1 Sanctification of Territory and Divine Transpositions: An Introduction

A Network of Connections

It is February 2011 and I am sitting cross-legged on the ground, waiting for the elderly man to come and speak with me. His son promised me a meeting a few days ago when I had entered the temple during the evening ceremony, a time of great crowds. We are on the cusp of Mahāśivarātrī,[3] the great night of Śiva, and all the temples dedicated to this god are frequented by gesticulating but orderly crowds, perpetually in line. Both father and son join me and sit with me in the secondary hall of the Kāśī Karvāṭ temple, where the Upadhyaya family[4] lives and takes care of the resident deities. In an underground cell, the complex hosts Bhīmaśaṅkar, one of the local manifestations of the pan-Indian *jyotirliṅga*s, whose more famous form (the 'original'?) is in Pune. The father begins, 'The description of the twelve *jyotirliṅga*s is given by the *Śiva Mahāpurāṇa*; the *jyotirliṅga*s are located in various places…' He is reciting the *Jyotirliṅgastotra*,[5] the hymn that pairs the names of the *jyotirliṅga*s with the places where they are found. He then continues:

> In this group, there is also Viśvanāth, who is the *jyotirliṅga* of Varanasi,[6] while the others are scattered throughout India. However, in the Kāśīkhaṇḍa of the Skandapurāṇa, another story is told, another story… that is, in ancient times the twelve *jyotirliṅga*s were also perceived (*anubhav honā*) here in Kāśī. Among these local *jyotirliṅga*s is the one that resides in this temple, Bhīmeśvar, which in Pune is known as Bhīmaśaṅkar. That *liṅga* is here, in the Kāśī Karvāṭ temple. Similarly, all twelve are found in

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3 Mahāśivarātrī is a Hindu festival dedicated to the worship of Śiva, celebrated annually on the night between the thirteenth and fourteenth day of the month of Phālguna (February–March). A description of the celebration can be found in the sixth chapter.

4 Ritual specialists are often publicly known local figures, thus their names are not anonymised.

5 The hymn is discussed in more detail in the third chapter.

6 Here he uses the official name of the city. Later he also uses Kāśī, which means 'the luminous', and is frequently used, especially in narratives that recount mythological episodes about the city. I have chosen in general, however, to call the city Banaras in this book, because that is what it is most commonly called by its inhabitants.

> Kāśī within an area of about ten kilometres. In ancient times, when Śiva had to leave Kāśī, all the goddesses and gods, the serpent deities and the spirits also left, and the city remained empty for thirty thousand years. Only after many attempts did the Lord manage to return... but that's a long story... anyway, when he returned, the *jyotirliṅga*s manifested in the territory of Kāśī, along with all the other deities: they no longer wanted to leave this city.[7]

While we talk, some worshippers make their way to the main hall of the temple, where a golden fence marks the spot from which devotees can lean over to observe the *liṅga*—a symbol of Śiva's presence—situated on a lower level, in a cell accessible only to temple personnel. From above they have the *darśana* (literally 'vision') of the deity, throw their offerings and watch the cleaning and decoration practices that precede the lamp ceremony *(ārtī)*. Other devotees approach and listen attentively to the explanations and stories that the temple's Brahmans are telling this curious foreigner. Like me, when they get a chance to speak they ask questions and enquire about the locations of other local manifestations of *jyotirliṅga*s in the city. These people are pilgrims or city residents who surely aren't hearing the stories about the city's all-encompassing ideal space for the first time. However, imbued with these images, they, like me, naively look for their materialisation in the temples of the city.

Similar dialogues between temple officiants *(pūjārīs)*, who often present themselves as the authoritative representatives of mythic wisdom about the city, and myself, a foreigner needing instruction on the places and their stories, were recurring moments during my field research. As illustrated in the narration of my interlocutor above, the ethnographic context in which I found myself—sometimes with patience, sometimes with restlessness—consisted of places that are never narrated in just a single way.

The Kāśī Karvaṭ temple, located in the heart of the old city of Banaras, belongs to the city, Amla Shankar tells us, but it is also the abode of a deity who is situated here and elsewhere simultaneously. As we will discover in discussion of other transposed forms, the deity from elsewhere is nonetheless thought to be primarily and fully present in Banaras. Amla Shankar explains that certain forms of Śiva—the *jyotirliṅga*s—are described by a specific authoritative narrative that places them at various sites across the subcontinent; however, he immediately clarifies that there is also another story, equally important and locally more significant, that describes how these same divine forms have come to be in the territory of Banaras, making accessible to its inhabitants and visitors the fruits of

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7   From an interview with Amla Shankar Upadhyaya and his son Dinesh, *pūjārī*s of the Kāśī Karvaṭ temple, February 2011.

a pilgrimage that, if undertaken in its pan-Indian form, would require far more time, resources and effort.

