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PRAYĀGA: THE RITUALSCAPE OF A HINDU PILGRIMAGE PLACE

There is a pronounced importance to place in South Asian culture. Just as Hindus consider certain parts of body purer than others, so too certain places are believed to be charged with greater power than others. Lawrence observes, *"Different places on the face of earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars; call it what you like. But the spirit of place is a great reality"*¹. And "the spirit of place", in the opinion of Relph², "lies in its landscape." Throughout the Indian subcontinent there are places wherein culture, geography and cosmos interact with each other to create a landscape that is infused with meaning and transcendent power. These places are called tirthas which are of extensive mythological associations where many believe that spirit can cross between different realms. Focusing on one of these places can particularly reveal things not only about the place, but about the society which considers it worthy of devotion, loyalty and esteem. This paper is a study of forces shaping the ritual landscape of Prayāga/Allahabad, a place of pilgrimage for well over three millennia at the site where the holy rivers Gangā, Yamuna and the invisible Sarasvati meet. This place is surcharged with the notion of religious ecology founded on the belief that the natural world is part of the deity that created it. Here nature is worshipped through the belief that god and nature are one and the same thing or that nature is the dwelling place of the gods. This paper addresses the textual and field sources for constructing the ritual landscape of Prayāga in historical perspective to discern what makes it special in Hindu eyes.

Prayāga or Allahabad is one of the most renowned sacred places of India. It is known as Tirtharaja and is believed by the Hindus to be the holiest place

¹ Lawrence D.H., 1964, *Studies in Classical American Literature*, Heinemann, London, p. 6.

² Relph Edward C., 1976, *Place and Placelessness*, Pion Ltd., London, p. 30.

in the three worlds existing in space (heaven, earth and the netherworld) and in time (past, present and future). Prayāga is called Tirtharaja on account of its special features, not possessed by other tirthas. Among innumerable rivers and confluences the Gangā-Yamuna sangama at Prayāga is unique. The wonderful sight offered by the mixing of the two rivers – the white coloured Gangā and the blue flowing Yamuna has often been sung by poets. Kalidasa (5th c. CE) describes the beautiful tumult of waves and ripples at Sangama in the Raghuvansha: *“The stream of the Gangā mixed up with the waves of the Yamuna, looks at one place like the string of pearls interspersed with the lustre – imparting sapphires and, at another place, like a garland of white lotuses intertwined with the blue ones”*³. Murari (10th c. CE) is also attracted to the astonishing beauty of the confluence at Prayaga. He says, *“the two rivers, flowing through the antaravedi which is the original home of the brahmanas, proceed to meet each other as if they bathe the earth with the liquid of the fragrant aloe wood and sandal. The Gangā is white because it has lived in the laps of its father, the snowy Himalaya, and the Yamuna is black because of the scorching heat of its father, the Sun”*⁴. The description of the confluence as given by Tulasidasa (CE 1532-1624) is no less inspiring. In a priceless piece of the nature poetry, he says, *“beautiful is the meeting of the white and dark waters of the two rivers Gangā and Yamuna. Tulasī’s heart leaps with joy at the sight of the waves, it looks as if strong groups of calves of the divine cow are grazing green grass”*⁵. In fact, the view the waters of the two rivers present to the visitors is bewildering. The miraculous power of waters of Sangama is attested by scientific investigations carried on there by S.S. Nehru, an eminent scientist of the University of Allahabad, some forty years ago. He was amazed to notice that radioactivity of the confluence was much greater than the sum total of the two figures about the two rivers⁶. To complete such a power, according to a tradition, deep beneath the two streams the Sarasvati mingles its water with the dark ones of the Yamuna and the clear ones of the Gangā. The Puranas speak of the piercing (vidarbhana) of the confluence of the Gangā and the Yamuna by the Sarasvati at Prayaga. While describing the presence of the river Sarasvati there, they remark that it was created by Brahma for the purpose of attaining Brahmhaloka⁷. The sacred space thus symbolises and embodies the gateway to the Unknown Realm.

