



The *Tirtha* of Sage Kapila

○ Knut A. Jacobsen

Kolayat, a village in Rajasthan, represents a unique feature of the Hindu tradition, namely the belief that certain special places not only have sacred power including the power to heal, but also the power to bring salvation. Kolayat is situated west of the city of Bikaner far out in the desert close to the border of Pakistan. It claims to take its name from the word *Kapila*. *Kapila* means 'red-brown,' and the original meaning of Kolayat might have been 'the red-brown place,' describing its colour, similar to *Kapila-vastu*, 'the red-brown place', the capital of the kingdom of the father of the Buddha. But *Kapila* is also the name of an ancient sage and today Kolayat means 'the place of the sage *Kapila*.' Among the places of pilgrimage associated with *Kapila*, I have found three places in India called Kolayat (though spelled differently): Kolayat in Rajasthan; Kalayat close to Narwana in Jind District in Haryana; and Kolyad where the rivers Airani and Narmada meet.¹ All these places are *Kapila-tirthas*, that is, they are local pilgrimage places, *tirthas*, associated with the ancient sage *Kapila*.

Several stories about the 'rituals and power of place' of Kolayat are told in the *Shri Kapila Mahatmya Kolyatji*, a short homage text of 10 pages in Hindi. The text is sold during the main annual festival of Kolayat in Rajasthan at Karttik Purnima, the full moon festival of the month Karttik (October-November). The text is

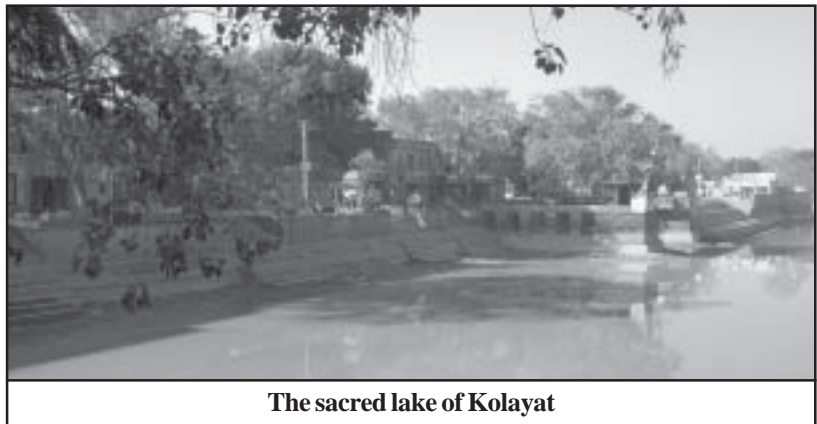
construed as a conversation of Agastya and the god Skanda who is the narrator. In the text, Skanda reveals the salvific quality of Kolayat through several stories, which include *The Sanyasin and the Dog*, *The Blind Man*, *The Man Who Had Done No Good Deeds* and a story about the six sisters. Kolayat is described as better than all the other *tirthas*, and the land is said to give salvation to all those who do penance there. It is the gem of all centres of pilgrimage but in the *kali-yuga*, according to the text, few people know about the greatness of this *tirtha*. There is, indeed, some truth to this statement. Kolayat is hardly mentioned in contemporary pilgrimage texts. According to the *Kapila Mahatmya*, this is because in these times most people are occupied with the accumulation of wealth.

Even Animals are at Par

One story of the *Shri Kapila Mahatmya Kolyatji* tells about a *sanyasin* who together with his dog started to circumambulate the Kapilsarovar, 'the lake of *Kapila*' in Kolayat at the *Karttik Purnima* festival. This is the greatest annual

festival and it attracts mainly local people. *Karttik Purnima* is one of the special days when people take a sacred bath in the lake and *darshan* of *Kapila* in the *Kapil Mandir*.² The text says that people were amazed to see the dog circumambulate, and they tried to stop it by beating the animal in an attempt to chase it away. Oblivious to this, the dog continued the circumambulation. People then tried to convince the *sanyasin* to take the dog away from the place.

A discussion arose and the crowd was divided into two camps, some were in favour of the dog and others against it. While the discussion went on, the *sanyasin* and the dog completed the circumambulation. The dog then went down to the lake, drank some water and sat there with eyes closed. People looked amazed at this. Then, suddenly the dog died and at the same time a flying vehicle arrived. The dog turned into a man and proceeded to the world of the gods, the *devaloka*. All the people who were against the dog felt ashamed and those who were in favour started to chant the name of *Kapila*. The text



The sacred lake of Kolayat

says: 'As the result of the sacredness of this place, the dog gained salvation and proceeded towards heaven.' That is, the power of place gave salvation to the dog. The dog is then identified with a star located near the polar star.

