



## The sacred and the spatial: Cultural territoriality in India with special reference to the Char Dham pilgrimage

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### Abstract

This article examines the intricate relationship between sacred geography, ritual, and cultural territoriality in India, with a special focus on the Char Dham pilgrimage circuit—Badrinath, Dwarka, Puri, and Rameswaram. Drawing on classical and contemporary scholarship, the article explores how the concept of darshan (seeing), the tradition of tirtha (sacred crossing), and the layering of myths and local cults have shaped the Indian subcontinent's religious landscape. The Char Dham Yatra is analyzed as a paradigmatic example of how sacredness is mapped onto space, fostering both personal transcendence and collective identity.

**Keywords:** Darshan, sacred geography, pilgrimage, tirtha, Char Dham, Badrinath, Dwarka, puri, Rameswaram, Hinduism, transcendence, Indian philosophy, sacred sites, cultural territoriality, indigenous traditions, genii loci, cosmology, salvation, spiritual crossing, sacred rivers, abhisheka, liminality, collective memory, layering of myths

### Introduction

Among the masses of the Indian subcontinent, the concept of darshan—the auspicious viewing of the divine—has played a significant role in encouraging religious mobility and pilgrimage. In Indian tradition, to see a sacred site is to come into direct contact with the divine, a process believed to facilitate personal transformation and transcendence (Eck, 1998) [6]. The act of seeing, or darshan, is not merely visual but is understood as a form of touching and understanding, establishing a vital connection between the devotee and the deity (Kramrisch, 1976) [17].

This article investigates how the practices of darshan, the significance of tirthas (sacred crossings), and the mythic layering of place have contributed to the construction of cultural territoriality in India. The Char Dham pilgrimage, one of the most revered circuits in Hinduism, serves as a focal case study.

### Darshan: Seeing as Sacred Encounter

In Indian philosophy, seeing is an active movement of the sight toward the sacred, where the sense of sight comes into contact with the object and imparts it with shape and vitality (Kramrisch, 1976) [17]. The act of darshan is thus a form of spiritual touch, where the energy of the deity is believed to be transmitted to the devotee. Unlike the worship traditions of the Semitic religions, Hindu practice places profound emphasis on seeing and being seen by the deity, making the gaze exchange a central ritual act (Eck, 1998) [6].

When a Hindu visits a temple, the stated purpose is often to have darshan of the deity, rather than to worship in the Western sense. The tradition holds that seeing the deity's eyes, and being seen in return, is a transformative and auspicious event (Eck, 1998) [6]. This emphasis on vision is reflected in the artistic representation of Indian deities, whose unblinking eyes are designed to facilitate this mutual gaze.

The concept of darshan extends beyond Hinduism to other Indian religious traditions, such as Buddhism, and is intimately linked with pilgrimage. The image is not merely an idol but a living presence, and the act of seeing it is charged with spiritual significance (Eck, 1998) [6].

### Tirtha: The Sacred Crossing

The tradition of pilgrimage in India revolves around the concept of tirtha, a Sanskrit word meaning "ford" or "crossing place." Derived from the root tr/tarati ("to cross"), a tirtha is understood as a liminal space where the earthly and the divine meet, facilitating a transition between worlds (Eck, 1981) [5]. Pilgrimage to tirthas is a means of crossing from the profane to the sacred, from ignorance to enlightenment.

Tirthas manifest in many forms: Jyotirlingas, Shakti Peethas, Char Dhams, river sources, confluences, riverbanks, mountain peaks, caves, and places sanctified by the presence of saints (Eck, 1981) [5]. The Vedic imagination imbued these places—especially waters—with nourishing and purifying power, a belief later associated with the Ganges and other sacred rivers. The descent of the Ganges from heaven, for example, is a mythic narrative that underscores the purifying and life-giving properties of sacred waters (Eck, 1981) [5].

Bathing in sacred rivers is a central ritual of pilgrimage, symbolizing purification and preparation for further rites. This act is analogous to the abhisheka (ritual bathing) of deities in temples, reinforcing the idea that the purified pilgrim becomes a tirtha for others (Eck, 1981) [5].

Tirthas are also temporal as well as spatial crossings: dawn and dusk, the "twin twilights," are considered especially auspicious times for worship, mirroring the liminality of sacred places (Akk, 2015) [1].

### Myth, Place, and the Layering of Sacred Geographies

The Indian subcontinent's sacred geography is the product of centuries of myth-making, folklore, and the integration of local cults. Myths and stories are layered upon specific locations, transforming them into hallowed geographies (Eck, 1981) [5]. The emergence of new gods and sects has often coincided with the creation of new narratives and rituals associated with particular places.

Indigenous traditions—such as those of the yakshas, nagas, ganas, and matrikas—were rooted in the veneration of guardian spirits associated with groves, hills, trees, and

villages. These *genii loci* were believed to control specific territories and were incorporated into the broader Brahminical tradition as Hinduism evolved (Eck, 1981)<sup>[5]</sup>. This process of mythic layering and appropriation allowed for the integration of diverse cults and identities, fostering a sense of harmony between nature and humanity. Over time, this contributed to the emergence of a cosmological consciousness that connected the immediate world with celestial realms, and embedded ethical and spiritual values in the landscape (Eck, 1981)<sup>[5]</sup>.

