

Rāmeśvaram Sacred Sand and Gaṅgā Holy Water The Pilgrimage to Prayāga Starts from Rāmeśvaram

India, viewed as a holy land (*punyabhūmi*), is home to thousands of ancient temples, great saints, monasteries, cultures and traditions. It boasts an abundance of holy and spiritual places, where ancient practices remain intact even in modern times, each place in possession of its own set of rituals, guidelines, and beliefs that people ardently follow. Devotees all over India routinely undertake religious journeys to these various holy sites, be they temples, rivers, mountains, or monasteries. Among the many different pilgrimages at their disposal (e.g., *cārdhām yātrā*,¹ *pañcakedāra yātrā*,² *ārupaṭai vītu*,³ and so on), one of the most famous pilgrimage tours (*tīrthayātrā*) is the pilgrimage from Rāmeśvaram to the river Gaṅgā (either in Prayāga or in Kāśī), which begins and ends at Rāmeśvaram. All the three places, which are among the oldest pilgrimage centres in India, are located about 2500 km from each other (Kāśī and Prayāga in the north, Rāmeśvaram in the south). In spite of that, since ancient times people have been travelling the long distance to observe this pilgrimage. Present chapter discusses the procedure and structure of a Hindu pilgrimage, *yātrā*, with the Rāmeśvaram-Gaṅgā pilgrimage as the central example.

In the first half of the chapter, I describe the general practice of pilgrimage, its motivations, benefits, and conditions. I then discuss the destinations of pilgrimage as they are described in traditional accounts found in the epics and the *purāṇas*. Thereafter, I provide a close-up description of my specific case study, the *yātrā* from Rāmeśvaram to the river Gaṅgā and back, detailing its myths, requirements, and customs.

- 1 The circuit includes four abodes located at the four cardinal points of the subcontinent: Badarīnāth in the north, Dvārakā in the west, Purī in the east and Rāmeśvaram in the south (modern Rameswaram). The 'small' Himalayan circuit of four abodes, confined to Uttarakhand, consists of Kedārīnāth, Badrīnāth, Gaṅgotrī and Yamunotrī.
- 2 The circuit of five sacred places consists of: Kedārīnāth, Tuṅganāth, Rudranāth, Madhyameśvar and Kalpeśvar.
- 3 Six abodes of Murugaṇ in Tamilnadu: Tirupparaṅkuṇṇam, Tiruccēntūr, Paḷaṇi (Tiruvāṇṇai), Cuvāmimalai, Tiruttaṇi, and Paḷamutircolai. A study by Ofer Peres of this *yātrā*'s origins appears in this volume.

Pilgrimage (*tīrthayātrā*)

In his *History of Dharmaśāstra*, P. V. Kane writes:

All religions have laid great emphasis on the sacredness of specific localities and have either enjoined or recommended with great insistence of undertaking pilgrimages to them. Among the religious duties of a Muslim, a pilgrimage at least once in his life to Mecca and Medina, the birthplace of the Prophet Mohammad, is one. The four places of pilgrimage for Buddhists have been the birthplace of Buddha (Lumbini), the place where he attained enlightenment (Buddha Gaya), the place where he set in motion the wheel of dharma (Sarnath) and the place where he passed away into the state of *nirvāṇa* (Kūśīnāra). For Christians, Jerusalem has been the holiest place. (Kane 1953: 552)

Similarly, for people who follow ancient, customary Hindu practices, holy places play a very important part. Great rivers, mountains and forests have been worshipped for millennia as sacred and are seen as abodes of God.⁴ The concept of pilgrimage is considered as meritorious and is firmly knitted in the minds of the people of India; one can undertake the pilgrimage journey according to one's personal choice, devotion, and interest.

Performing a pilgrimage: motivations, fruits, conditions, and obstacles

Hindu pilgrimage can be undertaken for many reasons. Every individual who is interested in acquiring merits (*punya*) and destroying his de-merits/sins (*pāpa*) can undertake a pilgrimage for this purpose. Some take up a *yātrā* to appease their forefathers by performing ancestral rites (*śrāddham*); others undertake pilgrimages as a substitute for *kṛcchra* (austerities),⁵ or to fulfil other religious observances, while yet others undertake the journey for the sake of a divine experience.

4 An example for the centrality of pilgrimage can be found in the *Brahmapurāṇa*, where a full chapter is devoted to explaining the four types of *tīrthas*: Daiva, Āsura, Ārṣa and Mānuṣa (*Brahmapurāṇa*, *Gautamīmāhātmya*, 1.1–33).

5 *Kṛcchra* is a general word for several penances. It has a number of varieties such as *atikṛcchra*, *taptakṛcchra*, *śītakṛcchra*, *kṛcchrātikṛcchra*, *sāntapana*, *parāka*, *cāndrāyaṇa* and so on.

The *Gr̥hyasūtras* and ancient *smṛtikāras*, such as Manu and Yājñavalkya, do not speak much about *tīrthayātrā*. In the *Mahābhārata*,⁶ however, the performance of a pilgrimage is compared to a sacrifice to the gods. Sacrifices, it is said, require numerous implements, collection of materials, the support of priests. Thus, they can be performed only by kings or wealthy people, but not by poor men. At the same time, the reward that a man gets by visiting holy places as the result of the *tīrthayātrā* cannot be secured by performing even such sacrifices as *agniṣṭoma*, *vājapeya*, etc., in which a large fee and expenditure is involved; therefore, visiting holy places is superior to sacrifices.⁷

However, this is not accepted unanimously, as, for example, the *Viramitrodaya*⁸ states that those who have the right or obligation regarding *yajñas*, especially the householders, do not have the obligation of pilgrimage, because *yajñas* yield more fruit than resorting to any *tīrtha*. Thus, according to this text, the status of pilgrimage is that of a non-obligatory rite, which is recommended for those who are less capable of performing other, more expensive types of rites; nevertheless, pilgrimage does yield substantial spiritual results.

The power of pilgrimage is ‘measured’, so to speak, by its ability to be a substitute for other religious rites. An early expression of the general notion of pilgrimage (*tīrthayātrā*) as a substitute (*pratyāmnāya*) of performing a *kṛcchra* penance is given in Parāśara’s code of laws (*Parāśarasamṛti*): “One who undertakes a pilgrimage of two *yojanas* is considered as equivalent of undergoing a *kṛcchra* penance.”⁹

Gautamadharmasūtra 26.1–5: *athātaḥ kṛcchrān vyākhyāsyāmaḥ ||1|| haviṣyān prātar āsān bhuktva tisro rātrir nāśniyāt ||2|| athāparaṃ tryaḥam naktam bhuñjīta ||3|| athāparaṃ tryaḥam na kaṃcana yāceta ||4|| athāparaṃ tryaḥam upavaseṭa ||5||*

“Next we will describe the arduous penances. During three days a man should eat in the morning food fit for sacrifice and not eat anything in the evening; during the next three days he should eat only in the evening; during the following three days he should not request food from anyone; and during the final three days he should fast.”

- 6 *Mahābhārata*, *Aranyaparva* 80.34–38: *ṛṣibhiḥ kratavaḥ proktā vedeṣv iha yathākramam | phalaṃ caiva yathātatvaṃ pretya ceha ca sarvaśaḥ || na te śakyā daridreṇa yajñāḥ prāptuṃ mahīpate | bahūpakaraṇā yajñā nānāsaṃbhāravistarāḥ || prāpyante pārthivair ete samṛddhair vā naraiḥ kvacit | nārthany ūnopakaraṇair ekātmabhir asaṃhataiḥ || yo daridrāir api vidhiḥ śakyah prāptuṃ nareśvara | tulyo yajñaphalaiḥ puṇyaistaṃ nibodha yudhāṃ vara || ṛṣiṇāṃ paramaṃ guhyam idaṃ bharatasattama | tīrthābhigamaṇaṃ puṇyaṃ yajñair api viśisyate ||*

- 7 A similar idea is found in the *Brahmapurāṇa*, too, when Nārada asks Brahmā to elaborate on the notion that worshipping in *tīrthas* is superior to *tapas*, *yajña* and *dāna* (*Brahmapurāṇa*, *Gautamīmāhātmya* 1.3: *tapaso yajñādānāṇaṃ tīrthasevanam uttamam | iti śrutaṃ mayā tatto jagadyone jagatprabho*).

