Pilgrimage as Imagined Site: A study of Prayag Tirtha

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Introduction

Human beings have always tried to find meaning in their surroundings. For a religious person, nature is never just natural; it is imbued with religious value (Eliade, 1959: 116). The word for pilgrimage is *tirtha* and it means a ford or crossing. Going from one place to another via this crossing has a symbolic meaning; it signifies the passing from a human to a trans-human plane. For Eck (1983: 34), *tirtha* is a place where one crosses over the river of *samsara* - this repeated cycle of birth and death - to attain a state of liberation. Many of the *tirthas* were places which were indeed a ford, i.e. where a river could be crossed safely. The significance of a certain place can make it a sacred site and the notion of pilgrimage is related to this idea. ‘Sacred’ is the one aspect which separates a space from all other spaces; a break from the otherwise homogenous plane.

It can be said that people do not only want to live in a sacred world, they also want to be part and parcel of it. Hence, the desire to visit where a sacred order exists, where they can ‘live in a pure and holy cosmos’ as Eliade describes it.

Key Words: Prayag, Allahabad, Kumbh Mela, Sangam
In all probability, the concept of tirtha grew from the Vedic reverence of rivers. The river hymn (nadistuti) of the Rig Veda indicates this reverence.\(^1\) Bathing in a river or lake is not to be interpreted merely as a ceremony of purification; it has a much deeper significance (Bharadwaj, 1973:149). A tirtha can cleanse moral impurity; hence, it is accorded an important place in Hindu tradition. The cleansing of the impure body and moral impurity are closely related. When a tirtha is associated with water, bathing becomes an important ritual, for it is symbolic of cleansing of the soul. The purification of paap (impurity/sin) by using water combines the physical experience of the cleansing property of water with the salvific property of sacred water (Bharadwaj, 1973:82). Blending both physical and moral purification is evident from this verse from Varahpuran:

He who goes to Mathura on the Astami day and spends the night as celibate, cleans teeth in the morning, washes clothes and takes a bath, circumambulates there in silence, gets all his sins removed (Varahpuran, 158.37-38).

The Matsyapuran similarly states that there can be no purity of mind without taking a sacred bath (Matsyapuran, 102.1).

The basis of pilgrimage is centred on belief in the purification of the soul\(^2\) and the solution to problems of everyday life. Most Hindu pilgrims seek to transcend the mundane and express their experiences in a spiritual manner, perhaps in dialogue with their deity or ‘greater self’. As the Kasyatraya Charitra indicates, pilgrimage entails visiting sacred centres (darshan - which is seeking an auspicious sight of a sacred shrine), fulfilling vows (vrata), taking ritual baths in the Ganges (Ganga-snan) and other rivers, and performing specific rituals at sacred sites (e.g. shraddh or faithful offerings to departed kin) (Yaang, 1998:113).

Most Hindu pilgrimages are performed on auspicious occasions (shubh kal) or at sacred times that are often defined in terms of astronomical-astrological correspondences, which underpin their associated qualities of sacredness (pavitrika) and merit-giving capacity (punya-phala) (Singh, 2013:60). It is believed that on these occasions the spiritual benefits of a particular tirtha are most powerful. For instance, Ashtami is the time prescribed for bathing at Mathura in order to reap religious merit (Varahpuran, 158.37-38). Similar beliefs lead to pilgrimages such as the Kumbha Mela (at Prayag in the month of Magh) or the Panchakraoshi Yatra (at Varanasi during Malmas). According to Hindu tradition, each month has its own merit for religious activities, but some months, as Varahpuran says, grant more merit, such as Ashvina, Kartika and Marghashirsha. It is important to understand here that sacred time does not recreate itself; it is only through the activity of the believers and the religious community that it is re-enacted. It is through the festivals, prayers or pilgrimages that sacred time becomes institutionalised.

According to Singh, sacred places are consecrated or illuminated by faith, and are the subject of propitious visits because of their religious content. These places are considered holy, and their holiness is a result of an event that took place, or:

because they comprise a place of worship for hosting sacred events there or for guarding sacred relics or to receive blissful healing (Varahpuran: 80).

When the sentiment has a collective origin it defies critical and rational examination. The pressure exerted by the group on each of its members does not permit individuals to judge freely the notions which society itself has constructed and in which it has placed something of its personality. Naturally, the quality of a sacred place depends on the human context that has been shaped by it, with respect to memories, experiences, and expectations (Varahpuran, 87).

