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## Bare Feet and Sacred Ground

Nugteren, Tineke

*Published in:*  
Religions

*DOI:*  
[10.3390/rel9070224](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9070224)

*Publication date:*  
2018

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Nugteren, T. (2018). Bare Feet and Sacred Ground: "Visnu was here". *Religions*, 2018.9 (7) 224, 1-21.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9070224>

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Article

# Bare Feet and Sacred Ground: “Viṣṇu Was Here”

Albertina Nugteren

Department of Culture Studies, Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences, Tilburg University,  
PO Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands; a.nugteren@tilburguniversity.edu

Received: 29 June 2018; Accepted: 16 July 2018; Published: 23 July 2018



**Abstract:** The meaning of a symbol is not intrinsic and should best be seen in relation to the symbolic order underlying it. In this article we explore the ritual complexities pertaining to the body’s most lowly and dirty part: the feet. On entering sacred ground persons are admonished to take off their footwear. In many parts of Asia pointing one’s feet in the direction of an altar, one’s teacher or one’s elders is considered disrespectful. Divine feet, however, are in many ways focal points of devotion. By reverently bowing down and touching the feet of a deity’s statue, the believer acts out a specific type of expressive performance. The core of this article consists of a closer look at ritualized behavior in front of a particular type of divine feet: the natural ‘footprint’ (*viṣṇupāda*) at Gayā, in the state of Bihar, India. By studying its ‘storied’ meaning we aspire to a deepened understanding of the ‘divine footprint’ in both its embodiedness and embeddedness. Through a combination of approaches—textual studies, ritual studies, ethnography—we emplace the ritual object in a setting in which regional, pan-Indian, and even cosmogonic myths are interlocked. We conclude that by an exclusive focus on a single ritual object—as encountered in a particular location—an object lesson about feet, footsteps, foot-soles, and footprints opens up a particular ‘grammar of devotion’ in terms of both absence and presence.

**Keywords:** Hinduism; India; material culture; ritual; Viṣṇu’s footprint; place of pilgrimage; sacred geography; imaginative embodiment

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## 1. Sacred Ground

### 1.1. The Object and Its Emplacement

The object is an octagonal basin, encased in silver. It stands on a low pedestal in the center of the shrine. Pilgrims flock around it and obscure my view. Some devotees make gestures of reverence, touch the basin, hold out a baby to receive a blessing, and scatter rose petals. Mourners throng around it and have their priest perform ancestor rituals. He pours milk in a conch-shell, then empties the conch-shell container in a longish dent in the middle of the basin. More flowers. Powdered sandalwood. Emerald-green basil leaves. White rice. A tray of fruits. Garlands strung of delicate white jasmine buds. Balls made of dough. Sesamum seeds. *Kuśa* grass. Brass water vessels. Marigolds.

It is only when temple assistants briskly remove all the stuff that for a moment the inside of the basin becomes visible and shows, vaguely, an uneven rock surface with a slight indentation in the center. It is perceived as a footprint. Lord Viṣṇu’s footprint: Viṣṇu Himself was here and left a tangible trace around which pilgrims and mourners gather. With the Lord Himself in their midst, would not all prayers, all wishes, all vows be successful?

The place is the Viṣṇupāda temple in Gayā, in the eastern state of Bihar, India. The location is known from ancient times, and is glorified in a wide range of literature, from appropriated references in the *Rgveda* to personal comments in TripAdvisor. Although it must be said that today the eyes of most international travelers are focused on its neighbor, traveler-friendly Bodhgayā with which

it shares part of the name. A Google search will almost always redirect to the Buddhist complex, and *Lonely Planet India* (Lonely Planet 2015, p. 520) admits: ‘Truth be told, the whole of this region is off the beaten track. Outside Bodhgaya, foreign tourists are almost nonexistent, so if you are looking up to sidestep mainstream travel, this unfashionable pocket could be an unexpected highlight.’

It may be true that Gayā for foreign tourists merely serves as a transit point on the way to its Buddhist neighbor, ‘Destination Enlightenment’ (Geary 2008), but the town of Gayā, as one of the main ritual centers of Hinduism, on a normal day draws a steady stream of visitors who go there to perform ancestor rituals for the recently deceased. In special calendrical moments huge crowds of locals and pilgrims alike flock to the river to bathe at the most auspicious time, pour out water offerings to the Sun, perform simplified or elaborate ancestor rituals, and visit one or more of the sacred places in and around the town: particularly the ‘immortal tree’, the ponds, the hills, and of course Viṣṇu’s footprint (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Gayā—the footprint with traces of milk, petals and *piṇḍas* (Albertina Nugteren).

## 1.2. Introduction

The narratives told about places of pilgrimage in India have a variety of sources. These may consist of (1) written references made to a particular event or place in ancient texts. Although these may be no more than cryptic fragments, they are cherished as authenticating perspectives on myths, miracles, divine agency, and the special power with which a specific location is said to be imbued. (2) On a secondary level a place of pilgrimage may be mentioned and ‘storied’ in the great epics, *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*. One of the epic heroes or heroines may have visited this place, or better still, may have had a life-changing experience here. (3) On a tertiary level a long laudatory poem may have been composed, a *māhātmya* or *sthalapurāṇa*, in praise of the sacred geography and glorifying its merits for anyone who visits such a place with a pure heart.<sup>1</sup> Although these panegyrics are often in Sanskrit, locally available copies in cheap print tend to be abridgments in vernacular languages. (4) And fourthly there are the local experts, ranging from long-established brahmanic families who

<sup>1</sup> Of this genre, Glücklich (2008, p. 146) wrote: ‘The earliest promotional works aimed at tourists from that era were called mahatmyas.’

tend to keep themselves aloof from the pilgrims' bustle but are excellent storytellers, to a special class of priests who serve as *paṇḍas*. *Paṇḍa* is a shortened form of *paṇḍita*, a learned person. Together they form a class of hereditary religious guides (and ritual fixers) at the major north Indian places of pilgrimage (Lochtefeld 2011, 2017). Their exclusive rights to serve certain families in the wider region are often protected by detailed genealogical records and the hand-written so-called *paṇḍa*-ledgers. They facilitate any necessary ritual actions, particularly rituals intended to help the transition of the recently dead to the state of ancestors.

Although Gayā's track record is richly established in all four types of sources mentioned above, in this article we will only briefly touch upon them, as our focus is not on the archaic pilgrims' town as such, but on one of its main features, the footprint. In Section 2.1 we introduce the fascinating world of feet, foot-soles, and footsteps in the Indian subcontinent. In section two (Section 2.2), we follow a particular form of divine embodiment, the rare footprint of the divine. In Section 2.3 we wonder how to qualify such an alleged footprint and discuss footprints (and their derivatives) as relics, representations, and reminders. In doing so we have crossed over from human-made objects to the naturally sacred, or, as ancient Indian custom has it, the self-born (*svayambhū*), self-existing, self-revealed theophany of a divine manifestation. In section four (Section 2.4), we trail—literally, in this case—Viṣṇu's footsteps through cosmogony, mythology and sacred topography, and stop in Gayā, where his divine footprint on a natural rock has become a center of devotion and ancestor rituals. By selecting three textual passages (Sections 2.4.1–2.4.3) a patchwork of 'storied' evidence and local appropriation of pan-Indian myths unfolds. We began this article with a brief sensory impression of the bustle around the footprint and pick up the trail anew by describing, analyzing and categorizing the ritual behavior in the direct presence of the footprint (Section 2.5.1). We further structure this section by zooming out to include its wider setting: a natural ensemble of sacred river (Section 2.5.2), tree (Section 2.5.3) and hills (Section 2.5.4), and, on another level, solar alignment. Finally, in part 3, we use the object lesson we learned from feet and the ritual behavior displayed around the footprint—both in its direct presence and in the sense of its narrative meaning—to discuss the embodiedness and embeddedness of a divine footprint in what we found to be a vast, layered and interlocked cultural complex.

## 2. Bare Feet

### 2.1. Of Feet and Footsteps

In Indian literature, performance art, religious life, and everyday social etiquette the human foot is both ambiguous and polyvalent. Generally, feet are humble, impure and even polluting (Moss 2016). In a hierarchically ordered society, feet both literally and figuratively are the human body's most modest and dirty part. This is particularly true in India where an ancient body symbolism—of the First Man, Puruṣa—once connected the social order with the human physique, and vice versa. The division of the First Man's physical body into a hierarchy of *varṇas* (hereditary classes) is one of the first delineations of the Hindu social body. Its four castes or classes (*caturvarṇa*) were said to correspond, in descending order, both literally and symbolically, to the four domains of the human body: the head; the shoulders and arms; the stomach area; and the legs, including the feet (cf. Smith 1994).

