

The Symbolism of Mountains in Hindu Literature: Cosmological Representations and Their Relevance to Contemporary Spirituality

Ida Ayu Komang Arniati

Universitas Hindu Indonesia, Indonesia

Email: idaayuarniati@unhi.ac.id

Keywords	Abstract
symbolism, mountains, Hindu cosmology, Bali, spirituality	Mountains in the Hindu tradition have complex symbolic meanings as a representation of cosmology and spirituality. In classical texts such as the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Purana, mountains are understood as the center of the cosmos (<i>axis mundi</i>) that connects the human world with the divine world. This study aims to analyze the representation of mountains in Hindu literature and examine their symbolic meaning in Hindu religious practices in Bali, especially on Mount Agung and Mount Batur. The method used is qualitative with a literature study and hermeneutic analysis approach. The results indicate that mountain symbolism not only functions as a cosmological concept but also retains relevance in contemporary spirituality, especially in the context of ecological awareness and the search for life's meaning. In the Mahabharata, mountains serve as spaces for spiritual transformation; in the Ramayana, they represent sources of life and healing power; and in the Purana, they function as cosmogonic elements affirming the structure and stability of the cosmos. In the Balinese context, Mount Agung is positioned as the spiritual center and local representation of Mount Meru, while Mount Batur reflects ecological and spiritual dimensions through its role as a source of water and fertility. The conclusion of this study affirms that mountain symbolism demonstrates a close connection between cosmology, spirituality, and social life, and remains relevant in addressing modern spiritual needs and environmental concerns.

INTRODUCTION

In various religious traditions, mountains are often interpreted as sacred symbols that represent humanity's connection to transcendent reality (Guneratne et al., 2024; Mathieu, 2023; Mgaya, 2023; Zagorski, 2023). In Hinduism, this symbolism developed into a cosmological concept that positions mountains as the center of the universe (*axis mundi*) (Mircea Eliade, 1959). The concept of *axis mundi* refers to the belief that certain places, particularly mountains, serve as cosmic centers connecting the three layers of existence: the heavens, the earth, and the underworld. Through this central point, humans are able to orient themselves within the cosmos and establish a bridge between the profane world and the sacred realm. As a concrete representation of the *axis mundi*, mountains, owing to their towering form that seemingly connects earth and sky, are viewed not merely as natural phenomena but as cosmological symbols that fulfill a religious function as the center of the world. This understanding is further reinforced by the thought of Ernst Cassirer (1944), who argued that humans are *animal symbolicum*, namely, beings who comprehend the world through symbols. Within this framework, the symbol of the mountain in the Hindu tradition can be understood as a cultural construct that represents both the structure of the cosmos and humanity's spiritual experience.

Mount Meru in Hindu cosmology is regarded as the center of the cosmos and the dwelling place of the gods. In various Purāṇa texts, Mount Meru is described as the axis that organizes the cosmos both vertically and horizontally (Dokras, 2024). Vertically, mountains connect the

three worlds within the concept of triloka: bhūr (the human world), bhuvah (the intermediate world), and svaḥ (the world of the gods) (Paramadhyaksa & Dwijendra, 2021). Horizontally, mountains serve as the center of spatial orientation, from which all cardinal directions are determined. This concept is not only found in classical Indian texts but has also manifested in the religious practices of the Balinese people, particularly through the interpretation of Mount Agung as a local representation of Mount Meru and Mount Batur as a symbol of cosmic and ecological balance (Dwijendra, 2020). In the Balinese context, mountains occupy a central position in the spatial orientation system, such as in the concept of kaja-kelod, where the direction toward the mountain (kaja) is considered sacred and serves as the primary reference in the layout of houses, temples, and villages (Putra et al., 2020; Paramadhyaksa & Dwijendra, 2021). Mount Agung, with Besakih Temple on its slopes, functions as the spiritual center and the holiest orientation point for the Balinese Hindu community (Sudarsana et al., 2022). Meanwhile, Mount Batur, closely associated with Lake Batur and the worship of Dewi Danu as the goddess of water, symbolizes the balance between the elements of fire (volcano) and water (lake), reflecting the concept of harmony among humans, nature, and the divine that underpins the lives of the Balinese people (Adityanandana & Gerber, 2019; Dwijendra, 2020).