- 8 A vast digest of *dharmaśāstra* composed in the seventeenth century by Mitramiśra, I refer to the edition of 1987, p. 20.

- 9 *Parāśarasamṛti* 12.61ab: *dviyojane tīrthayātrā kṛcchram ekaṃ prakalpitaṃ |*

Another text, Śrīdhara's twelfth-century *Smṛtyarthasāra* (edition of 1912, p. 153), assigns to each holy site the value of a particular number of penances, in proportion to the distance travelled. For example:

Bathing at Setu [yields the fruit of] 30 *kṛcchras* for one who travels 30 *yojanas*; if one worships Rāmeśvara after taking bath [at Setu] will get the equal fruit of 60 *kṛcchras* for the people of Vindhya; the fruit of [bathing] at Seturāmeśvara and the Jāhnavī is triple; similar [fruit for] Jāhnavī and Kedāra; for the people of the countries of the Southern ocean, bathing at the Jāhnavī is six times; similarly, for the people [residing] at the Gaṅgā region, bathing at Seturāmeśvara [yields the fruit] six times; worshipping Skanda [yield the fruit] equal to 30 *Kṛcchras* for one who travels 30 *yojanas*; similarly, wherever [a waterbody] is regarded as 'Gaṅgā'; in all cases, there will be a reduction of distance based on the difference in language and [intervened by] mountains etc.¹⁰

The *Devīpurāṇa*, quoted in the *Smṛtyarthasāra*, says, "The Pāṇḍavas, to obtain the kingdom and to get rid of their sins, performed *tīrthayātrā* along with Kṛṣṇa, Nārada, Mārkaṇḍeya, the seven Rṣis, etc., as a substitute for performing twelve *kṛcchras* for twelve years."¹¹ Similarly, in the case of the pilgrimage to Rāmeśvaram (that we shall elaborate upon later), one makes, at the nearby beach of Dhanuṣkoṭi, the following *mahāsaṅkalpa* described in a ritual manual called *Bhāratasthala-yātrā*:¹²

I perform the great reparatory rite (*mahā prāyaścitta karma*) in the form of bathing 36 times in the Dhanuṣkoṭi of Rāmacandra which is

10 *Smṛtyarthasāra* of Śrīdhara, p. 153: *setau triṃśatkṛcchrasamaṃ triṃśadyojanagatasya | snātvā rāmeśvaradarśane ṣaṣṭikṛcchrasamaṃ vindhya deśīyānām | seturāmeśvare jāhnavyam ca triguṇaṃ phalam | jāhnavīkedārayos tathaiva | dakṣiṇābhideśīyānām jāhnavyāṃ ṣaḍguṇam | gaṅgādeśīyānām tu seturāmeśvare ṣaḍguṇam | skandadarśane triṃśatkṛcchrasamaṃ triṃśadyojanagatasya ca | yatra gaṅgā saṃjñā'sti tatra caivam | sarvatra bhāṣābheda-parvatādinā yātrāhrāso bhavaty eva |*

11 *Devīpurāṇa* as quoted in *Smṛtyarthasāra* (1912, p. 150): *pāṇḍavā rājyalābhāya duri-topaśamāya ca | śrīkṛṣṇanārada-vyāsaśrīkaṇṭhendrājalomaśaiḥ || mārkaṇḍeyapulas-tyājasaptarṣipramukhais tathā | dvādaśadvādaśābdāni kṛcchrāṇy ādaya bhaktitaḥ || tīrthairakurvannityādi purāṇe śrūyate katha |*

There are many similar examples. The *Laugākṣi Smṛti* states that if the *prajāpatya kṛcchra* could not be observed to purify a multitude of sins that one had committed, one can undertake bathing in great rivers as a substitution (ibid., p. 257).

12 A *mahāsaṅkalpa* is the description of the entire universe and helps one to identify himself in the universe, which is invoked before commencing any important rituals. For the text of *mahāsaṅkalpa*, see: *Bhāratasthala-yātrā*, pp. 76–80.

a confluence of the Sea and Ocean, which yields the fruit of undergoing one year of *kṛcchra* in single bathing, as compensation for those who could not carry out 1080 *prājāpatya kṛcchras*, which is possible [to carry out] in twelve years, for the removal of all sins such as great sins, etc.¹³

It should be noted, however, that some texts prescribe a maximum number of *yojanas* for a *yātrā*, above which the benefit derived from each *yojana* declines. Even then, some particular trans-India journeys make an exception to this rule, such as the journey from the Gaṅgā to Rāmeśvaram, and from the Vindhya mountain-range (in the middle of the sub-continent) to Kedāra in the extreme north or to Rāmeśvaram in the extreme south (Salomon 1979: 126–27).

Some general aspects and conditions for *tīrthayātrā*

According to the scriptures, one precondition for a successful pilgrimage is the pilgrim's faith. In fact, faith is essential for performing any rite, otherwise, no ritual will yield its fruit.¹⁴ The *Nārada-purāṇa* and the *Vāyupurāṇa* state:

A steadfast man visiting *tīrthas* with faith and controlling his senses would be purified even if he has been guilty of sins; [and if so,] what is there to say about him whose actions have been pure? One who has no faith, who has committed many sins, whose mind is not free from doubts [about the rewards of pilgrimages and the rites there], who is an atheist, and who

13 *Bhāratasthalayātrā*, pp. 62–63: ... *mahāpātakādi samastapāpakṣayārthaṃ ratnākara mahodadhi saṅgame rāmacandra dhanuṣkoṭau triguṇita dvādaśābdaśādhyaṇaśītyuttara sahasra saṃkhyāka prājāpatya kṛcchrān, svarūpataḥ anuṣṭhātum aśaktyā tatpratyaṃnāyatvena ekasānānena abdakṛcchrāphalapradāyāṃ śrīrāmacandra dhanuṣkoṭyāṃ śaṭtriṃśatsaṃkhyāka snānarūpa mahāprāyaścitta karma kariṣye.*

In general, observing 1080 *prājāpatya kṛcchras* is considered *mahāprāyaścitta*, and takes 36 years to complete. Taking a bath in Dhanuṣkoṭi yields the fruit of observing a year of *prājāpatya kṛcchra*. Therefore, those who cannot perform the *mahāprāyaścitta* as it is can compensate for it by taking 36 bathings in Dhanuṣkoṭi.

