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Tapobhūmi: When Spiritual Power Saturates the Landscape

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ABSTRACT: The sacred geography of India has long captivated scholars, who have emphasized its mythologization and demonstrated how this landscape connects places to deities, saints and heroes, creating a network that links locations and people through pilgrimage. This paper explores a rarely investigated typology of sacred places, the *tapobhūmi*. *Tapobhūmi*, the ground (*bhūmi*) of spiritual power (*tapas*), refers to a place where someone has performed ascetic practices (*tapasyā*) to such an extent that the accumulated spiritual power has been transmitted to the area. These places continue to attract ascetics, who, by practising there, are believed to further increase the *tapas* of the area. India is dotted with numerous sites recognized as *tapobhūmi*s, which can sometimes evolve into pilgrimage destinations, preserving the memory of renowned ascetics who once practised there. By linking the concept of *tapobhūmi* to that of *guphā* (cave) as places for ascetic practice, this paper analyses various forms of *tapobhūmi*. Using visual examples from central and northern India along with ethnographic data, it illustrates how *tapobhūmi*s embody a human rather than a divine or deified endeavour, forming a parallel sacred geography that is primarily transmitted within ascetic circles and operates according to individual or sampradāyic agendas.

KEYWORDS: asceticism; austerities; cave; isolation; *tapasyā*.

INTRODUCTION

During my fieldwork among ascetics (*sādhu*s) in India, I have observed that they refer to some of the places where they perform their practices as *tapobhūmi* or *taposthalī*. These terms are seldom mentioned in academic literature on India's

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sacred geography. According to contemporary *sādhu*s, a *tapobhūmi* is any place where *tapasyā* (austerity) is continuously practised. These locations hold specific significance for *sādhu*s and are not necessarily related to major pilgrimage sites. Thus, from a *sādhu*'s perspective, the sacred geography of India may encompass different meanings and include more locations than those typically recognized and considered by the average pilgrim.

This paper attempts to explore the concept of *tapobhūmi* by relating it to that of *guphā* (cave) and by examining various examples of *tapobhūmi*—including those that are abandoned, isolated, community-based (sampradāyic), touristic, developing (i.e. those that could become pilgrimage sites), macrocosmic and so forth. Some *tapobhūmi*s are part of India's sacred geography, as many sacred places are linked to the penance or austerities of deities or mythical figures. However, the focus here is on *tapobhūmi*s that manifest human efforts. The examples discussed are based on data collected during fieldwork trips over the years, contributions from colleagues, and online sources that show hidden or less accessible *tapobhūmi*s. The purpose of the article is to shed some light on specific sacred sites as they are lived but also enlivened by ascetic practitioners, emphasizing the ascetics' agency. It demonstrates how *tapobhūmi*s embody a human rather than a divine or deified endeavour, creating a parallel sacred geography that is primarily transmitted within ascetic circles and operates according to individual agendas, rather than following the collective and shared calendar related to Indian sacred sites. The paper illustrates how the life of a *tapobhūmi* can evolve and how some of these places, despite being abandoned, still retain the memory of past human endeavours, imbuing the landscape with meaning. Furthermore, it shows how *tapobhūmi*s can become bridges between ascetic and lay societies, even though they are experienced in vastly different ways. While the ascetic is drawn to the place itself, laypeople are often more interested in the ascetic who occupies it. Finally, the paper argues that the concept of *tapobhūmi* provides insight into the role of ascetics in the creation of sacred and pilgrimage sites. As this is a preliminary investigation of *tapobhūmi*s, the entire concept would surely benefit from the collection of further material and a wider comparative approach.

SACRED GEOGRAPHY AND PILGRIMAGE

Considering stories and narratives about places collected in her travels, Diana Eck writes:

> [A]nywhere 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.
>
> (Eck 2012: 15)

These places are also potentially linked to each other, creating a landscape of networks which form India's 'sacred geography'. This term refers to the presence of a vast number of sites, with varying degrees of religious importance, that can be connected 'through local, regional, and transregional practices of pilgrimage' (p. 15). As Bhardwaj (1973: 7) notes, some sites serve as 'the focal points for pilgrims from the entire vast Indian subcontinent', while others are more modest, just attracting devotees from the surrounding area. Between these two extremes, there are many intermediate levels. As already mentioned, these sacred sites are associated with narratives, particularly from the Purāṇas, that describe activities of gods and goddesses, and of gurus and saints, that are believed to have taken place on earth. Such narratives are often developed in sections known as Māhātmyas, a text genre designed to describe and emphasize the glory or greatness (*māhātmya*) of a particular place or deity. These narratives have fuelled the practice of pilgrimage, leading to the fame of countless pilgrimage sites which today can undergo further development due to their connection with religious tourism (see below). Eck (2012: 12) suggests that the entire land of India is a complex and ever-changing network of pilgrimage places—referential, inter-referential, ancient and modern. This sacred geography is said to facilitate encounters between humans and divinities through a microcosmic web 'regulated and expanded by the continuity of rituals, festivities, and celebrations' (Singh and Rana 2023: 222). Reaching the sites where mythological events are believed to have occurred provides pilgrims 'with an embodied experience' (Jacobsen 2013: 6), which is one of the main reasons for travelling to *tīrtha*s (holy crossing-over places). The term *tīrtha*, connected to the root *tṝ*, meaning 'to cross', primarily denotes a ford, a crossing-point to the other bank of a river. In a broader and metaphorical sense, it signifies a means of passage, representing a place of transcendence beyond the mundane. This concept always involves the presence of a hierophany—often, due to its etymology, represented by a body of water, sometimes by a mountain, cave, tree, stone or some other receptacle of the numinous. Another key motivation for visiting a *tīrtha* is the merit associated with encountering its inhabitants: the ascetics and other religious people residing there.

