

watch the animated scenes with fascination and devotion, and they linger to tell one another the stories and to remind one another of the details. Finally, the mass printing of color reproductions has extended the availability of images. Hindus are great consumers of these polychrome glossy images of the gods and their deeds. Taking them home from a temple or a place of pilgrimage, the devout may place such images in the home shrine. Thus one may have *darśan* not only of the image, but, of the picture of the image as well!



Popular polychrome image of the child Kṛṣṇa

### B. The Ritual Uses of the Image

How is the divine image regarded by Hindus? And how is it used in a ritual context? Pursuing these questions is important to our understanding of the nature of the divine image which Hindus "see."

## 2 attitudes of Hindus towards image

Two principal attitudes may be discerned in the treatment of images. The first is that the image is primarily a focus for concentration, and the second is that the image is the embodiment of the divine.

(1) In the first view, the image is a kind of *yantra*, literally a "device" for harnessing the eye and the mind so that the one-pointedness of thought (*ekāgrata*) which is fundamental to meditation can be attained: The image is a support for meditation. As the *Viṣṇu Sāmhita*, a ritual *āgama* text, puts it:

Without a form, how can God be mediated upon? If (He is) without any form, where will the mind fix itself? When there is nothing for the mind to attach itself to, it will slip away from meditation or will glide into a state of slumber. Therefore the wise will meditate on some form, remembering, however, that the form is a superimposition and not a reality.<sup>61</sup>

The *Jābāla Upaniṣad* goes even a step further, intimating that such an image, while it may be a support for the beginner, is of absolutely no use to the yogi. "Yogins see Siva in the soul and not in images. Images are meant for the imagination of the ignorant."<sup>62</sup>

(2) It is the second attitude toward images that most concerns us in the context of this essay. That is, that the image is the real embodiment of the deity. It is not just a device for the focusing of human vision, but is charged with the presence of the god. This stance toward images emerged primarily from the devotional *bhakti* movement, which cherished the personal Lord "with qualities" (*śaguna*) and which saw the image as one of the many ways in which the Lord becomes accessible to men and women, evoking their affections.

In the early theistic traditions of the *Bhāgavatas* or *Pāñcarātras*, who emphasized devotional worship (*pūjā*) rather than the Vedic sacrifice (*yajña*), the image was considered to be one of the five forms of the Lord. The five are the Supreme form (*para*), the emanations or powers of the Supreme (*vyūha*), the immanence of the Supreme in the heart of the individual and in the heart of the universe (*antaryamin*), the incarnations of the Supreme (*vibhava*), and, finally, the presence of the Supreme Lord in a properly consecrated image (*arcā*).<sup>63</sup> Later, the *Srī Vaiṣṇavas* used the term *arcāvātāra* to refer to the "image-incarnation" of the Lord: the form *Viṣṇu* graciously takes so that he may be worshiped by his devotees.<sup>64</sup>

Indeed, the very theology of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava community, as articulated by Rāmānuja in the 11th century, is based on the faith that the Lord is characterized both by his utter Supremacy (*paratva*) and his gracious Accessibility (*saṅgabhya*).<sup>65</sup>

God has become accessible not only in incarnations, but also in images. In the *Bhagavad Gītā* (4.11), Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna, "In whatever way people approach me, in that way do I show them favor." The word *bhajāmi* translated here as "I show favor," is from the same root as *bhakti*. It could equally be translated "in that way do I love them," or "in that way do I share myself with them." Rāmānuja, in commenting on this passage, says that it means "in that way do I make myself visible (*darśayāmi*) to them."<sup>66</sup> He goes on to comment, "God does not only rescue those, who resort to him in the shape of one of his *avatāras*, by descending into that shape alone, but He reveals himself to all who resort to him, whatever the shape in which they represent him."<sup>67</sup>

Following Rāmānuja, another theologian of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava movement, Pīlāi Lokācārya, writes of the grace by which the Lord enters and dwells in the image for the sake of the devotee:

This is the greatest grace of the Lord, that being free He becomes bound, being independent He becomes dependent for all His service on His devotee. . . . In other forms the man belonged to God but behold the supreme sacrifice of Īśvara, here the Almighty becomes the property of the devotee. . . . He carries Him about, fans Him, feeds Him, plays with Him — yea, the Infinite has become finite, that the child soul may grasp, understand and love Him."<sup>68</sup>

The image, which may be seen, bathed, adorned, touched, and honored does not stand *between* the worshiper and the Lord, somehow receiving the honor properly due to the Supreme Lord. Rather, because the image is a form of the Supreme Lord, it is precisely the image that facilitates and enhances the close relationship of the worshiper and God and makes possible the deepest outpouring of emotions in worship.

In observing Hindu worship, in the home or in the temple, many Western students are baffled by the sense in which it appears to be an elaborate form of "playing house" with God. The image is awakened in the morning, honored with incense and song, dressed, and

fed. Throughout the day, other such rites appropriate to the time of day are performed until, finally, the deity is put to bed in the evening.

How is one to honor God? What human acts and gestures most directly convey the devotion of *bhakti*? For Hindus and for people of many religious traditions, they are the gestures of humility, with which a servant approaches his master, or a host his guest — gestures such as bowing, kneeling, prostrating, and, in the Hindu world, touching the feet of a revered superior. In addition to such servant-master gestures, however, the Hindus utilize the entire range of intimate and ordinary domestic acts as an important part of ritual. These are common, affectionate activities, family activities, which are symbolically powerful because of their very simplicity and their domestic nature: cooking, eating, serving, washing, dressing, waking, and putting to sleep. These are precisely the acts which ordinary people have most carefully refined through daily practice with loved ones in the home. In summary, Hindu worship reveals not only an attitude of honor but also an attitude of affection in the range of ritual act and gesture utilized in the treatment of the image.

The general term for rites of worship and honor is *pūjā*. The simple lay rites of making offerings of flowers and water, and receiving both *darśan*, the "sight of the deity," and *prasād*, the sanctified food offerings, may be called *pūjā*. More specifically, however, *pūjā* consists of elaborate forms of worship performed in the home by the householder and in the temple by special priests called *pūjārīs* who are designated for that purpose. These rites involve the presentation of a number of articles of worship, called *upacāras*, "honor offerings," to the deity. The number of *upacāras* presented may vary, but sixteen is considered a proper number for a complete *pūjā*. The *upacāras* include food, water, fresh leaves, sandalwood perfume, incense, betel nuts, and cloth. They are the type of hospitality offerings with which one would honor a guest, or a revered elder, or a king. In addition to such tangible offerings, the waving of the fan and the flywhisk are considered *upacāras*, since they are pleasing to the deity, and the rite of circumambulation is an *upacāra*, since it shows honor to the deity.

