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## The Sacred Geography of Kapila

### The Kapilāśrama of Sidhpur\*

#### Kapila in the Hindu tradition

To most scholars of Hinduism, the sage Kapila is a person associated only with ancient India and known mainly as the mythical founder of the Sāṃkhya system of religious thought. This is the Kapila whose teaching is known through *Yuktidīpikā*, the *Sāṃkhyakārikā* by Isvarakṛṣṇa and other Sāṃkhya texts and the tradition of technical commentaries on them.<sup>1</sup> In India this Kapila belongs to a scholarly tradition preserved mainly by *paṇḍits* with a knowledge of Sanskrit and, for the last hundred years, also by professors in the Indian university system.

In Hinduism there is, however, a larger narrative and ritual dimension to the Kapila tradition. Several sacred narratives about Kapila are found in the Hindu texts: in the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Purāṇas* and in several *Māhātmyas*.<sup>2</sup> These sacred narratives about Kapila are celebrated at several sites of pilgrimage in India today. They are alive, therefore, in sacred landscapes. Worship of Kapila seldom takes place in the private home or in the local temples, but temples to Kapila are nevertheless found at several pilgrimage sites. At these centres of pilgrimage, Kapila is known as the founder of a system of religious thought called Sāṃkhya, but he is also associated with sacred narratives that are linked to India's geography.

In this article I will analyze the "locative dimension" of Kapila. I will explore the symbolic significance of one of the most important pilgrimage centres (*tīrthas*) connected with Kapila, Sidhpur in Gujarat. I will investigate the meaning of the sacred narratives about him and the rituals connected with this place. In other words, I will investigate the interaction of the mythical, the ritual and the locative dimensions of religion.

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1 See Larson and Bhattacharya 1987, for a summary of most of the texts belonging to this tradition.

2 For some of these narratives see Jacobsen 1998. For a book length study of Kapila see Jacobsen 2004.

## Kapila's locative dimension

Hinduism has a strong locative dimension. The sacred narratives of Hinduism are linked to geography. They are believed by Hindus to have happened at particular places in India.<sup>3</sup> The continuous pilgrimage traffic to these places is one of the significant features of Hinduism. In general, among Hindus, the religious motivation for going on a pilgrimage is the attainment of favours in this life or procurement of religious merit, that is, to become cleansed of moral impurities (Bhardwaj 1983: 148–62). But, according to Hinduism, places also have salvific power and pilgrimage is, consequently, a way of salvation. Going to a sacred place with the right purpose is a sufficient requirement for attaining *mokṣa*, according to the sacred texts celebrating the sites of pilgrimage.

The main temples or shrines devoted to the ancient sage Kapila in India today, are at pilgrimage centres and a considerable number of pilgrims visit the places annually. Especially the festivals often draw huge numbers of people. The power of these places is believed to have originated with the previous presence of Kapila. At these centres Kapila is known as the founder of Sāṃkhya, but he is celebrated for other deeds he performed. Each of these centres celebrates the particular deed or deeds of Kapila that took place there: his birth, the giving of salvific knowledge to his mother, the cave in which he meditated and the place he burned to death the sixty thousand sons of Sagara. At the centers of pilgrimage, the pilgrims usually visit the temples to have *darśan* of Kapila. However, the purpose of their visit is not worship of Kapila.

Each place celebrates a deed of Kapila. That Kapila was the founder of the famous Sāṃkhya system of religious thought nevertheless adds to the power of the places. Sāṃkhya is a *mokṣasāstra*, a system of thought occupied with the attainment of *mokṣa*. Since Kapila is known in particular to have discovered and revealed a way to *mokṣa*, his presence there has infused the places with salvific power.