Previous research has extensively discussed mountain symbolism within the study of religion and culture. Eliade (1959) introduced the concept of *axis mundi* as the center of the cosmos in his seminal work *The Sacred and the Profane*, which has become a foundational framework for understanding the sacredness of mountains across various religious traditions. Doniger (2009) expanded this discussion by specifically examining Mount Meru in Hindu cosmology in her comprehensive work *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, where she elaborates on the symbolic and mythological roles of mountains in the structure of the Hindu universe. In the context of sacred geography, Misra (2018) examined how mountains serve as organizing principles for pilgrimage routes and sacred landscapes in India, demonstrating that mountain symbolism extends beyond textual traditions into lived religious practices. Singh (2021) further contributed by exploring the intersection between mountain symbolism and ecological awareness in Hindu traditions, arguing that reverence for mountains can serve as a foundation for contemporary environmental ethics. Sharma (2020) conducted a comparative study of mountains as sacred landscapes across South Asia, revealing that, although specific interpretations vary, the fundamental conception of mountains as centers of spiritual power remains consistent across different regions and traditions. In the specific context of Bali, Geertz (1973), in his classic work *The Interpretation of Cultures*, emphasized the importance of geographical symbols, including mountains, in the cultural and religious systems of the Balinese people. Lansing (2006) further highlighted the crucial role of mountains, particularly Mount Batur, in the ecological and agricultural systems of Bali through his study of the water temple network, demonstrating that the sacredness of mountains is intricately linked with practical aspects of daily life. These studies provide a strong foundation for understanding mountain symbolism; yet, there remains a need for a more integrated analysis that connects textual representations in classical Hindu literature with contemporary spiritual practices in Bali, particularly in the context of modern ecological awareness and evolving understandings of spirituality.

However, in the modern era, there has been a significant shift in the way religious symbols are perceived and interpreted. The rise of secularism, the advancement of science and

technology, and the increasing ecological crisis have prompted reinterpretations of traditional religious symbols. Mountains are no longer understood solely within a mythological framework but are also being reinterpreted as spaces for self-reflection, inner journeys, and symbols of ecological awareness. Activities such as nature meditation, spiritual hiking, and ecotourism have emerged as new forms of spiritual practice that draw upon the symbolic power of mountains. This reinterpretation demonstrates that religious symbols possess a dynamic quality and are capable of adapting to changing times without losing their essential meaning. Therefore, it is important to reexamine the relevance of mountain symbolism in the context of contemporary spirituality, particularly regarding how classical Hindu cosmological concepts can contribute to addressing modern spiritual needs and environmental concerns.

Based on this background, the research problems to be investigated are as follows: first, how are mountains represented in Hindu literature as the center of the cosmos; and second, what is the symbolic meaning of mountains in Hindu religious life in Bali? The theories employed to address these problems include Symbol Theory (Cassirer, 1944), which posits that humans understand the world through symbols; *Axis Mundi* Theory (Eliade, 1959), which conceptualizes mountains as the center of the cosmos; and Hindu cosmology (Doniger, 2009), which explains Mount Meru as the center of the universe. The objectives of this study are to analyze the representation of mountains in Hindu texts, examine their symbolic meaning in religious practices in Bali, and explain their relevance to modern spirituality. The theoretical benefits of this research include enriching the study of Hindu cosmology and religious symbolism, while the practical benefits include providing communities with an understanding of the spiritual meaning of mountains and their relevance to contemporary life, as well as fostering ecological awareness rooted in religious values. Furthermore, this research is expected to contribute to the preservation of local wisdom and cultural heritage, particularly in Bali, where the sacredness of mountains remains an integral part of the community's religious and social identity. It is also hoped that this study will serve as a reference for future researchers interested in exploring the intersection among religion, culture, ecology, and spirituality in the modern world.

METHODS

This research used a qualitative, interpretive approach with a descriptive-documentary method. The objects of study were classical Hindu texts, specifically the *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, and *Purāṇas*, which were analyzed as primary documents. The research data consisted of narratives, words, phrases, ideas, and symbols related to the meaning of mountains in Hindu cosmology. This study employed a qualitative approach with a literature review method. This approach aimed to understand the symbolic meaning of mountains through the analysis of academic texts and literature. Interpretation was carried out using a hermeneutic approach to understand cultural and religious contexts (Eliade, 1959).