Prayāga thus owes its sanctity to the confluence of the rivers, which emerged as a centre of the Aryan culture in the Vedic period. A khila verse of the Rigveda glorifies it thus: *“Those who plunge into the waters where the black and white rivers*

³ *Raghuvansha of Kalidasa*, [in:] Kalidasa Granthavali (ed.), R.P. Dwivedi, BHU, Varanasi, 1976, XIII. 54.

⁴ *Anargharaghava of Murari Mishra, Ramachandra Mishra (ed.)*, Chowkhamba Vidya Bhawan, Varanasi, 1960, VII. 125.

⁵ *Kavitavali of Tulasidasa*, Vamadeva Sharma (ed.), Ramanarayan Lal Publ. and Booksellers, Allahabad, 1938, VII. 144.

⁶ Sukul K.N., 1974, *Varanasi Down the Ages*, Kameshwar Nath Sukul, Patna, p. 197.

⁷ *Padma Purana*, Venkateshwar Press, Bombay, 1927, 6, 126. 35, *Naradiya Purana*, Venkateshwar Press, Bombay, 1933, II. 63, 23b-24a.

meet together ascend to heaven, and those determined men who cast off their bodies there secure immortality”⁸. This confluence of the rivers at Prayāga came to be regarded as the visible symbol of Madhyadesh by the Gupta period, it is depicted in the Varaha cave at Udaigiri around CE 400. In tradition, Prayāga formed the eastern boundary of Madhyadesh⁹. That Prayāga is the eastern point of Madhyadesh is of spatial significance stressing correspondences between humanity (microcosm) and space (mesocosm) in order to make the most out of the various lines of cosmic forces (macrocosm). “The most basic of these forces”, observes Brenda Beck¹⁰, “are fixed in association with the various compass points. The east, for example, is the direction from which many beneficial forces emanate”. In fact, east serves as one of the axis of cosmic forces; and it demonstrates that Prayāga is the mythical place where heaven and earth were first separated in illo tempore.

To the casual visitor Prayāga appears to be a place wholly preoccupied with religion. It is believed to be sanctified by traditional association with the sacred performance of a great sacrifice by Pitamaha¹¹ and is considered to possess certain intrinsic power and efficacy for spiritual purification. Shiva has transformed Himself into the holy Banyan tree there¹². Vishnu in the form of Madhava is always present in the waters of the confluence there. The Matsya Purana says that Shiva is located as Vateshvara in Prayāga by Vishnu and the latter in the form of Keshava is always lost under the Vata (Banyan) tree in his reveries of yoga.¹⁴ Thus, unlike Kashi, Ayodhya, Mathura, or Ujjain, Prayāga is of non-sectarian nature in the religious world. The Matsya Purana states, “As Brahma is worshipped in all the beings, so Prayāga is adored by the learned in all the worlds. Brahma also thinks of this sacred place everyday, that is why wisemen after repairing to Prayaga, do not feel inclined to anything else”¹⁵. The same Purana again says that Prayāga is saved at the time of the dissolution of the universe¹⁶. At Prayāga there are no great and grandiose temples. Whatever shrines do exist there, are poor, insignificant and shabby looking. No specific deity presides over Prayaga, because the significance of this tirtha is associated with water.

⁸ *Rigveda*, F. Maxmuller (ed.), Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, Varanasi, 1960, *Khila*, 22.1.

⁹ *Manusmriti*, Gopal Shastri Nene (ed.), Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, Varanasi, 1970, 2, 21; Gupta D.K., 1972, *Society and Culture in the time of Dandin*, Meherchand Luchhmandas, New Delhi, pp. 81-83.

¹⁰ Beck B.E.F., 1976, *The symbolic merger of body, space and cosmos*, Contributions to Indian Sociology (NS), v. 10(2), p. 214.

¹¹ *Mahabharata*, V.S. Sukthankar et al. (eds.), Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona, 1933-59, III. 85.14.

