

From Palm Leaves to Print: Canonical Homogenization and the Barbakra River in the Puranic Tradition

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ABSTRACT: The present paper discusses how regional manuscript traditions have produced interaction with the canonicalization of the Puranas in modern times, as illustrated in the Surma–Barak Valley in Northeast India. It highlights the sacredness of the Barak River in the 15th century Tirthacintāmaṇi and also other chronicles of the region like Srihatter Itibritta and Kacharer Itibritta. The study proposes that certain regional sacred geographies, which are unique to local Sanskrit recensions and local sthala-mahatmyas, have been lost to nineteenth and twentieth century print. Printed texts like Puranas made reference to a standard narration across the country, while others like Barbakra Mahatmya were omitted from the Vayu and Varaha Puranas and thereby the frontier geographies were erased. The paper underscores the importance of regional archives as spaces of recovered lost traditions of texts and other sacred geographies.

KEYWORDS: Puranic philology; textual homogenization; Surma–Barak Valley; Tirthacintāmaṇi; sacred geography; manuscript culture; Barbakra Mahatmya

1. INTRODUCTION

Local sacred geographies, as in the case of the Surma–Barak Valley in contemporary Northeast India, are historically linked to a larger puranic space, but subsequently lost through the process of editing. The river is now commonly called the Barak, and is mentioned in early regional and pilgrimage literature as the “Barbakra” or “Barbakru” (literally “the bestower of great merit”); this name is applied to the river due to the merit that pilgrims who bathe in or drink from it achieve. However, the Vayu and the Varaha Puranas, which are the two puranas mentioned in the Barbakra Mahatmya, do not exist in the form of a chapter or a verse in the standard printed versions of the puranas that are still available today, thus creating a seeming contradiction between local memory and the standard printed purana.

This paper asserts that this contradiction is no mistake in regional memory, but rather a direct consequence of philological choices made in favor of a “core” of the text in the interest of a Pan-Indian standard. The Barbakra case throws light on the methodological difficulties of writing in a fluid way, the politics of canon, and the epistemological implications of the shift from manuscript to print. The research aims to make a contribution to wider discussions of the construction, standardization and in some cases narrowing of the 'sacred geography' of 'India' in the modern era, by looking at one frontier river. The argument draws on and extends current research on sacred space, region and the socio-cultural life of the Purana, and highlights a region that is not often at the heart of Pan-Indian discussions.

2. HISTORICAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXT OF THE SURMA–BARAK VALLEY

Today, the Surma–Barak Valley is a zone of liminality that stretches across the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura and Bangladesh, and once constituted a contact space for the Indo–Gangetic plains, the Brahmaputra valley and the hill polities of the North East. Before colonial boundary making, this area was more bound together politically by the rivers, pilgrimage circuits, shared cultic sites. The Barak was an important connecting route between high- and low-lying regions.

The valley during the early modern period was ceded to the overlapping Tripuri and Manipuri polities and once again included older tribal polities like the Dimasa. Even though the accounts of missionaries and colonies in the nineteenth century rarely recorded the textual traditions associated with the shrines, temples, and sacred groves on the banks of the Barak and its distributaries, the accounts were often quite descriptive in their remarks on the density of such sites.

The naming of the river in Sanskrit, as Barbakra, needs to be understood not as a force majeure in an indolent topography but as the result of a series of negotiations between various ritual specialists, Brahmanical scholars, trading communities and ruling powers with an interest in securing specific sacred itineraries.

3. Ethno-Linguistic Genesis of “Barbakra”

3.1 Dimasa toponymy and river morphology

Sanskrit etymology is not sufficient to explain the historical identity of the Barak River as it is in the language of the Dimasa (Kachari) communities of the Cachar plains. In Dimasa the name of a river is frequently structurally linked to its physical characteristics; the morpheme “Bra” is a split, bifurcation, and “Kro” is upper part, headwater or primary stream.

