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**SAMANTAPANCHAKA KSHETRA AND THE EMERGENCE OF  
KURUKSHETRA: A STUDY OF SACRED GEOGRAPHY IN THE  
INDIAN KNOWLEDGE TRADITION**

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**ABSTRACT**

Kurukshetra is widely known as the battlefield of the *Mahabharata* and the place where Lord Krishna delivered the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* to Arjuna. Because of this association, the region holds a special place in the cultural and spiritual tradition of India. However, references in Sanskrit literature suggest that the sacred importance of this land existed even before the events of the *Mahabharata* war. Earlier texts refer to the region as Samantapanchaka Kshetra, which is connected with the account of Lord Parashurama. According to the *Mahabharata* and several Puranic sources, Parashurama created five lakes at this site after defeating certain Kshatriya rulers and performed offerings for his ancestors there. These events led to the recognition of the region as a sacred place. Over time, the same land became associated with the events described in the *Mahabharata* and gradually came to be known as Kurukshetra. This study examines references to Samantapanchaka found in the *Mahabharata* and Puranic texts in order to understand how the region came to be identified with Kurukshetra. By looking at these textual traditions along with the idea of sacred geography in the Indian knowledge tradition, the study explores how stories, rituals, and cultural memory contribute to the formation and continued significance of sacred places in India.

**KEYWORDS:** Samantapanchaka, Kurukshetra, Parashurama, Sacred Geography, Indian Knowledge Systems, Mahabharata

## INTRODUCTION

In the Indian tradition, certain places are remembered not only for their physical location but also for the meanings attached to them through stories, rituals, and shared cultural memory. Over centuries, many regions mentioned in Sanskrit texts came to be regarded as sacred because they were linked with important events, teachings, and practices. In such cases, the landscape itself becomes part of the tradition, carrying with it memories of the past and shaping the cultural identity of communities that continue to visit and remember these places. One of the most well-known of these places is Kurukshetra. It is remembered as the field where the events of the *Mahabharata* reached their decisive moment and where Lord Krishna delivered the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* to Arjuna. Because of this association, Kurukshetra is often seen as a place where questions about duty, righteousness, and moral responsibility were discussed at a deeply philosophical level.

Yet the importance of this region did not begin with the war described in the *Mahabharata*. Earlier textual traditions refer to the area as Samantapanchaka Kshetra and connect it with the story of Lord Parashurama, who is regarded as the sixth incarnation of Vishnu. According to these accounts, Parashurama confronted rulers who had strayed from the principles of just rule. After these events, he is said to have created five lakes in the region and performed rites for his ancestors. Through these acts, the place came to be regarded as sacred and associated with purification, remembrance of ancestors, and the restoration of moral order.

With time, the region became known as a place of pilgrimage, and the traditions connected with the *Mahabharata* became closely linked with it. Gradually, the land came to be identified as Kurukshetra. This process shows how places in the Indian tradition often acquire meaning through layers of stories, practices, and memories that accumulate over generations. Looking at Samantapanchaka and its later identification with Kurukshetra helps in understanding how landscapes become important within Indian thought. Through references in texts and the continuity of cultural memory, places come to represent ideas about ethics, philosophy, and history. The story of this region therefore offers insight into the way narratives, rituals, and lived traditions shape the sacred geography of India.

### **The Concept of Tarpan in the Indian Ritual Tradition**

In the Indian ritual tradition, Tarpan refers to the act of offering water to ancestors, sages, and deities as a mark of reverence and remembrance. The word *tarpan* is derived from the Sanskrit root *ṭṛp*, which means “to satisfy” or “to nourish.” Through this ritual, the living express gratitude and respect toward their forefathers, acknowledging the continuing bond

between past and present generations. The practice of tarpan occupies an important place in the broader framework of ancestral rites described in Vedic and later Sanskrit texts. It is commonly performed with water, often accompanied by the recitation of sacred mantras, and is offered using the hands as a symbolic gesture of devotion and remembrance. In many traditions, the ritual is carried out during specific occasions such as Shraddha, Amavasya (new moon day), and other sacred periods dedicated to honoring ancestors (Bhattacharyya, 1996).