An important *upacāra* is the honoring of the deity with light. The priest or the householder slowly circles a five-wicked oil lamp

or camphor lamp before the deity, often to the accompaniment of the ringing of handbells and the singing of hymns. This lamp-offering is called *āratī*, and the rite is so central to Hindu worship that *āratī* has become the common general name for the daily rites of honoring the deity, often replacing the term *pūjā* completely. In a temple there will ordinarily be several *āratīs* during the day and into the evening.

What notion of the image is revealed in the presentation of these *upacāras*? Does the deity really enjoy the smell of incense and the cooling refreshment of water? Is the deity really bothered by the heat and irritated by flies? Does the deity really wake up each morning and go to bed each night?

First, it must be said that most Hindus, especially of devotional sectarian movements like the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas, take the notion of image-incarnation quite seriously. The image is a divine "descent" of the Supreme Lord who entrusts himself to human caretaking. In the image-incarnation, one sees evidence of the theological notion expressed by Piṅgali Lokācārya that people not only depend upon God, but God is willingly dependent upon people, upon their nurturance and caretaking. The worship of the child Kṛṣṇa, who elicits the most spontaneous and tender of human parental emotions, is another instance of the divine-human mutuality which is the essence of *bhakti*. *Bhakti* comes from a Sanskrit verb which means "to share," and *bhakti* is relational love, shared by both God and the devotee. There is no docetic notion of incarnation here. Remember that the docetic view was a "heresy" in the early Christian tradition, because it alleged that Jesus, although he appeared to be a man, did not really experience the thirst, the delight, and the pain of the human condition. While Hindus would not call such a view "heresy," they would certainly find it inhospitable not to offer the Lord water on the presumption that he does not experience thirst! In short, the image-incarnation is the divine guest, and it must be treated as such.

A further point might be made about these honor-offerings, namely that all ritual offerings and acts constitute a human grammar of devotion and really have nothing to do with the image at all. In other words, we show honor with these fruits and flowers because they are the most beautiful offerings that all people, even the poor, can afford. And we show honor with these particular

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gestures of reverence and nurture because these are the gestures of honor and devotion we know best. Whisking away the flies and offering a drink of water is our language, and not God's necessity:

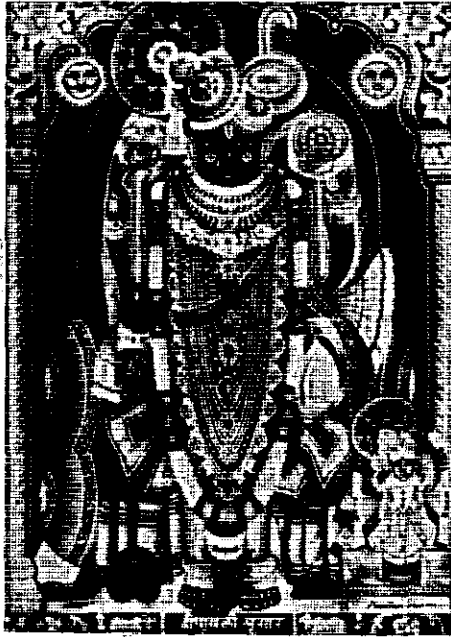
Finally, what of the sense appeal of these honor offerings? The incense, the flowers, the lights, the chanting and hymnody, the food offerings — all this delights the senses, and not only the senses of the deity, but the senses of the worshiper as well. As Rāmānuja writes in his *Bhagavad Gītā* commentary (4.11), enlarging upon the words of Kṛṣṇa: "I suit myself in a manner that I am to them not only a visible demonstration, but they may enjoy me by every one of their sense faculties and in all diverse ways."<sup>69</sup> Hindu worship, therefore is certainly not an occasion for yogic withdrawing of the senses "as a tortoise withdraws its limbs,"<sup>70</sup> but it is rather an occasion for awakening the senses and directing them toward the divine. Entering the temple, a worshiper clangs a big overhead bell. The energy of the senses is harnessed to the apprehension of God. Thus, it is not only vision that is refined by *darśan*, but the other senses as well are focused, ever more sharply, on God.

Another way in which Hindu ritual provides some insight into the meaning of the image is in the simultaneous worship of multiple images. While the Śrī Vaiṣṇava temple will contain the image of Viṣṇu, flanked perhaps by his consorts Śrī and Bhū, there are many temples and homes in which there is no such single focus of devotion. The broad sectarian group called the Smārtas, for example, practice a form of worship called *pañcāyatana pūjā*, the "five-altar pūjā," in which five deities — usually Viṣṇu, Śiva, Sūrya, Devī and Gaṇeśa — are honored in a single geometrical diagram, with four images situated in the four directions and one in the center. Any one of these deities may occupy the center of this *maṇḍala* of deities. The very fact of the five reminds one that the presence of the God worshiped here transcends any one single form.<sup>71</sup>

The rites of *āvāhana* ("bidding") and *visarjana* ("dismissal") which very often open and close the period of worship also illumine something of the meaning of the image. *Āvāhana* is the "calling," the "bidding" of the deity at the commencement of worship. For example, Śiva may be invoked to be present in the *liṅga* with these words "O Lord, who protects the world, graciously be present in this *liṅga* until the end of the worship."<sup>72</sup> Similarly, when the *pūjā* is over, the deity is given leave to depart, with a prayer of

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dismissal: "O excellent gods, O Supreme Śiva, return now to your own abode so that you may come again for the benefit of the worshiper."<sup>73</sup>



Kṛṣṇa as Dvārakanāth Dvārakā,  
Gujarāt

While it is believed that God is present continually in any consecrated image of *liṅga*, the bidding and dismissal prayers provide a special framing of the ritual honor-offerings, and they make it clear that the omnipresent God is in no sense restricted by the multiple "image-incarnations" it undertakes.