One classification of *tīrtha*s explained by Pellegrini (2008) divides them into three broad groups: immovable fords (*sthāvara tīrtha*s), mental fords (*mānasa tīrtha*s) and movable fords (*jaṃgama tīrtha*s).[2] *Sthāvara tīrtha*s are physical locations that remain stationary, such as cities, mountains and rivers. Mental

2. Singh and Rana (2023: 224) mention the classification present in Vedic literature: *tīrtha* as a route or a place where one can receive power (*Ṛgveda* 1.169.6; 1.173.11); as a place of purification related to sacred waters (*Ṛgveda* 8.47.11; 1.46.8); as a sacred site where God is immanent (*Ṛgveda* 10.31.3); and as a place associated with the religious territory where divine events or interventions took place. They also divide *tīrtha*s topographically into three groups: those associated with sacred baths, those related to a particular deity or sect, and those shaped by the form of the cosmic *maṇḍala*. There are many works that discuss *tīrtha*s: see Kane 1953,

*tīrtha*s correspond to specific tendencies and virtues, such as compassion, detachment, faith accompanied by strength, and determination combined with discrimination. The *jaṃgama tīrtha*s are holy men who have renounced a fixed abode; these itinerant ascetics, if followed, can guide a person to the highest of destinations, which is why ascetics are themselves considered true pilgrimage places (Pellegrini 2008: 379). The concept of 'movable *tīrtha*' is conceived from the perspective of the pilgrim, a viewpoint commonly adopted by authors of Brahmanical texts and scholars analysing India's sacred geography. Nevertheless, this perspective raises certain concerns. For instance, Jacobsen discusses a dilemma found in textual sources, questioning the appropriateness of a holy man being a pilgrim: 'Why would he be in need of the salvific power of a sacred place? Why should he travel on pilgrimage? He is already pure' (2013: 151). From the perspective of the *sādhu-samāj* (society of *sādhu*s), however, *sādhu*s are not *tīrtha*s per se, and they are not inherently pure. Their spiritual journey and its outcome are determined by the *sādhanā* (religious discipline) they undertake throughout their lives.

*Sādhu*s embark on pilgrimages and visit sacred places not merely to set an example for laypeople, but as part of their *sādhanā* and in accordance with the traditions of their religious order (*sampradāya*). Each *sampradāya* has its own rules, duties, customs, spiritual teachings and goals, which become the life purpose of its ascetics. To achieve these goals, the supposedly 'movable *tīrtha*s' follow religious paths that lead them to stay in various places or to move from one religious site to another, where they may reside for varying periods. Their purpose is to carry out their *sādhanā*s, and *tapasyā* (austerities) is one of them. To practise *tapasyā*, ascetics may retreat to a *tapobhūmi*.

TAPAS, *TAPOBHŪMI* AND *GUPHĀ*

As previously mentioned, a *tapobhūmi* is any place where *tapasyā* is continuously performed. *Tapasyā* includes various activities and practices, such as meditation, that are carried out with intense discipline. The practice of *tapasyā* generates *tapas*, or ascetic fervour. The word *tapas* is derived from the Sanskrit root *tap*, meaning 'to give out heat', 'to make hot' or 'to be hot', and is often understood as 'heat' (Kaelber 1989: 2). *Tapas* was originally conceived as the power at the beginning of creation and of great events; it was generative and transformative, preceding the deities themselves. The *ṛṣi*s were immersed in *tapas* and were inspired by it during the compilation of the Vedas; Indra conquered heaven by *tapas*; Agni was produced by *tapas* and the Primal Being practised *tapas* before the creation of the world (Bhagat 1976: 18, 107, 115). Vedic sources shed some light on the development of the word and the practices associated with it. In

Upadhyay 1976, Eck 1981, Saraswati 1985, Nath 2007, Jacobsen 2013 and Branfoot 2022, to mention a few.

the *Atharvaveda*, the Vedic student undergoes physical and mental disciplines—such as fasting, remaining isolated or silent, sleeping on the ground or not at all and controlling the breath—to acquire the knowledge of *brahman*, and 'his life of tapas comes to be associated with celibacy or *brahmacarya*' (Bhagat 1976: 17). The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (3.4.3.2–3) equates the ceremony of consecration for the Soma sacrifice to *tapas*, since it involves practices like abstaining from company, fasting, silence and so forth, to produce the necessary heat (Galewicz 2020: 136). In the context of the sacrifices elaborated in later Vedic literature, *tapas* is associated with *śrama* (concentrated effort). When *śrama* appears in relation to *tapas*, these two terms indicate the means by which a particular goal can be attained (Bodewitz 2007: 155). Indian literature—ranging from the Vedic to the epic and Purāṇic texts—is filled with stories of hermits, kings, gods and demons who subjected themselves to austerity to compel the gods to grant their desires. Through *tapas*, they could achieve incredible powers—such as reaching the highest point of the cosmos, possessing great strength, gaining wisdom hidden from others and the ability to defeat death (Olson 2015: 2), or generating a sexual and fertilizing energy necessary for creating rain, fertile fields or biological offspring (Kaelber 1989: 3–4).

In the realm of asceticism as a way of life, *tapasyā* was practised by those who withdrew from society to focus on self-liberation, stabilize the fluctuations of the mind or clear accumulated *karma*. It became a tool for attaining knowledge and *mokṣa* (liberation). In general, while early Vedic sources often present *tapas* as generative heat or the heat of sexual desire, hence as 'an "involuntary", natural tapas', when employed for spiritual rebirth it becomes a 'voluntary, self-imposed asceticism', an 'event calculated to "overcome" the natural condition' (Kaelber 1976: 359). As summarized by Kaelber (p. 360), *tapas* then refers 'to the practices or austerities performed; *tapas* is the practice of asceticism. It, however, refers also to the result or product of that asceticism, the heat generated.' Whether in the form of mental discipline, ritual sacrifice or whatever other form, to be successful *tapasyā* required (and requires) the development of a strong determination to engage in the practice, often accompanied by intense, prolonged effort, which led to the accumulation of *tapas*.

Often the stories narrated in Māhātmyas to emphasize the power of a *tīrtha* mention the practice of austerities by deities or sages. Sacred rivers, for example, are often described as the liquid forms of goddesses who became rivers, flowing to Earth as a result of the austerities of deities or sages—such as in the famous story of the descent of the River Gaṅgā, who was brought from heaven to Earth by Bhagīratha's penances (see e.g. *Rāmāyaṇa* 1.41–43; *Mahābhārata* 3.107–08; *Gautamī Māhātmya* 8.47–77). In such examples, sacred or divinized 'natural' elements (a river or mountain) are tamed by the ascetic practice of a human or divine being. The protagonists of these stories probably represent the mythologized versions of several real ascetics who sought to gain powers or spiritual achievements.

