2 Finding One's Way in Banares: Between Imagined Spaces and Lived Places

Encountering the City

My first encounter with the city happened more than twenty years ago during a brief but intense visit. It was my first trip to the subcontinent and Banaras is almost inevitably included in the itinerary of a first visit to northern India: those who have been there, travel guides, informational materials and much academic literature contribute to igniting the imagination about a city that, according to what has become a literary trope, is an ancient centre and a microcosm of Indian, particularly Hindu, religiosity. In short, its myth precedes it, obscuring many aspects of the city. Despite the long and difficult process of deconstructing this myth, which I have done by engaging with scholars who aim to restore the city's historicity, and by discovering its diverse dimensions through research, the impressions from that first visit remain latent even when I think I have moved past them.

When I arrived in the city it was nighttime. I was guided by a rickshaw puller *(rikśāvālā)* through dark, strangely silent alleys toward my accommodation. It was early September, and the monsoon was particularly heavy that year, leaving the streets wet and muddy. I remember slipping in my plastic sandals as I tried to keep up with the nimble man who was almost gliding through the alleys while I struggled several meters behind. In subsequent years, whenever I ventured into new parts of the city, I often preferred this method of navigating its streets—following a swift and sure-footed stranger who knew the city like the back of their hand.

That night, I passed by a cow that had just given birth; exhausted and nonchalant, it sniffed and licked its calf as they lay in the alley. With these first images of the city in my head—its dark streets, the mud, the stones under my feet and the birth—I fell asleep that night brimming with impressions. The next morning I stood on the terrace of my lodging, wanting to catch my first glimpse of the river and the famous *ghāṭ*s—the massive steps leading to the riverbanks, forming a kind of architectural barrier that controls the floodwaters during the rains. But the Gaṅgā (Ganges) had risen to the level of the terrace: its brown waters carried vegetation swept downstream, electrical poles emerged from the water and there was no trace of the *ghāṭs*. My first visit to Banaras lacked the

waterfront; for me, the city was not what most visitors know and where they spend much of their time, but rather it was defined by a vast river, one I would continuously rediscover every time I got lost in the alleys near it. That first time I found an infinite city, where getting lost was inevitable every time I stepped outside and left behind the reassuring terrace that overlooked the river, for me the city's most comforting side.

From then on, I often spoke about the city: one that was made of the oblivion brought by the flow of a river and an immense, disorienting tangle of voices and gestures that I couldn't decipher. I immediately began forming a bond with the city, becoming entangled in what I later learned to think of as its 'imagined space'. From that first visit, I haven't stopped thinking about it, recalling it or dreaming about it the way I first saw it—vast and drenched. Even today, after so many returns, long stays for study and research, after writing about it, desiring it from afar, experiencing and fighting it up close, I still have many questions about Banaras—about the myth that cages it and often obscures its more material and historical nature, and about its many places. These pages are, in part, an attempt to answer some of those questions.

During my subsequent stays, as I visited the city's temples and listened to the narratives my interlocutors provided to explain the origins and qualities of local deities and their locations, I came to realise the exchange that occurs between the city's physical places and the image of Banaras. The myths that have defined it over time are living, inexhaustible material that the individual sites—through the mediation of various officiants—seem to draw upon to define and narrate themselves. The city carries with it a kind of aura—of antiquity, eternity, tradition, authenticity, essence and ahistoricity—that travel literature, popular writing and academic work have helped perpetuate. The extensive body of work categorised as the 'city of light genre'[23] portrays Banaras not only as one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities since ancient times but also as the place that has always been the quintessential pilgrimage centre for those who identify as Hindu. This 'idea of Banaras' (Dodson 2012), with which any scholar intending to study the city must engage, has its own history, just like the city itself.

Many critical studies have helped to reveal that many images of Banaras—like many of the places in this city that we are led to believe are ancient—are actually of relatively recent creation or became reified during the colonial period (Bayly 1992 [1983]; Cohn 1987; Kumar 1988; Freitag 1989; Dalmia 1997; Desai 2007, 2017).

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23   Dodson (2012, 1) refers to this type of monographic study on the city, with the classic *Banaras: City of Light* by Diana Eck being a prime example. Such works favour an ahistorical view of the city and often endorse perspectives found in glorifications and rehearsed by Brahmans, who have been primary interlocutors for scholars since the colonial period.

Post-colonial approaches shifted attention to the changes brought about by the power dynamics that emerged from the encounter with European rulers. However, at times, this scholarship seem to suggest that the changes, redefinitions, and self-classifications of the 'colonised' are merely the result of the presence of the 'colonisers' and that differences between local communities in the city were emphasised, or totally superimposed by the powerful onto the people during the colonial period. However, in such analyses, those local communities rarely emerge as active participants in the processes of urban transformation. Desai, in particular (2007, xxvi), argues that studies of colonial discourse have engaged poorly with the indigenous city, often reducing pre-colonial Indian cities to traditional and static realities that only experience change when they encounter the foreign.

It is evident, however, that to grasp the complexity of a city in continuous development, one must maintain an approach that considers the *longue durée* of events and examines the structural evolutions of society and economy in pre-modern India (Bayly 1985). At the same time, it is important to study local contexts, actors and histories (Pinch 2012). The history of the myth and idea of Banaras, which I will refer to as its 'imagined space', does not begin in the modern era; rather, it has been and is being continuously rewritten and has as many faces as its promoters. Deconstructing the 'idea of Banaras' goes hand in hand with studying the forces and factors that have constituted and reconstituted it. However, once the fiction of the imagined space is revealed, one must recognise its multifaceted endurance and engage with its contemporary evolutions in Banaras' lived places.

As we begin to see, the city should be understood as an entity with multiple spatial dimensions, as many scholars have highlighted (Parry 1994; Gutschow 2006; Gaenszle and Gengnagel 2008). At the same time, the ways in the various temples of the city are made sense of and experienced by various actors testifies to the spatial complexity of the *lived* places. We will see later how these multiple spatial dimensions of both imagined and lived places interact and cross-fertilise each other.

