

Divinity Diffused: Pilgrimage in the Indian Religions

The Indian town of Brindavan lies on the river Jumna in the region of Braj, to the south of Delhi. Here, it is believed that the deity Krishna can be found in a 500 year-old temple.¹ The god inhabits an image of fossilised stone, and is regularly woken before sunrise by the songs and bells of the temple's priests. Once he has been bathed and dressed, he is presented with offerings of butter, fruit, sweets and milk. Then, while his image remains in the temple, Krishna is also thought to join his fellow cowherds in the woods of Brindavan, where he combines work with amorous adventures, for as an eternal and omnipresent deity his activity encompasses all human life.

That Krishna spent his early life in and around the location of Brindavan was established by a man called Chaitanya, a mystic and devotee, to whom this information was divinely revealed. Indeed, many now believe that Chaitanya himself was an incarnation of both Krishna and Radha. Today, in the many temples devoted to Krishna in Brindavan, the Gaudiya Vaishnava greet the god by dancing and singing, and they and others gain spiritual sustenance either from gazing at his image or from sharing the food that has been consecrated through its contact with the sacred image. Neighbouring villages are also imbued with the mythology of Krishna, so that holy legends are associated with specific, local places.

At the time of the monsoon in July and August pilgrims from all over India come to the town. They bathe every morning in the river Jumna, the presiding deity of which is thought of as a sister to the famous Ganges. Here they may collect water to take home and use sparingly at family altars situated far away from the holy site. They come particularly to see the *Ras Lila*, sacred dramas enacted by local children who adopt the roles of Krishna, Radha (his consort) and assorted cowherds. 'Lila' means play in both senses of the word, and these performances combine drama and liturgy in order to describe incidents in Krishna's life. To see them is to experience a form of sharing which has some resemblances to the Christian drama of the Eucharist: the plays are communal celebrations of the life of a god who unites the worlds of humans and deities. The divine force is invoked to be present in the static image of the god, just as the wafer and wine become the body and blood of Christ in the Mass.

Despite its distant resemblance to Christian liturgy, pilgrimage to Brindavan, in keeping with Hindu pilgrimage in general, deviates markedly from the traditions we have encountered so far. The *hajj* to Mecca or

the Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land ideally embody an archetypal journey to a supremely sacred locality. In contrast, the *Mahabharata*, the great Hindu epic, recommends in passing a form of wandering to a wide variety of holy places.² Hundreds of shrines and pilgrimage sites are named in an order which follows the movements of the sun. While the holy places focus mainly on northern India, the heartland of the Indo-Aryan civilisation which emerged in India in the second millennium BC, they also encompass a tour of the entire subcontinent.

This broad spreading of sacred space parallels a diffusion of the divine that is characteristic of Hindu worship. Early sacred texts of the first and second millennia BC, in particular the *Upanishads*, contain a notion of an all-pervading, abstract God, while early Vedic religion seems to have avoided worship through temples and images.³ Yet the concept of divinity has subsequently taken on many faces, giving form to the formless by introducing anthropomorphic gods and *avatars* or human incarnations (literally, 'descents') of the gods. Krishna's representation in Brindavan shifts with the seasons and varied locales, just as the oral tradition of the *Ras Lila* may change with each performance. He himself is also part of a vast pantheon of Hindu gods, one where lesser divinities may be seen as aspects of the greater ones, creating a loosely defined and endlessly splintering hierarchy of beings.

Such fragmentation not only aids the assimilation of a variety of cults into Hinduism, but also increases the sense of the omnipresence of divine forces. The anthropologist Chris Fuller emphasises that Hinduism postulates no absolute distinction between divine and human beings.⁴ A priest in a Shiva temple must install the god's power in himself before commencing worship, and ritual texts proclaim 'only Shiva can worship Shiva'. Just as humans show respect to deities through a characteristic gesture of obeisance, *namaskara* – bowing the head, with hands held high, and palms pressed together – so this is also practised from god to god, and human to human. The act implies relations of hierarchy combined with interdependence which imbue both social and divine relationships in Hinduism.

A single deity can also contain a number of apparently contending forces: Shiva, for instance, embodies principles of both fertility and death, healing and crazed destruction. Among the many Hindu goddesses, some are maternal and domestic, the embodiment of art and culture, but others are great warriors, perhaps living wild existences on the fringes of civilisation, exercising dynamic but dangerous female forces. (By marrying a goddess, a god checks and harnesses the threat of her female power.) Vishnu 'the preserver', of whom Krishna is an incarnation, and Shiva personify powers that are believed to remain active in the world, and it is they, along with aspects of the mother goddess, who today receive the most worship in shrines and pilgrimages. In contrast Brahma, a creator deity, at one stage perhaps the chief god of the early Hindus, is often thought of as sunk in deep meditation or slumber now that his task is complete.

An Indian expression used to describe the process of pilgrimage is *tirthayatra*. *Yatra* implies the act of travelling, while *tirtha* is a complex



50 Procession of pilgrims at Tanjore, India. Each red flag depicts a Shiva linga.

Sanskrit term encompassing the notion of a ford, but also sometimes used to refer to holy men and even scriptures. The common aspect of these apparently diverse meanings lies in the idea of crossing over – the possibility of moving between human and divine realms, or at least mediating between them, which is evident in holy texts, places and people. Each *tirtha* can thus represent special nodes in what one author has called a kind of 'sacred geometry'.⁵ They are seen as especially good places for the performance of rites: acts performed and prayers uttered here are believed to be many times more beneficial than they would be elsewhere.

The practice of pilgrimage institutionalises the journey of the worshipper to *tirthas*. Often, such journeys imply an immersion in sacred time as well as space, since Hinduism distinguishes between auspicious and inauspicious times for performing important actions. Pilgrimages and holy gatherings therefore tend to occur at special astrological conjunctions. In 1989, for instance, the famous Kumbha Mela pilgrimage and fair

was held at Prayaga (Allahabad), where the Ganges and Jumna rivers meet. On this occasion, a favourable conjunction coincided with a lunar eclipse, and the event attracted some 15 million pilgrims.

An important element in contemporary Hinduism, manifested not least in the practice of pilgrimage, is the expression of 'devotionalism' (in Sanskrit, *bhakti*).⁶ This can be traced back to the sixth or seventh centuries AD, a period when itinerant devotees travelled from shrine to shrine, abandoning their lives to the worship of a deity. Such devotion, as well as inspiring a large corpus of poetry, has helped shift the focus of some Hindu worship away from ritual sacrifice and toward hymn-singing and a surrender of the self in love of and union with god. It has thereby allowed non-Brahmin sections of society to feel that they can gain direct access to their favoured deities. Chaitanya himself, amongst many other famous teachers of devotion to Krishna, may be seen as part of this tradition, and indeed in more recent centuries it has often been evident specifically in the worship of Krishna.

Through the mediating powers of the image at Brindavan, then, we have been introduced to a concept of divinity and a pilgrimage tradition that is, above all else, multi-layered and flexible. Unlike the other world religions, Hinduism – as much a social system, perhaps, as a religion – cannot look back to a single prophetic founder or decisive event in historical time for its creation. Indeed, the very idea of a single tradition called Hinduism may derive from colonial British attempts to define and demarcate an Indian system of beliefs along Judaeo-Christian lines.⁷ One pilgrimage scholar warns us against assuming that western notions of piety and sacredness need be shared cross-culturally:⁸

Quite recently, and with some mirth, I observed a pilgrim taking the holiest of all possible baths at the Dasasvamedha Ghat in Varanasi, holding his transistor radio to his ear to monitor the cricket test match against the West Indies broadcast from Calcutta.

Unlike Christianity, Islam and Judaism, Hinduism's foundations are based on a series of sacred texts (often difficult to interpret) rather than a single, revealed, repository of 'truth'. Instead of the universalising and proselytising impulses that are so evident in Islam and Christianity, its traditions encompass ways of life that actually encourage syncretism and local adaptation – the Buddha and sometimes even Christ, Marx, Freud and Einstein have been perceived as incarnations of Vishnu.⁹ It may be the case that pilgrimage is almost as important within Hinduism as it is, for instance, in Islam. Yet for Hindus it represents merely one possible pathway among many in the search for salvation.

IMAGE, TEXT AND PLACE

A myth is told in sacred Hindu texts about the goddess Sati, wife of Shiva. Its details vary slightly from version to version, but the elements of the story remain reasonably consistent. Sati's father is said to have performed a sacrifice to which neither Sati nor Shiva was invited. Sati went to the ceremony nevertheless, but was insulted by her father. As a result, she is

said to have died of a broken heart, or possibly by suicide. Shiva, inconsolable at her death, traversed the earth in a mad dance, carrying her body. The gods became anxious to free him of his grief and decided to deprive him of Sati. They therefore dispersed her body bit by bit, and places where the body fell became holy. These sacred sites became major pilgrimage centres for goddess worship in India.

Descriptions of Sati's fate not only provide a justification for religious practice, they also construct an image of India as a mythologically charged landscape whose holy spots are as widespread as the body of Sati herself. The very soil of India is thought by many Hindus to be the body or at least the residence of the divine, particularly in its female form.¹⁰ Yet, despite their scattered locations, the spread of Hindu pilgrimage centres is largely limited to India (where over 80% of the population is Hindu), which is defined as the sacred space par excellence.¹¹ There is a clear contrast here, for instance, with the spread of important Christian centres of pilgrimage. If the importance of Rome and Jerusalem, or even Lourdes and Compostela, reflects the successful spread of a faith anxious literally to conquer the world for Christ, the Hindu tradition has usually been much more parochial in its range. Even so, this apparent limitation has also brought with it certain advantages, since the sacred geography has played some part in shaping the national identity of a country which has only rarely been unified under central rule. The fact that Hindus have been able to circumambulate the whole of India, visiting hundreds of *tirthas*, has helped to impart some sense of unity in the face of political and military conflict, and has also helped in the spreading of cults. In the present era, of course, political centralisation and even nationalism have emerged, and this fact has received significant ritual expression. In Benares (also known as Varanasi and Kashi), for instance, the temple dedicated to *Bharat Mata*, or 'Mother India', does not contain an anthropomorphic image of the goddess. Instead, a large, coloured relief map of the Indian subcontinent receives the due reverence of pilgrims.