Since *tapas* was thought to transform individuals into vessels of heated potency, ascetics practising *tapasyā* are believed to accumulate *tapas* and, as a

consequence, to imbue the soil where they practise with this energy. While some of these places have become *tīrtha*s for pilgrims and, in the current *kali yuga*,[3] are said to offer the merit of years of austerities simply by reaching them or bathing in their waters, they also serve as *tapobhūmi*s or *taposthalī*s—sacred places where ascetics continue to practise meditation and *tapasyā*. The term *tapobhūmi* includes the word *bhūmi*, meaning earth or site, suggesting a concrete location where *tapasyā* has occurred.[4] It is a place found here on this Earth (another possible translation for *bhūmi*). In *taposthalī*, *sthalī* means place or land. Another term, *tapovana*, which combines *tapas* and *vana* (forest), translates as 'forest of austerities' and refers to places where *ṛṣi*s (sages) and other hermits performed their austerities. Many locations today have *tapovana* in their name, though the term is especially associated with the area above the Gangotri glacier.[5]

The most secluded among these places are often known, suggested or shown by *sādhu*s and shared within their society. Unlike the austerities of sages or deities in mythological stories—austerities which serve to explain the causes of events or situations but do not represent the main point of the narration—these sites are important in themselves, and their tradition is accessible orally but not to everyone. However, a *tapobhūmi* can sometimes be reached by non-practitioners, and so its significance may change, transforming it into a pilgrimage site and, more recently, into a tourist destination.

A *tapobhūmi* is often, though not necessarily, a place where ordinary people would not venture or stay. Some geographic areas possess intrinsic structural features that make them the ideal *tapobhūmi*: mountains, deserts and rocky terrains, for instance, provide isolation, difficult living conditions and a natural environment conducive to practising *tapasyā* and generating *tapas*. The need for isolation is strictly related to the need to perform *sādhanā* (spiritual practice), which also requires detachment from laypeople. In contrast, sharing space with other practitioners is said to enhance individual practice, as one benefits from the example and the *tapas* of others. It is not uncommon for ascetics and monks from different religious traditions to share isolated places, a practice that continues today. For example, Panhale Kaji, an ancient complex of meditative cells carved into the rocks in Maharashtra's Ratnagiri district, was initially (c. third century CE) home to Buddhist monks before being occupied by Śaiva ascetics (Mallinson 2019). These manually carved caves are an example of how *tapobhūmi*s are often

3. During *kali yuga*—the fourth and most terrible era, according to the Hindu calendar—traditional practices such as meditation or austerities are too difficult for ordinary people to achieve *mokṣa* (spiritual liberation) by, and it is instead attained through devotion or external blessing. Ascetics become then, by circumstances, non-ordinary people.

4. Unlike, for example, the *tapoloka*, which refers to another plane of existence (*loka*).

5. At the foot of the Shivling peak there is a barren area at about 4,463 metres in elevation, which serves as a seasonal home for several *sādhu*s who live in caves and huts.

Figure 1: Carved cells in the rock for monks and ascetics (functioning like a cave), in Panhale Kaji, Maharashtra.

Photo: author

closely associated with *guphā*s (caves in Hindi), another key geographical element that marks India's sacred landscape (Figure 1).

The word *guphā* (*guhā* in Sanskrit) is derived from the root *guh*, meaning 'to conceal', and refers to an inner, secret space. The imaginary of the cave is significant in the history of soteriological theories, often symbolizing the 'cave of the heart'. In the Upaniṣads (e.g. *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 3.20), the cave represents the vital centre where not only the *jīvātman* (individual soul) but also the unconditioned *ātman* (associated with the *brahman*) resides. Thus it is not surprising that physical caves are used to unite symbolic and pragmatic goals: the physical cave favours the introspection and detachment needed to reach the symbolic cave. As one Rāmānandī *sādhu*, Rām Caraṇ Dās, describes: 'The cave is like the mother's womb. There, you can practise *tapasyā* properly. Why? Because outside, the air is thin; where there is wind, the mind wanders, following thoughts. In the cave, the air becomes heavy, it does not move. Then the mind can concentrate too, in *bhajan* [devotional singing] and meditation' (interview with the author, Varanasi, March 2016). To be successful, meditative practice has

to be pursued in places where the mind is undistracted, allowing the individual to be *ekānta* (in solitude).[6]

*Tapobhūmi*s and caves are the ideal spots for doing *sādhanā*. Their geography, structure and environment are symbolic and meaningful: they represent the arduous aspect of religious practice, its difficulties and the strong intention necessary to reach its goals. *Sādhu*s reach them following the examples of their gurus or of other *sādhu*s, and exploit the perceived power of the area while at the same time contributing to its preservation. The choice to practise in a *tapobhūmi* is not related to its salvific nature (as in the case of laypeople going to religious centres) but to its tapasic nature, which alludes to the fact that the place is saturated by *tapas*. The *tapobhūmi* is a space that emphasizes the agency of the ascetic practitioner and of the practitioners who have preceded him/her. The *tapobhūmi* does not have a salvific nature per se; *sādhu*s are aware that the success of their practice is not a given but depends on their discipline and, according to believers, on the grace of God. Despite living in a *tapobhūmi*, they know they can fail.

The examples of *tapobhūmi* presented below are intended to illustrate how India's sacred landscape is interspersed with numerous places that preserve the memories and practices of individual or collective spiritual efforts. While this discussion is not intended to be exhaustive, it highlights aspects that underscore the role of *tapobhūmi*s also as foundational sites in the development of pilgrimage destinations. As McKay's research has highlighted in the case of Tapovan, this 'land of gods' was once accessible only to individuals 'who had renounced worldly existence and mastered *tapas*, gaining that ultimate magical power … that qualified them to live in the land of gods' (2015: 62). McKay demonstrates that this area was not part of any pilgrimage route until recently, but it is now very famous for trekking, having being transformed also into a touristic place.

The various examples provided enhance our understanding of Indian sacred geography and demonstrate, in practical terms, that the sacred 'imagined

6. Ever since the Vedic texts, hermits have been associated with secluded places, often in the jungle, where they can do their practice without being bothered or distracted by others. Isolation seems to be an indispensable condition for spiritual enhancement, and this appears well established when considering yogic texts. The *Haṭhapradīpikā* (1.12–14) provides precise indications about the ideal place to practise, while the *Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā* (5.5) says that the practitioner should 'build a hut and encircle it with a wall' (*kṛtvā tatraikaṃ kuṭīraṃ prācīraiḥ pariveṣṭayet*). A similar approach is shown in the *Caurāsī Āsana*, a text in Hindi from the end of the nineteenth century, written by Brahmacārī Śrī Nṛsiṃha Śarmā: 'Only by practising *ekānta* (alone) can one obtain the fruits of yoga' (Brahmacārī 1911: 8–9). The importance of the *guphā* as a symbol of isolated practice is so significant that *guphā*-like conditions are recreated in places without natural caves, such as monasteries. In such cases, a room where secluded practices are conducted may be designated as a *guphā*. Not all ascetics can leave for remote places, particularly if they have responsibilities such as managing monasteries or ashrams.

landscape' of India, as Eck (1998: 167) notes, is not singular. Instead, it reflects the presence of diverse, specific and often sectarian religious sites.

