



SACRED TERRAIN AND NARRATIVE AUTHORITY: THE TEXTUAL CONSTRUCTION OF KURUKSHETRA FROM THE VEDIC PERIOD TO THE FIFTH CENTURY C.E.

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Abstract: This paper examines the evolving construction of Kurukshetra as a sacred place in South Asian literary and religious history, tracing its transformation from a ritual site in late-Vedic literature through its complex formulation in epic and epic-period texts up to the fifth century C.E. Drawing on the *Mānavadharmasāstra*, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Līṅgapurāṇa*, and a fifth-century Khmer inscription from Laos, this analysis argues that Kurukshetra's significance is not primarily geographical but conceptual: it is constructed in successive literary traditions as an ideal *tīrtha* (sacred ford), as a site of *dharma*-grounded political authority, and as a portable symbolic resource that could be dislocated from its native terrain and re-inscribed onto new landscapes. The paper further argues that the *tīrthayātrā* (pilgrimage) framework in the *Mahābhārata* created a stable but mutable ritual category that allowed for the proliferation of both geographic specificity and narrative legitimacy associated with Kurukshetra, making it one of the most semantically rich place-constructs in classical South Asian thought.

Keywords: Kurukshetra, *tīrtha*, *tīrthayātrā*, *Mahābhārata*, sacred geography, *dharma*, place-construction, South Asian religious history

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1. Introduction

The question of how places acquire sacred meaning how a geographic location becomes theologically weighted, narratively charged, and politically authoritative and is among the most enduring problems in the historical study of religion. In South Asian traditions, few places illuminate this question more richly than Kurukshetra, the northern plains region situated

between the Himalaya and the Vindhya mountains, east of the Punjab and west of the Yamuna, identified in numerous textual traditions as the battlefield of the *Mahābhārata* war, the site of primordial sacrifice, and the field of *dharma* (*dharmakṣetra*).

Kurukshetra has attracted scholarly attention predominantly in two registers: as an archaeological and geostrategic location, and as a pilgrimage site with contemporary religious significance. What has received comparatively less systematic treatment is the *literary and discursive process* by which Kurukshetra's sacred authority was constructed, maintained, transferred, and transformed across a span of roughly a millennium of Sanskrit literary production. This paper undertakes precisely that analysis. It argues that the construction of Kurukshetra across successive textual traditions is characterized by a progressive *de-territorialization* of the site a movement away from geographic specificity toward conceptual and narrative idealization and that this de-territorialization was itself productive, enabling later texts to deploy the idealized Kurukshetra as a template for constructing new sacred landscapes.

The present paper focuses on a comprehensive study of Kurukshetra in Sanskrit literature, covering the period from the late-Vedic era to approximately the fifth century C.E. The four principal texts analyzed are: the *Mānavadharmasāstra* (*Manusmṛiti*), the *Mahābhārata* (with particular attention to the Vana Parvan, the Śalya Parvan, and the Ādi Parvan), the *Līṅgapurāṇa*, and the fifth-century C.E. inscription of King Devānīka from the banks of the Mekong River in present-day Laos.

Theoretical Framework: Place, Tīrtha, and Conceptual Geography

Before engaging the textual evidence, it is necessary to establish the theoretical framework through which this analysis proceeds. The concept of *tīrtha* — frequently translated as “sacred ford” or “crossing-place” — is central to understanding Kurukshetra's religious significance. Derived from the Sanskrit verbal root *tī* (to cross), *tīrtha* denotes a place where the boundary between the ordinary world and the sacred becomes permeable, a site at which ritual activity is augmented or facilitated by the place itself. As Diana Eck has noted, *tīrthas* are places where one may “cross over,” implying both a physical transition and a soteriological one.

The scholarship of Stanley Tambiah on ritual performance is also relevant here. Tambiah's observation that play and ritual constitute “a

stepping out of real life into a temporary sphere of temporary perfection,” taking place in a “marked off space,” has important implications for understanding *tīrthayātrā* (pilgrimage) as a ritual category. The *tīrtha* and its associated pilgrimage function, in this framework, as a liminal zone in which ordinary temporal and social constraints are suspended and a heightened form of religious experience or what one modern Kurukshetra pilgrim described as “floating” above the transient concerns of daily life becomes possible.

The analysis presented here draws additionally on the concept of *conceptual geography* i.e. the understanding that sacred landscapes are as much discursive constructions as physical territories. The texts examined do not describe a stable, pre-given terrain; they *constitute* a geography through the rhetorical and ritual categories they deploy. As this paper demonstrates, the “geography” of Kurukshetra in the texts under discussion is almost always a geography of relationships between places, between ritual categories, between political and religious authorities rather than a cartography of physical terrain.