To begin understanding the contemporary dialectic between lived places (such as the sites of our study) and the imagined space of the city, it is essential to know something of Banaras' history, its built space and its myths.

A Brief History of Banaras and Its Myths

Based on excavations conducted in the area known as the Rājghāṭ Plateau, at the northern edge of present-day Banaras, it has been concluded that the earliest settlements near the current city did not exist before the 8th century BCE (Bakker

1996, 33; Bakker and Isaacson 2004, 19). During a period of significant social, political, economic and cultural change that saw the development of a flourishing urban civilisation across the Gangetic Plain from the 6th century BCE, the Rājghāṭ area became an important commercial hub, likely due to its strategic location at the confluence of the Ganges and Varuna rivers. Perhaps it was the area's commercial dynamism that attracted the Buddha and later the Buddhist community to nearby Sarnath, a village a few kilometres from the present city, where he delivered his first sermon. Generally, Buddhist sources describe the splendour and wealth of Banaras.[24]

Archaeological evidence suggests that the city did not play a dominant role in Brahmanical religion in the centuries BCE. The only significant evidence of non-Buddhist or Jain cults is represented by a few sculptures of *yakṣas*. This suggests the presence of the kind of local cults that were dedicated to nature-related divine beings and later absorbed by the major devotional traditions.[25] The *Tīrthayātrāparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*, which represents an early systematisation of Hindu sacred geography and catalogues various regional centres, assigns a minor position to the city of Banaras, mentioning only one shrine dedicated to Śiva.[26]

It was only from the 4th century CE to the early 6th century, during the unification of north India by the Gupta dynasty, that the city gradually developed into a pilgrimage centre. During this period the construction of temples is evidenced by archaeological finds and a large number of seals issued by both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava institutions (Bakker and Isaacson 2004, 22). The main temple of Gupta-era Banaras was Avimukta, which is indeed the only place of worship attested to by both seals and early glorifications (Motichandra 1985 [1962] fig. 15; Bakker and Isaacson 2004, 22–23). In addition to Avimukta, a form of Śiva associated with renunciation and death (Bakker 1996), another ten *liṅga*s are mentioned by the seals; however, these are not referred to in the literary sources of the first millennium. Excavations at Rājghāṭ show that Śaiva temples were only a part of Banaras' territory; in fact, there were many Vaiṣṇava institutions in the area as well (Thaplyal 1972, 161), indicating that the religious landscape was diverse and different devotional currents were likely competing for dominance.

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24 The opening of numerous *jātaka*s, the narratives of the Buddha's previous lives, is well-known: 'Once, when Brahmadatta ruled in Benares…'. This phrase indicates the city's prominence from ancient times; it was chosen to set the scene for the Buddha's past lives to anchor the narrative to a renowned and significant site. In the imaginative geography of the *jātaka*s, Banaras appears not only as a royal residence but also, and primarily, as a centre of commerce. See Gnoli 2004.

25 For a description of the earliest images, see Bakker and Isaacson 2004, 22 and note 41.

26 *Mahābhārata* 3.82.69 recommends visiting Varanasi to worship Vṛṣabhadhvaja, bathe in the Kapilāhrada tank, fast and pay homage to Maheśvara.

With the collapse of the Gupta Empire and after a brief period of Hūṇā domination, the Ganges valley came under the control of the Maukhari before the mid-6th century. Their capital was Kannauj, formerly known as Kānyakubja. Puranic literary sources of the time (which I will discuss below) indicate that Varanasi experienced religious development during this period and the first *māhātmya*s entirely dedicated to the city were composed. Archaeological evidence from the second half of the first millennium is, however, quite scarce, most likely due to the gradual relocation of the city centre from the Rājghāṭ area to the south, the territory of the present-day city, where no archaeological excavations have been conducted (Bakker and Isaacson 2004: 34).

The discovery of what has been termed the 'original' Skandapurāṇa (SkP), preserved in Nepali palm-leaf manuscripts of which the oldest dates to 810, has provided us with access to the earliest *Vārāṇasīmāhātmya*, tentatively dated between the 6th and 8th centuries.[27]

An overview of other sources from the period preceding the second millennium can been obtained through the citations of such texts in Lakshmidhara's compendium, the *Tīrthavivecanakāṇḍa*, from the early 12th century.[28] In it, he primarily draws on four texts to compile a comprehensive description of the sacred territory of Banaras, not only naming his sources but also citing entire illustrative passages from them about the various divine forms present in Kāśī. Thus he provides an insight into the textual material predating his own era and available at the time of his writing. Additionally, this helps in dating the various glorifications and understanding the perspectives of different compilers on the boundaries, locations and qualities of the described space.[29]

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27 Chapters 26, 29, and 30 provide the oldest examples of *Vārāṇasīmāhātmya* and the first description of the sacred topography of the city. The critical edition of the *Vārāṇasīmāhātmya* is included in Bakker and Isaacson 2004. For a chronology of studies on the Skandapurāṇa, see Bakker 1996, notes 13, 14, and 15.

28 Lakshmidhara was a minister of King Govindachandra of the Gahadvala dynasty, who reigned from 1104 to 1154. The *Tīrthavivecanakāṇḍa* (TVK) is a section of the *Kṛtyakalapataru*, a compendium of fourteen parts dedicated to aspects of *dharma*, referencing sources available at the time. The TVK is the section that deals with pilgrimage, included in the enumeration of *dharmic* practices. Nearly half of the compendium is devoted to a description of Varanasi.

29 His sources are, in chronological order: the Vārāṇasīmāhātmyā of the 'original' Skandapurāṇa, the Vārāṇasīmāhātmyā of the Matsyapurāṇa, the Brahmāpurāṇa and the Liṅgapurāṇa (LP). Notably, citations from this version of the LP—of which only the TVK provides evidence—seem to have been introduced so as to include descriptions and lists of many *liṅga*s present in the city in his time but not mentioned in earlier sources. The parts of the LP cited do not show connections or overlaps with older texts. For information on the dating of these sources and their correlations, see Bakker and Isaacson 2004, 39–41.