Macrocosmic, microcosmic and ephemeral *tapobhūmi*s

A macrocosmic *tapobhūmi* can be defined as an area considered sacred by mythical or epic accounts. This macrocosmic *tapobhūmi* often incorporates several smaller, microcosmic *tapobhūmi*s. An example of this is Mount Abu in Rajasthan. In the Purāṇas the region is referred to as Arbudāraṇya (the forest of Mount Arbuda), and the name 'Abu' is a shortened form of this ancient name. In the *Arbuda Māhātmya*, which is part of the *Skanda Purāṇa*, it is said that the mountain Nandivardhana was sent by his father Himalaya at the request of the sage Vasiṣṭha to fill a cavity in the soil that was at that time gaping open. To fly Nandivardhana there, they called the winged divine snake Arbuda (Magnone 2006: 41–42). It is said that Vasiṣṭha then performed tremendous austerities there to convince Śiva to dwell on the mountain. His *tapasyā* led to the appearance of a *liṅgam* (the Acaleśvara), which became the first and original *tīrtha* of Arbuda (Magnone 2006: 50). Vasiṣṭha is not the only *ṛṣi* to have performed *tapasyā* there. As described by Eck (2012: 193), it is believed that the River Sabarmati, which flows from the Aravalli Hills, was a gift from Śiva to the ascetic Kāśyapa, who was performing *tapas* on Mount Arbuda. Pleased by Kāśyapa's asceticism, Śiva blessed him with the River Gaṅgā, which flowed from his matted hair down upon Arbuda, becoming the Sabarmati.

Today, Mount Abu hosts several significant Jain temples, *tīrtha*s and shrines—not necessarily those described in the Māhātmya (Magnone 2006: 49)—as well as smaller temples related to gurus and their austerities, often associated with specific ascetic orders. One such place is Guru Śikhar, the 'Peak of the Guru', where it is believed that Dattātreya practised. A temple now stands there, and inside a cave associated with his practice are his *pāduka*s (footprints, here sculpted in marble). When I visited, another cave attached to the main one was occupied by a *sādhu* belonging to the Daśanāmī *sampradāya* (which oversees the spot), who lives there and continues the practice of *tapasyā*. While this spot is visited by the curious, devotees and tourists, Mount Abu remains renowned among *sādhu*s for its many caves scattered across the area, some of which have been made 'comfortable' for living in isolation (Figure 2). These are rooms or cells dug into the rock where *sādhu*s retreat for their practices, as in more isolated *tapobhūmi*s.

Some practices of *tapasyā* are temporary, tied to specific times of the year (see Bevilacqua 2024: 123–33) in accordance with the Hindu religious calendar. These practices can be related to ephemeral *tapobhūmi*s. A meaningful example is the area of the Prayagraj *melā*s (religious festivals). Prayagraj, a city in Uttar Pradesh, is a famous *tīrtha* that annually hosts the Magh Melā and every six or twelve years the Kumbh Melā, one of the largest religious gatherings on Earth. Every year, the *melā* ground is built and organized differently, depending on how the waters of the Ganges recede and the sand settles. For this reason, it is

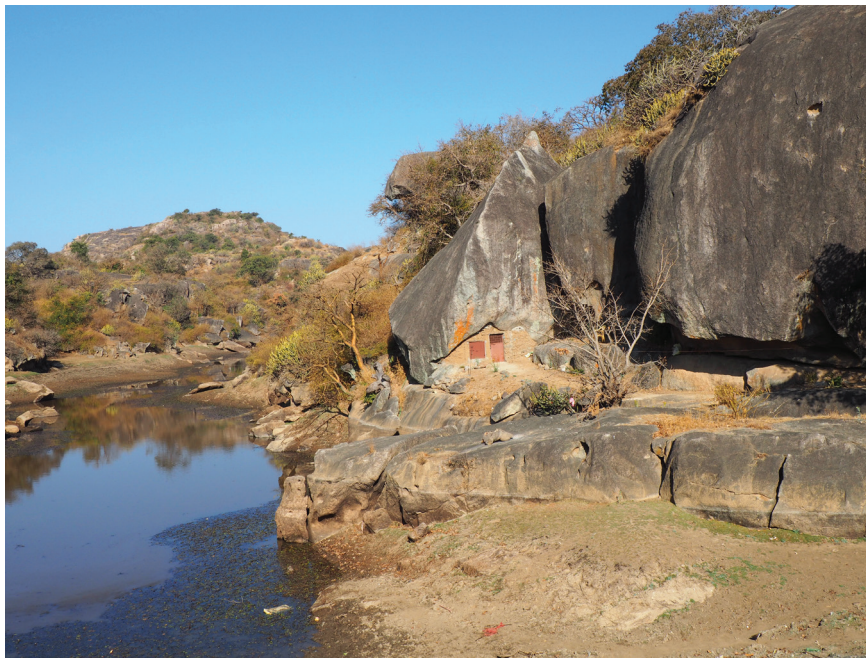

Figure 2: Inhabited cave sculpted in the rock and organized as a cell, with a door and window, in Mount Abu.

Photo: author

an ephemeral city, with ascetics and religious camps that change annually. The *melā* ground hosts not only ascetics but also millions of people who believe that bathing in the *saṅgam*—the confluence of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers (plus the supposedly underground River Sarasvati)—on auspicious days removes sins and purifies their *karma*. Ascetics benefit not only from the powerful astrological and geographical gathering but also attend the *melā* to enhance or start their practices. Ascetics who perform *pañca-dhūnī tap*,[7] for example, must begin their practice here during *vasant pañcamī* (the fifth lunar day of the bright fortnight of the month of Māgh, February–March). Typically performed after a collective *saṅkalpa* (vow), the areas where they practise *pañca-dhūnī tap* within the *melā* ground transform into *tapobhūmi*s, whose spiritual potency is amplified by the presence of many ascetics practising simultaneously and by the power of the *saṅgam tīrtha* itself. However, after a few days, they leave the festival to continue their practices in more isolated places, aware that the ephemeral city will soon be dismantled and submerged again.

7. During this *tapasyā* the ascetic sits among fires, whose number increases every three years (see Bevilacqua 2024: 123–29).