Amla Shankar is ready to speak when he sits with me; he knows his role as a storyteller very well and believes he knows what I want to hear. His account of the presence of all the *jyotirliṅga*s within the local urban territory, and the consequent possibility of undertaking substitute pilgrimages to otherwise distant, pan-Indian deities does include important features of the glorification narratives and the image of Banaras that has been formed over time. It also reflects a certain 'indigenous anthropology', that considers who might benefit from such narration and what those people are willing to hear.

This book addresses all these matters: plural places composed of many stories that give life to layered traditions, and the ways in which social actors define the contours of their locality by engaging with realities situated elsewhere, as well as mythical spatial dimensions. More simply, it will discuss connections, a term that in anthropology has acquired deep meanings that challenge the clear division between universality and locality (Amselle 2001). The weaving of such connections between individual localities and 'elsewhere' places, I argue, constitutes a principal mode of sanctifying the Indian territory and, therefore, of forming, informing and transforming the sacredness of places. Indeed, I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that India can be read geographically as a vast network of connections, whose nodes are formed through divine transfers, repetition of names and references to corresponding spaces situated elsewhere.

The field of investigation here is primarily that of Hindu landscapes and religious practices in a city that, as I will discuss in the second chapter, has over time been shaped and transmitted by many voices as 'the ancient Hindu centre par excellence', despite its actual cultural and religious heterogeneity. However, it is not uncommon for pilgrimage places in India to be shared, conceived, and co-produced by other religious communities, who have been there for centuries, making the intertwining of meanings of places even more complex.[8] The cultural mosaic that we call Hinduism does, however, provide a vast wealth of connections between places, people, and deities.

Observing the centrality of place-centred traditions for Hindus, Jacobsen states that:

> [...] it is perhaps not an overstatement to say that, for a large majority
> of Hindus, their religious practice is more oriented around sacred space

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8   According to the 2011 census, alongside Hindus (79.90 %) there are in India people of Islamic faith (14.23 %), Christians (2.3 %), Sikhs (1.72 %), Buddhists (0.7 %) and Jains (0.37 %). The remaining population belongs to 'other religions' (0.66 %), such as Zoroastrianism and Judaism, or does not declare a religious affiliation (0.24 %).

> than around sacred books and that the ritual of pilgrimage and visits to temples is of more relevance in their religious life than rituals involving books. For many Hindus, visits to sacred landscapes and places, including their temples, rituals and pilgrimage festivals, are probably considered high points of their religious life.[9]

Pilgrimage centres and practices related to visiting various types of shrines are undoubtedly among the immediately visible characteristics of Hinduism. The countless holy sites across India reflect the well-documented belief in a variety of gods and goddesses, gurus, ascetics, saints and heroes who—according to written, oral, or visual narratives, whether ancient or modern—have passed through and acted in the places of the subcontinent. It is thus a sort of immense geographic text that can be read through travel. This space-text reflects the deeds of divine personalities or special humans, whose presence for the faithful is inherent in elements of the local landscape. Most of Indian rivers, as is well known, are considered earthly descents of specific female deities; mountains are equally known as divine figures whose mythical deeds are inscribed in the land and revived in the local memories of the people who dwell there; trees, stones, and even caves and furrows in the soil are interpreted and narrated as signs of a deity's presence, sometimes even as its limbs. Each place will likely have multiple stories, host more than one divine form (each with multiple names) and embody multiple voices that describe its qualities and define its boundaries.

In the pages of this book I will present a snapshot of such a reality, analysing the ways in which narrative traditions about some of these places have, over time, been established and transmitted, and how they are being embodied and reshaped in the present. I will describe how the people I have conversed with establish various connections: between places and spaces, localities and universality, between gods and humans. Ultimately, though, they continuously cultivate their connections with the places to which they belong.

The Sacred Place: A Brief History of a Powerful Idea

Given the centrality of places and devotional practices associated with specific sites within Hinduism, and before introducing the various spatial dimensions through which this research has navigated, it is necessary to engage briefly with the cultural history of Hinduism and question the origins of this 'locative' attitude.

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9   Jacobsen 2013, 5.

