

THE DESCENT OF KING LION: SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THE RELATION BETWEEN
THE INDUS AND OTHER RIVERS IN THE SACRED GEOGRAPHY AND CULTURE OF
ANCIENT INDIA

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A mong the countless rivers flowing down from the remote heights of the Himalaya towards the endless waters of the Indian Ocean the Indus occupies in many ways a prominent position. Although in recent memory its rank among the sacred rivers of South Asia has been somewhat eclipsed by other streams flowing further east, the Indus or Sindhu as it is locally known, like all major or minor rivers in India, holds a distinct identity in the imagination of the people of the Subcontinent. As in every traditional society, this identity results from the perception of a connection between the importance and role of nature in the perennial cycles of time sanctioning life in this world and the realm of the transcendent beyond the boundaries of space and time. These perceptions are traditionally expressed through the language of symbolism, which interprets the various features of a landscape as part of a complex and fascinating pattern of what we can quite aptly describe as a sacred geography. It is therefore not surprising that from the earliest days of human civilization the river Indus, one of the three major water channels of Southern Asia, too had been part of this universalistic

vision acquiring its place in time and space from its very birth high up among the lofty peaks of the 'abode of perennial snow and ice' (the literal meaning of the term *Himālaya* or *Himāvanta*) till the moment when it extinguishes itself in the vast expanse of the Arabian Sea. As such, this mighty river has since times immemorial claimed its rightful place in the culture of *Bhāratavara*, the age-old land of India.

If described strictly from a modern geographical point of view, the river Indus is the longest river in South Asia and largest in terms of drainage area. After springing from the glaciers of the West Tibetan plateau it is fed by the confluence of numerous torrents, such as the Gar, Shyok, Shigar and Zaskar, which originate in the Himalaya and Trans-Himalaya at an altitude of around 5000 meters above sea level. At first, it runs in a north-westerly direction through the highlands of Western Tibet before reaching Ladakh, the land of high passes also known as 'little Tibet', part of the modern Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, before winding its way through the regions of Baltistan, Kohistan and Gilgit (nowadays part of Pakistan's Northern Territories) channelled by the steep slopes of the Karakoram and the Kunlun mountain chains. It then bends southwards, descending gradually along the southern flanks of the Hindukush through the ancient land of Gandhāra eventually reaching the plains of the Panjab exactly at the spot where since 1976 it is blocked by the Tarbela dam. After being joined at Attock by the waters of the river Kabul that run down from the heights of the Khyber Pass marking the border with neighbouring Afghanistan, it becomes tamed and navigable for a short tract before reversing its waters into the Arabian Sea after flowing over a total distance of 3180 km. The large and ample plains of its river valley constitute the natural boundary between the Indian Subcontinent and the rugged territory leading up to the Iranian plateau. The principal tributaries of the Indus in terms of quantity of water are the rivers Satlej, Ravi and Chenab, all of them part of the extensive Panjab drainage system whose basin covers a total surface of 1,165,500 square kilometres. The Indus plays an essential

role for the regions through which it flows, for many of these are characterized by an arid climate. Channelled by an elaborate irrigation system already developed under the Mughals and further expanded during British colonial rule, its waters irrigate an area that covers more than eight million hectares of agricultural land, mostly in the Panjab and Sind regions which constitute the core territories of the modern nation-state of Pakistan.

In order to bring to life these purely technical notions it is useful to provide both the river itself and the regions through which it flows with a historical and cultural setting. To start with, we should point out that the importance of the Indus as a significant natural boundary is attested since antiquity by the fact that the numerous peoples who throughout history reached its shores from a western direction used to extend the name of this river to the entire country lying beyond it, i.e. India, its inhabitants, the Hindus, and its social and religious culture, commonly defined in modern language as Hinduism.¹ This name is derived from the Sanskrit word *sindhu* which in a general sense indicates any large water body, like the sea and an ocean or, on a minor scale, a big lake or a large river, but which in its particular meaning is used to describe the river Indus.² Hence derives that the Sindhu or Indus was at one time considered the river *par excellence*, most probably in virtue of its length and size, the importance of its waters for the economy of an entire region combined with its geographical and strategic position at the western edge of the Indian Subcontinent. As a matter of fact, the oldest known civilization of the Indian Subcontinent flourishing many thousand years before the common Christian era developed largely along and around the shores of this river and became therefore known as Indus civilization.

¹ The Indians themselves prefer to refer to their country as Bhārata, the land of the descendants of the homonym Vedic tribe and its leader.

² Monier Monier-Williams: *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publ.s, 1999, p.1217.