The almost abandoned *tapobhūmi*

Located 128 kilometres north of Ahmedabad, Taranga Hill is a three-peaked hill important to both Buddhists and Jains. The hill is home to ancient temples that are easily accessible by car, as well as the Devī Tārā Mātā temple, which requires a short trek to reach. Among these temples, perched atop one of the hills, are smaller shrines and a few hidden caves. While I was trekking in this area with colleagues Prof. James Mallinson and Dr Mark Singleton, we noticed that there were several signs with names that referred to yogis. Unfortunately, they were poorly marked on the rocks, making them difficult to locate, as the rocks all appeared similar. However, we eventually found the Jogī kā Guphā, or the 'Cave of the Yogi' (Figure 3). Inside, we found a small altar, a *dhūnī* (firepit) with a *triśūl* (trident), *chimṭā* (tongs) and other objects indicative of a Śaiva site. The cave did

Figure 3: The cave created from the space between the massive rocks of Taranga Hill, called Jogī kā Guphā.

Photo: author

not appear completely abandoned, though we did not encounter anyone that day, making it hard to determine whether it is still inhabited by ascetics or if devotees maintain the small shrine. In the same area, we came across the Siddha Śilā, or the 'Rock of the Perfected One'. In this cave, we found the *caraṇa pādukas* (divine footprints, even here sculpted in marble) of a *sādhu* who was probably renowned for having lived there. The *sādhu*'s name, Śrī Virang Sāgar—a Śaiva *nāgā* ascetic, as indicated by the last name, Sāgar—was inscribed on the rock. Unlike the other *guphā*, this one appeared completely abandoned, and it is probable that the *pādukas* were installed by devotees without anyone currently maintaining the practice of *tapasyā* there. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that these places still preserve the memory of the yogis and *tapasvins* who once practised there, and they potentially offer shelter to other practitioners.

Isolated *tapobhūmis*

There are isolated places, hidden deep in mountains or forests, that are exclusively used by *tapasvins*. I have personally refrained from visiting such *sādhus*, concerned that I might disrupt their *sādhanā*. However, there are numerous videos online showing how people have encountered them, offering a glimpse into these secluded environments. Interestingly, these ascetics are generally aware that laypeople might attempt to seek them out. Below, I describe a few examples found on YouTube that depict these typical isolated places in mountainous regions.[8]

In one video recorded in Uttarakhand (Sharma 2023), the interviewer reaches a fairly spacious cave that appears to have been expanded over time by its inhabitants, creating a structure with deeper inner cells for practice, decorated with tiles and housing several *mūrtis* (idols). The video reveals that two ascetics from different religious orders reside there: a Śaiva *nāgā* ascetic and an *augar pīr* from the Nāth *sampradāya*. During the interview, it becomes clear that these *sādhus* are quite detached from mainstream *sādhu* society. When asked if they wanted the location of the cave to be disclosed, they quickly declined. Although local people are likely to know of the ascetics' presence and may visit them for *darśan* (sighting) and to provide them with basic necessities, the *sādhus* did not encourage more visitors.

Another video (Gaurav 2023) focuses on a *mauni bābā* (one who follows the *tapasyā* of remaining silent) from the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* living in a cave in Uttarakhand. The writings on the external wall of the cave (Figure 4), which include invocations to Sītā Rām and Radhe Śyām, suggest that the place is generally occupied by Vaiṣṇava *sādhus*. The isolated, silent *bābā*, who

8. In this section, I refer to the contents of videos presented on the YouTube channel Dharm Ki Yatra, which hosts the recordings of Kanhaiya Sharma (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCI1nyGyE7mZZjsZbsry8K1Q), and one video found on the YouTube channel of Guru Gyan Gaurav (https://www.youtube.com/@gurugyangaurav).

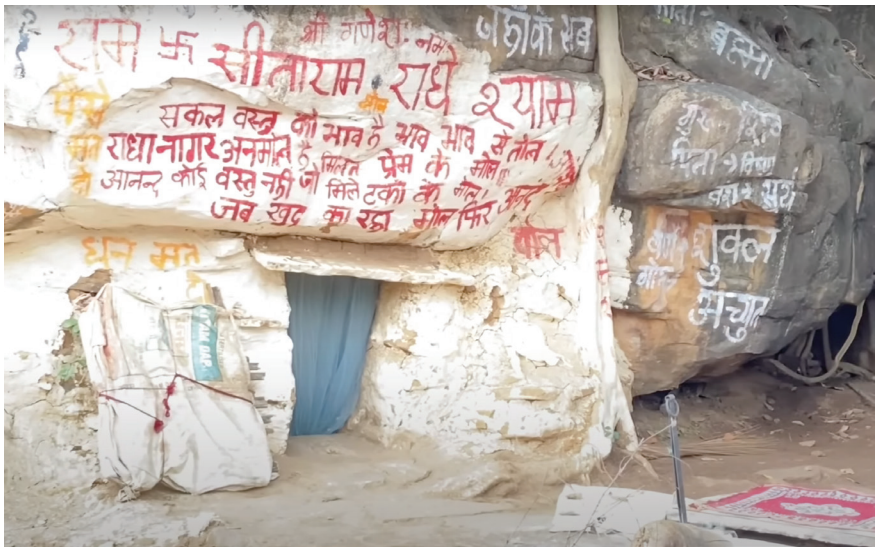

Figure 4: A Vaiṣṇava *guphā* carved in the rock and decorated with religious sentences, Uttarakhand.

Source: Gaurav 2023

communicates by writing, reveals that he is also a *phalāhārī* (one who subsists only on fruits, another form of *tapasyā*) and that he does not touch or accept money. When asked how long he has been living there, he wrote that he has been there for the last three years and will remain as long as necessary, likely until he has achieved the goal of his *tapasyā*. He also mentioned that visitors can come for his *darśan* between 9 AM and 5.30 PM.

In another interesting video (Sharma 2024), a *sādhu* is found deep in the jungle around Chitrakoot in Uttar Pradesh. The location seems challenging to access, requiring the visitor to climb and to use a purpose-built ladder in the forest. Before entering the *tapobhūmi*, the visitor encounters a board with a message in Hindi, which I translate as follows: 'This is the hut of *sādhu*s and *saṃnyāsī*s, for doing *sādhanā* and *bhajan*. Access is forbidden to those who come for picnics, casual walks or fun. Any form of intoxication is prohibited. The time to meet the *mahārāj* and engage in conversation is from 4 to 4.30 PM.' In this case, there is no cave, but rather a hut (*kuṭī*) with stone walls to protect inhabitants from wild animals. A Vaiṣṇava ascetic has been living there for the last three years, after spending time in Uttarakhand and other places for *sādhanā*. He moved into that jungle on the advice of another *sādhu* who had previously built his own *kuṭī* there. The current dweller constructed a new hut and claims to survive thanks to the support of people from the nearby areas. However, he also mentioned that he is

not concerned with basic needs, as focusing on them would distract the mind. Instead, he places his trust in God and accepts whatever God sends.