The association with Sāṃkhya also gives the places a noteworthy ascetic and intellectual quality. Some features of the philosophy of Kapila are presented in the *Māhātmya*-texts of the places. A few persons associated with

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3 Diana L. Eck (1998: 169) writes: "It is indisputable that an Indian imaginative landscape has been constructed in Hindu mythic and ritual contexts, most significantly in the practice of pilgrimage. The vast body of Hindu mythic and epic literature is not free-floating literature of devotional interest to the Hindu and of scholarly interest to the structuralist, comparativist or psychoanalytically trained interpreter. Hindu mythology is profusely linked to India's geography – its mountains, rivers, forests, shores, villages, and cities. 'It takes place' so to speak, in thousand of shrines, and in the culturally-created 'map' of Bhārata. Just as myth is linked to the land, so the land is alive with mythic meanings, and stories."

the places such as *brāhmaṇa*-priests or *saṃnyāsins* often have some rudimentary knowledge of Sāṃkhya philosophy. However, the pilgrims travel there not to learn about Sāṃkhya, but to utilize the salvific and healing power of the places in rituals, especially in ritual bathing and in *śrāddha*-rituals.

The continuous presence of ascetics at the Kapila places also adds to the sacredness of these sites. Some ascetics have settled permanently and established *āśramas*. Other *āśramas* have been established to accommodate ascetics and lay-persons arriving here for the festivals. The *āśramas* frequently have names taken from the philosophical or narrative traditions of Kapila such as Kardamāśrama (Kardama was Kapila's father), Kapilāśrama or Sāṃkhyayogāśrama.

The purpose of pilgrimage to the sacred places of Kapila is often to gain a better rebirth or final salvation for oneself or for one's relatives. Since Kapila is known for having given salvific knowledge to humanity, the places of Kapila worship focus on purification, asceticism and *mokṣa*. People usually come here not primarily to gain material welfare in this life, as is often the case in visiting temples, but to be purified or purify others from sin and gain the ultimate goal in life, *mokṣa*. They go there to utilize, by means of ritual performance, the salvific power of the place created by Kapila's presence. The *Māhātmyas* of the places also describe the power to cure diseases, often associated with moral impurity, and therefore salvific power. Worship of Kapila in the Kapila temples is part of the ritual, but is not the most important part.

The sacred places of Kapila are often part of greater sacred complexes. The particular places in which Kapila is said to have stayed are called Kapilātīrtha, Kapilāśrama, Kapilāhrada or Kapiladhārā, but these names are not the names of the greater sacred complexes. Several of these places are of Pan-Indian or larger regional significance: Gaṅgā Sāgara, the place where the river Gaṅgā enters the Indian ocean; Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh at the foot of the mountain that leads to Tirumala, the place in India which receives the greatest number of pilgrims annually; Kolāyat in Rajasthan, Amarkaṇṭaka where the Narmadā river begins in Madya Pradesh; Vārāṇasī, at the last stop on the Pañcakrośī pilgrimage, and Sidhpur in Gujarat. Tradition relates that Kapila enjoyed the natural beauty of many of these places and therefore selected them as sites for his *tapas*.

Kapila pilgrimage sites are surrounded by natural beauty and associated with water. In Hindu tradition, *tīrthas* are traditionally held to be sacred on three grounds: because the locality has some striking features of natural beauty, because of some extraordinary features in a place associated with water, or because a sage stopped at a place in order to perform *tapas*, take a bath, etc. (Saraswati 1984: 37). There is a conception among the *saṃnyāsins* who worship Kapila that he was fond of beautiful nature.<sup>4</sup> This might be

because yoga, according to the Hindu tradition, is to be performed in places that are pleasing to the mind. *Āśramas* are described in the classical Indian literature as places of natural beauty. All the sacred places of Kapila are associated with water in the form of waterfalls, rivers or streams, or lakes or tanks. This might have several reasons. Firstly, Kapila is associated with the coming to earth of the river Gaṅgā. He is the person who informed Sagara's relatives that only the water of the Gaṅgā was pure enough to save the souls of the sons of Sagara. According to the sacred narratives, therefore, he knew very well the salvific power of water. Secondly, Kapila is associated with *mokṣa*, and water is considered to have the purifying quality of releasing humans from moral impurity. In the *Māhātmyas* of some of the sacred places associated with Kapila, the purifying quality of water is emphasized. The miracles associated with the places occurred because of Kapila performance of *tapas* at the places, but it is bathing in the water or circumambulating the sacred watertank that is the immediate cause.