India may long have been a barefoot country but also has a strong culture-specific etiquette concerning feet and footwear. Putting off one's footwear before entering a home or a temple has many grounds. The first is a basic one: hygiene. The second is: a sign of respect. Crossing the threshold between the streets or fields and the house, while leaving one's footwear outside, denotes an acknowledgement of traversing from one domain to another. From the public and potentially dusty and dirty ambiance of the outside world one crosses over and steps into the domestic domain, where more subtle and possibly more rigid etiquette is required. Some may see this as an acknowledgement of the feminine domain where cleanliness and ritual propriety should rule, others simply refer to it as 'this is our custom.' In another way, home is supposed to be a more relaxed place than work or traffic, and it may be a relief to let one's shoes outside and free the feet from their day-long captivity. In some

Hindu households, leather shoes and sandals are not allowed, and it is seen as a sign of respect when one leaves any offensive leather article outside, be it shoes or belt or briefcase. For some, home is traditionally also the place where one's elders live. Entering their presence in most cases no longer requires the 'touching of their feet' as a gesture of respect, humility, and submissiveness, but entering their premises may still trigger the act of leaving one's shoes outside. In some households there are, almost imperceptible to the outsider, zones of 'foot etiquette'. Families who can afford to do so may prefer to have a zone in which behavior is liberal—including footwear, smoking, eating non-vegetarian food and sitting with one's feet up—whereas there is a more private zone behind this where such things are rejected if not strictly prohibited (cf. Lamb 2005).

While in the domestic domain many traditional rules regarding feet and footwear may have disappeared, this is rarely so in temples and at other sacred sites. The threshold experience—indeed liminal in both a literal and a symbolic sense—of shedding one's footwear and walking on bare feet into the cool and shaded interior of an ancient temple may be an effective way to leave the glaring sunlight and bustle of the street behind. On the other hand, the receptiveness to another dimension may be counteracted by the feelings of vulnerability or downright helplessness upon entering 'modern' temples: slippery tiles wet with oblations, wilting petals, rotting fruit peels and sacrificial leaves. Walking around barefooted, especially in the form of a *pradakṣiṇa* (ritual circumambulation) before one enters the sanctum (*garbhagr̥ha*), may be a prolonged liminal experience. It prepares the devotee, through the senses—a clair-obscur for the eyes, ages of incense in the air, and bare feet grounded on stone—as well as inwardly by surrender and anticipation, for the encounter with the divine (cf. Eck 2007; Vidal 2006; Huyler 1994). Many are the temples and shrines where one devoutly touches the feet of the deity—or the living guru, for that matter. Full prostrations may not be possible because of the pressing crowds, but most of the faithful at least try to touch the *mūrti* (icon). The feet of a statue are often elaborately hennaed, circled with ankle-bells, and decorated with toe-rings; they thus invite the flow of emotions (*rasa*) and visitors may respond by laying gifts of flowers and incense at the divine feet. Moreover, as in many temples devotees find themselves at eye level with the feet of the Lord, this is the level where they can ritualize privately, intimately, without the need for a priest. In other moments of the daily ritual procedure devotees witness how the image of the deity is washed, including its feet, and subsequently dressed, decorated and fed. It should come as no surprise that this bath-water is feverishly collected as reputedly having healing and protective properties.

In some shrines, however, there may be no iconic deity or image of the revered guru or the local ruler, but merely an empty seat carrying a pair of divine feet, or a glass case holding a pair of used shoes or sandals. When asked about the origin and meaning of such objects and the ritualized behavior they evoke, some devotees refer to passages in the *Rāmāyaṇa* where the rightful ruler, Rāma, was replaced by his brother Bhārata and sent into exile. When Bhārata unsuccessfully begged his elder brother to return, he took Rāma's pair of 'paduka' with him and placed them on the king's throne in Ayodhyā, to serve as his proxy. A saint's sandals, especially the toe-knob sandals popularly known as 'paduka' (Hindi *pādikā* or *pādukā*)<sup>2</sup>, are particularly popular in the visualization of the sacred, so much even that they may be carried around in a garland-covered palanquin (*pālkhī*), such as is the case with the saint Dnyaneswar (Jñāneśvara) whose 'padukas' are carried in a silver bullock cart from Ālandi to Paṇḍharpūr or reverse (cf. Shima 1988; Stanley 1992; Glushkova 2015).<sup>3</sup> A beautifully detailed depiction of 'paduka' on a stone sculpture's feet is to be seen in the Odisha State Museum in

<sup>2</sup> In this article, in which Indo-ethnography (a combination of ethnographic, textual and comparative approaches) moves between the Sanskrit of ancient texts, written Hindi, anglicized spelling inherited from the colonial era, and vernacular pronunciation, I use spelling suited to the particular contexts. This implies that I need to alternate, such as in the case of 'paduka', used along with *pādikā*, or Vishnupad Temple along with *viṣṇupāda*.

<sup>3</sup> One of the other regional Sants for which this may be performed is Tukaram (Tukārām, 1568/1608–1649/1650), the saint-singer whose deeply devotional songs are still sung during Mahārāṣṭrian pilgrimages. A relevant fragment from verse 1165 goes: 'God [is] a stone; a step [is] a stone/the one [is] worshipped, the other is trodden under a foot' (Tukaram 2003).

Bhubaneswar. Here the deity, Kṛṣṇa—easily recognizable by his flute-playing pose (*natavarāsana*)—is wearing the typical platform shoes. Not only are the ‘paduka’ intricately detailed, as if the ‘stilts’ are placed on lotus-petalled standers, his feet and ankles are covered with jewelry. A dwarfish devotee (possibly a *gopāla* or *gopī*, cowherd) reverently touches the soles of Kṛṣṇa’s high-heeled sandal and looks up at him in ecstatic fervor.<sup>4</sup>

One often finds a pair of divine feet chiseled in stone, and resting on a round lotus pedestal, sprinkled with yellow kunkum (curcumin) and red sindur powder (vermilion, cinnabar), and covered with flowers and coins, in front of temples inside which the deity is portrayed in full iconic splendor. Feet or footwear replacing statues may symbolize both presence and absence, form and formlessness, and evoke gestures of devotion as intense as the human or divine figure would have done.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps even more so, since such stone feet are approachable, within reach of one’s hands and eyes, free-standing so that one may make a reverent circumambulation, without priests rushing the devotee through.<sup>6</sup> The touching of divine feet is experienced as a full encounter, a tactile ‘cross-over’ possibly even richer than mere seeing (*darshan*; *darśana*) since this reaching out, kneeling and touching includes various physical gestures of devotion involving multiple senses and the entire human body (cf. [Howes and Classen 2014](#)).

Another way of weaving the divine into embodied acts of devotion is the common practice of making *raṅgolī* (*raṅgāvalī*), respectively *ālpānā* (*ālimpana*, *ālepanā*) or *kōlam* or any other regionally specific name for colorful intricately patterned designs on temple floors and at one’s doorsteps.<sup>7</sup> This is mostly done by women, who may have a large repertoire with patterns and colors fitting the seasons and calendrical occasions ([Nagarajan 1993](#); [Tadvalkar 2015](#)). Or their repertoire may consist of one single intricate pattern they apply anew every morning. It is an art form practiced in the belief that these decorative paintings—applied directly to the earth, Bhūdevī ([Nagarajan 1998](#))—keep the dwelling, the village, or the city safe and prosperous. The making of these ‘painted prayers’ ([Huyler 1999](#)) may be a ritual in itself, or may accompany specific ritual vows (*vrata*). Such decorative patterns may be made with paint, ground flour, rice powder or colored chalk. Intricate floral-geometrical designs mostly have a dot or a series of dots in the center but some may instead have a pair of divine feet in the middle. On special days richly decorated feet (*pagla*, *pagliya*) may appear, especially on festival days associated with goddess Lakṣmī, who is considered the deity that protects the home. The painted feet may be in pairs, statically positioned in the center of a rich decoration, but some women produce feet that seem to be moving, ushering the goddess into the house where she will bring happiness and prosperity to the family. At night, especially during Diwali (Dīpavālī) the series of footsteps may be lighted with oil lamps. Goddess Lakṣmī may also be represented together with her consort Viṣṇu. Both symbolize happiness, auspiciousness, and prosperity. They are painted in the form of plants, creepers, and flowers, especially the lotus, or cornucopias and vases of plenty and other symbols of prosperity and domestic happiness. The divine couple may also be represented by their feet, sometimes in juxtaposition, as in southern India. Another type of moving feet belongs to Bāla-Kṛṣṇa,

<sup>4</sup> A study of Indian footwear ([Jain-Neubauer 2000](#)) may easily detract us from our main topic. Yet it is worth noting here that the ‘paduka’ is mostly associated with mendicants and an ascetic lifestyle. This may have its roots in the non-violent origin of the material (it is usually made of wood, not leather), and its special construction. Although these platform shoes may be very impractical for walking—let alone dancing, as Kṛṣṇa does—they are designed in such a way that they prevent accidental trampling on insects and vegetation. As both ambiguity and polyvalence are key concepts in our analysis of feet and footprints it is worth pointing out that a pair of ‘paduka’ used to be part of a bride’s trousseau, hinting at the eroticism of the foot and the length high-heeled shoes add to the lady’s legs.