Such constructs are sacred for individuals. The validity of the beliefs is never questioned because the society as a whole celebrates them. Thus, the ‘collective beliefs replace individual concerns’ (Pickering, 1984:333). The sacred texts vividly mythologise and eulogise the manifested power of the place. Because they exude potent meanings of significance for worshippers, these places exert a devotional magnetism over pilgrims; (Singh, 2013:102). The Puranic epics, for example, project value-laden images and eulogise the ‘sacredscapes’ by tracing mythological narratives through these landscapes. Singh (2013:102) quotes Heidegger saying that such sacred sites reflect ‘being in place’. This is to say that the spirit of a place narrated in mythology is reflected in the spirituality manifested there. In the process of sacralisation, the place transcends its geographical space. In due course the power inherent there amplifies horizontally, attracting people from far off places.

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1. Rig Veda, X.75.5, as quoted in Kalyana, Tirthanka, p.620
2. The moral impurity disappears the moment one enters Prayag and even the perpetrators of evil deeds attain salvific liberation (Matsyapuran 104.12-13)
Prayag Embedded in Sacred Space and Sacred Time

For a religious person the entire cosmos is a living entity expressing something that transcends it. The sky reveals an infinite distance, and with it, the transcendence of a deity (Eliade, 1959:117). At Allahabad, the confluence of two rivers looks magnificent, and the belief that amrit (the nectar of immortality) had fallen here evokes both mystery and awe, for it seems to be from an invisible divine source. The sacred always manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from natural realities (Eliade, 1959:10); it is of a trans-human nature. The believers, hence, want to be a part of this sacred dimension, and participate in this reality and its divine power. For them the cosmos ‘lives and speaks’ and it is through the sacred spaces that they connect to God, as the gods created it (Eck, 1983:165).

Prayag [3] located on the Gangetic plains, is one of the most famous sacred places of India. The great site of the meeting of rivers in north India is known as the Sangam, the confluence of the three rivers Ganga and Yamuna, and the mythical (invisible) Saraswati, at Prayag, an ancient city on the site of modern Allahabad (Eck, 2012:145). This confluence seems to be referred to in one of the verses of the Rig Veda, which says,

Those who bathe at the place where the two rivers, white and dark, flow together, rise up to heaven (Rig Veda X.75 (khila, supplementary verse)).

Allahabad has become a centre of faith and devotion, where people hope to find liberation (Matsyapurupan, 104.2). To go to Prayag is considered to be a merit-giving act (Ibid, 102.25). The Purans proclaim that it is the sacred space of Prajapati; those who bathe here go to heaven and those who die here are not born again (Skandpuran, IV.7.47; Koormpuran, I.34.20; Matsyapurpan, 103.5). This is indicative of the religious significance of Prayag. Padmapuran says that,

as the sun is amidst the planets and the moon is amidst the asterisms, so is Prayag the foremost sacred place in the galaxy of tirthas (Padmapuran, VI.24.3-4a).

The Matsyapurpan mentions that,

As Brahma is worshipped in all the beings, so Prayag is adored by the learned in all the worlds. Prayag is indeed to be propitiated as the king of all tirthas. Among many rivers and their confluences, Triveni holds a special place for the Hindus. The confluence of the two sacred river streams forms a triangular curvature of religious significance for those who follow Sanatan Dharma (Narain and Narain, 2010:27).

The triangular area at each of these is known as Sangam. The Sangam at Allahabad holds the greatest importance and attracts the largest gathering in the world during the Kumbh Mela.
Any pilgrim who arrives at Prayag offers flowers on arrival, which is followed by certain observances, mainly three - shaving, bathing and giving gifts. The ritual of shaving is followed by those who arrive from outside and the local inhabitants need not observe it. Prayag as a pilgrimage site offers diversity in beliefs and practices when compared to other sacred sites in matters of conducting rituals.

During the period of Kumbh Mela many rituals are performed at Prayag. A total of 26 types of rituals are considered to be essential (Ramananda, 2013:75). The most auspicious rituals (sanskaar) at Kumbh Mela are

- mundan (shaving the head),
- snan (bathing in sacred waters),
- tarpas (offering food to ancestors), and
- daan (giving gifts as acts of charity).

The most common daan made by the pilgrim is gau-daan (gifting of cow). The cow helps the soul to cross the river of punishment called Baitarni after death, and hence, gau-daan is important (Narain and Narain, 2010:23).

For a religious person, just like space, time, too, is not homogenous. Time consists of certain periods which are regarded as sacred. Religious culture is preserved in sacred time. It is through the activity carried out during a sacred time that religious culture is recreated or transferred. Therefore, rituals depend on sacred time. For example, Pitr Paksha or Shraadh is a time dedicated to honour ancestors. It’s always during Pitr Paksha that devout Hindus make offerings to their ancestors.

These intervals of time are reversible, or in other words, it is the past which is actualised in the present.

Every religious festival, any liturgical time, represents the reactualisation of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past (Eliade, 1959:69).

Hence, for a religious person time is also circular, and as sacred time it is reversible and recoverable. With each periodical gathering at Allahabad, participants experience the same sacred time.