The message of the story, besides celebrating Kapila, seems to be that the power of this place can be harvested by anyone who performs the simple ritual and that this sacred place is open to everyone. Anyone interested in performing the ritual is welcome. Even a dog attained heaven by performing the circumambulation and the water ritual.³ Even the so-called untouchables can receive similar results by performing the ritual. The story functions as an advertisement for the power of place. The legend is aimed at attracting people, especially the poor and those assigned a low social status.

Pilgrimage is presented in the text as the poor man's ritual. It says, 'The poor person cannot gain religious merit by giving, nor can he perform sacrifice, but with just a little effort can he take a sacred bath at a *tirtha*.' Sacrifice and gift giving favour the rich, the more you give or sacrifice, the more religious merit you ostensibly gain. You are supposed to get as much benefit as you pay for. But at the *tirthas* everyone has claim to equal benefit.

Story of the Blind Man

Another story tells about a man who had been born blind. When he was given some lentils from Kolayat, he suddenly gained knowledge of his previous birth. He realised that in his previous life, he had been an animal, a deer living in the Kolayat area. While living there his head had got stuck in a tree while he rubbed it to gain relief from itching. Unable to free itself, the deer had died. Animals had eaten it and when the rain had come, its skeleton had been washed away and ended up in the lake Kapilsarovar. Its head, however, had

remained stuck in the tree. Because the moral impurities of the deer had been washed off in the pure water of the Kapilsarovar, he had been born in a rich *vaishya* family, the text informs us. However, because his head had been stuck in the tree he was born blind. After learning all this, he asked the people in the village to go to Kolayat, find the head and throw it into the Kapilsarovar. As soon as the head entered the lake, the man regained normal eyesight. All the people involved, therefore, began to chant the name of Kapila with heart felt respect, the text says. The storyteller concludes this story by saying that even if one goes to all the other *tirthas*, the mission is not complete unless one visits Kolayat. Visiting Kolayat, brings as much merit (*punya*) as having gone to all the other *tirthas* put together. This is not an unusual way to praise the power of a pilgrimage place. Similar stories about other *tirthas* as well.

The power of this *tirtha* is illustrated by the moral impurity being washed away even after death, by the skeleton ending up in the water of the Kapilsarovar. Also in this story the moral impurities of an animal are purified. The power of place causes

an animal to be reborn as a rich *vaishya*, and a blind man to regain his eyesight. This gives hope to other persons with physical disabilities of a miraculous healing.

One Who Did No Good

A third story tells about a man who died in Kolayat. Then the messenger of Yama, Chitrugupta, took him with his noose and brought him to Yama. Yama asked Chitrugupta how many good deeds the man had done in his life. Chitrugupta answered that he had done no good deeds whatsoever, but that he died in Kapilayatan. To this Yama replied: 'If he died in the land of Kapila (*kapil-bhumi*), all his moral impurities were washed away. Allow him therefore to be born in a sacred house.' Consequently, he was reborn in a wealthy family, living in Kapilayatan. Therefore, he ultimately attained *moksha*. That he first became rich and then attained *moksha* indicates that this story, as an advertisement of the sacred place of Kolayat, is likely to be directed primarily at poor people.

Another story of the *Shri Kapila Mahatmya Kolayatji* narrates the tale of six sisters who bathed in the Kapilsarovar every day for three years. Because of their daily baths in the sacred lake, they gained memory of their previous lives and also salvation. According to the storyteller, the six sisters worshipped Kapila, and Kapila, satisfied with their devotion, showed himself to them and promised them a boon. Their wish was to stay together always. Thereafter these six girls were known as the six *Krittikas* (the Pleiades) and the text assures us that they are still present as stars in the sky. Because of the power of Kapila, they shine in heaven till the end of the *kalpa* and continuously remind humans of the greatness of bathing at a *tirtha*.