<sup>5</sup> For a more systematic discussion of this, especially in the light of the iconicity and non-iconicity debate, see further on, Section 2.3 (Of relics, representations, and reminders).

<sup>6</sup> The term ‘defiant religiosity’ ([Larios and Voix 2018](#)) may be too strong here, but obviously two of the affective qualities of pavement shrines, tree shrines and foot-pedestals right at the entrance of temples are their accessibility and informality.

<sup>7</sup> Anyone who happens to have been caught in pre-wedding frenzy in India may be aware of the ‘haldi’ (Bengali: *holud*) ceremony traditionally held for the bride. Turmeric paste is applied to her face and body in sensuous patterns akin to *raṅgolī* and especially her feet are objects of artistic attention: intricate decorations made of henna (*mehendi*, *mendi*) covering the entire foot and ankle (cf. [Huyler 2008](#)).

baby-Krishna, lovingly produced on the occasion of his birthday, *janmāṣṭamī* (or *gokulāṣṭamī*). Small footsteps made of rice flour may be drawn on doorsteps but also inside the house, especially leading from the domestic altar to the kitchen, where baby Krishna is invited to gorge on butter and sweets.

Another type of divine feet we need to mention here are reproductions of deities' feet as portable devotional articles. They may be made of any material: carved in wood or stone, plastic, or paper, painted or left bare. They may come as cheap paper reproductions merely showing simple outlines of a pair of anonymous feet—as a tentative empty container, to be filled in with whatever divine name one imagines—or with the foot-soles filled, literally to the brim, with auspicious symbols pertaining to a particular deity. In the case of Viṣṇu, such foot-soles would contain his four major attributes: the conch shell (*shankh*; *śaṅkha*), war discus (*chakra*; *cakra*), mace (*gada*; *gadā*), and lotus flower (Hindi: *kamal*; Sanskrit: *padma*, *puṣkara*, *punḍarikā*). In addition, one can typically find the ammonite, a fossilized spiral shell (*śālagrāma*), or the primeval serpent (Nāgarāja, Śeṣanāga, Ādiśeṣa, popularly referred to as Shesh). Such foot-soles, inscribed with his most evocative attributes, may be museum pieces, but may also be sold as cheap prints or amulets in any street stall (cf. [Bhatti and Pinney 2011](#)). As we will see below, visitors of Viṣṇu's footprint in Gayā sometimes make use of such plastic forms to deploy them as bright and conspicuous overlays covering the rather indistinct 'real' footprint (Figure 2). Of a special type of mobile (and marketable!) footprints are those facsimiles reproduced on textile or strong fibrous paper (such as the handcrafted lokta paper from Nepal) by rubbing the original footprints off. By affixing a piece of paper or thin cloth over the stone footprints, and rubbing the contours of the feet with wax, paint or charcoal, a close copy of the minuscule elevations and depressions is produced. It may serve as an easily portable relic.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 2.** Gayā—the footprint decorated for evening worship (Albertina Nugteren).

## 2.2. Of Divine Footprints

Whereas so far we have introduced man-made representations of feet and footsteps, there is a crucial distinction to be made between those manufactured ones (*mānuṣa*) on the one hand,

<sup>8</sup> A photograph of a Tibetan monk preparing a colorful copy of the sacred footprints of the Buddha impressed on stone in front of the Mahābodhi temple in Bodhgayā is shown on p. 131 of ([Leoshko 1988](#)).

and divine (*daivya*) footprints supposedly left on natural rocks by the gods themselves, on the other. With self-manifested ‘footprints’ we emphatically mean ‘imprints’—perceptibly sunken, concave (hollow) impressions made on a surface by the pressure of body weight—in order to distinguish them from manmade depictions of foot-soles and feet in whatever material, which are raised, carved and convex (cambered). South Asia’s topography, in the experience of believers, is brimming with such material traces of epic heroes, Hindu gods, Buddha’s footprints and foot-soles (Kinnard 2000, 2014) and even footprints of the Prophet Muhammad (Hasan 1993; cf. Schimmel 1980). They are mostly natural holes, dents, and depressions more or less in the form of a foot imprint, with or without distinct indications of toes. Some of them are huge, but their size is normally not experienced as crucial; that gods supposedly leave giant footprints is normally not a barrier for believing in their authenticity. The size of the footprint in Gayā is not gigantic, a ‘naturalistic’ divine size of about 40 cm.<sup>9</sup> Our main interest here is in divine footprints—hollow imprints—in their natural and ‘original’ state. The confusion, even among scholars, about what is imprecisely referred to (and lumped together) as footprints, is obvious. This lack of precision and categorical fuzziness made us decide to use the term ‘footprint’ exclusively for the hollow indent in natural rock, of which it is claimed that a god or the Buddha made this with his foot.

### 2.3. Of Relics, Representations and Reminders

In a composite culture (Alam 1999; Mohamed 2007) we find innumerable salvific spaces woven into a web of myths, stories, and sacred topographies. Objects like divine footprints confirm the presence of the gods and goddesses (or of the historical Buddha, as in Sri Lanka, cf. Skeen 1870) not only in national history but also through personal encounter in pilgrimage.<sup>10</sup> Hyperbolic sayings about local icons being considered absolutely and completely Viṣṇu should be seen in the perspective of the Vaiṣṇava theological tradition. Moreover, oral traditions of popular piety ascribe a cumulative significance to their ‘own’ icon (*arcā*): not only is it interwoven with ‘puranic’ origin, the image has its own personality and is treated as a distinct person (Narayanan 2011, p. 569). Such images may also be cumulative in another way; it is often believed that an iconic statue of a deity, a half-figurative and half-non-figurative ‘relic’ such as a footprint, or an aniconic object such as a *śālagrāma* fossil, collects ‘energy’ over the years, absorbing not only layers of grease, milk, soot, turmeric, and vermilion, but also the waves of devotion radiated by generations of pilgrims. Having been the object of intense devotion ‘for as long as one can remember’ is considered to have charged both the material object and the place of pilgrimage with an almost tangible power and spiritual magnetism (Preston 1992, p. 33).<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to what is prescribed in sacred texts about images of the divine ‘properly’ housed in temples (Kramrisch 1976) many representations of the divine are found elsewhere, such as beneath trees, at the outer edges of religious compounds, on kitchen shelves and in wildernesses. Whatever rules there are about formal consecration of buildings and statues, believers also have a tendency to

<sup>9</sup> There is considerable confusion and contestation about the *viṣṇupāda* qualifying as (1) either a natural footprint; as (2) a manmade sunken foot-sole; (3) an ‘engraving of his right foot in the basalt’ (Vidyarthi 1978, p. 4); (4) a reproduction (Asher 1988, p. 74); (5) a ‘replica in stone’ (idem); (6) a ‘sculptured impression’ (idem); (7) a man-made raised foot or foot-sole; (8) or a carved pair of feet, in plural. Yet it seems safe, based on its present appearance, to copy the term Glücklich (2008, p. 3) used, ‘a footprint-like indentation’. See further footnotes 10, 19, and 20. This confusion may be partly due to (possibly) later replacements, partly to the situation that most of the time the silver-coated basin is filled with offerings all over, obscuring any view one might need ‘to see for oneself.’

<sup>10</sup> Although it might seem more relevant here to refer to the many forms in which Buddha’s feet occur in neighboring Bodhgayā (about intricate relations between the footprint in Gayā and the sculptured pairs of feet in Bodhgayā, see Paul 1985; Asher 1988; Kinnard 2000), the allusion to his footprint on natural rock at the summit of Mount Sumanala (Adam’s Peak in Sri Lanka) is deliberate. Based on morphological considerations these two single depressions in natural rocks are much more on a par; on the same footing, as it were.