The *Vārāṇasīmāhātmyā* of the *Skandapurāṇa* describes a territory that likely took shape during the Gupta period, and where the favoured deity is Avimukteśvara or Avimukta—a name that could denote either the entire urban area or a part of it. The city is depicted as a preferred location for ascetics and *yogī*s, especially frequented by followers of the Pāśupata order, one of the oldest Śaiva philosophical schools. These ascetics, who apparently had significant influence over the political centre of Kannauj, likely established ascetic communities and monasteries in ancient Banaras and were involved in the dissemination of their doctrine through most of the city's shrines. Besides its ascetic disposition, the city is described as connected to death and liberation: dying here meant salvation. The city's association with death and salvation, a feature evident continuously since classical times, took shape during this period. As the city expanded southward, the cremation ground *(śmaśāna)*, usually located on the southern outskirts of a city because it was considered contaminating, was incorporated into Banaras' centre (Bakker and Isaacson 2004, 42–46). This space was crucial for ascetic practices, and particularly for the Pāśupatas. By settling in this contaminated and marginal space, the ascetic takes a further step towards detachment and total renunciation of the world, precisely through the violation of conventional purity norms. Thus it was the ultimate challenge for the ascetic, as it was outside the usual pilgrimage and devotional routes. The presence of ascetics, though, helped transform the cremation ground from a polluted and abominable place to a transit ground towards the otherworldly dimension and liberation; ascetics, seen as living examples by ordinary pilgrims, identified the path to salvation in death at Avimukta's *śmaśāna* (SkP 29.58-59).

In addition to these important insights into the transformation of the sacred landscape during the second half of the first millennium CE, it should be noted that the SkP records what is possibly the first pilgrimage or list of *liṅga*s in the city. Besides the shrine of Avimukteśvara, twelve *liṅga*s are listed (SkP 29.58-59), some of which are *svayambhū* (self-manifested), while others were established by deities. The sequence may correspond to a sort of route around Avimukta but the term *yātrā* (pilgrimage) does not appear (Bakker 2008, 23). It is important to note that the listed *liṅga*s do not correspond to any of the seal inscriptions, which mention shrine names and deities not found in any of the early glorifications either.

It appears from the *māhātmya*s, that some members of the intellectual elite, strongly influenced by Pāśupata ascetics, were attempting to reinforce a certain image of the city by emphasising what had been a distinctive feature of Avimukta from its origins—its association with practices related to the transition from earthly life. By filtering a reality actually shaped by heterogeneous cults (as documented by material finds), the early composers of glorifications preferred to represent Kāśī as the supreme cremation ground, where one can achieve detachment from life and death. This marks the first phase of myth construction, in which the city

has chosen its uniqueness: it is, above all, the place of liberation—a feature that will shape the deities and future practices throughout the city.

With the decline of the Kannauj kingdom, Varanasi became a contested territory among the feudal kings who claimed their independence. Although the city was never the political capital of these kingdoms (until the rise of the Gahadvala dynasty), it was nonetheless a stage where various princes could make prestigious displays (Bakker and Isaacson 2004, 59). As often happened in Indian kingdoms, patronage and funding of religious institutions was a favoured means of celebrating and showcasing a ruler's grandeur and power.

With the initial incursions of foreign invaders into the Ganges valley—following Mahmud of Ghazni's lead—the main centre of Kannauj began to decline. Banaras was plundered by Sultan Ibrahim of Ghazni but around 1079 Chandradeva Gahadvala took power, marking the first time the city became a political centre (Motichandra 1985 [1962], 11). In response to the challenge posed by invaders, the Gahadvala rulers declared themselves from early inscriptions to be protectors of the sacred sites of northern India (*Epigraphia Indica* IX: 302–305; Bakker and Isaacson 2004, 66–68) and contributed to further enriching the already complex sacred landscape with the construction of new shrines. The city now also became an expression of royal religiosity and the stage for its ceremonies and the further expansion of the sacred territory is also evidenced by the *Vārāṇasīmāhātmyā* of the Bhairavaprādurbhāva—in which we find first mentions of Viśveśvara, and which will serve as a precursor for the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* (Bisschop 2021)—and the likely commissioning of the TVK by the most important ruler of the dynasty, King Govindachandra.

In the TVK, Kāśī emerges as a complex network of temples and shrines; besides Avimukta, Lakshmidhara lists 285 *liṅga*s, including Viśveśvara (TVK 17 and 27). However, Avimukta remained the primary sacred centre until the end of the 12th century, eventually giving way to the new shrine of Viśveśvara / Viśvanātha (a name for Śiva meaning 'Lord of the Universe'), a deity that remains patron of the city in the present day.[30] The rise of Viśveśvara / Viśvanātha is generally placed after the sack of the city and the destruction of numerous temples by the army led by Qutb-ud-din Aybak and General Muhammad ibn Bhaktiyar in 1193–94 (Elliot and Dowson 1867–77, vol. II, 223).[31]

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30   The origins of Viśvanātha are obscure. Some hypotheses about its original location and its relationship with Avimukta are summarised by Eck (1983, 130–135), Bakker (1996), and Smith (2007a and 2007b).

31   Recent discoveries, however, reveal that the temple was known from the first half of the 12th century; see details in Bakker and Isaacson 2004, 72–75. Smith (2007a and b) reviews various positions on the origins of Viśveśvara and proposes new hypotheses.

Despite the grandeur of the testimonies of its rulers, the Gahadvala dynasty failed to prevent or address the external threats to northern India and was defeated by the Ghūrid army in 1194 (Bakker and Isaacson 2004). For about fifty years after the fall of the the Gahadvala dynasty (and other north Indian kingdoms), the situation remained unstable and fighting continued around the city (Motichandra 1985 [1962]; Bakker 1996). We know that around 1212 a pillar was erected to commemorate the victory of King Sena Vishvarup in Banaras, now designated as the abode of Viśveśvara (*Epigraphia Indica* XXXIII, 322). From this time on, Viśveśvara replaced Avimukta as the patron of the city, the divine hierarchies were rewritten around him and the city's image began to be redefined.

