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Indian Cultural Landscape vis-à-vis Ecological Cosmology: A Vision for the 21st Century

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Abstract. The concept of Indian Cultural Landscape refers to a complex cultural mosaic and network of spatiality of time, temporality of space, sacrality of nature and overall the encompassing manifestation of transcendence of man who since time immemorial is trying to make a strong bridge between conscious mind and super-conscious divine. This way the interplay has been part of constant and continuous evolutionary drama between earthly Man and cosmic Nature, turning into various built-structures and traditions that maintained continuity-maintenance-transformation and changes, of course always keeping the essence of the past that processed and get transferred from one generation to another. This makes the aliveness in the lifeways of the people and culture. Concept of cultural landscape has root in geographical thought and commonly accepted as one of the best strategies to understand and project the vividness and commonality of landscape and culture. This paper is an attempt on the line of critical appraisal of history of Indian Cultural Landscape, and its selected manifestive representations, e.g. cosmic rhythm and mandala, Bharat as Devi, the ‘motherly’ Ganga River, and sacred sites.

Keywords: Indian Cultural Landscape, heritage, religious symbolism, Hindu cosmogony, sacredscapes, global message.

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### **1. Cultural Landscape: Envisioning the heritage**

Virtually all landscapes have cultural associations, because virtually all landscapes have been affected in some way by human action or perception. Therefore, the phrase “cultural landscape” does not mean a special type of landscape; instead, it reflects upon a way of seeing landscapes and associated attributes that emphasizes the interaction between human beings and nature over

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time — maintaining existence-continuity-transformation and transferability — that makes the cultural landscape. In Indian tradition, cultural landscape denoted as heritage and is defined as “*dharohara*”, which is derived from ‘the mother earth’ (*dhara-*), and ‘endeavour of identity through time’ (*-ihara*). That is how it is explained in terms of the “root” (*shrota*) and “identity” (*asmita*) – a framework of continuity of interconnectedness and a personality of culture (cf. Rana and Singh 2000). The cultural landscape is an object of change either by the development of a culture or by a replacement of cultures. The datum line from which changes are measured is the natural condition of the landscape. As resultant cultural landscape shows influences worked on people by their institutions, taboos, design preferences, built-up architecture, and system and spatial order, assemblages of cultural features which comprise their cultural landscape, and which support and embrace their civilisation — that is how cultural landscape is conceived as an integral part of heritagescapes (cf. Singh 2011b).

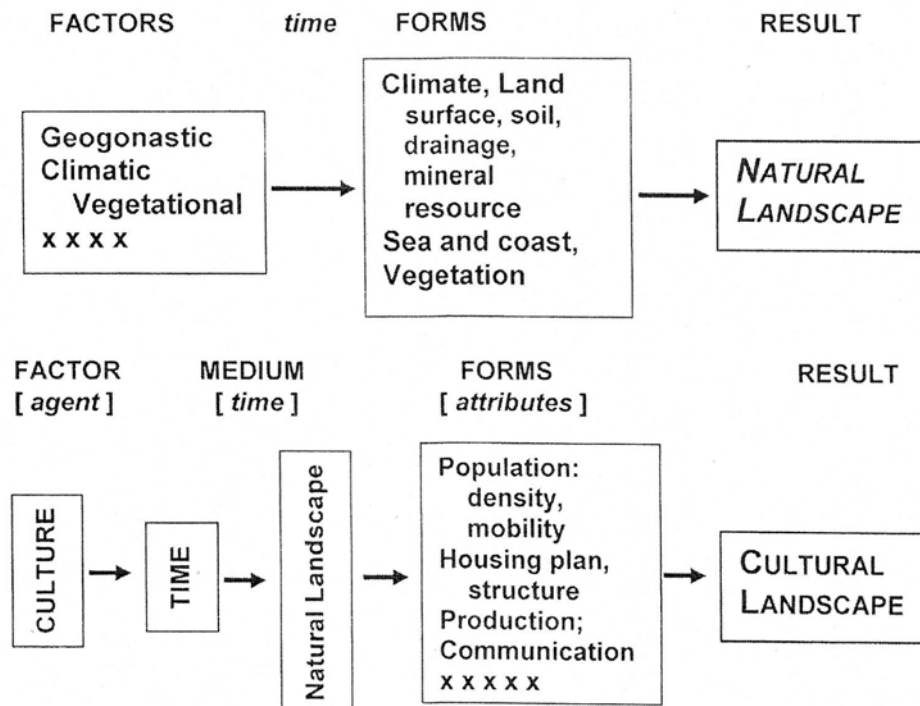
Cultural landscape is conventionally a principal object of study in cultural geography and still the subject of intense debate among cultural geographers, and with special consideration of UNESCO Cultural Heritage (tangible and intangible) the frame, scope and networks of cultural landscape becomes comprehensive, intensive and valid in heritage studies.

The German geographer Otto Schlüter (1872-1959) is credited with having first formally used “*cultural landscape*” as an academic term in the early twentieth century (Martin 2005: 175). In 1906, Schlüter argued that by defining geography as a *Landschaftskunde* (landscape science) this would give geography a logical subject matter shared by no other discipline (Elkins 1989: 27). He defined two forms of landscape: the *Urlandschaft* (translated as original landscape) or landscape that existed before major human induced changes and the *Kulturlandschaft* (translated as ‘cultural landscape’) — a landscape created by human culture. The major task of geography was to trace the changes in these two landscapes (Martin 2005: 176).

Since Schlüter’s first formal use of the term, and Sauer’s effective promotion of the idea, the concept of ‘cultural landscapes’ has been variously used, applied, debated, developed and refined within academia; and when, in 1992, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee elected to convene a meeting of the ‘specialists’ to advise and assist redraft the Committee’s Operational Guidelines to include ‘*cultural landscapes*’ as an option for heritage listing properties that were neither purely natural nor purely cultural in form (i.e. ‘mixed’ heritage) (cf. Fowler 2003). They are today’s concern of conservation and revival of aesthetical values aiming to serve global integrity and feeling of interrelatedness (WHC 2003).

It was Carl O. Sauer, a human geographer, who was probably the most influential in promoting and developing the idea of *cultural landscapes* (for critique see Mitchell 2000: 27-28). Sauer was determined to stress the agency of culture as a force in shaping the visible features of the Earth’s surface in delimited areas. Within his definition, the physical environment retains a central significance, as the medium with and through which human cultures act that finally result into formation of ‘cultural landscape’ (Sauer 1925/ 1963: 337, 343; see the Fig. 1):

Fig. 1. Natural landscape and Cultural landscape  
(after Sauer 1925/ 1963: 337, 343).



“The cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a cultural group. Culture is the agent, the natural area the medium, the cultural landscape is the result. Under the influence of a given culture, itself changing through time, the landscape undergoes development, passing through phases, and probably reaching ultimately the end of its cycle of development. With the introduction of a different — that is, alien — culture, a rejuvenation of the cultural landscape sets in, or a new landscape is superimposed on remnants of an older one”.

There is a clear parallel in conceptual language between Sauer’s description of cultural landscape as subject to evolutionary change over time, and W.M. Davis’s normal cycle of natural landscape evolution as both took chorology and succession as the process of evolution and changes (Livingstone 1992). Sauer was determined to stress the agency of *culture* as a force in shaping the visible features of the Earth’s surface in delimited areas, and his own landscape studies and methods. Yet the physical environment retains within his definition a central significance, as the *medium* with and through which human cultures act. Thus, elements of the physical environment, such as topography, soils, watercourses, plants and animals are to be incorporated into studies of the cultural landscape insofar as they evoke *human responses* and *adaptations*, or have themselves been altered by human activity, for example forest clearance, hydrological management or plant and animal domestication (cf. Fig. 1).

Sauer's definition is grounded in a neat distinction between NATURE and CULTURE, reflected in the structure of his diagram, a distinction which few cultural geographers would be so willing to uphold or defend today. Not only is there broad acceptance that the *tabula rasa* of 'natural landscape' upon which 'culture' inscribes itself has probably never existed, since its own features are subject to constant change through geophysical, climatic, hydrological and other processes of change, but 'nature' itself and the boundaries which separate it from the human are culturally contrived in radically different ways by different groups in different historical contexts (Cronon 1995). Thus, both nature and culture are best regarded together, as co-productions. All *landscapes* are thus equally *natural landscapes* and *cultural landscapes*, according to the contexts of questions and the processes chosen to examine in relation to understanding evolution. It is clear also from this stereo model that Sauer laid greatest emphasis on the visible forms of cultural landscape as the principal features for geographic study, as implied also by the term '*morphology*' in the title of his classical essay.