14 This is stated, for example, in the *Smṛtisārasamuccaya*, quoted in the *Vīramitrodaya* (1987, p. 14): *mantra tīrthe dvije deve daivajñe bheṣaje gurau | yādṛśī bhāvanā yasya siddhir bhavati tādṛśī || anena śraddhayā phalāvāptir iti spaṣṭīkṛtam |* “Just according to one's thought or faith on mantras, pilgrimage, brahmin, God, fortune-teller, physician and teacher, his fruit will be such. With that it is clarified—[one] obtains the fruit by faith.”

is examining on bad reasoning—these five do not reap the rewards of pilgrimages.¹⁵

The *Vāyupurāṇa*¹⁶ prescribes the following general conditions, “Those who wish to perform the *tīrthaśrāddha* should abandon desire, anger, and greed, and should have truthfulness and compassion.” The *Mahābhārata* speaks in a similar vein, setting the greatest emphasis on the cultivation of high moral and spiritual qualities, if the complete reward of pilgrimages is to be reaped:

He whose hands, feet, and mind are well controlled and who possesses knowledge, austerities, and good fame derives the [full] reward of pilgrimages. He who is away from receiving gifts and is content with what little he gets and controlled, and he who is free from hypocrisy (or deceit) obtain the rewards of pilgrimages. He who is free from impurities, self-supported, (not engaged in wicked undertakings for earning), moderate in diet, has subdued his senses, and is [therefore] free from all sins, obtains the rewards of pilgrimages. He who is free from anger, firm in protecting truth, and seeing himself in all beings will obtain the rewards of pilgrimages.¹⁷

Thus, the general idea seems to be that pilgrimages may help to remove the sins of men who do not possess the above characteristics, while those who possess these acquire a great amount of merit in addition. To this should be added that, according to the *Nāradaṭpurāṇa*, if one undertakes the pilgrimage incidentally, he gets only half of the ‘fruit,’ and if one goes on pilgrimage for the sake of others, one will

15 *Vāyupurāṇa* 77.125–27: *tīrthānyanusaran dhīra śraddhadhāno jitendriyaḥ | kṛtapāpo viśuddhyeta kiṃ punaḥ śubhakarmakṛt ||*

Also, *Nāradaṭpurāṇa* II, 62.15c–17b: *tīrthāny anusarandhīraḥ śraddhadhānaḥ samāhitaḥ | akalpako nirārambho laghvāhāro jitendriyaḥ || vimuktaḥ sarvasaṅgais tu sa tīrthaphalabhāg bhavet | tīrthāny anusarandhīraḥ śraddhadhānaḥ samāhitaḥ || kṛtapāpo viśuddhyet tu kiṃ punaḥ śuddhakarmakṛt | aśraddhadhānaḥ pāpārto nāstiko cchinnasaṁśayaḥ || hetuniṣṭhaś ca pañcaite na tīrthaphalabhāgīnaḥ | nṛṇāṃ pāpakṛtāḥ tīrthe pāpasya śamaṇaḥ bhavet || aśraddhadhānaḥ pāpmāno nāstikā sthitasamśayaḥ | hetudraṣṭā ca pañcaite na tīrthaphalabhāgīnaḥ ||*

16 *Vāyupurāṇa* 105.40–41: *tīrthaśrāddhaṃ prayacchadbhiḥ puruṣaiḥ phalakāṅkṣibhiḥ | kāmāṃ krodhāṃ tathā lobhāṃ tyaktvā kāryā kriyā ‘nīsam || brahmacāryekabhojī ca bhūṣāyī satyavākśuciḥ | sarvabhūtaḥ raktāḥ sa tīrthaphalamāśnute ||*

17 *Mahābhārata*, *Āraṇyakaparva*, (*Tīrthayātrāparvan*) 80.30–33: *yasya hastau ca pādaḥ ca manas caiva saṁnyatam | vidyā tapaś ca kīrtiś ca sa tīrthaphalam āśnute || pratigraḥ upāvṛttaḥ saṁtuṣṭo niyataḥ śuciḥ | ahaṃkāraṇivṛttaś ca sa tīrthaphalam āśnute || akalkako nirārambho laghvāhāro jitendriyaḥ | vimuktaḥ sarvadoṣair yaḥ sa tīrthaphalam āśnute || akrodhanaś ca rājendra satyaśīlo dṛḍhavrataḥ | ātmopamaś ca bhūteṣu sa tīrthaphalam āśnute ||*

get the fruit of one-sixteenth of a pilgrimage.¹⁸ The *Tristhalīsetusārasaṅgraha*,¹⁹ while explaining the word ‘*prasaṅgena*’ as ‘*vāṇijyārājasevādīprasaṅgena*’, i.e., as part of his trade or official duties, states that bathing at a pilgrimage site while on a work assignment and not as a part of a pilgrimage *per se* accrues only a marginal merit.

There are several preconditions for pilgrimage. One major condition is the presence of the pilgrim’s wife. This is not unique to pilgrimage, as any religious activity, including pilgrimage, is to be performed along with one’s wife. In fact, according to the *Padmapurāṇa*, if a man performs any dhārmic activity without his wife, the same will yield no fruit.²⁰ An example for this is found in Vālmiki’s *Rāmāyaṇa*, where, while preparing for the *aśvamedha* sacrifice, Rāma instructs Bharata to make a golden statue of Sītā as a substitute for her person, since she was not with him at that time.²¹ Specifically with regard to pilgrimage, the *Brahmapurāṇa*, as quoted in the *Tristhalīsetusārasaṅgraha*,²² elaborates: “[by] leaving one’s wife and undertaking a pilgrimage, all one’s virtuous results are in vain.”

Another general aspect of pilgrimage is related to one’s means of transportation. Although nowadays long-distance pilgrimage journeys are most often done by railway, bus, or car, traditionally, pilgrimage was to be done only on foot. For example, the *Nāradaṭpurāṇa* states that if one goes on a pilgrimage using vehicles out of feelings of supremacy, desire, or ignorance, his pilgrimage is fruitless, and therefore he has to abandon the journey.²³ The *Viramītrodaya* further states—if one undertakes a pilgrimage on a cow as a vehicle, he will be considered a murderer of a cow.²⁴ Also, there is no fruit from the [pilgrimage] if going on a horse,

18 *Nāradaṭpurāṇa* II, 63.37: *ardhaṃ tīrthaphalaṃ tasya yaḥ prasaṅgena gacchati | ṣoḍaśāṃśantu labhate yaḥ parārthena gacchati ||*

19 *Tristhalīsetusārasaṅgraha*, p. 2: *tīrthaṃ prāpya prasaṅgena snānaṃ tīrthe samācāret | snānaṃ phalaṃ āpnoti tīrthayātrākṛtaṃ na tu ||*

“If someone goes to a pilgrimage place incidentally and bathes, he will get the fruit of taking bath in the sacred bathing not the fruit of pilgrimage.”

20 *Padmapurāṇa*, *Bhūmikhaṇḍa*, 59.8: *pūtāṃ puṇyatamāṃ bhāryāṃ tyaktvā prayāti yaḥ | tasya puṇyaphalaṃ sarvaṃ vṛthā bhavati nānyathā || [...] bhāryāṃ vinā ca yo dharmāḥ sa eva viphalo bhavet |*

21 Rāma conducted the *aśvamedha* with the statue as a substitute of Sītā, saying (*Rāmāyaṇa*, *Uttarakhaṇḍa*, 91.25): “the golden image of my wife [Sītā] to be initiated at the sacrifice, let illustrious Bharata go before.” *kāñcanīm mama patnīm ca dīkṣārhaṇ yaḥ | agrato bhārataḥ kṛtvā gacchatv agre mahāyasaḥ ||*

22 *Tristhalīsetusārasaṅgraha*, p. 1: *pūtāṃ puṇyatamāṃ bhāryāṃ yo vā tyaktvā prayāti hi | tasya puṇyaphalaṃ sarvaṃ vṛthā bhavati nānyathā ||*

23 *Nāradaṭpurāṇa* II, 62.33–34: *aśvāyāḥ lobhamohād vā gacched yānena yo naraḥ | niṣphalaṃ tasya tattīrthaṃ tasmād yānaṃ vivarjayet || goyāne govadhāḥ prokto hayayāne tu niṣphalaḥ | narayāne tadardhaṃ syāt padbhyaṃ tac ca caturguṇam ||*

