India: A Sacred Geography

Diana L Eck
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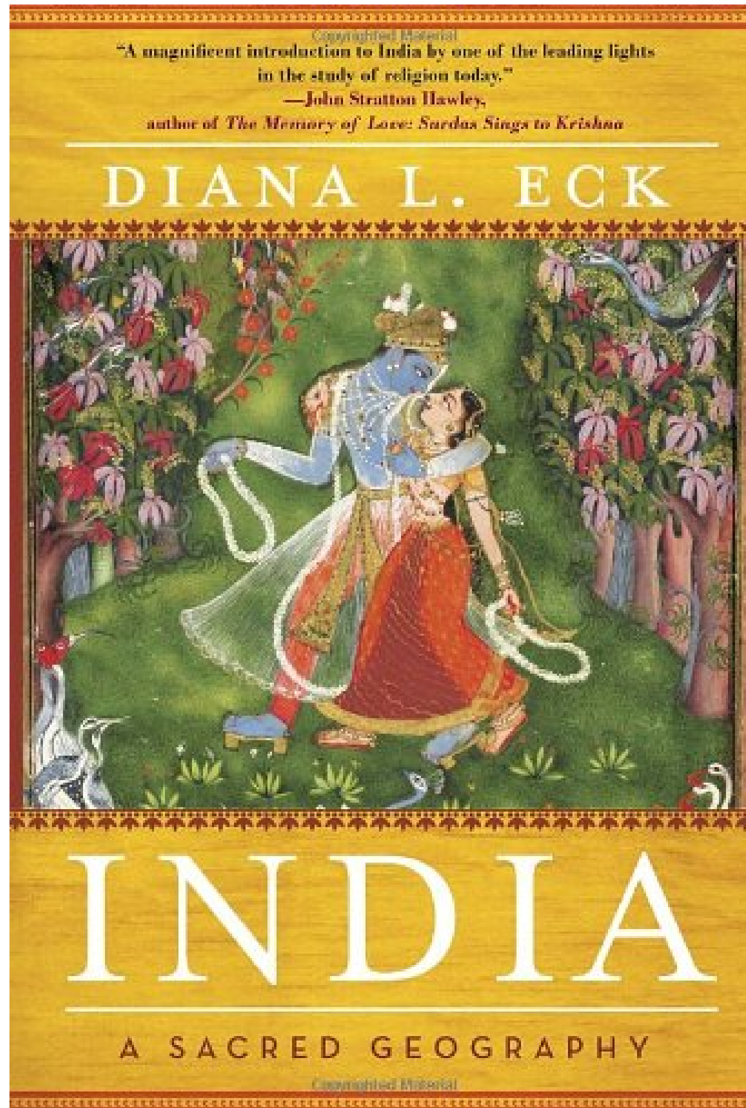

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following review helpful. India: A Sacred GeographyBy CustomerI love this book (still reading) as it is well researched with references and facts that corroborate fairly accurately the conclusions and/or contemplations drawn after each section.2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. The Quintessential book on IndiaBy Barbara Saromines-GanneThis is the book that I've been looking for for the last 10 years. It explains India like no other book I have ever read. It explains the sense of purpose Hindus and Buddhists alike give to pilgrimage. It is instructive and engaging to read without being pretentious or overly intellectual in any way. It is an astonishing accomplishment that Diana Eck has achieved with this book.

A spiritual history of the world's most religiously complex and diverse society, from one of Harvard's most respected scholars.India: A Sacred Geography is the culmination of more than a decade's work from the renowned Harvard scholar Diana L. Eck. The book explores the sacred places of India, taking the reader on an extraordinary trip through the beliefs and history of this rich and profound place, as well as providing a basic introduction to Hindu religious ideas and how those ideas influence our understanding of the modern sense of "India" as a nation.

