 consort Siva Sundaresvara are carried in a royal palanquin through the streets. The Goddess reenacts her conquest of the world, her coronation as Queen, her marriage to Sundaresvara, and their marriage procession. This yearly festival, called Chittarai, coincides with another festival procession in which a local hill deity — Alagära, said to be a form of Viśnu — 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 Minäkṣi and Sundaresvara. Every year he is a day late for the wedding, but the real purpose of his journey through rural Tamilnad is apparently fulfilled in giving the people his public darśan.

A. The Temple and the Image

The construction and consecration of a temple, according to the architectural portions of the śilpaśastras, 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." 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 mandala, 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 mandala of the Hindu temple is called the vāstu-purusa mandala. The Purusa is the cosmic "Person," from the sac-
rifice 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.96

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 vāstu-puruṣa mandala, 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.”97

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 mandala, 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.”98

A classical north India temple in the nagara style99 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-

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 Himalayan peaks which are the home of the gods: Meru, Kailāsa, and Mandara. Both its lush exterior and its cavelike sanctum point to the symbolic linking of temple and mountain.

Kandariya Mahādeva Temple, Khajurāho

The exterior of the temple, such as the temple of Kandariya Mahādeva at Khajurāho, is a series of progressively higher porches or mandapas culminating in the ākāra, the highest spire of the temple, situated directly over the inner sanctum. The word ākāra also means “mountain peak,” and this temple-peak resembles a series of “foothills,” the smaller ākāras 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. Like the mountain, the temple links heaven and earth, and the sun-disc of the āmalaka is "the architectural symbol of the celestial world."

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 nagas, lions and elephants. The directional guardians stand forth in relief to protect this mandala.

If the exterior of the temple is the articulation of the plenitude 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."\(^9\)

The sanctum of the temple is called the garbhagṛha, 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.\(^9\) It is this seed which symbolically germinates and grows directly upward, through the vertical shaft of the temple to the sky. The garbhagṛha, 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 garbhagṛha. 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 mandala 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."\(^9\)

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,
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 Himalayas 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 dīrghams or ‘abodes’ of the divine at the four compass points: Badrīnāth in the north, Puri in the east, Rāmaśāram in the south, and Dvārakā in the west. The names of the great mountain ranges, such as the Himalayas and the Vindhayas, and the names of the great rivers, such as the Ganga, the Yamunā, the Narmadā, the Godavāri, and the Kaveri — 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 Himalayas, for example, the “Abode of Snows,” are also called devālaya, the “abode of the gods.” Pilgrims have journeyed into the Himalayas for the darsan of great mountain peaks, such as Meru, the center of the world, Kailāsa, the abode of Śiva, and Mandara, said to have been used as a churn to churn the Sea of Milk. They also seek the darsan of great Himalayan shrines, such as the Saiva Kedarnāth, the Vaṣṇava Bādrināth, and the ice-līṅga 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 Ganga, have also been of symbolic importance. Himalayan pilgrims climb to the source of the River Ganga Gangotri, where the river emerges from under a glacier. The Ganga 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 Himalayas, leaving the mountains at Haridvār, also called Gaṅgaṅdvrā, “Door of the Ganges,” and from there flowing out upon the plains of India, past such great tīrthas as Prayāg and Varānasi Kāśi, reaching the sea at Gaṅga Sāgar on the Bay of Bengal. In Hindu hymns, the Ganga is praised as a liquid form of Śiva’s divine energy. Sakti.
Bathing in the Gāṅgā is said to wash away all one’s sins. The other sacred rivers of India are likened to the Gāṅgā in their purity and are often said to be the Gāṅgā, 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 Gāṅgā and the other sacred rivers.

Sadhu at Bhaironāth, the shrine of protective deities on the hillside above Kedārnāth

While the Himalayas and the Gāṅgā 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, Mahārāstra, 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 Mahadeva. These places are praised in various sthulapurāṇas, “place-legends,” as well as in the hymns of the Tamil bhakti poets-saints, the nāyakamārs, who flourished in the sixth to ninth centuries. 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
these shrines: "... the God of Tondapuram where the sea has many beaches," or "... the coral-hued Lord who dwells in Kānūr of the fragrant groves." The love of nature and the intimate knowledge of the particular hills, seashores, and fields of Tamilnad is evident in these poems, which inspire pilgrims not only to the love of Siva, 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 *tirthas* 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 *tirtha* 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 *tirtha* verbal root (*aava + tr*), meaning "cross down," and precisely at those countless places where the gods have "crossed down" into this world as *avatāras* are the *tirthas* where earthly pilgrims can make their spiritual crossings.

Some of the places especially famous for the mighty events which happened there include Kuruksetra, the site of the great war of the Mahābhārata: Ayodhya, the ancient capital of Lord Rama; and Rāmānavaram, where Rama established a Siva *linga* after crossing the sea to Lankā to rescue Siśa. Great centers, like Kaśi, 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 Vraja, covers an area of some sixty-four square miles in the area around Mathurā. Its spiritual center is in the village of Vrndāvan. 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 Vrndāvan. The places of Kṛṣṇa's divine "play" (*līlā*) amidst the pastoral cowherding folk of Vraja are called *līlāsthālas*, the "places of the Lord's play." 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 Rādha 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. In Vraja, 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 Vraja may visit the temples of Vrndāvan and Mathurā for the *darśan* of the various images of Kṛṣṇa, the real power of Vrai pilgrimage is in the land of Vraja itself. Pilgrims undertake a special pilgrimage through the rural countryside of Vraja, 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 Vraja," (Vraja *kīrāj*) is considered sanctified by the feet of Kṛṣṇa, and pilgrims touch it reverently to their foreheads.