¹² *Kurma Purana*, A.S. Gupta (ed.), All-India Kashiraj Trust, Varanasi, 1972, 1, 37.9; *Padma Purana*, III. 48.6a; *Matsya Purana*, Venkateshwar Press, Bombay, 1895, 110.10a; *Vamana Purana* (ed.) A.S. Gupta, All-India Kashiraj Trust, Varanasi, 1968, 57.28b.

¹³ *Padma Purana*, VI.14.10, *Skanda Purana*, Venkateshwar Press, Bombay, 1909, IV.7.53.

¹⁴ *Matsya Purana*, 21.9.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 108. 13-16.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 110.4.

The Brihadaranyaka Upanisad speaks of "the origin of truth from water, truth that originated Brahman; Brahman who is the originator of Prajapati; and Prajapati who is the father of all beings"¹⁷. In the Shatapatha Brahmana "water doubtless means ambrosia", so this vedic text advises brahmacarin "to sip water for suffering no harm of any kind"¹⁸. The water of the confluence of the great water-bodies like the Gangā and the Yamuna has, therefore, naturally been glorified. Everyday a number of pilgrims come to Prayaga, and all that they do is to take the holy dip in the sacred waters of the confluence. During the annual month long fair of Magha (January-February) hundreds of thousands of people assemble there for ritual bathing, and every twelfth year they come by millions to the Kumbha Mela. The Kumbha Melas are also held at Haridvara, Nasik and Ujjain, but none of them is comparable to the Kumbha Mela at Prayaga. It is the biggest, the most sacred, the most attractive, and the most spoken of and written about mela in the world.¹⁹ Herein lies the greatness of Prayaga, which is inseparably linked with the cultural and religious heritage of India.

The word Prayāga is derived from pra√yaj, the prefix 'pra' means 'great' and the term 'yaga' denotes 'sacrifice', and this reminds of the way in which pilgrimage to a sacred place came to be considered the primary substitute for the Vedic sacrifices. The Mahabharata says that since Prajapati performed a great sacrifice there, it is known as Prayaga²⁰. In the Padma Purana Prajapati is said to have performed the great sacrifice there for gaining power to create the universe at the beginning of the creation. Prayāga is the middle sacrificial altar of Prajapati, other such vedis (altars) on the earth being at Gaya, Kurukshetra, Viraja and Pushkar.²¹ The vedic sacrificial altar is connected to the transfer of energy from heaven to earth : "I am Heaven, thou art Earth", declares the Brihadaranyaka Upanisad IV.4.3. This place is thus transformed into a sacred place, showing how a macrocosm can be transformed into a mesocosm reflected into the microcosm - a process called sacralization. This was the greatest of all sacrifices as is signified by the prefix 'pra'. The epic-puranic texts emphasise on the prefix 'pra', when it is said that Prayāga predominates over all places on account of its supernatural efficacy.²² The Puranas explain 'pra' in Prayāga as 'prakrista', generally translated as 'excellent', but it may also be taken to mean 'drawn forth' or 'drawn out', alluding to the act of ploughing²³. This may suggest

¹⁷ *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad*, [in:] the Upanisatsangraha, J.L. Shastri (ed.), *Motilal Banarasi-dass*, New Delhi, 1970, V. 5.1.

¹⁸ *Shatapatha Brahmana*, A. Weber (ed.), Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, Varanasi, 1964, XI. 5.45.

¹⁹ See Dubey D.P., 2001, *Prayāga: The Site of Kumbha Mela*, Aryan Books International, New Delhi, pp. 120-155.

²⁰ *Mahabharata*, III. 85.14.

²¹ *Padma Purana*, VI. 128.263-264.