Tarpan also reflects an important philosophical idea within the Indian worldview: the recognition of Pitru Rina, the debt owed to one's ancestors. According to this belief, individuals carry a responsibility toward their forefathers, and the performance of rituals such as tarpan serves as a way of fulfilling this obligation. The act therefore represents not only remembrance but also continuity of lineage and tradition. Within the narrative connected to Samantapanchaka, the concept of tarpan gains particular significance. After his conflicts with the Kshatriya rulers, Lord Parashurama is said to have created five lakes at this site and performed tarpan for his ancestors. This act symbolized repentance, reverence, and the completion of his duty toward his lineage. Through this ritual offering, the region came to be associated with ancestral remembrance and spiritual purification (Fuller, 2004).

In this context, the performance of tarpan contributed to the sanctification of Samantapanchaka. The place gradually became known as a sacred site where offerings to ancestors could be made. The association of the region with such rituals further strengthened its spiritual importance, and in later traditions the land became connected with Kurukshetra, a place that continues to attract pilgrims who perform ancestral rites even today (Rocher, 1986). Thus, the concept of tarpan not only reflects a central element of ritual practice in Indian tradition but also helps explain how certain places acquire sacred significance through acts of remembrance, devotion, and cultural continuity.

### **The Tradition of Lord Parashurama and the Creation of Samantapanchaka Kshetra**

In Sanskrit literature, Samantapanchaka Kshetra is closely associated with the account of Lord Parashurama, who is regarded as the sixth incarnation of Vishnu. The tradition presents Parashurama as both a sage and a warrior who appeared at a time when the established order of society had been disturbed. His actions are described as efforts to restore righteousness and re-establish the principles of dharma.

According to the *Mahabharata* and several Puranic texts, Parashurama was born in the Bhrigu lineage as the son of the sage Jamadagni and Renuka. Although he belonged to a

family of sages, he is also remembered for his skill in warfare and is often shown carrying a divine axe said to have been granted by Lord Shiva. The narratives about his life describe a period when certain rulers had abandoned the ideals of just rule and had begun to misuse their power. The *Mahabharata* mentions that at a place later known as Samantapanchaka, Parashurama formed five lakes filled with the blood of the defeated Kshatriyas and there performed offerings to his ancestors (Parasher, 2014).

The texts describe that Parashurama fought a series of battles against these rulers. These events are not described only as acts of warfare but as attempts to restore order and uphold dharma. After these conflicts, he is said to have arrived at the region that came to be known as Samantapanchaka.

At this place, the *Mahabharata* narrates that Parashurama created five lakes. Standing in these waters, he performed tarpana, the ritual offering made to one's ancestors. This act reflects the importance given to ancestral reverence and filial duty in the ritual traditions of India. The narrative further describes that the ancestors of Parashurama appeared before him and expressed satisfaction with the offerings he had made. In spite of his victories, Parashurama is described as approaching them with humility and asking forgiveness for the destruction that had taken place during the conflicts. He also requested that the lakes formed at this place should remain sacred for future generations (Fuller, Ritual and belief in Hindu religious practice, 2012).

According to the tradition, the ancestors granted his request and blessed the land, declaring it a sacred place. They also advised Parashurama to forgive the remaining rulers so that peace and harmony could be restored. From that time onward, the place came to be known as Samantapanchaka Kshetra, meaning the region of the five lakes.

In later traditions, this sacred region gradually came to be identified with Kurukshetra, which later became known as one of the most important sacred landscapes in Indian civilization. The earlier association of the land with the actions of Parashurama contributed to the continuing religious importance of the region.

The account of Parashurama and the creation of Samantapanchaka shows how rituals, ancestral traditions, and scriptural narratives are connected with particular places. Over time, the memory of these events became linked with Kurukshetra, reflecting the way cultural traditions and textual accounts shape the sacred geography of India.

### **Choosing Samantapanchaka as the Battleground for the Mahabharata**

In Sanskrit sources, the place called Samantapanchaka is mentioned as a sacred region even before the events of the *Mahabharata*. In later tradition this area came to be known as Kurukshetra. The sanctity of the region is connected with the account of Lord Parashurama. After his battles with the Kshatriya rulers, he is said to have created five lakes there and performed offerings for his ancestors. Because of these acts the place came to be regarded as sacred.

The *Mahabharata* refers to Kurukshetra as Dharmakshetra. The opening verse of the *Bhagavad Gita* begins with the words “*Dharmakshetre Kurukshetre...*” (Bhagavad Gita 1.1). This expression indicates that the place was already considered a sacred field connected with duty and righteousness. For this reason, the battlefield of the war is presented in the epic not only as a geographical location but also as a place linked with moral reflection.