Sauer's reference to the introduction into a cultural landscape of a different – 'alien' – culture is more than a mere reflection of the Davisian idea of erosional rejuvenation with uplift of physical landscapes, but reflects Sauer's interest in the cultural impacts of colonisation and modernisation on pre-Columbian cultural landscapes in Hispanic America which manifested visibly the imposition of colonial cultures upon pre-existing cultures, and which many American cultural geographers in the Sauerian tradition have sought to reconstruct. More recent studies in cultural ecology over the past half millennium have deepened our understanding of the complexities of cultural landscape change (cf. Butzer 1992), while post-colonial theory has prompted significant re-evaluation of those 'alien' introductions into the existing cultural landscapes. In both these revisions, greater attention is given to 'political ecology', so that Sauer's idea of a climax cultural landscape swept away by a rejuvenated one and remaining only in relict or remnant form has been replaced by notions of a more mediated, hybrid and trans-cultural landscape.

Such studies of cultural landscape may be genealogically related to the Sauerian concept, but they demonstrate also the impact of theoretical criticisms made of the Sauerian model. Cosgrove and Daniels (1988: 1) claimed that, "a landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings. This is not to say that landscapes are immaterial. They may be represented in a variety of materials and on many surfaces – in paint on canvas, in writing on paper, in earth, stone, water and vegetation on the ground". But, here the emphasis remains on the visual character of landscapes, but is not restricted to morphological consideration and visible features: all aspects of landscape are regarded as representational, thus cultural signifiers, the interpretation of which reveals social attitudes and material processes. This approach to cultural landscape draws upon British and European social and cultural theory with minor concern for ecological and environmental considerations. It also bears comparison with the approach to vernacular cultural landscapes in the United States pioneered by Jackson (1984) and discussed by Meinig (1979), which also emphasised the communicative and representational rather than the ecological aspects of cultural landscapes. A semiotic approach to cultural landscape finds its most extreme expression in the

treatment of cultural landscapes as texts and their discursive consideration through the language and methods of literary analysis (Duncan 1990).

Schein (1997), while seeking to retain the identification of cultural landscape with the 'tangible, visible scene' draws upon Massey's (1991) idea of places as 'moments' in a continuing networked process of social relations that stretch across space: 'Landscapes are always in the process of "becoming", no longer reified or concretised □ inert and there □ but continually under scrutiny, at once manipulable, always subject to change, and everywhere implicated in the ongoing formulation of social life' (Schein 1997: 662). With the introduction of UNESCO's framework of intangible cultural heritage, the notion of cultural landscape has been changed into more comprehensive way.

In the aftermath of often heated debate over the definition and methods for studying cultural landscape within geography, "the concept itself has been rejuvenated; a wealth of substantive cultural landscape studies are appearing, and while the genealogy of the Sauerian concept remains fertile, the usage of the term cultural landscape within cultural geography no longer implies" in a sense what was once prevalent at Berkeley School (Cosgrove 2000: 141). Shackley describes a cultural landscape as "an integrated complex of cultural and natural resources, whose values derive from their physical quality, as well as from associated human endeavours and traditions" (2001: 139). In Indian context, use of literature testing the spatial, landscapic and lifeways issues is a rich resource, but rarely tapped (cf. Singh 2004).

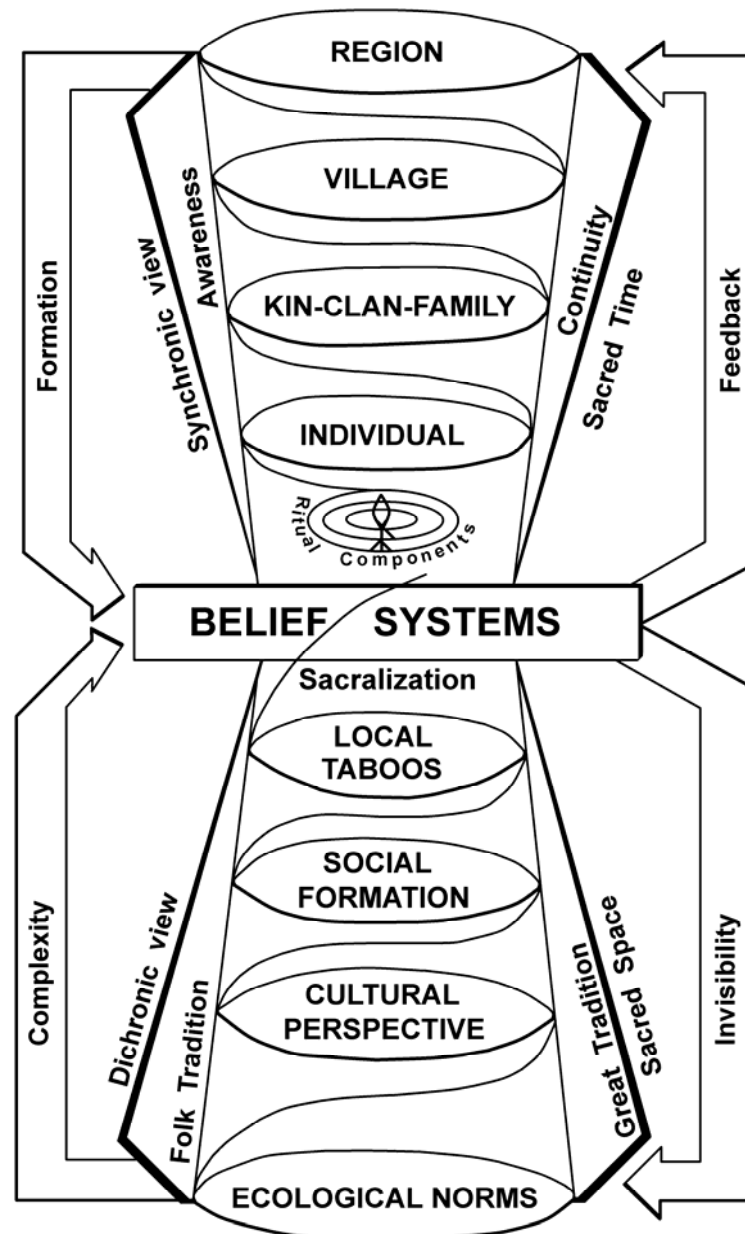
## 2. Framing the Indian Cultural Landscape (ICL)

*Indian Cultural Landscape (ICL)* is envisioned as amalgamated mosaic of mental construction, visual exposition, memorial repositories, monumental structures, physical existence, ritual happenings, cultural traditions, and several of their associates and auxiliaries that result into a complex web of a collection of religious, cultural and physical meanings ascribed to geographical components through collective memory, planted on the ground (shaped in the landscape) in active engagement with communities over generations (cf. Thakur 2012: 154-155). Predominantly, the *ICL* is a repository of the collective perceptions of geography, where memory, information and imagination converge to shape the landscape through imagination, realisation, memorisation and continuity and finally revelation. The physical form of the landscape that survives has the capacity to regenerate itself when associations, ideologies and continuity are re-established to engage the contemporary minds of the people. The evidence of their history remains preserved as 'historical layers' and 'cultural manifestations' interwoven with the tangible and intangible resources and that result into embedded knowledge, which requires to be deciphered and dissected and disseminated in making cross-cultural understanding across all the borders of political, cultural and societal realm, especially in case of the South and the east Asia.

In spite of impact of several socio-cultural changes and introduction of new democratic society, the basic unit of Indian culture with majority of villages (over 68

%) exists as a pattern of life. In no way Indian society should be termed as a 'transitional' society (see Malik 1968: 173-174).

Fig. 2. Hindu tradition of Landscape interactions: Spatial levels of Territorial expansion.



Malik (1968: 174) has rightly concluded: "Therefore, it should be quite natural to expect the loyalties of this basic unit to remain at the regional – macro-(*meso*)-micro – level rather than at any other wider nationalistic or humanistic level." In theoretical plan the linkages among individual, culture-history and awareness may be explained at two levels. The spatial level of territorial exposition

starts from kin-clan sacred ties and reaches to the highest ethical level of mankind. The lower level of rootedness starts from tradition of sacred society and passing through socio-political, socio-cultural-economic, culture areas, ultimately reaches to the ecological-natural areas (Fig. 2). In both the cases the degree of emotional bond decreases.