There are some images, however, which are not permanently consecrated, and for these the bidding and dismissal constitute the temporal boundaries of the life of the image. For instance, the Goddess is asked to take up residence in the images especially made for each year's Durgā-Pūjā, and at the end of the festival she is invited to depart, whereupon the images are disposed of. Even more dramatic is the "momentary" *kṣanika liṅga*, a lump of clay fashioned by the worshiper; perhaps in the palm of her hand. Śiva is asked to be present, the worshiper offers her prayers along with perhaps a flower and some water, and then Śiva is given leave to go. Again the lump of clay is but clay, and the worshiper throws it away, taking care to place it in a river or temple tank.<sup>74</sup>

All these ritual acts are premised on a common view of the nature of the image: that God is present in the image, whether for a moment, for a week, or forever. It is this fact of presence which is at the basis of *darśan*. People come to see because there is something very powerful there to see.

*And something powerful there to be seen by.*

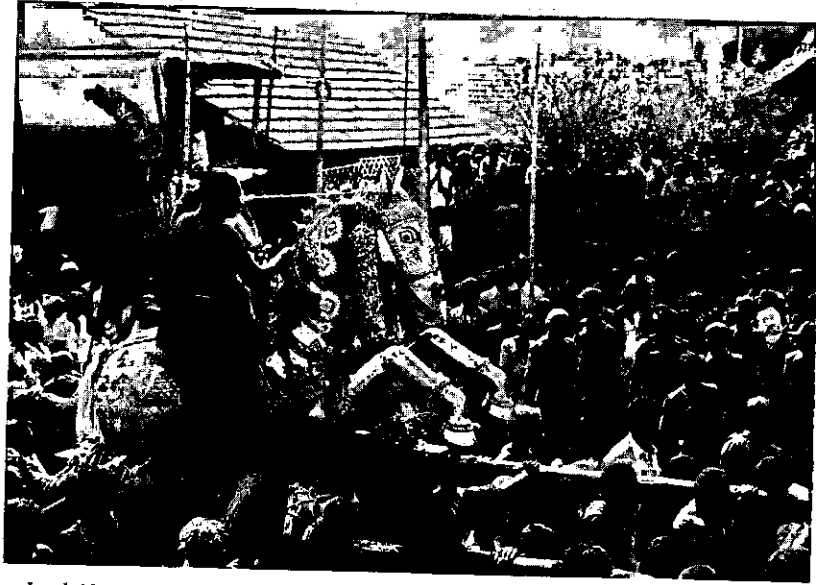
### C. The Creation and Consecration of Images

How are divine images made? And in what way do they become invested with the presence that makes them not simply statues, but the abodes of deities?

There are many Sanskrit texts, based on ancient traditions transmitted orally, which deal with iconography and iconometry. They are the texts of artists, called *śilpīns*, who make images. These *śilpaśāstras* treat image-making, along with architecture and the building of cities.<sup>75</sup> For each particular deity, these works specify the proper proportion of the parts of the body, the appropriate postures, the appropriate number of arms, the gestures of the hands (*mudrās*), the emblems and weapons to be held in the hands, and the appropriate animal mount (*vahana*). Thus, the fashioning of the image is not left to the "imagination" of the individual artist.

A single god does not have a single form, of course, but may appear in a variety of traditional poses which reveal aspects of that god's nature or episodes in the god's mythology. Śiva, for example, may be depicted in the aniconic *liṅga* form, as a dancer (Nāṭarāja), as a meditating ascetic (Dakṣiṇāmūrti), as the husband of Pārvatī (Kalyāṇasundarā), as the destroyer of demons (Tripurāntaka, for example), as the half-woman god (Ardhānārīśvara), or as the one who emerges bodily out of the *liṅga* (Liṅgodbhava).<sup>76</sup> The *śāstras* enumerate the various poses and specify the details for each.

An image is also supposed to be beautiful, since it will be the abode of a deity. As the scholar J. N. Banerjea states in his extensive work on iconography, "A well executed image, if it follows the rules of proportion laid down in the *śilpaśāstras* and is pleasing to the eye, invites the deity to reside in it and is particularly auspicious to the worshippers."<sup>77</sup> What is beautiful, however, is also defined by the *śāstras*: "Only an image made in accordance with the canon can be called beautiful; some may think that beautiful which



Lord Alagār, accompanied by brāhmin priest, approaches Madurai on horseback, borne on the shoulders of his devotees

consort Śiva Sundareśvara are carried in a royal palanquin through the streets. The Goddess reenacts her conquest of the world, her coronation as Queen, her marriage to Sundareśvara, and their marriage procession. This yearly festival, called Chittarai, coincides with another festival procession in which a local hill deity — Alagār, said to be a form of Viṣṇu — leaves his temple in the hills several days' journey south of Madurai and is carried in procession through the countryside toward Madurai, where he is to attend the yearly wedding of Minākṣī and Sundareśvara. Every year he is a day late for the wedding, but the real purpose of his journey through rural Tamilnād is apparently fulfilled in giving the people his public darśan.

## CHAPTER 3

# Image, Temple, and Pilgrimage

### A. The Temple and the Image

THE CONSTRUCTION and consecration of a temple, according to the architectural portions of the *śilpaśāstras*, is very much like the shaping and consecration of an image. For example, the ground on which the temple is to be constructed is carefully selected on the basis of its auspicious situation and seeded for the auspicious sign of germination. Then the local *genii loci* who dwell in that ground are invited to leave and take up residence elsewhere: "Let spirits (*bhūta*), gods (*deva*), and demons (*rākṣasa*) depart and seek other habitations. From now on this place belongs to the divinity whose temples will be built here."<sup>86</sup> Finally, at the very end of the construction process, the "eyes" of the temple are opened by the master architect and the priestly architect, who ascend to the top of the temple in the middle of the night and pierce open the eyes of the temple with a golden needle. Is the temple also a divine image, as well as the abode of a divine image?

In building a temple, the universe in microcosm is reconstructed. The divine ground-plan is called a *maṇḍala*, a geometric map of the cosmos. At its center is the *sanctum*, where the image will be installed. Its eight directions are guarded by the cosmic regents called the *lokapālas*. Various planetary deities, world guardians, and gods are set in their appropriate quadrant. The temple is an architectural pantheon, with each portion of the structure inhabited by the gods.