<sup>11</sup> I borrow this term from James Preston (1992, p. 33), but find that his scholarly caveat (‘It is not an intrinsic “holy” quality of mysterious origins that radiates objectively from a place of pilgrimage; rather, spiritual magnetism derives from human concepts and values, via historical, geographical, social, and other forces that coalesce in a sacred center.’) should not obscure the literal meaning of *śakti*-power-energy attributed to devotional objects in India. Or, as Preston adds: ‘Folk explanations of the spiritual magnetism attributed to a sacred center are valid from the participant’s point of view.’



build intimate relationships with organically grown (i.e., self-revealed, *svayambhū*) embodiments of the divine. Natural forms of divinity have this innate appeal, and as ‘representational modes’ and markers of divine presence such objects combine a visual-tactile encounter with a natural element. This poses the question of iconicity versus aniconicity. Gaifman (2017, p. 338) defines ‘aniconic’ as indicating ‘a physical object, monument, image or visual scheme that denotes the presence of a divine power without a figural representation of the deity (or deities) involved.’ It appears that divine footprints are neither completely anthropomorphic nor completely non-figural. Allowing the notion of a range or spectrum between the strictly iconic and the strictly aniconic may allow us to reflect on what Hindus experience as a god’s divine pervasiveness. Hinduism is known for its unabashedly figural materiality but also has a rich and profound tradition in aniconic—or, rather, semi-iconic—imagination and representation of the divine. In popular cults aniconic and anthropomorphic elements blend and co-exist easily. A pair of anthropomorphized footsteps—originating as holes, dents, or hollows in natural rock, but adapted to look like imprints of ‘real’ feet—may tell us a different story of the footprint than those man-made cultic feet and foot-soles used in regular worship. These, in their turn, should be distinguished from portable second-order ‘facsimiles’ produced by rubbing off the original form onto a piece of paper or textile.

The scholar may make a distinction between hollow imprints, however shapeless, as more authentic than ‘imitative’ representations, being artifacts and clearly the work of an artisan. But in a spiritual sense both are signs of a transitive exchange: it is man who sees the divine in a stone (cf. Aktor 2017a) or in a light indent in a rock, and it is man who chisels out a pair of divine feet from stone after having imagined the feet as pre-existing in the stone. The index of divine presence may be higher in the first form, lower in the second form, and still the devotional tendency to anthropomorphize aniconic or half-iconic objects is ubiquitous. We may also speak of the co-existence of various modes, as in a spectrum (Aktor 2017b): divine feet are found to be present in this world as non-figural, semi-figural, and fully figural. In Hinduism, feet may function as recognizable embodied forms of divinity, but the extent to which they are literally or figuratively embodied (i.e., anthropomorphized in form or ‘merely’ in the mind) may vary. One might logically expect that naturally revealed (*svayambhūta*, *svarūpi*, *ekibhūta-rūpi*) objects are accorded a higher mode of denoting divine presence, but this is not necessarily so. The purely non-figural often invites and draws out the iconic from the aniconic (Haberman 2017): devotional practices of worship tend to transform an aniconic object into an iconic one, or at least a half-iconic one, as is the case with footprints. Naturally manifested footprints, however storied and celebrated, are ‘barely there’: a vague outline, an indication of toes, merely a heel. In the experience of the devout, such footprints, being merely what they are, invite being ritualized, and in that process receive reconfiguration: an emphasized outline here, a slight impression hollowed out to more effect there, and toes tend to become neatly compartmentalized.<sup>12</sup> What on one scale may count as an act of devotion—lovingly helping the divine to manifest more clearly—may, on another scale, count as a lack of faith. Or, as Gaifman (2017, p. 350) aptly concludes: ‘the realia of practice and worshippers’ perspectives may not fit scholarly paradigms.’

Another pressing question is: are they relics? In Buddhism, with its long-lasting discourse on the early aniconicity of the Buddha image (Tanaka 1998; Kinnard 2000), there appears to be a consensus

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<sup>12</sup> In this regard the antiquity of Viṣṇu’s central footprint at Gayā was argued by Paul (1985, p. 140) as follows: ‘[ . . . ] indicated by a simple outline the sacred object is neither encumbered with conventional auspicious marks nor entangled by inscriptional paraphernalia.’ Since the objective of Paul’s discussion was the comparison with Buddha’s neatly carved-out slightly hollow pair of feet on a lotus pedestal by the side of the Mahābodhi Temple in Bodhgayā, her argument is only partially relevant here. But there is no denying that, once bared of its decorations and the plastic overlay (bearing Viṣṇu’s emblems for the evening worship), the silver-enshrined imprint in the nucleus of the Vishnupad Temple looks archaic, even if only as a result of the frequent anointings and rubbings. See also what O’Malley wrote more than a century ago, in 1906 (O’Malley 2007, p. 63): ‘The outline of these footprints [sic] are still to be seen [ . . . ] on a large granite stone with an uneven top, which is much worn with the frequent washings it daily undergoes.’

that the existing natural footprints<sup>13</sup> of the Buddha, among which we merely mention the Śrī Pāda in Sri Lanka, are *pāribhogaka* relics. Such relics are objects that are sanctified by having been used or owned by the historical Buddha. An imprint of his foot thus counts as a relic-of-use, or rather, a relic-of-touch. Could we likewise consider the *svayambhū* footprint ascribed to Viṣṇu as a relic testifying to the god's physical presence in this particular place, once in primeval times, and the footprint as a depression that had been produced by the pressure of his (anthropomorphic even if in some cases of giant proportions) foot on rock? Whatever dialogic imagination (Bakhtin 2008, p. 276) we may use, we enter a tension-filled discourse in which Hindu theology, Hindu on-the-ground devotionalism, and possibly our own distanced position 'brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object'. Or, as Kinnard (2000, p. 36) writes: 'On the one hand, a footprint<sup>14</sup> is considered to be the actual mark left by Viṣṇu or the Buddha and thus has been regarded as a kind of corporeal extension, even an actual embodiment. On the other hand, a footprint is not a foot but rather simply the empty mark left by a foot.'

At the very least, for the faithful it acts as a contact zone. In Hinduism the gods can be highly visible, tangible, and audible, and especially the ritual interaction with objects evokes anthropomorphic aesthetics. Yet also the formless (*nirguṇa*) is highly revered, and exists in a parallel relation with the explicit form (*saguṇa*).<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Vaiṣṇava Hindus conceive the *pādas* as the actual abode of Viṣṇu. According to the *Gayāmāhātmya* (109.20, pp. 43–5) Viṣṇu is *vyaktāvyakta*, both manifest and unmanifest, in the footprint. Any artisan-produced footprint, properly inaugurated, is, essentially, a *mūrti*. A *mūrti* is a man-made image in which, through ritual consecration, the deity is invited to dwell. A *svayambhū mūrti* is more: it is a mark created by Viṣṇu himself.

#### 2.4. How a Divine Footprint Became Embodied and Embedded

After this long prelude we now look more closely at the footprint in Gayā. Its pedigree is impressive, well-attested, and traceable through all four categories of sources (see above, page 2). Just as we may need a vivid imagination to see a footprint in a dented piece of rock, we need a narrative gaze (Morgan 2012, p. 67) to intuit what the faithful see. Accordingly, we first follow the track of three different textual motifs that are often presented as explaining, justifying as well as adding the prestige of antiquity to the existing cult. The scenes are patchworks of various text passages. We begin (Section 2.4.1) with a Vedic creation scene in which the world was created by sacrifice. The sacrifice took place in primeval (empty, unordered) space. A mysterious footprint was all there was. It was this shallow pit that served as the first sacrificial altar around which the gods gathered. Then, in Section 2.4.2 we see Viṣṇu taking three giant steps, thus ordering space. In scene three (Section 2.4.3), we see a ritual re-enactment of both, at Gayā.

##### 2.4.1. Scene One: The First Footprint, the Place of Sacrifice

In the beginning, when the earth was still soft, someone left a first footprint: was it the footprint of a cow, of goddess Iḷā, or of Speech? They were triple and one. Together they ensured the flow

<sup>13</sup> In some sources we read that Gautama Buddha left three footprints: two in what is now Afghanistan (or Pakistan?), and one on the Samantakūṭa of Samanala Mountain. In Sri Lanka it is speculated that he left his left footprint on the Samanala summit (also known as Adam's Peak) and his right footprint in Anurādhapura, a feat that may well be an intended parallel to Viṣṇu's wide strides (cf. Paul 1985, p. 140). Both Myanmar and Thailand claim to have real footprints in natural rock too (cf. Sailer 1993; Sailer's website on [www.dralbani.com/buddhafootprint](http://www.dralbani.com/buddhafootprint); Guerney 2014; and various entries on 'Buddha's footprints' or 'buddhapāda' in Encyclopedias, such as in Keown and Prebish (2013, p. 113) and Buswell and Lopez (2014, p. 154)). For a categorization, see my unpublished paper presentation 'Of feet, footsteps, foot-marks, foot-soles and footprints of the Buddha', EASR annual conference, Bern, 17–21 June 2018 ([www.easr2018.org/program/session\\_S37](http://www.easr2018.org/program/session_S37) 'Plurality and Materiality').