There always exists a 'spirit of place' which interconnects the varying niches of the levels. Of course, at present mostly perhaps due to increasing pace of individualism this unifying spirit is now in danger. Does India's future maintain its long tradition of 'unity among diversities' is a question of doubt! However, by the ethical revival of the deeply rooted old values a healthy tradition of making a balance be promoted. Pilgrimages and heritage tourism are among the strongest traditions in this direction. The direct experience of sacred places has a transformational quality that inherently possesses the continuity; that is how it turns into complexity.

'Identity' in cultural geography is commonly addressed by the characteristics mainly like place, language, religion, ethnicity, nationality, community, class and gender. In a country like India — already wide, culturally ancient, humanly pressurised, regionally diversified, local cosmological — to search the homogenisation of these aspects are neither possible, nor derivative. Place matters in a different ways, at different scales and in different territories. We find materials symbolic, mythical and mystical places that identify the landscape. Of course, the attachment to place through its *genus loci* is an important element in Indian geography, however not seriously drawn attention by dweller geographers. The essence of understanding cultural identities and landscapes are evident at all spatial scales — local, regional, national, and global from place-to-place variations in quality of life and lifeways. In the context of India, relevance of space and place (as two nexus of landscape) to all human endeavours has been appreciated in different ways with different spectacles. Above all this is the reflection of geographical imagination in the spectrum of cultural landscape that rooted in India's past and may have dreams in future. In India geography 'explains ways of living in all their myriad diversities' that converge into mosaicism, and that gives the notion of wholeness of cultural holes.

The process of formation of the landscape of India is unique. The knowledge and understanding of this process remains encapsulated in the collective consciousness of the diverse communities interspersed across the sub-continent. The myriad living traditions and intangible heritage grew to further reinforce this collective consciousness. These were later celebrated, consolidated and expanded over time through continuity, a process which has shaped the characteristics of the Indian Cultural Landscape.

Varied geography, imbued archaeology, framing past through history, innumerable faiths and cultural traditions have all come together in making and shaping the Indian Cultural Landscapes (cf. Thakur 2012: 155). They have evolved through processes of cultural synthesis and specific practices within the complexities, diversities, transitions and mosaicism among various regional cultures. The cultural understanding of geography enabled the landscapes to be envisaged as a canvas against which the Indian traditional perspectives and knowledge were conceptualized, practiced and is celebrated in continuity,

manifestations and performances. It also forms the context where man interacts with his environs based on a holistic knowledge of Nature within both sacred and secular underpinnings and purviews.

The *ICL* has been described and exemplified in myths, legends, lyrics, oral traditions and religious texts, as also marked on the ground through construction of shrines, temples, mortuary structures, pavilions and tombs, and various forms of built-up landscapes. Often the reconfiguration of *ICL* incorporates rock-shelters, hills, boulders and streams in keeping with contemporary requirements. These were planted/imprinted on the ground from memory in the medieval times (at the backdrop of rise Islam to reinforce faith) and given a physical form by ascribing values, meaning and aesthetics and association to different forms of Nature. The unique pattern of natural features and forms networked with the sacred geography of faith and its secular norms supports integrated man, place and faith to shape a cohesive cultural landscape. The unity achieved at the physical and metaphysical levels gives rise to a continuity, consistency, complexity and comprehensiveness that reinforce the holistic cognition of the cultural landscape (cf. Thakur 2012). The bond among the physical, metaphysical and perceived parts of the landscape was further expanded after passage of time through man's engagement with their geography in various forms. This sacrality exists right from the memory to geography which gives greater meaning/ values through collective memory and association of local communities, resulting into the formation of layers, varieties, orderings, and similarly so many qualities and characteristics in the cultural landscapes.

Indian Cultural Landscape is an integral form and resultant of long understanding and practice of spatial manifestation of spirit and its exposition into variety of and complex web of mythologies, that further promoted and re-awakened the its *genius loci*. Sinha (2006: 31), concludes that "A place's *numen* may be explained in terms of opportunities for prospect-refuge, coincidence of terrestrial features and solar events, geomagnetic anomalies affecting the body's electrochemical processes, unusual topographic formations suggesting the appearance of land in the midst of a large expanse of waters, and features that have sustained human evolution; yet they shall remain secondary explanations of a phenomenon whose primary rationale lies in man's intrinsic search for spiritual transcendence." This is the personality of *ICL*.

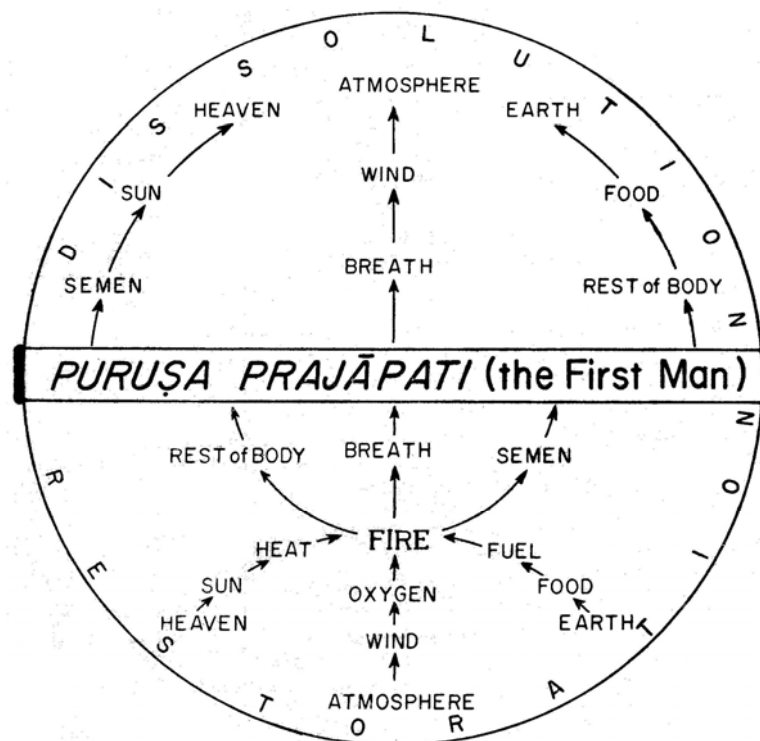
India's sacred geography helps in understanding Indian Cultural Landscapes. Historical process of selecting and locating sacred places and temples in perpetuity with landscape is based on an understanding of Indian classical geography reinforced by faith, tradition and mythologies. In Indian tradition nature is the overall encompassing frame of sacrality and landscapes, where since ancient past "Nature was deified by prehistoric societies, and its components, such as rocks, tress, well, and springs, were recognised as receptacles for spirits" (Sinha 2006: 23); [*in fact*], "Nature was the primordial mother archetype, in time leading to the worship of the great mother goddess" (ibid., cf. Neuman 1972). The Indian ethos envisages culture as a creation of the interaction of three elements of the cosmos. The Cosmogram is an integration of the *macrocosm* (universe, planets, stars) with the *microcosm* (man, temples, cities) enabled by the *mesocosm* (earth, rivers, nature) through the interaction of communities with their landscape. No element exists in isolation but as

a part of a greater and integral whole (cf. Singh 2013b). It may be illustrated with the cosmogram of Kashi (Banaras), which is composed of several smaller sacred territories manifesting layers upon layers but each one marking a sacred geography, of course within inter-linkages, inter-connections and super-impositions. The individual extent of these territories is lined by temples that create a *parikrama patha* (sacred routes) and by enveloping all smaller territories provide the complete entity of Kashi. These *pathas* have been traversed since time immemorial by generations in continuing practice establishing the open-ended relationship of man with nature. Similar structures and networks of correspondences and alignments illustrated and compared with many other holy cities of India (cf. Singh 2009a, 2011a, and 2013a)

### 3. Mandala: Spirality of the Cosmic Rhythm

The complex duality of disintegration and reintegration is symbolised with the *mandala*. Signifying the totality of this counterpart system, it shows a map of the Cosmos in space, and also the psycho-spiritual state of the organic reality of humans, in relationship to the fundamental elements of Nature.

Figure 3. The *Mandala* of Dissolution and Restoration  
(SB: 7.1.2.1, and 7.1.2.2-6-1; Singh 1987: 307).