In Vedic times, the *ārya* tribes of Northern India called the territory where they had chosen to settle in the course of their perennial migrations *sapta-sindhavah*, the land of the seven rivers, an expression that is attested numerous times in the *Ṛgveda-samhitā*, the most ancient collection of hymns and verses pertaining to the sacred tradition of India. In ancient Persian, the sibilant sound ‘s’ found in Sanskrit is transformed into an aspirant ‘h’; thus in the language of the Avesta the *sapta sindhu*, i.e. the seven rivers, mentioned in the Vedas appear as *hapta hendu*.³ For the Persians, the biggest among those rivers flowing on the eastern periphery of their ancient nation from north to south was therefore known as *hindu*. Gradually, this name came to indicate the country and the people who lived on the other side, that is, east of its shores, and as such it became known in the Western world too.

One of the central themes of the *Ṛgveda* develops around the account of the fight of Indra, the warrior-king god (*deva*) and sovereign ruler of all other divine beings, against the demon (*āsura*) Vṛtra (literally: he who envelops and restrains). Indra, who is described throughout this sacred text as the divine protector of all *āryā* tribes,⁴ slays his enemy with the help of his powerful weapon, the thunderbolt (*vajrāyudha*), piercing the skin of the powerful three-headed dragon that was hiding coiled seven times around its mountain-fortress. As a result, the waters held captive by the *āsura* foe were released allowing them to flow freely in the fashion of seven rivers

³ Cfr. the article by Gherardo Gnoli: “Avestan Geography”, in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Vol. III, 1985, pp.44-46; reference to the *hapta hendu* as one of the fifteen countries neighbouring the land of the ancient Iranians known as *airyāna vaēja* (cf. the *āryāvarta* of the Vedic people) is also found in the more recent *Vendidād* I:16.

⁴ “May the libations poured to thee thrice daily, day after day, O Savitar, bring us blessing; may Indra, Heaven, Earth, Sindhu with the Waters, Aditi with Ādityas, give us shelter.” (*Ṛgveda* IV:54:6, English tr. by Ralph T.H. Griffith, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1973).

into the plains of India, which had been badly affected by a prolonged drought, all the way down until reaching the oceans.⁵

As with regard to the identity of these seven streams in the human geography of Vedic India, sometimes referred to as seven sisters (*saptavasā*) by the authors of the *Ṛgveda*,⁶ no clear indication can be gathered from the numerous hymns (*sūkta*) interspersed in the ten sections (*maṇḍala*) of this sacred text. This allows for a series of contrasting though not incompatible interpretations.⁷ All in all, in the *Ṛgveda* we come across the names of thirty rivers, out of which twenty-one appear to be of major importance. Mention of all but two of these latter is found in a hymn dedicated specifically to the rivers of ancient India, known as the *nadīstuti sūkta*, the hymn in praise of

⁵ Cf., among many other verses, *Ṛgveda* I:32:1: “I will declare the manly deeds of Indra, the first that he achieved, the Thunder-wielder. He slew the Dragon, then disclosed the waters, and cleft the channels of the mountain torrents; II:12:3: Who slew the Dragon, freed the Seven Rivers, ...; IV:28:1: Slew Ahi [another name for Vṛtra], and sent forth the Seven Rivers, and opened as it were obstructed fountains; and X:43:3: These the Seven Rivers flowing on their downward path increase the vital vigour of the potent Steer.”

⁶ It may be interesting to point out that the number seven bears great symbolical importance in the cosmology described in the *Ṛgveda* and in Indian tradition in general. As such, it appears in numerous enumerations on both the macro-and the microcosmical level thus allowing for the seven rivers freed by Indra to be interpreted also as the awakening of the flow of *kuṇḍalinī*, the serpent energy lying coiled on the bottom of the human backbone, through the seven subtle centres (*cakra*) located on a vertical axis upwards towards the ocean of bliss, set of the divinity.

⁷ Although there is no certainty as with regard to the etymology of the name Indra it is however curious to note the striking similarity not only between the name of this most virile of all Vedic gods and that of the most powerful among the rivers described in the *Ṛgveda*, i.e. the Indus, but also the affinity of character that appears from the descriptions provided in the hymns. Some Sanskrit scholars, such as A.A. Macdonell (*A History of Sanscrit Literature*, Delhi, Baratiya Kala Prakashan, 2007, p.44), derive it from *indu* (drop) thus suggesting a link in meaning between the drops of water raining from a cloud (as such Vṛtra is frequently imagined!) and the river [Indus] that owes its very existence to these drops, collecting, carrying and delivering them to the sea.

the rivers, in which the names of what appear to be the main water-courses known to the Vedic peoples are invoked in the following way:

Favour ye this my laud, O Gangā, Yamunā, O ·utudri, Parusnī and Sarasvatī;
 with Asiknī, Vitastā, O Marudvrdhā, O Ārjīkīyā with Susomā hear my call.
 First with Tṛsāmā thou art eager to flow forth, with Rasā, and Susartu, and with Svetyā here,
 with Kubhā and with these, Sindhu and Mehatnū, thou seekest in thy course Krumu and Gomatī.⁸

Looking carefully at these two verses one can notice that the list provided begins with the easternmost river, i.e. the Ganges, and then proceeds westwards until reaching the utmost periphery of the Indian Subcontinent with two rivers, the Kurram and the Gomal, joining the Indus after flowing down from the Paktia province of modern Afghanistan. They also establish a relation between the rivers invoked in the first half of the first verse describing the eastern part of *ārya* India and those mentioned in the second half of the first verse and the entire second verse, all of which are tributaries (as far as they can be identified!) of the Indus.