The particular *maṇḍala* of the Hindu temple is called the *vāstupuruṣa maṇḍala*. The *Puruṣa* is the cosmic "Person," from the sac-

rific of whose giant body the entire universe was created, as told in Rg Veda X.90:

From his mind the moon was born,  
and from his eye the sun,  
From his mouth Indra and the fire,  
From his breath the wind was born.

From his navel arose the atmosphere,  
And from his head the sky evolved,  
From his feet the earth, and from his ear  
The cardinal points of the compass:  
So did they fashion forth these worlds.<sup>87</sup>

The body, as an organic whole diverse in the function of its parts and limbs, is here the image appropriated for the cosmos. The symbolic parallel between body and cosmos is articulated ritually in the construction of the Vedic fire altar, in which the body of Puruṣa (also called Prajāpati) is reconstructed from the various parts of the cosmos. A similar reconstruction of the body-cosmos occurs in the construction of the Hindu temple. The temple is the condensed image of the cosmos.

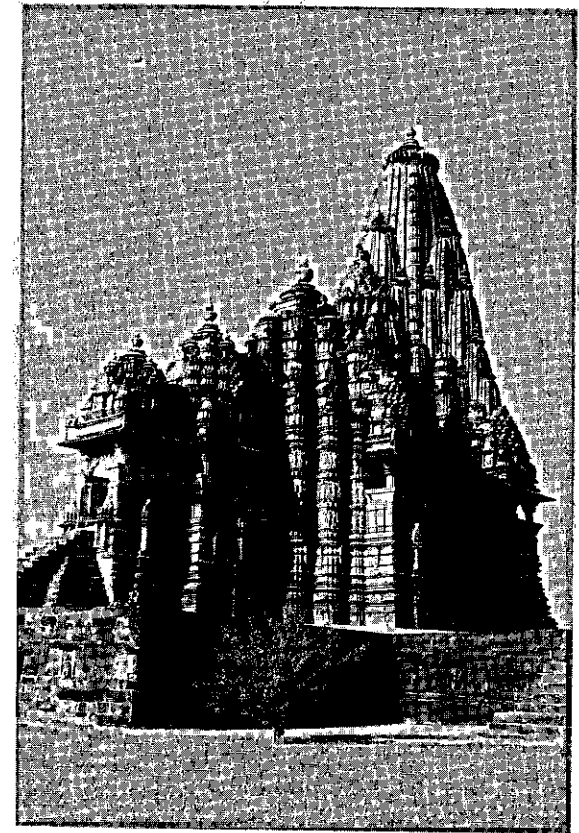
Stella Kramrisch, in explaining the meaning of the *vāstupuruṣa maṇḍala*, writes: "Puruṣa is the Universal Essence, the Principle of all things, the Prime Person whence all originates. Vāstu is the Site; in it Vāstu, bodily existence, abides; from it Vāstu derives its name. In bodily existence, Puruṣa, the Essence, becomes the Form. . . . Puruṣa himself has no substance. He gives it his impress. The substance is of wood, brick or stone in the temple."<sup>88</sup>

The building of a temple, like the shaping of an image, is not left to the creativity of the architect or craftsmen: It carefully follows canons of building and is, from beginning to end, a ritual activity. "From the stretching of the cord, or the drawing of the lines of the *maṇḍala*, every one of the movements is a rite and sustains, in its own sphere of effectiveness, the sacred building, to the same extent as the actual foundation supports its weight."<sup>89</sup>

A classical north India temple in the *nagara* style<sup>90</sup> is striking to the eyes of the Western observer in two ways: first, its exterior is teeming with intricately carved ornamentation and bas relief fig-

## IMAGE, TEMPLE, AND PILGRIMAGE

ures and, second, its interior sanctum is dark and usually windowless. The temple is said to be the architectural likeness of a mountain. Indeed, the various names of temple styles are the names of those great Himālayan peaks which are the home of the gods: Meru, Kailāsa, and Mandara. Both its lush exterior and its cave-like sanctum point to the symbolic linking of temple and mountain.



Kandariya Mahadeva  
Temple, Khajuraho

The exterior of the temple, such as the temple of Kandariya Mahadeva at Khajuraho, is a series of progressively higher porches or *mandapas* culminating in the *shikhara*, the highest spire of the temple, situated directly over the inner sanctum. The word *shikhara* also means "mountain peak," and this temple-peak resembles a series of "foothills," the smaller *shikharas* massing, rising, one upon

the other, toward their final culmination in the sun-disc, the āmalaka, the crowning cogged ring-stone at the very top of the temple.<sup>91</sup> Like the mountain, the temple links heaven and earth, and the sun-disc of the āmalaka is "the architectural symbol of the celestial world."<sup>92</sup>



Pilgrims come for the darśan of Minākṣī in Madurai

The prolixity of the cosmic mountain, covered with all forms of vegetative, animal, human, and divine life, is also replicated in the temple. As the sunlight changes through the day, the figures of every niche of the temple come alive. There are women applying cosmetics, warriors preparing for battle, gods and goddesses, serpent hooded *nāgas*, lions and elephants. The directional guardians stand forth in relief to protect this *maṇḍala*.

If the exterior of the temple is the articulation of the plenum of life, the interior of the temple directs our attention toward the center, the seed, the source of it all. The sanctum, approached through increasingly dim-lit porches, is the symbolic equivalent of the cave,

deep within the mountain. The *Kandariya* is literally the temple "Of the Cave."<sup>93</sup>

The sanctum of the temple is called the *garbhagrha*, the "womb chamber." In this room, as the temple is being constructed, a rite called *garbhadhāna*, the "implanting of the seed," takes place. In the middle of the night, the priest plants the "seed" of the temple, in the form of a small casket which is set into the foundation.<sup>94</sup> It is this seed which symbolically germinates and grows directly upward, through the vertical shaft of the temple to the sky. The *garbhagrha*, with its cave atmosphere, reminds us that there is a mystery, a secret, at the heart of this exuberant tradition of spirituality. The deep interior of the tradition is not flooded by the light of cathedral windows, but is deep within.