**Pilgrimage and the Sacred Image**

There are other *tirthas* 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 Venkatesvara, an ancient icon said to be a form of Viṣṇu. In Mahārāstra, the twice-yearly pilgrimage of the Varkari sect to Pañḍharpur is also oriented toward the *darśan* of a particular deity, Vithoba, who is said to be a form of Kṛṣṇa. 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 Vraja. The image is not even in Vraja, however, but is in Nāthdvarā in Rajasthān. According to the Vallabhit sectarian tradition, the Lord appeared out of Govardhan in a spontaneously formed image called Śrīnāthji. 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- dvdāra, is visited by Vallabhithe pilgrims solely for the purpose of having Śrīnāth-ji’s darṣan.

Finally, we should again mention the unique wooden images of Kṛṣṇa Jagannāth, Balarama, and Subhadra housed in the great temple complex at Puri. The cultus of Jagannāth, like that of all of the above mentioned images, has an antiquity which extends deep into the regional folk traditions. 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 Puri. 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, Viśvakarma, from a log washed ashore in the time of the legendary king Indradvīnna. 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 nāyavānār 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 Kabir 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 Vaisnavas went to Tirupati and Śrī Rādīgam. The Saivē Śuddhāntins went to Kāñcī and Cidambaram. The Gaudīya Vaisnavas went to Vṛndāvana.

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 Mahārāstra, for example, the Varkari pilgrims who journey to Paṇdharpur bring the great Mahārāṣṭrīan 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 Tukārām, Eknāth, or Jñānēsvara. The most famous of these processions follows the pādukās of Jñānēsvara, starting from a village near Poona and traveling over 150 miles to Paṇdharpur. On the way, they sing the songs of the Mahārāṣṭrīan 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 Paṇdharpur.
Thus would I be under the feet of the Saints.

While the pilgrims to Paṇdharpur travel with the saints, they also travel to the saints, for two of the beloved Mahārāṣṭrīan saints, Nāmdev and Cokhamela, are interred right at the doorstep of Viṭhobā’s temple. Worshipping the saints is part of the pilgrimage to Paṇdharpur. Elsewhere in India, pilgrimage to places associated with the saints, especially their tombs or sannādhi, 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 Rajasthān, Mahārāstra, and Gujārat 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 darṣan 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 darṣan of sādhus and sannyāsins who tend to congregate at the great ārāms, such as Kāśi, Hardvār, and Badrīnāth.
In a sense, these renouncers are the patrons of tirthas and serve to enhance the popularity and power of the tirtha by their very presence. In the Bhagavata Purāṇa, King Yudhishthira emphasizes this point in speaking to a sage who has just returned from a pilgrimage: “Devotees like you, who have become tirthas themselves, are the ones who make the tirthas into crossing places by embodying the presence of God there.”

The term tirtha 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 tirthankaras, “ford-makers.” Much later, one of the orders of sadhus organized by Sāṅkara took the name tirtha as a title. The point is clear enough: holy men can also help one reach the “far shore.” Thus, in going to geographical tirthas, Hindus have had a special preference for those places where the walking-tirthas congregate.

Pilgrimage Place as Divine Image

Just as the temple may become an image of the sacred whole of the cosmos, so do some tirthas 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 Tamil Nadu, where the city is laid out in the shape of a mandala. At the center is the temple compound of Minākṣi and Sundaresvara, 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 šilpasāstras, and the plan is precisely that of the vastupurisa mandala which delimits the sacred space of a temple. The city is the cosmos, bounded from forces of disorder by the boundaries of order which the mandala establishes. Each year, in the Chittarai festival, the Goddess Minākṣi reestablishes the sacred order by conquering the lords of the eight directions and by establishing the sovereignty of herself and Siva Sundaresvara at the center of this cosmos.

The city of Varanasi, acknowledged by Hindus as a whole to be the most sacred of the tirthas, is also a sacred image of the cosmos. The city is said to be the permanent earthly home of Lord Siva, and it is often called Avimukta, the “Never-Forsaken,” the place Siva never leaves. According to myth, Siva upholds this city on the tip of his trident even during the pralaya when the universal flood destroys the earth. And from this place the world is created again. The city is also called Kaśi, the “City of Light.” It is here, according to myth, that Siva’s fiery linga 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, Kaśi is not only the location of that mythic episode, but is said to be that linga itself. The entire city, a sacred circle or mandala with a radius of ten miles, is said to be a linga — the very embodiment of Siva.

With its three thousand years of continuous habitation, Kaśi’s mandala 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 Kaśi, receiving their respective realms of sovereignty by establishing Siva lingas in Kaśi. Similarly the heavenly deities who govern time are said to have received jurisdiction over time in Kaśi. The temples of all these deities, in addition to the temples of
density of images and lingas here. And there has always been a
great congregation of saints, sādhus, and sannyāsins here.
Although Kāśi 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 Kāśi is to gain liberation.
Thus, while ordinary pilgrims may come to Kāśi with many of the
same vows and desires they bring to other tīrthas, there is another
group of pilgrims who come to Kāśi 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.

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

As a microcosm, Kāśi is said to contain all the tīrthas of India's
sacred geography within her borders. Thus, in the city of Kāśi
there are temples, tanks, lakes, and rivulets which represent the
symbolic presence of such places as Kedārnāth and Badrināth in
the Himalayas, Kaṇcī and Ramesvaram in the Tamil south, Puri in
the east, Dvārakā in the west, the old cities of Mathurā, Ayodhyā,
and Ujjain, the Narmada and Godāvari rivers, the Vindhyā and
Himālaya mountains.

In Kāśi, 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