⁸ *R̥gveda* X:75:5-6. The rivers named in the verse and their modern correspondents are thus the following: Gangā (Ganges), Yamunā (Yamunā), ·utudrī (Satlej), Parusnī (Ravi), Sarasvatī (now extinct, its ancient course corresponding to the Ghaggar-Hakra-Nara channels in Haryana, Rajasthan and Sind), Asiknī (Chenab), Vitastā (Jhelum), Marudvrdhā (Mahuwardhavan), Ārjīkīyām (Haro), Susomā (Sohan), Trsāmā (Gilgit), Rasā (?), Susartu (?), Svetyā (?), Kubhā (Kabul), Sindhu (Indus), Mehatnū, Krumu (Kurram), Gomatī (Gomal). To these altogether nineteen rivers are added the Sarayu (in the earlier fifth *maṇḍala* listed as a western tributary of the Indus, but later identified with the Ghogra river, a major tributary of the Ganges flowing through Nepal and eastern Uttar Pradesh) and the Vipās (the modern Beas) or, alternatively, the Dṛṣadvatī/Yavyavatī (possibly identical with the Yamunā or in any case flowing very close to that river in ancient times).

In addition to the list provided in the two verses quoted above, other hymns of the same *maṇḍala* inform us that the twenty-one rivers were considered as three groups of seven rivers, each of which was headed by one major stream:

The thrice-seven wandering Rivers, yea, the mighty floods, the forest trees, the mountains, Agni to our aid,
 Kṛśānu, Tisya, archers to our gathering-place, and Rudra strong
 amid the Rudras we invoke.
 Let the great streams come hither with their mighty help, Sindhu,
 Sarasvatī, and Sarayū with waves.
 Ye Goddess Floods, ye Mothers, animating all, promise us water rich
 in fatness and in balm.⁹

This additional information taken from the same (most recent) *maṇḍala* allows us to identify the three major streams as Sindhu, Sarasvatī, and Sarayū. It is also implied that all the other rivers contribute to the might of, that is to say merge their waters into those of the principal river. This leads to the logical conclusion that if the long defunct Sarasvatī was associated with the central regions of *āryāvarta* and the stream known as Sarayū (later identified with the Karnālī mentioned in the Purāṇa) was located in its eastern part, the Indus was undoubtedly considered the chief watercourse in the western part of Vedic India. However, another enumeration of the *sapta-sindhu* commonly proposed by scholars, perhaps referring to an earlier period, locates the Sindhu in the west, the five major rivers of the Panjab (*pañj-āb* in Persian literally means the ‘five rivers’, hence the land of the five rivers), i.e. Parusni (Ravi), Asiknī (Chenāb or Chandrabhāga), Vitastā (Jhelum), Vipās (Beas), ‘usudrī (Satlaj) in the centre, and Sarasvatī to the east. This latter interpretation would point at the fertile plains known even today as the Panjab and makes it very likely to assume that at some stage during the Vedic period this latter ‘land of the seven rivers’ became the country of

⁹ *Rgveda* X:64:8-9

choice for the Bharatas, Purus and the other *ārya* tribes, independent of the direction whence they may have moved into that area. In both cases, it is possible to establish a link between the recently re-named Indus-Sarasvatī civilization¹⁰ flourishing in the *doāb* (land between two rivers) of these two rivers including the modern Indian states of Panjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Gujarat and the Pakistani regions of Panjab and Sind on one hand and the *sapta-sindhavah* mentioned by the *Ṛgveda* on the other. Whatever be the (perhaps shifting) location of the ‘land of the seven rivers’ in the course of time, the Indus emerges as one of the most prominent rivers in the geographical picture of *āryāvarta* provided by the hymns of the *Ṛgveda* its sacredness being attested by the numerous associations with the principal Vedic gods Indra, Varuṇa, Agni and Somā. Interestingly, this pre-eminent role is further enhanced by the striking fact that, among all the important watercourses mentioned, the Sindhu is the only river qualified by both the feminine and the masculine gender. In fact, as appears from the above quoted verse, unlike most other important rivers in India, rivers are in most cases worshipped as female goddesses that came to be depicted as beautiful, young and generous ladies in virtue of the nourishing, maternal