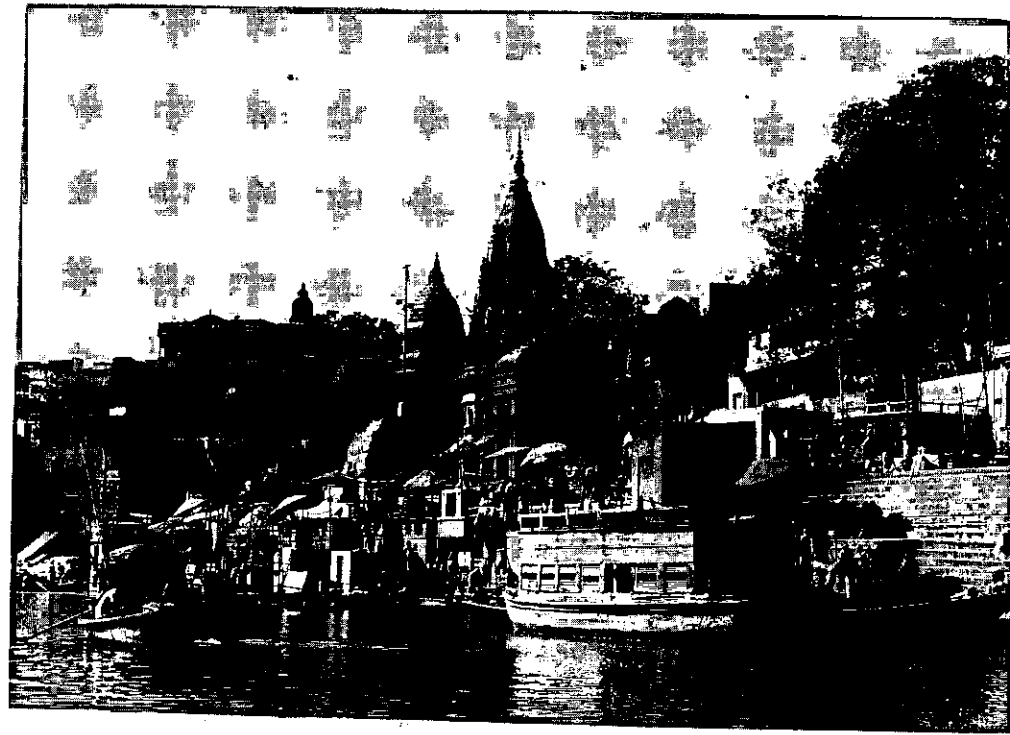
The journey of the worshiper to such a temple-mountain is a pilgrimage. Approaching the temple, one circumambulates it, symbolically attending to the entire visible world of name and form. Having seen all there is to see on the intricate exterior, one journeys to the interior, to the very center of the world. Often there is another circumambulatory passage around the *garbhagrha*. Having made this final circumambulation, one receives the *darśan* of the deity at the center.

The temple is covered with artistic images, and it contains a primary consecrated image in its inner sanctum. In a larger sense, however, the temple is an image. It is not any particular deity, but the sacred *maṇḍala* of the cosmos as a whole. Kramrisch writes, "The temple is the concrete shape (*mūrti*) of the Essence; as such it is the residence and vesture of God. . . . The devotee who comes to the temple, to look at it, does so as a 'seer,' not as a spectator."<sup>95</sup>

## B. Image and Pilgrimage

The same impulse for the *darśan* of the image which is at the center of the temple cultus also provides the impetus for pilgrimage. People go to "take the *darśan*" of the place and its deities, and to receive the *prasād* from its temples.

The most common term for such pilgrimage places is *tīrtha*, literally a "crossing place" or a "ford." The term originally referred to the ford in a river, where one could safely cross to the other shore.



The Bathing ghāṭs of Maṅikarnikā, along the Gaṅgā at Kāśī

Through the centuries some of India's most important places of pilgrimage have indeed been located along the banks of her great rivers and have been "fords" in this geographical sense. As pilgrimage places, however, they are also symbolic and spiritual fords, where one may cross the flood of *saṁsāra*. Just as the "far shore" has become the predominant Indian image of the final spiritual destination of the soul's pilgrimage, so the "crossing place" has become an important image of the means of getting there.

The practice of pilgrimage, *tīrthayātrā*, has long been an important part of India's religious life. As early as the time of the epic Mahābhārata in the first two centuries C.E., *tīrthayātrā* was compared to the Vedic sacrifice in its benefits and, unlike the sacrifice, was a ritual activity accessible to all, not only to the very rich.\*

In India today, the advent of modern means of transportation has served to stimulate the zeal for pilgrim travel. Pilgrimage is as popular and important a religious and cultural phenomenon as it was in the height of the Middle ages in Europe. The organization of pilgrim tours is a thriving business, and these *tīrthayātrās* in "deluxe"

buses are advertised to include dozens of sacred sites on their itineraries.

#### *Pilgrimage and Landscape*

The entire land of India is, to the eyes of Hindu pilgrims, a sacred geography — from the Himālayas in the north to the tip of India at Cape Comorin in the south. As pilgrims circumambulate a temple, so do some pilgrims circumambulate the whole of this sacred land, including on their route the four *dhāms* or "abodes" of the divine at the four compass points: Badrīnāth in the north, Purī in the east, Rāmeśvaram in the south, and Dvārakā in the west. The names of the great mountain ranges, such as the Himālayas and the Vin-dhyas, and the names of the great rivers, such as the Gaṅgā, the Yamunā, the Narmadā, the Godāvarī, and the Kāverī — all are names that ring with mythological associations for Hindus. They are part of a very important symbolic geography which constitutes what Hindus mean by "India."

The Himālayas, for example, the "Abode of Snows," are also called *devālaya*, the "abode of the gods." Pilgrims have journeyed into the Himālayas for the *darśan* of great mountain peaks, such as Meru, the center of the world, Kailāsa, the home of Śiva, and Mandara, said to have been used as a churn to churn the Sea of Milk. They also seek the *darśan* of great Himālayan shrines, such as the Śaiva Kedār-nāth, the Vaiṣṇava Badrīnāth, and the ice-*līnga* at Amarnāth. The trek into the mountains has traditionally required great discipline and endurance and was often compared to the difficult austerities of ascetics and yogis.

The great Indian rivers, especially the Gaṅgā, have also been of symbolic importance. Himālayan pilgrims climb to the source of the River Gaṅgā Gaṅgotrī, where the river emerges from under a glacier. The Gaṅgā is called the River of Heaven and is said to have flowed in heaven alone before she agreed to come to earth. Śiva caught her in his tangled ascetic's hair to break the force of her fall, and from his head she flowed down through the Himālayas, leaving the mountains at Har-dvār, also called Gaṅgadvār, "Door of the Gaṅgā," and from there flowing out upon the plains of India, past such great *tīrthas* as Prayāg and Vārānaśī Kāśī, reaching the sea at Gaṅgā Sāgar on the Bay of Bengal. In Hindu hymns, the Gaṅgā is praised as a liquid form of Siva's divine energy, Śaktī.