The pujari of the Kapil Mandir in Kolayat

The Power of the Place

These stories illustrate a unique feature of the Hindu tradition, the belief that places as such have salvific power or the power to bring *moksha*. Natural bodies of water such as rivers, lakes and beaches, and even certain cities are believed to have this power. The function of the rituals associated with that place is to harvest this power for the benefit of the individuals. Thus, ritual performance at sacred places or simply being present at a particular place is, according to the tradition, enough to gain the ultimate goal of *dharma*. It expresses a belief in the Hindu tradition, systematised in the Purva Mimamsa, that ritual acts attain their results by their intrinsic merit without intervention of a god or gods. According to this strand of the Hindu tradition, gods do not give *moksha*, ritual acts do; gods are reduced to mere grammatical datives in ritual speech.⁴

How did salvific power become established in Kolayat? Kolayat seems to belong to the class of places that have their sacredness grounded in narratives about the real or fictional presence of an ascetic or *avatara*.⁵ In the Hindu tradition, sacred geography and the tradition of pilgrimage are closely connected to the practice of asceticism. The presence of ascetics contributes to their sacredness. Ascetics in large numbers are often present at the pilgrimage places and many ascetics are full time pilgrims. They conform to the established pilgrimage system and the annual cycle of religious festivals. Other ascetics have some sort of semi-permanent residence from which they make a series of pilgrimages throughout the year.⁶ Kolayat and several other pilgrimage places derive their sacredness from the previous presence of the ancient ascetic Kapila.

Kapila may have become connected to sacred places in two



A sadhu in Kolayat

different ways. One probability is that Kapila was a historical person who travelled around in India a few thousand years ago. He performed *tapas* at several places. At some of these places a tradition of pilgrimage was established connected to the sacredness of place and worship of Kapila. The Hindu tradition, and also some indologists do consider Kapila a historical figure. As an Anand Swarup Gupta writes: 'We Indians are not used to regard [ing] all our ancient sages and heroes as mythical figures.'⁷

Another possibility is that since *sadhus* and *avataras* make places sacred, places which can connect themselves in some way or other to the mythology of Kapila or to the name Kapila have used this connection to establish themselves as pilgrimage places or to increase their religious significance. Kapila's concern as *avataras* and as founder of Sakhya was to make *moksha* available to others. Since *moksha* is one of the main religious concerns of pilgrims, Kapila fulfils two functions. On the one hand, a place has become sacred by him visiting, and on the other, he gives the individual visiting

the place or the relative for whom the pilgrimage is performed, the promise of *moksha*.

According to the tradition of *Bhagavata Purana*, when Kapila left Kardama's *ashrama* at Bindusaras, he travelled northeast. Kapila is also in the *Mahabharata* associated with the northeast. The *Shri Kapila Mahatmya Kolayatji* tells that Kapila after having given his teachings to his mother, travelled towards the north and there found an area with trees full of creepers and beautiful birds. Because of the beauty of the place, he stayed there to perform *tapas*. Since Kapila chose it as a favourite place, it was called Kapilayatan, 'Kapila's place'. Kolayat is also called the Kapila *kshetra*, the area of Kapila, Kapilatirtha and Kapilashrama, the sacred water body is the Kapilsarovar, the lake of Kapila.

According to the text, Kapila was seated in Kolayat like a *murti*. Thereafter a second *murti* came out of Kapila. Kapila left his gross body in the form of the Kapila *murti* of the Kapil mandir in Kolayat, and thereafter moved towards the northeast with his subtle body. Kapila, in other words, remained in Kolayat with a part of himself, his gross body which actually became the *murti*. These events, says the text, happened in the *satyayuga*. Thereafter persons from all the *lokas* who came here would gain salvation. Kapila's presence, in other words, endowed the place with salvific power. The text states: Knowledge, memory or vision of the place alone is sufficient to gain salvation, not only for humans, but even for wild animals. Salvation in this context often means going to *Vaikuntha*.

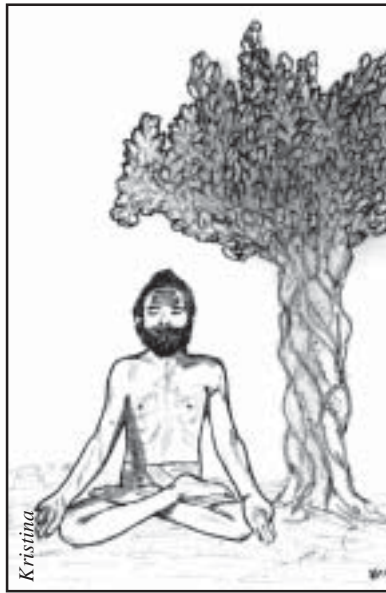
The tradition of Kolayat told in the *Shri Kapila Mahatmya Kolayatji* proclaims that the gods became jealous of this place. Instead of undergoing the hardships of *tapas* and sacrifice or undertaking long

