes (cār dhām) are a group of four sanctuaries situated in ideal correspondence with each of the cardinal points: in the North Badar n̄tha (Uttar khaṇḍa), one of the sankarite coenobia, where a pair of twin peaks is venerated, personified as the couple of divine seers (ṛṣi) Nara and Nār̄yaṇa (identified with the epic couple of the two main characters of the Bhagavadgītā, that is Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa); in the West Dvārakā (Gujarāt), the capital of Kṛṣṇa's reign, sunk into the sea after the disaster that caused the collapse of its people (narrated in the Appendix to the Mahābhārata, the Harivaṇḍa); in the East Jagann̄thapuri (Orissa), where Kṛṣṇa is part of a ritual triad including even his brother Balarāma and his sister Subhadrā; and in the South Rāmevaram (Tamiḷ Nāḍu), seat of one of the twelve signs of light (jyotiṛlīṅga), sacred to Rāma, where the ritual bath into the sea is capable to purify the pilgrim from every sort of guilts. The lists of sacred sites are too numerous to be remembered in this occasion. We have left over all the cases of duplication, elaborated according to the mechanism of the substitute pilgrimage. Actually a number of doubles occur: five different Kedār n̄tha, seven Badar n̄tha, five Kṛṣṇa (the most famous being the southern and the northern ones, Dakṣiṇākṛṣṇa and Uttarakṛṣṇa), seven Sarasvatī and so on. More, we can recite lists including 51 siddhakṣētra "fields of the perfect ones", siddha, perfect, being a specific class of ascetics; 21 gaṇapati kṣētra "fields sacred to Gaṇeśa"; 108 īśvakṣētra, "fields sacred to Śiva"; 274 āivasthāna "seats sacred to Śiva".

Within Kṛṣṇa the site of Badar n̄tha is duplicated as the Nār̄yaṇa tīrtha, the ford of Nār̄yaṇa, in the northern area of the city, between Gya Ghāt and Trilocana Ghāṭ; the site of Dvārakā is duplicated as the area of Vākhodhara (southwestern edge of the city); the site of Jagann̄thapuri is duplicated near the Asi Ghāt; the site of Rāmevaram is duplicated as three different sites (Rāmakṣētra in the city center; the village of Rāmevaram rising along the circuit of the pañcakroṣa; and the temple of Rāmevara near the Mān Mandir Ghāt).

The temples of the sanctuary of Badar n̄tha, a little village in the high valley of the Ganges (Chamoli district, Uttarakhaṇḍa), at the base of Mount Kamet, near 8000 meters high, are situated at a height comprised between 3100 and 4000 meters, the pilgrimage being possible only during summertime. According to tradition the main temple of Badar n̄r̄yaṇa has been founded by the great master ākarṣya: its main icon is dedicated to Viṣṇu Nār̄yaṇa, and is placed side by side by images of the revered couple of divine seers Nara and Nār̄yaṇa (left) and of the gods Garuḍa and Kubera (right). In its proximity there is a spring of sulphurous thermal water, the Taptakṣētra, that is one of the five sacred fords (tīrtha) of the sanctuary (the other ones being Śiṅga gṛha, Karmadhara, Prahlaḍadhara and Nārada kṣētra).

Proceeding a little northward from Badar n̄tha we find a site where it is usual to practice postfuneral rites in order to allow the deceased ancestors to obtain the liberation from the cycle of rebirths, the Brahmakṣētra ("skull of Brahmā") along the right bank of the river Alaknanda. The ancestors who receive the offer of the ritual meal (śrāddha) in this site obtain immediately the perennial abode in Viṣṇu's heaven, they do not need any further offer by living members of the family in order to maintain their existence in the afterlife, being under the direct protection of Viṣṇu.

Jagann thapuri rises upon a gradual slope near the seashore, in a “field” named Puru ottamak etra. According to the foundation myth of the site, its original icon, now lost, found at the foot of a fig tree, has been buried into the sand, because it caused the immediate death of those who could see it, the deceased being immediately transferred in heaven. King Indradyumna, desiring to reestablish the site for the cult, received directly by Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva detailed instructions in order to reshape a new icon. After cutting personally a branch from the fig tree, he gave it to two priests, who shaped from it the cultural images of Kṛṣṇa, Balarāma and Subhadrā, adored even now.