The 13th century is a turning point, not only in the history of northern India but also for the city of Banaras. Throughout the century, and in the beginning of the next, we witness the reorganisation of traditions and in some cases the creation of new conceptualisations of its territory. According to Motichandra (1985 [1962], 256), this happened in response to the encounter with Islam. The combination of this encounter with new Islamic rulers, the ruins of the old city and political instability seems to have particularly stimulated the imagination of the Brahman classes. In their attempt to recover the forms and places of a presumed past splendour, they began a process of organising and systematising narratives about the city's sacred sites. This effort led to the creation of a text that would become the principal authority and textual framework for all subsequent reinterpretations up to the present day (Bakker 1996, 43). As we will see in the fifth chapter, the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* (KKh)[32] remains an authoritative source for oral transmission in contemporary places of worship and for the redefinition of local pilgrimages in recent times. References to it often draw on a kind of 'ideal' rather the actual content of the text, but referring to it at all, even if inaccurately, is seen to be drawing on the highest and most authoritative tradition.

The KKh is a section of the edited *Skandapurāṇa*, interspersed with spatial references. For many sites, there are references to earlier myths and an ancient location—presumably before the destructions—and then to a new site, thus integrating the heritage of the past with the new geography of the city (Sukul 1977, 278–279; Eck 1993, 10; Gutschow 2006, 32). The KKh reorganises the narrative material of previous glorifications to promote the new landscape described, validating the transition of the city from a sacred field centred around Avimukta to the residence of a large number of deities who have settled here, with Śiva now in his form as Viśvanāth (Smith 2007b).

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32   The KKh consists of 100 *adhyāyas* and is usually dated to the 13th – 14th centuries. See Eck 1983, 347 and 1993; Bakker 1996; Bakker and Isaacson 2004. Alternative dates are proposed by Smith 2007a and b.

Following the invasions of Sikandar Lodi in 1494 and Babar in 1529 there was a further literary elaboration of the sacred landscape: the *Kāśīrahasya*[33] was likely composed in the 16th century with the intention of reinforcing and integrating the mythological material about the city's sites established by the KKh (Gutschow 2006, 32). In particular, chapters 9–11 are dedicated to describing the *Pañcakrośīyātrā*, 'the pilgrimage of the five leagues', which is the most well-known route of the city and traces the perimeter of the *kāśīkṣetra*. The *Pañcakrośīyātrā* will be the subject of constant debate and revision, even in recent times.[34]

During the Mughal period, temple construction in the city did not cease: numerous donations from regional rulers are recorded for the reconstruction of ancient temples destroyed during invasions and the building of new temples (Motichandra 1985 [1962], 150–155). Moreover, the city continued to be a centre for ascetics and followers of various renunciation traditions and a place for the lively exchange of opinions (ibid.). In 1585, during the reign of Akbar, the Viśvanāth temple—presumably destroyed in the 12th-century invasions—was rebuilt either by the minister Todar Mal or under the patronage of Raja Man Singh of Jaipur,[35] who also constructed a variety other temples, *ghāṭs* and sacred tanks (Motichandra 1985 [1962], 162, 168; Gutschow 2006, 32, 34; Rötzer 1989).

Aurangzeb, undoubtedly the most controversial Mughal ruler, is often described as a ruthless monarch and bigoted destroyer of Hindu temples, particularly in Banaras. However, examination of the sources provides a more nuanced view of his actual policies and the motivations behind temple demolitions, while concrete details about the constructions attributed to him are often lacking (Truschke 2017). In the case of Banaras, he generally had a policy of respect for temples, practices and priestly groups, prohibiting actions that disturbed or obstructed Hindus.[36] Some temple destructions are confirmed: notably, the Viśvanāth temple was demolished by Aurangzeb in September 1669, apparently in retaliation against landowners and descendants of Rājā Man Singh, who were suspected of

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33 The *Kāśīrahasya* (KR) is considered an appendix to the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* but circulates independently. It is composed of 26 *adhyāya* dedicated to the description and glorification of the city as a whole, rather than focusing on individual sites. For instance, the city itself is interpreted as a *jyotirliṅga* or identified with the *brahman* (KR 7.65, 17) and is considered to be the abode not only of Śiva but also of Viṣṇu.

34 For more detail about the *Pañcakrośīyātrā* see Singh 2002; Gutschow 2006, 113–204; Gengnagel 2008, 145–164; and Gengnagel 2011.

35 Motichandra (1985 [1962], 168) identifies Narayan Bhatta and later Todar Mal as the proponents of this reconstruction; other sources attribute the patronage to Rājā Man Singh (Asher 1992, 254).

36 In a *farmān* from 1659, a copy of which is held at the Bhārat Kalā Bhavan museum in Banaras, Emperor Aurangzeb issued instructions to the officer Abdul-Hasan in Banaras. This document shows that the ruler's general policy was to protect temple activities. The full translation can be found in Eaton 2001, 71.

helping the Maratha fighter Shivaji, an enemy of Aurangzeb, escape from imperial authorities in Agra (Sinha 1974, 65–68). It is believed that the demolition was intended to strike both at the rulers who supported his enemy and at the dominant political forces in Banaras—namely, the landowners and Brahmans of the main temple—to reaffirm his authority during a period of political instability (Asher 1992, 254; Eaton 2001, 74–75). Apparently, part of the demolished temple was used as the base for Gyān Vāpī, a mosque built on the site where the temple presumably stood. However, evidence about the construction of Gyān Vāpī is lacking, and neither the patron nor the date of its construction is known (Asher 1992, 254).