Data were obtained from classical Hindu texts, such as the *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, and *Purāṇas*, as well as from various academic references. The analysis was conducted descriptively and symbolically by associating the texts with religious practices in Bali (Geertz, 1973; Doniger, 2009). The research data sources consisted of both primary and secondary data. Primary data were derived from classical Hindu texts, while secondary data were obtained from books, scientific articles, and other literature relevant to mountain symbolism, cosmology, and

Hindu spirituality. Data collection techniques were conducted through a literature review process, namely reading, analyzing, recording, and classifying information related to the research focus.

Data analysis was conducted using a hermeneutic approach to interpret the symbolic meaning of mountains in Hindu texts. Through this analysis, the researcher uncovered cosmological representations contained in Hindu literature and examined their relevance to contemporary spirituality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis in research, in this case to clarify the object of research, will first be discussed about the concept of symbols and *axis mundi*. According to Mircea Eliade (1959), symbols are the main medium for understanding transcendent reality that cannot be directly reached by human empirical experience. Symbols serve not only as representations, but also as a means of participation in sacred reality. Meanwhile, the concept of *axis mundi*, which is the center of the world that connects the sky, the earth, and the underworld. According to Eliade, the existence of *axis mundi* allows humans to orient themselves in the cosmos and bridge the relationship between the profane and sacred worlds. This means that the Mountain, understood as a concrete representation of the *axis mundi*, because of its towering shape and as if connecting the earth with the sky. In Eliade's perspective, mountains are not just natural phenomena, but cosmological symbols that have a religious function as the *center of the world*. Thus, mountains become reference points in various ritual practices and spatial orientation. This is reinforced by the thought of Ernst Cassirer (1944), who stated that humans are *animal symbolicum*, that is, beings who understand the world through symbols. In this framework, the symbol of the mountain in the Hindu tradition can be understood as a cultural construct that represents the structure of the cosmos as well as the spiritual experience of man. Further discussion on: (1) Mountains as Axis Mundi in Hindu Cosmology: Mountains as Axis Mundi in Hindu Cosmology, function as the center of the universe (*axis mundi*), which connects the human world and the divine world (Eliade, 1959). Mount Meru is the main symbol of the order of the cosmos and the balance of the universe (Doniger, 2009). In Hindu cosmology, mountains occupy a central position as a representation of the *axis mundi*, which is the axis that connects the various layers of existence. This concept is most clearly reflected in the figure of Mount Meru, which in various *Puranas* texts is described as the center of the universe. Mount Meru is not just a geographical element, but a symbolic structure that organizes the cosmos vertically and horizontally.

Vertically the mountains connect the three worlds in the concept of *the triloka*: *bhur* (the world of man), *bhuvah* (the intermediate world), and *the svah* (the world of the gods). In this structure, the mountain serves as a spiritual path that allows communication between humans and the divine. Horizontally, mountains become the center of spatial orientation, where the entire cardinal direction is determined based on its position. This symbolism reflects the Hindu cosmological view that emphasizes order and balance. Mountains as the center of the cosmos are a symbol of stability in the midst of the dynamics of the universe. In this context, mountains are not only understood as physical objects, but as representations of cosmic order (*rta*) that are the basis for the continuation of life (IGN Putra, 2019).