Bathing in the Gaṅgā is said to wash away all one's sins. The other sacred rivers of India are likened to the Gaṅgā in their purity and are often said to *be* the Gaṅgā, diverted miraculously to the various regions of India. All water used in ritual is symbolically transformed into sacred water by invoking the presence of the Gaṅgā and the other sacred rivers.



Sādhu at Bhaironāth, the shrine of protective deities on the hillside above Kedārṇāth

While the Himālayas and the Gaṅgā are famous throughout India, there are hills, rivers, and mountains in the various regions of India which have their own sacred traditions. Regional pilgrimage — whether in Bengal, Mahārāṣṭra, or the Tamil south — has given a sense of unity and shared landscape to people of particular areas, language groups, or sectarian traditions. For example, the Śaiva *bhakti* tradition of Tamilnād has its own network of sacred shrines which link Tamil geography with the great deeds of Śiva Mahādeva. These places are praised in various *sthalapurāṇas*, “place-legends,” as well as in the hymns of the Tamil *bhakti* poet-saints, the *nāyanmārs*, who flourished in the sixth to ninth centuries.<sup>97</sup> These saints were themselves perpetual pilgrims, wandering from place to place in Tamilnād and singing the praises of the various shrines of Śiva. Their poems praise Śiva as he dwells in each of



The Himālayan shrine of Śiva as Kedārṇāth

these shrines: "...the God of Tōnipuram where the sea has many beaches," or "...the coral-hued Lord who dwells in Kānūr of the fragrant groves."<sup>98</sup> The love of nature and the intimate knowledge of the particular hills, seashores, and fields of Tamilnād is evident in these poems, which inspire pilgrims not only to the love of Śiva, but to the love of the landscape where he lives.

#### *Pilgrimage and Myth*

In addition to pilgrimage places of geographical beauty, there are the many *tīrthas* associated with great events of the mythological tradition. India's myths are living in the geography of the land, and conversely India's geography is alive with mythology. The *tīrtha* is conceptually the counterpart of the *avatāra*, the word used to describe the divine "descents" of the gods. *Avatāra* comes from a variation of the *tīrtha* verbal root (*ava + tr*) meaning to "cross down," and precisely at those countless places where the gods have "crossed down" into this world as *avatāras* are the *tīrthas* where earthly pilgrims can make their spiritual crossings.

Some of the places especially famous for the mighty events which happened there include Kurukṣetra, the site of the great war of the Mahābhārata; Ayodhyā, the ancient capital of Lord Rāma; and Rāmeśvaram, where Rāma established a Śiva *līnga* after crossing the sea to Laṅkā to rescue Sītā. Great centers, like Kāśī, seem to collect mythological traditions, to the extent that virtually all the great mythic events are associated with the city. Perhaps the best example of the direct linking of place and myth is in the area around Mathurā, the birthplace of Kṛṣṇa in central North India.

The land of Kṛṣṇa, called Vraj, covers an area of some sixty-four square miles in the area around Mathurā. Its spiritual center is in the village of Vṛndāvan. The area is filled with sites which mark the mythic events of the life of Kṛṣṇa, from his birthplace in Mathurā, to the home of the baby Kṛṣṇa's foster parents in Gokul and the later childhood home of Kṛṣṇa in Vṛndāvan. The places of Kṛṣṇa's divine "play" (*līlā*) amidst the pastoral cowherding folk of Vraj are called *līlāsthālas*, the "places of the Lord's play."<sup>99</sup> There is the holy hill of Govardhan, which young Kṛṣṇa is said to have lifted with one finger; there is the pool where his beloved Rādhā is said to have bathed; there is the tree by the river where Kṛṣṇa hung the clothes he stole from the milkmaids, the *gopīs*, as they bathed; and

there is the grove where Kṛṣṇa and the *gopīs* danced in the middle of the night. Countless such *līlāsthālas*, associated with even the most minute details of Kṛṣṇa's life, have created a sacred landscape as intricate as that of medieval Palestine, where such sites as the place where Mary nursed Jesus, the place where Mary washed Jesus' clothes, and the place where the food was cooked to be served at the Last Supper, were located with imaginative precision.<sup>100</sup> In Vraj, these many places are said to bear the "traces" (*cīhna*) of Kṛṣṇa, and they bid the pilgrim to constant remembrance of him and his miraculous life. While the pilgrim to Vraj may visit the temples of Vṛndāvan and Mathurā for the *darśan* of the various images of Kṛṣṇa, the real power of Vraj pilgrimage is in the land of Vraj itself. Pilgrims undertake a special pilgrimage through the rural countryside of Vraj, visiting the groves, the pools, and the hillocks where Kṛṣṇa's "traces" may be found. The earth itself is said to be holy here. The "dust of Vraj," (*Vraj ki raj*) is considered sanctified by the feet of Kṛṣṇa, and pilgrims touch it reverently to their foreheads.

#### *Pilgrimage and the Sacred Image*

There are other *tīrthas* in which primary importance is attached to the particular *image* of the deity which is found there, and not so much to the place itself or to its mythological associations. For example, pilgrims go to the sacred hill of Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh especially for the *darśan* of Śrī Venkateśvara, an ancient icon said to be a form of Viṣṇu.<sup>101</sup> In Mahārāṣṭra, the twice-yearly pilgrimage of the Vārkaṇī sect to Paṇḍharpur is also oriented toward the *darśan* of a particular deity, Viṭhobā, who is said to be a form of Kṛṣṇa.<sup>102</sup> According to legend, the Lord came to bless a particular devotee who was faithful in his duties toward his parents. The devotee did not even take time from his filial duties to greet the Lord properly, but simply threw him a brick to stand on. Kṛṣṇa, impressed with such devotion, has remained standing there ever since.