These examples illustrate the concept of the *sādhu* as a *tīrtha*. Visiting an ascetic in the environment of his practice becomes a spiritual journey for the devotee, who has to adhere to precise rules in order to meet and talk to the 'holy' man. While the individual comes and goes at designated times, the 'movable *tīrtha*' is immovable for as long as the practice requires.

An isolated but touristic *tapobhūmi*

In recent times, there has been a growing trend of developing tourist spots around religious sites,[9] which has impacted some *tapobhūmi*s. A notable example is Akkāmahādevī's Cave in Andhra Pradesh, promoted by Srisailam Tourism as a destination for those 'looking for some adventure' (Srisailam Tourism 2024). The cave is named after Akkāmahādevī, the twelfth-century saint and philosopher associated with the Vīraśaiva movement (Schouten 2012). Tradition relates that Akkāmahādevī reached this cave on the advice of her guru. The cave is about 150 metres deep, is devoid of light and its width narrows as one progresses further inside. At the end of this tunnel lies the natural Śiva-*liṅgam* worshipped by Akkāmahādevī. She is believed to have practised her *tapasyā* and eventually attained *samādhi* there (Figure 5).

Today, this section of the cave is primarily visited by tourists, who come either to explore the cave or to worship the saint's *mūrti* and the *liṅgam*. Most of these visitors are locals or pilgrims who travel to Srisailam and then decide to visit the cave, located only 18 kilometres from the pilgrimage site.[10] The cave is accessible via a one-hour boat ride from Pathalaganga on the Krishna River. When I visited the site in 2017, I observed that this once isolated but now touristic *tapobhūmi* is still kept alive by an ashram above the cave. Śrī Narasimha Sarasvatī (1378–1459), considered to be the second incarnation of guru Dattātreya, visited this place with his disciples and decided to settle. Since he was part of the Daśanāmī *sampradāya*, which has Dattātreya as one of its gurus, the place is now occupied by ascetics of this group. In 2017, there was still a *tapasvin* (Śrī Śrī Sadguru Gaṇeś Avadhūt jī) in the ashram, who lived and practised there. Despite the influx of tourists, who probably rarely venture up to the ashram, the site remains austere, with no electricity and with water drawn solely from the river, preserving its tapasic atmosphere.

9. On this topic see for example Shinde 2012 and 2020, and Bhadeshiya and Prajapati 2024.

10. On Srisailam, see Shaw 1997.

Figure 5: The entrance of Akkāmahādevī's Cave, Srisailam, with the statue of the saint. Photo: author

Sampradāyic *tapobhūmi*s

The ashram above Akkāmahādevī's Cave can be described as a sampradāyic *tapobhūmi*, a *tapobhūmi* maintained by a specific order of *sādhu*s who continue the tradition of *tapasyā*. Such *tapobhūmi*s are found throughout India, and it is not uncommon for them to pass from one *sampradāya* to another over time, as seen in places like Panhale Kaji.

An interesting place that exemplifies the concept of sampradāyic *tapobhūmi* is a Nāth site in Dhinodhar, Gujarat. According to tradition, Dharamnāth, a Nāth yogi, arrived in Kutch, Gujarat, from Peshawar around 1382 and found a suitable place there to perform *tapasyā*. While he was absorbed in his practice, his disciple Garībnāth had to sell wood to provide food for his guru, and an old lady had to cook for them, as the inhabitants of the area did not support them. Twelve years later, when Dharamnāth discovered the suffering his disciple and the old lady had

endured, he cursed the people, and all the cities in the vicinity were swallowed by the earth. To atone for this wrathful act, Dharamnāth began another session of *tapasyā* on Dhinodhar Hill. However, a portion of the hill split off due to the weight of his sins. There, he stood on his head for 12 years, with his eyes closed, 'resting on a conical ball of hard stone' (or on a betel nut) (Briggs 1938: 117). The *tapas* accumulated during those years was so powerful that when he finally opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was burnt by the fire. He eventually dried up the sea, leaving the present Rann of Kutch, a salt marsh in the Thar Desert (Khakhar 1878: 49; Briggs 1938: 117). The current Nāth ashram built on top of the hill still retains Dharamnāth's tapasic power. His particular practice has been transmitted and maintained to this day: Maheś Nāth, the present *mahant* (abbot) of the monastery, follows the tradition and practises a headstand daily, which lasts 1 hour and 15 minutes.

Another example of a sampradāyic *tapobhūmi* is Paramahaṃsī Gaṅgā, a remote spot located in the jungle near Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh. This location, introduced to me by Prof. Gianni Pellegrini (who also provided photographs), offers the example of a sampradāyic *tapobhūmi* that is slowly transitioning into a pilgrimage site. It is renowned as the place where the former Śaṅkarācārya of Dwarka, Svārūpānanda Sarasvatī, undertook *tapasyā* before his initiation into the *daṇḍī* group (a *saṃnyāsī* subset). He was drawn to this area because it was already recognized as a famous *taposthalī*. The site contains several caves, probably carved into rocks by *tapasvin*s over time, now secured with gates to prevent wild animals from entering. Surrounded by mountains, streams of water and other *tapobhūmi*s, this location is rich in ascetic history. Near to Paramahaṃsī Gaṅgā lies another place known as Vicār Śilā, named in memory of the rock where Svārūpānanda meditated. This rock was chosen due to its proximity to an ancient Siddheśvara temple, which features an *akhaṇḍa dhūnī*, an eternal firepit that symbolizes the area's deep connection to *tapasyā*. This site is famous for the many *mahātmā*s (great souls) who have practised there, evidenced by the numerous *chimṭā*s and wooden *pāduka*s (footwear) left behind as signs of their presence and spiritual endeavours (Figure 6).

After taking *daṇḍī* initiation and becoming Śaṅkarācārya, Svārūpānanda Sarasvatī further developed the place, linking it to the Śaṅkara *paramparā* and the *daṇḍī svāmī*s. Today, the area includes a few rooms, *dharamśālā*s (shelters), small temples and two new buildings constructed by the new Śaṅkarācāryas. As the site evolves, it has begun to attract laypeople, indicating a potential transformation of this traditionally ascetic area into a pilgrimage destination.