¹⁰ For a rich collection of excellent articles dealing with all aspects of the river Sarasvatī and its importance in Vedic India, see S. Kalyanaranam (ed.): *Vedic River Sarasvatī and Hindu Civilization*, New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2008. Unfortunately, many of these articles betray too obviously a new kind of scholarly approach towards the subject, sponsored by the former nationalist BJP government and dictated by a nationalist agenda, which promotes research aimed at establishing the superiority of what is now ‘Indian’ culture versus any possible claims of ‘Pakistani’ culture. As an example of the prevailing 19th century scholarly view put forward by European scholars, see, among many others, - Edward Thomas: “The rivers of the Vedas and how the Aryans entered India”, in *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland Series*, Hertford: S. Austin & Sons, 1883.

aspect of the waters they represent. However, there is no cult of any female goddess personifying the sacred waters of the Sindhu -all past and present associations are with the male gender of the just mentioned ancient Vedic gods. This alone could be an important indication either pointing at the Indus as the most ancient among all sacred rivers of India or as defining its peculiar, masculine character suitable for a guardian of the borders. However, the Veda emphasizes the importance of the Indus among the rivers that constitutes the cradle of Indian civilization and recalls its warrior and king like status:

...The Rivers have come forward triply, seven and seven. Sindhu in might surpasses all the streams that flow.
 Varuna cut the channels for thy forward course, O Sindhu, when thou rannest on to win the race.
 Thou speedest o'er precipitous ridges of the earth, when thou art Lord and Leader of these moving floods.
 His roar is lifted up to heaven above the earth: he puts forth endless vigour with a flash of light.
 Like mothers to their calves, like milch kine with their milk, so, Sindhu, unto thee the roaring rivers run.
 Thou leadest as a warrior king thine army's wings what time thou comest in the van of these swift streams.
 Rich in good steeds is Sindhu, rich in gold, nobly fashioned, rich in ample wealth
 ...so have I praised its power, mighty and unrestrained, of independent glory, roaring as it runs.¹¹

¹¹ *Rgveda* X:75:1-4, 8; interestingly, in these verses we also find mention of Vāruṇa, the god of both celestial and earthly waters in the *Veda*, in association with the Indus. Worship to this important figure by Hindus as the presiding divinity of the Indus in the upper and lower Sindh region as well as at its point of merging into the Indian ocean continues till the present day. For a more detailed account of this ancient surviving cult, see also T. Dähnhardt: "Avatāra e maestro vivente: il ruolo mediatore di Amarlāl, Signore immortale delle acque, nella tradizione popolare del Sindh", in *Annali di Ca' Foscari* 47, 2008, vol. 3 (serie orientale 38).

From these verses we can easily gather the pre-eminent, i.e. masculine, role of the Indus with regard to the other rivers of the Panjab conceived as mothers, all of which, with the exception of the Sarasvatī, eventually contribute and surrender their very existence to the mighty Sindhu. They moreover exalt the typical martial values of a warrior Ksatriya, such as vigour, military leadership, swiftness, glory, power and wealth so typically associated with the untamed power and strength of the lion, an animal that like no other represents the innate values of the brave warrior and the just and authoritative ruler. It comes therefore as no surprise that the underlying virility of the Indus will eventually find its ultimate expression in its personification as a lion (*simha*) and the wild, untamed fashion of its descent from the heights of the West Tibetan plateau along the narrow valleys and gorges of the Himalaya into the vast plains of the Panjab are perceived as the roar of the mighty king of the animal kingdom.

In a later historical period, mention of the Indus among the seven streams of India are found in the epic literature of the *Mahābhārata*¹² and the *Rāmāyaṇa*¹³ as well as in the mythological accounts given in the *Purāṇas*¹⁴. The evidence provided by these texts suggests that notwithstanding the decline in importance the Sindhu still ranks among the big rivers of the land of Bhārata located in the southern part of *jambu dvīpa*. Occasionally, from some verses found in the

¹² “And there the celestial stream Ganga having three currents, issuing out of the region of Brahman, first showed herself, and then dividing herself into seven streams, became Vaswokasara, Nalini, the sin-cleansing Saraswati, Jambunadi, Sita, Ganga and Sindhu as the seventh.” (*Mahābhārata*, Bhiṣma-parva: Jambukhanda Nirmana-parva (VI):48, based on the English translation by Kisari Mohan Ganguli, published between 1883 and 1896.

¹³ *Rāmāyaṇa*, I (Bāla-kanda): In this version as told by sage Visvamitra to the young Rāmacandra and his half-brother Lakṣmaṇa, the Ganges split into seven branches as a result of the impact on hitting the earth after being released from the hair of Lord Śiva.

¹⁴ Gaṅgāvatara Varṇana, in *Vāyu Purāṇa*, XLVII:1-81; *Matsya Purāṇa*, CXXI:1-121; *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa*, II:2-6. et. al.

