

The descriptions of *Tirthas* in some Early North Indian Texts

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Abstract

Places proclaimed as tirthas include crossroads, river-crossings, banks of rivers, hermitages in forests, mountain-passes and important towns. The mode of such proclamation, sometimes made by gods and sometimes by godmen, is the fabrication of a new mythology which sanctifies the tirtha by associating it with the 'sacred', besides publicizing the performance of dana rituals at proclaimed tirthas as acts of unparalleled religious merit. It has been argued that a 'myth' is the ideological projection of a ritual, and the purpose of such projections is providing a foundation for the ritual.¹ In the present context, the new ritual consists in undertaking a pilgrimage and giving gifts at the tirthas in favor of the brahmana ministrants living there. The ideological foundation for such a practice was provided by the Puranic mythological tales which captured the imagination of credulous clients.²

Keywords: tirtha, pitrs, mukti, vrata

In Sanskrit and related languages, the central term for pilgrimage places is *tirtha*, a crossing place or a ford where one leaves the mundane world and crosses over into a more powerful or spiritual location.³ The term already points to the centrality of water, rivers, and bathing in Hinduism. It is possible that this centrality was already present in the ancient Indus Valley Civilization, in which bathing seems to have been of central ritual importance. The Indus River itself is highly praised in the Vedas (where it is called the Sindhu), as are seven other "mother-rivers," originally located in Punjab in the northwest of India. The practice of Hindu pilgrimage always involved bathing, so that the pilgrim is purified before entering the sacred place or approaching the divinities there. From ancient times until the present, rivers have been prominent pilgrimage places, along with numerous temples and other religious places along their banks.⁴

Over the time, Hindus have developed an enormous number of pilgrimage places,

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