<sup>14</sup> Kinnard seems to speak deliberately of footprints without distinguishing between feet, foot-soles, footsteps and footprints.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, verse 33 in the popular *Viṣṇucālīsā*, the forty couplets written in praise of Viṣṇu by Sundardās: 'agaṇit rūp anup apārā/nirguṇ saguṇ svarūp tumhārā / /' ('your forms are countless, incomparable and infinite; you are both personal and impersonal', or translated in a more philosophical vein: 'with and without qualities/attributes').

of abundance, of milk, of the cosmic order (*ṛta*). Or was it Viṣṇu's footprint (*Viṣṇoḥ pada*), whose three strides had resulted in a footprint on Earth? His footprints are containers of sweetness and abundance. This is how the gods used 'ghee-dripping' Iṅā's footprint or wide-reaching Viṣṇu's footprint as an altar into which oblations were poured.<sup>16</sup> Man knows this because seers and poets, as 'knowers of the track', told them so. A *pada-jñā* knows that footprints serve as trails, to be traced by them and their descendants; it is they who show the newly deceased their way. In the words of Gonda (1969, p. 176), Iṅā's hands and feet drip with butter, and leave a trail of footprints, a track of goodness; or of Sandness (2010, p. 519) who concludes: 'A footprint is a trace, a track or sign by means of which one has visible evidence of an invisible presence.' And both have ghee-dripping feet (*ghṛtapada*) for it is through sacrifice that the living and the dead find their way beyond by following the ancient footsteps.<sup>17</sup>

#### 2.4.2. Scene Two: The Division of Primeval Space, Viṣṇu's Three Steps

Creation myths in Hinduism are practically innumerable, but here we select a single motif, that of Lord Viṣṇu creating the cosmos by dividing it into three distinct realms. Although in the disguise of a dwarf, by taking three giant steps he could claim the space he had covered with his three strides as his own. He thus brought order in empty space by his strides. This is how Viṣṇu became the god of ordered space:

From the *R̥gveda*: 'I will proclaim the heroic deeds of Viṣṇu, who measured apart the earthly realms, who propped up the upper dwelling place, when the wide-striding one stepped forth three times. [ . . . ] All creatures dwell in his three wide steps. [ . . . ] he alone has supported three-fold the earth, the sky, and all creatures.'

From the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*: '[ . . . ] the demons thought, 'All this world is ours.' They said, 'Let us divide this earth, and when we have divided it let us live upon it.' Then they set out to divide it [ . . . ]. The gods heard about this and said, [ . . . ] Let us go where the demons are dividing it, for who would we be if we did not share in it?' They placed Viṣṇu [ . . . ] at their head and went there and said, 'Let us also share in this earth; let a portion of it be ours.' The demons, rather jealously, replied, 'As much as this Viṣṇu lies on, so much we give to you.'

From the *Vāyupurāṇa*: '[ . . . ] O king, you should give me the space covered in three strides.' 'I grant this,' answered the king, [ . . . ] and since he thought him to be just a dwarf he himself was very pleased about it. But the dwarf, the lord [i.e., Viṣṇu in his dwarf incarnation] stepped over the heaven, the sky, and earth, this whole universe, in three strides [ . . . ]. He revealed that the whole universe was in his body; there is nothing in all the worlds that is not pervaded by the noble one.'<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The sacrificial altar (*vedi*) traditionally is not a raised altar as such, but a sacrificial pit—a shallow depression in the ground—around which the gods were invited to sit down. In Gayā most of the places where mourners are to offer *pinḍas* to their ancestors are referred to as *vedis*. Both footprints and *vedis* share the same symbolic order as the navel, a parallel we find in *R̥gveda* 3.29.4 (the footprint as the 'navel of the Earth'). In Gayā one of the parallel stories told of the giant Gayāsur, and sometimes portrayed in popular colorprints sold to pilgrims, is that the fire sacrifice referred to in scene three (Section 2.4.3) had taken place in the *asura*'s navel (*nabhi*).

<sup>17</sup> This summary is based on various cryptic passages in the *R̥gveda*, mainly RV 3.23-29. See also *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 1.8.1.

<sup>18</sup> These translations are taken from chapter five (on Viṣṇu) in Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty's *Hindu Myths. A sourcebook translated from the Sanskrit* (Doniger 1978, pp. 176–9). The locus classicus for 'the three strides of Viṣṇu' (*trīṇi padāni viṣṇoḥ*) is *R̥gveda* 1.22.17–21; additionally 1.154.1–5. Although these three text passages are wide apart in time and context they are selected on the basis of their narrative strands, together forming a fabric that is locally told and retold, as well as used to authenticate the ritual practices. From a text-historical perspective the key question would be: when were such myths revolving around Viṣṇu woven into the fabric of Gayā as a place of pilgrimage famous for its *śrāddha* rites? Text passages such as *Viṣṇusūtra* 85.40 and *Viṣṇupurāṇa* 3.45, where the *viṣṇupāda* is casually mentioned, may provide links between narrative motifs and the specific location, but a full study in which the third key textual element, Gayā testified as a famous *śrāddhatīrtha*, would nicely fit in, is far beyond the scope of this article.

### 2.4.3. Scene Three: Viṣṇu's Footprint on Earth: Gayā

Viṣṇu's divine footsteps may spiritually be traced in every place where the sacred is encountered, but in the perception of many there is one particular footprint that is in precise alignment with the celestial path: Viṣṇu's footprint (*viṣṇupāda*) at Gayā, in the contemporary state of Bihar, eastern India. According to myth (*Vāyupurāṇa* chapters 105–106; *Gayāmāhātmya*) it is here where Viṣṇu touched Earth in his three strides, and left the imprint of his right foot on natural rock.<sup>19</sup> That alone would make it a formidable place, but the ancient cosmogonic myth, in which the global term 'earth' had not been specified or made geographically-topographically explicit, got blended with place-specific myths and local lore. We thus have a universal cosmogonic myth, that of Viṣṇu's three giant steps, on the one hand, and two versions of a local myth, on the other.<sup>20</sup> The most basic version of the local narrative tells us of a demon (*asura*) by the name of Gaya (m.) who had been engaged in such extreme austerities that this interfered with the power of Yama, the deity who presides over death. The three main gods, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, were willing to intervene and came down in the guise of brahmans. They asked the *asura* for a sacred place where they could perform *yagya*, sacrifice. As a boon it was agreed that they could use the body of Gayāsura (Gaya the *asura*) as the location for a sacrificial fire-pit. For this, the demon had to lie completely still, without moving, for a full seven days. It was in fact a plot to kill him. At the beginning of the final day Lord Śiva took the form of a rooster and crowed already at midnight. Immediately, the demon, deluded by the 'false dawn', got up and disturbed the *yagya*. The three brahmans-in-disguise revealed their true identity and told Gayāsura he now had to be killed. Accordingly Viṣṇu stepped his foot on the demon's chest and subdued him. In an alternative version they had placed a heavy piece of rock on him in order to keep him immobilized. This large stone could also serve as a fireplace to make the sacrificial fire. To make sure that he would not get up, Viṣṇu kept his foot firmly on the stone's surface.<sup>21</sup> The powerful demon had thus been tamed into immobility forever, but compassionate and fair Lord Viṣṇu still granted him his boon: his giant body would become the eminent sacred place, Gayā (f) where the dead would gain salvation and would never need to return in another incarnation. And indeed, the town of Gayā grew into one of the main places of pilgrimage, especially famous for its ancestral rites (*śrāddha*). In its centre is the awe-inspiring trace, enshrined in silver: the footprint.

### 2.5. Rituals around the Viṣṇupāda in Gayā<sup>22</sup>

In this way, the contemporary town is linked into a chain of ancient text passages, myths, and sacred geographies. As a town it has a documented history that goes back to the Enlightenment of

<sup>19</sup> Some authors refer to Viṣṇu 'planting his foot at the Vishnupada on the Gaya peak' (emphasis added, AN) (Jaiswal 1964); Bhattacharyya (1964, p. 91) writes: 'Some natural crevices in the rocks which were originally fetishistic objects of worship were later recognized as the footmarks [sic] of Vishnu.' [emphasis added, AN]. Anil Kumar maintains that the practice of 'footprint worship' started with the worship of the footprint of Viṣṇu at the Vishnupad Temple since the fourth century (emphasis added, AN) (Kumar 1987). None of these authors are able to establish full chronological evidence for the rise of *viṣṇupāda-pūjā* or *viṣṇucaraṇa-pūjā* in Gayā. This matter of footprint-worship is further complicated by the historically sensitive and area-specific issue which was first: reverence to Viṣṇu's footprint in Gayā or to Buddha's feet in Bodhgayā.

<sup>20</sup> In association with the remarks made in notes 18 and 19 the Gayāsura legends form yet another narrative strand. According to O'Malley (2007) the legend of Gayāsura was invented around the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. See also the sixteenth-century text on pilgrimage *Tristhalīsetu* (Salomon 1985); and *Gayāmāhātmya* (Jacques 1962), a pilgrimage guide to Gayā replacing some older chapters of the *Vāyupurāṇa*.