Mahābhārata we gather that the memory of the divine rank of this river as told by the *Ṛgveda* was still alive and we find repeated mention of the names of the ancient Vedic gods in relation to the Indus. For example, Sindhu is present in the palace of Varuṇa and glorifies him as his Lord (*sabhā-parva*, IX:19); elsewhere it is described as the origin of the fire-god Agni (*vana-parva*, CCXLII:22). As with regard to the innate power of this river on its own behalf, we come across the idea that the mere mention of its sacred name has extraordinary results on the human soul on the par with that of its more famous sister:

Whatever sins one may commit by day or by night or by the two twilights, consciously, or unconsciously one is sure to be cleansed therefrom and become thoroughly pure by reciting its sacred name.¹⁵

The purifying effect of its waters endowed with supernatural qualities is again indicated when Yudisthira, the king of the Pāṇḍavas, is instructed by the sage Pulastya on the sacredness of many places in India in preparation of a pilgrimage to be undertaken by the former:

The many rivers that flow through Ka *mira fall into the great river called Sindhu. By bathing in these rivers one is sure to become endowed with good character and to ascend to heaven after departing from this world.¹⁶

As a matter of fact, just to remind us that the memory of the Sindhu had in no way disappeared from the sacred geography of India during those times, the extensive route of pilgrimage covering the whole of India described in the homonym section of the *Mahābhārata* (*tīrtha-yatra-parva*) leads the pilgrim along large parts

¹⁵ *Mbh.* CLXVI:19.

¹⁶ *Mbh.* Anu *āsana-parva, XXV:8.

of the ancient course of this river. It starts out from the *tīrtha* of Varuṇa,¹⁷ the Lord of all waters, celestial and earthly, sweet and salty, indicating the point where the Sindhu meets the ocean, known as the *Sindhūttama*:

There is a celebrated tirtha of the name of Sindhūttama, which destroyeth every sin. O best of men, by bathing there, one acquireth the fruit of the gift of gold in abundance.

And again:

Arriving then, O Bharata, at the spot where the Sindhu mingleth with the sea, one should with subdued soul bathe in that tirtha of Varuna. And bathing there and giving oblations of water to the Pitris, the Rishis, and the gods one acquireth, O bull of the Bharata race, the region of Varuna, and blazeth forth in effulgence of his own.¹⁸

Moving stream upwards one finally reaches its source mentioned in the list as one of the sacred crossing points (*tīrtha*) through which the pure-hearted gain access to the higher world:

Repairing next to Sindhu-prabhāva, which is worshipped by Siddhas and Gandhārvas, and staying there for five nights, one obtaineth the merit of giving away gold in abundance.¹⁹

Thus, shining gold is promised to the earnest seeker on both ends of this great river where it springs into existence and where it con-

¹⁷ For the last many centuries, this place is situated on the tiny island of Manora, just a few miles at large from modern Karachi, where a temple to Varuṇa still exists and is visited by Hindu pilgrims, but the location may have shifted over time together with the actual mouth of the Indus which, in Vedic times, was found to the east somewhere in the Rann desert of Kuchh.

¹⁸ *Mbh.* Vana-parva, tirtha-yatra parva, III:82.

¹⁹ *Mbh.* Vana-parva, tirtha-yatra-parva, LXXXIV:86.

cludes its lengthy journey in this world rewarding him with precious currency both in this world and the higher realms of the transcendent. But despite all these lofty association, it becomes obvious from the historical theatre depicted by the two big epical poems that the epicentre of Indian culture has now shifted eastwards away from the shores of the Indus (which, ironically, has kept moving westwards over time!). Yet, along its shores flourished the Sindhu kingdom ruled by Jayadratha, the son of Sindhu and husband of Duryodhana's sister, who successfully united the two major peoples (*jānpada*) of the Indus valley, the Sindhus and the Sauviras, under his valiant rule. Although the references to the Indus and its surrounding region show its continued relevance in the overall culture and geography of India during those time, the two key events described by the epics, i.e. the battle of Kurukṣetra in the *Mahābhārata* and the struggle for the throne of the kingdom of king Daśaratha in the *Rāmāyaṇa* leave us with little doubt that a shift away from the prominent role held by the great western river as envisaged by the seers of the *Vedas* towards the cultural mainland of the big Gangetic plains has occurred during that period.

This decline in the fortunes of the Indus notwithstanding, all these texts but especially the numerous collections that became known under the generic title of *Purāṇa*, provide us with a great many rich and extremely elaborate mythological accounts that, if interpreted through the lenses of their symbolical language, add significantly to our understanding of the sacred geography of India. In particular, by extolling the rank of the Ganges they reiterate the link between the main rivers of India and the superior worlds describing them as branches of one original stream, the celestial Gangā, which is said to have descended from heaven for the sake of mankind. According to the versions proposed with only minor differences and amount of detail in these texts, the Ganges, personified in the shape of the daughter of the Himālaya, was called to flow in heaven on request of Indra in order to soothe the divine abodes with her refreshing and purifying waters. To us humans, this celestial archetype of

the earthly ‘mother of all rivers’ is visible in the guise of the Milky Way (*ākāśagaṅgā* or *svargaṅgā*), which in the northern hemisphere appears as revolving around the North Pole in the shape of the polar star (*dhruva*).