At some Kapila pilgrimage sites, *gayāpārvaṇaśrāddha*, a ritual to provide salvation for ancestors, is performed. Although Bhardwaj (1983), in his discussion of the purposes of pilgrimage, categorizes *śrāddha* as a life-cycle ritual, the purpose of *śrāddha* is to gain a better rebirth or salvation. The performance of *śrāddha* rituals therefore harmonizes with the main purpose of the Kapila pilgrimage. One of the most interesting places associated with Kapila is Sidhpur in Gujarat. Sidhpur is a place to perform *gayāpārvaṇaśrāddha* to the female ancestors, that is, to one's mother, to perform the *matṛgayāpārvaṇaśrāddha*. The rituals performed here are closely connected with the sacred narratives about Kapila. It therefore exemplifies the close link between the narrative, the ritual and space in the sacred geography of Kapila.

## Sidhpur in Gujarat

The sacred city of Sidhpur (also called Siddhapura, Siddhapada, Siddhakṣetra, previous to 1200 the name was Śrīsthāl<sup>5</sup>) in Gujarat, close to the town Patan and between Palanpur and Mahesana, is a significant pilgrimage centre and one of the most important places in the sacred geography of Kapila. It is a place for the performance of *śrāddha* rituals for dead mothers. Sidhpur is to the female ancestors what Gayā, Prayāg or Vārāṇasī

4 Hanuman Baba, Mahānirvāṇī Akhārā, Kankhal, personal communication.

5 Śrīsthala is mentioned in *Skanda Purāṇa*. The first historical reference to the place was made by Alberuni in his diary. The name Sidhpur is usually explained by referring to Jayasimha Sidhraj (d. 1143) who completed the great temple in the town, Rudramahālaya. The name Sidhpur was given in his honour.

are to the males. Sidhpur is *matṛgayā*, the mother's Gayā. To perform *gayāpārvaṇaśrāddha* for the mother and female ancestors, many Hindus go to Sidhpur. In Sidhpur, the *matṛgayāpārvaṇaśrāddha* is to be performed at the Kapilāśrama, Kapila's *āśrama*, two miles west of Sidhpur. Sidhpur is believed, by worshippers of Kapila, to be Kapila's birthplace but especially the place where he gave the Sāṃkhya teaching to his mother Devahūti.<sup>6</sup>

At the pilgrimage centre Kapilāśrama there are temples to several gods, but the main ritual is linked to only one of the temples. In this temple are statues of Kapila, his mother Devahūti, his father Kardama and Viṣṇu. This temple is next to Bindusarovar, one of three sacred waters here. The Sanskrit text *Siddhapura Māhātmya*, a text of 114 verses and of unknown date, identifies the place where Kapila gave the truth of Sāṃkhya to his mother as the water tank of Bindusaras or Bindusarovar in Sidhpur.<sup>7</sup> According to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the water tank is a tear of compassion from Viṣṇu (3.21.38), but the oral tradition of Sidhpur told to pilgrims explains that the water in the Bindusarovar is the tears of happiness of Devahūti on having realized *mokṣa*. *Siddhapura Māhātmya* says that on realizing the highest, pure drops of tears flowed from Devahūti's eyes (20).

The *Siddhapura Māhātmya* is formed as a conversation between Kapila and his mother Devahūti. The drawing on the first page of the printed edition pictures the child Kapila in conversation with Kardama and Devahūti. The author of the *Siddhapura Māhātmya* first pays homage to the gods and his own teachers (1–5), next mentions some teachers of Sāṃkhya (6), and then describes Kapila

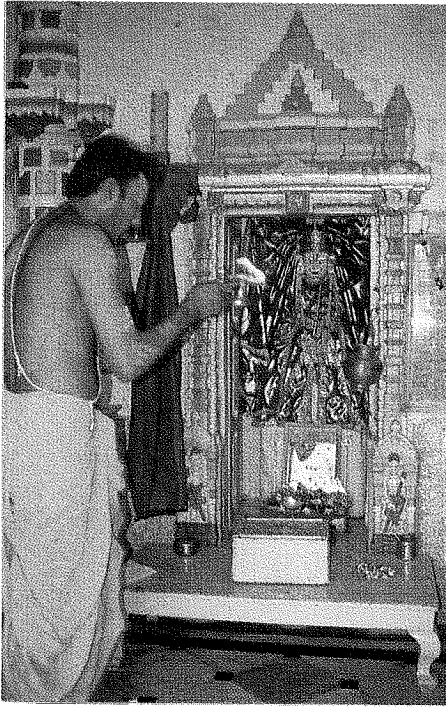
*kapilo vipulas teṣu sām̐khyācāryo mahāmuniḥ  
kevalam vāsudevāṃśo devahūtyām ajījanat (7)*