24 *Viramītrodaya*, p. 34: *goyāne govadhāḥ prokto hayayāne tu niṣphalaḥ | narayāne tadardhaṃ syāt padbhyaṃ tac ca caturguṇam ||*

and if someone uses a human being as a vehicle, he will get half the fruit; if one goes on foot, he will obtain four times of the fruit [of pilgrimage]. But, the *Kūrmapurāṇa* quoted in the *Viramitrodaya* says that if someone is not able to go on pilgrimage due to health, he is allowed to go in a vehicle drawn by humans, a mule, chariot attached with horses, and that will not be considered as a fault.²⁵

When going on pilgrimage, there is the question regarding the identity of the priests—should one bring one's own priests, who, naturally, belong to the same tradition, or should one use local priests? The latter option is the one endorsed by several digests, such as the *Kṛtyakalpataru*²⁶ that says, quoting from *Devīpurāṇa* on *tīrtha*, that one should not enter upon an examination of the worth of *brāhmaṇas* at holy places. At the same time, *brāhmaṇas* who are known for certain to possess defects deserving of condemnation should be avoided. Another example is found in the *Varāhapurāṇa*, which, with regard to the Mathurā pilgrimage, says that at Mathurā a pilgrim should prefer to honour a *brāhmaṇa* born and brought up in Mathurā over a *brāhmaṇa* who has studied all the four Vedas (but is a stranger to Mathurā). Those who reside in Mathurā, indeed, are in the form of Viṣṇu, the wise men see him as [Viṣṇu] and the ignorant see him as not.²⁷

Places of pilgrimage

How does a place become a pilgrimage destination? The *Mahābhārata* explains why some parts of the earth, or some waterbodies, are considered holy: “Just as some parts of the body (right hand or ear) are held to be purer [than other body parts], similarly, some localities on earth are held to be holy, and some places are graced by *sādhus* with their brilliance, therefore, those parts of the land and the water bodies are sacred.”²⁸ Thus, *tīrthas* are held to be holy on three grounds: on account of some wonderful natural characteristic of the locality, on account of the peculiar nature of some watery place, or because some gods or sages resorted to them for bathing, austerities, and so on. A similar statement is

25 *Viramitrodaya*, p. 34: *narayānaṃ cāśvatārī hayādisahito rathaḥ | tīrthayātrāsvasaktānāṃ yānaṃ doṣakaraṃ na hi ||*

26 *Kṛtyakalpataru*, p. 10: *tīrtheṣu brāhmaṇaṃ naiva parīkṣyeta kathañcana |*

27 *Varāhapurāṇa* 165.57–58: *caturvedaṃ paritayajya māthuraṃ pūjayet sadā | māthurāyāṃ ye vasanti viṣṇurūpā hi te narāḥ || jñāinas tān hi paśyanti ajñā paśyanti tān na hi |*

28 *Mahābhārata*, *Anuśāsanaparva* 108.16–18: *śarīrasya yathoddeśā śucayaḥ parikīrtitā | tathā prthivyā bhāgās ca puṇyāni salilāni ca || parigrahāc ca sādḥnām prthivyāś caiva tejasā | atīva puṇyabhāgās te salilasya ca tejasā ||*

found in the *Nāradaṭpurāṇa*, which explains the greatness of pilgrimage in the following passages:

Please hear the reason for the holiness of *tīrthas* on earth. Just as some spots in the body are remembered as important/superior, *tīrthas* are declared as holy because of the supernatural power, glory of the earth or water, and also because of the grace of seers.²⁹

As the name *tīrtha* (“crossing”) may suggest, many of the pilgrimage sites are connected to waterbodies. Thus, we find the following statement in the *Śaṅkhasmṛti*. A Hindu scripture outlines the duties and rituals for different stages of life: “All the springs and mountains are sacred, all rivers are sacred especially the Jāhnavī (i.e., Gaṅgā).”³⁰

The names of many pilgrimage sites are listed in the epics and the Purāṇas. These lists vary from text to text. In the *Mahābhārata*’s *Aranyaparva*, for example, there is a very long list of *tīrthas*, running for about 500 verses, spread over four chapters (80–83), in which are given the names of the *tīrthas*, their speciality, the fruit of taking a bath there, specific people who benefited by taking a bath and worshipping in those places, the bathing procedure, and so on. The list ends with the advice of sage Pulastya to Kauravya [viz. Bhīṣma]: “Therefore, O Kauravya (Yudhiṣṭhira), you also should undertake the pilgrimage [...] to please your ancestors, the gods and the ṛṣis.”³¹

A later example can be found in Śrīdhara’s twelfth-century *Smṛtyarthasāra*, which lists thirty-eight places as sacred and as those that yield liberation in an equal manner to Gayā:

By worshipping the following liberation-yielding places, one will obtain the [fruit of] taking bath in Gayā, they are: Gayā, Mahānādī, Seturāmeśvara, Someśvara, Bhīmeśvara, Śrīraṅga, Puruṣottama [in] Padmanābha,

29 *Nāradaṭpurāṇa*, Uttarakhaṇḍa 62.46–47: *bhaumānām atha tīrthānām puṇyatve kāraṇam śṛṇu | yathā śarīrasyoddeśāḥ kecin mukhyatamāḥ smṛtāḥ || prabhāvād adbhutād bhūmeḥ salilasya ca tejasah | parigrahān munīnām ca tīrthānām puṇyatā smṛtā ||*

30 *Śaṅkhasmṛti* quoted in *Vīramitrodaya* VII (1987, p. 14): *sarve prasraṇāḥ puṇyāḥ sarve puṇyāḥ śiloccayāḥ | nadyaḥ puṇyāḥ sadā sarvā jāhnavī tu viśeṣataḥ ||*

31 *Mahābhārata*, *Aranyaparva* 83.90–94: *evaṃ tvam api kauravya vidhinānena suvrata | vraja tīrthāni niyataḥ puṇyam puṇyena vardhate || bhāvitaiḥ kāraṇaiḥ pūrvam āstikyāc chrutidarśanāt | prāpyante tāni tīrthāni sadbhīḥ śiṣṭānudarśibhiḥ || nāvratō nākṛtātmā ca nāśucir na ca taskarah | snāti tīrtheṣu kauravya na ca vakramatirnarah || tvayā tu samyagvṛttena nityam dharmārthadarśinā | pitarastāritāstāta sarve ca prapitāmahāḥ || pitāmahapurogāś ca devāḥ sarśigaṇā nṛpa | tava dharmeṇa dharmajñā nityam evābhtoṣitāḥ ||*

Naimiśa, Badaryāśrama, Puṇyāraṇya, Dharmāraṇya, Kurukṣetra, Śrīśaila, Mahālaya, Kedāra, Puṣkara, Rudrakoṭi, Narmadā, Āmrātakeśvara, Kubjāmra, Kokamukha, Prabhāsa, Vijayeśa, Purīndra, Pañcanada, Gokarṇa, Śaṅkukarṇa, Bhadrakarṇa, Ayodhyā, Mathurā, Dvāravatī, Māyā, Avantī, Gayā, Kāñci, Śālagrāma, Śambhalagrāma, Kambalagrāma, and others. Vārāṇasī is the superior among them.³²

Rāmeśvaram sacred sand and Gaṅgā holy water

1) The story

The Rāmeśvaram-Gaṅgā pilgrimage includes a visit to either Prayāga or Vārāṇasī (and sometimes to Gayā as well), after which one is to return to Rāmeśvaram again. In the current chapter, Prayāga is considered the main destination, given the larger number of sources that suggest it as the place for the specific practices of this pilgrimage: in addition to the regular ritual procedures in each of the sites, this pilgrimage also includes the carrying of sand from Rāmeśvaram to the Gaṅgā and taking back Gaṅgā water to Rāmeśvaram. This is explained by an oral tradition, which is claimed to belong to the ninth *skanda* (“canto”) of the *Śrīmadbhāgavatapurāṇa*, as part of the story of the origin of Gaṅgā.³³