It is essential to recognise that many practices, beliefs and traditions in Hinduism are the result of a long and ongoing reinterpretation of ideas, terms and practices. Any observer of the present must inevitably take account of this in order to produce a nuanced description of ethnographic reality.

As many scholars have pointed out (for example, Bharati 1963 and 1970; Bhardwaj 1973), devotion to places and pilgrimage are not widespread in the Vedas, the earliest textual traditions of Indian religious thought.[10]

The intimate link between physical territory and divine landscape can be traced in the etymology of the term most commonly used today to refer to sacred centres in Hinduism. *Tīrtha* derives from the Sanskrit verbal root *tr̥*, which means to cross a body of water. The term—later interpreted as a place where one transcends human dimension and encounters the divine—is essentially a geographical expression identifying specific sites where one could cross or bathe in one of the numerous rivers of the subcontinent. It should be noted that crossing any river, and especially the formidable watercourses of South Asia, was not an easy task in ancient times. Rivers, though, have always been an important cultural symbol for the indigenous populations of the Indian subcontinent, as well as for the peoples speaking Indo-European languages who settled there from the middle of the second millennium BCE. In the Vedic imagination, rivers are already powerful metaphors of connection between various planes of reality: waterways are considered celestial entities that originate in the sky, descend through the atmosphere to the earth, and bring life, inherent in the water, to its inhabitants (Eck 1998).

Travel is a central dimension in the Vedas; however, the gods are described as being in constant motion through an indefinite and placeless space. Angot's (2003) comprehensive analysis of the concepts of space and place in the earliest literature shows that Vedic deities are not typically associated with specific places; space seems to be 'the indefinite territory of the gods' actions' (ibid., 12). Stasis and inactivity do not belong to celestial beings because fixed places are perceived as constrictive at this stage and are quickly abandoned in favour of resuming movement. In the Vedas there are very few place names; the focus is entirely on movement, journeying and the transit of gods and humans, rather than on

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10   The Sanskrit term *veda* means 'knowledge' and also 'science' and is related to the Latin *video*, 'to see', which by extension refers to discerning and understanding. The Vedas are the literary corpus of the *ārya*, the population speaking an Indo-European language that settled in northern India around 1500 BCE. Various sections contain hymns to Vedic deities, explanations of rituals, comments on religious practice and reflections on the cosmic order. The Vedas represent the evolution of religious, social and philosophical thought of a nomadic population that gradually settled in a new territory. They are considered by most Hindus to be the product of divine revelation.

actions contextualised in specific locales.[11] The area of sacrifice itself—central to the religiosity of the ancient Brahmanism—is also temporary and disappears once the ritual actions are completed. Angot also observes that another term, *kṣetra*, in this phase of religious thought, meant simply a field of human action, entirely unrelated to the presence of a deity; whereas in later texts, it is often paired with a place name or a deity's name and does indicate a specific 'field' of the divine. In Vedic times not only did gods not have privileged relationships with specific places, they did not dwell in images or symbols either. That became an important characteristic of deities in later Hinduism.

The terminology and practices related to *tīrtha*s, and the acts of crossing, traversing and descending—a characteristic of Indian deities with numerous earthly descents *(avatāra)*—evolve over the centuries. The reworking of Vedic imagery associated with watercourses goes hand in hand with the assimilation of devotional attitudes and attachment to specific sites, believed to stem from the so-called popular substratum or pre-Vedic religious forms.[12] Artistic and epigraphic evidence also documents the spread among indigenous populations of devotional attitudes towards specific locations and cults related to natural elements and place guardians such as *yakṣa*s and *nāga*s (Eck 1981, 334; Kessler 2009). The influence of such local cults is also evident in Buddhist and Jain artistic testimonies. *Stūpas*, funerary monuments for preserving relics, are the first true religious buildings known in South Asia; specifically, the journey to the oldest *stūpa*s, located in places connected to the life of the Buddha and established during the Mauryan period, is the first documented form of pilgrimage (Schopen 1997). The iconography and decoration of these monuments seems to incorporate symbols and features associated with local deities, which were presumably already widespread and understood by the indigenous population that Buddhism sought to attract. Furthermore, it appears that experimentation with the anthropomorphic image of the Buddha originated from possibly competitive artistic dialogue after the production of colossal images of *yakṣas*, to which devotees made substantial offerings. Evidence of attempts to 'domesticate' such nature spirits and their incorporation into new religious systems is also found in Buddhist texts and, later, in Hindu mythology (ibid., 248; cf. Coomaraswamy 1928–1931).

