

## Review

*Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition: Salvific Space*, by Knut A. Jacobsen. London and New York: Routledge, 2013. 208 pp., £95 (hb), £29.99 (pb). ISBN 978-0-415-59038-9 (hb), 978-1-138-84466-7 (pb).

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Knut A. Jacobsen has presented readers interested in Hindu pilgrimage traditions with a novel approach to one of the most important religious practices in Hinduism. The theme of his recent book is taken from the Hindu tradition itself, namely the understanding that pilgrimage is basically the quest for salvific rewards, which are said to be attainable at certain places. These places, especially when situated at rivers or lakes, are understood as ‘salvific space’. Jacobsen has set himself the task to elucidate the nature of Hindu salvific space and to ask how and why it became a central feature in Hinduism. He emphasizes right at the outset that he did not want to just repeat what texts like the Māhātmyas and Purāṇas say about the various pilgrimage places or to provide additional knowledge of ancient Indian geography by studying old pilgrimage texts. His interest lies instead in ‘the ascription of sacredness, divinity and salvific power to places, and in pilgrimage rituals as sources for understanding an aspect of the history of Hinduism’ (p. 1). How and when did pilgrimage originate and what are the preconditions that made power of place a decisive element in Hinduism? In search of answers Jacobsen consulted historical Sanskrit texts, contemporary Hindi literature praising pilgrimage places, as well as academic publications on Hindu pilgrimage. Moreover, he also made use of the results of his own field research conducted at various pilgrimage sites where he had observed pilgrimage activities in situ and talked to pilgrims, pilgrimage priests and other religious experts at length. Numerous photos taken by Jacobsen attest to the large number of places he has visited in different parts of India over the last years.

The results of the extensive research activities are presented in seven chapters. The first deals with the concepts connected with Hindu pilgrimage and the texts describing and propagating pilgrimage and pilgrimage sites (*tīrtha*). The second one discusses two outstanding features of the pilgrimage tradition

in Hinduism, which in Jacobsen's opinion most probably distinguish Hindu pilgrimage conceptions from those of other religions. The first is the notion of salvific power of space; it rests on the belief that certain sites are not only sacred spaces but also salvific spaces, that is, sites at which the various salvational goals of religion (like health, wealth, rebirth or final salvation) may be attained, often without the mediation of a god. Jacobsen chose the example of the ancient pilgrimage site of Kurukṣetra to clarify this notion. The second is the notion of salvific sites as divinities. There are narratives, which present *tīrthas* as personifications of divine powers, even as individualized divinities. In some of these accounts certain sacred water sites are described as needing to go themselves on a pilgrimage; they have to visit other sacred rivers to get rid of the impurity brought about by all the pilgrims who have washed off their sins in their waters. That they have to leave their original sites for a while gives rise to the interesting question of what happens to the sacredness of these sites during their absence. The narratives also hint at the possibility of strife and politics of ranking between pilgrimage sites.

The following chapters answer questions about the origin of the belief in the efficacy of salvific space and the growth and spread of the pilgrimage tradition throughout the South Asian subcontinent. Over the centuries, countless people held on to the belief in the salvific power of certain places and tried to make a visit to one or more of these sites. The last two hundred years saw an extraordinary increase in the number of pilgrims, a development which is still going on. The political, economical and technological changes brought about by British colonial power not only facilitated travelling but also inspired the improvement of pilgrimage places (for instance, Vārāṇasī, Allāhābad, Gayā), which made it possible to accommodate masses of visitors. A growing number of priestly experts, as well as merchants, earned and still earn their keep by providing services to pilgrims, and the fast development of tourism during the last decades created income to members of all sections of society. As 'the sacred and secular institutions share the same interest in the growth of pilgrims' (p. 93), it is not surprising that the attraction of pilgrimage places did not decrease but seems to be stronger than ever before.

In the fifth chapter, Jacobsen turns to narratives and doctrines of salvific space choosing the example of the sage Kapila about whom he has already published a monograph (*Kapila: Founder of Sāṃkhya and Avatāra of Viṣṇu*. Delhi, 2008). But, different to the former study, his attention is here directed to the various pilgrimage places associated with Kapila's life and deeds. Most of them are well-known sites for performing the death rituals (*śrāddha*) for deceased relatives. The most important places connected with Kapila and death ceremonies are Sidhpur in Gujarat, the main site for performing *śrāddha* for mothers, and Gaṅgā Sāgar in Bengal. Narratives of both places underline the possibility of salvific liberation (*mokṣa*) at these sites. The same goes for stories told in Kolāyat (Rajasthan) and various other Kapila pilgrimage places. They present Kapila not as a god, but as a great teacher who has attained

*mokṣa*, and the salvific power of the places is believed to derive from the presence of this outstanding person in earlier times.

The remaining parts of the book give an instructive overview of the various structures and networks of pilgrimage sites emphasizing the pluralistic, anti-centralist character of the Hindu pilgrimage tradition (Chapter Six) and consider contradictions in the texts about pilgrimage (Chapter Seven), such as the tension between concepts stressing benefits earned by travelling, that is, making a pilgrimage, and those emphasizing the salvific power of the place. In addition, important contemporary challenges are discussed: 'Tīrthas and pollution' and 'Tīrthas and conflict'. 'Pollution' in this context refers to the visible environmental pollution that is spoiling several pilgrimage sites today. Other sites experienced conflicts and strife owing to claims on exclusive rights by one religious party, the forceful destruction of the mosque in Ayodhyā in 1992 being a well-known case in point.

The discussion of these recent developments and the various new data from Jacobsen's field research demonstrate that his book is not only a most informative study of the long tradition of pilgrimage in Hinduism but also a well-informed account of this phenomenon in present-day India.