²² *Mahabharata*, III. 83.74; *Matsya Purana*, 109.10b-11a; *Naradiya Purana*, II.63.57; *Skanda Purana*, IV.7.49

that the name Prayāga owes its origin to the introduction of cultivation together with the transplantation of vedic sacrificial culture, but is explained in a mythical way in the ancient scriptures. This is corroborated by the epic-puranic evidence which personifies Prayāga as the symbol of fertility by saying that “the thighs of the goddess Earth are between the rivers Gangā and Yamuna, and Prayāga is her generative organ.”²⁴ Moreover, ploughing itself is traditionally regarded as a sacrificial ritual. ‘The introduction of cultivation and clearing of forests and bushes for agricultural land was the old form of yajna and dharma in India,’ suggests Bhagwan Singh²⁵. This experiment was made somewhere in the Indo-Gangetic plain which was the biggest and supposedly the richest farming zone in the world, generating a surplus far more impressive than the one fancied in the fertile crescent zone. Prayāga appears to be the first region occupied by the early forming settlers in the Gangā plain. The discovery of wild rice in the 9th-8th millennium BCE in Chopani Mando in the advanced Mesolithic and cultivated rice in the Neolithic levels of 7th-6th millennium BCE at Koldihwa and Mahagara in the Prayāga region²⁶ has provided solid archaeological foundation to the thesis.

Prayāga is found to acquire a highly developed structural form. A whole range of rituals and usages came to be associated with it, which invested the holy environment with an extraordinary popular appeal. Besides sacrifices, other rites prescribed there are bathing (snana), death rites (shraddha and tarpana), fast (upavasa), gift-giving (dana), tonsure (mundana) and suicide (kayotsarga). Most of these are rites commonly associated with all tirthas. The ceremony of mundana is, however, made compulsory there. It is said that if one has tonsured at Prayaga, there is no need of offering pindas (ceremonial cake of cooked food) to ancestors at Gaya, making gifts at Kurukshetra and eschewing the body at Varanasi.²⁷ Kings and commoners from different parts of the sub-continent are known to have often visited this place on pilgrimage to commit suicide²⁸ and make suitable grants in charity²⁹ to commemorate the event. Prayāga was the most popular centre for suicides attracting persons inclined to observe this practice. This self inflicted death rite at the foot of the Banyan tree and from its

²³ Upadhyaya, G.P. 1976, *The Origins and Functions of Tirthas : Some Epic and Puranic Testimonies*, Indian History Congress Proceedings, 47th Session, Calicut, p. 127.

²⁴ *Mahabharata*, III.83.71; *Kurma Purana*, I.35.11; *Matsya Purana*, 105.19; *Padma Purana*, III. 39. 71b-72a.

²⁵ Singh, Bhagwan, 1995, *The Vedic Harappans*, Aditya Prakashan, New Delhi, pp. 5-6.

²⁶ Sharma G.R. et al. 1980, *From Hunting and Food-gathering to Domestication of plants and animals: Epi-Palaeolithic to Neolithic*, History and Archaeology, v. I (1-2), p. 23.

²⁷ *Naradiya Purana*, II. 63. 105-106.

²⁸ Dubey D.P., 1987, *The Religious Practice of Suicides at Prayaga*, *Archiv Orientalni*, v. 55, pp. 355-369.

²⁹ Dubey D.P., 2001, *Prayāga: The Site of Kumbha Mela*, Aryan Books International, New Delhi, pp. 86-91.

top at Prayāga came to an end by the last quarter of the sixteenth century when emperor Akbar built his fort there. However, it continued at the confluence of rivers upto the middle of the Nineteenth century when the British Government forcibly banned and stopped it. Still today people in old age long for death there; and for that they go on pilgrimage in the chilly cold month of Magha, stay there under the open sky or in tents and huts pitched on the sandy bed, bathing thrice a day, subsisting on meager food, reading scriptures, listening discourses and chanting the holy names of god.