Mountains as an ontological dimension, have a symbol of existence that connects the material and spiritual worlds. This makes the mountain a sacred space that has high religious value, as well as a symbol of man's journey to spiritual perfection; (2) Representation of Mountains in the Text: An Analysis of *the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Purana*, which are described as follows: (a). Mountains in *the Mahabharata*: In *the Mahabharata*, the mountain is often described as the hermitage of the monks and enlightenment-seeking figures. Mountains become liminal spaces, which are transitional spaces between the profane and sacred worlds (Ardika, 2022). In this context, the existence of mountains allows for spiritual transformation. The figures who climb the mountain usually experience a process of self-purification, either through *meditation*, meditation, or exile from worldly life. The mountain is a symbol of the human mind journey that moves from attachment to liberation (*moksha*). Thus, the mountain not only serves as the setting of the story, but also as a symbol of the spiritual process. (b) Mountains in *the Ramayana*: In *the Ramayana*, mountains have a more dynamic meaning. One of the most famous examples is the story of Hanuman who lifted a mountain to get medicinal plants to save Laksmana (Ardika, 2022). In this context, the mountain symbolizes the source of life and the power of healing. This symbolism shows that mountains are not only related to spirituality, but also to practical aspects of life. Mountains are a source of energy, medicine, and natural balance. Thus, the mountain has a dual function: as a sacred symbol and as a source of life: (c) The mountain in the Purana: In *the Purana literature*, the mountain has a cosmogonic role, that is, it is related to the creation and structure of the universe. Mount Meru is described as the center of a cosmic system surrounded by continents and oceans. This structure reflects an organized and hierarchical worldview (Sharma, 2020). In this context, mountains become a symbol of the order of the cosmos and the balance between the various elements of nature. The mountain is also often associated with the abode of the gods, thus reinforcing its position as a spiritual center. (3). Contextualization in Bali: Mountain Symbolism in Religious Practice, namely: (a). Mount Agung as a Representation of Mount Meru, in the context of Bali, Mount Agung has a very important position as a spiritual center. This mountain is seen as a local representation of Mount Meru, so it has a high sacred value. The existence of Besakih Temple on its slopes strengthens the function of the mountain as a center of religious activity. Symbolically, Mount Agung is the main direction in the orientation of space (*kaja*), which is considered a sacred direction. This affects the spatial layout of houses, temples, and villages in Bali (Putra, 2019). This orientation shows that the symbolism of the mountain is not only conceptual, but also integrated in everyday life: (b) Mount Batur: Cosmic and Ecological Balance, meaning that Mount Batur has a different, but still important, symbolic character. This mountain is closely related to Lake Batur and the worship of the Goddess of Lake as the goddess of water (Ardika, 2022). In this context, the mountain symbolizes the balance between the elements of fire (mountain) and water (lake). This symbolism reflects the concept of harmony in the life of the Balinese people, which emphasizes the balance between humans, nature, and God. Mount Batur is not only a spiritual symbol, but also has an ecological function as a source of water and life. (4). Symbolic Analysis: Mountains as a Spiritual Metaphor, mountains can be interpreted in several main dimensions:(a). Verticality and Transcendence, meaning that the Mountain symbolizes the vertical movement from the human world to the divine world. Mountain climbing can be understood as a metaphor for man's spiritual journey in attaining the highest consciousness; (b). Stability and Balance, meaning

that as the center of the cosmos, the mountain symbolizes stability in the midst of change. This reflects the human need for balance in life: (c). Spiritual Transformation, meaning that the mountain becomes a space where humans experience inner changes. The climbing process reflects a spiritual struggle that requires discipline and perseverance; (d). The Relationship between Man and Nature, meaning that mountains also symbolize the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. In this context, mountain symbolism is relevant to modern ecological issues. (5). Relevance in Contemporary Spirituality, meaning that in the modern context, the symbolism of the mountain has not lost its meaning, but has undergone reinterpretation. Mountains are now often understood as a space for self-reflection and the search for meaning in life. Activities such as meditation in nature or mountain climbing are becoming new forms of spiritual practice. In Bali, cosmological values related to mountains still persist, especially in the concept of *kaja-kelod* and ritual practices. This shows that traditions are not static, but are able to adapt to the changing times.

In addition, the increasing awareness of the importance of environmental preservation also strengthens the symbolic meaning of the mountain. Mountains are not only seen as spiritual objects, but also as part of an ecosystem that must be protected.

CONCLUSION

The symbolism of mountains in the Hindu tradition represents a profound cosmological concept in which mountains function not merely as geographical features but as sacred centers of the universe (*axis mundi*) that connect the human and divine realms. Classical Hindu texts such as the *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, and *Purāṇas* depict mountains as symbols of spiritual transformation, sources of life, and stabilizing elements of the cosmos, with Mount Meru serving as the primary representation of cosmic order through the concept of *triloka*. In the Balinese context, this symbolism continues through the sacred roles of Mount Agung and Mount Batur, as well as the *kaja-kelod* spatial orientation system, demonstrating the integration of cosmology into religious and social life. Furthermore, mountain symbolism remains relevant in contemporary spirituality, where mountains are increasingly understood as symbols of inner journeys, self-reflection, and ecological awareness. Overall, mountains symbolize the harmony between humans, nature, and the divine, emphasizing the importance of preserving spiritual and ecological values amid modern challenges. Future research is recommended to explore comparative studies of mountain symbolism across different religious traditions and to examine more deeply the relationship between sacred landscapes, environmental ethics, and contemporary spiritual practices in the context of global ecological issues.

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