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11 Some scholars have identified a Vedic precursor to pilgrimage in the *sarasvatīsattva*, a ritual that includes a journey along the Sarasvatī River; however, this interpretation has faced criticism. The various positions are summarised in Jacobsen 2013, 45–46.

12 Parpola (2003) argues, for example, that the people of the Indus Valley civilization were familiar with a form of pilgrimage to water places and to the abodes of renowned ascetics.

The popularity of local cults and the establishment of the first Buddhist centres of worship are early forms of what I call 'locative piety' which refers to an acute sensitivity and participatory devotion to specific places. This was later adopted and adapted in post-Vedic Hinduism, eventually becoming its most visible characteristic. Locative piety developed during this period, however, simultaneously with the critique of sacrificial religiosity brought forward by new philosophical and religious movements that saw a need for changes in religious attitudes within the Brahmanic community. By the beginning of the Common Era, during the Kushan period, we see the first responses to this crisis in Brahmanism and, perhaps as early as the second century, we find the first remains of temple buildings, never in urban centres but always in rural or isolated areas, likely near the residences of ascetics. Around the same time, the first depictions of deities that would later be assimilated into Hinduism were produced. However, it was only in the middle of the first millennium that normative texts began to include reflections on divine images and the significance of temple reality (Olivelle 2010).

While Brahmanism was beginning to experiment with different forms of worship—focused on temples and deities with tangible forms—there was also resistance to these new religious attitudes and practices. The normative literature on *dharma* (literally 'law' or 'norm', and by extension used to refer to religious doctrine), that was mostly systematised in the early centuries of the Common Era, reflects a certain scepticism about the worship of divine images, and especially towards the first ritual specialists *(devalaka)* associated with temple worship (ibid., 202). These ritual figures were evidently in competition both with Buddhist monks and more 'orthodox' Brahmans who continued to practice sacrifice as the sole form of religious activity, presumably wanting to attract the same clientele (Nandi 1979). From the beginning, temple Brahmans were viewed with suspicion, perhaps because they moved to places where temples were established, coming into contact with people of perceived lower rank and thus jeopardising their own 'purity'. Moreover, such ritual specialists have always been associated with the practice of donation *(dāna)*—which they receive from their clients or patrons—and which is still considered a source of contamination and impurity (Goodwin-Rahejiya 1988; Michaels 2004, 197–198; Solinas 2010).

Despite the initial resistance and prejudice against the new ritual specialists, forms of locative piety centred on *tīrtha*s emerged as dominant ideas starting in the Mahābhārata.[13] Within this vast epic, we find numerous sections concerned

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13   The dating of the epic and its various sections is a subject of intense debate among scholars. Hiltebeitel places its composition between the mid-second century BCE and the turn of the first millennium CE (2001, 31), and summarises the positions of various scholars on the issue (ibid., 20–31).

with sacred places and the practice of pilgrimage *(tīrthayātrā)*.[14] These sections, presumably composed and adjusted over time as a reaction to the crisis in early Brahmanism, testify to the appropriation and reworking of already widespread non-Brahmanical religious practices and ideas by Brahman compilers.

In the descriptions of the journeys undertaken by the Pāṇḍava heroes we can glimpse early forms of geographical imagination and first attempts to systematise the vast subcontinental territory. There is also an explicit effort to promote the practice of pilgrimage as a valid alternative to sacrifice-centred religiosity. The routes described in the epic, however, along with the catalogue of merits associated with specific destinations, seem to reflect a set of already mature geographical and devotional practices, likely borrowed from contemporary realities and non-Brahmanical cults.

The progressive expansion of pilgrimage and the encouragement of offerings and donations at temples housing divine icons appear to emerge as responses to the specific socio-economic situation in which the practice of sacrifice, already questioned by the ethical demands of Buddhism and Jainism, was in deep crisis. The rise of *tīrtha*s as new focal points of religious activity should be understood within the broader and progressive cultural evolution that saw the transition from early Brahmanism—with its formless and intangible deities—to what can be called popular Hinduism, a multifaceted religion largely centred on the worship of deities present in defined forms and locations.

The literature of the Purāṇas, which consistently and repeatedly emphasises the importance of pilgrimage and making donations to the Brahmans of the sacred centres mentioned, bears witness to the results of this evolution. Locative piety becomes paramount and pilgrimage sites become the new centres of wealth and cultural development, constantly interacting with political power (Bakker 1992; Sax 2000). As well, the encyclopaedic Purāṇas, composed from the early centuries of the Common Era, gather cosmologies and sectarian narratives and contribute to the spread of devotional currents centred on the worship of the deities Śiva, Viṣṇu and Devī. Each emerges from time to time as the centre and origin of the universe, encompassing and incorporating other deities and having places in the territory dedicated to them.