The descent of the Ganga (*gaṅgāvatāra*) from heaven back to earth was brought about by the severe penances of king Bhagīratha performed in order to redeem the souls of the 60,000 sons of his ancestor King Sagara, who had been burned to ashes by the wrath of Ṛṣi Kapila accused by the youth of stealing their father’s sacrificial horse. When finally convinced to descend, Gaṅgā rose from the toe of the god Viṣṇu, who was resting on the waters of the celestial ocean on the site of the polar star. During her descent along the polar axis she passes through the lunar sphere (*candraloka*) thus cleansing and redeeming this ancestral abode before reaching Brahmapurī, the divine citadel at the summit of Mount Meru. After encircling it seven times through seven channels Gaṅgā is said to divide herself into four streams running down the slopes of the cosmic mountain in direction of the four cardinal points of *jambu-dvīpa*. Each of these four eventually releases its waters into a lake only to emerge at some distance through four rocks carved into the shape of four animals as proper rivers flowing towards the ocean.²⁰ The Gangā runs towards south passing through a cow’s head (*gomukha*) flowing into Bhāratavarsa, the river Caksu flows towards west through the head of a horse (*a *vamukha*) and into the country of Ketumāla, the Sītā flows eastwards through the head of an elephant (*hastīmukha*) into the land of Bhadravarsa and the Bhadrasomā proceeds towards north through the head of a lion (*siṃhamukha*) into the northern region of Uttarakuru.²¹

²⁰ The names of these lakes are given as Aruṇodā to the east of Meru/Kailāsa, Manasā to the south, Sītodā to the west and Mahābhadrā to the north.

²¹ Some scholars have identified Mount Meru with the Pamir mountain range of Central Asia thus identifying the Sītā with the Yarkand Tarim, the Caksu with the Oxus, the Bhadrasomā with the Syr Darya and the Gangā with the Ganges.

Other accounts in the *Purāna* explicitly identify the earthly projection of the cosmic Mount Meru with Mount Kailāsa,²² the most sacred of all peaks located in the Trans-Himalayan region of Hemakūta. Equally, according to these accounts the four rivers that separated after the Svargaṅgā touched the earth emerged from the mouths of certain animals, thereby ascribing the qualities of these to the respective river and, by extension, to the people living on its shores. The Bhadrasmā initially went westward and later sprung from a horse's mouth to the east where it became known as the Brahmaputra, the Caksu originally went eastwards emerging later in the west from the mouth of an elephant as the river Satlej, hence the people living along its shores are renowned for their extraordinary strength, the Sītā in the beginning went southwards and then came out of a lion's mouth to the north as the river Sindhu, the reason for which the people living along its course are famous for their valour and bravery; the Gaṅgā herself, after going north emerged to the south of the Kailāsa from the beak of a peacock as the river Karnālī (a tributary of the Saryu and ultimately the Ganges in the plains around Ayodhyā) thus lending her beauty to the inhabitants of this part of the world.²³

Legend has it that those who drink the waters of the Ganges would become as strong and worthy as the elephant, endowed with an exceptionally good memory, a strong sense of gratitude, and an auspicious sign marking his destiny. Similarly, those who drink the

(cf. Muzaffer Ali in his *Geography of the Puranas*, Delhi, People's Publishing House, 1966, pp.60-72). This theory does not seem very convincing if only because the Ganges cannot possibly be associated with that mountain range, but is easily explained by the purely modern geographical approach adopted by this scholar.

²² In Sanskrit, the word *Kailāśā* means 'crystal'. In fact, according to the tradition as narrated in the *Skanda-Purāna*, the crystal-mountain is described by the texts as having four faces, respectively made of crystal, ruby, gold and lapislazuli.

²³ It is important to note that this latter account indicates the change in perspective taking place while moving from the heavenly towards the earthly plane inverting the initial direction taken by the rivers as in a mirror image.

waters of Karnali would become as beautiful as the peacock. The waters of the river Brahmaputra are cold and legend has it that those who swallow its sacred waters would become sturdy as a horse. On the other hand, the waters of the Indus are warm and the one who drinks from it is said to become as brave and courageous as a lion. Does that perhaps explain why the numerous invaders to India always successfully conquered after stopping to quench their thirst on the banks of the Indus?