Kurukshetra in the *Mānavadharmasāstra*: Ideal Geography and Hierarchical Space

The earliest text of the epic period analyzed here, the *Mānavadharmasāstra* (*Manusmṛti*), offers a construction of Kurukshetra that is geographic in form but conceptual in content. The *Manusmṛti* does not attempt to establish firm territorial boundaries for Kurukshetra; rather, it describes an idealized, hierarchically organized geography in which Kurukshetra occupies a position of ritual and normative authority.

The geography of the *Manusmṛti* is organized concentrically around the *Brahmāvarta* — the doab between the Sarasvatī and Dṛśadvatī rivers — which is identified as the seat of proper conduct and the source of normative Brahmanical behavior. Kurukshetra is placed in the ring immediately bordering this central doab, in a region called *Brahmarṣideśa*, from which properly trained Brahmin sages (*brāhmaṇas*) emerge. This placement is significant: by locating Kurukshetra adjacent to but outside the central doab, the text allows it to function as a source of authoritative dharmic knowledge without requiring its precise territorial identification.

What is particularly revealing in the *Manusmṛti*’s construction of Kurukshetra is the analogical use it makes of this geographic hierarchy for military organization. The text states that a king should place soldiers from

the *Brahmarṣideśa* regions — the same concentric arrangement that structures the ritual geography — on the front lines of battle. This is not, as later commentators would claim, a praise of the martial prowess of the people of Kurukshetra. Rather, it is a *spatial conceptualization of military formation* drawing on an idealized geographic hierarchy. The implication is that by the period of the *Manusmṛti*, the significance of Kurukshetra had become sufficiently conceptual to be deployed as an analogy for a wholly different domain — military strategy — without any reference to physical terrain.

Post-Epic Abstraction: The *Liṅgapurāṇa* and the Laos Inscription

Two texts composed in approximately the fifth century C.E. demonstrate with particular clarity the process by which Kurukshetra's sacred authority was abstracted from its native terrain and relocated onto new landscapes. These are the *Liṅgapurāṇa* and the inscription of King Devānīka from the banks of the Mekong River in present-day Laos.

The Liṅgapurāṇa and Avimukta

The *Liṅgapurāṇa*, dated to between 300 and 400 C.E., does not discuss Kurukshetra directly as a physical location but rather invokes it as a touchstone an ideal and authoritative reference point for legitimating a *tīrtha* in Varanasi called Avimukta. In the text, Bṛhaspati equates Avimukta with Kurukshetra, repeating the formulation: “This is Kurukshetra the place of sacrifice for the gods, the seat of Brahman for all beings”. The geographic description of Kurukshetra is entirely absent in this deployment; what matters is not where Kurukshetra is located, but the constellation of meanings “sacrifice, liberation, divine presence” that the name carries.

The *Liṅgapurāṇa* also makes explicit the connection between Kurukshetra and the *tīrtha* concept of *mokṣa* (liberation), drawing on the *Mahābhārata* verse “I will go to Kurukshetra; I will live in Kurukshetra” to suggest that residing at a place identified with Kurukshetra confers final liberation (*mukti*). The mechanism of transfer here is significant: it is the *narrative identity* of Kurukshetra and its association with sacrifice, with the presence of the divine, with the attainment of *mokṣa* that is transported to the new site, not its geographic coordinates.

The Devānīka Inscription and Kurukshetra in Laos

The second text, the fifth-century inscription of King Devānīka, represents an even more dramatic instance of the dislocation and relocation of Kurukshetra.

This inscription, discovered on the banks of the Mekong River in present-day Laos, describes the founding of a new *tīrtha* also named Kurukshetra and is the first known construction of a Kurukshetra outside of the Indian subcontinent.

A close textual comparison between the inscription and the corresponding passages from *Mahābhārata* 3.81 reveals a systematic removal of geographic specificity from the epic text. Where the *Mahābhārata* refers to “the dust raised by the wind in Kurukshetra” (*savo*), the inscription replaces the tangible, place-specific image with the more narrative figure of Viṣṇu (*tatra*) removing the physical, dirt-carrying wind and substituting a divine agent whose authority is not tied to specific terrain. Similarly, the inscription omits the *Mahābhārata* verse that specifies the southern and northern boundaries of Kurukshetra (the *dakṣiṇena uttareṇa* verse), thereby severing the site from its native landscape.

