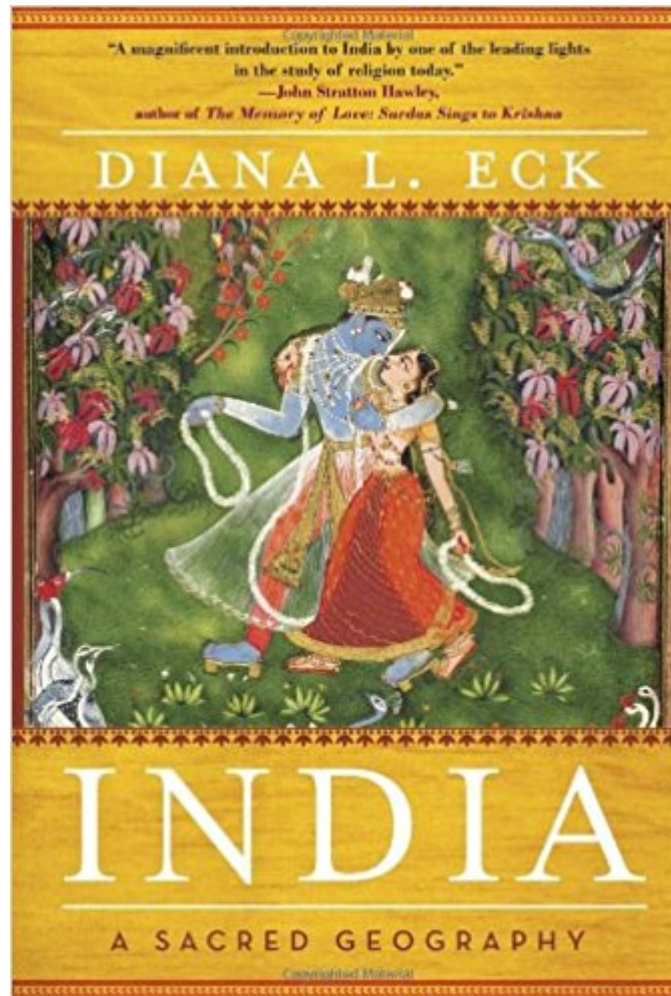




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# India: A Sacred Geography



## Synopsis

A spiritual history of the world's most religiously complex and diverse society, from one of Harvard's most respected scholars. *India: A Sacred Geography* is the culmination of more than a decade's work from the renowned Harvard scholar Diana L. Eck. The book explores the sacred places of India, taking the reader on an extraordinary trip through the beliefs and history of this rich and profound place, as well as providing a basic introduction to Hindu religious ideas and how those ideas influence our understanding of the modern sense of "India" as a nation.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“No major civilization has made sacred the very ground of its being as India has done, and no one has described this sacred organism with the down-to-earth humanity of Diana Eck. This is magnificent introduction to India by one of the leading lights in the study of religion today.” -- John Stratton Hawley, author of *The Memory of Love: Surdas Sings to Krishna*. In this lucid, learned and luminous book, Diana Eck introduces the Western reader to the sacred landscape of India. She leads us into an unfamiliar world, with myths and symbols that seem initially strange, but by the end of this rich journey we find that we have encountered unexpected regions within ourselves. — Karen Armstrong, author of *A History of God and Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* “Reading [Diana Eck’s] new book was like listening to an old, wise friend, whose love and admiration of India and its people shines on every page.” — Phil Semler, *San Francisco Book Review* (5/5 stars) “Praise for Diana Eck’s *Banaras* — In *Banaras*, Diana Eck... has written a notable book about this greatest of Indian pilgrimage sites.... Her brilliant, comprehensive

book seems likely to remain for a long time the definitive work on this great Indian city. •--Washington Post •œThe most beautiful book... on India.â •--Journal of the American Academy of Religion •œEck is a master of tone here. She begins as dry scholar, allows her personal voice to emerge and then, through judicious use of lyric quotations, advances to a striking level of exaltation and triumph.... To take us gently off this high, Eck buttresses us-and her arguments-with a truly amazing display of addenda; glossaries, calendars and appendices. One ends filled with admiration and awe, not just for the vision given us, but for the scholarship and dedication that made it possible.â • --Los Angeles Times

DIANA L. ECK is professor of comparative religion and Indian studies at Harvard University and is Master of Lowell House and Director of the Pluralism Project. Her book *Banaras, City of Light*, remains a classic in the field, and *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* won the prestigious Grawemeyer Book Award. In 1998, President Clinton awarded her the National Humanities Medal for the work of the Pluralism Project in the investigation of America's religious diversity.