. . . the same that had been manifested in the festival of the previous year, or in the festival of a century earlier (Eliade, 1959:69).

The religious person, therefore, assumes a transcendent form, and taking a dip in the Ganges at the sacred time reflects a desire to be a part of trans-human plane. Reintegrating with the sacred time makes one a contemporary of the divine beings, even if they are invisible.

It is important to understand that this sacred time is nothing but the time associated with a myth. It is the myth that explains the factor behind the gathering at Allahabad at a specific time. Myth reveals the way in which reality came into existence. Thus, it can be said that an attempt to be in the divine presence and reactualising with the mythical time is reactualised by bathing at the Sangam during a sacred time. In a gathering like this the sins and faults of the individual and even that of the community are believed to be annulled, consumed as by fire (Eliade, 1959: 78).

It is also necessary here to appreciate that it is the ‘original time’ or the ‘festival time’ during which bathing has significance. People bath in the Ganges at other periods but it is not with the same religious intent. It is precisely the reintegrating of this original sacred time that differentiates a person’s behaviour during a festival from his or her behaviour after it (Eliade, 1959:85).

Pilgrimage: A sacred construct

The religious traditions of Hindus are often portrayed as being in existence since time immemorial. Hindus have a good reason to assert this, as it shows their conviction towards their practices being rooted in antiquity. Like many Hindu festivals, the Kumbh Mela, too, has a myth associated with it. The myth talks about its origin, and the places and celestial position for its celebration. Some scholars such as RB Bhattacharyya and Amado argue that the story about the fight between gods and demons for 12 days, and in the process sanctifying four spots, does not have a place in the Mahabharata or any of the published Purans (Lochtefeld, 2004: 105). Therefore, a possible explanation could be that during the composition of
these texts, the Kumbh Mela was not a significant event. The myth seems to be grafted over the gathering to give it a mythological sanction. Looking specifically at Allahabad’s Kumbh Mela, it can be said that Haridwar is the only place where the Aquarius zodiac (Kumbh raashi) determines the Mela, and not the Allahabad one. The Kumbh Melas at Allahabad, Nasik and Ujjain might have grown out of some established festivals like the Magh Mela in Allahabad, ‘which has a much longer history’ (Lochtefeld, 2004:109).

Sacred literature is a kind of stamp that attests to the belief regarding a place or an event. These ‘constructed’ sources root the Kumbh Mela in the distant past. The claim to sacredness by various tirthas is based on the Mahatmayas and the Purans. They validate the special status that should be accorded to them, owing to their association with the divinity or an event of mythological importance. Bhattacharya has argued that:

the legend in the Puran has been grafted onto the Kumbh Mela with the purpose to show Puranic authority for it. Though amrit manthan (churning of the nectar) has been stated in several Puranic works, the ‘fall of amrit at four places’ has not been stated in any of them (Bonazzoli, 1977:5).

Matsyapuran’s descriptions of the holiness of Prayag in the Prayag Mahatmaya emphasises its superlative sanctity in the month of Magh, but does not mention the Kumbh Mela (Mclean, 2008:88). The Prayag Mahatmaya mentions that

One can get rid of sins done anywhere at various tirthas, but for the sins done at tirthas, Prayag offers the only remedy (Ramanand, 2013:85).

Therefore, it establishes Prayag as superior to all tirthas, with unparalleled sacredness. Agnipuran says that all gods, sages and other divine beings are always present here, and therefore, it is the most benevolent (Quoted in Ramanand, 2013:85) of all sacred sites. It is possible that this establishment of Prayag as the most superior tirtha was necessitated due to competition from other sacred sites. This is evident from a verse from Skandpuran, according to which,

One who desires to fulfil his wishes in a tirtha other than Prayag cannot fulfil it anywhere in the country.

The texts make sure that their claim to grant benefits or salvation is easily accessible. The more difficult it is to reap the awards of a sacred site, the lesser the devotees might opt for it. So, we have sections claiming that even remembering the tirtha has salvific effects, or by merely seeing the tirtha one gets salvation. A verse in Matsyapuran says

O king Yudhisthir, there is no doubt that you can attain heaven by remembering Prayagraj (Ibid:86).

Verses in Koormpuran and Matsyapuran say:

By visiting it, chanting its name, or setting foot on its soil, one gets free from sins (Ibid:87).

Matsyapuran adds that even those who unknowingly come to Prayag attain heaven. Looking further into such verses, we find that some of them mention, how a tirtha done at Prayag is equivalent to certain other meritorious acts.