Despite the pervasive presence of *tīrtha*s in sources from various genres (Jacobsen 2013, 12–15), it is in the Puranic literature of glorifications that we find the culmination of the devotion to sacred places and promotion of pilgrimage that

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14   In addition to the well-known Tīrthayātrāparvan of the Vanaparvan or Āraṇyakaparvan, the Śalyaparvan contains twenty chapters dedicated to pilgrimage. Vassilkov (2002) argues that the entire epic should be understood as a text on various forms of pilgrimage.

has come to characterise Hinduism. *Māhātmya*s,[15] the main textual sources about pilgrimage sites, are often sections of the Puranas but circulate as independent texts. They detail mythologies and explanations of the origins of the temples as well as devotional practices to be performed. This is a rich and varied production that contributed significantly to increasing the importance of places and the spread of the fame of *tīrtha*s in popular Hinduism. *Māhātmya*s dedicated to cities, divine *kṣetra*s, temples, rivers, mountains, pilgrimage routes, caves, forms of deities both widely-known and local, sacred tanks and so on present a wide range of ways people have developed to connect their land to divine deeds and sanctify their places.

Many of the techniques used today by ritual specialists and officiants to convey the power, qualities and meanings of sacred places draw directly from the narrative motifs and methods of sanctification found in local *māhātmya* traditions. For this reason, an ethnographic study focusing on specific temples and their traditions (often systematised hegemonically by Brahmans) must constantly engage with this diverse written production. Although *māhātmyas* are valuable sources for understanding pilgrimage places and traditions, they have to be approached critically and treated as products of their own kind, namely as 'advertisements'— as Lochtefeld put it—crafted by those whose livelihood was dependent on the success of a specific place among pilgrims (Lochtefeld 2010). However, I contend that *māhātmyas* should also be read 'against the grain' (Ginzburg 2000), that is 'against', or independently of the intentions of their creators. The aim is to deconstruct the worldview these sources produce to uncover the underlying socio-cultural mechanisms of their production and selective transmission. Moreover,

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15 A *māhātmya* is a glorification. The literal meaning of the term is 'greatness' and by extension glory, glorification or praise. It generally refers to the glorification of local entities, including sacred places, and the focus of praise in any *māhātmya* is the centre of the devotional universe within that text. According to a traditional classification reported in Piano (2000, 229), a *māhātmya* can concern:

- Immobile sacred places *(sthāvara-tīrtha),* such as mountains, rivers, confluences, etc.
- Specific times, such as lunar months or particular days auspicious for worshiping relevant deities.
- Ritual activities or meritorious actions.
- Sacred places of the mind *(mānasa-tīrtha),* or holy persons (*jaṅgama-tīrtha* or,'moving sacred places') or the inner pilgrimage, which involves devotion and surrender to the deity *(bhakti).*
- Deities, in their many forms and names.
- Puranic texts themselves, for their salvific and educational qualities.
  The importance of the *māhātmya* genre for the study of the dynamics of place sanctification and diverse approaches to these texts are discussed by several authors, including Hardy (1977) Porcher (1985), Granola (1998) and, more recently, Ambach, Bucholz and Hüsken (2022).

as we will see, the glorifications are tools in the hands of those contemporary individuals who continue to craft the traditions about these places, shaping and creating new material as they see fit, with clear financial ends in mind. 'Modern *māhātmyas*' and guides for pilgrims continue to be written in the present day, as the constant interplay between texts, living practices and sites updates and amends the traditions.

The Grammar of Sanctification and Geographical Imagination

Each glorification provides its own unique account of the origins of a particular site. Generally, the sacredness of places is explained through the connection of parts of the landscape to specific 'mythological' events, which, according to the most widespread conception, are actually historical: as Piano (2000, 129) notes, both *itihāsa*, which refers to epic literature and literally means 'thus indeed', and *purāṇa*, meaning 'ancient', do not merely refer to events that took place a long time ago but also to things that have always existed, transcending time, while simultaneously belonging to a historical past. The glorifications develop numerous explanations to account for the history and power of places, using a specific language with stylistic devices, rhetorical figures, and specific rules reinforced by repetition. As often happens in genres of Indian literature, the *māhātmya* genre has accumulated a set of rules and narrative motifs that new productions must adhere to and refine. Through this continuity with the past new productions can be incorporated into the tradition and recognised as its continuation.[16]