Diana Eck's latest book is in the line of her first, rightly celebrated, description of Kashi (Benares) as the "City of Light", but with twenty or thirty years of research added. Admittedly, this is not a book for beginners. It presupposes at least some basic knowledge of the Indian "Weltanschauung" : if you have no idea who Krishna, Rama or Shiva are, you are unlikely to be able to enjoy Diana Eck's superbly perceptive description of what she calls the sacred geography of India. She means by that the subtle connexion between the geographical landscape, the history of certain famous places - Ayodhya for instance - and the underlying religious visions of a sub-continent where ever year tens of millions of pilgrims travel to what we would call holy places. Diana Eck talks from experience: it is obvious from her descriptions that she has been there and the reader is thus treated to a superb mixture of impressive erudition with practical experience. Furthermore the author is very good at describing what she saw: her writing is clear and elegant, never repetitive, yet precise. The book is divided by divinities, so to speak: Shiva's pilgrimages and sacred landscape, Vishnu, Devi, Krishna, Rama, etc. Diana Eck deals splendidly with the complexity - and the sheer volume - of information available. She is sometimes a little light footed where one would have expected less diplomacy: for example, the scandalous neglect of the Indian government(s) for their "sacred" rivers, most of which are sewers, totally polluted, filled with human and industrial waste, endangering the life of the worshippers who bathe in them is evoked several times, but one would have expected a stronger

call for action. But these are minor deficiencies in an otherwise superb book. Anyone with an interest in India should read it and it is sure to remain THE reference on this subject for many years.

But the truly effacious pilgrimage is one that combines the ritual journey with true faith, "the one who always bathes in earthly tirthas as well as the tirthas of the heart reaches the supreme goal." Diane Eck, 'India: A Sacred Geography'. Two themes stand out in this outstanding scholarly study of 'India: A Sacred Geography', A) the pilgrim and B) What is India. This book approaches the landscape from the pilgrims' point of view: as mythology rooted in geography. Ms Eck travels to the sites of Shiva's many manifestations, picks up the pieces of the dismembered goddess, and visits the temples dedicated to Vishnu. In Braj, in north India, she relates immersive reconstructions of stories from Krishna's life which pilgrims re-enact. Finally, she traces the journey made by Ram as he travelled from Ayodhya in the north to Lanka (presumed to be present-day Sri Lanka) in the south, navigating the length of the country. Eck's book conclusively shows that India is shaped not by the modern notion of a nation-state, "but by the extensive and intricate interrelation of geography and mythology (around rivers, shores, mountains, forests) that has produced this vast landscape of tirthas". Pandit Nehru said this even more authoritatively in his historic address at AICC's Madurai session in October 1961: "India has, for ages past, been a country of pilgrimages. All over the country, you find these ancient places, from Badrinath, Kedarnath and Amarnath, high up in the snowy Himalayas down to Kanyakumari in the south. What has drawn our people from the south to the north and from the north to the south in these great pilgrimages? It is the feeling of one country and one culture." The Spirit of India is, in fact, the Idea of India. You cannot even begin to understand India without acknowledging, experiencing and comprehending its sacredness—that is, without becoming a pilgrim yourself. Whether you go to Girnar, Chisti's Dargah in Ajmer, or Kanyakumari, whether you bathe in the Holy Ganga or in the "tirthas of the heart", to reach the shores of after-life, is up to you. In closing, the idea of Indian sacredness is not some western concept grafted on to the subcontinent in a fit of mystical Orientalism: it is instead an idea central to India's mythological conception of itself, which "continues to anchor millions of people in the imagined landscape of their country". Hindu mythology consistently visualises India as a spiritually charged and "living landscape in which mountains, rivers, forests and villages are elaborately linked to the stories of the gods and heroes. The land bears traces of the gods and the footprints of the heroes. Every place has its story and, conversely, every story in the vast storehouse of myth and legend has its place ... In this mental map, geography is overlaid with layer upon layer of story." As Professor Eck writes in her conclusion: "The affirmation of the everywhere of the sacred - this is the

peculiar genius of the theology given expression in the landscape of India."

This is a terrific book for multiple reasons. The first is the meticulous, intense research done by the author over her lifetime. It brings India alive in a way I have never seen or experienced before. Despite being brought up in a Hindu family in India, knowledge of Hindu epics via both my parents and the television, this book added greatly to my understanding of India and Hinduism.

This exploration of India's sacred sites and their interconnectedness takes an academic approach so is sometimes over-long and repetitive but is readable and thorough. Diana Eck obviously has a deep understanding of and respect for the Hindu tradition so there is also real spiritual insight to be found amongst the background and myths associated with India's many sacred sites and pilgrimages. It has suggested some new destinations to me for my next trip to India and has deepened my understanding of many stories and places that were already familiar. It's probably not the best book as an introduction to India's sacred places but is rewarding for anyone who wants to look deeper into the fascinating mythology that is still part of living reality and daily inspiration for many Indians (and quite a few westerners!)

Diana Eck is one of the world's preeminent Indologists and it shows in this tour de force. Her use of geography as the literary map to introduce the complex collection of religions we call Hinduism is a wonderful guide to better understand the nuances of the non-Muslim religions of the sub-continent. It was my guide when I visited northern India in Jan 2015 and southern India in Aug 2015. I look forward to my 2018 trip to Gujarat and Karnataka, where I expect this book to provide much needed geohistorical backdrops to why the locals believe as they do.

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