

Mapping spaces

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When the golden cosmic egg Hiranyagarbha was prised open, the upper half became the heavens, and the lower half became the earth. The space in between, akasha, was not emptiness but a vibrant medium, linked closely to sound. Akasha is one of the five primal elements, that both pervades everything — air, fire, water, earth — and binds it together.

Ever-receding space limits human beings to the distance they can cover primarily with their two feet, forcing them to inhabit a particular time-space continuum. The gods and demi-gods, even the demons, of Indian myths traversed space with nonchalant ease at a time when cars and airplanes were non-existent. Vishnu flies everywhere on the back of the huge bird Garuda. Surya, the sun-god travels across the skies in a chariot pulled by seven horses. Hanuman flew to Lakshman's rescue carrying an entire mountain so that he could deliver a life-saving herb. After the war in Lanka, Rama and Sita are carried back home in the pushpaka vimana, a flying chariot.

Most mythological characters also have the ability to inhabit spaces not accessible to mortals, such as patala, the netherworld, or the other lokas, or spheres of existence. It is interesting to see how these mythological stories and their concern with space are rendered in different forms of art.

The great river Ganga nourishes and sustains not only the millions of lives that live in the shelter of her tributaries but also the

very soul of India. To see the Ganga at Benaras, to touch waters that sustain life is to remember her divine origins; the way the celestial and the earthly worlds were bridged when she fell in torrents from above, only to be caught and tamed in Shiva's hair. It is to remember the fact that Shiva looms somewhere close by, allowing those waters to stream down from his matted locks.

One of the most stunning works of sculpture, Arjuna's Penance at Mahabalipuram, captures this descent of the Ganga on a huge sheet of rock. A deep gorge splits the visual field of the sculpture into two parts, left and right, and while there are various airborne celestial creatures towards the upper half, their bent knees suggesting flight, the lower half is anchored to this earth by the solidity of a herd of elephants and men with their feet on the ground. It is possible that rainwater collected in the surface above the cliff, and when rushing down the channel in the sculpture, simulated imaginatively the flow of the Ganga .

There are many devotional songs that refer to Shiva as Ganga-dhara, One-who-bears-the Ganga . Both in music and dance, the thunderous roar of the mighty Ganga is depicted with great energy and tightly packed beats which gradually slow down to a gentle flow. The dancer covers the space on stage with rapid undulating movements, supported by strong drumbeats and musical syllables to match. Vertical space is suggested by arms held over the head. When the spate is arrested and a trickle released from Shiva's hair, the dancer locates herself in one spot, her arms move lower and the drumbeats and ankle-bells convey the sound of the drops falling one by one.

Artisans working in bronze portrayed Ganga 's intimacy with Shiva in a different way. In the Chola bronzes, particularly those of Nataraja, we find sophistication at its peak, not only in the actual

expression of vital movement through the stillness of bronze but also in the use of symbols to convey concepts of time and space. The entire universe is Shiva's body, the sun and the moon his ornaments, and his speech forms the essence of all spoken language. Therefore Shiva's dance is one of transformation on a cosmic scale— where destruction precedes creation, where his flying locks of hair have the power to knock planets off course. In these images of Nataraja, the Ganga is represented by a small feminine form safely ensconced, almost hidden, in the whirling strands of his hair, her hands folded in the traditional gesture of veneration.

Space is an element relative to size, both reduced and made larger in many mythological stories. Transformed as a dwarf, Vishnu tricked the all-powerful demon-king Mahabali into granting him as much land as he could cover with three steps. The king, arrogant in his generosity, underestimated the little man who had asked for what amounted to nothing at all. To his dismay the dwarf began to grow, and grew to such gigantic proportions that with one stride he covered all of earth, with another all of the heavens so that there was no place for him to take a third step. The king offered his own head then to protect his word, and stepping on it, Vishnu pushed him into the netherworld and was known as Trivikrama. Interestingly, from Vishnu's toe then sprung the Ganga . While it is easier to depict the story in painting, there are rock sculptures of Vishnu as Trivikrama, where one leg is raised almost vertically to show the second step into the heavens.

Sometimes the entire universe is condensed, contained in the most lovable form of a toddler. Yashoda discovered this to her great amazement when she caught baby Krishna eating sand. Twisting his ear, she insisted that he open his little mouth. Secretly amused, Krishna

obeyed and Yashoda could not believe what she was seeing. Mountains, oceans, planets, living beings, other-worlds, entire galaxies and the heavens hummed inside that clean pink mouth. The same idea is conveyed by the juxtaposition of the two words, parama-purusha — the Supreme One, and gopala-baalam — baby Gopala, in the song *Bhaavayaami Gopaalabaalam*, where the first word is sung in the high upper register reaching up to God, and the second plummeting low to evoke a naughty toddler.

Krishna, now grown-up, dallies with the gopis of Vrindavan and with Radha. The divine dance, rasa-lila, takes place on a full-moon night when the sound of Krishna's flute entices them to encircle him. Space here, is both the enclosed space within the moving circle of dancing gopis, and the expanding space of the cosmos. Many schools of miniature paintings have celebrated this sacred space of Krishna's love-play with the gopis. The most striking are those where Krishna, having multiplied himself, appears beside each gopi. The individual self of the gopi simultaneously experiences a personal union with Him as well as an elevation and surrender within the larger entity of the collective. There is a transcendence, not only of outer space but of inner space as well.

Where is this inner space found? The Chandogya Upanishad describes man as brahma-pura, a city where the Brahman resides. Within this microcosm is a small lotus flower and the space within, the antar-akasha of the heart. This inner space is not caged within the ribs nor confined to the size of the small human heart. It is immense, limitless, containing heaven, earth, sun, moon, fire, air, lightning and the stars. As far as space extends in the outer world, so also is the extent of the interior of this heart-space.

The garbha-griha at the very core of a south-Indian temple is a small womb-chamber housing the image of the deity. To reach it, one has to cross several thresholds, traverse several layers. The four gopurams, or towering outer gateways are visible for miles in the distance and offer the first view of the temple to the pilgrim. Nandanar the untouchable saint, stood beyond the gopuram of the Thirupungur temple, yearning for a glimpse of Shiva. Famously, the mountain-like image of Nandi that blocked his view was moved to one side by the strength of his simple faith. To walk from the vast outer enclosure through successive inner enclosures to the very heart of the temple, where one is graced with a view of the divine image, is to progressively lose notions of one's self, one's quotidian relation with time and space, and to enter a different dimension where the time is suspended and space altered.

Much of our life plays itself out in a restricted geographical space, and even though modern inventions have made it possible to travel to any part of the globe, ultimately the mundane business of everyday living involves treading ground with one's feet. If one feels bogged down at times, it is useful to remember that the spirit can always soar through the vast inner space, seeking transcendence even while housed in the material and the physical. When the inner space expands to meet outer circumstances, one might achieve a sense of peace.