According to the legend, the great king Sagara of Ikṣvāku dynasty was ruling Ayodhyā. He had two wives, namely Keśinī and Sumatī. Keśinī had a son called Asamanjasa, while Sumatī was blessed with sixty thousand sons. Once, Sagara performed the *aśvamedha* sacrifice and, as a part of the ritual, the sacrificial horse was to be released to wander in the nearby kingdoms. The Kings of those kingdoms had to either surrender and offer gifts or tie the wandering horse and fight the King. The sacrificial horse, after passing through many kingdoms,

32 *Smṛtyarthasāra* (1912, p. 152): *gayāṃ mahānadīṃ seturāmeśvaram someśvaram bhīmeśvaram śrīraṅgaṃ padmanābhaṃ puruṣottamaṃ naimiśaṃ badaryāśramaṃ puṇyāraṇyaṃ dharmāraṇyaṃ kurukṣetraṃ śrīśailaṃ mahālayaṃ kedāraṃ puṣkaraṃ rudrakoṭiṃ narmadāṃ āmrātakeśvaraṃ kubjāmraṃ kokamukhaṃ prabhāsaṃ vijayeśaṃ purīndraṃ pañcanadaṃ gokarṇaṃ śaṅkukarṇaṃ bhadrakarṇaṃ ayodhyāṃ mathurāṃ dvāravatīṃ māyāmavantīṃ gayāṃ kāñciṃ śālagrāmaṃ śambhalagrāmaṃ kambalagrāmamevamādi muktikṣetrāṇi saṃsevyā labhate gayāsnānam | sarveṣāṃ vārāṇasī viśiṣṭaiva |*

33 While this section indeed tells a very similar story, the crucial difference is that, in the current text, Kapila muni’s *āśrama* is in the “north-east” and not in Rāmeśvaram (*Śrīmadbhāgavatapurāṇa* 9.8.9).

eventually arrived at the *āśrama* (hermitage) of Kapila Muni (“sage Kapila”) which is believed to be in Rāmeśvaram.

Kapila Muni was seated in a state of silence, when the sixty thousand sons of Sagara came looking for the horse. Assuming that Kapila Muni, who was sitting with his eyes closed, have captured the horse, they shouted at him, disturbing his transcendental state. Enraged at being disturbed, the sage opened his eyes, resulting in sixty thousand sons of Sagara burning down to ashes. Sagara, who was worried for his sons, sent his grandson, Aṁśumantha (son of Asamanjasa), to find the whereabouts of his sixty thousand sons and the sacrificial horse. Aṁśumantha reached the Kapila’s *āśrama* and learned about the incident. Sage Kapila advised him that only the celestial river Gaṅgā can wash off the sins of his uncles. So Gaṅgā had to flow over the heap of ash. Then Sagara, his son Asamanjasa, Aṁśumantha, and his son Dilīpa, made many attempts to bring the celestial Gaṅgā down, but failed. Finally, King Bhagīratha, the son of Dilīpa, took up the task, performed a severe penance, and was successful. He routed the Gaṅgā to the ocean (*sāgara*), which is now called the Bay of Bengal. It is further said that Gaṅgā, after it enters the ocean, used to touch the shore in Rāmeśvaram near *agnitīrtha*, where the ashes of the ancestors of Bhagīratha were present. However, in Treta Yuga, when Rāma and his army of monkeys (*vānarasenā*) built the bridge to Laṅkā, Gaṅgā could no longer reach the sands of Rāmeśvaram. Hence it was made a custom for the pilgrims to carry some sand from *agnitīrtha*, which holds the ashes of Sagara’s sixty thousand sons, to Kāśī, and immerse it in Gaṅgā’s waters.

The reason for carrying back some Gaṅgā water and using them to anoint Śrī Rāmanāthasvāmi, the deity of Rāmeśvaram temple, is further explained. As time went by, not only the waters of Gaṅgā could not reach Rāmeśvaram, but also many other rivers appeared, which were draining out into the Bay of Bengal, such as the Godāvārī, Kṛṣṇā, and Kāverī. Thus, it was no longer a “Gaṅgā ocean” (Gaṅgā Sāgara); it became the confluence of many rivers, apart from Gaṅgā. Therefore, pilgrims bring real Gaṅgā water, unmixed with other rivers’ water, in order to immerse the ashes of Sagara’s sons in Kapila’s *āśrama* at Rāmeśvaram.

Thus, the mythological explanation of the complementary acts of immersing southern sand in northern waters and pouring back northern waters on southern sands (by anointing the image of God in Rāmeśvaram), is a continuation of an ancient ancestral rite, performed to liberate the sons of the ancient King Sagara.

2) Rāmeśvarayātrā

There are certain preparatory rituals and procedures to be performed prior to undertaking any pilgrimage, one of the most common being *śraddha*—an offering

to one's ancestors (made on any auspicious occasion). The *Brahmapurāṇa*, for example, says:

Before commencing the pilgrimage and after returning from it, one should perform *vrddhi-śrāddha* with a great quantity of ghee.³⁴

The *Vāyupurāṇa* says, in the context of pilgrimage to Gayā:

Those who have undertaken the pilgrimage to Gayā should perform *śrāddha* accordingly, dressed in ragged garments, circumambulating the village. They should proceed to the next village and consume the remainder of the *śrāddha*, then every day they should continue the journey without receiving any gifts. They will obtain the fruit of performing the horse sacrifice in each step he proceeds to *tīrthayātrā*.³⁵

With regard to the visit to Rāmeśvaram (“setu”), the *Skandapurāṇa* suggests another variation, and adds fasting and worship of Gaṇapati:

He who wishes to undertake a pilgrimage should fast on the previous day, at home, and worship Lord Gaṇeśa, the ancestors, brahmins, and the [other] relatives, according to his capacity. Having completed the fasting, he should start [the journey] happily. After returning from the pilgrimage, he should perform the *śrāddha* to his ancestors and thus he will obtain the fruit.³⁶

The procedure of pilgrimage to Setu (viz. Rāmeśvaram) is prescribed in the chapter called “Setuyātrākrama” in the *Skandapurāṇa*:

On the next day, after the personal purification, one should make a *saṅkalpa*: “I will undertake a pilgrimage to Setu” (*setuyātrām kariṣye 'haṃ*) and then, while reciting *aṣṭākṣara/pañcākṣara* mantras, with minimal consumption of food and controlled senses, he should depart to Setu (Rāmeśvaram). On his way, the pilgrim should read the glory of Setu

34 *Brahmapurāṇa*, as quoted in the *Vīramitrodaya* VII (p. 26): *tīrthayātrāsamārambhe tīrthāt pratyāgame 'pi ca | vrddhiśrāddhaṃ prakurvīta bahusarpīḥ samanvitam |*

35 As quoted in the *Vīramitrodaya* VII (p. 29).

36 *Skandapurāṇa* quoted in *Tristhalīsetu* (1915, p. 4): *tīrthayātrām cikīrṣuḥ prāgvid-hāyopoṣaṇaṃ grhe | gaṇeśaṃ ca piṭṛn viprān bandhūn chaktyā prapūjya ca || kṛta-pāraṇako hr̥ṣṭo gacchen niyamadhṛk punaḥ | āgatyābhyarcya ca piṭṛn yathoktaphal-abhāg bhavet ||*

(*setumāhātmyam*) or *Rāmāyaṇa* or *Purāṇas*, and refrain from unnecessary talk. In addition, he should give alms (*dāna*) to mendicants.³⁷

As stated in the *Bhāratasthala-yātrā* (pp. 47ff.), in Rāmeśvaram, the pilgrim should first bathe in the sea, at the place where the bridge (*setu*) was built to Laṅkā. After bathing, he should draw a bow on the sea sand, place a fruit on it and make a *tarpaṇa*³⁸ with sesame seeds to gods, *ṛṣis*, ancestors. He should offer the sand (on which the *tarpaṇa* has been performed) in the water which was collected from the shore, which is called *pāśāṇadāna* there. Having done that, he has to offer water from his hairlocks (*śikhodakam*) and his garments (*vāsodakam*), as a mark of the completion of ceremonial bathing. He then recites Gāyatrī-mantra and offer gifts to a Brahmin. Similarly, he has to make a *saṅkalpa*, *snāna*, *tarpaṇa* and *dāna* in each of the baths in the sacred tanks in the following stage of the visit (there are different fruits of taking a bath in each of the tanks). Then, he should make a *mahāsaṅkalpa* and, along with his wife, take a bath, for the uninterrupted completion of the pilgrimage.