The inscription’s program is thus one of deliberate *de-territorialization* followed by *re-territorialization*: the ideal Kurukshetra is first stripped of its geographic anchors, equated with the transcendent *Trivikrama* (“out there” in the cosmos), and then brought down to the banks of the Mekong River as the legitimate heir of the original’s sacred authority. The stated goal of the inscription is to equate the two Kurukshetras in terms of merit (*phala*) conferred upon visitors, constructing a new *tīrtha* that possesses all the soteriological benefits of the original.

The R.C. Majumdar hypothesis — that both the inscription and the *Mahābhārata* drew from a common third text, a *Kurukṣetramāhātmya* — appears unnecessary in light of this analysis. The variations between the inscription and the *Mahābhārata* are not scribal errors or regional recensions but deliberate and purposeful adjustments that serve the specific goal of dislocating and relocating the ideal Kurukshetra. The inscription’s author was clearly familiar with the epic, as evidenced by the comparison of King Devānīka to the epic figures of Yudhiṣṭhira.

Kurukshetra in the Mahābhārata: Contest, Dharma, and the Sacrificial Field

Kurukshetra as Dharmakṣetra

The *Mahābhārata*’s construction of Kurukshetra is the most complex and multi-layered of the texts under discussion. The epic constructs Kurukshetra along two parallel axes: as a narrative and conceptual place organized around the intertwined themes of contest, political authority, and religious legitimacy; and as a geographic place constructed within the ritual framework of *tīrthayātrā*.

The thematic construction of Kurukshetra in the *Mahābhārata* is announced in the very first verse of the *Bhagavadgītā*: *dharmakṣetre kurukṣetre* “in the field of *dharma*, in Kurukshetra.” This phrase, which will become one of the most frequently deployed descriptors of the region in subsequent literature, encapsulates the central thematic complex surrounding Kurukshetra in the epic: it is the site at which the contest for political authority (*rājya*) is decided through the sanction of religious propriety (*dharma*). The victory at Kurukshetra does not merely establish military supremacy; it establishes the *dharmic* legitimacy of the victors’ claim to rule.

Several sub-narratives within the epic demonstrate the consistency with which Kurukshetra is constructed around this thematic complex of contest, political authority, and religious legitimacy. The genealogy of kings from *Bharata* to *Kuru* in the Ādi Parvan includes a narrative of a righteous king ousted by his cousins, who regains his kingdom with the backing of the sage Bṛhaspati a narrative that prefigures the central Pāṇḍava-Kaurava conflict and may represent a “First Battle of Kurukshetra”. The story of the *gandharva* who defeats the Pāṇḍavas at Kurukshetra near the beginning of the epic (leaving them in a state of “non-possession”) and the narrative of Paraśurāma, who fills five lakes at Kurukshetra/*Samantapañcaka* with the blood of slain *kṣatriyas* in an era-defining act of cosmic violence, both reinforce Kurukshetra’s status as the symbolic battlefield where religious and political authority are decided and re-established.

The narrative of Paraśurāma’s *kṣatriya*-slaughter is particularly important because it connects Kurukshetra with the concept of *dharma* in its most expansive sense — the ordering principle of cosmic and social life rather than merely with Brahmanical ritual orthopraxy. The interplay between *dharma* (religious propriety) and *rājya* (ruling authority) in the Paraśurāma narrative, in which Paraśurāma’s right to use violence against *kṣatriyas* is challenged on *dharmic* grounds, establishes Kurukshetra as “the symbolic battlefield whose possession implies universal sovereignty”.

Strategic Geography and Symbolic Significance

The Indian historian M. Arjunan Pillai has emphasized the geostrategic importance of the Kurukshetra corridor the narrow plain between the Thar Desert and the Himalayan Mountains, through which all invaders from Central Asia were compelled to pass on their way to the Gangetic heartland.

The battles of Taraori (1191, 1192 C.E.) and Panipat (1526, 1556, 1761 C.E.) attest to the continued military significance of the region. This paper does not deny the geostrategic importance of the terrain; however, it argues that the epic's choice of Kurukshetra as the setting for the central battle cannot be explained by geostrategic considerations alone.

The epic's construction of Kurukshetra draws on a pre-existing tradition visible in late-Vedic literature and confirmed in the *Manusmṛiti* of the region as a site of contest for religious and political authority. The place-name itself, literally "the field of Kuru," connects the battlefield to the ancestral lineage from which both the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas descend, making the choice of battleground not strategically contingent but narratively necessary. Kurukshetra is the field on which the Kuru lineage's succession crisis must be resolved, and its resolution carries the sanction of *dharma*.