To explain how the territory is imbued with meanings and connections, Eck (1988 and 2012, 17–34) referred to a 'grammar of sanctification', a phrase that effectively conveys the idea that there seem to be some more or less rigid rules guiding the mechanisms of sanctifying places, and consequently forming sacred geography, but perhaps does not fully capture the vast range of techniques used to create connections. Some places might, for example, be sites of *avatāraṇa*, meaning they have hosted in a mythic past the earthly manifestation of a deity, or they might host a *svayambhū* form of a deity, which has self-manifested, often in natural elements. Holy places might also originate from *pratiṣṭhā*, which is the spontaneous or invoked adherence of a deity to a specific spot on the earth, from which it has never departed. The origins of a large number of sites on the

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16   On the concept of tradition, the relationship with the past and the value of ancient things compared with novelties in the Indian context, see Squarcini 2011, 11–38.

subcontinent are traced to an occurrence of divine body dismemberment—the most notable group of places derived from this 'rule' is the Śakti Pīṭha, which are the various locations of the body parts of Sātī. The 'rules' of the grammar of sanctification are obviously fluid and each has a range of regional variations, but the result is numerous local sacred geographies that are shaped by references and resonances with the broader pan-Indian landscape.

Divine duplications and transfers are integral, if not foundational, to the 'grammar of sanctification'; indeed, I will argue that the repetition of places, names and homonymous deities is what sustains and constitutes all processes of sanctification. A pilgrimage centre or divine abode is never unique or isolated but is embedded within a vast system of trajectories and references extending across the subcontinent. The sites in this geography are interconnected through a logic of references and proliferation, rather than relying on a single hierarchy or dynamics of exclusion and uniqueness. At the same time, each *māhātmya* has a rhetoric of uniqueness, greatness and antiquity and, each site is said to be the most powerful sacred centre and the only one capable of granting liberation from the cycle of rebirths *(mokṣa).* Around each new object of glorification, the hierarchy of all places in the subcontinent can be rewritten.

Regarding pilgrimage—which I will examine in detail in Banaras in the fifth chapter—many scholars suggest that the networks connecting pilgrim destinations across the subcontinent have contributed to the creation of a continuous sacred space, in which regional differences are diminished through the movement and trajectories of pilgrims (e.g., Bhardwaj 1973; Varma 1990; Fleming 2007; Eck 2012). However, we should be careful in mobilising the idea of pilgrimage as a practice that anticipates a sense of territorial (and subsequently national) unity because this has often been embraced by Hindu nationalist forces. As is well known, in the early decades of last century the ideology of Hindutva (Savarkar 1969 [1928]), or 'Hinduness', emerged. It includes the notion that a significant portion of the population of the Indian subcontinent—the non-Hindus—could not be considered part of what was then still an abstract concept, namely the nation of India. The exclusion is informed by the idea that religious minorities, unlike Hindus, do not regard the lands of the subcontinent as sacred, and therefore cannot be considered part an Indian nation. Hindutva and other militant and political forces that draw from this ideology—including the Bharatiya Janata Party, which currently forms the Indian government under Narendra Modi—stress religious affiliation, territorial attachment and national belonging.

A more nuanced approach regarding the concepts of community and otherness related to the practice of pilgrimage, has been introduced by Feldhaus (2003, 134) when she emphasised that, on the one hand, pilgrimage has been a fundamental means through which Hindus have constructed the idea of a religious community. Not only has it helped to define this community ritually and geographically, but it

has also fostered connections across a vast territory marked by regional, linguistic and social differences. On the other hand, though, this idea of community, like other constructions of identity, delineates boundaries that necessarily exclude 'the other', thus reinforcing sometimes fluid and less well-marked differences (Remotti 1996). The population of the subcontinent has included non-Hindus and indigenous people for centuries and these minorities have knitted their own connections to the very land that Hindu nationalists claim as exclusively their own, and developed equally complex dynamics of sanctification, which often intersect with those of the Hindu majority.[17] Furthermore, while it is undeniable that the network and trajectories traced by pilgrimages have fostered a powerful sense of territory from ancient times to the modern pilgrimage industry—accelerated by infrastructure development from the colonial era—this territory remains deeply marked by regional differences.