Many Hindu sites are linked not only to texts, but also to features of the landscape itself, such as hilltops, confluences of rivers, caves, outcrops of rock and forests. There are seven particularly holy rivers, of which the Ganges, believed to acquire its sanctity by issuing forth from the very locks of Shiva's hair, is nowadays considered the foremost. The goddess Ganga is said to be one of the escorts of Shiva, just as the sacred river laps 'seductively', according to one author, against the walls of Benares, a city associated particularly with the god.¹² There are also seven holy cities which, if visited, have the power to bestow salvation or *moksha* – a state similar to the Buddhist notion of *nirvana*, which implies total, final, release from all binding attachments and the cycle of reincarnation that is the lot of humanity.¹³ Four *dhamas* or dwelling-places of the gods provide abodes of sanctity in the cardinal directions of the entire subcontinent: Badrinath in the Himalayas, Rameshvaram in the extreme south; Puri on the east coast; Dvaraka on the west coast.

Tirthas are often associated with running water, and ritual bathing is of considerable importance. The seven sacred rivers are said to have

★ why is very important

originated in heaven before being released to flow down to earth, and the Ganges itself is sometimes referred to as 'the flowing ladder to heaven'. Pilgrimage thus provides the occasion for self-purification by bathing, which often takes place at dawn, the most auspicious time. Such important sites as Benares (rarely a political centre, but said to have been founded at the beginning of creation) have developed a sacred architecture that reflects the importance of the act of ablution. The city reaps rich benefits from its location on the banks of the river Ganges, whose source is high up in the Himalayas (near the home of the gods) and which flows into the Bay of Bengal after some 1,560 miles. It is thought by some both to be at the centre of the world and situated high above the earth, on Shiva's trident.¹⁴ More visibly, the city has more than seventy *ghats*, many built in the eighteenth century at a time of Hindu revival, which comprise platforms and stairs by the river up to 50 feet (15.25 m) in height. Their steps are crowded with *ghatias*, priests who aid pilgrims in the performance of complex rites of worship as well as looking after their clients' belongings while they bathe.

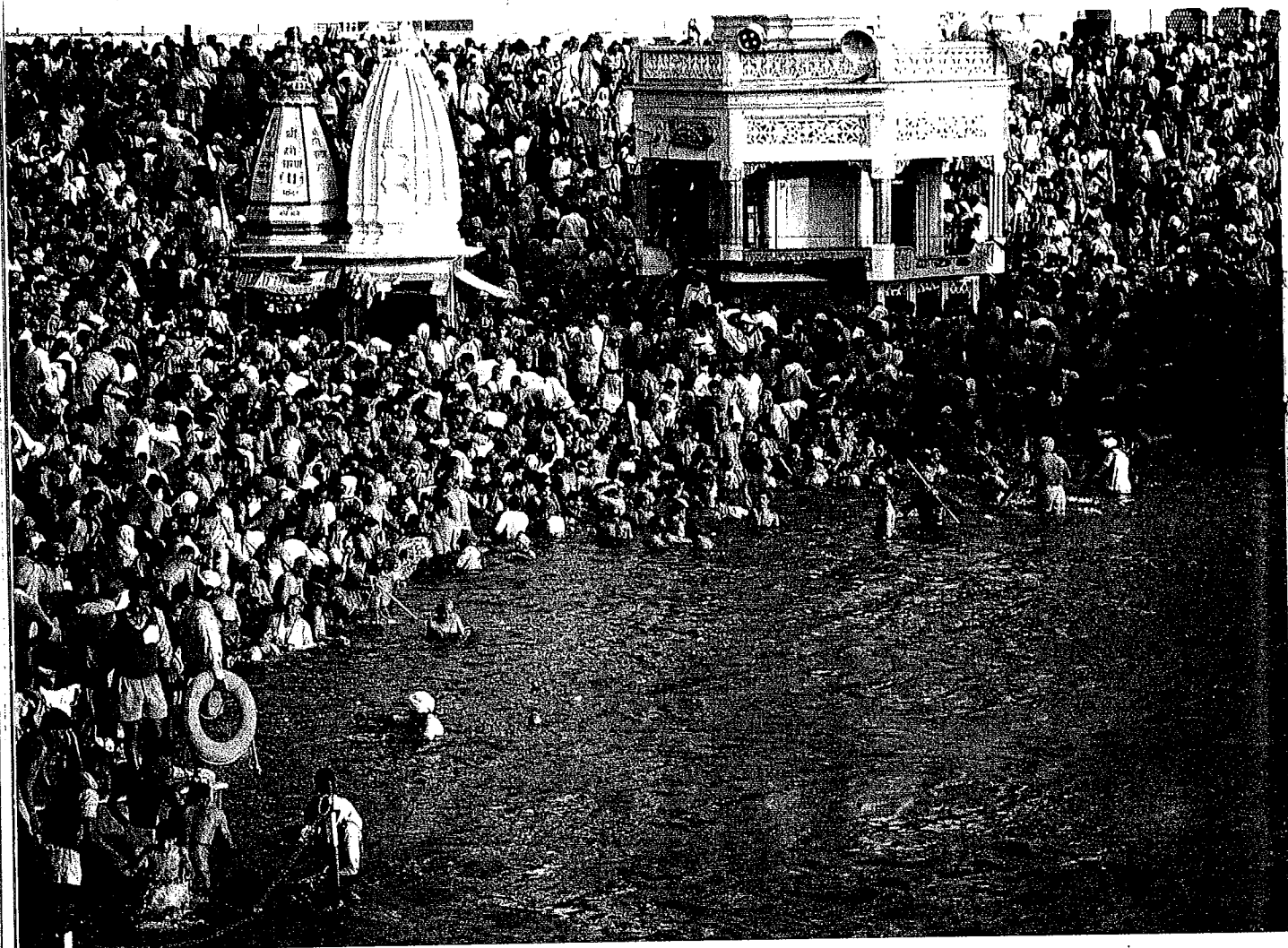
Movement itself, towards or between holy areas, is a sacred act. The older *Vedas* – the earliest literary documents of an Aryan culture that was originally semi-nomadic – reveal the virtues of travel by making clear the morality of its opposite: 'Evil is he who stayeth among men.' They also describe the benefits to be accrued by the pious traveller:¹⁵

Flower-like the heels of the wanderer,
His body groweth and is fruitful;
All his sins disappear,
Slain by the toil of his journeying.

Landscapes and movements listed in the *Mahabharata* are complemented by other texts from perhaps the third to the fifteenth centuries AD, such as the *Puranas* and *Tantras*. These parallel the epic in that they contain no details of the physical settings of sacred sites, but are more concerned with their potential to provide spiritual rewards. Here is a characteristic passage from the *Mahabharata* itself:¹⁶

When one has gone to the Meadow-of-Kapisthala, which is hard to find, his sins are burned off. . . . Thereupon one should go to world-renowned Saraka and approach the Bull-bannered God on the fourteenth of the dark fortnight; for thus one obtains all his desires and goes to the world of heaven. In Saraka there are three crores of holy places. . . . There is also there the Abode-of-Ila Ford: by bathing there and worshipping the ancestors and Gods one suffers no misfortune. . . .

One pilgrimage scholar has described these types of formulaic description as 'archaic advertisements',¹⁷ an apt phrase when we remember that it has been in the interests of priests, the guardians of temples and writers of holy texts, to emphasise the importance of their own sites in relation to others. We can also see from these texts the importance of a written tradition in reinforcing the status of prominent religious places. Yet we cannot regard the sanctity of pilgrimage sites as created and justified merely through texts, not least because any pilgrimage tradition has to be



51 Benares, India. Pilgrims performing self-purification through bathing at a ghat. Whilst the Ganges has been at the centre of worship at Benares for thousands of years, the Hindu shrines currently used in the city date mostly from the 18th and 19th centuries, after the decline of the Muslim empire in northern India.

flexible enough to accommodate different and shifting local needs. The *Puranas* themselves contain various emphases which correspond to contending sectarian and regional affiliations, reflecting the fact that different religious movements may, at any one time, be engaged in the process of creating and building on their own sacred geographies. In some cases, 'ancient' texts may even have been conveniently manufactured by priests to suit the needs of the present.

In the absence of a centralised and centralising priesthood the Hindu 'tradition' is thus characterised by immensely complex relationships between 'orthodox' traditions based on Sanskrit texts and their popular forms in regional subcultures. For some scholars, the contrast can be expressed in relatively stark terms, between a religious practice administered by high-caste Brahmin priests, which emphasises long-term welfare and transcendental goals, and one whose horizons are geographically and spiritually more confined – associated with pragmatic goals of individual welfare and less prestigious containers of the divine, such as village goddesses acting also as local clan deities.

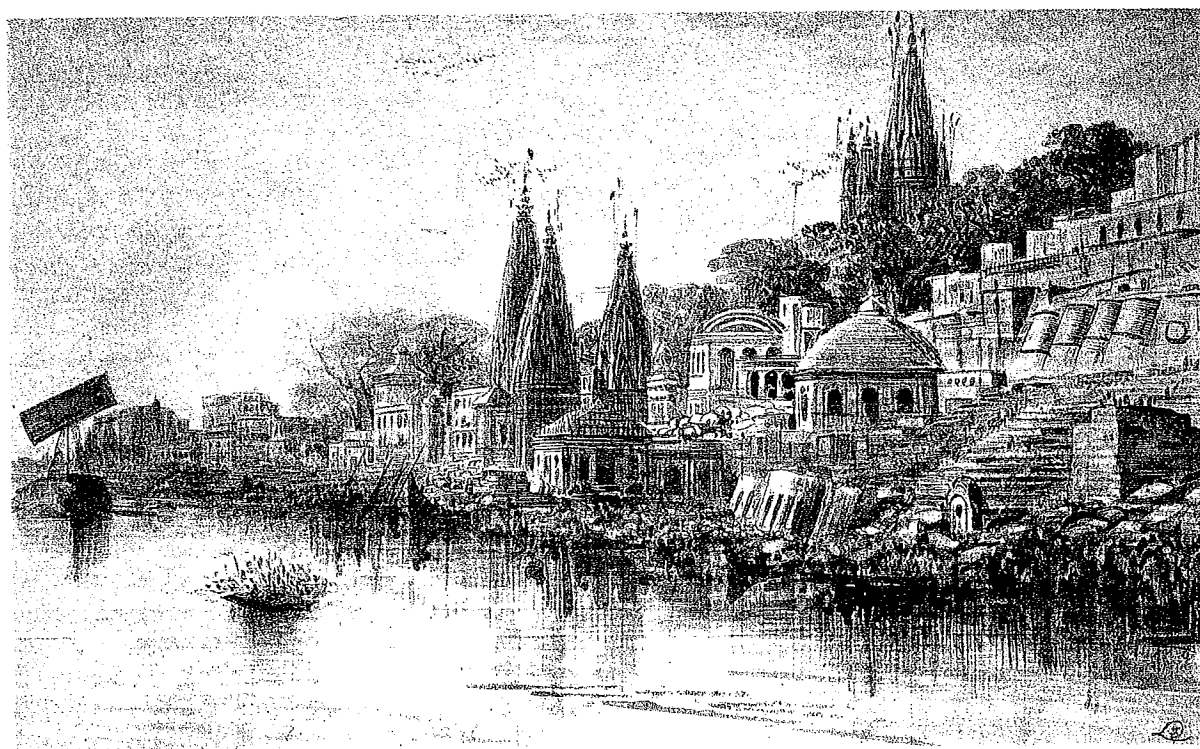
However, the relationships between so-called continental and local, great and little traditions, are often complementary rather than mutually exclusive. An extraordinary combination of perspectives may be produced in which a partisan view of the sacredness of a locality coexists with a broader, apparently conflicting view. This is illustrated by a response to the questions of an American scholar at a famous pilgrimage site:¹⁸

At Gaya a college teacher told me that the Phalgu River was certainly the most sacred river in all of India for the people of Gaya. To a question about the sanctity of the Ganga, the reply was that of course the Ganga was the most sacred river of India, yet the Phalgu was more sacred than it.