journeys to places of pilgrimage such as Ayodhya and Varanasi, people would attain *moksha* the easy way by just taking a dip in the holy lake at Kapilayatan. The power of this place meant that humans no longer needed the gods, the gods were transcended by the salvific power of place. The gods therefore in the *kaliyuga* hid it from human beings humanity and its power became a secret. The god Skanda, however, felt sorry for the human race and brought the sacred place to light for the benefit of all so that everyone easily can obtain *moksha* even in this dark *kali-yuga*.

The stories Skanda tells belong to a local tradition, but they fit the pattern typical also of other Kapila centers of pilgrimage.⁸ That is why Kapila, who plays hardly any role in the religious imagination of the Hindus today, and who is only exceptionally, if ever, worshipped privately in the home, is worshipped at a series of pilgrimage places. Real or imagined association with Kapila, one of the most famous Hindu ascetics, has made many places sacred.

Classical ascetics in the Indian tradition such as Kapila, Buddha or Mahavira were not worshippers of gods, instead they themselves became divine figures and surpassed the gods. They were teachers of a self-help way to salvation, and produced a legacy of sacred power that transcends that of gods. Even after they disappeared, their salvific power was left behind which can be appropriated in different ways, but also at some *tirthas*.

That Kapila was the founder of the famous Samkhya system of religious thought adds to the power of the places. It also gives the places a noteworthy ascetic quality. A few persons associated with the places such as *brahmana*-priest or *sanyasins* often have some rudimentary knowledge of the Samkhya philosophy. However, pilgrims do not



go to these places to worship Kapila or to learn about Samkhya, although they usually visit the temples to have *darshan* of him. They go to feel, utilise and participate in the supposed power of the place created, by the earlier presence of Kapila.

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9. Sehgal, K. K. (ed.). *Rajasthan District Gazetteers: Bikaner*. Jaipur: Government of Rajasthan, 1972.

10. *Shri Kapila Mahatmya Kolayatji*. Bikaner: Nadlal Modi Book Sellers, 1999.

Footnotes

1. Kolyad where the rivers Airani and Narmada meet is mentioned in *Kalyan Tirthank* (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 2056 [samvat]), p. 439. Kolayat in Rajasthan and Kalayat close to Narwana in Jind District in Haryana are not mentioned in this valuable book.

2. *Rajasthan District Gazetteers: Bikaner*, ed. K. K. Sehgal (Jaipur: Government of Rajasthan, 1972), p. 117, writes about the lake: 'The Kolayat lake with its mystic tradition has a magical effect on the minds of the simple people and they reveal it in singing songs in its praise deep in religious ecstasy.'

3. Kapila is often associated with animals and beautiful wilderness. The story also seems to show, perhaps, that even animals can perform the tirtha rituals, and that when they perform them, they attain salvation.

4. Satischandra Chatterjee and Dhirendramohan Datta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*. 8th. ed. (Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1984).

5. Agehananda Bharati, 'Pilgrimage Sites and Indian Civilization,' writes: 'The actual or legendary presence of a sadhu or an avatara makes places pure. It makes a center of pilgrimage of any site.' In J. W. Elder (ed.), *Chapters in Indian Civilization* (Dubuque (Iowa): Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1970).

6. *Ibid*. The reason the ascetics conform to the established pilgrimage system is partly economic: They travel to the pilgrimage centres at times of peak pilgrimage influx to collect the maximum amount of alms from the large number of lay pilgrims.

7. Anand Swarup Gupta, 'A Problem of Puranic Text-Reconstruction,' *Purana XII* 2 (1970), pp. 304-321.

8. See Knut A. Jacobsen, 'The Sacred Geography of Kapila: The Kapilashrama of Sidhpur,' *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* vol 18: *Ritualistics* (2003), pp. 82-91; Knut A. Jacobsen, 'Matrigayaparvanashraddha: Pilegrimsferd til Sidhpur for å gi frelse til avdøde mødre,' *Chaos* 39 (2003), pp. 49-58.

The author is a Professor in the Department of the History of Religions, University of Bergen, Norway. □