This morphology exactly corresponds to the Haritkar area of present-day Sribhumi (Karimganj) district, where the main river splits into Surma and Kushiya. In the regional oral and textual traditions, the main course before the bifurcation is referred to as “Brakro” or “Barbakro” and thus is perceived as undivided, before it spreads into the deltaic system in the downstream course.

The naming of the Dimasa and Barman elders in their local histories, however, indicate that the naming of Brakro/Barbakro was not solely a mythological process but a product of a situated ecological literacy.

3.2 Sanskritization and phonetic assimilation

Sanskritization in the Surma–Barak Valley was not a single and sudden act of theology, but one which was historically complex, and entangled in socio-political issues, and directly connected with state supported agrarian expansion. Historical epigraphy shows that from the 7th Century CE onwards, Brahmanical scholars and ritual specialists have settled in the area in a systematic way through a series of royal land grants (Agrahāras) granted by the Varmana Dynasty of Kamarupa (Choudhury 1910). During this early medieval period, these incoming students started to use the local geography in a Pan-Indic religious system, phonetically adapting indigenous hydronyms into Sanskrit forms (Pollock 2006). The Sanskrit term ‘barbakra’ was more or less directly associated with the word curvature, ruggedness, and this fitted the actual geographical position of the meandering and looping course of the river, near Silchar (Guha 1921).

Significantly, this early Sanskrit text layer predates the political control of Dimasa (Kachari) Kingdom in the plains which could be established in this particular valley in the later part of the 18th Century CE (Gait 1906). Hence, the linguistic situation is one-of-a-kind reverse-chronological palimpsest: an administrative and ritual Sanskritic overlain on the eco-toponymic Dimasa (Brakro) in the 18th century. This result was a very structured and multi-layered toponym, which was originally indigenous and ecologically oriented and is subsequently re-categorized within a Sanskrit poetic and theological language system. This bilingual genealogy, however, is no ‘pure’ ‘Sanskrit’ production, but a historical accident of tribal naming practices and classical philology that overthrew the linearity of time to co-create a sacred frontier geography (Chakrabarti 2001).

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sacred Geography, Regional Puranas and Textual Canonization

In her seminal writing on India as sacred geography, Diana Eck has highlighted the processes by which river, mountain and pilgrimage paths connect the different regions into a symbolic space. Meanwhile, her interests have been largely focused on key circuits and nodes of the entire country, with lesser attention being paid to those river valleys that are considered to be as “frontier” as the Surma–Barak, the site where sacred cartographies are negotiated, and sometimes erased.

The work of Kunal Chakrabarti on the localizations, augmentations and alterations of the Puranas in Bengal has shown how the seemingly Pan-Indian texts were modified, repeated and adapted over time, with particular deities, rituals and landscapes being added to them. His work makes clear that the “interpolation” that modern editors use, and that is pathologized as such, is often a pre-modern normal and necessary process of regionalization.

A number of observations by philological scholars in modern editions of the Puranas, especially those by the All-India Kashiraj Trust, have pointed out the need for collation of the manuscripts from various geographical sources for the preparation of a single critical edition. But the geographies of this approach – in other words the places from which texts disappear in the process – have been given comparatively little sustained consideration. This is the reason the present study focuses on the Barbakra fragment as a case to be rethought in the light of spatial politics of the canon formation.

Chronicles of the different regions, such as Choudhury's Srihatter Itibritta and Guha's Kacharer Itibritta, fall somewhere between the extremes of this historiography. While they may have been overlooked as being antiquarian or local in the past, they contain valuable clues to now lost strata of textual history, even Puranic verses that have disappeared from the standard editions. Such a nuanced reconstruction of the Puranic archive is achieved by inserting these chronicles into the dialogue with modern philology.