Despite the fact that regional pilgrimage centres often compete with each other, my investigation will show that the Indian territory can be understood as the result of continuous attempts to establish connections. Individual temples themselves will emerge as plural realities with constant resonances between the here and the elsewhere. Connections, resonances and the visceral plurality of places will thus reveal how discordant and misplaced is any exclusivity claimed by Hindu nationalist forces in contemporary India.

Explaining Transposition: The State of the Art and New Perspectives

The spatial transposition of divine forms is a common phenomenon in several religious traditions. There are numerous instances in the Christian world, for instance, of places designed to 'replicate', even spatially, the geography and attractions of Jerusalem—perhaps the quintessential Christian pilgrimage destination. For example, there are several Calvaries and Sacred Mountains in Italy. These spatial transpositions, which reference and crystallise the final events of Christ's life, seem historically to have offered an alternative route that mirrored the pilgrimage to the Holy Land, potentially bestowing similar spiritual benefits even when the pilgrim was unable actually to go to Jerusalem, for whatever reason.[18]

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17 Lazzaretti and Jacobsen 2024 and Lazzaretti 2023 elaborate on the functioning of Hindu majoritarianism through the cooption of local pilgrimage traditions.

18 About the sacred mountains of Piedmont and Lombardy, see Barbero 2001 and 2004, and Cardini 2004.

A phenomenon as complex and central to the Indian context as transposition has, though, received relatively little attention from scholars and there has been a lack of consideration of the perspective from specific places and the social actors involved in reproducing this mode of territorial sanctification. The dynamics of divine transfer and the presence of numerous homonymous entities has, however, certainly been recognised and examined in the *written* sources describing the traditions of various sacred centres. A first consideration is that the intrinsic qualities of universality and transcendence attributed to *tīrtha*s, or parts of the sacred landscape such as rivers and mountains (Gutschow 2006, 343–344), recur often as necessary and constitutive features of transposed spaces, as will be noted presently in some of the cases discussed here. Due to their universality and transcendence, this reading suggests, sacred places seem naturally to lend themselves to being evoked and 'replicated' in various contexts, just as certain mythical prototypes and narrative patterns are subject to countless local variations.

The proliferation of homonymous places has also been explained in terms of the appropriation of widely-known deities and landscapes by minor kings, who validated their limited power by re-creating distant realities and making them accessible to their subjects (Pelissero 2012, 30). Indeed, the local need to reference far away realities, high-sounding names and sites connected to mythical events has been explained as the 'geographical equivalent of sanskritization' (Eck 1981, 336), and discussed as part of the complex debate on the dynamics of sanskritisation and the dialectic between the so-called great and little traditions. However, as I will argue, this explanation reduces the transposed forms to lesser realities that must authenticate and promote themselves through reference to pan-Indian pilgrimage centres. In contrast, through my ethnography of the transposed *jyotirliṅga*s in Banaras, the places of transposition themselves emerge as vehicles of fame for the 'original' realities they 'replicate'.

Moreover, the rhetorical and stereotypical nature of references to 'original' forms and names has been discussed, for instance, in the case of the repetition of Indian toponyms in Southeast Asia (Salomon 1990, 161). The author points out that the presence of homonyms should not always be interpreted as evidence of actual links between the 'model' and the 'copy'; rather, the latter may be seeking not to reproduce the 'original' Indian form but perhaps, as in Southeast Asia, another version present in locally known geographies (ibid., 160). This rather testifies to the fact that it is the names themselves that have resonant power, so that they are worthy of being reproduced everywhere, without the need for direct knowledge of the 'original'. The place names of Hindu sacred geography are usually divine names; the temples themselves almost always have the name of the main deity they house, as do the associated *tīrtha*s. Such names are open systems that can take on new meanings and correlations (Wilke 2008, 72), while

still remaining carriers of the past traditions; they are bearers of narratives, encompass mythological episodes and geographical references and help to connect the landscape to divine history. Names of places in Hindu sacred geography are illustrative of Basso's assertion that:

> [...] placenames are arguably among the most highly charged and richly evocative of all linguistic symbols. Because of their inseparable connection to specific localities, placenames may be used to summon forth an enormous range of mental and emotional associations—associations for time and space, of history and events, of persons and social activities, of oneself and stages in one's life.[19]

We will see that the evocative power of names, and their ease of 'exportability', undoubtedly plays a major role in the modes of transposition observed in Banaras.