Kapila the great sage, the teacher of Sāṃkhya, who was well known among them and who was exclusively a part of Kṛṣṇa, was born of Devahūti.<sup>8</sup>

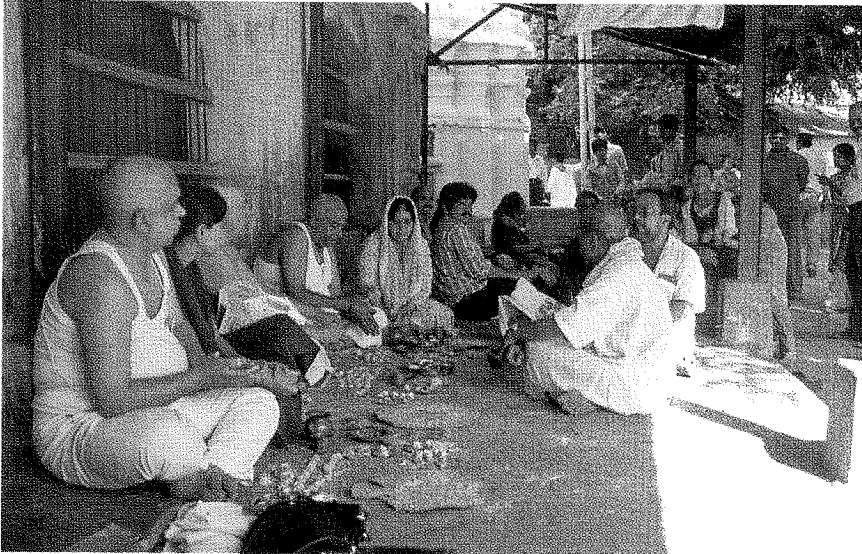
6 These episodes in the life of Kapila are told in the *Kapilagītā* of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (3.21–33). In this text the place identified as the *āśrama* is called Bindusaras on the bank of the river Sarasvatī. It is described as a beautiful place with all kinds of trees, birds, wild animals and renunciants. The place where the mother attained *mokṣa* or *brahmanirvāṇa* is according to the text called Siddhapada (3.33.31).

7 *Siddhapura (Siddhapada) Māhātmya*. This Sanskrit text is 135 printed pages. Part one is the conversation between Kapila and his mother Devahūti. Part two is the *Matṛgayāpārvaṇaśrāddham*. *Siddhapura (Siddhapada) Māhātmya* is 38 printed pages with 114 verses in Sanskrit with a Gujarati translation in *devanāgarī* script. The text is composed as a conversation between Devahūti and Kapila. Much of the text is a description of the sacred complex of Sidhpur and Mount Abu.

8 The translations from the Sanskrit texts are by the author.



**Figure 1.** Worship of Kapila at the Kapil mandir in Sidhpur.



**Figure 2.** The ritual offering of *pinḍas* (rice-balls) to dead mothers at the Kapilāśrama in Sidhpur.

That Kapila is an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa is stated in the *Kapilagītā* of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and is an accepted doctrine in the *Purāṇas*. The philosophy of many of the Vaiṣṇava schools of theology is theistic Sāṃkhya. It is therefore not surprising that Kapila should be considered an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu (Jacobsen 1998). This Kapila arrived in Sidhpur, started to perform *tapas* and reached the highest state (8–9). His mother Devahūti then came to Kapila. She told him to marry since this is considered right according to the *śāstras*. Kapila answered that the only purpose of his birth was to give *mokṣa* to his mother (*mātarmukti*) (15) and that there can be no *mokṣa* without knowledge. This knowledge involves especially the giving up the notion of the self with respect to the body (18). After hearing that, Devahūti attained the highest (19) and thereupon pure drops of tears flowed from her eyes (20). She said:

*vande bindusarovaram ca kapilaṃ sāmkyādhipaṃ yoginaṃ siddhaṃ siddhapadaṃ  
puraṃ sukr̥tināṃ kaivalyamokṣapradam,  
gaṅgā yatra sarasvatī priyatamā prācī jagatpāvinī mātā māṛgayā sadā vahati yā  
pāpāpahā punyadā (21).*

I offer my namaskār to the pond Bindusarovar, to the perfect yogin Kapila, the leader of Sāṃkhya, to the city called Siddhapada which is the city of learned people and which grants *mokṣa* in the form of *kaivalya*, in which city Gaṅgā Sarasvatī, dearest Prācī, which is instrumental in purifying the whole universe, the mother Māṛgayā, which is the killer of sins and grants merit, always flows.