### The Char Dham Yatra: Mapping the Sacred

The Char Dham Yatra is widely regarded as one of the most important religious journeys in Hinduism. According to tradition, the term "Char Dham"—meaning "four abodes of God"—was first used by Adi Shankaracharya, who identified Badrinath, Dwarka, Puri, and Rameswaram as the principal pilgrimage sites marking the four cardinal directions of the Indian subcontinent.

### The Four Dhams

- **Badrinath (North):** Nestled in the Himalayas, Badrinath is renowned for its snow-clad peaks and pure atmosphere. It is dedicated to Vishnu and is associated with the Satya Yuga.
- **Dwarka (West):** Situated on the Arabian Sea coast, Dwarka is linked to Krishna and the Dvapara Yuga.
- **Puri (East):** Located on the Bay of Bengal, Puri is home to the Jagannath temple and is associated with the Kali Yuga.
- **Rameswaram (South):** On the Gulf of Mannar, Rameswaram is dedicated to Shiva and is connected to the Treta Yuga.

These sites are not only geographically dispersed but are also situated at the intersection of natural and mythic landscapes—mountains and oceans—reinforcing their liminal character.

### Pilgrimage and Salvation

For Hindus, completing the Char Dham Yatra is believed to atone for sins and secure a place in heaven. It is commonly held that every Hindu should undertake this journey at least once in their lifetime. The annual influx of millions of pilgrims to these sites testifies to their enduring significance (Dharmik Vibes, 2025)<sup>[3]</sup>.

### Sacred Geography and Cultural Territoriality

The mapping of sacredness onto the land through pilgrimage circuits like the Char Dham is a powerful expression of cultural territoriality. By linking the four corners of the subcontinent, the Char Dham Yatra transforms the entire nation into a sacred space, fostering a sense of unity in diversity.

The journey to each dham is not only a quest for personal salvation but also a performative act that reaffirms collective identity. Pilgrims from diverse backgrounds traverse the same routes, participate in shared rituals, and engage in the mutual exchange of darshan at each site. This shared experience integrates regional cultures and sectarian traditions into a common religious framework.

The spatial and temporal dimensions of tirtha yatra—crossing physical distances, engaging in ritual bathing, and participating in festivals—reinforce the idea of India as a sacred territory, where the divine is immanent in the landscape (Eck, 1981)<sup>[5]</sup>.

### Conclusion

The Char Dham pilgrimage exemplifies the dynamic interplay between sacredness, spatiality, and cultural territoriality in India. Through the practices of darshan, the tradition of tirtha, and the mythic layering of place, the Indian subcontinent has been mapped as a sacred geography. The Char Dham Yatra, with its deep historical roots and enduring contemporary relevance, stands as a testament to the power of pilgrimage to shape both individual transcendence and collective identity.

The Char Dham pilgrimage stands as a profound testament to the ways in which sacred geography, ritual practice, and mythic imagination converge to construct cultural territoriality in India. Rooted in the ancient traditions of \*darshan\*—the transformative act of seeing and being seen by the divine—the journey to Badrinath, Dwarka, Puri, and Rameswaram is not merely a physical traversal of the subcontinent but a spiritual crossing that binds the pilgrim to a living landscape charged with divine presence and historical memory.

Through the concept of \*tirtha\*, these four abodes become liminal spaces where the boundaries between the earthly and the transcendent dissolve. The pilgrimage itself is a ritualized crossing, echoing the Vedic and Puranic narratives of descent and ascent, and reinforcing the belief that sacredness is not confined to temples but is woven into the very rivers, mountains, and coasts of India. The act of bathing in sacred waters, performing rituals at auspicious times, and journeying across the land are all expressions of the Indian ethos that sees the world as permeated by the divine, and that regards movement through sacred space as essential to spiritual fulfillment.

The Char Dham Yatra is also a living example of how mythology and geography are layered upon each other to create a "living landscape." Each site is not only a destination but a nexus of stories, legends, and local traditions, continuously reinterpreted and re-inscribed by generations of pilgrims and communities. The integration of indigenous cults, guardian spirits, and regional deities into the Brahminical and pan-Hindu framework reflects a dynamic process of cultural synthesis that has shaped India's religious identity over millennia.

Moreover, the pilgrimage circuit fosters a unique sense of unity in diversity. By linking the cardinal points of the subcontinent, the Char Dham Yatra transcends regional, linguistic, and sectarian boundaries, offering a shared spiritual journey that is both deeply personal and collectively unifying. This unity is not static but continually negotiated through evolving practices, the layering of new myths, and the adaptation to social and technological changes.

At the same time, the Char Dham pilgrimage is not without its challenges. The pressures of mass tourism, environmental degradation, and the commercialization of sacred sites threaten the delicate balance between tradition and modernity. As the pilgrimage continues to draw millions each year, there is an urgent need for sustainable management that honors both the sanctity of these spaces

and the ecological systems that support them. The resilience of the Char Dham tradition lies in its ability to adapt while remaining anchored in the core values of transcendence, purification, and the sacredness of the land.

In sum, the Char Dham pilgrimage is a microcosm of India's broader sacred geography—a landscape where myth, ritual, and territory are inseparably intertwined. It is through such journeys that the spiritual and spatial dimensions of Indian civilization are continually reaffirmed, ensuring that the land remains not just mapped, but meaningfully inhabited. The Char Dham Yatra thus endures as both a journey of personal transformation and a collective act of cultural remembrance, shaping and sustaining the sacred territoriality of India for generations to come.

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