***Tīrthayātrā* and the Fluid Geography of Kurukshetra**

***Tīrthayātrā* as Stable Container, Variable Content**

The *Mahābhārata* introduces the first significant treatment of *tīrthayātrā* (pilgrimage) in Sanskrit literature, and this treatment has profound implications for the geographic construction of Kurukshetra. This paper follows Stanley Tambiah's analysis of ritual as composed of stable formal structures containing variable constituent elements, and extends this insight to the *tīrthayātrā* complex as it is presented in the Vana Parvan's *tīrthayātrā* section (*Mahābhārata* 3.80-83).

The analysis of the Vana Parvan's pilgrimage itinerary for Kurukshetra reveals that *tīrthayātrā* functions as a stable categorical framework a "container" for a set of variable constituent elements: the actions performed at the *tīrtha*, the rewards (*phala*) obtained, the specific geographic locations visited, and the narrative justifications provided for the site's sacred status. The actions prescribed are limited and formulaic: bathing (*snāna*, sixty-seven instances), praise of a deity (*arcanā*, sixteen instances), fasting (*upavāsa*, eight instances), dwelling (*vāsa*, six instances), and a small number of other acts including giving gifts, sipping water, circumambulation, and dying. The specific actions prescribed at any given *tīrtha* within Kurukshetra are, however, not exhaustive or mutually exclusive; the Vana Parvan's itinerary and Balarāma's own *tīrthayātrā* in the Śalya Parvan differ substantially in the actions performed at specific sites, confirming that the actions are variable content within the stable container category.

The Formulaic Construction of *Phala*

The rewards (*phala*) attributed to pilgrimage acts at Kurukshetra are similarly formulaic and modular. They may be classified into six broad types: equivalence to Vedic sacrifices (e.g., *aśvamedha*, *gomedha*); attainment of a divine realm (*loka*); multiplication of the benefit of a performed act; destruction or purification of *pāpa* (sin/demerit); attainment of *mokṣa*; and transformation of social or ritual status. These *phala* occur singly and in combination, and there is no stable hierarchy among them. Field research at Kurukshetra and the town of Pehowa (the ancient *tīrtha* of Pṛthudaka) has confirmed that modern pilgrims and *purohīts* treat specific *phala* as near-equivalents: the benefit of bathing in the Sarasvatī is equated with the benefit of seven *aśvamedha yajñas*, which is in turn equated with the benefit of giving a gift of 1,000 cows (*gavāyana*), which is equated with the *gomedha* sacrifice. This chain of equivalences suggests that specific *phala* function as metaphors for undifferentiated merit as members of a set of interchangeable benefits within the container category.

The algebraic formula for a *tīrthayātrā* verse may be expressed as: [going to (X *tīrtha*)] + [performing (Y action)] = [obtaining (Z *phala*)], as illustrated by *Mahābhārata* 3.81.13: “Then, O *Dharmajña*, having gone to [the *tīrtha*], staying there one night, one obtains the merit acquired by giving a thousand cows”. The formulaic language of these verses combining place, action, and result in a predictable structure is consistent with oral transmission and suggests that the *tīrthayātrā* section was composed and transmitted in a performative context in which formulaic expression facilitated the inclusion and elaboration of new sites.

Geographic Expansion and the Proliferation of Narrative

The stability of the *tīrthayātrā* category, combined with the flexibility of its constituent elements, provides the mechanism for a dramatic expansion of geographic specificity within the *Mahābhārata*’s construction of Kurukshetra. The Vana Parvan lists 103 *tīrthas* within Kurukshetra across 178 verses. By contrast, the pre-epic literature identifies only a handful of specific locations within the region. This tenfold-plus expansion of geographic detail is, this paper argues, directly attributable to the *tīrthayātrā* framework: the formulaic structure allowed new sites to be easily inserted into the itinerary without disrupting the stability of the category, and the connection between narrative and place created an incentive for the proliferation of site-specific stories.

O.P. Bharadwaj's observation that several place-names in the Vana Parvan's Kurukshetra itinerary (including *Sudinatve* and *Āha*) appear to be derived from the *R̥g Veda* (3.23.4) rather than authentic local toponyms supports the view that the geography of Kurukshetra in the *Mahābhārata* remained fluid and underwent deliberate expansion by redactors drawing on textual rather than cartographic sources.