The cosmogonic portrayal of the dissolution and restoration of Purusha Prajapati, the first human, is illustrated by three vertical levels of the Indian cosmos: earth, atmosphere and heaven, as described in the *Shatpatha Brahmana* (7.1.2.1 and

7.1.2.2-6). Accordingly, “Prajapati’s semen (or, less concretely, his “Virility” or “energy”, Sanskrit *Viryam*) becomes the sun, located in the distant above; his breath becomes the wind, located in the intermediate atmosphere; and the rest of his body becomes food, scattered across the surface of the earth” (Lincoln 1986: 79). The text further describes the process of restoration, where fire is assumed to be the base, which can be produced through heat, oxygen and fuel, and finally through the action of fire: “the Sun is changed back into Prajapati’s semen, the wind into his breath, and the food of fuel drawn from the earth into the rest of his body” (Lincoln 1986: 80). These two processes form a *mandala*, represented with a diagram (Figure 3).

But *mandala* is more than just this description. Orientalist Giuseppe Tucci described it in its full vitality: “It is, above all, a map of the cosmos. It is the whole universe in its essential plan, in its process of emanation and of re-absorption. The universe not only in its merit spatial expanse, but as temporal revolution and both as a vital process which develops from an essential Principle and rotates round a central axis, Mount Sumeru, the axis of the world on which the sky rests and which sinks its roots into the mysterious substratum” (Tucci 1968: 23). The spatial view of the *mandala* and its cosmic correspondences are further transmuted into psychical relationships, or a psycho-spiritual state. The first idea of these connections is found in the *Rig Veda* (c 1500 B.C.E.), referring to a tertiary division of the world into “earth, atmosphere and heaven, created by three appropriate words, the sounds produced by *Vac*, the sacred word – “*bhu, bhuvah, svah*” (Tucci 1968: 116). This triad corresponds with other concepts related to the psycho-spiritual state (Table 1).

Table 1. Rig Vedic World and Psycho-Spiritual Correspondences.

| Creation of the word in three sounds | Symbols (the World)    | State of body           | State of consciousness | Centres of Synthesizing universe | Biocosmological symbol, <i>BaU 1.5.4</i> |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| 1                                    | 2                      | 3                       | 4                      | 5                                | 6                                        |
| 1. <i>bhu-</i>                       | Earth (Terrestrial)    | <i>Jagrata</i> (awaken) | active                 | Sexual organs                    | speech                                   |
| 2. <i>bhuvah-</i>                    | Atmosphere (Middle)    | <i>Svapana</i> (dream)  | imagery                | heart                            | mind                                     |
| 3. <i>svah-</i>                      | Sky/heaven (Celestial) | <i>Susupti</i> (sleep)  | lulled                 | brain                            | breath                                   |

(BaU, *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 1.5.4); source: Singh 1987: 309.

The state of consciousness is also interpreted with the help of *mandala*, as first introduced to the Western world by psychologist Carl Jung, who viewed the spontaneity of *mandala* as a step in the individuation process, as well as a process for the integration of unconscious material. In other words, the idea of the emergence of microcosmic (human) into the macrocosmic (universe) led to an understanding of the processual interrelationship between matter and spirit. Jung concluded that “the unconscious tend to regard spirit and matter not merely as equivalent but as actually

identical and this is flagrant contrast to the intellectual one-sidedness, which would sometimes like to spiritualise matter and at other times materialise spirit” (Jung 1957: 29).

Following the same tradition, geographer Gunnar Olsson described *mandala* “as a symbolic representation of the archetypal of the collective unconscious” (Olsson 1980: 19e). Elaborating the imagery frame of *mandala*, Jung believed that “the severe pattern imposed by a circular image of this kind compensates the disorder and confusion of the psychic state through the construction of a central point to which everything is related, or by a concentric arrangement of the disordered multiplicity and of contradictory and irreconcilable elements” (Jung 1959: 388). Thus, in an extended form, *mandala* “is a cosmogonic symbol which represents creation and dissolution, form and emptiness, social wholes and individual parts” (Olsson 1980: 20e). This is identical to the description given in the *Shatapatha Brahmana* (Figure 3).

Rituals and religious activities of Hinduism are associated with the sacralization of space and time, and can be expressed in a ritual *mandala* (cf. Singh, Rana 1987: 309). Jung considered this “a fundamental reality, a principle *sui generis* which at the same time is independent of the psychic processes and is the essential ground of their unity” (as in Nagendra 1971: 94). The ritual *mandala* takes the form of a circle, symbolising Hindu “thoughts-and-actions.” Jung shows that the circle containing the four parts was regarded as a symbol of the Deity: “The idea of those old philosophers was that God manifested Himself first in the creation of the four elements. They were symbolised by the four partitions of the circle. .... The division of four, the synthesis of the four, the miraculous appearance of work – nigredo, dealbatoo, rubefactio and citrinitas – are constant preoccupations of the old philosophers. Four symbolises the parts, qualities and aspects of the one” (Jung 1957: 56-57).

#### 4. Cultural Landscape vis-à-vis Cosmic Mandala

The origin and unity of organic life in nature are conceived as the product of *Purusha* (male energy) and *Prakriti* (female energy), each represented by a triangle (*trikona*) — one with its apex at the top and the other with apex at the bottom, respectively (Fig. 4).

Together these two triangles make a hexagram, which symbolises the continuity of creation and existence. The two forms of triangles also symbolise phallus (*Linga*) and vulva (*Yoni*), thus interaction of the two results into creation. The two positions of the triangles also represent two forms of relationships between humanity and environment — value and operation. In each case an angle represents a particular attribute: physical, social, and spiritual as basic attributes of the value system, and ideology, needs, and action as components of the operational system. These two systems working together represent the human lifeworld (Fig. 4).

The triangle image is transformed into a divine form showing Shiva *Linga* which has two bases: the spherical ending *Linga* (phallus) and the flat-plate *Yoni* (vulva). The *linga* has three parts, i.e., basement, central part, and spherical cylinder, respectively representing evolution, existence, and involution, and thus refers

sequentially to the trinity pantheon of Hindu gods, viz. Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva (Fig. 5). This image, which represents supreme form of Shiva (*Mahesh-vara*), symbolises the supreme state of unity, and stands for all knowledge (Singh 1987: 310-311).

Fig. 4. *Trikona* (Triangle) symbolism in Hinduism

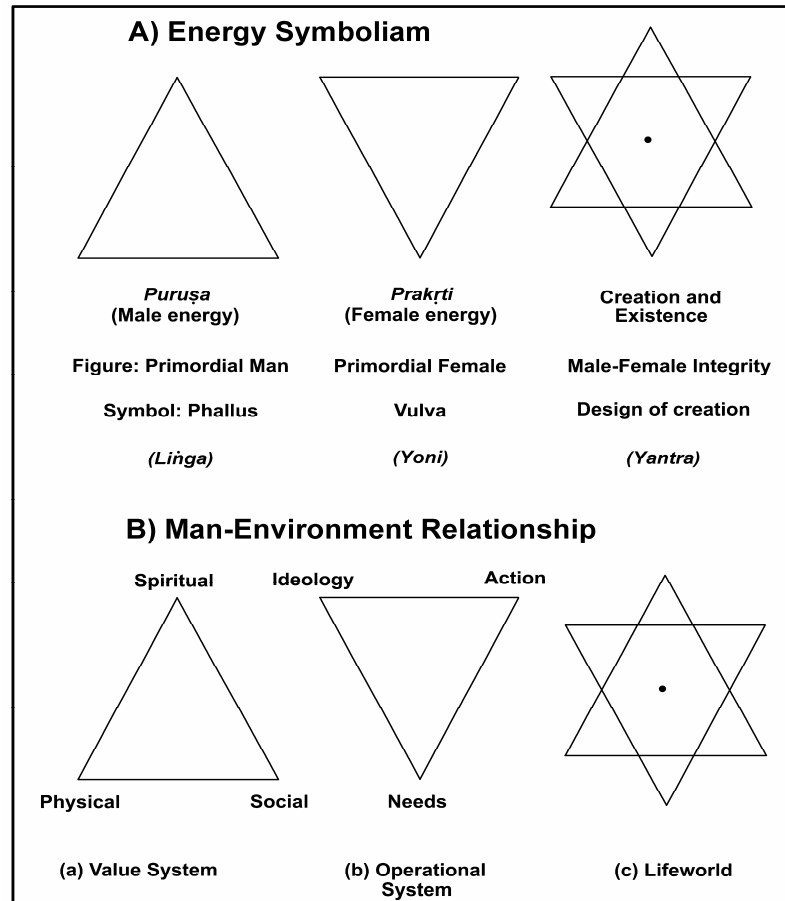
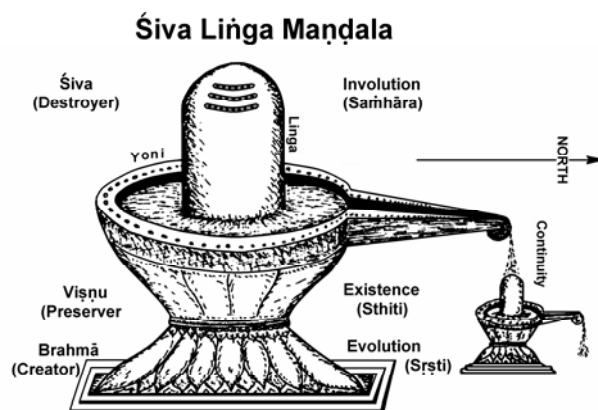


Fig. 5. Shiva Liṅga as Mandala.