Another icon of great renown is the cultic image of Kṛṣṇa as the Lord of Mt. Govardhan in Vraj. The image is not even in Vraj, however, but is in Nāthdvārā in Rājasthān. According to the Valabhīte sectarian tradition, the Lord appeared out of Govardhan in a spontaneously formed image called Śrīnāth-ji.<sup>103</sup> They served this

icon of Kṛṣṇa in Vraja, and when Muslim persecution forced them to abandon Vraja, they took the icon westward and ultimately built a temple to house it in the Arāvalli Hills. The place, called Nāth-dvārā, is visited by Vallabhite pilgrims solely for the purpose of having Śrīnāth-jī's *darśan*.

Finally, we should again mention the unique wooden images of Kṛṣṇa Jagannāth, Balarāma, and Subhadrā housed in the great temple complex at Purī. The cultus of Jagannāth, like that of all of the above mentioned images, has an antiquity which extends deep into the regional folk traditions.<sup>104</sup> Since the specifically Vaiṣṇava identity of these images is attached to a more ancient cultus, it is little wonder that the stories of Kṛṣṇa have little importance in Purī. The myths associated with this place are, rather, those which concern the appearance of these images, which are said to have been carved by the craftsman of the gods, Viśvakarman, from a log washed ashore in the time of the legendary king Indradyumna.<sup>105</sup> Here, as in many Indian temples with a strong regional affiliation, the day to day service of the deities in the temple is parallel in structure to the honor and service which the king used to receive.

#### *Pilgrimage and the Saints*

When the Tamil pilgrims walk to a distant Śiva shrine singing the songs composed by one of the *nāyanmār* poets over one thousand years ago, they join in a tradition which links them with the saints as well as with the sacred shrines. All over India, the *bhakti* movements emphasized the direct, devotional love of God. For some, such as Kabīr in the north and Basavanna in the south, this direct love meant a diminished regard for the elaborate brahmanical temple cult and for the great ritual centers of pilgrimage. God, after all, is close within the heart. For most of the *bhakti* saints, however, especially those who saw the Lord as intensely personal and endowed with qualities (*saguna*), the image-incarnations of the Lord were of great importance and became the focal point of their devotion. The saints sang their hymns at the doors of the temples, and so did the pilgrims who followed them. The Śrī Vaiṣṇavas went to Tirupati and Śrī Raṅgam. The Śaiva Siddhāntins went to Kāñcī and Cidambaram. The Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavas went to Vṛndāvan. The saints themselves were often great pilgrims and wanderers. Many took up a life of homelessness, becoming itinerant minstrels

and poets. The people of the *bhakti* movements which these saints launched have followed the footsteps of the saints in pilgrimage. In Mahārāṣṭra, for example, the Vārkarī pilgrims who journey to Paṇḍharpur bring the great Mahārāṣṭrian saints along on pilgrimage with them. Traveling in processional groups from their own districts, the pilgrims follow after a cart which carries the *pādukās*, "footprints," of one of the great saints, such as Tukāraṁ, Eknāth, or Jñāneśvara. The most famous of these processions follows the *pādukās* of Jñāneśvara, starting from a village near Poona and traveling over 150 miles to Paṇḍharpur. On the way, they sing the songs of the Mahārāṣṭrian saints, who made this journey many times:

I should like to become the small pebbles  
or the big stones, or the dust  
of the road which leads to Paṇḍharpur.  
Thus would I be under the feet of the Saints.<sup>106</sup>

While the pilgrims to Paṇḍharpur travel with the saints, they also travel to the saints, for two of the beloved Mahārāṣṭrian saints, Nāmdev and Cokhāmela, are interred right at the doorstep of Viṭhobā's temple. Worshiping the saints is part of the pilgrimage to Paṇḍharpur.<sup>107</sup> Elsewhere in India, pilgrimage to places associated with the saints, especially their tombs or *samādhis*, is not uncommon. A striking example is the annual pilgrimage to the tomb of the Rājput hero-saint Rāmdev, which attracts thousands of pilgrims from Rājasthān, Mahārāṣṭra, and Gujarāt each year.

The saints (*sants*) are not the same as the *sādhus*, the "holy men." Perhaps the most notable distinction between them is that the saints of the *bhakti* movements were, to a great extent, anti-establishment figures who often championed the downtrodden and the untouchables and despised brahmanical ritualism, while the *sādhus* and *sannyāsins* represent the brahmanical establishment, even in transcending it by casting off their worldly *dharma*. Nonetheless, the notion that there is something to be gained from the presence and *darśan* of a holy person is equally relevant to both saints and *sādhus*. Just as pilgrims follow the saints, so do they follow the *sādhus*.

Hindus seek the *darśan* of *sādhus* and *sannyāsins* who tend to congregate at the great *tirthas*, such as Kāśī, Haradvār, and Badrināth.

In a sense, these renouncers are the patrons of *tīrthas* and serve to enhance the popularity and power of the *tīrtha* by their very presence.<sup>108</sup> In the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, King Yudhiṣṭhira emphasizes this point in speaking to a sage who has just returned from a pilgrimage: "Devotees like you, who have become *tīrthas* themselves, are the ones who make the *tīrthas* into crossing places by embodying the presence of God there."<sup>109</sup>



Pilgrims at Sri Sailā, a *tīrtha* of Lord Śiva, Andhra Pradesh

The term *tīrtha* refers not only to places, but may also refer to people — holy people who have themselves become "crossings." In the ancient Jain tradition, the spiritual pathfinders were called *tīrthan̄karas*, "ford-makers." Much later, one of the orders of *sādhus* organized by Śaṅkara took the name *tīrtha* as a title. The point is clear enough: holy men can also help one reach the "far shore." Thus, in going to geographical *tīrthas*, Hindus have had a special preference for those places where the walking-*tīrthas* congregate.