The next part consists of taking baths and performing rituals in the various *tīrthas* in and around Rāmeśvaram. The pilgrim should first go, along with his wife, to Ādisetu,³⁹ and worship lord Gaṇeśa. He should then make a *saṅkalpa* and pray to all gods and the gods of the directions, to allow them to take a bath in all of Rāmeśvaram's *tīrthas*, starting from Cakratīrtha up to Dhanuṣkoṭī-tīrtha. There are sixty-four tanks in total, out of which twenty-two (see Fig. 1) are present inside the temple (some people prefer a dip in all the sixty-four tanks and some only in the temple's twenty-two tanks).⁴⁰

37 *Skandapurāṇa*, *Setuyātrākramavidhi* 51.5–10: *setuyātrām karīṣye'ham iti saṅkalpya bhaktitaḥ | svagr̥hāt pravrajān maunī japann aṣṭākṣaram manum || pañcākṣaram nāmamantram japeṇ nīyatamānasaḥ | ekavāram haviṣyāśi jitakrodho jitenḍriyaḥ || pādukāchattrarahitastāmbūlaparivarjitaḥ | tailābhyaṅgavihīnaś ca strīsaṅgādi vivarjitaḥ || madhye mārgaṃ paṭhan nityaṃ setumāhātmyam ādarāt | paṭhan rāmāyaṇaṃ vāpi purāṇāntaram eva vā || vyarthavākyāni santyajya setuṃ gacched viśuddhaye |*

38 *Tarpaṇa* (literally “satisfying”) is a libation of water to the gods and deceased ancestors.

39 Ādisetu is a strip of land about one km wide and about fifteen km long on the eastern end that resembles an arrow poised for release. On one side of it is the Indian Ocean and on the other—the Bay of Bengal.

40 Currently there are twenty-two sacred wells inside the Rāmanāthasvāmi temple in Rāmeśvaram; they are: Śiva-tīrtha, Mahālakṣmī-tīrtha, Gāyatrī-tīrtha, Śaṅku-tīrtha, Sarasvatī-tīrtha, Sethumādhava-tīrtha, Kavaca-tīrtha, Gandhamādana-tīrtha, Gavaya-tīrtha, Nala-tīrtha, Nīla-tīrtha, Cakra-tīrtha, Brahmahattvivimocana-tīrtha, Sāvitrī-tīrtha, Sūriya-tīrtha, Candra-tīrtha, Gaṅgā-tīrtha, Yamuna-tīrtha, Gayā-tīrtha, Sadyamṛta-tīrtha, Sarva-tīrtha and Koṭi-tīrtha. The *Skandapurāṇa* (*Brahmakhaṇḍa*, *Setumāhātmya* 2. 104–14) lists the following twenty-four sacred ponds in Rāmeśvaram: *caturviṃśatitīrthāni santi setau pradhānataḥ | prathamāṇi cakratīrthaṃ syād vetāla-varadantataḥ || tataḥ pāpavināśākhyam tīrthaṃ lokeṣu viśrutam | tataḥ sītāsaraḥ*

At the end, one should go to Dhanuṣkoṭi and make a *mahāsaṅkalpa*:

For the expiation of all sins such as great sins (*mahāpātaka*), I shall perform the great atonement in the form of thirty-six baths in Dhanuṣkoṭi of Sri Rāmacandra, which bestows the fruits of performing 1080 *prājāpatya kṛcchra* undertaken in three times twelve (i.e., thirty-six) years of performance, of those who cannot undertake [that many *kṛcchra*] as that much, as a substitute here [in Dhanuṣkoṭi] by one bathing will yield the fruit of undertaking *kṛcchra* for one year, in that manner [I will perform] thirty-six bathings.⁴¹

In all the above-mentioned *tīrthas*, one should perform *tīrtha-śrāddha* individually; if not possible, one can perform a single *śrāddha* by offering (*piṇḍas*) with cooked rice.

In addition to these, one should, of course, worship the main deity of the temple, that is, Śiva as Rāmanāthasvāmi.

3) Rāmeśvaram sacred sand and Gaṅgā holy water

From the sea near Dhanuṣkoṭi/Rameśvaram, one should collect the sand (see Fig. 2) and divide it into three lumps. One should invoke the first one as *setu-mādhava*, the second as *bindu-mādhava*, and the third as *veṇī-mādhava*, worship them in the place of Setumādhava shrine (i.e., in Rāmeśvaram) and then disperse the first one (viz. *setu-mādhava*) in the Rāmeśvaram sea. The second one, *bindu-mādhava*, is given as a gift (*dāna*), along with money, to a *brāhmaṇa*.⁴² The third sand lump,

puṇyaṃ tato maṅgalatīrthakam || tatas sakalapāpaghnī nāmnācā'mṛtavāpikā | brahmakuṇḍaṃ tatas tīrthaṃ tataḥ kuṇḍaṃ hanūmataḥ || āgastyāṃ hi tatas tīrthaṃ rāmatīrthamataḥ param | tato lakṣmaṇatīrthaḥ syāj jaṭatīrtham ataḥ param || tato lakṣmyāḥ paran tīrtham agnitīrtham ataḥ param | cakratīrthan tataḥ puṇyaṃ śivatīrthamataḥ param || tatas śaṅkhābhidhan tīrthaṃ tato yamunatīrthakam | gaṅgātīrthan-tataḥ paścādgayātīrthamanantaram || tataḥ syāt koṭitīrthākhyāṃ sādhyānām amṛtaṃ tataḥ | manasākhyān tatas tīrthaṃ dhanuṣkoṭistataḥ param || pradhānatīrthāny etāni mahāpāpaharāṇi ca | kathitāni dvijaśreṣṭhās setumadhyagatāni vai ||

41 *Bhāratasthalaṭyātrā*, p. 62–63: [...] *mahāpātakādisamastapāpakṣayārthaṃ ratnākaramahodadhisāṅgame rāmacandradhanuṣkoṭau triguṇita dvādaśābdaśādhyaṇ aśītyuttarasahasrasaṃkhyāka prājāpatyakṛcchrān svarūpataḥ anuṣṭhātum aśaktyā tatpratyaṃnāyatvena ekasānānena abdakṛcchrāphalaprādāyāṃ śrīrāmacandradhanuṣkoṭyāṃ śaṭtriṃśatsaṃkhyāka snānarūpamahāprāyaścittakarma kariṣye |*

42 This is what is currently being practised. However, the *Skandapurāṇa* dealing with this issue can be understood to mean that one sand lump is to be dispersed (as *Veṇīmādhava*) in Prayāga and another in *Bindumādhava* in Vārāṇasī.



Fig. 1 *Sarvatīrtha* one of the twenty-two *tīrthas* inside the Rāmanāthasvāmi temple. Photo by R. Sathyanarayanan.