Also in Jagann thapuri we find five tīrthas: the pond of Mārkandeya (the eternally young sixteen years old character, favourite in Vaiṣṇava milieu); the banyan (Ficus indica) tree venerated as a hypostasis of Kṛṣṇa; Rauhiyā, dedicated to Balarāma; the ocean and finally the pond of Indradyumna. The five tīrthas are linked together in a circuit. The pilgrim must reach the main icon in the twelfth day of the clear half of the lunar month of May-June.

The island of Ramevaram is situated in the Ramanthapuram district in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. It is located on Pamban Island separated from mainland India by the Pamban channel and is about 50 kilometres from Mannar Island, Sri Lanka. It is situated in the Gulf of Mannar, where the Bay of Bengal gets mixed with the Arabian Sea. The liṅga adored here according to tradition is supposed to have originally contributed to the liberation of Rāma from the guilt of brahmanicide, guilt caused by Rāma's killing of Ravana, the rakṣasa of brahmanic ascendance (brahmarakṣasa), who had raped his wife Sītā, bringing her to Lanka. The liṅga of Ramevaram has originally been shaped by Sītā using only moist sand, but revealed to be indestructible. The main sanctuary, built in a time span of 350 years and finished near 1420 CE, rises in the eastern coast of the island.

Highly impressive is the main passage named “corridor”, measuring approximately 120 meters long, 9 meters high and 5 to 6 meters wide. The colossal statue of Nandin, the bull being the vehicle (vahana) of Śiva, situated in front of the sanctuary, measures 3.6, 2.4 and 2.7 meters. According to its foundation myth, the main icon of the sanctuary is named Rāmalingasvamin, “Lord of Rāma's liṅga”. The huge size of the architectural spaces gives an idea of the mass dimension of pilgrimage in the site, and indirectly of the power of the temple towns, centers of political and economical power, being able to shape the destinies of royal dynasties.

The places of the five elements (pañcabhūtaśāla)

The five gross elements (mahabhūta) of classical Indian physics are related to five sites where specific liṅgas are venerated: Kāñcī (temple of Śiva Ekāmbarevara, Tamil Nadu), linked with earth element (bhūmi, pṛthivī), where the pṛthivīliṅga is venerated; Tiruvanaikaval (temple of Śiva Jambukevara, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu), linked with water element (jala, āpas), where the pōliṅga is venerated; Tiruvannamalai (temple of Śiva Aruṇācalavara, Tamil Nadu), linked with fire element (agni, tejas), where the tejoliṅga is venerated; Kālaḥasti (temple of Śiva Kālaḥasthvara, Kāndhāra Pradeś), linked with wind element (vāyu), where the vāyuliṅga is venerated; Cidambaram (temple of Śiva Natarāja, “Lord of dance”, Tamil Nadu), linked with space element (ākāśa), where the kākaliṅga is venerated. The number five occurs frequently within Śaiva symbology, and it is specifically honoured with a meditative formula named “five syllable

formula", pañc k aramantra, that is nama īva ya, "hommage to īva". The five elements, adding to them the sun, the moon and the sacrificer, form the eight cultural icons of the god (a ām rti). The reverse pronunciation of the pañc k aramantra sounds īva nama . In this reverse form the phonosymbolic meaning of the formula is readable as follows: ī means īva; va is the Potency of Grace (anugraha akti), the one allowing liberation; ya is the individual conscious principle, the Self (ātman); na is the Potency of Veiling (tirodha na akti), the one forcing the individual in bondage; and ma are the three fetters (mala) that envelope the man under bondage (āva, the maculation of considering himself as a limited being, m ūy , the bond of cosmic illusion, and finally karman, the bond of the law of retribution of acts).

A temporary li ḡa made of ice is spontaneously formed during cold season into a natural cave, the Amarantha site in Ka m r. It attracts huge crowds of pilgrims, even though the march in order to reach the site is very hard due to climatic reasons. As a symptom of the phenomenon of global warming, it is to be noted that in 1994 the ice pillar could not take shape, the fact being interpreted as a sign of future calamities and inspiring severe awe. It is a peculiar typology of the li ḡas named "autogenous" (svayambh ū), not shaped by human hands, generally made of river pebbles, as a result of water erosion. A different kind of raw material particularly pure and precious for making li ḡas is the rock crystal.