*sāmkyācāryamahāmuniḥ kṛtayuge svādhyātmaniṣṭhārataḥ prakhyātaḥ kapilo hi  
kardamasutaḥ siddhaś ca siddhāśrame,  
tīrthaṃ bindusarovaraṃ ca sumahadvijñānadīpojjvalaṃ kṣetraṃ māṛgayeti  
siddham iti yatkyātaṃ trilokeṣv api (22).*

In the *kṛtayuga*, Kapila who was the teacher of the Sāṃkhya philosophy and a great sage, was constantly with complete confidence engaged in his own philosophy of realizing *ātman*. He was known as the son of Kardama and a perfect person. In that place leading to perfection there is a sacred place named Bindusarovar which is shining with a lamp in the form of extremely great knowledge, a place leading to perfection named Māṛgayā which is well known.

At the place where Devahūti attained *mokṣa*, *maṛgayāpārvaṇaśrāddha*, the ritual of offering *piṇḍas* (rice-balls) to dead mothers should take place. The *gayāpārvaṇaśrāddha* ritual has the same function as the transference of merit (*punya*) to the dead in Buddhism, and is one of the causes of salvation in Hinduism. By means of the *gayāpārvaṇaśrāddha* ritual the dead can be secured a better rebirth on earth, the attainment of heaven or *mokṣa*. After

stating that the Mātrgayā is the cause of *mokṣa*, the *Siddhapura Māhātmya* states: "In the great ocean of *saṃsāra* innumerable women have been my mothers since I have had many previous births in different classes of beings" (24). The text thereafter celebrates the sacred area of Sidhpur and the different gods and goddesses associated with Sidhpur and the surrounding area.

The *matṛgayāpārvaṇaśrāddha* ritual in Sidhpur these days has five parts. Previously it also included a bath in the river Sarasvatī, but this river has dried up due to the building of dams upstream and lack of rain. One hundred years ago the riverbank was crowded with *āśramas*, today the buildings are empty and decayed. A new modern cremation facility called Mokṣadān, which uses water from tube wells for cooling and for fountains, was recently opened next to the riverbank. The ritual bathing that previously took place on the banks of Sarasvatī has been moved to Kapilāśrama. This has shortened the ritual. It previously took two days but now lasts only one. The ritual involves cutting of the hair, bathing in the Bindusarovar, the sacrifice of sixteen *piṇḍas*, taking water from the Bindusarovar on the pipal tree and *darśan* in the Kapil mandir, and payment to the brahmins.

With each of the 16 *piṇḍas* (rice balls) given, a different Sanskrit *śloka* in the simple *anuṣṭubh* meter is repeated. This collection of *ślokas*, called *Mātrṣodaśī*, expresses the different types of pain and sorrow a son may feel he has caused his mother to suffer. The verses seem to express feelings of guilt. They show that one function of the ritual is to relieve the son of guilt. For each *piṇḍa* that is offered, the son asks to alleviate a particular suffering the mother experienced in performing her duty of reproduction. These include the suffering a mother feels for not giving birth to a son, the suffering of the physical pain of pregnancy, the suffering of giving birth when the baby is placed wrongly in the uterus, the disgusting taste of the medicines she had to take, the death of the mother in childbirth, pain during the son's childhood, and finally the pain of fear the mother feels at death's door.<sup>9</sup> The sixteenth and final verse says:

*yasmin kale mṛtā mātā gatis tasyā na vidyate  
tasya niṣkramaṇārthāya mātṛpiṇḍaṃ dadāmy aham*

For the mothers that have died now, and for those that have no liberation, for the alleviation [of their punishments] I offer this *piṇḍa* to my mother.