*Tapobhūmi*s that have become pilgrimage sites

A clearer example of a *tapobhūmi* that has evolved into a place of pilgrimage is Garh Jungle, where a still-living ascetic, Jogi Bābā, performed austerities. Jogi Bābā took *saṃnyāsa* after an early marriage and retreated to a jungle near Shantiniketan, West Bengal. The story relates that he found a large tamarind tree

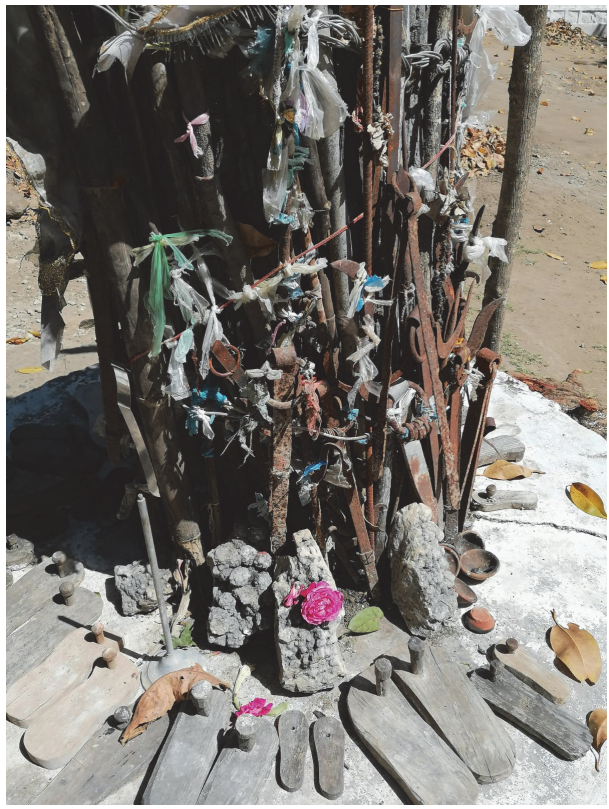

Figure 6: *Chimṭā*s and *pāduka*s at Vicār Śilā, Madhya Pradesh.

Photo: Gianni Pellegrini

and spent three years meditating in its hollow. Initially, only local Adivasi people knew of his presence and provided him with food. Over time, news of the 'yogi in the tree' spread, and people began visiting (Figure 7).

Jogi Bābā claims that during his *tapasyā* he attained *siddhi*s (powers) and had a vision revealing that his meditation site was where the sage Medha Muni celebrated the first Durgā *pūjā*.[11] The 'discovery' of mythical places by ascetics due to their spiritual merits is nothing new in the history of Hindu religious orders. These discoveries of the past were often presented as miraculous events guided by the god or goddess connected with the story of the place, and were narrated to give authority and legitimacy to the foundation of new religious centres so

11. I have extensively examined the story of Jogi Bābā in Bevilacqua 2018.

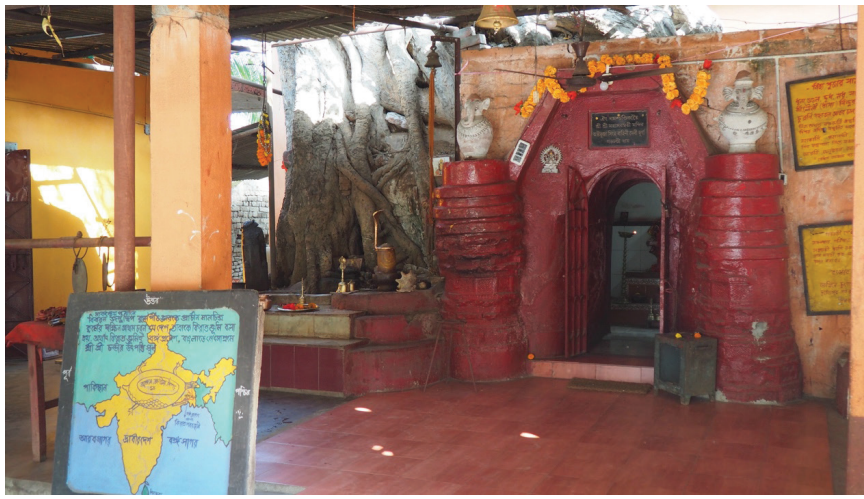

Figure 7: Māhāriṣi Medha Ashram, West Bengal.

Photo: author

as to attract pilgrims, which is what indeed happened in the case of Jogi Bābā.[12] Following this revelation, Jogi Bābā started constructing temples dedicated to the goddesses Māhā Kālī, Māhā Lakṣmī and Māhā Sarasvatī, as well as other structures celebrating the area's sacredness and historicity. To give authority to the construction of Māhāriṣi Medha Ashram (also called Garh Dhām, 'the abode which is a fort'), the life story of Jogi Bābā began to be narrated, containing miraculous features that follow the structure used in Indian hagiographies, to consolidate his identity as a yogi and *tapasvin*. The Māhāriṣi Medha Ashram was officially inaugurated in 2009. The claims of Jogi Bābā are supported by his followers and devotees, who believed in his powers and who assisted him in developing the area. According to him, the history of the place is narrated in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, and the ashram's location corresponds to descriptions in the text. A map in the ashram outlines the area as Garh Dhām. I first visited the ashram in 2017 and 2018; at that time, Jogi Bābā managed the place almost alone, with the help of a few Adivasi people.

The presence of three temples dedicated to three of the main goddesses of the Hindu pantheon marks the place as a centre of attraction for people from the nearby areas. Since the jungle has been cleared from around the ashram, the place is also agreeable for picnics and short walks. There are different types of people visiting the place. There are the 'Sunday visitors', who come just to have

12. See, for example, Lutgendorf 1991 on sites associated with Kṛṣṇa in Vrindavan 'rediscovered' by saints in the sixteenth century, or Burghart 2016 for the 'rediscovery' of Janakpurdham by Sur Kishor Das, a seventeenth-century Rāmānandī who lived in what is now Rajasthan.

a look: most of them do not know the story of the place and do not even take time to read the boards. They come, take photos and go, sometimes leaving their garbage as a sign of their presence. Jogi Bābā does not support these visitors and he is often sulky with them, since, according to him, they are not really devotees of the goddesses. This kind of visitor appears from December until the beginning of March, while the weather is pleasant. Among other visitors, there are also pious devotees of the goddesses, who do *pūjā*s in their temples, and Jogi Bābā's followers. From his words, it seems that they are quite numerous, coming there from throughout West Bengal and different parts of India.