At Cidambaram, all along the external corridor of the temple, being object of the first circumambulation (pradak ṣi ṇ) by the pilgrims during their visit to the site, before entering the interior part of the sanctuary, are portrayed the main codified positions of dance, due to the fact that the temple is dedicated to īva in his hypostasis as the Lord of dance, Na āra ja. The precision of the iconography is astonishing, each and every position corresponds to descriptions to be found in different technical treatises about dance. It is usual for actual dance practitioners to study the temple images in order to learn with the utmost precision the positions of their own art, choreography. At Cidambaram pilgrims are mainly attracted during the period of June and December: they homage not only īva but even his son Ga ēa and Vi ṣṇu, gods that have specific niches dedicated to both of them within the area of the sanctuary.

The seven cities (saptapuri)

The seven sacred cities, being able to bestow liberation from the cycle of rebirths (moksad ūyin) are: Ayodhya (birthplace of the hero-god R āma, Uttar Prade ṣ), Mathurā (seat of the cult of the bucolic deity K ṛ ṣṇa, Uttar Prade ṣ), Maya(puri) (that is Haridv āra, periodic seat of the mass meeting kumbhamelā, Uttar kha ṇḍā), K āśī (that is V āraṇasī, Uttar Prade ṣ), K ṛ ṇā (seat of a sankarite coenobium, Tamiḷ N āḍu), Avanti (that is Ujjayinī, periodic seat of the kumbhamelā, Madhya Prade ṣ), and finally Dv ārat (that is Dv ārak , capital city of the reign of K ṛ ṣṇa, one of the "four abodes", c ōr dh ā, Gujar āt). As it is easy to observe, the circuit of the seven sacred cities links sites that are part on their own of other devotional circuits of pilgrimage (kumbhamelā, c ōr dh ā, sankarite coenobia). The strict interconnection of the key knots of sacred geography is in such a way intensely strengthened, the intersection of the different devotional routes opens new perspectives to the free will of the crowds of pilgrims. In a certain way, K āśī represents the ideal center of the circuit, its hard core, due to the reason that through a net of mythical references all the other six cities are punctually reduplicated in it, through the mechanism of substitute or replacement

pilgrimage. The āiva part is not really prevalent in this game, as it could appear to be at a first glance. If we scan the list more attentively, we may easily ascertain that the first of the seven holy cities is dedicated to Rāma, the second and the last ones are dedicated to Kṛṣṇa, two from the most relevant avatāras of Viṣṇu. In effect, the most quoted list of the avatāras includes ten members: Matsya, Kṛmā, Varāha, Naraśiṅha, Vāmana, Parāśurāma, Rāma, Buddha, Kṛṣṇa, Kalki, all of them being called to put a remedy to different calamities afflicting humankind during different cosmic and mythic sequences of events, according to the famous definition of the category of avatāra included in the Bhagavadgītā : (4,7-8: yad yad hi dharmasya glānir bhavati bhārata | abhyutthānam adharmasya tad ātmānaḥ s j my aham || [7] paritrāyaś cha nā vinā ya ca dukṛtīm | dharmasāsthya pānṛthya śaś bhavi mi yuge yuge || [8], “For whenever of the right a languishing appears, o son of Bharata, a rising up of unright, then I send myself forth. For protection of the good, and for destruction of evil-doers, to make a firm footing of the right, I come into being in age after age”, transl. Franklin Edgerton, Cambridge 1944).

On December, 6th, 1992, at the acme of a campaign organized by the fundamentalist rightwing party, instigated by the VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad, “Hindu Plenary Congress”, named rath yātrā, “carriage pilgrimage”, a sort of triumphal march by car took place, with the intent to bring to Ayodhyā the bricks necessary to build (according to the organizers, to reinstall) a temple dedicated to Rāma. The objective of the march was to destroy the Babri Masjid, the Mosque in Ayodhyā dating back to the founder of the Mughal dynasty, Babur (Zahīr ud-Dīn, 1483-1530 CE), according to VHP built over the ruins of the birthplace of Rāma. The mosque was sacked and destroyed, and law enforcement didn’t oppose any real resistance.