Fig. 2 Pilgrims are doing *sankalpa* at Rāmeśvaram to undertake a pilgrimage to Prayāga after collecting sand (invoking as three Mādhavas: Setumādhava, Bindumādhava and Veṇimādhava) from Dhanuṣkoṭi. Photo by R. Sathyanarayanan.

called *venī-mādhava*, is to be taken to Prayāga and dispersed in the water of the Gaṅgā there. Early evidence of this practice of carrying sand from Rāmeśvaram to the Gaṅgā and bringing the holy water Gaṅgā to Rāmeśvaram appears in the *Skandapurāṇa*:

If a man takes sand from Setu (viz. Rāmeśvaram) and disperses it in the Gaṅgā, having divided it, in Mādhavapura—he will reside [after his death] in Mādhava’s city, [Vaikuṇṭha]. [If] a learned person, who wishes to go to the Gaṅgā, sets off toward the Gaṅgā after having made a *saṅkalpa* at Setumādhava shrine,⁴³ that pilgrimage will be fruitful. Also, [if] one brings [back] Gaṅgā water, anoints Rāmeśa [with it], and pours it at Setu, he will, by all means, obtain the *brahman*.⁴⁴

This passage from the *Setumāhātmya* may be the source for the present-day practice of the Rāmeśvaram-Gaṅgā *yātrā*.

4) Prayāgayātrā

Having completed the pilgrimage to Rāmeśvaram, the next stop in the Rāmeśvaram-Gaṅgā *yātrā* is the conjunction of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā in Prayāga (the present day Prayagraj/Allahabad). The importance and greatness of Prayāga has been stated already in the supplementary (*pariśiṣṭa*) verses to the *Ṛgveda*:

Those who take a bath in the confluence where the white and black rivers (viz. Gaṅgā and Yamunā) meet—go to the heavens. The brave men who abandon their bodies [there]—will enjoy immortality.⁴⁵

43 This beautiful Setumādhava temple is located inside the complex of the Rāmanāthasvāmi temple in Rāmeśvaram.

44 *Skandapurāṇam, Setumāhātmya*, 50.112–15: *grhītvā saikataṃ setoḥ gaṅgāyāṃ nīkṣīped yadi | vibhajya mādhavapure vaikuṇṭhe sa vasen naraḥ || gaṅgā jigamiṣur vipraḥ setumādhavasannidhau | saṅkalpya gaṅgāṃ nīgacchet sā yātrā saphalā bhavet || ānya gaṅgāsālilāṃ rāmeśam abhiṣicya ca | setau nīkṣīpya tadbhāraṃ brahma prāpnoty asaṃśayaḥ ||*

45 *Ṛgveda-pariśiṣṭha* 22.1 (p. 779 in Satwelkar’s 1957 edition of the RV): *sītāsīte sarite yatra saṃgathe tatrāplutāso divam utpatanti | ye vai tanvaṃ vi sṛjanti dhīrā ste janāso amṛtatvaṃ bhajante ||*

Here the word *dhīrāḥ* may also indicate the forceful abandoning of their life (suicide), but still, it is not a fault (although suicide is considered a crime according the *Dharmaśāstra*). Perhaps we can also understand this passage as saying—“If one stays here until one dies.”

On the day before this pilgrimage, one should shave, fast, and perform the ancestral *śrāddha* with ghee. The pilgrim should make the following *saṅkalpa*:

I along with my wife undertake the pilgrimage to Prayāga (Prayāgayātrā) for the removal of physical, verbal, and mental sins committed in this birth and in any other births, and also for obtaining the eternal worlds of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and others, by lifting my ancestors from different hells.⁴⁶

The sequence of procedure to be followed in Prayāga is given thus: “First one has to plunge into the water [in the holy river], then shave one’s hair and then he has to take a bath. Afterwards, he should perform the *śrāddha*.”⁴⁷

The practice of shaving one’s hair is not uncommon in the context of pilgrimage. In fact, according to *Tristhalīsetusārasaṅgraha*, “shaving and fasting in all pilgrimage places is common except Kurukṣetra, the wide Virajā, and Gayā.”⁴⁸ At the same time, shaving one’s hair is regarded sinful in non-ritual contexts. Thus, the *Tristhalīsetusārasaṅgraha* also states that “he who shaves the hair without [the context of] a pilgrimage, or a *yajña*, or the death of his parents—he is [like] a son who committed patricide.”⁴⁹ The reason for shaving one’s hair is clearly stated in the *Bhāratasthalaṅkāra*: “Any sins similar to that of great sins (*brahmahatyā*...) are resting in the hair, therefore one has to shave the hair.”⁵⁰

Going back to the Prayāga pilgrimage—after shaving the head, one begins the rituals with the following *saṅkalpa*: “For the removal of all my sins committed physically, verbally, and mentally, in this birth or in any other births, for lifting my ancestors from the different hells, and for obtaining the eternal worlds of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and others—I undertake the *prayāga yātrā*.”⁵¹

46 *Bhāratasthalaṅkāra*, p. 2.: [...] *mama sapatnīkasya iha janmani janmāntare ca kāyika vācika mānasika sakalapāpakṣayārthaṃ—asmadpitṛṇāṃ nānānirayoddhāraṇadvārā śāśvata brahmaviṣṇvādilokaprāptyarthaṃ ca prayāgayātrāṃ kariṣye.*

47 *Bhāratasthalaṅkāra*, p. 6 fn.1: *pūrvam vagāhanaṃ tīrthe muṇḍanaṃ tadanantaram. tataḥ snānādikaṃ kuryāt paścāc chrāddhaṃ samācaret ||*

48 *Tristhalīsetusārasaṅgraha* (1936, p. 9): *muṇḍanaṃ copavāsaś ca sarvatīrtheṣvayaṃ vidhiḥ | varjayitvā kurukṣetraṃ viśalaṃ virajāṃ gayāṃ ||*

49 *Tristhalīsetusārasaṅgraha* (1936, p. 10): *vinā tīrthaṃ vinā yajñaṃ mātāpitror mṛtiṃ vinā | yo vāpayati lomāni sa putraḥ pitṛghātaḥ ||*

50 *Bhāratasthalaṅkāra* (1971, p. 2): *yāni kāni ca pāpāni brahmahatyā samāni ca | keśānāśrītya tiṣṭhanti tasmāt keśān vapāmy aham ||*

51 *Bhāratasthalaṅkāra*, p. 2: [...] *mama iha janmani janmāntare ca kāyikavācikamānasika-sakalapāpakṣayārthaṃ—asmadpitṛṇāṃ nānānirayoddhāradvārā śāśvata brahmaloka prāptyarthaṃ ca prayāgayātrāṃ kariṣye.*

In Prayāga, one offers one's hair at the confluence of the three (Gaṅgā, Yamunā, and Sarasvatī⁵²) rivers, which is called *Veṇīdāna*. Two fingers' breadth of shaved hair is put on a plate, along with *kuṅkuma* (turmeric) powder and other auspicious items (*maṅgaladravya*), alongside additional precious metals, gems, and money. All these are then offered into the confluence of three rivers, while uttering: "Let all my sins be destroyed by offering hair in the confluence, let the fortune grow even in my other births."⁵³ This offering of hair (*veṇīdāna*) is performed during the first pilgrimage only, and not every time. After this offering, the pilgrim disperses the *veṇīmādhava*, which has been carried from Rāmeśvaram, in the confluence at Prayāga, and some people collect the holy water from here to go again to Rāmeśvaram to perform *abhiṣeka* of lord Śiva there.