In addition to the symbolism of the number four, which quite evidently refers to the spatial dimension indicated by the cardinal points, the *Vāyu-Purāṇa* provides us also with a complimentary account which reposes the seven streams already encountered in the *Veda*, inserting them into the myth of the Ganges and thus subordinating them to the most sacred of all rivers. We are told that to the north of the Kailāsa there is a golden-peaked mountain (*hiraṇyāśṛṅga*), rich in orpiment and diamonds, at the foot of which lies the famous *Bindū-sarovara* lake, said to be the place where Bhagīratha had performed his penances. There the goddess Tripathagā, another name for the Gaṅgā, is said to have descended unto earth after being released from the locks of Lord Śiva her powerful current dividing into seven streams. Out of these, three, named as Nalinī, Hrādinī and Pavanī went towards the east, other three named as Sītā, Caksu and Sindhu went towards the west and the seventh current which after the great ascetic king took the name Bhagīrathī, flew southwards.²⁴

Interestingly, the descriptions provided by the *Purāṇas* agree largely with those preserved in Tibetan mythology as expounded in the *Kangrī Karchag* and the *Ti-sei Karchag*²⁵, traditional Bön guide-

²⁴ *Vāyu-Purāṇa* XLVII:23-40.

²⁵ This text has been edited and partially translated into English by Namkhai Norbu and Ramon Prats, published under the title *Gans Ti Se'iDkar C'ag: a Bon-po Story of the Sacred Mountain Ti-se and the Blue Lake Ma-pan*, in Serie Orientale LXI, Roma, Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1989. Cf. also Svāmī

books to the sacred mountains and rivers of Tibet and, in case of the second, specifically to the Kailāsa region at the centre of the ancient kingdom of Zhangzhung. According to these texts pertaining to the pre-Buddhist shamanic tradition of Tibet, the Ganges had at first descended from the holy nine-storey *svastika* mountain (Yungdrung gutzek) venerated as the seat of the Sky Goddess Sipaimen, to the spring of Chhumik-thungtol.²⁶ From there the four rivers were channelled in copper pipes to pass into Lake Ma-pan Yu Tso (in Sanskrit: Lake Mānasarovar), considered as the true earthly source of the four rivers. Flowing off underground from this sacred lake the branch of the Ganges that first went eastwards thence came out from the mouth of an elephant-shaped mountain in the western Kyun-lun valley (Langchen Khambāb) as the ‘elephant river’ i.e. the Satlej²⁷; the channel that first went northwards emerged to the south of the holy lake from a mountain resembling a peacock (Mapcha Khambāb) giving birth to the river Karnālī; the branch initially flowing to the west emerged to the east of lake Ma-pan from the mouth of a horse-shaped mountain (Tamchog Khambāb) known in Tibet as the Tsang-

Praṇavānanda: “New light on the sources of the four great rivers of the holy Kailas and Manasarovar”, in B.C. Law, *Mountains and rivers of India*, Calcutta: National Committee for Geography, 1968.

²⁶ The relation to the polar symbolism of the cosmic mountain could not be expressed more clearly. Among the Tibetan Buddhists the mountain is known as Gangs Rin-po-che (or Kang Rinpoche), which literally means ‘the precious jewel of glacial snow’. They consider it to be the dwelling place of Demchog (also known as Cakrasamvāra or Pavo) and his consort, Dorje Phagmo or Vajra-Vahārī.

²⁷ Again it is interesting to note that here the inversion of the course of these rivers takes place in or under the lake known by the Tibetans as Ma-pan. According to Hindu mythology, the lake was first created in the mind of Lord Brahmā, hence, in Sanskrit it is known as *Mānas-sarovara*, a combination of the words *mānas* (mind) and *sarovara* (lake) conveying the meaning of the lake borne out of the mind of Brahmā. The mental plane constitutes the plane of reflection where the celestial archetypes assume their earthly reality being inverted as if they were reflected in a mirror.

po and in India as the Brahmaputra; and finally, the southern branch of the celestial river emerged to the north of lake Ma-pan from the mouth of a mountain shaped in resemblance of a lion (Senge Khambāb)²⁸ – this is the Indus flowing through Ladakh, Baltistan and Hor regions whose inhabitants are said to be fearless and brave.²⁹

But that the relation between the leonine-natured river and the feline are not to be intended exclusively as symbolic emerges from historical records of a different kind. The Roman historian Quintus Curtius Rufus narrates in his *Historiae Alexandri Magni* that in the times of Alexander the Great, this arguably greatest of all warriors, in Bactria and Gandhara, two ancient region extending from Afghanistan into what is now Pakistan, the biggest expression of Oriental leisure feat were the enclosed hunting reserves all around which were built wooden turrets from where a series of wild beasts could be hunted, including numerous lions.³⁰ However, as of recent there have been no reports of sightings of this animal in those regions. Claudius Aelianus (175-235AD) confirms in his *De natura animalium* the widespread presence of the lion in India in the first centuries of the Christian era and until the 19th century the species was commonly found in the north-western regions of India corresponding to the modern states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, the Panjab, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. The Asian lion has been a common sight along the shores of the river Indus till the mid-18th century, but in 1842 the last example has been reportedly killed during a royal hunt. The disap-

²⁸ Note the curious phonetic similarity between the Tibetan *senge khabab* (literally: lion's mouth) and the urdu equivalent *singh kā bāb* (literally: the gate of the lion).