Rāma is bound to his mythical birthplace and capital city, Ayodhyā ; Kṛṣṇa to his capital city, Dvārakā . But Kṛṣṇa is bound even to the places being the theatre of his erotic juvenile exploits, first of all Vṇdvana (on the left shore of the Yamunā), and to the city where he killed his enemy Kaśa, Mathurā , not far from Vṇdvana.

The sign (līlā)

The circuit of the tīrthas creates a sort of specific mythical mapping of the territory, giving birth to a real geography of the sacred sphere, a dense net of signs. One of the most important subnets of this large net is the system of the twelve signs of light (jyotirliṅga). Etymologically, a līlā is just a sign, e.g. the sign distinguishing the male gender from the female, that is the penis, and from a religious perspective, the sign of the pervading presence of the God āiva in a certain place. It would be conceptually wrong, and ethically limiting, to reduce the līlā to a phallic symbol: it is much more than this. It is the very emblem of the deity, and in its most evolute form it represents the link bounding together the divine the human and the universe, a sort of synthesis uniting the macrocosm and the microcosm. It may be made either of durable material (stone, metal, wood, earth), or temporary (being built and immediately destroyed after having finished the ritual act, e.g. made of sand); either fixed (placed into a sanctuary as a fixed cult object) or mobile (periodically brought in parade during festivals); either decorated or unadorned, with one or more or no divine faces on it. The icon of āiva known as Līlāgodbhāvamūrti is a small figure of the god emerging out of a mandorla open at the middle of the shaft, as a reminder of the supremacy of āiva over and beyond both Brahmā and Viṣṇu.

It is possible to delineate a real evolution of the iconography of the li ga, starting from a primitive form clearly antropomorphic, where the features of a human penis are clearly noticeable, proceeding with an intermediate form, where a little figure of the deity is visible at the middle of the shaft, and concluding with a final completely aniconic form of the divine, where the li ga is a pure geometrical shape, an ellipsoid produced by the rotation of an ellipse around its longer axis.

Each and every li ga built by human hands includes three parts: the inferior part of Brahm , that is the foundation stone of the structure, its basis; the middle part of Vi u, that is the shaft properly; and the superior part of Rudra, the top of the icon. The iconography of the li ga includes the optional presence of one, four or five faces of the god, these last corresponding to the four cardinal points plus the invisible zenith, this one representing the transcendent aspect of the god.

Normally li gas are inserted into a base representing the vulva (yoni), evoking the compresence of the goddess as the Potency (akti) of iva. The vedantic interpretation of the li ga loses entirely any antropomorphic feature of the symbol, transforming it into a sort of imago mundi, a macrocosmic embleme, that in its different parts includes the 36 principles of reality or categories (tattva), evoking all the different planes of existence. This sort of de-antropomorphisation and assimilation of the li ga to a cosmography, is only the late development of a process being already implicit into its earlier phases: in effect we must remember that the li ga is never or rarely adored as a fertility symbol, it is in contrast the emblem of the virile potency used for ascetic goals and ends.

More than a single episode of the mythical cycle of iva underlines the fact that this god, being a model to be imitated by ascetics (yogins: he is venerated as Yoge vara, master of yoga), takes a great care in order not to waste his virile semen. The ascetic practice of the retention of sperm is exemplified by the figure of the rdhvaretas, the character "whose semen is turned upwards", the ascetic being able to avoid ejaculation and to have his semen turned upwards internally along the spinal column till to reach the brahmarandhra, the "hole of Brahm ", the occipital fontanelle. In such a way he masters the sexual stimulus, avoids to waste his own potency and vital energy, and finally accumulates a superhuman ascetic power. It is not to be considered as fortuitous at all the fact that the li ga represents an ever turgid erect penis, a shaft never subject to detumescence: it is not an organ of generation of life, but rather and more properly an accumulator of interior virile energy.