<sup>21</sup> This alternative version is based on locally available pilgrim's documentation, such as found in illustrated bazaar booklets. In informal conversations and on Internet one finds further variations. For an impression of public relations found in digital media, such as of online services ('Online Services for After Death Rituals of Pinddaan'), a list of *paṇḍas*, photos, or services to be reserved online, see [www.pinddaangaya.in](http://www.pinddaangaya.in). For local and regional maps, see Singh 2009 (as well as some other of his publications on Gayā).

<sup>22</sup> This part is based on various field visits since 1979, the most recent being in 2016 (see Figures 1 and 2). Because of the crowds of worshippers, the solemn nature of the *sapīṇḍīkaraṇa*, but particularly because officially 'non-Hindus are not allowed', I had to avoid making myself conspicuous and refrained from photographing people. More recently, Deborah de Koning, MA, managed to make a picture of ritual activities going on around the *viṣṇupāda* (Figure 3). I gratefully acknowledge her permission to use it here.

Gautama Buddha who may have been drawn there because of the fame of its ascetics. One of the most frequently given references to Gayā as a place where *śrāddha* was performed is based on a passage in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (2.99) where Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa are said to have gone to Gayā for *piṇḍa-pradāna*, the offering of food to the ancestors, after the death of King Daśaratha. Gayā's fame additionally rests on having received one of the drops of *amṛta* (the immortality drink), and partly on its locational 'topomorphic' significance. The main elements of this local fame consist of the sacred river on its way to join the Ganges; of having an 'immortal' banyan tree, the Akṣayavata; and of being surrounded by sacred hills in a meaningful astrological alignment with Sūrya, Sun.<sup>23</sup> When exactly the cosmogonic myth about Viṣṇu's strides and about the very first footprint that served as a sacrificial pit began to be connected with this place is uncertain. Today it is emphasized that the present *viṣṇupāda* has always been in the place where it is now, and that the present eighteenth-century temple was built around the much older footprint—whether that footprint be the result of the act of subduing the demon Gayāsura, with Viṣṇu's foot holding the piece of rock in place, or of Viṣṇu's right foot firmly stepping on Earth in his three all-encompassing cosmogonic strides (*trivikrama*).<sup>24</sup> But for most, the various elements, interlocking multiple traditions, form the composite culture on which the fame of the town is based.

### 2.5.1. The Footprint

From a spatial and ritual perspective, the divine footprint at Gayā has to compete with many other objects and other centers of attention. Formally, those who come to Gayā to perform ancestor rituals have to start close by or in the Vishnupad Temple. In fact, in preparation they should have fasted for a day, undergone ritual shaving, taken a bath in the river Phālgu and donned ritual garments. Directed by their *paṇḍa* and his assistant(s), relatives come to the Vishnupad Mandir and the cluster of other shrines with the offerings they have freshly prepared, especially the *piṇḍas*, balls made of wheat and oat flour, rice powder, sandalwood, sesame and water or milk. The offerings, representing the paternal and maternal ancestors, are offered to the deities, the sages, Yama (the god of Death) and the manes in various places in town. The encounter with the footprint is given form in the ritual that is popularly called *charan pooja*<sup>25</sup> (*caranapūjā*): paying respect to the footprint. Traditionally, the fixed formula with which the footprint is greeted is from *R̥gveda* 1.22.17:

'We bow to this, thou Viṣṇu's circular basement, Chakra.'

In its most basic form, this ritual consists of circumambulation, gestures of respect, a fixed form of greeting, and a statement of what one's intentions for worship and offering are, such as health and prosperity. Devotees can also make a vow or state their gratefulness after the fulfillment of a vow. People may come with specific problems for which they seek healing. More elaborate rituals, apart from the usual ancestor rituals, may be in the form of other life-cycle rituals such as a child's first hair-shaving (*muṇḍana*) or initiation (*upanayana*). In a place like Gayā many people may come in order

<sup>23</sup> The town's connection with the sun (in relation to the four hills) would deserve a research of its own. Here it should suffice to refer to authors such as Paul (1985) and Singh (2009). It has been stated that Viṣṇu's three strides not only spanned the universe, they also symbolize the three positions of the sun throughout the day: dawn, noon and dusk. Paul (1985, p. 84) added: 'The single footprint of Vishnupad, as opposed to an immobile pair of prints, suggests that Vishnu was indeed moving [emphasis added, AN] sun-like across the cosmos and placed his (right) foot momentarily on the head of the demon Gaya.'

<sup>24</sup> The late-Pāla period saw a great popularity of the Viṣṇu cult in Bihar, and the Trivikrama-Viṣṇu became one of the 24 icons (*caturvīṃśatimūrti*). Even as the 'wide-strider' the god is mostly depicted standing firmly on two legs, and holding four attributes in his hands. There is a variation, however: when he is depicted stretching his left leg to an almost straight line with his right leg, in 180°. Such an image is often part of a *daśāvatāra* temple representing his ten incarnations. Among those I saw being the center of lively worship was one in the ancient part of Bhaktapur, Nepal. Typically, while stepping wide, he has his right foot firmly planted on a pedestal surrounded by adorants.

<sup>25</sup> Viṣṇu's footprint has an astonishing number of parallels in other local shrines. I counted at least 18 deities whose shrines are listed as 'Rudra pad', 'Brahma pad', 'Surya pad', 'Indra pad' etcetera. As I have made no further study of those, I leave them out of my article here; also because I assume they are not footprints but artifacts. Traditionally, these 'pad' shrines should all be visited for *piṇḍapradāna*. Together with other sacred places these constitute a full pilgrimage circuit numbering 45, 48, 51 or 54 'vedis', including a pipal tree (and sometimes Buddha's foot-soles as well) in the Mahābodhi Temple compound in Bodhgayā (cf. Barua 1975).

to earn merit for the next life, as all kinds of scriptures promise that the site brings many blessings, ablution of sins, liberation for the recently deceased, and even immortality. At night and during festival time there may be recitation of sacred texts (*kathā*) and sankirtan (sankīrtana), the collective singing of devotional songs in local dialects and the regional language. At festival times there may even be artistic and dramatic performances, mostly in the form of *līlās*, plays re-enacting episodes from the lives of the epic heroes and deities such as Rāma. Gifts offered at the footprint, and given into the hands of officiating priests, may include water, milk, ghee (*ghṛta*, clarified butter), flowers, sandalwood powder, fruits, sindur, kunkum, garlands, oil lamps, and money. Similar to the iconic deities the footprint is accorded the usual sixteen services (*upacāra*), such as offering a symbolic seat, water, garments, camphor, and a sacred thread; the footprint is anointed and offered flowers, food, betelnuts, money, and lighted lamps.

Viṣṇu's footprint, like other sacred marks, serves as an 'omphalos', the navel of the universe—or at least of the entire territory, the sacred landscape of Gayā, encompassing the other shrines, the river, the sacred trees, the cremation *ghāṭs*, the hills and even the wider pilgrimage circuit (*pañcakrośi-gayākṣetra*). This serving of the footprint as a ritual 'navel' (or in other versions, 'head', Gayāśīra) becomes evident especially on days or nights of a particular astrological constellation, such as during the winter solstice, the vernal equinox, on full moon days (especially during *pitṛpakṣa-melā*, October–November), on new moon days and during eclipses. There is a special connection between Viṣṇu and the solar order. He is imagined to have established the threefold division of space and thus determines the journey of the sun across the firmament. This becomes manifest during the annual sun festivals when offerings of water, milk, flowers, and flour cakes (*pakvaṇ*) are made around the Sūryakuṇḍ, the well (often referred to as a 'water tank' or pool) named after Sūrya, the sun god. Ritual baths in the river include *arghya*, offerings of water to the sun, to be distinguished from *tarpaṇa*, the elaborate libations of water for the manes.

### 2.5.2. The River

The river Phālgū (Falgu, Falguni; Sanskrit Nairāñjanā) is sometimes, to add to its sacredness, called a tributary of the Ganges, but the regional reality is quite different. The Phālgū empties itself in the Ganges flowing through the Gangetic plain further to the north-east. The river is formed by the confluence of the Nirāñjan (Nilāñjan, Nilājan) and the Mohanā rivers. At Gayā the river reaches a considerable breadth. Here it passes high banks consisting of a rocky outcrop from which paved stairs, the *ghāṭs*, lead down to the riverbed. The Vishnupad Temple thus stands high above the river, surrounded by countless minor shrines and narrow alleys. The river is sacred to Hindus, and it is traditionally<sup>26</sup> in the river that pilgrims performing *śrāddha* make their first offering. However, since the riverbed is almost completely dry in the winter months, it may at times be no more than a wide expanse of sand and mud. Locally it is said that this state is due to a curse made by Sītā, when she had visited Gayā to perform ancestor rituals for her father-in-law king Daśaratha. This incident is relevant for our topic for at least two reasons. First, it refers to a passage in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and various *Purāṇas* that is used to explain the lack of water today from an ancient curse instead of natural causes or anthropogenic impact. Secondly, it indicates that at the times these ancient texts were written the town of Gayā already functioned as an eminent place where the threesome had gone in order to perform ancestor rituals. The *piṇḍas* are preferably offered in a circular movement from *vedi* to *vedi*, starting from the Punpun river bank, and ending beneath the Akṣayavat. Although today many use shortcuts, the final donation to the overseer priest at the Gāyatṛī *ghāṭ* is inescapable.