In an extended form of the above statue, a small *linga* is also shown. Together these two *lingas* show the sense of evolution-existence and continuity through the process of reproduction, and finally indicate the ultimate reality of unity between Man and the Cosmos. Says Bateson (1979: 172), “Evolution is a value free and as beautiful as the dance of Shiva, where all the beauty and ugliness, creation and destruction are expressed or compressed into one complex symmetrical pathway”. He has used name of Shiva (together with Abraxas) as label for the total process of life. Remember that beneficent dancing Hindu god of creation, the protector of forests and wild beasts (as Pashupatisha), has a second identity as Rudra, god of destruction. That is how Shiva is eulogised as ecological divinity.

Hindus believe that evolution of any individual soul starts with the first rudiments which are initially diffusive. This tiny spark then gets incarnated into bodies of plants, where it continues to grow, then it moves into animal bodies and finally into human ones. Among the trees *pipal* (called *ashvatha* in Vedic literature, *pipal* in later period and even today, and Bodhi tree in Buddhist literature; *Ficus religiosa*) is the most sacred to Hindus. Ashvatha represents the combined image of three conditions of universe in floral form, identical to *linga*: its roots symbolise creation, main stamen to existence, and the tips involution; thus it symbolises the entire cosmos and eulogised as ‘Tree of Life’ in ancient texts. Ashvatha is a unique and remarkable tree as the branches themselves morph into roots, and even when the original tree decays and perishes the young branches underneath continue to grow and enclose the parent. This eternal life of the Ashvatha has inspired many Hindu philosophers over millennia. Similar mythology is attributed to another sacred tree, i.e. banyan (*vata*, *Ficus Indica*). The human stage evolution of the soul implies, and not limited to, an understanding and experience of these fundamental principles of consciousness’ development as well as taking an active part in this process. Thus Hinduism’s philosophical and religious principles treat ‘ecospirituality’ as part and parcel of harmonious coexistence of human beings.

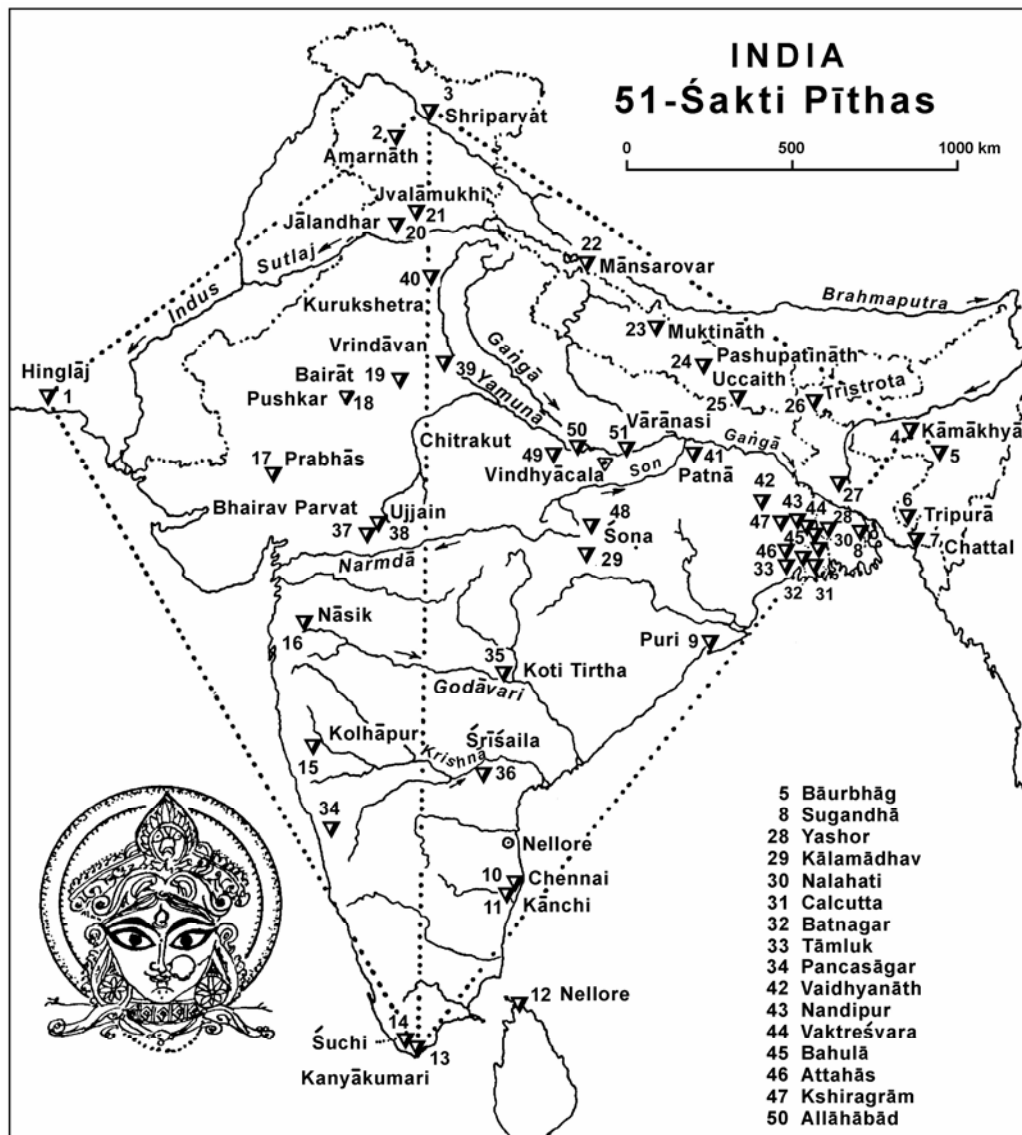
In Hindu symbolism a point represents the infinite; thus interconnecting three points through wish, intellect, and action results in a triangle symbolising “energy.” Rotation of these can yield combinations of 6, 8, 10. . . angles, ultimately emerging into a circle. This idea indicates the sense of expanding universe, commonly referred in Hindu and Buddhist mythologies as *Mandala*. The *mandala* in practice is comparable to lifeworld and is regulated by the dynamic force of action, *karma*—‘the action principle of play,’ where the total universe “is in action and everything is dynamically connected with everything else” (Capra 1975: 78), what is called as sense of ecological rootedness – the essence of Indian Cultural Landscape.

## 5. Indian Cultural Landscape: ‘Bharat Mata’ and Body of the Devi

In his *Hindu Goddesses* (1986) Kinsley has attempted to carve out female (Hindu) deities’ image through the existing belief systems, faithscape, and supported the conclusions drawn with the literary evidences. The chapter 12 ‘Goddesses and Sacred Geography’ (ibid.: pp. 178-196) of the book needs special reference here; where his main concern is to highlight important aspects of the reverence for the goddesses in Hindu tradition in which sacrality of the land, at greater level the earth

itself, is duly conceptualised, realised, experientially reflected and regarded. The Hindu literature, both the classical and modern, is full of reverence for ‘Mother India’ (*Bharat Mata*) and ‘Mother Earth’ (*Bhudevi*). The ‘land (and earth)’ is a personified goddess. This image, as described in literary tradition, is conceptualised by relating all geographical features, viz. mountains, hills, rivers, etc. to the mother earth and in that sense the goddess automatically becomes part of the sacred geography of the country (cf. Eck 2012; Singh 2013a: 134-140).

Fig. 6. India: 51 Shakti Pithas



Kinsley must be given credit for making his analysis highly relevant by citing beautiful excerpts from even pure regional literature. Reference to the image of *Bharat Mata* as conceived by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in his famous novel *Ananda Matha* is an example of that. In spite of all, the orientation of the exercise remains Indological. Even the imbued sacred geography is not described sufficiently

and hence, there lies the scope for making such an attempt and to promote pilgrimage-tourism based on Shaktipithas and locally attached shrines of mother/folk goddesses.