In some cases, a site of great importance may become a paradigm for other shrines and holy places, as if features of a sacred geography could bestow some of their prestige on to lesser replicas of themselves. One anthropologist has described how Rajasthani villagers told her that the dharmas could actually be found within their own village, so that a circumambulation around India could be achieved without leaving home.¹⁹ A similar view is often maintained by worshippers at Benares, who argue not only that the 'city of light' is symbolically present in a thousand places in India, but also that it contains all the other *tirthas* – and their sacred powers – within it.²⁰

These examples show how a Hindu 'structure of consciousness' can be maintained which is both pluralistic and yet also able to focus worship on a single location.²¹ We also see once more the importance of Benares in the geography of Hinduism – as both a sacred centre in itself and a

52 Water-colour of Benares by Edward Lear. Lear spent over a year travelling around India between 1873–75, fulfilling numerous commissions to paint views of the subcontinent. He described Benares as one of the most 'startlingly radiant of places, full of bustle and movement'.



refraction of other sacred places. Lieutenant-Colonel Davidson described the city in 1843 as 'the Hindoo Jerusalem',²² and although his observation perhaps reflects a desire to assimilate Hinduism within a Judaeo-Christian category, it nevertheless highlights the character of the city as an embodiment of the sacred space of India.²³ To the scholar Diana Eck, the ability of Benares to condense sacred spaces into a single location has parallels with Hindu attitudes to texts: just as the *Vedas* can be comprehended through one mantra, so travelling the pilgrimage route around the circumference of the city can be seen as akin to circling the world. Benares is even incorporated into pan-Indian ritual practice, such as on those occasions when a groom appears at the doorway of his bride's house and announces to his future father-in-law his 'intention' to renounce the world and go to Benares in order to study the *Vedas*. Such a statement in effect invites the bride's family to dissuade him from his proposed course of action. In some parts of India, part of an initiation ceremony for young men actually requires the initiate to take seven steps in the direction of Benares.

Benares illustrates, then, the ability of a paradigmatic centre both to encompass other sacred sites and to be replicated beyond its geographical borders. Part of an original site can also be appropriated in the setting-up of a new one. Indeed, a shrine can appear when a devotee of a distant deity takes home earth or perhaps a small stone from the original abode of the god. Myths may even imply that sites are literally linked in the physical landscape. According to a story connected with the temple of Biraja, a large and famous pilgrimage site in Orissa, a priest from Benares came to the temple over a thousand years ago. He threw his specially marked cane into the well at the site. When he returned to Benares he found his cane floating in the Ganges river – implying that the well is connected underground to the Ganges several hundred miles to the north.

The construction of such stories linked to place sometimes reflects the presence of competition between sites. The anthropologist Peter Van der Veer recounts a legend associated with the sacred pilgrimage centre of Ayodhya, in Uttar Pradesh.²⁴ According to the story, King Vikramaditya met a totally black man at a point near the town. Having bathed in Ayodhya's sacred river, the man emerged completely white from the waters. The transformed stranger told the wondering king that he was Prayaga, king of the *tirthas*, who had become black by absorbing the sins of so many humans. Why then go to Prayaga (we are encouraged to ask) when even the king of the *tirthas* comes to Ayodhya to be cleansed?

Despite such considerations of relative spiritual merit, economic considerations cannot be ruled out as factors in the foundation and continued importance of sites of worship. By the eighteenth century, groups of *sadhus* or holy men, had become the principal traders in parts of north India, not least because they were able to use their pilgrimage cycles as trading networks. Today, wealthy industrialists sometimes build temples and rest houses for pilgrims in order to gain merit both for themselves and for their ancestors.²⁵ Nor can the political authority associated with sacred sites be ignored. One author states:²⁶

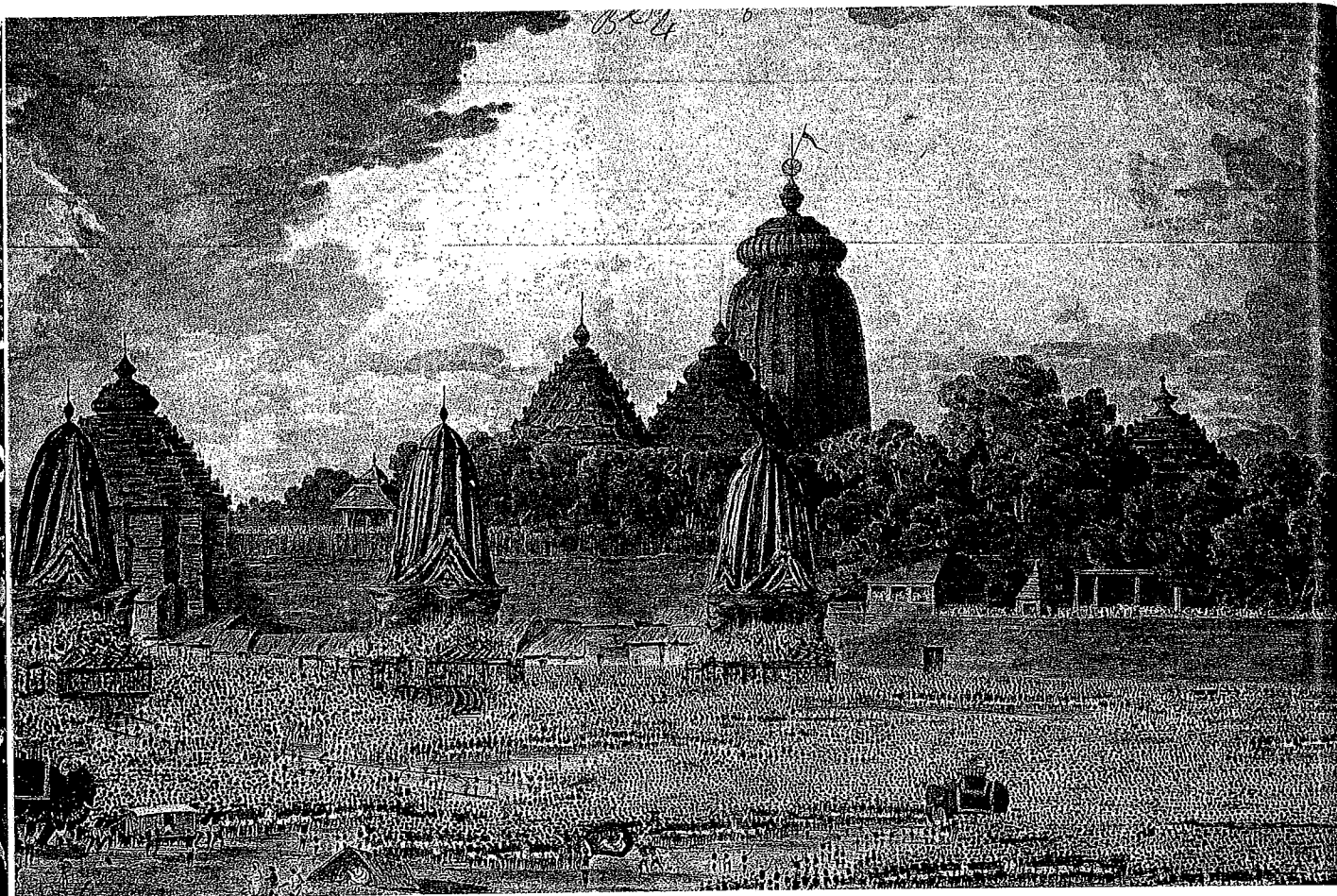
Kings and queens used to identify with the icons in temples which they built or patronized, claiming divine sanction to rule and provide both water by hydraulic engineering and social control from the sacred centre. . . .

A single site may have retained its importance as a sacred centre and yet served a wide range of political masters over time. Puri, the most important site of the cult of Lord Jagannatha, is one of the most sacred pilgrimage places in India. Jagannatha possibly evolved from tribal roots to become a Buddhist and then a Hindu deity, and is known among Hindus as an image of Krishna. Kings of various dynasties, belonging to different sects and traditions, have patronised the cult, not least by ostentatiously building shrines in order to accrue political capital. In the twelfth century, the kings of Orissa constructed a massive stone temple which still stands, rising to over 200 feet (61 m). When the British took over the area, they were well aware of the importance of not damaging the temple, and their job was made easier by the pragmatic acquiescence of the local priests. Shortly before British troops entered Puri in 1803, they were informed by the latter that:²⁷

. . . the Brahmins at the holy temple had consulted and applied to Lord Jagannath to inform them what power was now to have his temple under its protection, and that he had given a decided answer that the English Govt. was in future to be his guardian.

After the priests had issued this statement, the British were able to enter Puri without resistance. Today, power has yet again shifted hands, and patronage in effect rests with the state government of Orissa. In the modern period, Jagannatha has become the patron deity of state nationalism, reflecting and justifying new political concerns.