According to verses in Agnipuran,[6] Brahmapuran[7] and Matsyapuran,[8] bathing at the Sangam during the month of Magha is as meritorious as ‘donating a crore cows’, ‘performing Ashwamegh yagya’ and ‘visiting ten crore tirthas’, respectively. It can be concluded that these texts also attempt to converge people at Prayag during a particular time, which in this case happens to be the month of Magh. A verse from Padmapuran says a similar thing:

It is a rarity for the mortals to have visited Prayag during Magh, and having bathed there is even rarer (Ibid).

According to one pilgrimage myth, during the month of Magh, all the sacred places arrive at Prayag to get rid of the sins they have received (Jacobsen, 2013: 34), and so, there is no benefit in going to other sacred places in this month.

The method for establishing the superiority of Prayag is by portraying the virtues of other tirthas to be lesser than that of Prayag. It makes the ritual activity that one

6. The great sages say that the fruits of bathing at Prayag every day during the month of Magh, are equal to that of donating a crore cows every day (Agnipuran) (Ramanand 2013: 91)

7. Snana during the month of Magha at Tirtharaj is equal to that of an Ashwamegha Yagya. Bathing in Ganga-Yamuna purifies one and all (Brahmapuran) (Ibid).

8. The benefits of doing a pilgrimage of ten thousand, ten crore tirthas are same as that of bathing at the Sangam during the month of Magh. (Matsyapuran) Ibid

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5. Here ‘constructed’ suggests the primacy of a particular sect of actors / activities in shaping their surroundings.
And an entire class of Brahmins arose who obtained a living from the pilgrimage traffic (Jacobsen, 2013:55).

It is to be noted that the expansion of tirthas took place in the same period as the composition of the Purans (Jacobsen, 2013: 84). A description of tirthas is a major part of the Purans, and the composition of them might very well be related to the promotion of places and sites. The texts illustrate how certain people relate to a sacred cosmology and the actions of people sanctify places as sacred, hence, establishing a mythos.

It can be concluded that the ‘sacred’, which is the central feature of pilgrimage, is ascribed by people’s agency and reinforced by culture. It is the people who believe and imagine a particular place to have a merit-giving capacity. It is at the level of their imagination that they classify their surroundings and demarcate regions which assist in communion with the gods. For the religious person, their surroundings were touched by divinity; it is here that the nectar of immortality was spilled. Therefore, it is at this place that a transformation can also take place.

do at other tirthas look irrelevant if not complemented with a ritual at Prayag. The Purans mention that Pinda-daan has a special significance in Gaya, and so does daan in Kurukshetra and dying in Kashi. There is a verse saying that,

*If mundan is not done at Prayag, then what is the point in performing pinda-daan in Gaya and dying at Kashi or charity at Kurukshetra?* (Ibid, 89).

Thus, it can be argued that these texts were written in order to construct a particular image of Prayag. The purpose of mahatmaya is to extol, expand, and exaggerate the glories of its subject (Eck, 1983:xiv). This could have been done to attract pilgrims as:

*these images intersected economic and religious concerns* (Lochtefeld, 2010:5).

The most important act at tirthas is that of charity or donating gifts (daan). In the description of pilgrimage places in the Mahabharata, giving gifts to Brahmans is mentioned repeatedly as a way for pilgrims to accumulate merit (Jacobsen, 2013:53). Thus, over a certain time period, pilgrimage became an important source of income for priests associated with pilgrims.

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Conclusion

Religion consists of symbolic actions that embody religious meaning. Rituals are the enactment of those meanings and they strengthen and reaffirm the beliefs. In Hinduism we find ceremonies whose sole purpose is to awaken certain ideas and sentiments that attach the present with the past. Hindus celebrate these because their ancestors did, because they are attached to a highly respected tradition and because they leave with a feeling of moral well being (Durkheim, 1915:378).

Hindus believe in the afterlife and, therefore, they perform certain rituals for their deceased ones. They perform Gangapujan (worship of the Ganges) asthipujan (worship of bones) and pind-daan (flour balls offering) to the spirit of the deceased (Gold, 1991:133). The content of an act is not what makes it a ritual, rather it is the symbolic meaning attached to it by the participant. Ritual ensures the fulfilment of certain duties by portraying them as a sacrament. The rites and rituals that are performed at any sacred site add to the importance and sacredness of that place.

Pilgrimage to Prayag has been established in the collective memory of society, and keeps reinforcing itself. People throng to this place because they believe they should. It is their past, and their sacred texts have instilled in them the capacity to imagine a communion with the divine there. Therefore, it can be argued that there is nothing in the nature of things that makes them sacred. As James Lochtefeld says,

The notion of any place is an idea - consciously and deliberately constructed, propagated, ascribed to and imposed on the physical landscape of space (Lochtefeld, 2010:4)

Therefore, it is very possible that myths were grafted onto the city of Prayag in order to impart to it a sacred character.

Bibliography