No major civilization has made sacred the very ground of its being as India has done, and no one has described this sacred organism with the down-to-earth humanity of Diana Eck. This is magnificent introduction to India by one of the leading lights in the study of religion today.-- John Stratton Hawley, author of The Memory of Love: Surdas Sings to Krishna.In this lucid, learned and luminous book, Diana Eck introduces the Western reader to the sacred landscape of India. She leads us into an unfamiliar world, with myths and symbols that seem initially strange, but by the end of this rich journey we find that we have encountered unexpected regions within ourselves.Karen Armstrong, author of A History of God and Twelve Steps to a Compassionate LifeReading [Diana Ecks] new book was like listening to an old, wise friend, whose love and admiration of India and its people shines on every page. --Phil Semler, San Francisco Book (5/5 stars) Praise for Diana Ecks Banaras In Banaras, Diana Eck... has written a notable book about this greatest of Indian pilgrimage sites.... Her brilliant, comprehensive book seems likely to remain for a long time the definitive work on this great Indian city.--Washington Post The most beautiful book... on India.--Journal of the American Academy of Religion Eck is a master of tone here. She begins as dry scholar, allows her personal voice to emerge and then, through judicious use of lyric quotations, advances to a striking level of exaltation and triumph.... To take us gently off this high, Eck buttresses us-and her arguments-with a truly amazing display of addenda; glossaries, calendars and appendices. One ends filled with admiration and awe, not just for the vision given us, but for the scholarship and dedication that made it possible. --Los Angeles Times About the AuthorDIANA L. ECK is professor of comparative religion and Indian studies at Harvard University and is Master of Lowell House and Director of the Pluralism Project. Her book Banaras, City of Light, remains a classic in the field, and Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras won the prestigious Grawemeyer Book Award. In 1998, President Clinton awarded her the National Humanities Medal for the work of the Pluralism Project in the investigation of America's religious diversity.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.1A Sacred Geography, An Imagined LandscapeI began thinking about this book in the city of Banaras on the River Ganga in north India more than twenty-five years ago. I was then writing a book about that great city, a place I presumed to be the most important sacred city of India. Over the centuries, many visitors to Banaras, or Varanasi, have compared this city in sanctity and preeminence to Mecca, Jerusalem, and Rome, as the holiest center of Hindu pilgrimage. For example, in the 1860s, a British civil servant, Norman Macleod, wrote effusively, "Benares is to the Hindoos what Mecca is to the Mohammedans, and what Jerusalem was to the Jews of old. It is the 'holy' city of Hindostan. I have never seen anything approaching to it as a visible embodiment of religion; nor does anything like it exist on earth."1 The singling out of a center toward which an entire religious community turns in collective memory or in prayer made sense to Macleod, as it does for many who have been schooled in the habits of thought shaped by Western monotheistic consciousness. Even in India, there have been many who would agree on the central and supreme significance of Banaras, which Hindus also called Kashi, the Luminous, the City of Light.2 This is a powerful and ancient city, its dense maze of alleyways as dark as its riverfront is radiant. Its morning bathing rites facing the rising sun and its smoking cremation grounds right there along the riverfront are the heartbeat of a city that never fails to leave a lasting imprint on the visitor or pilgrim.I lived off and on for years in Banaras. Even as I investigated the legends and temples of this city, however, I began gradually to understand what most Hindus who visit the city already know--that Banaras does not stand alone as the great center of pilgrimage for Hindus, but is part of an extensive network of pilgrimage places stretching throughout the length and breadth of India. The very names of the temples, the ghats, and the bathing tanks of the city are derived from this broader landscape, just as the names of Kashi and its great Shiva temple of Vishvanatha are to be found in pilgrimage places all over India. I began to realize that the entire land of India is a great network of pilgrimage places--referential, inter-referential, ancient and modern, complex and ever-changing. As a whole, it constitutes what would have to be called a "sacred geography," as vast and complex as the whole of the subcontinent. In this wider network of pilgrimage, nothing, not even the great city of Banaras, stands alone, but rather everything is part of a living, storied, and intricately connected landscape.At first, I resisted the complexities of this peripheral vision, still interested as I

was in establishing what makes this one place special, different from the rest. It became clear to me, however, that I could understand Banaras only in the context of a much wider system of meanings in which significance is marked not by uniqueness, but by multiplicity, even in the great city of Kashi. Everything about "the" holy city seemed to be duplicated elsewhere, set amid a pattern of symbolic signification that made Banaras not unique, but inextricably part of a wider landscape shaped by the repetition and linking of its features. I began to realize that Kashi was not the center, but one of multiple centers in a fascinating and polycentric landscape, linked with the tracks of pilgrimage.The most important of the religious claims of this sacred city is that Kashi, the City of Light, is a place of spiritual liberation, which is called moksha or mukti. Kashyam maranam muktih, they say. "Death in Kashi is