Myths attached to a site frequently reveal tensions between groups anxious to appropriate the power of the sacred place for their own purposes. Ayodhya, for instance, is considered to be the birthplace of, and therefore holy to, the Hindu god Rama (hero of the *Ramayana* epic), and even the architecture of the railway station echoes that of a Hindu temple.²⁸ Although most of the buildings of the town are of relatively recent date, myth and history have merged so that temples are regarded as restorations from the time of the town's sacred foundation. In the sixteenth century, the Mughal emperor Babur came to India with the intention of becoming its ruler, and visited Ayodhya. Local Muslim fakirs promised him that when he destroyed the temple of Rama his desire would be fulfilled.²⁹ According to legend, although Babur succeeded in destroying the Hindu temple, his attempts to build a mosque failed because each night everything that had been built simply collapsed. Eventually, a mosque was built which left the Hindu sanctuary open to believers. However, trouble was to flare up again in the years following partition in 1947. On the night of 22–23 December 1949, Hindus managed to smuggle an image of Rama into the mosque, a form of religious defiance that was to prove a catalyst for violence and riots. In 1989, at the potentially explosive time of a general election, Hindu 'fundamentalists' attempted to build a temple to Rama with bricks taken to the town from all over India, but were prevented from completing their task by the



53 Painting of Jagannatha procession at Puri in Orissa, Bay of Bengal, by an anonymous artist. The 12th-century stone temple, built by the kings of Orissa, rises to over 200 feet (61 metres) and displays Vishnu's sacred wheel and flag at its summit.

government. In 1992, devotees of Lord Rama tore down the mosque which stood at his supposed birthplace, setting off waves of violence in the whole of India.

Most recently, the emigration of Hindus has begun to aid the diffusion of the sacred landscape beyond the boundaries of the subcontinent, even though over 90% of the world's Hindus still live in India. In the United States, a number of temples have been built, complementing the family altars of domestic, daily worship. Intriguingly, not only have many of these become new pilgrimage sites, but they have also been seen as duplicating the topography and patterning of their counterparts in India itself. The major temples are located in the cardinal directions of the country – east (New York and Pittsburgh), north (Michigan), west (California) and south (Texas), as if they were the North American version of the *dhamas*. Sites that are specially favoured are likely to have topographical features replicating those of an 'original' holy place. At a temple in Pittsburgh, the confluence of two rivers in Ohio has been explicitly compared with the confluence of the sacred Ganges, Yamuna and Sarasvati rivers. In this way: '... Pittsburgh was instantly made the holy Prayagraj of America; a remarkable transformation of the Steel City as a sacred centre.'³⁰

We see the complex interplay between a number of elements in the construction of pilgrimage sites: topography, texts, political patronage and even individual self-interest can play a part, as can the spiritual authority of a holy figure such as Chaitanya at Brindavan. Over the past two centuries, pilgrimage has also been considerably boosted, both by better communications systems – railways, roads and even airways – and by higher standards of general education, increasing knowledge of sacred centres located far from people's homes.³¹ A further element in the creation of sacred space is revealed, however, in the way that Hinduism employs physical images both to represent and make tangible the presence of divinity. As one writer has put it, the image relates to the absolute in the way a dance is related to the dancer, or a dream to the sleeper.³² What is ultimately an immaterial and formless deity is brought, through the skill of the artist and the ritual expertise of a priest, into a physical object – usually a sculpture – and served as if it were a human of high status with bodily needs. The innermost part of a temple contains a womb-like chamber in which is located the presiding god of the temple (contained in the *mula murti* or immovable 'root image'). The retinue of the god is usually arranged in decreasing order of precedence away from this primary image: the consort of the god comes first, followed by, among others, those that stand guard over the eight directions, saints who have worked in the service of the god, local folk deities, and so on.³³

For some Hindu authors, there is no contradiction between the belief in an all-embracing, all-pervading, omnipresent God and the worship of a variety of deities through images, even if the latter merely provide useful means of focusing devotion:³⁴

It is the spirit of inmost devotion, the Formless that is given shape in the images of the deities. Though these are used as aids in religious life, 'every Hindu hopes to escape someday from the necessity of using images'.

Images are very frequently anthropomorphic, as if to emphasise the notion of the gods made human, or at least accessible to humans, but temples may also grow from a less obvious emblem of the divine entering the world, such as a special tree or stone. Shiva, a force representing, among other things, fertility, is often associated with a phallic *linga*. At the heart of such belief is not only the notion that such objects are aids to worship, but also that they contain power, even if it is often claimed that Hindus should worship the god whose power is in an image, not the image itself (reflecting a mistrust of 'idolatry' that may indicate recent Christian influences).

Worship, or *pūja*, consists of several parts, one of which is made up of presenting objects before the deity which symbolise the human senses – food for taste, perfumes or flowers for smell, fine cloths for touch, bells or music for hearing. While the god may not need such substances as such, they do indicate respect for the divine presence. This may be followed by *arati*, a form of lamp-offering in which the priest sways an oil-lamp holding a number of wicks before the image. In all types of Hindu pilgrimage, worshippers seek to absorb the beneficial effects of contact with the deity via consumption or reception of sacralised substances



54 Halebid, India. Adults and children dressed in black clothes for the pilgrimage to Lord Ayyappa at Sabarimalai. The pose of the two seated boys consciously echoes that of the god himself.

(*prasad*), such as food, water, ash or flowers, which have been in close proximity to the deity. Benefit in the form of merit, good fortune and well-being is also derived from a sight of the deity (*darshan*), and, like *prasad*, this action provides a means of engaging in intimate transactions with the divine. According to some scholars, such transactions – or interactions – are of particular significance in relation to traditional Hindu thought, according to which the person is not perceived as sharply bounded, as in contemporary western models of the autonomous individual, but easily subject to influence from and moulding by the environment.³⁵

Whatever the validity of this view, the importance of *darshan* both in pilgrimage and in worship more generally must be stressed. At the enormously wealthy temple of Venkateshvara at Tirupati, it was recently suggested that closed-circuit television be installed in the temple grounds to project an image of the god to the thousands of pilgrims who sometimes wait for hours in the rain, queuing for *darshan* of their god.³⁶ At Sabarimalai in Kerala, devotees may only catch a glimpse of the image of the deity Ayyappa, as they are surrounded by the massed throngs of other pilgrims at the shrine, and yet this sight is still regarded by many as the centre-point of the whole pilgrimage.³⁷

A frequent assumption behind the belief in the benefits of sacred 'sight-seeing' is the idea that the greater the attraction a scene has for the mortal eye, the greater the beneficial effect will be. Just as the devotee stares at the god, so the deity stares back at the devotee in an exchange of vision.³⁸ Temple architecture is constructed not so much to accommodate congregational worship but to channel the devotee towards this form of viewing. While the deity in its sanctuary is usually located in a straight line from the worshipper as the latter enters the temple compound, in order to reach the image one must move through the space of the temple clockwise in ever-decreasing circles.³⁹

Despite the ability of physical forms to mediate between humans and gods, it is also the case that such embodiment carries with it an important price. Location in an image concentrates the attention of the worshipper but also constrains the power and scope of divinity. Thus, when gods are worshipped in temples they become tied to a locality even though the conception of their ultimately unlimited freedom of movement is also retained. It is as if they are constrained by the limited imaginations of mere humans, who cannot conceive of the true nature of the divine without bringing it – literally – down to earth.

not really
true, I think

THE FRUITS OF DENIAL: MOTIVATIONS FOR PILGRIMAGE

At one point in the *Mahabharata* it is related that Bhishma, son of the river goddess Ganges, asks a sage (who is also a 'saint of awesome austerities') about the rewards of pilgrimage:⁴⁰

A person who makes a sunwise tour of the earth, boundlessly mighty brahmin seer, what reward does accrue to him, tell me that, ascetic!

The sage's reply is one that emphasises the fruits of denial. Religious merit is accrued from self-discipline and cultivation of the correct state of mind:

He who has mastered his hands, feet, mind, knowledge, mortification, and good repute attains to the reward of the fords. He who has retired from possession and is contented, restrained, pure, and without selfishness, obtains the reward of the fords. He who is without deceit, without designs, of lean diet, in control of his senses, and free from all vices, he obtains the reward of the fords. The man without anger, O Indra among princes, with the habit of truthfulness and firm in his vows, who sees in the creatures the images of himself, obtains the reward of the fords.

The *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas* refer to the 'tirthas of the heart', implying that the pilgrim should not only bathe in the waters of earthly tirthas, but also in the inner virtues of truth, charity, patience and self-control. Discipline and denial in Hinduism can take a variety of forms, and may show some influence from Buddhist and Jain models. The path of renunciation (*sannyasa*) – the ultimate form of asceticism and self-mastery possible in life – is treated as a vocation by those who choose to become holy mendicants, wandering around the landscape. Ascetics also settle in ashrams at major pilgrimage centres and engage in lives of

in heart
Pilgrimage

instruction. Both ways of life provide powerful means of achieving salvation in the Hindu tradition. The *Upanishads*, for instance, define the goal of humans as the realisation that attachments to the material world, including the self, are mere illusion. These should be renounced in order to allow the self to become one with the all-pervading God and ultimate reality. The asceticism of *sannyasis* may take dramatic forms, such as the decision to keep a fist closed until the nails enter the flesh and come out on the other side. Although according to some Hindus these displays reveal a taste for the spectacular rather than spiritual progress, for many pilgrims such outward austerity reveals the presence of an inner power.

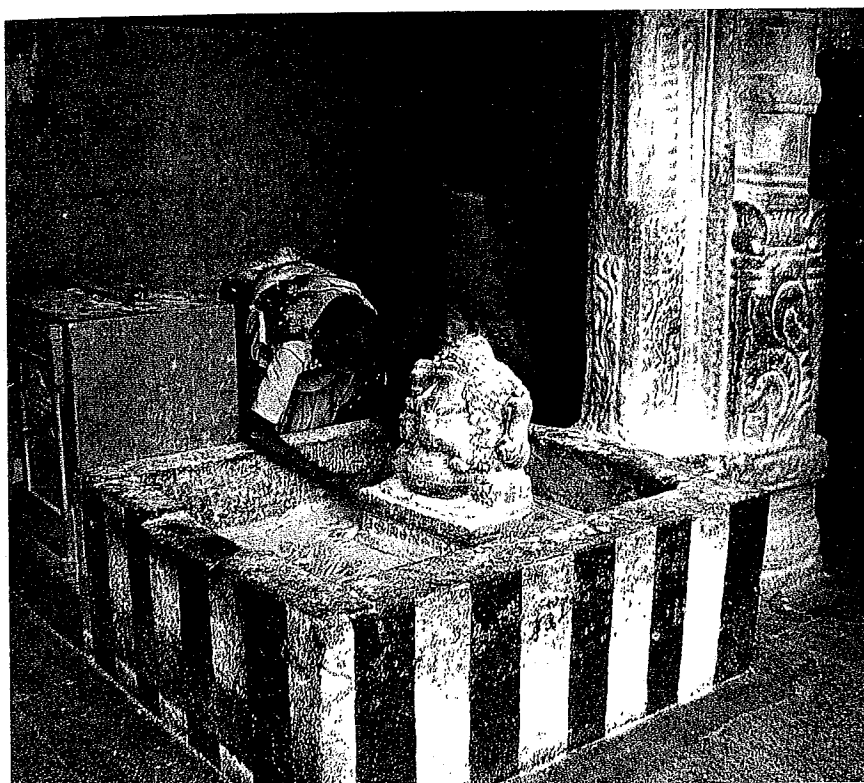
For a 'householder' pilgrimage provides the opportunity to experience a form of temporary renunciation. Pilgrimage is described vividly by Rajasthani villagers as equivalent to what is intriguingly called 'the rice pudding of money', since:⁴¹

Rice pudding is only made and savored when there is a surplus of milk; tirthayatra and the attendant pleasure of seeing other lands requires a surplus of cash.