The spatial pattern of the 51 most important goddess shrines (Fig. 6) in the country and attached religious merit to pilgrimage to them must be seen with reference to their role in projecting the Greater India (*Brihad Bharata Kshetra*) as singular cultural entity. Furthermore, they have also held Indian people together, who otherwise belong to multiple and diverse ethnic-cultural groups with intra-social rampant divisions, since several hundred years. Some important earlier studies have already observed considerable interaction among pilgrims from different places/regions at *tirthas*; that should be noted here as a strong subliminal factor in the cultural-political process of inculcating integrity and unity.

The number 51 is not only identical to the 51 letters of Sanskrit (and Hindi) alphabet but also represented mystically in numerous ways in the *yantra*, an archetypal design associated with goddess worship. Moreover, experts in archetypal numerology and symbolism do interpret the origin and maintenance, creation and destruction of the universal order controlled by the divine feminine with 51 points of reference.

Transformation has played significant role in the development of relatively new sacred complexes. It happens at most of the places that strong faith of visiting devotees enshrouded with local myths and mystic propaganda by the pilgrim-tourists persuade more devout Hindus to visit the shrine. Manifold increase in the number of the visiting devotees to such places during the last four decades is direct evidence to it. Despite the considerable increase in visitors and allied developments there taken place, majority of the devotees do not perceive local or regional goddesses distinctly in terms of her origin, qualities that characterise her, and the symbolic meanings the image manifests. These goddesses are taken as the powerful miniature forms of Great Goddess and identified separately due to the uniqueness of her image – ‘self decapitated’ only. The physical landscape, particularly the banks of rivers, provides unique setting for archetypal connotation with reference to such shrines. This process mostly projects the upward projection from ‘locality’ to ‘universality’ or sometimes superimpositions with mosaic of transitions – the other distinct feature of Indian Cultural Landscape.

## **6. The Gangaisation of Indian Culture and Waterscape**

Different kinds of myths and symbols associated with water are described in Hindu mythology. In ancient Hindu mythology (ca. 1000 BCE), water is described as the foundation of the whole world, the essence of plant life and the elixir of immortality (cf. *Shatapatha Brahmana* 7.8. 2.2; 3.6.1.7). The *Atharva Veda* (2.3.6.), a ca. tenth-century BCE text prays: “May the water brings us well-being!” There are many such descriptions about the quality, use, sanctity, and symbolism of water (Eliade 1958: 188). In a later period of Hindu mythology, water becomes a symbol for life, and a liquid spirit of sustainability. Water is said to be a healer (*Atharva Veda* 7.91.3). Metaphorically and metaphysically, the ancient mythologies refer to water as the container of life, strength, and eternity, but most commonly it is

perceived as the purifier (cf. Singh, Rana 1996: 87-88). However, to reach the source and receive the merit of “living water” involves a series of consecrations, rituals, and religious activities such as pilgrimages and sacred baths. The cult of living water is described in the Vedic literature and is continued vividly in the Puranic literature. The *Rig Veda*, in its famous “River Hymn” (10.75.5), mentions the divine power of the Ganga River (the *Ganges* River, an anglicized name used in the West):

“Favour ye this my laud, O Ganga, Yamuna,  
O Shutudri, Parusni and Sarasvati,  
With Asikni, Vitasta, O Marudvrdha,  
O Arjikiya with Susoma hear my call.”

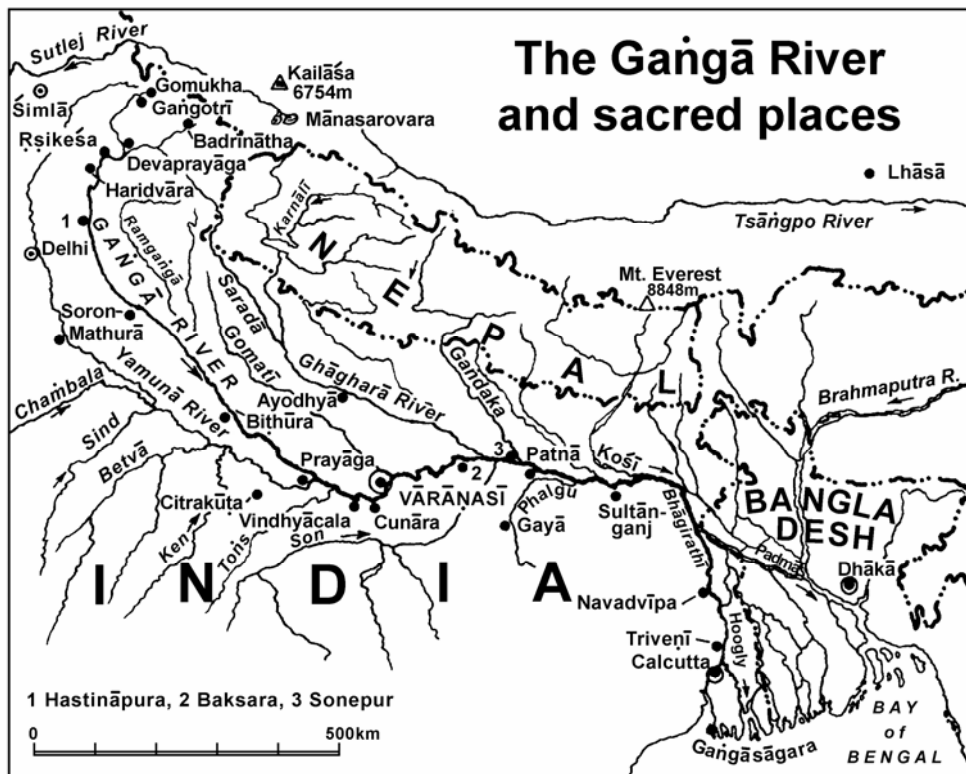
The text also eulogizes the Ganga as Gangeya, which means the “giver of all sorts of prosperity and peace” — the liquid spirit of sustainability (*Rig Veda* 7.45.3.1). Similar sentiments are echoed in the *Padma Purana* (*Shristi* 60.64-65), a ca. thirteenth-century CE text: “We pray to you O! the Liquid-energy of the Ganga — the universal form of supreme Lord Vishnu.”

The “wash away sins” quality of water is endowed with the power of sanctity and has many cosmological connotations in various mythologies. According to religious historian Eliade (1959: 131), “Everything that is a *form* manifests itself above the waters, by detaching itself from the waters.” Running water in general and the waters of the Ganga in particular are described as bestowing sanctity and miracles. From mythology to tradition, a common chain of interrelationship between the river and human society is maintained by a wide variety of performances and rituals. The psychic attachment to a place and the maintenance of cultural traditions reflects the realization of the divine manifestation at the place and preserves the intrinsic value of sustainability. The intensity and level of this manifestive power are greater in certain places. Such specific places are known as *tirtha* (“holy site” or “sacred place”).

In a symbolic representation before the Bhagirathi and the Alakananda meet and converge into the main river called Ganga at the place named Devaprayag, all other tributaries in the source area are suffixed by the word Ganga (cf. Fig. 7). Altogether in total there are 108 such streams that make the ‘wholeness’ of the Ganga; that is how she becomes holy mother. [Note that the number 108 is the most sacred, symbolising product of 12 zodiacs/ months into 9 directional points, including the centre]. In the source area of Uttaranchal there are exist several pan-India spatially manifested sacred places, making the entire area as holy territory or divine land. Such group of holy places are: 5 Kedars (Kedaranath, Madhyameshvar, Tunganath, Rudranath, and Kalpeshvar), 14 Prayaga, confluence point of the two sacred streams (Prayag, i.e. Allahabad itself, and rest are: Devaprayag, Rudraprayag, Karnaprayag, Nandaprayag, Vishnuprayag, Suryaprayag, Indraprayag, Somaprayag, Bhaskaraprayag, Hariprayag, Guptaprayag, Shyamaprayag, and Keshavaprayag), 5 Badris (Badrinath, Dhyani Badri, Yogi Badri, Bhavisya Badri, and Narsingh Badri). All these special places later developed as holy places and the most common sites for pilgrimages at regional level.