Traditional accounts also connect Kurukshetra with ancient sages, kings, and sacrificial rituals. The region became known for pilgrimage and religious observances. (Bhagavata Purana 9.16) The earlier story of Parashurama and the creation of the five lakes at Samantapanchaka added to the sacred reputation of the place. As a result, the land came to be associated with events connected with the protection of dharma.

The identification of Samantapanchaka with Kurukshetra shows how places gain importance in tradition through remembered events and ritual practices. The region had already been regarded as sacred, and the events described in the *Mahabharata* strengthened its significance. The war described in the epic is therefore presented not only as a political struggle but also as a conflict involving questions of justice and duty.

In this context, Kurukshetra is remembered not merely as a battlefield. It is also the place where the dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna took place, forming the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Because of this, the region is associated with reflection on human duty and moral choice.

The selection of Samantapanchaka, later known as Kurukshetra, as the site of the *Mahabharata* war reflects the close connection between sacred places and narrative traditions in Indian culture. The earlier sanctification of the land and its association with ritual practices contributed to its later importance in the epic tradition.

### **Literature Review**

(Jacobsen, 2016) The concept of sacred geography has received increasing scholarly attention in the study of Indian religious traditions and cultural landscapes. Scholars have emphasized

that within the Indian knowledge tradition, geography is not viewed merely as physical space but as a landscape imbued with scriptural narratives, ritual practices, and cultural memory. Sacred locations described in Sanskrit texts often evolve into important pilgrimage sites, shaping both religious practice and cultural identity.

(Eck, 2012) One of the most influential scholarly discussions on sacred geography in India is presented by Diana L. Eck, who examines how the Indian subcontinent is mapped through networks of pilgrimage sites connected by narratives, rituals, and sacred associations. Eck argues that the idea of India as a cultural and spiritual landscape developed through these networks of sacred places, linking rivers, mountains, temples, and pilgrimage routes across the region. According to her analysis, the Indian landscape contains numerous sites where religious traditions are embedded within the physical environment, creating a sacred cultural map sustained through pilgrimage and ritual practices.

(Jacobsen, Pilgrimage in the Hindu tradition: Salvific space, 2016) Recent scholarship has continued to explore how sacred landscapes emerge through narrative traditions and cultural practices. Studies in religious geography suggest that sacred sites often develop gradually through the interaction of scriptural narratives, ritual activities, and local traditions. These sites gain importance not only as centers of devotion but also as places that preserve historical memory and collective identity.

(Haberman, 2013) Within the context of Indian epic traditions, research on the *Mahabharata* has highlighted the significance of geographical locations associated with the narrative.

(Brockington, 1998) Scholars such as Brockington and Hildebeitel emphasize that the epic situates many of its events within identifiable landscapes that later became important pilgrimage destinations. Locations mentioned in the epic are not simply narrative settings but are transformed into sacred places that embody philosophical and ethical ideas expressed within the text (Hildebeitel, 2001).

(Singh, 2008) Kurukshetra itself has been widely studied as one of the most important sacred regions in northern India. Historical and cultural studies describe the region as a landscape filled with numerous sacred water bodies, temples, and pilgrimage circuits connected with episodes from the *Mahabharata* and other Sanskrit traditions. The well-known forty-eight kos pilgrimage circuit surrounding Kurukshetra includes several sites that are associated with events from epic and Puranic traditions. This network of pilgrimage locations illustrates how the sacred identity of the region developed through centuries of ritual practice and cultural continuity.

(Thapar, 2002) Scholars of cultural geography have also highlighted the importance of water bodies in the formation of sacred landscapes in Indian religious traditions. In Kurukshetra, sacred reservoirs such as Brahma Sarovar and Sannihit Sarovar are important ritual sites where pilgrims perform ceremonial bathing and ancestral offerings. Such water bodies are considered spiritually significant and are often connected with scriptural traditions that reinforce their sacred status.

Recent academic studies in religious and cultural studies have increasingly focused on how sacred landscapes evolve through the interaction between textual traditions and living ritual practices. Scholars suggest that such landscapes are dynamic rather than static; their significance continues to develop through ongoing pilgrimage activities, ritual performances, and cultural reinterpretations (Ganguli, 1983).