²⁹ In modern times, the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin 'discovered' that the Indus actually originates a few kilometres north of lake Manasarovar and together with it arise the Brahmaputra and the river Satlej, through lake Manasarovar. For a detailed account of the modern exploration of these rivers, see-Allen, Charles: *A mountain in Tibet: the search for Mount Kailas and the sources of the great rivers of India*, London: Futura MacDonald& Co, 1983.

³⁰ Quintus Curtius Rufus, *The History of Alexander*, tr. by John C. Yardley, introduction and commentary by Waldemar Heckel; London: Penguin, 2004.

pearance of the lion from India is without any doubt to be imputed to excessive hunting. This noble feline was in fact a very much sought after prey for every hunter during the whole 19th century; in 1860, one single hunter boasted to have killed more than 300 lions of which about 50 in the immediate surroundings of Delhi where, a few years later, a colleague of his was still able to kill around 80 animals.

Thus appears that throughout history the Indus has been regarded very much as a river of war and knowledge witnessing the passing of numerous conquerors and countless seekers of wisdom on its banks. But no account would be complete without mentioning that there is yet another side equally timeless side to it, one that through its universal power transcends the realm of time and space exactly like the noble action of the rulers dispensing justice and warriors and the used in the ancient sacred texts. Witness to this presence of tragic but invincible love beyond death are the many epic love tales popular in the Indus Valley, which include, among others, the famous stories of Adam and Durkhane, the romance of the Pakhtun from the Northwest Frontier, of Sohni and Mahival on the shores of the Chenab in Northern Punjab, that of Hīr and Ranjhā set in Southern Punjab and that of Sassi and Punnū in the Sindh region. I shall conclude my short account of the river Indus my retelling this story which in its historical setting is certainly not as ancient as the hymns of the *R̥gveda* but which in their essentials could have taken place during in the ancient cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa as well as in modern Multan or Hyderabad.

Sohni was the daughter of a potter named Tula, who lived in the town of Gujrat, a town on the banks of the river Chenab on the caravan trade route between Bukhara and Delhi. When the jars (*surahis*) and mugs came off the wheels, it was her task to embellish them with floral designs and other decorations.

One day, Izzat Beg, a rich trader from Bukhara, came to town on his way to India but when he saw the beautiful Sohni he remained so enchanted that in order to get a mere glimpse of his beloved he

would end up buying her water pitchers and mugs day by day. Sohni too lost her heart to Izzat Beg and instead of making floral designs on earthenware she started building castles of love in her dreams. Izzat Beg sent off his companions and asked for employment as a servant in the house of Tula, Sohni's father. Since one of his tasks was that of taking the family's buffaloes for grazing he soon came to be known as Mahiwal, the buffalo herder.

When the people started spreading rumours about the love of Sohni and Mahiwal, her parents hurriedly arranged the marriage of their daughter with another potter. When the marriage party arrived at the threshold of her house Sohni was left helpless and was forced to take seat in the palanquin (*dolī*), but all these outer constraints notwithstanding her love for Izzat Beg remained firm. Izzat Beg renounced the world and started to lead the life of a *faqīr* residing in a small hut across the river. He had forgotten his homeland, his people and his previous life. Taking advantage of the darkness of the night, when everybody else was fast asleep, Sohni would go out to the riverside to wait for Izzat Beg who would swim across the river to meet her. He would roast a fish and bring it for her as token of his love. Once, when due to high tide he could not catch a fish, Mahiwal cut a piece of his thigh and roasted it. Seeing the bandage on his thigh, Sohni opened it, saw the wound and began to cry.

From the next day, Sohni started swimming across the river with the help of an earthen pitcher as Izzat Beg was badly wounded and could not swim across the river. Soon, the rumours of their romantic encounters spread until one day, Sohni's sister-in-law followed her and discovered the hiding place where Sohni used to keep her earthen pitcher among the bushes. The next day, the sister-in-law removed the hard baked vase and replaced it with an unbaked one. That night, when Sohni tried to cross the river with the help of the earthen pot, it dissolved in the water and Sohni drowned in the floods. When Mahiwal saw Sohni drowning from the other shore, he jumped into the river and drowned as well. According to the story the dead bodies of Sohni and Mahiwal were recovered from the River

Indus near the city of Shahdapur in the upper Sindh region where they lie buried together united in love in their common tomb.