When viewed in this way, pilgrimage provides a means of divesting the self, for a time, of excess possessions and emotional attachments, and encouraging other merit-producing activities such as meditation and charity. Such travel may be associated with particular times of the year, such as festivals and/or slack periods in the agricultural cycle. Along with such common practices as prayer, the taking of a purifying bath and the throwing of flowers, fruits and money into holy rivers, pilgrimage rules ideally lay emphasis on austerities such as fasting, celibacy, the rejection of soft beds and avoidance of vehicles for making the journey. Some also emphasise that such an act of renunciation is ideally carried out alone. The pilgrimage to the temple of Ayyappa, at Sabarimalai in Kerala,

55 Mysore, India. Bus transporting Ayyappan pilgrims in 1993.





56 Madurai, India. Devotee supplicating an image of Ganesha by the entrance to the main enclosure. The statue is covered with ash, with which the worshipper marks her forehead.

involves not only the imposition of celibacy on its (almost entirely) male participants, but also the undertaking of an arduous journey that, in the past, exposed pilgrims to attack by wild animals. A devotee of the cult writes the following:⁴²

. . . it may not be desirable to provide any more 'get-there-quick' approaches . . . conveniences etc. to the pilgrims. . . . If the present trend is continued, the day when womenfolk irrespective of their ages flocking [*sic*] Sabarimalai will not be far off!

The austerities often associated with pilgrimage need not be experienced merely at a *tirtha*, then, but are inherent within the journey itself. Some sites are very remote, which means not only that they are suitable abodes for the gods, but also that they require effort and devotion to be reached. Pilgrims may even choose to proceed by successive body-length prostrations for part or all of the route. Given the frequent difficulties of pilgrimage journeys, it is perhaps not surprising that Hindus typically give worship to Ganesh, the god of beginnings and obstacles, before departing, as well as explicitly declaring their intention to undertake pilgrimage to a given place. On returning from pilgrimage to a temple, pilgrims usually take home a holy souvenir and reminder of their arduous trip, such as a picture or model of the god of the temple.

Pilgrimage places are also associated with obsequies for the dead, and a pious pilgrim may preserve the ashes of a relative till the time when the journey can be made in order to consign them to holy water. Ashes can

actually be mailed by post to temple authorities and the ritual performed vicariously for those who cannot afford the trip. To die at Benares (where the cremation grounds, unusually, are seen as auspicious) and have one's ashes sprinkled on the river is considered a possible path to liberation, and some believe that a few drops of Ganges water on the tongue at the moment of death provide a means of salvation no matter where the dying person meets their end. Other holy places can at least provide the possibility of a better rebirth, such as Braj, itself the final destination of many old people from Bengal. It is hardly surprising, then, that pilgrimage as a form of renunciation is often adopted by those who feel they have achieved and completed the duties of everyday existence. Here are the words of an old woman to one pilgrimage scholar:⁴³

We have nothing more to do in the world, our children and grandchildren are married, old people are not really wanted or needed, so we walk toward the source of the Ganges, and if we die in the effort, that is the most desirable death we can meet.

Yet, despite the sage's enlightened description in the *Mahabharata* of the attitudes ideally associated with pilgrimage, the practice among Hindus is far more varied in motivation and practice than he would perhaps have hoped. The following is a passage taken from a pilgrim's guide produced by the government of West Bengal:⁴⁴

Family men come here with devotion in their heart, sadhus come with a burning desire for moksha (spiritual liberations), singers, story-tellers, and artists come to entertain. Traders come with their wares. Even prostitutes and gamblers also crowd the place along with the blind, crippled and invalid beggars. . . . Politicians come here with the intention to mix freely with commoners, to earn popularity, social service workers come forward to help and anti-social come to snatch valuables. . . .

Thus the presence of a sacred site need not inspire an attitude of pious devotion amongst its pilgrims. Furthermore, the boons requested by such pilgrims, as we have seen, may seem remote from an austere search for salvation. At Tarakeshwar, the principal site of Shiva in West Bengal (known as Gupta Varanasi, or hidden Varanasi), the local deity, Baba Taraknath, is well-known for his capacity to cure diseases, as expressed in the words of a song:⁴⁵

If refuge is sought . . . with a totally devoted mind, numerous acute ailments are cured. . . . Dysentery, cough, gonorrhea and fistula in ano, Colitis, tuberculosis, leprosy and ascites, piles, severe leprosy, liver problems, all sorts of diseases shall be cured.

If the distinctly earthy claims of the song are likely to provide a cause for concern among the devout sophisticates of Hinduism, there are also strains within the tradition which go so far as to deny the validity of pilgrimage as an institution. The belief, for instance, that the divine should be found *within* the self may make one devalue the enterprise, as revealed in the words of a Kashmiri woman mystic of the fourteenth century:⁴⁶

I . . . went out far in search of Shiva, the omnipresent Lord; having wandered, I found him in my own body. . . .

Broadly similar sentiments are expressed by a Shiva devotee writing three centuries later, who criticises image worship and pilgrimage as examples of a false attachment to the material world:⁴⁷

What can be done by these artificial gods whose honour and even existence are under human control? How can they bring salvation to me? What is the use, then, of arranging flowers near a block of stone, and what benefit accrues from the burning of incense, and the sounding of bells before an idol, and from circum-ambulating it and observing similar other practices? . . . So give up attachment and pacify the mind; the holy Benares will rise up in your heart. It is the ideal Divinity and not the artificial images that is to be worshipped.

The notion of Benares rising in the heart has a striking resemblance, at least superficially, to the ideas of the sufi mystic who invoked the notion of an inner Ka'ba, or indeed the Christian Fathers who argued that the true Jerusalem lay within the self. Indeed, Kabir, the great medieval poet, who came from a low-caste background and who drew on both Muslim and Hindu traditions, wrote somewhat satirically:⁴⁸

Going on endless pilgrimages, the world died,
exhausted by so much bathing!

We see here powerful justifications for turning away from both place and movement, in other words a detachment from the very rootedness in landscape and image that is the key to the practice of Hindu pilgrimage. Yet, although these sentiments are common among holy figures, they often contain a paradox, and one which ultimately emphasises the enduring importance of the sacred journey:⁴⁹

. . . saints who have minimized the importance of pilgrimage have constantly been on pilgrimage themselves, most of them having spent their lives as mendicants and minstrels who sang their songs at places for pilgrimage for the benefit of the pilgrim. Thus, it has become customary for the pious Hindu to go on pilgrimages, to believe in their merit, and yet to state that pilgrimage is not important. . . .

Kabir himself may have refused to die in Benares, thus denying the idea of gaining liberation through spatial location. Yet his followers subsequently founded a centre in his name in the city. In a way, the power of the place proved too much for him in death, if not in life.

THE 'DIVINE HIERARCHY': UNITY AND DIVISION IN HINDU PILGRIMAGE

To some scholars of Hinduism, pilgrimage represents an institution whose rules are liberal and democratic. It is seen as constructing a sacred geography that not only links together holy sites and shrines, but also helps produce a form of social and religious unity.⁵⁰ Some centres of pilgrimage are indeed sacred to more than one sect, and some, such as Puri, Mathura and Ujjain, are patronised by almost all sections of Hindu society. All pilgrims bathe effectively in the same waters, and thus social boundaries may appear temporarily to be ignored or devalued. Yet these claims also force us to consider an issue that still retains huge importance in Indian society, and moreover one which appears to embody the very essence of division and hierarchy: caste.

Textual justifications for caste are present in Vedic texts which divide society up into four classes, or *varnas*. In a hymn from around 1000 BC, for instance, each of the four *varnas* emerges from a part of the body of a primeval man who is dismembered by the gods at the beginning of time:

The Brahman was his mouth,
of his arms was made the warrior,
his thighs became the Vaishya,
of his feet the Shudra was born.

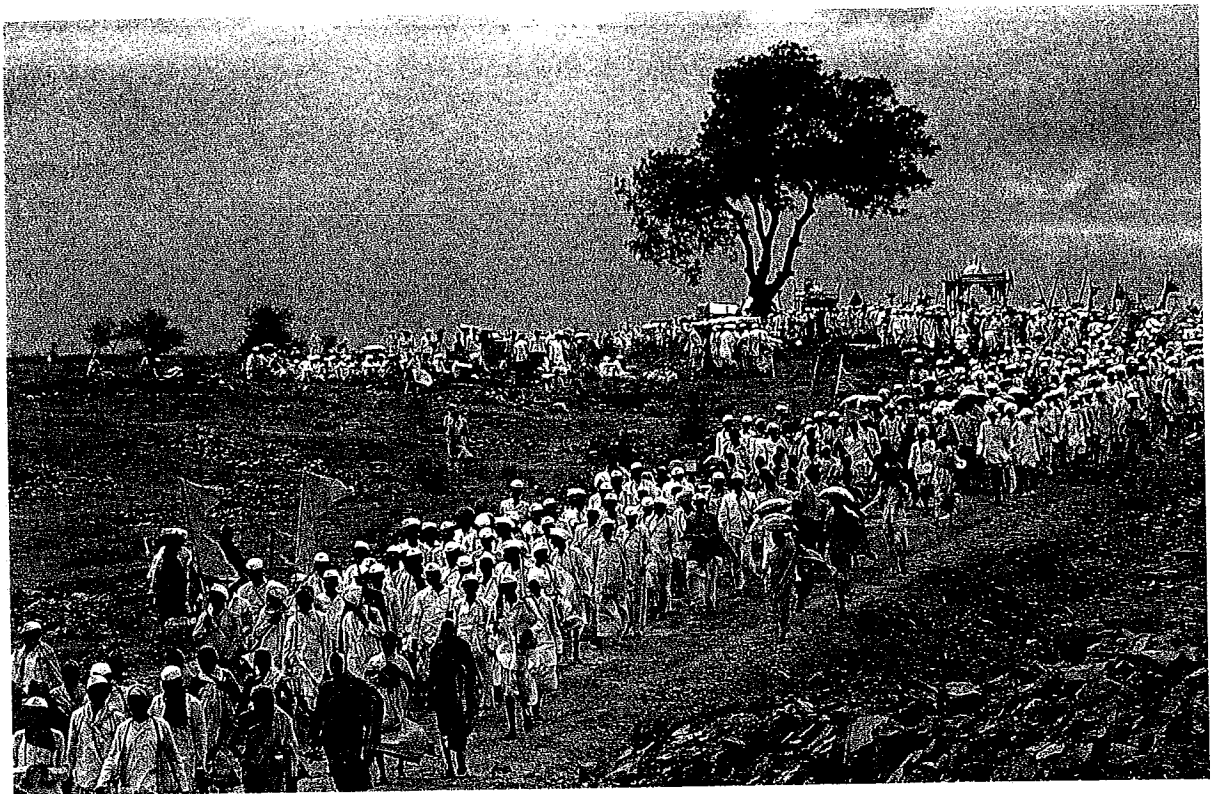
This hierarchy became ratified in legal texts written by priests (of the highest *varna*), so that each class came to be seen as performing a different role according to its ordained duty: the Brahmin to study, the warrior to protect the people, the Vaishya to till the earth and trade, and the Shudra to serve the three other classes. Below such groups came the 'untouchables', those considered so low that they did not properly merit a *varna* status. Such a straightforward division is in practice full of ambiguities over the precise relationships between caste groups within the *varna* system, between religious status and daily occupation, and between caste and sub-caste affiliation. Yet its influence, although transformed and increasingly challenged, prevails in India. It is more than just a set of beliefs, since it recommends practices and attitudes in an idiom of purity and pollution that serves to separate groups of people through taboos on marriage, eating together and even touch. What then, does this system imply for the practice of pilgrimage?