Narrative and Geographic Overlap: The Case of Samantapañcaka

The Kṣatriya-Blood Lakes and the Identity of Kurukshetra

One of the most revealing instances of the interaction between narrative construction and geographic definition in the *Mahābhārata* is the complex relationship between Kurukshetra and its synonym *Samantapañcaka*, and between the latter and the site of the lakes associated with Paraśurāma's *kṣatriya*-slaughter. *Samantapañcaka* occurs eighteen times in the text and invariably denotes Kurukshetra; three passages define the name in terms of the five lakes (*pañca hrada*) filled by Paraśurāma with the blood of slain *kṣatriyas*, explicitly conflating the toponym with the narrative event.

What is significant here is the *bi-directional* exchange of meaning between the nested site (the Paraśurāma lakes, situated *within* Kurukshetra) and the container site (Kurukshetra/*Samantapañcaka*). The lakes, through their connection with the Paraśurāma narrative, invest the broader region with the themes of *dharmic* violence, cosmic renewal, and the right to rule. Meanwhile, Kurukshetra, as the container, confers upon the lakes the authority of one of the most sacred *tirthas* in the subcontinent. This "inside-out influence," as it may be termed, illustrates the degree to which the geographic identity of Kurukshetra was constituted through narrative rather than through physical demarcation.

A single passage in the *Mahābhārata* defines *Samantapañcaka* spatially specifying that it extends twelve *yojanas* from end to end rather than narratively. The presence of this lone spatial definition amid multiple narrative ones underscores the essentially conceptual character of Kurukshetra's geographic identity in the epic period: the place is most fundamentally a *narrated* place, not a bounded territory.

Discussion: Toward a Theory of Sacred Place-Construction

The evidence examined in this paper points toward a coherent model of sacred place-construction in early South Asian religious literature. This model may be characterized by three interrelated processes:

De-territorialization: Across successive textual traditions from the late-Vedic period through the fifth century C.E., Kurukshetra undergoes a progressive detachment from specific terrain. The late-Vedic texts locate it vaguely within or adjacent to the *Sarasvatī-Dr̥ṣadvatī* doab; the *Manusmṛti* places it in a conceptual geography of relationships; the *Mahābhārata* constructs it primarily through narrative and ritual; and the *Liṅgapurāṇa* and the Devānīka inscription deploy it without any geographic reference to the North Indian plains.

Narrative sedimentation: The significance of Kurukshetra is not simply declared but *accumulated* through narrative. Each successive text adds new stories, new associations, new *phala*, and new ritual prescriptions to the site's identity. The Paraśurāma narrative, the Pāṇḍava-Kaurava battle, the story of the *gandharva* at Kurukshetra, the genealogy of kings from Bharata to Kuru all of these contribute to a semantic density that makes Kurukshetra's authority available for deployment in new contexts.

Re-territorialization: The de-territorialized Kurukshetra becomes a template available for inscription onto new terrain. The *Liṅgapurāṇa*'s identification of Avimukta (Varanasi) with Kurukshetra, and the Devānīka inscription's construction of a new Kurukshetra on the Mekong, demonstrate that the ideal Kurukshetra stripped of its geographic anchors could be transferred to new sites while retaining its soteriological and political authority. This process of re-territorialization is not a distortion or corruption of the original but a logical extension of the conceptual logic of *tīrtha* itself, which is grounded in crossing (*tīr*) rather than in staying.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the construction of Kurukshetra in epic and epic-period literature is characterized by a progressive de-territorialization of the site and a corresponding elaboration of its conceptual, narrative, and ritual significance. The *Manusmṛti* deploys it as a conceptual geographic marker in a hierarchy of ritual authority; the *Mahābhārata* constructs it as both the symbolic battlefield of *dharma*-grounded political authority and as the preeminent *tīrtha* of the subcontinent, expanding its geographic specificity through the mutable framework of *tīrthayātrā*; and the *Liṅgapurāṇa* and the Devānīka inscription transplant the ideal Kurukshetra now fully liberated from its native terrain to Varanasi and to the Mekong River.

These findings have implications beyond the specific study of Kurukshetra. They suggest that in South Asian religious literature, the process of sacred place-making is fundamentally discursive: it proceeds through the accumulation of narrative, the elaboration of ritual frameworks, and the strategic deployment of conceptual categories that allow places to be simultaneously located and unlocated, bounded and boundless, particular and universal. The dominance of the *Mahābhārata* narrative in the contemporary identity of Kurukshetra an identity that will not fully consolidate until approximately the seventeenth century, as subsequent scholarship has shown is the late outcome of a long process of narrative sedimentation and ritual elaboration that this paper has traced in its formative stages.

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