Bharati has observed, “Just as shrines of local, regional or sectarian importance all over India compare their own merit giving capacity to that of Banaras, shrines close to a river or located inside a water expanse compare themselves to Prayaga”³⁰. Its geographical position is laden with significance. The sacred space of Prayāga is often divided into three parts-Veni/Triveni, Prajapatikshetra and Prayāgamandala – each preceding one being smaller and holier than the subsequent one. This shastric division, when put to test, has still not lost its relevance in the sacred geography of Prayaga. Veni is the confluence of the rivers which dominates the physical landscape of the sacred place. It gives to Prayāga the most attractive natural character which is not found at any other place in the world. Prajapatikshetra signifies Prayaga, which extends from Pratishtana in the east to Kambalashvatara Naga shrine in the west and Vasuki-hrada in the north to Naga Bahumulaka in the south³¹. Prayāgamandala is said to be five yojanas in extent³². One yojana of the puranic sacred geography represents one kroscha only³³, a kroscha being a unit of measurement equivalent to 2.26 miles. Hence, the circuit of Prayagamandala would be about 11½ miles in diameter. The geographical centre of this mandala, according to the medieval tirtha-digests is the Brahmayupa (the sacrificial post of Prajapati)³⁴ which may be identified with the Ashokan pillar now standing in the Akbar’s fort in the vicinity of the confluence. The earliest reference to the confluence of the rivers Gaṅgā and Yamuna occurs in a paralipomena verse of the Rigveda. Prayāga is mentioned first in the Epics and the concept of Prayagamandala is first noticed in the Puranas. Thus the sacred space beginning with Sangama gradually extended to the surrounding areas. This shows how a single sacred site in course of time develops into a sacred zone. Such extension of the sacred topography is also found at other tirthas, such as in Kashi where four civic units – Antaragriha, Avimukta, Varanasi and Kashi – with definite

³⁰ Bharati A., 1970, *Pilgrimage sites and Indian Civilisation*, in Chapters in Indian Civilisation, J.W. Elder (ed.), Kendali-Hunt Publ. Co., v. I, p. 107.

³¹ *Mahabharata*, III. 83.72; *Naradiya Purana*, II.63. 54b-55a; *Padma Purana*, III.39.72b-73a; *Matsya Purana*, 103.3-4.

³² *Matsya Purana*, 107.9, 110.8; *Padma Purana*, III.45.8; *Naradiya Purana*, II.63.44.

³³ *Tristhalisetu of Narayana Bhatta*, S.N. Shukla (ed.), Govt. Printing Press, Allahabad, 1936, pp. 16, 101; *Tirthaprakasha of Mitra Mishra*, Vishnu Prasad (ed.), Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, Varanasi, 1917, p. 176.

³⁴ *Tristhalisetu*, p. 15; *Tirthaprakasha*, p. 328.

geographical boundaries are mentioned in the puranic texts³⁵. It may have been due to the "positive technique in the process of land taking or land settlement by the pioneers of the tirtha"³⁶.

It is notable that the sacred landscape was demarcated, differentiated and objectified into something spatially distinct. It shows order and emanates power, and two fences of Prayāga and Prayagamandala, though formless, encircle it (i.e. Veni) for the same reason "that a station generating electricity is fenced in to warn and shield unwary men".³⁷ The enclosures demarcating Prayāga and Prayagamandala delimit areas of concentrated divine powers. The circles serve to warn profane man of the danger to which he would be exposed if he is to enter without faith, as Yi-Fu Tuan leads us to believe. That is why religious minded people approach it in trembling because they believe it to be the habitation of supernatural powers that far exceed human grasp.

Prayāga is famous as the king of Hindu holy places. Therefore, all tirthas, cities, streams, gods, mountains and sages dwell there, desiring their own liberation as well as their attendance being always registered in the kingly court. Prayāga is thus dense with holy spots. It is said to contain so many holy spots that sage Markandeya declared his inability to enumerate them in total³⁸. This statement suggests that various objects and spots in this sacred place were perceived as its sub-tirthas, which are not separate units but parts of a whole. Most of the texts consulted, however, describe a few out of the hundred thousand of holy spots in Prayaga. Their number ranges from six in the Mahabharata to thirty five in the treatises on pilgrimage. The number of sub-tirthas in Prayāga appears to be very insignificant when compared to that of Ujjain, Mathura, or Varanasi where more than two hundred sub-tirthas exist. The holy spots are generally located near the river banks in Prajapatikshetra. But finding out their locations of antiquity is sometimes very difficult, sometimes even a fruitless effort. Some of them are, however, still regarded holy by modern pilgrims. The main holy spots in Prayāga, referred to in the texts, are Sangama, Agni-tirtha, Anaraka-tirtha, Bharadvaja Ashrama, Bhogavati, Dashashvamedhika, Hamsa-prapatana, Kambalashvatara Nagas, Naga Bahumulaka, Koti-tirtha, Pratishtana, Samudrakupa, Rinamocana, Sandhyavata, Akshayavata, Soma-tirtha, Urvashipulin and Vasuki-hrada. Trees, animals and water bodies fused with the worship of gods occupy an important place in the religious topography of Prayaga. These holy spots vary widely not only in degree of spiritual efficacy, but also in the rites considered especially appropriate to them. Thus, if a bath would obtain heaven in one spot, in another spot it would fetch a celestial plane, or a merit equal to the performance of an ashvamedha sacrifice. Again, if it is especially meritorious to take bath in