Anti-consumption,
in part but also
a solidification
of communities in
another sense

At many sites, regional and caste structures do in fact retain control of the pilgrim's actions. *Pandas* or *purohits* – guides who issue yearly manuals stating auspicious times for pilgrims to worship at their sanctuary and who enter their names in ledgers – also typically provide food, lodging and ritual instruction according to the custom of the pilgrim's land. Sometimes, they even go on 'inverted pilgrimages' to the homes of pilgrims who have become regular patrons, bringing sacred water and *prasad* from holy sites. Agents of guides may meet pilgrims at bus or train stations, enquire about their place of origin and caste status, and then assign them to appropriate guides. Like the Turkish visitors to Mecca, Hindu pilgrims may remain for the most part culturally cocooned amongst their own people, and therefore also within the safety of their own assumptions.

Despite current, explicitly secular, legislation which bans such discrimination, deep-rooted concerns over the polluting touch of lower castes is still reflected in the exclusion of those classified as 'untouchables' from some Hindu shrines. Sacred space can thus become an arena for conflicting views on the meaning of caste. At Benares the golden temple of Vishwanath, rebuilt by the wife of the Rajah of Indore in 1777, is a place visited by almost all pilgrims, not least because of the presence of a central image of Shiva in the form of a *linga*. Since 1954, even untouchables have been admitted to this sanctuary, and as a result a second Vishwanath temple has been constructed in protest at their presence. At yet another Vishwanath temple, however, at Benares Hindu University, not only untouchables but also non-Hindus are admitted.

If guides and guardians of temples play their part in maintaining social



divisions between pilgrims at sites, these can also be all too evident during the journey itself. Irawati Karve, a former sociology and anthropology professor at the University of Poona, reports on a fifteen-day procession from Alandi in Poona to Pandharpur in Sholapur district. This is a colourful occasion, when people follow the annual march of images of saints, and spend much of their time walking and singing together. In the vanguard of the group walk the untouchables, followed respectively by horses, flag wavers, wagons with the chief image, and then the rest of the group of pilgrims. Karve, trained in an academic tradition whose values clash with these assumptions of division, feels impelled to ask:⁵¹

All of the people were clean, and ate their food only after taking a bath. Then why this separateness? Was all this walking together, singing together, and reciting the poetry of the saints together directed only towards union in the other world while retaining separateness in this world?

JAIN AND SIKH PILGRIMAGE

The history of Hinduism in India has been marked by periods of both decline and revival. Perhaps the greatest challenge to its dominance came from the emergence and spread of Buddhism in the latter half of the first millennium BC. Much later, Muslim and Christian invaders were prompted by military and political ambitions as much as by the desire to spread their own version of spiritual enlightenment. Two further religious impulses, created out of the desire for reform and renewal, con-

57 Varkaris from Maharashtra on their annual fortnight-long pilgrimage to Pandharpur. During this pilgrimage devotees march on foot singing hymns in praise of Lord Vithoba, an incarnation of Krishna.

tinue to exercise considerable influence in India: Jainism and Sikhism. Their religious customs in general, as well as their pilgrimage practices in particular, are related to those of Hinduism in complex but significant ways.

The emergence of Jainism in the sixth century BC was roughly contemporaneous with that of Buddhism. Like the Buddha, its 'founder'⁵² Mahavira (the 'Great Hero') made converts among members of the royal houses. However, like Buddhism Jainism was a religion originally designed to be open to all, irrespective of hereditary status, even if in practice it has adopted features of the caste system. However, while the Buddha chose the 'middle way', Mahavira adopted a form of extreme asceticism as the proper pathway to enlightenment. He spent much of his life as a wandering teacher, revered by disciples, and was the last of the Jain *tirthankaras* ('ford-builders'). This term refers to twenty-four beings who have attained enlightenment and perfect bliss, removed from the cycle of reincarnation.⁵³ They are also referred to as *jinās* or 'conquerors' of the passions.

The religion enjoyed tolerance and patronage from political rulers up until the twelfth or thirteenth centuries in north India and one of the main areas where Jainism is still practised today is in Gujarat. Later its adherents suffered persecution under Hindu revivalism and Muslim expansion, although unlike Buddhism it was never totally forced out of India. One possible reason for its survival was its ability to 'Hinduise' by adopting the major life-cycle rituals of the dominant religion.⁵⁴ Nowadays, although Jains only number around 3.5 million people, concentrated in the west and south-west of India, they exercise much influence through their success in commercial life.

Jainism is not a religion of *the* book, but incorporates a large textual corpus covering doctrines, mathematics, poetry and astronomy. Its texts ideally advocate the single-minded pursuit of self-purification through austerity and fasting. In this way, negative *karma* accumulated in previous births can be dissipated. The notion of complete non-violence, or *ahimsa* is extremely important, since avoiding harm to the smallest living thing can be seen as an aspect of non-attachment in the world. Jains say that the air, water and earth are occupied by countless souls, and some adherents may even put cloths or masks over their mouths in order not to harm these invisible organisms.

Although some sects reject the use of images, many Jains engage in daily *pūjas* in temples to *murtis* – carved stone representatives of the enlightened beings, *tirthankaras*, who are seated in eternal meditation. Ritual practice is often similar in form to Hindu worship, also incorporating *darshan* and circumambulation. However, Jains are wary of suggestions that a 'real' presence may dwell in the images. Typically, theologians argue that offerings apparently made to an image are in fact made to the abstract virtues of enlightenment, liberation and dispassion that it symbolises.⁵⁵ The enlightened beings themselves are perceived as being remote, at the top of the universe, and thus (unlike in popular Hinduism) not interacting with or choosing to bless their 'worshippers'.

Two basic forms of adherence are available. Exemplary individuals, or

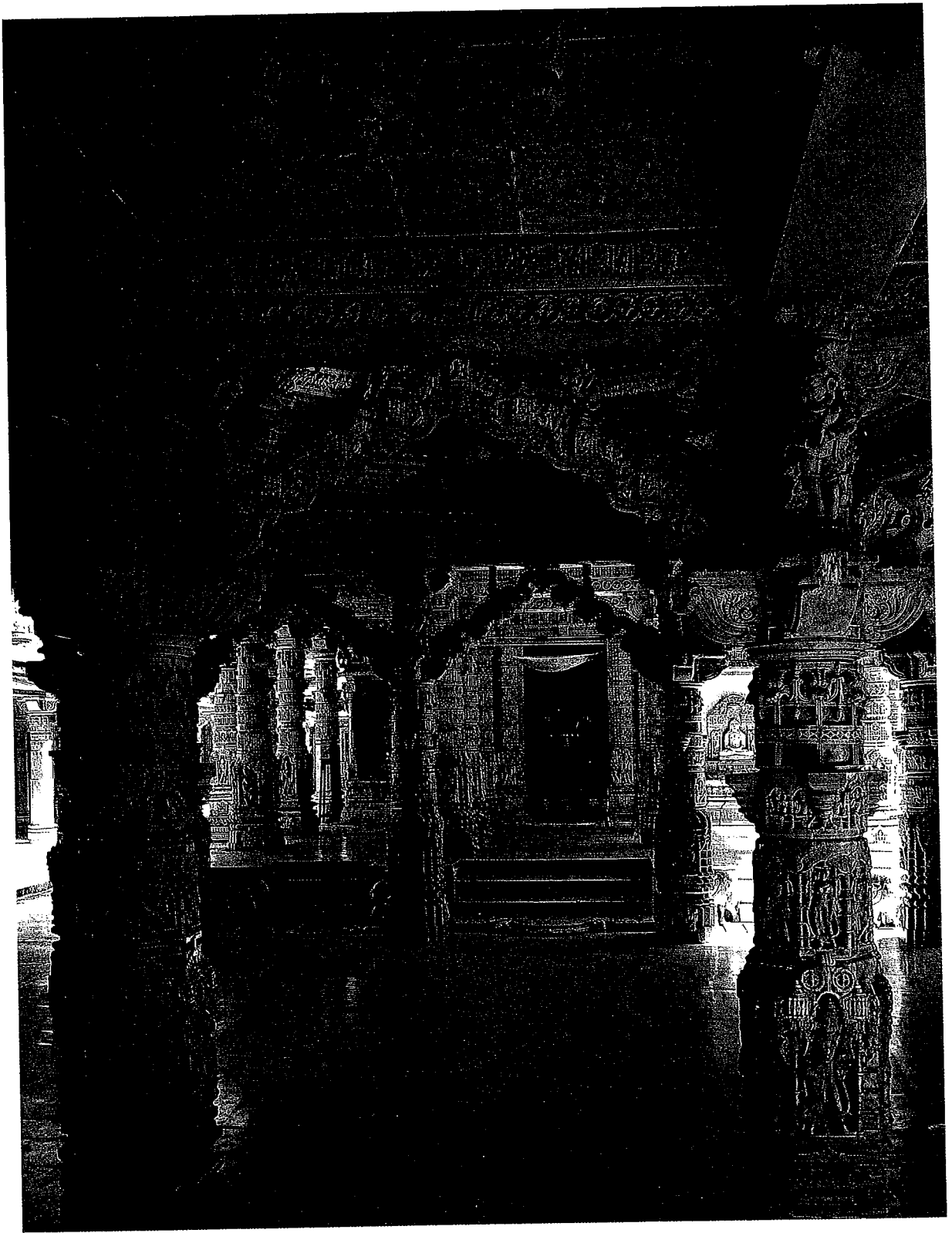
munis, follow the supreme model of non-attachment of the *tirthankaras*. Many such renouncers are organised into single-sex travelling groups which make their way between villages and towns, wearing simple white robes, carrying begging bowls and preaching the importance of non-attachment to the material world. They walk barefoot, and carry long brushes which they use to sweep insects away from their path, lest they tread on them. Lay people follow a code of practice that is rather less rigorous, and therefore further from the path of true asceticism. However, they support and may even worship living renouncers, who can be seen as forms of divinity.