During the disintegration of the Mughal Empire and the progressive entry of colonial forces onto the political scene in the 18th century, the city came under the control of the Nawabs of the Avadh (Oudh) province. In 1738, they installed Rājā Balwant Singh as their feudal lord in Banaras, thus founding the city's Kāśī Nāres dynasty.[37] This period marked the beginning of a fruitful transcultural interaction, where various social groups collaborated on multiple fronts to materialise the city described in the glorifications in the urban landscape.

Solidification of Banaras' Hindu Sacred Geography: Architecture, Maps and Pilgrimages

Patronage for the construction or reconstruction of temples and structures for cultural and religious gatherings contributed greatly to the reformulation of the myth of Banaras as a Hindu centre. Between the 16th and 18th centuries, the major landowners of the city were Rajputs, who displayed their wealth and power by sponsoring the building of palaces, shrines and other religious institutions. In particular, the riverfront was transformed into a showcase where various patrons could display their prosperity and participate in the architectural and cultural revival of the city. Among the principal builders were the Peshwas (Marathas), who, in addition to renewing the city's architecture, were also active promoters of Brahmanical traditions. Maratha Brahman families had begun to settle in Banaras several centuries earlier and exerted significant cultural influence.[38]

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37 For a comprehensive description of the various rulers and their individual activities see Cohn 1987, 346–355 and Dalmia 1997, 64–94.

38 For an account of the constructions undertaken along the riverfront during this period, see Desai 2012: 27–29. Motichandra (1985 [1962], 277–286) traces the settlement of the Maratha Brahmans from the 16th century when, after the fall of Vijayanagar, large

Other land was owned by families associated with the Muslim dynasties and they actively participated in the Indo-Islamic culture of the city (Kasturi 2012). In fact, in the centuries preceding the establishment of British rule the city had a strong Indo-Islamic character. Freitag describes its main characteristics as follows:

> In the early eighteenth century, like many of the other celebrated holy places such as Prayag (Allahabad) and Ayodhya, Banaras had been a 'mughalizing city', owing much to the cultural patterns established first by the Mughals and then fostered by the Nawab of Awadh's court. The physical world of Banaras certainly reflected this mughalization—in its Muslim buildings, the establishment of *muhalla*, and the dotting of Muslim shrines. The social world, too, had been mughalized, with configurations of such urban functionaries as the 'service types, sufi orders, pirs... and scribal groups'. No doubt this mughalized style accounted, in part, for the strong ties established early in the career of the Banaras dynasty with the Muslim lower-caste groups such as the weavers.[39]

Indo-Islamic culture was also encouraged and sponsored by the early local *rājā*s (Dalmia 1997, 67–73). Only after the direct takeover by the British colonial government, with changes in land ownership regulations and the emergence of new social classes, did the Kāśī Nāreś become active promoters of the 'Hinduisation' of the city's religious and cultural life (Dalmia 1997).

From the 18th century onwards new social forces emerged, shaping the dominant classes of the following years: the *baniyā*s (merchants) and *kāyasth*s (scribes).[40] These groups became landowners and significantly influenced the city's religious life throughout the 19th century, helping craft its new image, not only for local appreciation but also for foreign observers. That is because alongside the Brahmans, they became key interlocutors for foreign scholars interested in Hindu history and traditions, and for the colonial government. Initially, these families controlled fiscal affairs and soon began serving as bankers for the British, as well as becoming major allies of the local *rājā*s. Later, particularly after the change in the official language of administration from Persian to English in

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communities arrived in Banaras and initiated many of the Vedic study institutions. For further details on the activities of the Maratha Brahmans, also see Dalmia 1997, 54, 94–95.

39　Freitag 1989, 9; for a discussion on the *qasba* style and 18th-century Banaras, see also Bayly 1992 [1983].

40　Cohn (1987, 341–342) discusses the emergence of a new landowning class, which can be defined in European terms as such, starting from the latter half of the 19th century.

1840, the colonial government integrated them into its administrative apparatus (Cohn 1987, 320–342; Motichandra 1985 [1962], 313–330). Rejecting ties with the old Nawabi aristocracy, merchant groups focused on sponsoring Hindu traditions through substantial donations to temples and organising religious festivals and events. These activities reflect a trend of merchant castes—lower in the caste hierarchy—adopting Brahmanical customs to elevate their social status (Bayly 1999, 178–79, 220, 377).

The city's reputation as a centre of traditional studies had spread among the European intellectual elite in Calcutta, and by the end of the 18th century the British arrived in Banaras. It was perceived by the British as a centre encompassing the literary, legal, and religious traditions of the entire country and thus the primary place for gathering traditional knowledge. As mentioned, the primary informants for the British were initially the Brahmans, who transmitted the teachings and values of their textual tradition and the city's glorified image. The choice of the Brahmanical class as the preferred interlocutor by the English and, to some extent by missionaries, stemmed from a desire to distance themselves from the intellectual influences of the old ruling class. The Mughal court and administration was a multicultural, polyglot reality with officials and intellectuals from various religious traditions; but they were primarily bureaucrats and historians, not priests or jurists. The British preferred to promote other groups, distant from previous power structures and seemingly the sole bearers of ancient traditions that, from an orientalist perspective, needed to be preserved and brought to light (Torri 2002, 23–26).[41] Interaction with the priestly elite was an important colonial strategy but partially concealed the intent of domestication and control that the new rulers needed to exercise over an influential group in the city (Bayly 1999, 86–87).

Banaras was also of great strategic importance; it was at the centre of the trade network connecting Bengal to Maharashtra and played a dominant role in the regional economy. Economic and political interests thus aligned with the desire to know and preserve the 'ancient traditions' of the Hindus; this activity not only brought renown to the scholars who mediated the transmission of

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41   As is well known, the term 'orientalism' and the adjective 'orientalist' refer to the set of representations that various European institutions have produced over time, forming a particular idea of the Orient. The debate about orientalism began with the work of Said (2001 [1978]), which contributed to the renewal of cultural and literary studies by exposing the attitudes and prejudices that European intellectuals, administrators, explorers and academics had towards 'oriental' countries. In relation to South Asia, Said's publication sparked numerous debates and lines of study that have utilised, criticised or revisited the concept of orientalism. The volume edited by Breckenridge and van der Veer (1993) still provides a good overview of the various applications of the concept to the Indian context.

acquired knowledge to the 'civilised' world but also constituted a necessary step for establishing colonial control at all levels.