liberation." Pilgrims come to Kashi from all over India to live out their old age and die a good death there. In this, Kashi is special, famous for death, some would say preeminent. And yet Kashi is also said to be one of seven cities that bestow moksha, including Ayodhya, Mathura, Hardvar, Kanchi, Ujjain, and Dvaraka. These seven are all called mokshadayaka, the givers of spiritual freedom. Kashi is also said to be the earthly manifestation of Shiva's luminous sacred emblem, the linga of light, where Shiva's infinite shaft of light pierced the earth. And yet so are at least eleven other places, all renowned throughout India, the whole group known as the twelve lingas of light. As I studied Banaras years ago, their names were just names to me, although each of these renowned sites of Shiva was represented by a temple within the sacred structure of Kashi, as well. I began to realize that the famous goddesses of Kashi are also linked to hundreds of goddesses in a network of association called the shakta pithas, or "power seats," of the Goddess. The River Ganga, skirting the city, with its famous bathing ghats, is one of the "seven Gangas" of India, including the Narmada, Godavari, and Kaveri Rivers, each of which lays claim to the heavenly origin and gracious power of the Ganga that flows past Banaras in north India. This whole sacred zone of Kashi is said to have a radius of five kroshas, about ten miles, and this zone is circled by a famous five-day pilgrimage called the panchakroshi, with five stops along the way. Gradually, I discovered that the panchakroshi is not a unique pilgrimage, but a type of fivefold pilgrimage that is also found in Ayodhya, in Omkareshvara on the Narmada River, on Mount Brahmagiri in Maharashtra, and in dozens of other places. And, to top it off, Kashi itself is duplicated, with cities and temples all over India called the "Kashi of the South," the "Kashi of the North," or the "Hidden Kashi" of the Himalayas.One afternoon on an early trip into the Himalayas, I stopped at one of these other Kashis: Gupta Kashi, the "Hidden Kashi," high in the valley of the Mandakini River, one of the tributaries of the Ganga. Here, in this small village, I found a stout Kashi Vishvanatha temple. In front of the temple there was a finely built kund, a bathing tank, called Manikarnika after the bathing tank at Manikarnika, the great cremation ground, in Kashi. The bathing tank was fed by cold springs, the waters of which were said to come directly from Gangotri and Yamunotri, the Himalayan headwaters of the Ganga and Yamuna Rivers. Gomukh, the Cow's Mouth, as we shall see, is the name of the place high above Gangotri where the first trickle of the Ganga emerges from the edge of a glacier. I recalled that in the great Kashi down on the plains, Manikarnika Kund is also fed, so they say, by an underground spring flowing directly from Gomukh. The clear connections that linked this small village, its temple, and its bathing tank with Kashi and the larger sacred geography of India made real for me the notions I had read in the texts for many years. I found that Gupta Kashi is also linked to the great stories of the Mahabharata, as are many places in the Himalayas. The Pandava brothers and Draupadi came this way as they climbed into the mountains on their last earthly journey, they say. Here the five Pandavas left their war clubs, which they would need no more, and the clubs are there today, in the small temple of Shiva's manifestation Bhairava.3During these subsequent years, I have traveled many thousands of miles on the pilgrim tracks of this wider sacred geography, trying to understand from the ground up the ways in which India has been composed through the centuries as a sacred landscape. I took careful notes of the duplication of sacred places, the networks of sacred rivers, the systematizing of lingas of light, the proliferation of seats of the Goddess. I visited the headwaters of four of the seven sacred rivers--the Ganga, the Narmada, the Godavari, and the Kaveri. I traveled down the Western Ghats, along the narrow stretch of land between the mountains and the sea called Parashurama Kshetra, the land said to have been retrieved from the sea by one of the avataras of Vishnu, Parashurama. I discovered time and again how intricately and elaborately storied each part of the land of India really is. I sought out the places associated with Krishna's life and lore--from the birthplace of Krishna in Mathura to the place he is said to have died in peninsular Gujarat. I came upon countless places said to have been visited by the heroes of the Mahabharata as they roamed the forests of ancient India in exile, or by Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana in the forest journey described in the Ramayana. It became increasingly clear to me that anywhere one goes in India, one finds a living landscape in which mountains, rivers, forests, and villages are elaborately linked to the stories of the gods and heroes. The land bears the traces of the gods and the footprints of the heroes. Every place has its story, and conversely, every story in the vast storehouse of myth and legend has its place.This landscape not only connects places to the lore of gods, heroes, and saints, but it connects places to one another through local, regional, and transregional practices of pilgrimage. Even more, these tracks of connection stretch from this world toward the horizon of the infinite, linking this world with the world beyond. The pilgrim's India is a vividly imagined landscape that has been created not by homing in on the singular importance of one place, but by the linking, duplication, and multiplication of places so as to constitute an entire world. The critical rule of thumb is this: Those things that are deeply important are to be widely repeated. The repetition of places, the creation of clusters