³⁵ Eck D.L., 1983, *Banaras: City of Light*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, pp. 350-355.

³⁶ Agrawala V.S., 1963, *Matsya Purana: A Study*, All-India Kashiraj Trust, Varanasi, p. 115.

³⁷ Tuan Y.F., 1978, *Sacred Space : explorations of an idea*, in *Dimensions of Human Geography*, K.W. Butzer (ed.), University of Chicago, Chicago, p. 92.

³⁸ *Matsya Purana*, 103.6; *Padma Purana*, III. 41.6a-7.

one spot, in the other fasting would be more important, and libations to ancestors in the third or simple night stay in the fourth. However, the most ritually sensitive space is the vast sandy tract of land around the confluence where any ritual performed accrues immense merits of bhukt-mukti (happiness and release from rebirth). What is most striking about the rituals is that they have nothing at all to do with the temple or the image in the temple, though there are modest shrines (Naga Vasuki, Veni Madhava, Someshvara, Badhwa Hanuman, Manakameshvara and Alopī Devi) commanding veneration of pilgrims who visit Prayaga. In Prayāga we are outside the religious world in which images and image worship takes place. True sanctity resides in the unseen eternal energy associated with the holy ground itself.

The sacred geography of most of the holy places in India is related with water symbolism comparable to the theological interpretation of the origin of universe from the cosmic flood. Its highest magnitude has been transposed at Prayaga. It is therefore, many sites in India are replicated in the form of Prayāga throughout India. The symbiosis between visible (Gangā and Yamuna) and invisible (Sarasvati) reflects the unity between self and the infinite. This metaphysical personality of Prayāga is one of the reasons to accept it as Tirtharaja. Prayāga may also rightly claim the paramount status on account of being the only tirtha of very high antiquity with continuous habitation and sanctity from the pre-2000 BCE. The first settlers at Pratishtana (Jhusi) overlooking the confluence were the Mesolithic people whose evidence has been found there in the form of geometric microliths. The subsequent cultural deposits there are Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Early Iron Age, NBP ware, Shunga-Kusana, Gupta, and Early Medieval cultures; the Neolithic culture yielded rice husk tempered hand made pottery, pieces of grinding stone, and animal bones³⁹.

PRAYĀGA:

RYTUALNY KRAJOBRAZ HINDUISTYCZNEGO MIEJSCA PIELGRZYMKOWEGO

STRESZCZENIE

Miejsce odgrywa olbrzymią rolę w kulturze Azji Południowo-Wschodniej. Hindusi uważają, że podobnie jak pewne części ciała są bardziej czyste od innych, tak również pewne miejsca są obdarzone większą mocą od innych. Autor rozważa siły kształtujące krajobraz rytualny Prayaga/Allahabadu, miejsca pielgrzymek od ponad trzech tysięcy lat. Tu spotykają się święte rzeki Ganges, Yamuna, i niewidzialna Sarasvati. Symbolizuje to jedność między jednostką a nieskończonością, tu promieniuje wieczna energia związana ze świętym miejscem. Autor ukazuje w perspektywie historycznej, co czyni to miejsce wyjątkowym w oczach Hindusów.

Thumaczenie Bolesław Domański

³⁹ Mishra V.D., et al. 2002-2003, *Further Excavations at Jhusi: Evidence of Neolithic Culture*, Pragdhara, v. 13, pp. 227-229.