Colonial-era scholars, historians, artists and colonial administrators all contributed to the reinterpretation of Banaras as a sacred and eternal city, the centre of the ancient splendour of the Hindus and representative of the religious and cultural traditions of the entire country. In this process of interpreting and rewriting the city's image, ancient texts, particularly the Purāṇas, were considered the closest sources to historical material. Believing that Indian society, like other Asian realities, was static and timeless, and, above all, did not have historiography, scholars turned to mythological texts and normative treatises to interpret a history that was in fact very different from the one depicted in Brahmanical literature (Cohn 1987, 142–143). The writing of the history of Banaras by colonial-era scholars was thus heavily based on the belief in its antiquity and the information transmitted by Brahmans, rather than on artefacts or a study of other evidence. As Desai puts it:

> Thus, the construction of a past for Banaras was derived from a larger European tradition of classical archeology. In its case however, the past was constructed on the basis of conviction rather than material remains. The belief in the city's antiquity preceded any evidence that might be found for it. The lack of the latter did not shake that predominant belief.[42]

Throughout the 19th century, though, there were numerous archaeological excavations and inscriptions were deciphered. But when the the British developed an 'official' history of India they fitted this new evidence into existing notions and structured it around a rigid chronological framework—consisting of the Ārya and Vedic periods, Buddhism, Hinduism, the Islamic period and the arrival of civilisation with European rule—that served as a model until it was questioned in the post-colonial period. In particular, the perception of the centuries of Islamic rule as a dark and contaminating period for the ancient Hindu traditions contributed to 'cleansing' the Indo-Islamic cultural heritage that had characterised the major cities of the empire. This process also promoted the reification of religious communities—a reification that, as highlighted by numerous studies, was notably implemented through the colonial practice of census-taking.[43]

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42 Desai 2007, 54.

43 The census is a crucial moment (along with the creation of topographical maps and the establishment of archaeological museums) in the process of forming the nation-state as a colonial product (Anderson 1996 [1991]). The census represents the creation of categories of religious and linguistic identification that radically alter local perceptions and recognition dynamics, imposing units of enumeration and measurement

We have seen that the 18th and 19th centuries were crucial for the reformulation of the myth of Banaras. Another aspect of that process was the mapping and projection of divine names and places mentioned in glorification texts onto the physical territory. The promotion of reconstructed temples and the establishment of pilgrimage paths were key elements of this, involving various actors: the patrons of these constructions, including the newly emerged landowners such as merchants and bankers, and the local *rājas*; the Brahmans, as the knowledgeable custodians of authoritative texts; and the colonial administration, which often provided the technological means to measure and redraw the territory and as well initiated debates about pilgrimage routes.[44]

To attest to the process of topographical adjustment and the establishment of numerous urban pilgrimages—which, as we will see, will also anchor the vast divine population mentioned in the texts to the territory—the extensive production of visual material on the city also played a role. The colonial administration began creating topographical maps of the city in the 18th century but there was already a rich indigenous tradition of visualising the city. In fact, the creation of maps, diagrams and textile paintings depicting sacred sites has been widespread in India at least since the 15th-16th centuries.[45]

In particular, the *paṭa*s, or *paṭṭa*s, are representations of sacred centres whose viewing acts as a devotional substitute for visiting the places represented, and a *tīrthapaṭṭa* also encapsulates the essence of a *tīrtha* in a single glance. Many *tīrthapaṭṭa*s focusing exclusively or partially on Banaras (Fig. 2) were created in Rajasthan, presumably funded by wealthy patrons who sought to appropriate and promote an idealised and powerful image of a *tīrtha* whose sacred landscape they may well have helped shape architecturally.

Ways of visualising the city were reshaped locally in the 19th century, when numerous images were produced in Banaras using techniques other than the traditional illustrative techniques of Rajasthan. The encounter with colonial cartographic systems, the development of lithographic techniques and the spread of printing stimulated local artists, who now incorporated topographical details or forms representative of colonial surveying into their creations. Indigenous maps also inform us about the spatial rewriting of the image of the city. The extensive production of this period is likely due to the need to convey—through a new and

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previously foreign to the area. For discussions about the practice of enumeration applied to territory and caste, see also Appadurai 2001 [1996], 149–176.

44 Gengnagel (2011, 55–72) conducted a comprehensive study of the definition of the *Pañcakrośīyātrā* in the 19th century, which illustrates well the collaboration of these social forces in the establishment of routes and ideal spaces within the city's territory.