The twelve signs of light (jyotirli ga)

The twelve li gas of light form an important circuit of pilgrimage. They are 1) r soman tha (Prabh sak etra, Saur ra or K hiy v r district, Gujar t, on the shore of the Arabic Sea); 2) r mallik rjuna (mount r aila, along the river K , ndhra Prade); 3) r mah k le vara (M lava district, at Ujjayin , along the river Sipr , Madhya Prade); 4) O k re vara (M ndh t) alias Amare vara (along the river Narmad , Madhya Prade); 5) Ked ran tha (Him laya, Him cal Prade); 6) r bh ma a kara (along the river Bh m , hinterland of Mu ba , Mah r ra); 7) r vi ve vara (V r as , Uttar Prade); 8) r tryambake vara (along the river Godavar , N sik district, Mah r ra); 9) Vaidyan tha (near Jas , Bih r); 10) N ge vara (near Dvarak , Gujar t); 11) Setubandha-R me vara (on the island of same name, between India and r la k); 12)

Ghu me vara alias Gh e vara (near Daulat b d, Mah r ra). It is noticeable that in most cases the li ga is situated near to a river, to the sea or to a mount; the only site in Southern India is Setubandha. Even the circuit of the twelve jyotirli gas is duplicated within V r as , K being the real navel of the world for Indian pilgrimage.

The symbology of light is linked to the process of interiorization of the ancient Vedic sacrificial rite, process effected by the priestly class in the transition between Vedism and Brahmanism (the ancient phase preceeding Hinduism). Just as the Vedic ritual included the consumption of a living being within the sacrificial fire as part of an offer to the gods, in the same way the interiorized sacrificial process includes the consumption within the interior fire of knowledge of the transient components of human personality of the practitioner of the ritual: the darkness of nescience is burnt by the purificatory fire of gnosis.

A well known pur ic myth narrates that in the ancient times iva appeared as a sign of fire (jyotirli ga) in order to restate his own supremacy above both Brahm and Vi u. In order to remember this primordial event, particularly in the sites of the twelve jyotirli gas, people celebrate the festival of the "night of iva", ivar tr , in the 14th night of waning moon of the month either of M gha (January-February) or of Ph lguna (February-March). During this festival the night is dotted and enlightened with a plenty of countless oil lamps, being lighted by the devotees in order to imitate the bright divine pillar of fire.

iva's emerging out of the pillar of fire is particularly suitable to symbolize the redeeming fire of gnosis. Actually iva appears in this form in order to punish the excessive self-esteem of both Brahm and Vi u, engaged in a debate to establish who of them could be considered as the supreme deity. The pillar of light, from which later will emerge the figure of iva in front of the two opponents, obliges them to search for its origin: Brahm will go in search of its top, Vi u of its bottom. Both will be unable to accomplish the quest, because the fire pillar is iva, and iva is endless, unlimited, infinite.

The seats of the Goddess (aktip ha)

The Dev bh gavatapur a narrates that iva, destroyed by sorrow for the suicide of his beloved Sat , put unto his shoulders the corpse of his beloved and begun to wander throughout the whole world, being prey of an uncontrollable wrath. Worried about the consequences of this behaviour, the gods asked Vi u for help. He cut off the corpse into pieces, in such a way freeing iva from his burden of grief. The deceased body of the Goddess was scattered all over India. In this myth iva finds his confirmation as the god of transgression, Vi u as the god of cosmic order, and in this perspective the Goddess includes within her the coincidentia oppositorum, being the Mother of the universe.

The 108 parts of Sat 's corpse are each of them a goal of pilgrimage. They correspond to the same amount of a list of traditional names of the Goddess, being venerated in a plenty of devotional hymns, named namastotra "hymns of names". Each part of the corpse gave origin to a p ha, a "seat" of the Goddess on earth: at K fell on the ground Dev 's face (Vi l k , "the lady with large eyes"), at K magiri (Assam) fell her vulva (K m khy , "she whose very name is pleasure"). However, the most quoted lists (e.g. the list in the Mah bh rata, or the later traditions represented

by senior Tantric texts from Eastern India like *Prāhiraṇīya* alias *Mahāprāhiraṇīya*, “detailed description of seats”) include only 51 *pāhas*. The most celebrated out of them are *Kāṭigha* in Kolkata (toe of right foot, or alternatively the skull) and *Lalitā* in *Alīkhaḍ* (thumb of the right hand). Comparing different lists it is possible to identify four main seats (*Ātma*-, *Para*-, *Yoga*- and *Guhyapāha*) and 64 minor seats, according to the relative importance of the limbs of the Goddess being object of veneration.

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