<sup>26</sup> Although in some special cases the entire traditional sequence may still be followed, most *śrāddha* performances today are shortened to last merely a single day. Through e-ethnography (see, for instance, comments on TripAdvisor) we learn that some families now travel to Gayā in their own vehicle, have the rituals done with in less than two hours, and return in time to post online comments from home. As could be expected, these middle-class visitors tend to complain about the fees demanded by the priests and the squalor of the place.



**Figure 3.** Gayā—rituals around the footprint (picture made by Martijn Stoutjesdijk and Deborah de Koning, 10 July 2018).

The town and most temples are facing the river. The river serves as their point of orientation in many ways. This becomes especially obvious during festival days, when additional platforms are constructed in order to serve as temporary *ghāṭs*. On such occasions the river banks are teeming with people, both locals and pilgrims from far and wide. Many stand in the water, performing their water rituals. Although there is a constant use of the river in all kinds of lifecycle and calendrical events in which the river is the central point, Chhath Pooja (*chathā / śāṣṭī pūjā*) should be mentioned

as a special case, indicated already in the *Mahābhārata* (3.16.31). People even refer to it as Mahaparv (*mahāparva*), the great festival. Especially women throng to the river (as well as to the Sūryakuṇḍ) and perform ablutions and water offerings (*arghya*) for the sake of children, skin diseases in particular. The four-day festival, during which devotees fast and subject themselves to other forms of austerities, is dedicated to the life-giving powers of the sun. It takes place twice a year, in October–November and March–April, following the luni-solar calendar. Interestingly, no icons are used, and the sun is worshiped directly. Some may direct themselves to a goddess, lovingly referred to as Chhathi Ma or Chhathi Maiya (‘Mother Sixth’, ‘Mother Sun’), but there is no form of *mūrti* or *mūrti-pūjā* at all. This is part of the reason why this festival has been called the most eco-friendly festival of India: no polluting stuff floating in the river, no waste on the river banks.<sup>27</sup>

### 2.5.3. The Tree

In archaic places of pilgrimage sacred trees are often part of an ensemble, along with water bodies such as a well, a pond, a river, or the ocean; and in many cases there are hills or a mountain, or at least a central temple of which the towering form provides the vertical element. Gayā is one of those ancient places where we find not merely sacred trees in abundance, it hosts a tree with a special reputation, the Akṣayavata, or as tourist-pilgrim literature calls it, ‘Immortal Banyan Tree’. It is a sacred fig tree (botanical name: *ficus indica*), characterized by its feature of sending down aerial roots, which over the course of time may become massive trunks of their own. It is commonly referred to as banyan (a name from the colonial era: ‘the tree beneath which merchants used to do business’), *vata* (‘surrounded’ by its own aerial roots), and in literary sources as *bahupada* (‘having many feet’, this being an apt epithet in an article on feet). According to myth, legend, and pilgrims’ lore, it was this tree that could be seen as the only point of reference above the water level when in primeval times a cosmic flood (*pralaya*) had covered the entire world. It is stated that this tree has always been there, and will always be: it is truly indestructible.<sup>28</sup> Other famous *akṣayavatas* are found in ancient pilgrimage towns such as Prayāg (today’s Allahabad), Kurukṣetra, Varāṇasī, Gayā and Purī. Needless to say that quite a few places all over India claim that their banyan is also an *akṣayavata*.

In some esoteric circles it is said that these trees symbolize the eternal regeneration cycle of the universe and that human bodies are the reverse image of that tree, with its roots above and tip below (*ūrdhvamūlavṛkṣa*). India’s geography is particularly blessed, in this regard, as its upper half is stated to be formed by one gigantic banyan tree, with its roots in Prayāg, its trunk in Varāṇasī, and its tip in Gayā (cf. Bharati 1963; Eck 1981, 1998). The Akṣayavata in Gayā is thus seen as the crown, and this is especially relevant for those who come to perform ancestor rituals and offer their final *piṇḍas* at the feet of the great banyan. Its crown, with branches ‘reaching out to heaven’, is said to point the newly deceased their way to the world of the ancestors.<sup>29</sup> Famously, it was under a banyan like this that Savitrī tricked the god of death, Yama, into bringing her husband back to life.<sup>30</sup> The tree is likewise associated with all kinds of ‘family problems’ (*pitṛ-doṣa*), such as finding a marriage partner, progeny, and other aspects of family life. In this way it attracts not only mourners but many others who come

<sup>27</sup> See Piyush Tripathi’s article in the *Times of India* (Patna edition), 6 November 2016 (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/Chhathi-the-most-eco-friendly-festival-Environmentalists/articleshow/55266563.cms>) (last accessed 22 May 2018).

<sup>28</sup> See *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* 12.9. Although the banyan in general is often associated with Śiva, the *akṣayavata* is mythologically linked with Viṣṇu in various ways as well. It is the tree in which Viṣṇu sleeps during the cosmic dissolution, safely tucked away in one of its strong leaves (*Naradapurāṇa* 47.6–8; *Matsyapurāṇa* 167.31–67). The detail that Viṣṇu, in the form of a sleeping child, was perched on a branch of this tree, rolled into one of its leaves while sucking his toe—a charming detail in an article on feet—is found in *Brahmapurāṇa* 49.53 and 54.14–18.

<sup>29</sup> A verse in the *Matsyapurāṇa* (106.11) promises that anyone who dies beneath an *akṣayavata* (literally: at the root of this tree, *vaṭamūle*) goes to Lord Śiva’s abode. Compare this to *Brahmapurāṇa* 54.17–18 where merely worshipping the tree will lead the devotee to Lord Viṣṇu’s abode.

<sup>30</sup> *Matsyapurāṇa* 208.14. Although in this passage the type of tree is not identified, in a much-quoted work on the banyan, *Vata-Savitṛī-vratākāṭhā*, a Sanskrit guideline to vows undertaken in relation to the banyan, particularly by wives for the long life of their husbands, is specific about the type of tree.



here to make a vow or pay tribute to the tree after a prayer has been successfully answered.<sup>31</sup> In that sense, the tree is a wishing tree (*kalpavṛkṣa*),<sup>32</sup> certain to fulfill its promises. Ancestor offerings are often made on banyan leaves (sold to mourners by the priests). Visitors—mourners and other pilgrims alike—are instructed to circumambulate the tree three times, chanting softly

‘OM Śrī Kara-Akṣayavata-Vṛkṣaya Namaḥ’ or more elaborately ‘O banyan tree, you are immortal, surviving all throughout time. You are Viṣṇu’s abode. O banyan tree, take away my sins. O wish-fulfilling tree, obeisance to you’.

On the wall behind the tree another promise is written: ‘The Lord makes immortal that place where the Immortal Tree/Tree of Immortality is praised by the priests and food is given to the ancestors.’ According to the *Gayāmāhātmya* (a portion of the *Vāyupurāṇa*):

‘Whatever is given to the ancestors at the Vata tree in the pilgrimage town Gayā will be indestructible (*akṣaya*). By looking at, bowing to, and making obeisance to the Lord of the Banyan (Vateśa), with a calm and composed mind, that pilgrim will guide his ancestors to the indestructible eternal World of Brahmā.’<sup>33</sup>

#### 2.5.4. The Hills

Hills are plentiful in and around Gayā. Although Bihar in general is a flat and flood-prone state, it has hills in various regions. The town of Gayā is enveloped by temple-crowned hills on three sides and the river flowing by the fourth (i.e., eastern) side. For some, these rocky hills are the mythical body of Gayāsura whose body became locked in the landscape as it served as an altar for the gods’ sacrificial offerings. Pilgrims and sacrificers may opt for a visit to merely some of them, whereas others are determined to make the full round, an itinerary already referred to in ancient sources such as the *Gayāmāhātmya*, and today available in abridged form in vernacular languages. Although the hills may be important destinations for all types of visitors, for the purpose of this article it may suffice to include the hills merely because they are considered to form a natural ensemble of sacred tree, river and hills, of which Viṣṇu’s footprint is the gravitational center. Just as the Akṣayavata is considered to symbolically, with its branches, point the way for the departing souls of the newly deceased, so the surrounding hills (being linking ladders between earth and heaven) are considered as assisting the departure to the great beyond. Especially the hills form a spatial symbolic order of transcendence. More practically, it is crucial that souls successfully make the transition from the unsteady and potentially harmful state of *preta* (ghost) to that of ancestor (*pitṛ*). Rana P.B. Singh even spoke of Gayā not only as a ‘sacredscape’ and a ‘ritualscape’ but also as a ‘manescape’, ‘ancestorscape’, and even ‘ghostscape’ (Singh 2009; Marshall et al. 2009). The entire complex of *antyeṣṭi* rituals, traditionally lasting thirteen days from the moment of death, is meant to ease that transition, and metaphorically the hills, in their vertical dynamics, are perceived as assisting this process. On the eleventh day, Viṣṇu is requested to liberate the dead person. On the twelfth day sixteen *śrāddhas* are performed, with the express purpose of the incorporation of the deceased with the previously departed ancestors: *sapinḍīkaraṇa*. The hill Pretashila (Pretaśīla, the rock of the ‘ghosts’) expresses this concern vividly.