The tradition of perceiving the other regional rivers as the symbol of the Ganga and manifesting the mythic power may be called “*Gangaisation*” (Singh 1987: 316-318). The Ganga is considered “a prototype of all the rivers of India; and her magic power of salvation is shared — only to a lesser degree — by all the bodies of water in the land” (Zimmer 1991: 111). Says the *Matsya Purana* (102), a ca. ninth century text, that “without purificatory rite by the holy water, the mind cannot be purified, therefore a sacred bath is the first necessity before any religious act.” However, in a physical sense, the Ganga is not everywhere. Hindus believe that if a person remembers the Ganga with faith and reverence, any body of water would provide the manifestive divine-energy that the Ganga transmits (cf. Fig. 8). The real Ganga lies out there in the hearts and minds of many Hindus who have the faith to cherish any other river as the manifestive Ganga whenever they take their holy dip.

Fig. 7. The Ganga River basin and location of holy places.



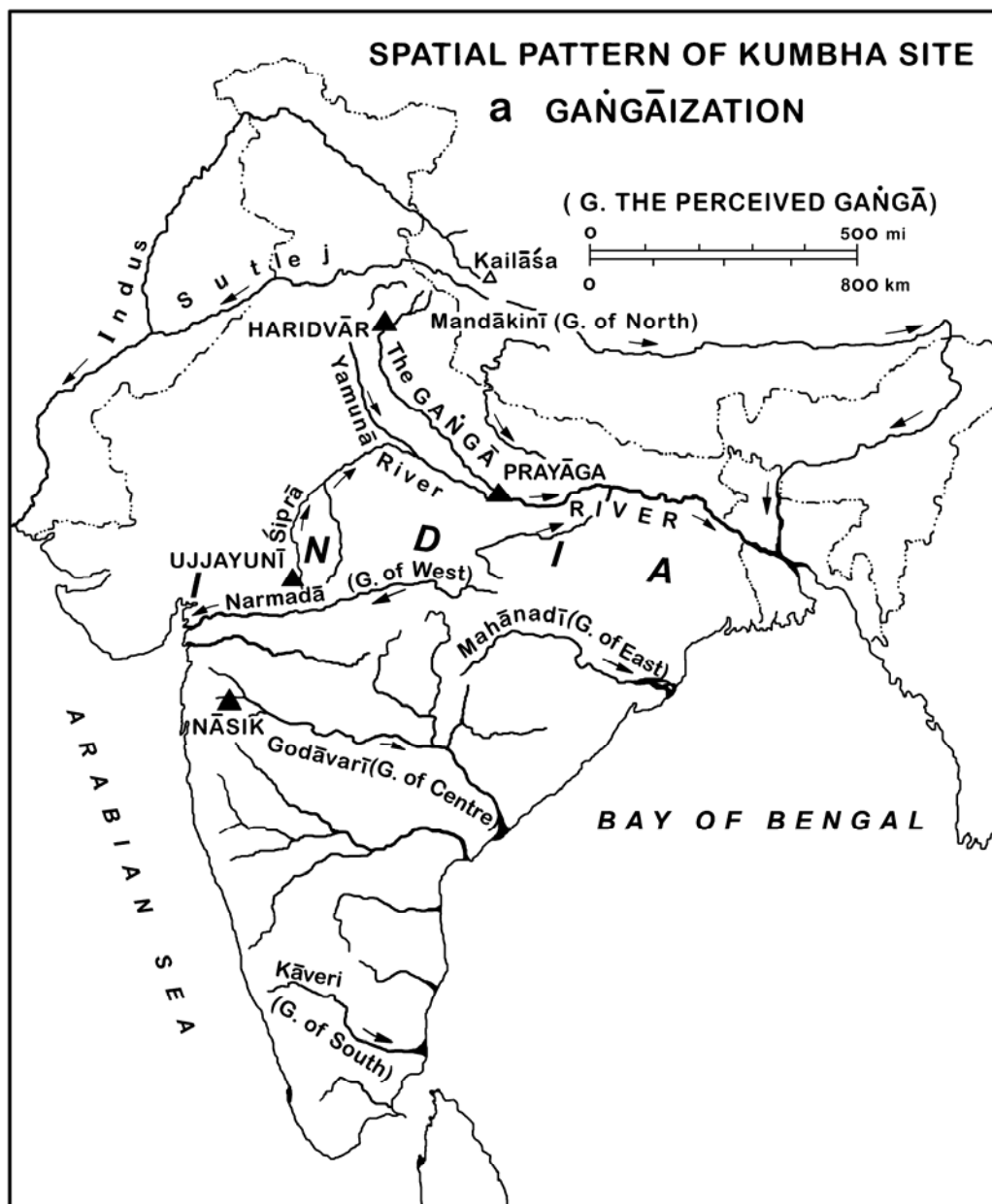
In its three form as the *Akasha Ganga* (heavenly river), the *Ganga* (earthly river), and the *Patala Ganga* (underworld river) it serves as the universal river.

The *Padma Purana* (5. 60.39, translated by A.L. Basham) mentions:

“What need of expensive sacrifices,  
or, of difficult penances?  
Worship the Ganga, asking for happiness and good fortune,  
and she will bring you heaven and salvation.”

Only after walking along the Ganga's bank does one realize that the great-great-grandparents of today's Hindus once walked that very bank and had certain experiences, manifestations, and revelations. Revealing the Ganga as a living organism requires specific forms of communication, interaction, environmental sensitivity, and transpersonal ecological feelings. That is how the Ganga is known as the mother and soul of India. The Ganga possesses a unique history and mythology, a deep faith and divine landscape, and its own individuality together with multiplicity.

Fig. 8. The Ganga river, Gangaisation and Kumbha sites.



The stories of the Ganga may change, but the motherly river lives on. The story of the Ganga is the story of Indian people catching up to the older social ideals and values of the more devout Hindu world. She is a cultural symbol where every visitor has experiences and feels their harmonic relationship with nature. The story of the Ganga tells us everything about Hindu society, history, culture, and religion — their possibilities and their future. However, a living mythology is not enough; its real understanding and preservation are the human needs and the call of the time.

According to Hindu theology, the spirit of place exists everywhere, imbuing the earth and the heaven with its unique and ineradicable sense of rhythm, mood and character; different experiences of this results in a variety of local forms of faith and traditions, but the fundamental ethic of reverence is everywhere. Disturbing the spirit and misusing the Ganga's holy water brings calamity to society. If the harmony is disturbed, the spirit of place begins to lose its power to sanctify life.

## **7. Sacred Natural Sites: Spatiality to Spirituality**

Since the turning of the 21st century, cultural and spiritual values have come to be recognised as crucial elements in nature conservation, emphasising sacrality with respect to space, time, function, and human psyche with place-attachment. This led the major nature conservation agencies — all work with representatives of faiths and spiritualities. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is at the forefront of these developments, with several commissions working on the cultural and spiritual values attributed to nature, and collaborating with local and indigenous peoples on conservation issues (Verschuuren 2007a: 299). This work is gradually getting 'endogenous development' onto the conservation agenda where geography can play a major role. The IUCN defines sacred natural sites as 'areas of land or water having special spiritual significance to peoples and communities'. Examples include mountains, groves of trees, springs and caves. In addition, sacred natural sites are often safe havens for biological and cultural diversity, and represent long-standing relationships between human beings and nature. They offer examples of how people connect to nature in meaningful and often spiritual ways. Sacred natural sites are found all over the world; but India even being more richer in terms of diversity, distinctiveness and mosaicism, not yet studied systematically in this context.

Sacred Natural Sites are the world's oldest protected places and of trajectory of ancient heritage values. Some of the most prominent examples include Uluru (Ayer's Rock, Australia), Mount Fuji (Japan), Sagarmatha/Chomolongma (Mt. Everest, Nepal, Tibet, and China), the River Ganga/[Ganges in anglicised form] (India), the Sacred Groves of India, Lake Titicaca (Bolivia and Peru) and Mount Kilimanjaro (Tanzania). Sacred natural sites are shown to contain remarkable biodiversity and therefore can make a significant contribution to halting the catastrophic extinction of wild species of plants and animals as well as the decline and damage of habitats and ecosystems. They also display a broad array of cultural diversity, languages, rituals, traditional knowledge, art, song, story, dance and identity and therefore appear of universal heritage value. Often cared for by their traditional custodian community, sacred natural sites represent a wide diversity of

socio-ecological models that can help find approaches for more sustainable lifestyles and human-nature relationships for the world at large. In a recent anthology these issues are exemplified with case studies from different parts of the world, including the Holy Hills (China), the Golden Mountains of Altai (Russia), Holy Island of Lindisfarne (UK) (Verschuuren, et al. 2010). This anthology concludes that conservation efforts are likely to be successful only if the cultural and spiritual values are taken into account together with the socio-economic interests of the custodian communities and other relevant stakeholders using heritage sites or heritage resources.