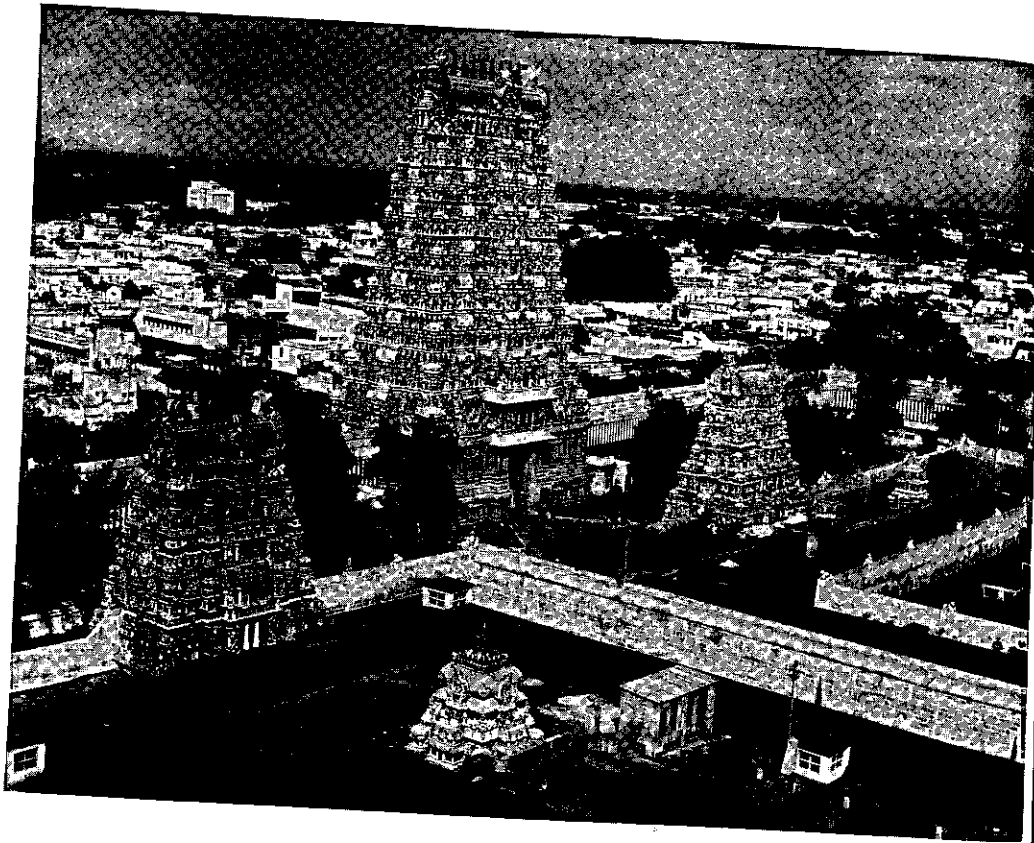
### *Pilgrimage Place as Divine Image*

Just as the temple may become an image of the sacred whole of the cosmos, so do some *tīrthas* become images of the cosmos. The place becomes an icon.

A direct parallel to the structure of a temple may be seen in the city of Madurai in Tamilnād, where the city is laid out in the shape of a *mandalā*. At the center is the temple compound of Mīnākṣī and Sundarēśvara, with its tall, elaborately carved gateways, called *gopurams*, in the four directions. Around the temple are three concentric square processional streets. Here an entire city has been built according to the plan of the *śilpāsāstras*, and the plan is precisely that of the *vāstupuruṣa mandalā* which delimits the sacred space of a temple.<sup>110</sup> The city is the cosmos, bounded from forces of disorder by the boundaries of order which the *mandalā* establishes. Each year, in the Chittarai festival, the Goddess Mīnākṣī reestablishes the sacred order by conquering the lords of the eight directions and by establishing the sovereignty of herself and Śiva Sundarēśvara at the center of this cosmos.

The city of Vārāṇasī, acknowledged by Hindus as a whole to be the most sacred of the *tīrthas*, is also a sacred image of the cosmos. The city is said to be the permanent earthly home of Lord Śiva, and it is often called Avimukta, the "Never-Forsaken," the place Śiva never leaves. According to myth, Śiva upholds this city on the tip of his trident even during the *pralaya* when the universal flood destroys the earth.<sup>111</sup> And from this place the world is created again. The city is also called Kāśī, the "City of Light." It is here, according to myth, that Śiva's fiery *lingā* of light burst up from the netherworlds, split open the earth, and rose to pierce through the top of the highest heavens — a luminous, fathomless, *axis mundi*. Moreover, Kāśī is not only the location of that mythic episode, but is said to be that *lingā* itself. The entire city, a sacred circle or *mandalā* with a radius of ten miles, is said to be a *lingā* — the very embodiment of Śiva.

With its three thousand years of continuous habitation, Kāśī's *mandalā* is hardly as ordered as that of Madurai. Nonetheless, the elements of the whole are here. The eight directions are said to have originated in Kāśī, receiving their respective realms of sovereignty by establishing Śiva *lingas* in Kāśī. Similarly the heavenly deities who govern time are said to have received jurisdiction over time in Kāśī. The temples of all these deities, in addition to the temples of



Minākṣī Temple Complex, Madurai, Tamilnādu, 17th century

Viṣṇu, Durgā, Bhairava, Gaṇeśa, and all the gods, have their places within the patterns of Kāśī's sacred geography. At the center is the famous *linga* of Viśvanāth — Śiva as "Lord of the Universe." The whole of the city is protected by a grid of fifty-six Gaṇeśas, who sit at the eight compass points in seven concentric circles spreading outward from Viśvanāth.

As a microcosm, Kāśī is said to contain all the *tīrthas* of India's sacred geography within her borders. Thus, in the city of Kāśī there are temples, tanks, lakes, and rivulets which represent the symbolic presence of such places as Kedārnāth and Badrīnāth in the Himālayas, Kāñci and Rāmeśvaram in the Tamil south, Purī in the east, Dvārakā in the west, the old cities of Mathurā, Ayodhyā, and Ujjain, the Narmadā and Godāvarī rivers, the Vindhya and Himālaya mountains.

In Kāśī, the whole of the sacred world is gathered together into one place. The sacred landscape of India is here. The great myths of the tradition are said to have happened here. There is a great

density of images and *lingas* here. And there has always been a great congregation of saints, *sādhus*, and *sannyāsins* here.

Although Kāśī condenses the entire universe in its microcosm, it is also said to transcend the entire universe. It is well known as that *tīrtha* which enables those who die within its borders to make the final "crossing" from this shore of birth and death to the "far shore" of *mokṣa*. It is believed that to die in Kāśī is to gain liberation. Thus, while ordinary pilgrims may come to Kāśī with many of the same vows and desires they bring to other *tīrthas*, there is another group of pilgrims who come to Kāśī to stay and to live out their years until they die. For them, this is the destination at the end of the pilgrim road. It brings to an end not only the circuit of pilgrimage in India, but the long soul's pilgrimage through life after life.