5. PURANIC AND SACRED TOPOGRAPHY OF BARBAKRA

5.1 Vayu Purana citation in regional chronicles

Achyut Charan Choudhury's Srihatter Itibritta and Upendra Chandra Guha's Kacharer Itibritta are some of the regional historical texts that refer to specific verses glorifying Barbakra's sanctity. Choudhury quotes a Bengali scriptural verse that he rightly takes from the Vayu Purana, reading into which he finds that Barbakra is born out of the “Vindhya” and that those who bathe in or drink the water of the Vindhya are granted high spiritual merit.

It is then followed by the transliterated verse:

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*“Vindhyapāda samudbhūto barabakra supunyadaḥ |
yatra snātvā jalam pitvā nara sadgatimāpnuyāt ||”*,

followed by a prose gloss that equates this river with the Barak as it is known in modern geography. The conceptually mapping of the Barail range as a structural element of the local Surma–Barak Valley onto a larger Puranic cosmography is the verse that anchors the Surma–Barak Valley within this larger structural cosmography.

What is notable about the way the verse universalizes and particularizes is that the universalizing element describes the pan-Indic Vindhya range, while the grounding of its salvific promise in the very particular hydrological reality is what makes it so. The sthala mahatmyas that try to fold in and into more expansive sacred imaginaries without eradicating their distinctiveness are typically double-coded.

5.2 Varaha Purana and the Barbakra Mahatmya

*“Rūpeśvarasya digbhāge dakṣiṇe muni-sattamaḥ |
Barabakra iti khyātaḥ sarvapāpa-praṇāśanaḥ ||
Yatra tepe tapaḥ pūrvam sumahat kapilo muniḥ |
Yatra kāpālikam tīrtham śubham siddheśvaro haraḥ ||”*

The Varaha Purana is also mentioned in the regional chronicles compiled by Choudhury, in which a Barbakra Mahatmya is mentioned, connecting the river with certain shrines, including the Siddheswar Shiva temple in Badarpur and the ascetic practices of the sage Kapila. A preserved verse refers to Barbakra to the South of the shrine of Rupeshwar, a river which purges off all sins, and the place where Kapila undertook severe penances near a Kapalika tirtha, associated with Siddheswar, the Shiva.

This assemblage of associations brings together the Barak Valley and makes it part of a network of tirthas which is neither a marginal frontier space but rather a well-defined point in the sacred geography of eastern India. In this context the Mahatmya genre is a textual technology that brings universal deities and stories to a specific landscape in the valley.

As a whole these verses indicate that the Barbakra Mahatmya was part of a wider Puranic policy of attempting to legitimate similar emergent pilgrimage centres on the margins of the subcontinent that were not unlike the better known mahatmyas of Gokarna, Kanyakumari or Puri.

6. TIRTHACINTĀMAṆI AND MEDIEVAL PILGRIMAGE MAPPING

6.1 Vācaspati Miśra’s compilation strategy

The Tirthacintāmaṇi (Fifteenth-century) by Vācaspati Miśra organizes pilgrimage sites throughout eastern and northern India and makes many verses from the major puranas available from the major texts about Barbakra. The author does not quote from the scriptures by chapter and verse, but quotes from the scriptures with formula words, such as “tathāca Vāyupurāṇe” or “iti Varāhapurāṇe” so that the learned reader will know what verse he is referring to by the beginning of the quotation.

This is the manifestation of the manuscript tradition of the day, during which various recensions of Puranic texts were in circulation with varying divisions of chapters and additions of local details. If a compiler is aimed at a readership that is located in different regions with different textual genealogies, the use of a precise numeric coordinate would have been less useful than the use of a verbatim textual coordinate.

From the point of view of pilgrimage studies, it is not just one anthology of texts, it is a device for making routes. Tirthacintāmaṇi gives lists of sequences of tirthas and puts them in the midst of citations from the Puraṇas, thus authorizing certain routes and by its omission, making others invisible.