As a pilgrimage centre, Garh Dhām becomes overpopulated twice a year: on the occasion of Rām Navamī, but especially during Durgā *pūjā*, when the *Devī Māhātmya* is also recited.[13] During these festivals, each of which lasts for nine days, temporary accommodation is built to host the thousands of people who come from the surrounding areas and even from afar. Those who have been following Jogi Bābā since the very beginning have told me that every year the participation at these events increases, to such an extent that today small shops and eating places are erected and other *sādhu*s come to celebrate but also to astonish people with some of their practices.

Upon my return in 2024, I found significant developments, including signs directing visitors from nearby cities and an improved road to the ashram. The place now boasts a large *gauśālā* (cowshed), and about 20 people work alongside Jogi Bābā. I was informed that as more people visit the site, especially during Durgā *pūjā*, the government has begun supporting the ashram.

TOURISTIC DEVELOPMENT

In the examples provided above, it is clear that the nature and development of a *tapobhūmi* can differ from site to site, and that renouncers themselves can support a site's expansion or can oppose the presence of common people in order to stop their practice area being transformed into a picnic site. As was already mentioned, despite the fact that Jogi Bābā is part of the process of the Garh Jungle development, he does not like the people who come just to 'enjoy' the place. This is a common tendency among *sādhu*s: while they appreciate the expansion of religious knowledge about *tīrtha*s and *tapobhūmi*s, the presence of random people who do not know the religious importance of sites, and consequently do not know how to behave, creates resentments. The transformation of some religious pilgrimage places into touristic spots chosen by couples for their honeymoon has been highly criticized. When in 2013 a midday cloudburst caused devastating floods and landslides in Uttarakhand, damaging pilgrimage centres such as Gangotri, Badrinath and Kedarnath, the Śaṅkarācārya Śrī Svarūpānanda

13. Rām Navamī is a Hindu festival that celebrates the birthday of the god Rām.

Sarasvatī blamed the sex-food-and-fun-oriented consumerism propagated by tour operators in the land. In an interview given to Rediff.com (Bhatt 2013), he stressed that Uttarakhand is the land where Lord Śiva holds the River Gaṅgā in his *jaṭā* as the highest *tapasyā* possible, to enable the holy river to flow seamlessly. Hence these mountains were not places to enjoy, but pilgrimage spots to cleanse the soul.

Despite this criticism, in 2015 the Ministry of Tourism launched the 'Swadesh Darshan' scheme to develop theme-based circuits, that is, routes connecting major tourist destinations into a unit 'that the tourism authorities are to develop, and the tourists are to consume' (Aukland 2017: 288). This form of organization is such that pilgrims often spend little time at one specific destination in order to reach the next stop in their itineraries (Aukland 2018: 23).

Another interesting case which further illustrates the link between ascetics and the development of pilgrimage sites is presented by McKay (2015). In his work, McKay demonstrates that a small sect of Śaiva Nāth renunciates in the early thirteenth century played a pivotal role in bringing Mount Kailas into the Indic world. They began to penetrate the upper Himalayas, and the abundance of Himalayan toponyms using the *nāth* suffix indicates their dynamic engagement in the construction of a sacred landscape. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Nāths were joined in these regions by the Giri order. According to McKay, since this group is now dominant in the area, it is possible that the full identification of the earthly Kailas as the abode of Śiva was made by the Giris during the late medieval period (p. 429). In the early twentieth century, a group of Hindu renunciates and Western intellectuals and explorers reformulated Himalayan sacred geographies around Kailas and the source of the Ganges, becoming key agents in constructing the modern understanding of these sites. The colonial government contributed through the provision of law, order and transport, especially the railways. The growing 'middle class', who were financially able to undertake major pilgrimages, along with the publicity of the mountain as a universal sacred site for spiritual seekers from all over the world, transformed it into a global phenomenon (p. 432). Today, even the journey to Kailas has been commodified into a trekking experience lasting several days, tailored to the needs, skills and ability of the individual.

CONCLUSION

How many caves have been used over the centuries? How many *tapobhūmi*s have been shared and subsequently integrated into the history of a specific *sampradāya*? How many have developed into pilgrimage sites or have been abandoned? Considering that many *tīrtha*s are mythologically associated with the practice of austerity (macrocosmic *tapobhūmi*s), how many conceal within their mythologized stories the efforts of a human seeker (microcosmic *tapobhūmi*s)?

The study of *tapobhūmi*s reveals a nuanced understanding of sacred geography, demonstrating how ascetic practices shape and redefine sacred spaces, contributing to the creation of a sacred geography that co-exists, intersects and overlaps with the mainstream. The relationship between *tapobhūmi*s and mainstream sacred geography highlights a layered understanding of sacred spaces. While mainstream *tīrtha*s often follow a collective and standardized pilgrimage calendar, *tapobhūmi*s are lived and interpreted through the lens of individual and sampradāyic practices. This distinction underscores the diverse ways in which sacred spaces are experienced and maintained by different groups. Each *sampradāya*, indeed, has sacred places linked to the *tapasyā*s, *sādhanā*s or *samādhi*s of its gurus, has journeys related to its histories and theologies, and participates in socio-religious dynamics that connect *sādhu*s with lay societies.

Analysing various *tapobhūmi*s shows not only how ascetics and laypeople engage differently with sacred spaces, but also how ascetics impart authority to laypeople, and how both ascetics and laypeople may cooperate in the development of a sacred place. The fact that people continue to seek out ascetics practising *tapasyā* in remote locations demonstrates that living in and mastering the wilderness is still perceived as a demonstration of spiritual power (McKay 2015: 64). As they gain recognition and popularity, the transformation of some *tapobhūmi*s from exclusive ascetic retreats into significant pilgrimage destinations highlights the dynamic nature of sacred geography, where the authority of a renowned *sādhu* can elevate a hidden *tapobhūmi* to the status of a revered site. As McKay emphasizes (p. 221), temples that later became pilgrimage sites often developed organically from being renouncers' shelters after gaining local acquiescence and attracting patronage and economic sustenance. Examples such as that of Jogi Bābā demonstrate how ascetics can shape and legitimize new sacred centres, influencing both local and broader religious landscapes. Mapping and studying these various *tapobhūmi*s and their associated histories offers valuable insights into the development of sacred centres in India. It highlights how personal spiritual endeavours can intersect with and even transform broader religious practices, contributing to a richer, more nuanced understanding of India's sacred geography and pilgrimage dynamics.

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