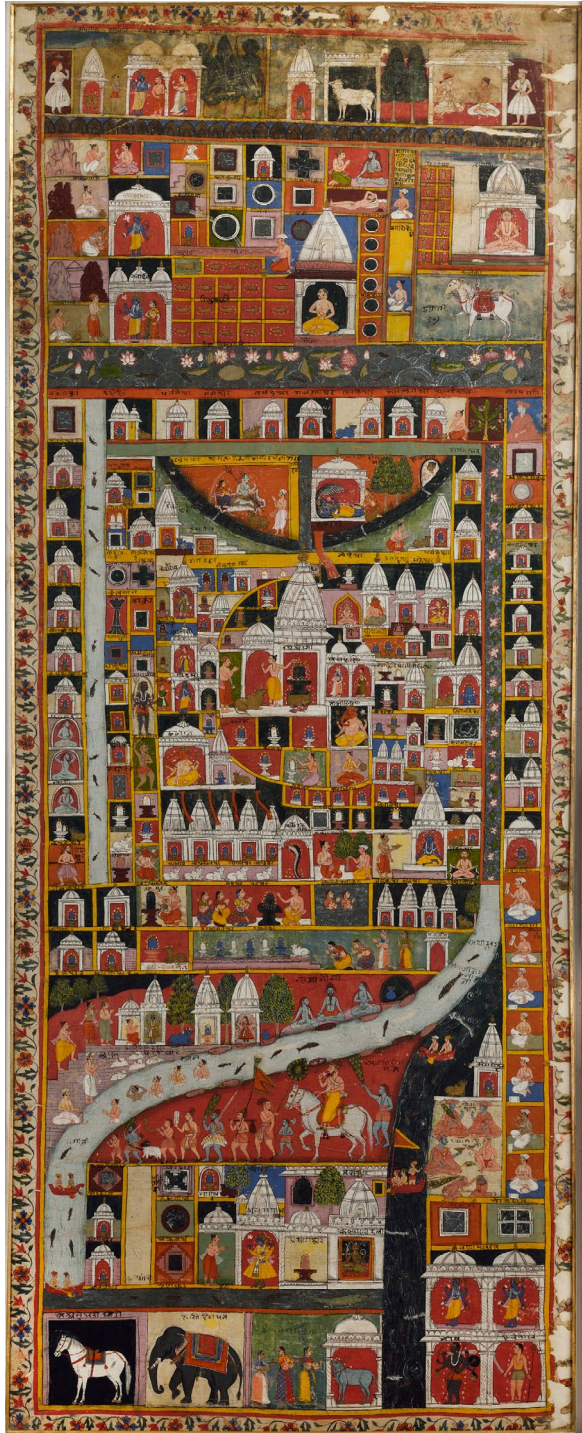45 For an overview of the various genres and subjects, see Gole 1989 and Schwartzberg 1992.

Fig. 2 *Tīrthapaṭṭa*, National Museum, New Delhi; acc. no. 56.59/58, Mewar, Rajasthan, circa 1700, 178 × 70 cm. Courtesy of the National Museum, New Delhi.

different medium—the image of the sacred space after a period of transformations and reconstructions of its physical territory. Like the glorifications of the past, the maps served to visualise the results of the processes of reconstruction and systematisation of the sacred landscape (Gutschow 2006, 36).

An iconological approach to the study of landscape and cartography interprets maps as vehicles for the agendas and values of the societies that produced them (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988, 1–10). Scholars have described and analysed the close link between cartography and the exercise of power: maps conceal the desire to know and dominate a territory, often through its objectification on paper (Edney 1997; Anderson 2000 [1991], 196–202).

Regarding religious cartography, however, the interpretation of symbols as expressions of power is controversial: earlier maps of sacred territories in India generally do not explicitly promote the domination of space through the objectification of boundaries and areas. Instead, they often seem to showcase the magnificent qualities of the holy centre, conveying its universality and transcendence; to achieve this, the artist frequently combines various representational types (Gaenszle and Gengnagel 2008, 11–13; Michaels 2008, 131–132, 140–141). However, with the recent resurgence of Hindu nationalism, pilgrimages, the representation of holy centres, and rituals of place, are mobilised more often as tools for Hinduising a landscape and coopted to advance majoritarian agendas (Lazzaretti and Jacobsen 2024).

The influence of the context in which the pictorial map is created, though, should not be underestimated. As suggested by the term 'picture map', introduced by Gutschow (2006, 18), visual sources cannot be considered merely as representations of an ideal space; they are also creations emerging from a specific context, which they reveal through the dynamics of space definition and appropriation, even if their creator was not aware of doing so.

The religious cartography of Banares has received considerable attention in the last decades. As highlighted by studies focusing on the city's visualisation practices,[46] the extensive production of indigenous maps is an integral part of the process of sanctifying the urban territory (Gutschow 2006; Gengnagel 2011).

The dissemination of images in manageable and visually impactful forms has clearly contributed to the wider transmission of the mythical image of the city. The image that emerges from most visual representations is that of a transcendent and highly symbolic space, characterised by the presence of temples—most

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46 The systematic study of this material began with the 'Varanasi Research Project: Visualized Space—Constructions of Locality and Cartographic Representation in Banaras', conducted by the South Asian Institute of Heidelberg (2000–2002). Publications by Gutschow 2006, Gaenszle and Gengnagel 2008, Michaels 2008, and Gengnagel 2011 are part of the results of the project.

of which are dedicated to Śiva—and traversed by various pilgrimage routes. This represents a Hindu *tīrtha*, from which the Islamic element is progressively excluded or filtered.

Thus, visual production effectively serves as a means of promoting an idealised image of the city, as it visually repeats and completes the imagined space of the texts, making it more tangible. As we will see, some examples of visual production are used as sources in reconstructing the process of transposing the pan-Indian *jyotirliṅga*s onto the territory of Banaras. More recent representations were printed in small paper formats and sold to pilgrims on *ghāṭ*s or at book stalls until a few years ago but, as observed during field research, these are now hard to find. Nonetheless, visual production about the city has not ceased but is evolving into new types of representation, which I believe are replacing the previous ones: I will discuss some of these new representations in the fifth chapter.

Interpreting the City and Its Spatial Dimensions

The spatial dimension has long been marginal in anthropology, so much so that even in the early 1990s Rodman (1992, 643) could assert that: 'The idea, well-established in geography, that places produce meaning and that meaning can be grounded in place, has yet to attract much theoretical interest in anthropology'. It is precisely thanks to the influence of cultural geography studies that, starting from the second half of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, anthropologists began to reassess the spatial dimension as an object of interest for anthropological enquiry.[47] By focusing on human groups, anthropology initially reduced places to mere backdrops for human action or, in some cases, turned them into allegories for certain images and 'topological stereotypes' (Appadurai 1988b, 46). India's spatial dimensions in particular, though, at first did not attract much scholarly attention, but this was later evaluated in (Berti and Tarabout 2003). The critique of the simplification of spatial dimensions, along with renewed interest in the relationships people maintain with their places, partly stems from the debate surrounding the plurality of 'voices' in anthropology and reflections on ethnographic representation.[48]

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47   Some key works of the so-called 'spatial turn' include Appadurai 1988a; Rodman 1992; Feld and Basso 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1996; Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995.