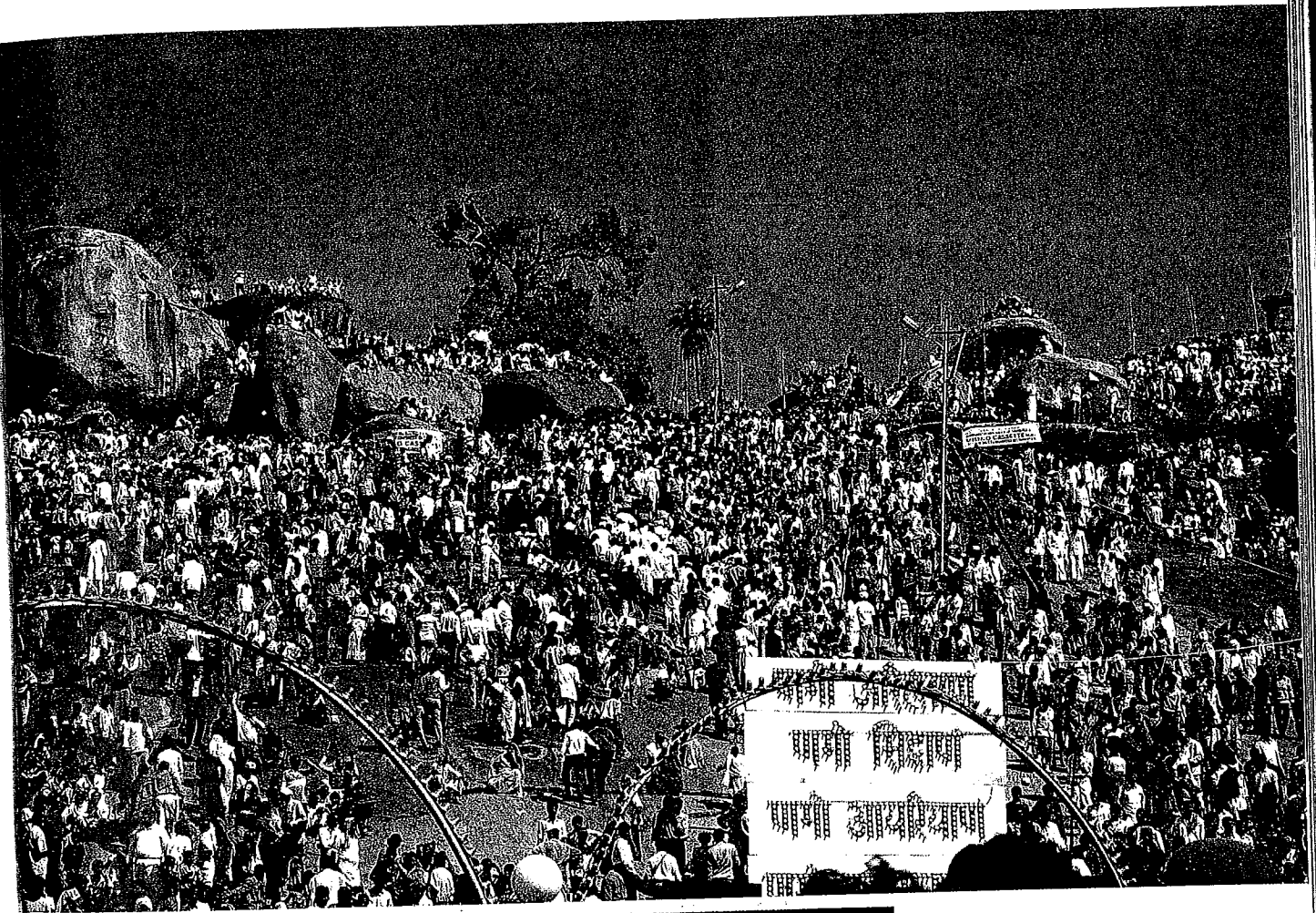
Ironically, lay Jains are well known for creating extremely successful business communities. The accumulation of wealth is regarded as the proper result of honest living, but a lack of attachment to such wealth is said to be demonstrated by donations to temples and religious ceremonies. Indeed, providing money for religious purposes as well as charitable organisations such as colleges, schools and hospitals, is the most meritorious form of giving and is practised on a large scale by men.

Some Jains spend much time in buses and trains, or walking, on pilgrimages to such holy sites as Mount Abu in Rajasthan or Parasnath in Bihar. A leaflet provided by the Department of Tourism at Bangalore describes 'The Jain Circuit', a suggested route incorporating all the important Jain centres in Karnataka (a state closely associated with the religion) and gives potential visitors information on both air and road connections to the sites. Such journeys to holy sites dispersed around the country can complement widespread travel for commercial purposes, and many of the important temple sites provide venues for annual fairs, to which non-Jains, including tribal peoples, are invited. Temples may gain fame and prove attractive to visitors for their architectural merit, association with a particular *tirthankara* or reputation for miraculous events. Many families make at least annual visits to some particular *tirtha* having made a vow to do so in return for a piece of good fortune granted by divine favour. Journeys from home are also invariably accompanied by visits to local Jain shrines and any ascetics who may be present nearby.

A single individual may also choose to bear all the expenses of a communal pilgrimage, and it may be assumed that this helps to prevent *parigraha* – the sin of taking satisfaction in possessions – since it involves spending large sums of money. However, sponsors of such pilgrimages and other virtuous enterprises inevitably also gain economic as well as moral status. A sound financial reputation is earned by demonstrating an ability to spend large sums of money, so that donations are both expressions of piety and also, in effect, self-advertisements.

The importance of gift-giving for religious purposes can, of course, lead to situations of competition within or between sects of Jains. One scholar has described a struggle between the Digambara ('sky-clothed', i.e. ideally naked) and Svetambara (white-clothed, i.e. white-robed) sects over the local pilgrimage site of Bahubali Hill in Kolhapur district, southern Maharashtra.⁵⁶ This was expressed in a conflict over the sacred space which involved considerable conspicuous consumption. At one point, for instance, the Svetambara constructed a temple next door to that





58 OPPOSITE Rajasthan, India. Interior of the Jain Dilwara Temple on Mount Abu, 11th century and later.

59 ABOVE Shravanabelagola, India, December 1993, Jain pilgrims at the Mahamastakabhishekha, or head-anointing ceremony, performed every 12 years to the statue of Gomateshvara, which stands at the peak of the Indragiri hill.

60 LEFT Jain pilgrims pouring milk over the feet of the Gomateshvara statue (not during the festival).

of the Digambara: the new temple was designed to be just slightly more opulent than its rival.

A sense of the immediate significance of Jain pilgrimage festivals is provided by two recent newspaper articles. The first, from the *Deccan Herald* of 20 December 1993, describes the special honouring of the 58-foot (17.7 m) figure (billed as the world's tallest monolithic statue) of Gomateshvara at Shravanabelagola, Karnataka, which takes place every twelve to fourteen years. Thousands of pilgrims from around the country and abroad come to honour the statue, including not only *munis* but also local and national politicians. The presence of numerous journalists is also noted, including television reporters from the BBC, CNN, France and Japan, as is the decision of the state government to position over 200 closed-circuit televisions near the event to enable devotees to have as good a view of the proceedings as possible. A central part of the ritual is the bathing of the statue with offerings, including water, sugar-cane juice, milk and sandalwood. While the assembled dignitaries are given the opportunity of showering flowers and water on the head of the Gomateshvara, it is also reported that:

Mr. Sudhir Jain, a Delhi businessman, . . . bought the *pratama kalasha* [pot offering] for Rs. 15 lakh at the auction held here on Saturday. He was given the privilege of pouring holy water on the statue first.

By publicly dowsing the statue with holy water, the Delhi businessman proclaims not only his devotion but also his ability to amass the financial resources necessary to win an auction.

The tenor of the second article, describing the same event and published in the *Hindu* of 2 January 1994, is rather different. Entitled 'Of Kalashas and Karma', it focuses on Jain teachings and the figure of Gomateshvara himself. Thus:

He could have become the ruler of Ayodhya but instead chose to become an ascetic, spreading the message of peace and disarmament. . . . On December 6 it seemed so right somehow, to be sitting on the newly erected scaffolding, staring into the supremely calm face of the man-who-could-have-been-king of Ayodhya. In other parts of the country, trains were being blown up and buses destroyed. But, here . . . there was a feeling of peace.

Here, the pilgrimage festival is interpreted as a supreme example of *ahimsa* – non-violence – teaching the non-violent Jain way of life to the varied groups of people, including ascetics, VIPs and even tourists. The reference to Ayodhya has extra, ironic significance in that it calls to mind a holy city notorious for violence between Hindus and Muslims, and we are reminded in this context that the message of renunciation has significance not only for Jains but for the world as a whole in its advocacy of 'peace, hope and harmony'. Yet, both articles illustrate the amplification of the significance of pilgrimage through the vicarious participation provided by the media. A picture in the *Hindu* not only shows pilgrims happily anointing the head of Gomateshvara with water, but also a cameraman recording the event for others, far from the site itself, to witness.

Sikhism's accredited founder, Guru Nanak, was born at Talwandi in the Punjab in 1469.⁵⁷ He is seen as the first Sikh or 'disciple' of truth.