According to some sources,<sup>10</sup> the story of Paraśurāma, who had cut off the head of his mother, Reṇukā, is the foundation story of the *matṛgayāpārvaṇa-*

9 *Matṛgayāpārvaṇaśrāddham*, constitutes pp. 39–135 of the printed text *Siddhapura (Siddhapada) Māhātmya*. The sixteen verses are printed on pp. 112–13.

10 *Gujarat State Gazetteers: Mehsana District* (Ahmedabad: Government of Gujarat, 1975) p. 830; Śāstri 1884.



*śrāddha* ritual in Sidhpur. By bathing in the Bindusarovar and using its water in the *śrāddha* ritual, Paraśurāma was purified from the guilt of killing his mother. However, Paraśurāma is not mentioned in the *Siddhapura Māhātmya*, and the Paraśurāma story does not explain why the water of the Bindusarovar has this salvific function. The power of Kapilāśrama in Sidhpur, the reason the *matrgayāpārvaṇaśrāddha* takes place here, is that Kapila previously performed *tapas* and saved his mother at this place. Next to the pond of Alpasarovar in Sidhpur is a statue of Paraśurāma, reminding the visitors of this sacred narrative, but there is no regular *pūjā* to the statue. *Pūjā* is performed to the *mūrtis* of Kapila, Kardama, Devahūti and Viṣṇu in the Kapilāśrama.

The figure of Paraśurāma personifies the feeling of guilt towards the mother. The Kapila story has a different function. Kapila personifies the son's wish and ability to grant *mokṣa* to the mother. Paraśurāma was able to get rid of his own guilt, but Kapila was able to save another person, his own mother. In the *matrgayāpārvaṇaśrāddha* ritual the son is able both to get rid of his guilt, as exemplified in the story of Paraśurāma, and give *mokṣa* to his mother as exemplified in the story of Kapila. The verses recited in the *piṇḍadāna* ritual express the feeling of guilt, but the stated purpose of the ritual is to give *mokṣa* to the mother. The son is made to feel like Paraśurāma and achieves the same as Kapila.

The story of Gayā, that Rāma offered *gayāpārvaṇaśrāddha* there to save his father Daśaratha, has a parallel to the Kapila story. In the same way as Rāma saved his father by performing *śrāddha*, Kapila saved his mother by giving her the Sāṃkhya teaching. He becomes a model, however, not for teaching philosophy to the mother, but on a more general level, to save her. The means available for a son to save his mother is the performance of *matrgayāpārvaṇaśrāddha*.

The story of Kapila giving *mokṣa* to his mother has become paradigmatic for those wishing to help their mothers in their afterlife and persons come to Sidhpur from all over India (but especially from Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra) to achieve what Kapila once did. The appearance of the mother in a dream might be interpreted as a reason for going to Sidhpur and this might happen many years after the mother has died.<sup>11</sup> Some persons are told to go there by spiritual advisors in order to cure a sick member of the family. The disease, they are told, is caused by the dead mother's inability to attain *mokṣa*.

The sacred complex of Sidhpur illustrates the close connection between the sacred narratives about Kapila and the rituals performed at the pilgrimage centres. This is a significant feature of the sacred places devoted to Kapila. The story of Kapila in Sidhpur functions to make credible the pro-

11 Interviews with visitors, November 2000.

mises of this pilgrimage site. The promise is that the place itself has the power to remove moral impurity and grant *mokṣa* when the correct rituals are performed. Since Kapila was a giver of *mokṣa*, his previous presence in Sidhpur has given permanent salvific power to the place.

## Conclusion

The close connection between the sacred narratives and the rituals performed at the pilgrimage centre is a significant feature of the sacred places devoted to Kapila. At every place of pilgrimage to Kapila there are narratives about him which account for the sacredness of the place. These narratives belong to the geography of Hindu India as much as to the mythology of the Hindu tradition. The life history of Kapila is engraved in a sacred landscape. The place where Kapila was born, the place where he gave the sacred knowledge of ultimate reality to his mother, the different places where he performed *tapas*, the place where he killed the sons of King Sagara are all part of India's imagined landscape. The promise of the Kapila pilgrimage sites is that these places have power in themselves to remove moral impurity and grant *mokṣa* to the pilgrims. The sacred narratives of Kapila function to make this promise trustworthy.

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