I have chosen to use the term 'transposition', to capture and define the mode of connection between places as observed in the Hindu context, distinguishing this from, for example, the *duplication* of sacred centres in Christianity. To transpose—from the Latin *transponere*, thus *trans + ponere*—means 'to change something from one position to another, or to exchange the positions of two things'.[20] A second meaning, used in music, is 'to play or write a piece of music in a different key [...] from the one used originally'.[21]

The term 'transposition', then, shifts the focus away from comparing the transposed form with the 'original'. Unlike Christian Jerusalem—a place representative of an event about which some historical facts are fairly certain and can be crystallised in the paths proposed by its local 'replicas',[22] the 'original' in the Indian context is often a completely different reality, situated in that previously mentioned dimension of historical ahistoricity and thus inherently unknowable to those experiencing the transposed forms.

'Transposition' captures the creativity inherent in the act of re-placing—exchanging the position of two things, reversing the order or changing the musical key—and thus the concept is able to foreground the reformulation of the narratives that establish and explain the qualities of a space. This creativity emerges from the non-fixity of the 'original' and thus the potential for infinite local

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19 Basso, 1988: 103.
20 https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/trasporre/.
21 Cambridge Dictionary online (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/transposition).
22 An interesting study of Jerusalem and the dialectic between its celestial and earthly versions can be found in Stroumsa 2017. For various approaches regarding the historicity of Jesus, see Gaeta 2009. For information on the geography of the Sacred Mountains and the events they 'replicate', see Barbero 2001.

variations. These transposed forms, as we will see, constitute new and peripheral centres—centres that gain value in their physicality and experiential dimension, and whose ethnographic study contributes to the 'disintegration of the notion of centre' (Remotti 2014, 270). The term 'transposition' embodies the reversal of the order of 'original' and 'replica', and thus between 'centre' and 'periphery' of divine presence—a theme on which the narratives presented by sources on transposed forms and the voices defining local *jyotirliṅgas* particularly insist.

It is crucial to acknowledge that there are no corresponding terms in Hindi for these pairs of divine forms. A transposed deity is sometimes characterised as *pratirūpa*, literally 'counterpart of a real form', but also 'correspondent' or 'suitable form' and thus, by extension, it could also be understood as 'that which is equal'. Transposed forms, like other deities and the places where they dwell, are primarily referred to by names that have their own resonance and are never mute but always evocative, and whose sound already conveys meaning. I suggest that the term 'transposition' helps capture this reversal and also accounts for the nuances of local terminology used by my informants, thus proving to be a useful analytical term. When discussing transposed forms, sometimes I do use the terms 'original' and 'replica', but in quotation marks, because not only do they not correspond to local terminology, they are also far too simplistic when applied to the phenomenon I am dealing with.

Despite the many explanations offered by scholars about the meanings of transposition there has been little discussion about the specific forms it takes in particular contexts. The work of Feldhaus (2003) is an exception; the scholar provides an exhaustive set of criteria to distinguish between 'original' and 'replica' which I will examine in the fourth chapter, discussing the methods used in the transposed *jyotirliṅga* shrines of Banaras.

Literally entering transposed sites can, in my view, provide new insights, especially by informing us about the local variations of a practice that I argue is foundational in the imagining, making and remaking of Hindu geographies. In addition to constantly engaging with written production about these sites, my research was conducted in the field, in specific locations, in order to understand the role of transpositions *vis á vis* the 'production of locality' (Appadurai 2001 [1996]).

In addition to being integrated, like most Hindu divine forms, into a system of references and trans-regional connections, the places subject to this research are part of a more specific context that physically encompasses them and influences their reality: the city of Banaras, which itself is exemplary of the phenomenon of spatial transposition. As illustrated by the field notebook excerpt at the beginning of this chapter, the glorification literature and contemporary narratives transmitted in its shrines describe it as the seat of the universe, replicating within itself the places of the entire subcontinent; the pilgrimage paths within its territory ideally trace the trajectories of all of India; the entire city is interpreted

as a cosmic *jyotirliṅga*, the supreme manifestation of Śiva, and the god himself. As a well-known proverb states—*Kāśī ke kankaṛ Śiva Śaṅkar* (the stones of Kāśī [are] Śiva Śaṅkar)—Śiva is felt to be present in the stones that make up the city's streets and walls. Moreover, some famous places in Banaras, such as the Viśva-nāth temple and even the city itself, are replicated throughout the subcontinent. It is with this context—to understand how to conceptualise it and how to read the connection between the city and its parts—that we must come to terms before delving into the sites of transposition.

Let us now take an initial look at the complexity of Banaras, before outlining the theoretical framework that will help us navigate its stories and guide us in the study of its places.