(Debroy, 2010) Despite the extensive scholarship on Kurukshetra and sacred geography in India, relatively limited attention has been given specifically to the earlier identity of the region as Samantapanchaka, which is mentioned in Sanskrit texts in connection with the actions of Parashurama. Scriptural accounts describe the formation of five sacred lakes and the performance of ancestral rites in this region, yet modern academic studies have rarely examined how these traditions contributed to the later sanctification of Kurukshetra.

Despite the considerable scholarship on Kurukshetra and the broader idea of sacred geography in India, the earlier identity of the region as Samantapanchaka has received comparatively limited attention. In particular, the process through which Samantapanchaka gradually came to be recognized as Kurukshetra has not been examined in sufficient depth within existing studies. This leaves an important gap in understanding how sacred landscapes develop and acquire layered meanings over time within the Indian tradition.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining scriptural references to Samantapanchaka and placing them within the wider framework of sacred geography in the Indian knowledge tradition. Through this approach, the study aims to explore how narratives preserved in texts, ritual practices performed across generations, and the collective cultural memory of a community contribute to the formation and enduring significance of sacred landscapes in Indian civilization.

### **Relevance in Contemporary Indian Knowledge Systems**

In recent academic discussions, sacred landscapes have received increasing attention, especially within the framework of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). In the Indian tradition, geography has not been viewed only as a physical space. Many places are remembered

through stories, rituals, and teachings preserved in sacred texts. Over time, such places acquire cultural and spiritual meaning. The account of Samantapanchaka and its later identification with Kurukshetra is one example of how a landscape becomes important through the combined influence of textual traditions, ritual practices, and shared cultural memory.

Even today, Kurukshetra continues to occupy an important place in the religious and cultural life of India. The region contains several sacred sites, temples, and water bodies that attract pilgrims and visitors from across the country. Ritual practices such as bathing in sacred tanks, performing offerings for ancestors, and participating in religious gatherings are still carried out at these places. These practices show the continuity between references found in ancient texts and the traditions that continue to be followed today.

From the perspective of Indian Knowledge Systems, the study of Samantapanchaka and Kurukshetra also shows how different aspects of knowledge are interconnected in Indian civilization. Textual traditions, ethical teachings, ritual observances, and geographical locations are closely linked with one another. Kurukshetra's association with the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* further adds to its importance, as the place continues to be remembered in connection with discussions on duty, moral responsibility, and human action.

Scholars working in fields such as religious studies, cultural geography, and heritage studies have increasingly pointed out that sacred landscapes should be understood as living traditions rather than only historical sites. Places like Kurukshetra show how narratives preserved in Sanskrit texts continue to influence social practices and cultural identity in the present.

In this context, the study of Samantapanchaka within the framework of Indian Knowledge Systems helps in understanding how traditional knowledge becomes connected with particular landscapes. Examining the relationship between textual references, ritual practices, and geographical locations also helps explain how sacred geography continues to shape the cultural and spiritual heritage of India.

## CONCLUSION

The history of Samantapanchaka Kshetra and its later identification with Kurukshetra shows how places become important in the Indian tradition through stories, rituals, and shared memory. Traditions connected with Lord Parashurama describe how the region became sacred after he created five lakes there and performed rites for his ancestors. These acts were remembered as expressions of duty and reverence toward one's forefathers, and over time the place came to be regarded as a sacred site linked with the restoration of order and

righteousness. As traditions about the *Mahabharata* became associated with this region, the land came to be known as Kurukshetra, the field where the war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas took place. The earlier sacred reputation of the area added meaning to the events described in the epic. The reference to Kurukshetra as Dharmakshetra in the *Bhagavad Gita* also reflects its association with questions of duty, justice, and moral responsibility.

The connection between Samantapanchaka and Kurukshetra shows how places gain significance over time through layers of stories, rituals, and cultural remembrance. Such locations are not viewed only as geographical spaces; they are also remembered as places where important teachings and moral reflections are connected with historical narratives. In modern scholarship, the study of sacred geography helps explain how landscape, narrative, and ritual practices are closely related in Indian civilization. Kurukshetra continues to hold religious and cultural importance, and its traditions remain part of the collective memory of society. Seen in this way, examining Samantapanchaka within the framework of Indian Knowledge Systems helps in understanding the link between landscape, tradition, and cultural continuity. The region continues to be remembered as a place where historical accounts, philosophical ideas, and religious practices come together within the cultural heritage of India.

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