and circles of sacred places, the articulation of groups of four, five, seven, or twelve sites--all this constitutes a vivid symbolic landscape characterized not by exclusivity and uniqueness, but by polycentricity, pluralism, and duplication. Most important, this "imagined landscape" has been constituted not by priests and their literature, though there is plenty of literature to be sure, but by countless millions of pilgrims who have generated a powerful sense of land, location, and belonging through journeys to their hearts' destinations.In the early 1990s, the political dimensions of this sacred geography burst into flame with the contestation over the Ramjanmabhumi, the Birthplace of Rama, in Ayodhya, a site said to have been destroyed in the sixteenth century by one of the generals of the Mughal emperor Babur and forever sealed by building a mosque right on top of it. A strident new form of Hindu nationalism vowed to rebuild Rama's temple. The throngs of activists voiced the slogan Hum mandir vahin banayenge. ("We'll build the temple at that very place"). The sustained controversy over the exact locus of Rama's birth raised sharply the very meaning of uniqueness in the symbolization of Hindu sacred geography. Even in Ayodhya, there had been many places that claimed Rama's birth as part of their sacred lore. How very dissonant the pledge to reclaim "this very place" sounded, given India's long history of multiplying the sacred in a complex landscape, rich with a sense of plenitude. Of course, the traditional religious advertisements and praises of Hindu India's hundreds of sacred places do indeed extol "this very place." They even employ the poetic license of exaggeration to amplify the greatness and glory of "this very place."4 But such praises are always set in the context of a wider peripheral vision in which the places praised are not unique, but ultimately numberless, limited not by the capacity of the divine to be present at any one of them, but by the capacity of human beings to discover and to apprehend the divine presence at all of them. The dissonance, of course, arises from a discourse of exclusivity and uniqueness, more typical of the monotheistic traditions of the West, now arising in a Hindu context in which patterns of religious meaning have traditionally been constructed on the mythic presuppositions of divine plurality and plenitude.This is a book about India, the pilgrim's India. For a time, I was discouraged about the writing of it, fearing that somehow the image of a sacred geography enlivened by the presence of the gods and interlinked through the circulation of pilgrims would further feed the fervor of an exclusive new Hindu nationalism. But the reality I describe and interpret here is clearly one not of religious exclusivity, but rather of complexity, mobility, and plurality. This is a book about the ways in which networks of pilgrimage places have composed a sense of location and belonging--locally, regionally, and transregionally. I do not say "nationally," for this way of articulating a land and landscape is far older than the modern nation-state. The pilgrim's India reaches back many hundreds of years and brings to us an astonishing picture of a land linked not by the power of kings and governments, but by the footsteps of pilgrims.This narrative way of construing the land is germane, however, to understanding the communities of emotion and ritual practice that give power and depth to the Hindu nationalism of today. While some of the scholarly analyses of Indian nationalism and, more recently, Hindu nationalism have recognized this living landscape, most pay little heed to the pilgrimage practices that have long generated a relationship to the land we call India. Indian intellectual historian Rajat Kanta Ray makes a strong case for looking at what he refers to as "communities of emotion" and, drawing on Weber, "communities of sentiment," in his book The Felt Community. He looks carefully and appreciatively at the forms of cultural belonging that are deeply rooted in the Hindu and Indo-Muslim past. He writes, "The prehistory of every national movement lies in emotions, identities, and notions. These constitute the mentality and culture of the body of people who are or have been seized by the idea of becoming a sovereign national state. That idea may be new, but the mentality and emotions are rooted in the past."5 As Sheldon Pollock has so masterfully demonstrated, this is also a literary world, in which the use of Sanskrit for royal inscriptions and praise poetry created a geographical sphere, a "Sanskrit cosmopolis," that stretched across what we call "India."61. Norman Macleod, Days in North India (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1870), p. 20.2. Banaras is also known officially by the name Varanasi, the city that is bordered by the Varana River on the north and the Asi River on the south, stretching out along the Ganga between the confluence of these two rivers.3. Here also, according to myth, Shiva became hidden (gupta) when he ran away from the Pandavas, who were climbing into the sacred sites of Kedar Khand in order to rid themselves of the sin of killing members of their own family in the great war of the Mahabharata. Shiva did not want to be approached by them for expiation, so he turned into a bull and dove into the earth. The Five Kedars of this area correspond to the parts of his anatomy. See Kedarnath in Chapter 5.4. This kind of Puranic exaggeration is called arthavada, language spoken or composed for a purpose (artha), which is, of course, to get you to go there and partake of the great benefits to be had.5. Rajat Kanta Ray, The Felt Community: Commonality and Mentality Before the Emergence of Indian Nationalism (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).6. Sheldon Pollock, The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). Pollock sees the rise of this Sanskrit cosmopolis extending through the first millennium and developing through the use of Sanskrit not only for religious and ritual purposes, but for what we might anachronistically call "secular" and "political" purposes.