<sup>31</sup> The first impression of the Akshayavat is often determined by its many almost horizontal branches from which colorful strips of cloth are suspended, often in shades of red, pink and yellow.

<sup>32</sup> Although ‘*kalpavṛkṣa*’ (*Naradapurāṇa* 52.66–67) is commonly translated as ‘wishing tree’, it gets a deeper meaning here, since *kalpa* also means ‘eon’ or vast stretch of time; after a period of dissolution a new *kalpa* will set in. Since an *akṣayavata* is said to survive the period of dissolution, the ‘wish’ expressed in front of such a tree may be considered to either go beyond the present *kalpa* or may be an explicit prayer for immortality.

<sup>33</sup> In various *Purāṇas* there are slight variations of this passage, cf. *Vāyupurāṇa* 49. 93 and 96–97 and *Naradapurāṇa* 47, 3–4. This latter passage promises the abode of Brahmā for the ancestors. Although there may be a pre-eminence of Viṣṇu in Gayā, and the local narratives around Gaya (the *asura*) may even be perceived as establishing the position of Viṣṇu over the other two gods involved in the deception, Brahmā and Śiva, the tree is impartial and promises a variety of heavenly abodes.

### 3. Discussion: Embodiedness and Embeddedness

In this article we have explored a particular place-specific cultic object and traced its embodiedness by first focusing on feet, footwear, foot-soles, footsteps, and footprints. We tracked its embeddedness by following some elusive trails through myth and tradition. In all instances we found ourselves dealing not with biology in itself but with symbolic classification. We witnessed ritual practices and browsed through online travel reports. We found that divine feet are objects of devotion in a special dynamic between nature and manufacture, between presence and absence, between actual topography and elusive traces of divine embodiment, between this-worldly needs and the great beyond after death. There may be cognitive ambiguity, but the faithful seem to find a third space, where they ritually interact with things seen and unseen. Their narrative gaze envelops the footprint in a ritual choreography that spans from the minuscule empty space of the footprint to the universe through which Lord Viṣṇu strode with his three cosmogonic steps.

The sacred footprint in Gayā does not stand alone. It appears to be woven into a rich fabric of textual references; ancient recommendations of Gayā as the eminent place to perform rituals for the dead; place-specific myths and topographical-geographical features; special veneration for Viṣṇu in the state of Bihar; and long-lasting associations with its twin sister, Bodhgayā. This fabric, in fact, is so rich that the pilgrim may easily lose track and forget about the footprint itself. Although the footprint may appear dis-embodied—being merely a slight depression on a rocky surface—it appears to be both embodied and embedded. It is embedded in ancient scriptures, cosmogonies, geographies, a number of overlapping symbolic orders, and a grammar of devotion. And it is embodied in elaborate systems of iconography, symbolism, esoteric interpretations, and narrative traditions of divine embodiment. In a way, ancient text passages about a mysterious primeval footprint serving as the sacrificial altar around which the gods gathered, are ritually re-enacted in the *viṣṇupāda* until today, fulfilling the ancient promise that the place will always be ‘dripping with ghee’.<sup>34</sup>

First of all, we found feet to be both dirty and divine; both disgusting and erotic; both directly physical and highly elusive. They are not only staggeringly ambivalent, they are confusingly polyvalent. They are objects of hygiene, aesthetics, social ordering mechanisms, material culture and spiritual techniques. What would Indian classical dance be without the tapping of bare feet? How different would be the disembodied experience of Indian temples with one’s shoes on, or a temple in which one would not be allowed to reverently touch the feet of the deity. Would not the world be a darker, heavier place without that light and almost imperceptible footfall of the divine? The bare calloused feet of a peasant; exquisite footwear worn by royals; delicate patterns applied to the feet of a bride; an empty throne carrying Rāma’s sandals during the years of exile, serving as his proxy. All these indicate a rich culture of the senses and imaginative embodiment.

Secondly, there are footsteps. All over the subcontinent people go on pilgrimage in the footsteps of the great ones. The devotional traffic is immense. But divine footsteps are not merely for following them. Footsteps can be imagined and actively shaped, such as in expressive webs of painted prayers, in the uninterrupted lines of *raṅgoli*, in intricate patterns of auspicious symbols on the foot-soles of deities. Footsteps can invoke: come, Lakṣmī, come, bless this house, this family, with your presence. Come, baby Kṛṣṇa, enjoy sweets in my kitchen. Artisans are constantly at work, chiseling away at blocks of stone, carving out pairs of divine feet, covering foot-soles with the god’s emblems. Whose feet? Does it matter? Feet and footsteps and foot-soles are empty containers, to be filled in with longings and projections. Devotees literally pour out their feelings over them, envelop

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<sup>34</sup> There are even three ancient and partly interrelated associative clusters here: the hands and feet (of Rgvedic Ilā or Viṣṇu) dripping with ghee; the ancient place Gayā where in the course of the cosmogonic fight between deities and demons a drop of ambrosia fell down; and Gayā as the spot where Gaya the demon-cum-ascetic was given the promise, by Viṣṇu himself, that food offerings—dripping or solid—would be continuous. Whether this implies, in the perception of both priests and mourners, an equation (ghee equals *amṛta* equals *tarpaṇa* water offerings) deserves further study.

them in enigmas of absence and presence, form and formlessness, here and there. Feet and footsteps indicate mobility; transitions and transformations. They are also transient: hands and minds try to grasp them, hold them, fix them in place, yet they are elusive, as their very nature is movement. Finally, wet footsteps on the *ghāṭs*: how long do they last? And where do the footsteps of the dead go, once they are cremated and beyond the reach of the living? Just like the smoke of the cremation pyre, their footsteps vanish in thin air.

Thirdly, there are footprints, however rare. Humans may fabricate feet and footsteps, but they cannot manufacture natural footprints. Yes, they can help, and fake. They can produce facsimiles. They can outline and decorate. They can theologize and devotionalize. But it is their imagination of the divine that sees a footprint in a piece of rock, and it is the devotee's sensory and synaesthetic experience that continues to make the chunk of rock into a relic. Generations of priests may earn their livelihood from such an imprint. Entire pilgrims' towns may be based on it, oblivious of the finer distinctions between concavities and convexities. How much water, clarified butter, milk, oil, herbal substances are poured into it, how many flowers and sacred leaves are scattered over it? How many words of praise are spoken in front of it, how many prayers silently expressed, how many vows taken with the footprint as witness? And then, who today continues to believe that the gods actually have feet, feet that walk this earth and leave footprints, feet that look suspiciously very much like our own, only perhaps just a tiny bit bigger?<sup>35</sup>

On the human body as a symbol of society Douglas (1976, p. 115) wrote:

'The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret rituals [ . . . ] unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body.'

This may be true and valid but let us reverse it for the sake of this article: humans may use their own body as a symbol and cipher for the social values a society wishes to inscribe on it, but they obviously ascribe more or less the same body to the gods. *Pāda* veneration, in Hinduism, may thus cynically be regarded as an all-too-human all-too-anthropomorphic projection, yet it could also be seen as a transitive encounter, an exchange. Especially when such a footprint is ascribed to Viṣṇu, whose name literally indicates his 'all-pervading' nature, to devotees the elusive imprint may rightfully remind of the god's divine pervasiveness. And, indeed, the empty mark left by his foot, thus implies both absence—he was here, once, but is gone now—and all-pervasive presence.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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<sup>35</sup> In our search for proper categorization of 'divine footprints', distinguishing them from the proliferation of feet, foot-soles, footsteps and footmarks, two parallel terms from European art history are worth considering: (1) the divine footprint on natural rock could, in a way, be called 'not made by human hands' and thus be classed among the 'acheironpoiēta'; (2) as a parallel to the phenomenon of (wrongly) perceiving forms in natural phenomena divine footprints could likewise be classed among the 'paradeilia'.

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