It is noted obviously that “The way people perceive nature depends on culturally defined value and belief systems that form an important, often intergenerational, source of information. Some of this valuable information, relating in particular to its spiritual dimensions, may not yet be considered in current ecosystem management. Part of the reason for this may be that such knowledge is inaccessible and difficult to be understood by outsiders such as western-trained conservationists and conventional ecosystem managers. Hence, accounting for the various worldviews and their corresponding cultural and spiritual values in the practice of ecosystem management forms a challenge for managers, policy-makers and local people alike” (Verschuuren 2007a: 299).

An important characteristic of the new epistemologies (also referred to as the Cartesian or Scientific paradigms), is the lack of critical spiritual connectiveness that persists in the links between people, nature and landscapes. Many examples exist of local and indigenous people’s custodianship where this connectiveness is evident. Also in western culture, such connectiveness exists through the concepts of “*sense of place*” and “*genus loci*”. In relation to sacred natural sites, it may be referred to as the “*sacer loci*”. The later is the root for the word “*sacred*” in Latin which mean is “restricted by belonging to the Gods” (cf. Shackley 2001).

In the context of the present discourse, the critical spiritual connectiveness refers to the transcendental aspects as described earlier in the text (see Fig. 9) when conceptualising transcendental interactions in conservation management. Emphasising and restoring the linkages between biological and cultural diversity has shown that in many cultures the spiritual relations of local people are a vital source not only for human wellbeing but also for the well-being of nature and ecosystems. These culturally determined spiritual human-ecosystem relationships therefore form a great potential for enhancing conservation management and policy targets such as for example the Millennium Development Goals (MDG’s).

The most common view shared by institutionalised and indigenous spiritual traditions alike is that the world is a ‘multiple level hierarchic reality’, similar to that of Mircea Eliade’s hierophany. These relationships may be represented with a simplified model showing three different planes that overlap (cf. Fig. 10). It is a way of showing that management of sacred sites should consider all values and stakeholders involved. Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge that in this world where many different worldviews coexist, each worldview may have its own hierarchy of values. Within these worldviews, different traditional cosmological sciences have evolved over time — often in harmony with nature — and many of

which are still alive in different regions around the world (cf. Verschuuren 2007a: 308).

Fig. 9. Transcendental interactions in conservation management (after Verschuuren 2007b: 20).

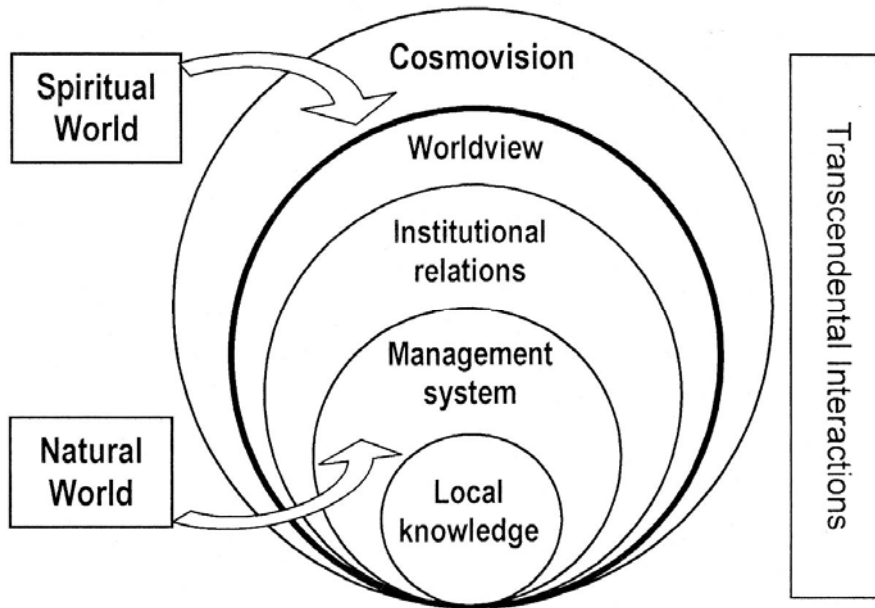
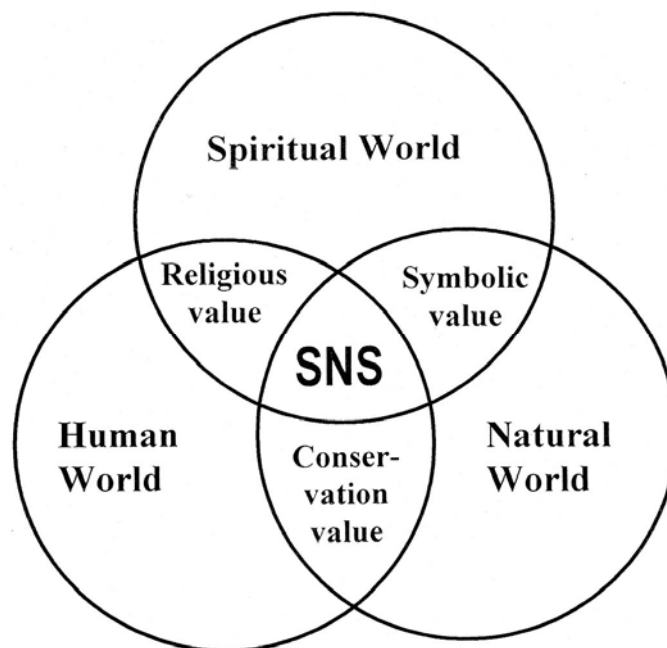


Fig. 10. Main constituent values of Sacred Natural Sites, SNS. (after Verschuuren 2007a: 308).



Concurrently this would require the inclusion of cultural criteria in ecosystem management and adoption of the concept of bio-cultural diversity, which would inevitably lead to the broadening of management objectives and the enhancement of related and facilitating policies. Simultaneously the concept of SNSs gains recognition because it enables managers and policy-makers to conceptualize and communicate complex spiritual-ecosystem relationships through intercultural learning and local environmental education, while at the same time developing conservation objectives (see Fig. 10, Verschuuren 2007a: 308). Embracing the concept of SNSs, it is evident that focal areas of spiritual values and cultural significance exist. However, it is of critical importance to recognize that in many cultures and traditional worldviews their importance generally extends to the wider landscape. Hence, the whole landscape can be permeated with spiritual significance (Verschuuren 2007a: 308). This has immense scope in Indian landscape study, as already exemplified with getting enlisted 28 sites in the UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

## 7. Epilogue: Emergence and March

If we have to evolve our geographical identity, most likely we have to perceive of life and action as the moral principles of nature. At least three ways to be followed on in this respect: cultivating sensory awareness in everyday experience, studying nature spirit as part of life, and as obligatory service to educate public about the rich heritage and the threats to nature. Geographical identity should be taken as synonymous to ecological identity. In this line of thought three perspectives of ecological identity and healing to be explored and evolved are: (1) the perception and action programme for cultural upheaval, (2) psychological inspiration for promoting responsibility and action, and (3) organisational stress preventing psychological implications (cf. Thomashow 1995: 143-144).

Certainly we need a good and balanced combination and synthesis between insider and outsider, the Eastern and the Western, inter-disciplinary and intra-disciplinary, experiential and reverential, rational and relational, ... and so on, thus we would have a sustainable, happy and habitable-humane-heritage of Indian Cultural Landscape. Let us hope for the good through the truth in a beautiful way (*Satyam-Shivam-Sundaram*)! As opposed to traditional intellectuals, whose concern derives from the self-enclosed realm of elite cultural life, let us cross over the disciplinary boundaries in making envisioning Indian Cultural Landscape a way of cosmic understanding and concerns for humanity. Think *universally*, see *globally*, behave *regionally*, act *locally* but *insightfully*. This is an appeal for cosmic vision, global humanism, and self-realization. Altogether, it promotes a worldview of Indian Cultural Landscape – a spirit of wholeness, a sense of holiness – grounded on an evolutionary cosmology in the core of which human dignity and future vision (Singh, Rana 2009b: 147-148). Let me sing the song of never-ending journey –

Path running towards beyond the boundary,  
Out of space, out of time and image.  
Let's cross sky-shape blue territory,

Searching what lies across the mirage.  
Ultimately reaching to wholeness of cosmic limit,  
Where God and Human formed a unit.

— Rana Singh (1995: 191).

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