6.2 Manuscript fluidity and the absence of modern numbering

The absence of fixed chapter and verse numbering is not a mistake, but a part of the structural issue in handwritten transmission of Puranic texts. In addition to variations in order, subdivision, and content, palm-leaf and birch-bark manuscripts frequently varied significantly in significant ways, particularly as far as regional mahatmyas were concerned, were added or omitted.

In the absence of a numerical grid to reference passages, scholars or ritual experts used their oral memorization skills, catchphrases and formulaic openings to find and verify passages. Later print culture, with its European philological traditions, has given rise to the modern expectation that all the canonical texts can be accessed by means of chapter-verse numbers.

The understanding of this fluidity may help to counter the impression that the “non-existence” of Barbakra verses in current printed Puranas is proof against their authenticity, but rather as a relic from one media regime to another.

7. FROM MANUSCRIPT TO PRINT: THE ERASURE OF BARBAKRA

7.1 Nineteenth–twentieth century critical editions

As large publishing houses and critical editing projects began to thrive in colonial and post-colonial India, editors started to create Pan-Indian definitive editions of the Mahapuranas. The individuals and institutions we have mentioned, like the Venkateshwar Steam Press in Bombay or the Kashiraj Trust in Varanasi, attempted to collate manuscripts from a variety of sources and to eliminate what they later called “regional interpolations”.

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In this methodological approach, other text units, which had been found in only the eastern Indian manuscripts, for example the Barbakra Mahatmya, were downgraded and excluded from the complete text. The outcome of these printings are more homogenized to the point of ignoring the geographies of the periphery and the frontier.

This was done with the idea of being an objective scientific cleansing of the text, but it was an inevitable process that was subject to the priorities and blind spots of the editors, mainly based in metropolitan centres far from the Surma–Barak frontier.

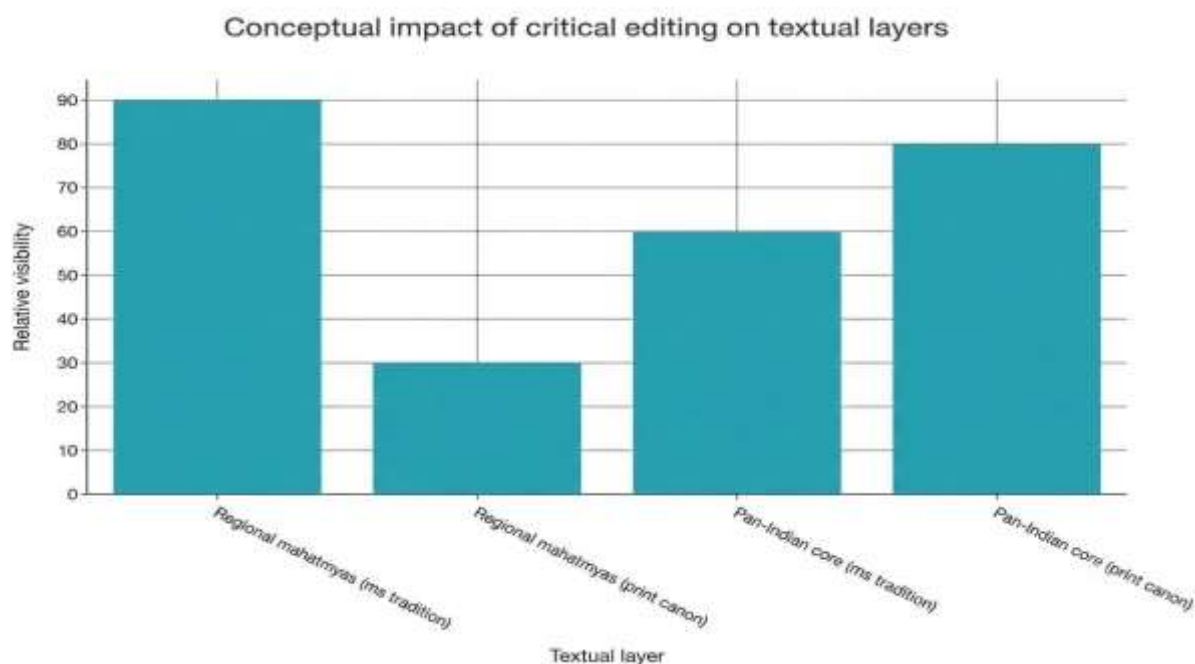


Figure 1. Conceptual bar chart comparing the relative visibility of regional mahatmyas and pan-Indian core narratives in manuscript traditions and standardized print canons.