After dispersing the *veṇīmādhava* sand, one should make a *mahāsaṅkalpa* and take a bath at the confluence. Then, he should make another *saṅkalpa* for the *tīrtha-śrāddha* (as was previously explained regarding the Rāmeśvaram *yātrā*). Before commencing the rituals of *tīrtha-śrāddha*, he should make reverential homage as a supplement to the *śrāddham* (*śrāddhāṅga-tarpaṇam*). In this supplementary *śrāddhāṅgatarpaṇam*, he first performs homage to gods (*deva-tarpaṇa*), then to the sages (*ṛṣi-tarpaṇa*), and then a *tarpaṇa* for his ancestors (*pitṛ-tarpaṇa*).⁵⁴ After performing the homage to ancestors, one should also pay homage to all the living beings, starting from the celestial to the creatures in the water, earth and air, uttering:

Let all these beings be satisfied with the water given by me. Also, the libation of water is given to refresh those who are in all hells, who are experiencing punishment. Those relatives and non-relatives, or relatives in other births, let them be satisfied with the water. Wherever the afflicted souls suffer from hunger and thirst, let this water with sesame seeds bring happiness to them.⁵⁵

52 Sarasvatī is a mythological river that, according to tradition, intermingles with the Gaṅgā and Yamunā in Prayāga.

53 *Bhāratasthala-yātrā*, p. 2–3: *veṇyāṃ veṇīpradānena sarvaṃ pāpaṃ praṇaśyatu | jan-māntareṣv api sadā saubhāgyaṃ mama vardhatām ||*

54 The *tarpaṇa* to the ancestors has a specific order given, for example, in the *Tristhalī-setusārasaṅgraha* (1936, p. 13): "First the father, then mother, a fellow-wife of father, maternal grandparents along with their wives, wife, sons, brothers, father's brother, maternal uncles along with their wives, daughters, sisters, daughter's son, sister's son, father's sister, mother's sister, mother-in-law, father-in-law and teacher, these are the [people] satisfying in the pilgrimage centres and *mahālaya* days." *ātau pitā tato mātā sapatnajanani tathā | mātāmahāḥ sapatnikā ātmapatnī tataḥ param || sutabhrāṭṛpitṛvyaś ca mātulāś ca sapatnikāḥ | duhitā ca svasā proktā dauhitro bhāgineyakāḥ || pitṛśvasā mātṛśvasā śvaśrūś ca śvaśūro guruḥ | ete syuḥ pitaras tīrthe tarpaṇe ca mahālaye ||*

55 *Bhāratasthala-yātrā* (edition of 1971, p. 5): *devāsuraśtathānāgāḥ yakṣagandharavarākṣasāḥ | piśācaguhyakās siddhāḥ kūśmāṇḍās taravaḥ || jalecarā bhūmicarāḥ*



Fig. 3 Offering *piṇḍas* (cooked rice balls) mixed with the sesame seeds to one's deceased ancestors. Photo by R. Sathyanarayanan.

At this point, one has to perform the ancestral rituals (*tīrthaśrāddha*) with *piṇḍas* (cooked rice balls) mixed with the sesame seeds to deceased ancestors (*piṇḍadāna*, see Fig. 3).

Conclusion of the pilgrimage

Having completed the rituals in Prayāga, one should go back to Rāmeśvaram and perform the *śrāddha* with many gifts (*dāna*) to brahmins, according to one's capacity. One should worship Rāmanātha (i.e., Śiva of the Rāmeśvaram temple) and Setumādhava, with incense (*dhūpa*), lamps (*dīpa*), food offering (*naivedya*), etc. It is in this stage that the pilgrim uses the Gaṅgā water he brought for performing ritual bathing (*abhiṣeka*) to Rāmanātha.

vāyavādhāraś ca jantavaḥ | tṛptimetenāyāntvāśu maddattenāmbunā'khilāḥ || narakeṣu
samasteṣu yātanāśu ca ye sthitāḥ | teṣāṃ āpyāyanāyaitad dīyate salilaṃ mayā || ye
bāndhavā'bāndhavā vā ye'nyajanmani bāndhavāḥ | te tṛptimakhilā yāntu ye cāsmat-
toyakāṃkṣiṇaḥ || yatra kvacana saṃsthānāṃ kṣutṛṣṇopahatātmanām | idam akṣayyam
evāstu mayā dattaṃ tilodakam ||

There are different practices followed when bringing holy water from Vārāṇasī or Prayāga. The *Tristhalisetu* advises that the holy water to Rāmeśvaram has to be brought from Prayāga.

In an alternative practice for the end of the pilgrimage, the devotees head to the holy spot—the Trivenī Saṅgam in Prayāga. Here, after the rituals, the devotees disperse the lump of sand (*veṇīmādhava*) brought from Rāmeśvaram. They then visit Lord Viśvanātha in Vārāṇasī to collect the water from the river Gaṅgā before heading back to Rāmeśvaram. The devotee then stops at Rāmanāthasvāmi temple at Rāmeśvaram and offers the holy Gaṅgā water to the Lord (before distributing it to the near and dear ones). With this the *tīrthayātrā* to Kāśī is completed. Although this practice is presently more familiar, the pilgrimage between Rāmeśvaram and Prayāga is better anchored in the textual tradition.

Having concluded the pilgrimage (Kāśī to Rāmeśvaram or Prayāga to Rāmeśvaram), one should return home after stated restrictions, feed a great feast to the brahmins and others; with that Rāmanātha satisfies and grants all his desires, as stated in the *Skandapurāṇa*.⁵⁶

Conclusion

Although India was historically divided into many kingdoms, and the people of India followed distinct practices, pilgrimages were inclined to foster the idea of the essential and fundamental unity of India. Places like Kāśī, Prayāga, and Rāmeśvaram, were held sacred by all Hindus, whether they hailed from the North, South, East, or West. The Hindu community, divided as it was into numerous castes and their specifications, continuously fostered the practice of pilgrimage, which tends to level up all men by bringing them together through their visit to the same holy rivers or shrines.

Undertaking a pilgrimage (*tīrthayātrā*) and, particularly, taking a holy dip (*snāna*) in such a place, is considered to yield the fruit of performing the *kṛccchras*, to get rid of one's sins and crimes. As we have seen, performing ancestral ceremonies is central to any pilgrimage, and is considered to yield the liberation of one's ancestors and virtue to oneself, as stated in the *saṅkalpa*.

The practice of exchanging Rāmeśvaram sacred sand and Gaṅgā holy water is traditionally considered to be for the liberation of the mythological King Sagara's sixty thousand sons, through washing their ashes—assumed to be intermingled

56 *Skandapurāṇa* 51.74–75b: *pūrvoktaniyamopetaḥ punar āyāt svakam gṛham | brāhmaṇān bhojayad annaiḥ śaḍrasaiḥ paripūritaḥ || tenaiva rāmanāthosmai prīto'bhīṣṭaṃ prayacchati ||*

with the sands of Rāmeśvaram—with the Gaṅgā's water. With time, however, the water brought back to Rāmeśvaram came to be used for performing the ritual bathing of Lord Rāmanātha.⁵⁷ This may be a process of merging together the mythological cause with the temple practice, through the assumption that the water used for ablution would anyway flow to the sand where Kapila Muni's *āśrama* used to stand and bring liberation to Sagara's sons. The mythological narrative behind the practice may also be connected to the strong emphasis on ancestral ceremonies that are prescribed, as we have seen, when performing this pilgrimage. However, the textual traditions do not indicate such a connection, and performing of ancestral ceremonies takes place in pilgrimages to many other holy places (e.g., Kāśī, Kāñci, Ayodhyā, and holy rivers such as Godāvarī and Kṛṣṇā). Therefore, I think the performing of ancestral rituals at pilgrimage sites has a different purpose and the exchanging of the sand and the water in these two places, different.

Undertaking the holy dip (*snāna*) will yield the fruit of performing the *kṛcchras* to get rid of one's sins and crimes committed by one, and performing the ancestral ceremonies will yield the liberation (as stated in the *saṅkalpa*) for one's ancestors and accrue virtue to the performer.

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57 The *Skandapurāṇa* passage also states that *ānīya gaṅgāsālilam rāmeśam abhiśicya*—"bringing the Gaṅgā water and anointing Rāmeśa in Setu".

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