48   The issue of voice is central to a discipline that originates as an account of the cultural practices of other peoples. Through a monograph, the ethnographer aims to convey or reconstruct the voice of other people for readers. Verbal exchange and dialogue are foundational pillars of any fieldwork. Starting with Clifford Geertz's interpretive

Starting from what is often referred to as the 'crisis of representation', the concept of voice has been rethought as polyphonic. The anthropologist must speak and write not by trying to reduce plurality to a single unified voice, but rather by engaging in conveying the multivocality—even if it is contradictory—of their field experience, and the process of negotiation of meanings that takes place in the dialogue between researcher and informants (Fabietti, Malighetti, and Matera 2002, 83). Consequently, space itself becomes a complex dimension to observe when taking into account the intrinsic multivocality of every place. That multivocality, when connected to a place, can be characterised also as 'multilocality' (Rodman 1992), a concept that proves particularly useful in the study of transposed places.

The process of enhancing place reaches its full expression in the phenomenological approach, which revalues the places of experience in contrast to the abstract dimension of space. By reversing the dominant scientific paradigm that interprets place as a derivative of space—understood as absolute, infinite and *a priori*—phenomenology considers places of experience as preceding and foundational to space. It is precisely through the bodily experience in lived places that the abstract and conceptual idea of space is constituted (Casey 1996, 14). The bodily dimension, central to phenomenological reflection (Merleau-Ponty 2003 [1945]), takes on particular significance in the devotional context and in the Indian attitude of locative piety. The divine body, as a representation of the universe and the territory of the subcontinent, is, as mentioned, a recurring metaphor in the grammar of sanctification.

Numerous practices of internalising sacred places, such as visual diagrams and maps of *tīrtha*s, bear witness to the multiplicity of experiences of the sacred place, which is not only felt and experienced in specific locations of the territory but also in 'affective spaces' located in what has been described as 'body-as-place' (Sarbadhikary 2015).

If phenomenology goes so far as to revalue place to the point of making it potentially universal, phenomenological anthropology seeks to bring to light the

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turn, which freed anthropological data from presumed objectivity, and the subsequent reevaluation of ethnographic writing and representation, the anthropologist is led to question the multiplicity of voices heard during field research and the methods available to convey this plurality. Fieldwork brings the researcher into contact with a variety of local thoughts and voices, while the phases of transcription, and finally the writing of the monograph itself, bring out the internal voices of the ethnographer, who organises, mediates, comments and conveys local voices through his or her own. For key theories on ethnographic writing, see Clifford and Marcus 1997 [1986], Clifford 1999 [1977], Fabietti, Malighetti, and Matera 2002, 81–87, and Piasere 2002, 14–21. For the dynamics of representation related to the ethnographic encounter, refer to Gallini and Satta 2007, and De Lauri and Achilli 2008.

contexts and dynamics of the communities that traverse these places and from which the stories and processes of spatial entities, such as regions or nations, emerge. The anthropology of places aims to collect and recount 'local theories of dwelling' (Feld and Basso 1996, 8) that enrich the many ways of thinking, knowing and representing the spatial dimension. To value place over space also means giving voice to local discourses, hidden, for example, in the practice of naming, in mythic narratives about the presumed origin of places, in the use of physical space and in the postures and attitudes of the body as a tool for embodying places. More profoundly, it involves rereading culture as an imprint on space (Remotti 1994). The relationship between humans and places has been analysed in terms of 'embodiment', or the visceral relationship between lived world and bodies (Harris 2016; Mascia-Lees 2011); this lens—together with the dimension of dwelling proposed by Ingold (2000)—proves particularly fruitful, as seen in the fifth chapter, for interpreting the attitudes that some ritual experts and promoters of local urban pilgrimages have towards the city of Banaras and its places.

Explicitly referring to the dialectic between space and places theorised by phenomenological approaches in geography, archaeology and anthropology, Gaenszle and Gengnagel (2008) propose an approach that I find particularly effective for the city of Banaras, and from which I derive the idea of the 'imagined space' that I propose here. The city is characterised as multiple: the fundamental tension that seems to emerge is the one previously theorised between the abstract and mythical dimension of space as an ideal entity and the experiential and local level of places in everyday life. The ideal space is not fixed or timeless, handed down solely by Brahmanical tradition, but is continually rethought by various individual actors and social forces. The scholars assert:

> Normative space is the subject of exegesis and largely defined by members of the upper castes, in particular the Brahmans. But such norms, even if it is claimed that they exist from time immemorial, continually change, old models are modified and new models are adopted, so that there are layers and layers of meaning which never completely erase the earlier ones. This has been likened to a palimpsest, which retains a trace of the past.[49]

This ongoing process of rewriting, it should be noted, takes place within specific places. What I wish to emphasise, and what will emerge from the case of the transpositions I examine here, is that the imagined spaces—be it that of Banaras or of the pan-Indian group of *jyotirliṅga*s—can be visualised and understood only through the mediation of lived places. From the phenomenological perspective, it

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49 Gaenszle and Gengnagel 2008, 17.

is the active practices in individual places that produce and sustain the multiple imagined spaces, which, for simplicity, I will now refer to in the singular form. As we will see, places are the sites of processes of individualisation (Fuchs and Rüpke 2015), where individual actions influence the evolution and transmission of traditions. As will emerge from the study of narrative traditions and the ethnographies of places, these specific realities—in our case, the transposed temples, which by definition already reproduce, duplicate and refer back to another presumed 'original'—emerge as laboratories where the imagined space is conceived, staged, rewritten and kept alive.

I thus set out to engage through the phenomenological approach with the power attributed to specific places, highlighting the influence that localised practices in individual temples, and the contributions of the individual voices of social actors, have on the broader dimension of space, whether real or imagined. I will identify the ways in which specific places stage and recreate the rhetoric of the imagined space of the city, constantly and creatively reconstituting its features, while at the same time staging and recreating the 'original' sites themselves which, more often than not, will be knowable not directly but only through their transpositions.