7.2 Canonical homogenization and spatial consequences

It is not a coincidence that the Barbakra verses have not been included into the standard printed Vayu and Varaha editions, but rather directly as a result of the editorial criteria that equated multi-regional attestation with authenticity. The localized sacred narratives found in the Surma – Barak Valley area were structurally weak to be considered as provincial additions as this region being a frontier of classical Sanskritic influences.

As manuscript culture became more fluid, locally adaptive, and fixed, nation-wide printed versions replaced it, this process has resulted in what can be termed a “cartographic erasure”, where whole regions have fallen out of the canonical sacred map. The case of the Barbakra is an example of a frontier space which is epistemically invisible due to the process of textual standardization.

The study also explores the editorial routes which led to this erasure, and argues for the need for a geography-based philology that is honest about the evidence of local recensions and local historiographies.

8. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 Sacred geography and centre–periphery dynamics

The Barbakra material prompts reflection on more complex theoretical explorations of the creation of sacred space in South Asia, highlighting the role of puranic narratives in establishing the local landscape in cosmic mapping. While other research has largely concentrated on the process of creating regional traditions out of Puranic texts, this example demonstrates how a modern editorial process can undo such a relationship between the centre and the periphery.

The Surma–Barak Valley not only becomes the arena of the confluence of these three intersecting tropes, but also the site of a complex past of inclusion/exclusion. It is crucial to understand this, if one is to attempt to reconstruct a more complete sacred geography of eastern India.

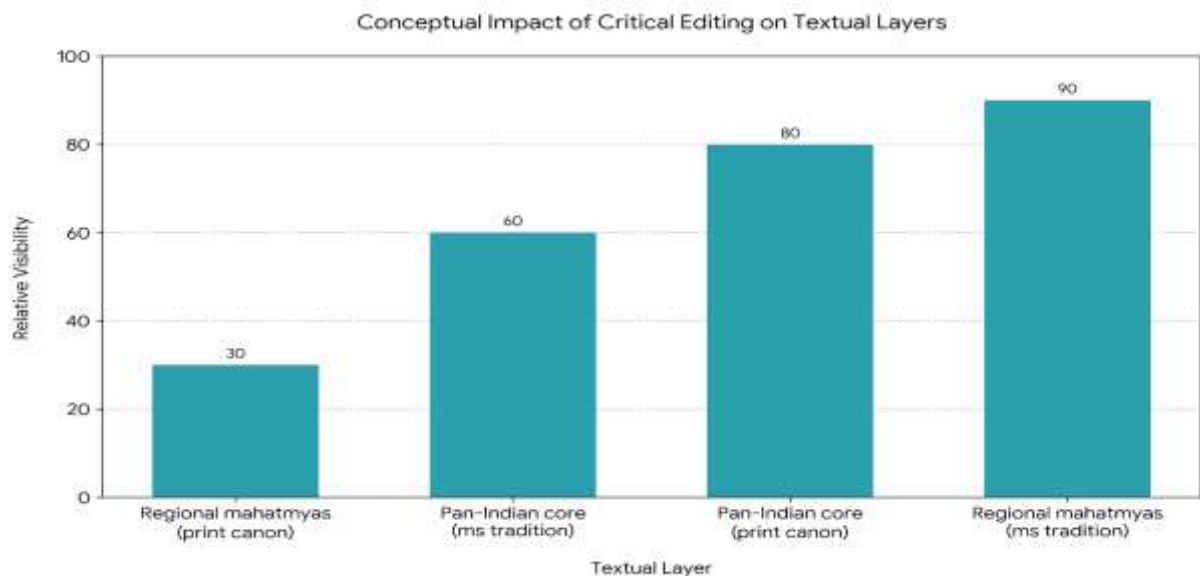


Figure 2. Visual representation of the shifting visibility metrics between the Pan-Indian textual center and regional frontier peripheries across different media regimes