Although he was probably brought up in an orthodox Kshatriya family, Nanak is said to have rejected this background, embarking instead on a religious quest to the main centres of Hinduism and Islam. Nanak concluded that God was neither specifically Hindu nor Muslim, and rejected exclusivism in religion. He also rejected the caste system in principle (even if Sikh practice has contradicted this injunction), stating that moral character was more important than birth. Indeed, a Sikh proverb states that a person should be a Brahmin in piety, a Kshatriya in defence of truth and the oppressed, a Vaishya in business acumen and hard work, and a Shudra in serving fellow human beings. One scholar has also suggested that some of the symbols now seen as characteristic of Sikh identity were originally developed in opposition to the Hindu ideals of renunciation: the comb and the turban, for instance, signify the ordering of hair as opposed to the conscious disorder 'cultivated' by the renouncer.⁵⁸

A story is recounted of a visit paid by Guru Nanak to the Jagannatha pilgrimage site at Puri. When the Hindu priests there performed the evening lamp worship of *aarti* (*arati*), they demanded to know why he had not stood up during the *puja*. Nanak is said to have replied:⁵⁹

I was performing aarti before the Lord of the Universe . . . and the whole of creation, the whole firmament joined me. Your hearts and minds, alone, were turned against it. I worshipped the supreme light. You worshipped a stone image. I contemplated the eternal word. . . . You chanted mantras without understanding them. My mind was enchanted by the unstruck music and the universe and God's presence in it. Yours was deluded by the noise of temple bells, feigned ecstasy of the dancers and the smell of incense.

Nanak did not necessarily wish to condemn Hinduism outright. Indeed, Sikhism retains notions of transmigration and liberation adapted from the earlier religion. However, he was opposed to hypocrisy and empty formalism in religion, and mistrustful of the use of images in worship. His mistrust of pilgrimage may also have been an indication of the life-affirming as opposed to life-renouncing tendencies evident in Sikh doctrine. As part of his attempt to challenge the monopoly of Brahmin priests in spiritual matters, he produced his own hymns and stressed the need for right conduct and devotion to a personal God as opposed to participation in rituals. Liberation could only be achieved by a form of interior spirituality, involving meditation on *Akal Purakh*, the 'Timeless Being'. The view that divinity could descend to the world in the specific form of an avatar was also denied, since divinity could be seen as pervading all forms. After Nanak's death in 1539 or 1540, a Sikh community consolidated itself in the Punjab and north-west India, benefiting from the rich agricultural land of the area. The religion now has some 13 million adherents, divided to some extent by geography, ethnicity, social hierarchy and ritual practices.⁶⁰

Nanak remains the focus of much devotion from Sikhs, but he was in fact followed by nine living successors, making ten Gurus in all. Teaching in the vernacular rather than Sanskrit, they helped develop a religious community conscious of its distinctiveness and keen to adapt Hindu



61 Sikh pilgrim bathing in the lake at the shrine of Hemkund Sahib in the Bhyundar Valley, high in the Himalayas. Sikhs believe the site indicates the spot where Guru Gobind Singh meditated at God's feet.

festive occasions for its own purposes. Sikh identity and indeed militancy was also strengthened by the need to resist increasing Mughal persecution throughout the seventeenth century, and later on the threat posed by Afghan invaders. For part of the nineteenth century, the enemy was to be the British who, in 1849, took the Punjab following the bloody Anglo-Sikh war.

The line of living Gurus was ended by a conscious decision of the tenth guru, Gobind Singh. After his death in 1708 succession was invested in both the community of Sikhs and a collection of the teachings of the Gurus called the *Guru Granth Sahib* or the *Adi Granth* ('First Collection'). The latter has become a sacred text of great symbolic significance and, in theory, the only true object of veneration. The mere presence of it in any building transforms that space into a *gurdwara* or place of worship (literally, 'gateway to a guru' or preceptor).⁶¹

Nanak himself, an opponent of outward conventions including ritualism and the cultivation of austerity, did not approve of pilgrimage. In his *Japji*, or book of psalms, he stated: 'One gains but a seed's weight of merit/ Through pilgrimages, austerities. . . .' On a visit to Mecca, he is reputed to have made pilgrims there recognise that 'God's house is everywhere and not only in the direction of *Kaaba*'.⁶² Yet his views in this regard have certainly not been adopted by his successors, even if journeys to rivers are generally proscribed. Pilgrimages are practised today, frequently cross-



ing political boundaries such as that between India and Pakistan, and gatherings help to celebrate significant events in Sikh history. An outline of the religion published in India lists ten 'historic shrines of Sikhs in Delhi', with the implication that these are places which should attract pilgrims.⁶³ The third Guru, Amar Das, even appealed successfully to the Mughal emperor against the tax imposed on Hardwar, one of the most important north Indian pilgrimage centres. He also appears to have made his own village, Goindwal, a pilgrimage destination. A pilgrimage that has grown in the twentieth century is that to Hemkund Sahib, a lake at 16,000 feet (almost 5,000 m), surrounded by a number of peaks in the Garhwal Himalayas near Badrinath.⁶⁴ The tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, is said to have performed penance on the mountain, and to have become blended thereby with God. Sikhs have also been known to visit Hindu and other sacred centres, as well as their own. While worshippers seek divine blessing in a way similar to Hindu devotees, they reject (at least officially) the characteristically Hindu seeking of material blessings from lower deities.⁶⁵

The most important sacred centre is at Amritsar ('tank of nectar'). The fourth Guru, Ram Das, excavated the pool there in the sixteenth century, and his son later built the Darbar Sahib, a place of worship and pilgrimage on the site which now contains the famous Golden Temple (so called because of the gold-plate covering of its dome) and the original copy of

62 The holiest of Sikh shrines, the Golden Temple at Amritsar, built in the 16th century by Guru Arjan, the fifth of the ten Sikh Gurus. Also called Harmandir, or Temple of God, it was constructed in the middle of the sacred waters of Amritsar.

the *Granth Sahib*. The settlement grew in prosperity, not least because it was situated near the Delhi-Kabul trade routes, and continued to be regarded as a holy city even though at some points in the eighteenth century Sikhs were forbidden entry on pain of death. Amritsar has thus retained its importance as a sacred centre and focal point of identity for an often beleaguered religious group that has had violent encounters with Hindu, Muslim and British political authorities.

The temple complex itself occupies some 30 acres (12 ha) in the centre of the town, and is conspicuously without images. The fact that the main temple has a doorway on each of its four sides indicates the notion that the faith is open to all. In addition, a walkway allows pilgrims to complete a ritual of circumambulation. On some occasions worship is combined with political activity, as at the time of Baisakhi (New Year's Day in the Punjab, 13 April). It has been the custom for devout Sikhs to come on this day to the Golden Temple and bathe in the pool. In the afternoon, political rallies are sometimes held, and even a large fair to the east of the town.

Sikh forms of fundamentalism and increased investment of authority in sacred scripture have emerged since the late nineteenth century, a time of perceived threat to the Sikhs from both Christian missions and Hindu propaganda.⁶⁶ Religio-political movements developed which attempted to reinforce a specific Sikh identity, separate in cultural terms from surrounding Hindu society. Thus a specifically Sikh form of sacred space was created; Punjabi was cultivated as a sacred language, and the Golden Temple was emphasised as a visual means of mobilising the community. At this time, also, the *Khalsa* (Sikh Order) tradition was promoted as a pan-Sikh means of preserving the community of faith, incorporating the wearing of a comb, a particular form of underwear, a sword and a wristband, as well as the practice of not cutting the hair.⁶⁷

While the celebration of martyrdom has long been a part of the Sikh religious tradition, it has been reinforced in the past two centuries as the sense of a distinct Sikh religious and cultural identity has also developed. Demands – often violent – for the creation of a separate Sikh state have grown throughout this century, and the control of Amritsar has proved a powerful symbol of a wider conflict over the autonomy of members of the religion. For the scholar of Sikhism T. N. Madan, the contemporary situation of the Sikhs in India is rendered still more ambivalent by the state's apparently neutral recognition of its citizens' right to hold diverse religious beliefs alongside the desire of some Sikhs to choose to combine politics and religion in the conduct of community life.⁶⁸ Most recently, the Golden Temple complex has been at the centre of a bloody conflict between Sikh separatists and the Indian government. In June 1984, the government ordered units of its army, including Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, to storm the precincts of the temple, causing extensive damage to the buildings and resulting in the killing of over 1,000 people, including pilgrims.⁶⁹ Later that year, the event took on national and world-wide significance, as it provided a motive for the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

This chapter on religious traditions in India has concentrated on

pilgrimage within a single, albeit vast, subcontinent. Yet, above all, it has emphasised that the study of the dominant religious tradition – Hinduism – and its pilgrimage practices should make us aware of the dangers of treating any religious system as a static or homogeneous entity. Through time, Hinduism has experienced the effects of numerous religious, cultural and military impulses – Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Muslim, Christian, and British. Through space, it can be experienced via sacrifices at a local, village, goddess shrine, or a sanctifying bathe in the Ganges at a 'pan-Indian' site like Benares.

If a *tirtha* represents a place of safe crossing between the divine and earthly worlds, the number and variety of such *tirthas* in India has allowed the pathways of pilgrims to create a sacred geography of manifold diversity. Pilgrims are given the opportunity not only to meet distinct forms of the divine, located in specific parts of the country, but also to meet a particular divine figure in a variety of sacred places. This sense of fragmentation is embodied even in a single site such as Benares. There are many ways in which to trace a sacred route through the city, just as the city itself is 'reproduced' in minor versions throughout India. Benares is simultaneously a sacred centre but also 'decentred', rendered accessible in other parts of the continent's sacred geography.

While Hinduism has often been characterised as containing both a this-worldly aspect, embodied in the life of the householder, and an other-worldly aspect, represented by the permanent ascetic, the practice of pilgrimage mediates between these two tendencies by permitting a temporary renunciation of the world.⁷⁰ Furthermore, apart from its ability to create and sometimes accommodate considerable internal diversity, Hinduism's flexibility has allowed it to assimilate as well as influence the practices of other faiths.

We have also seen how other religions have merged in India which have parallels with the dominant tradition but which are also formed partially out of opposition to it. If Sikhism today avoids the icon-worship of Hinduism by making a text the ultimate source of veneration, Jains either reject images outright or deny that they contain the real presence of a deity. Sikhism scorns the virtues of permanent renunciation, just as its mistrust of idols and minor deities removes the possibility of pilgrimage to an endlessly diffuse divine hierarchy (even if sites associated with the various Gurus provide a variegated religious landscape). Recent events at the Golden Temple have emphasised how the demarcation of a sacred space, ideally kept pure from other religious impulses, can be made central to the articulation of a sense of communal identity, but also a source of tragic conflict as the boundaries of both place and community appear to be put under threat.