More generally, the Barbakra fragment illustrates that frontiers are sites far from being just the margins of a civilizational map, but rather sites of encounter between various regimes of value, including ritual, economic, ecological and textual. Such laboratories can change the way that both historians and practitioners of the Hindu world think about the spatial limits of the Hindu world.

8.2 Philology, power, and the archive

The history of the Barbakra verses makes it clear that there is never just a philological question: there are power relations in play that decide which is “original” and which is “interpolation”. The critical editions have created the boundaries of the Hindu canon by favourising manuscripts from some areas and discounting others.

The regional chronicles such as Srihatter Itibritta thus have a new life as archives of lost recensions, and not just as repositories of local folklore. They hold on to the memories of the text that mainstream print culture has erased from Barbakra.

Replacing these chronicles in Puranic history opens the way to a more democratic archive, giving vernacular voices and frontier voices of memory equal standing with the metropolitan critical editions.

9. METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

9.1 Source-critical strategy

A comprehensive reconstruction of the Barbakra Mahatmya must take into account a variety of genres, including medieval pilgrimage manuals, early twentieth-century authors' accounts of the region, extant copies of the Puranic literature (where available), and modern critical editions. The present study brings together some of the missing pieces in this puzzle by juxtaposing the literal content of the verses and translations with explanatory notes on editorial practice in the text.

Future studies would be greatly aided by a direct examination of the manuscripts in the archives in Kolkata, Dhaka, Silchar and Guwahati for the presence of eastern recensions of Vayu and Varaha Purana which still preserve the Barbakra section. Such collation would empirically establish the actual degree of omission in such manuscripts when compared with the canonical ones.

Equally important would be continued ethnographic work with the priestly lineages and local historians and ritual communities of the Surma – Barak Valley, which might have oral Berber texts and performative traditions related to Barbakra without any written textual support.

9.2 Limits and prospects

As of now, the Purana in print, which is accessible from many sources does not contain any Barbakra material and so, slokas cannot be assigned chapter and verse numbers in a manner that would meet today's cataloguing requirements. But this is not the fault of the regional sources, it is rather an expression of canonical homogenization.

The Barbakra case is also an agenda that opens up – to systematically work out the identification of other frontier areas that might have had their sacred geographies edited out in the transition to print. This would greatly contribute to knowledge of the historical diversity of the Puranic traditions.

Finally, there are methodical constraints in relying almost exclusively on secondary reports of texts which are now lost. The study therefore does not propose specific conclusions but rather a series of hypotheses and interpretations that can be further explored by subsequent researchers in light of new discovery.

CONCLUSION

This is the tale of the "sacred frontiers" that were inscribed and erased from the Hindu text over the centuries of Barbakra. Barbakra spans the journey from puranic and pilgrimage texts to dimasa toponymy to the eventual loss from the standardized printed texts. By bringing this case to the fore, the study highlights the need for archives and oral memory of the region to reconstruct the lost geographies of Puranic world. It invites a reconsideration of critical edition work and a new philological approach to the plethora of manuscripts in the region that are not included in the canon.

Methodologically the article proposes that future research in Puranic studies should be based on the triangulation of the editions of the puranas, frontier religious practice and vernacular historiography. Ethically, it calls for looking at the Surma–Barak Valley and other frontier regions as not margins, but centre to any satisfactory discussion of the making and unmaking of sacred geographies in the South Asian region over time.

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