Banāras Revisited: Introduction

István Keul

In October 2011 the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim was host to a week-long series of conferences, seminars, and workshops grouped together under the – laconic and felicitous – title 'India 2011.'[1] While the primary aim of the event was to initiate and improve existing cooperation between Norway and India in terms of education, research, and business development, all university departments were invited to contribute from their own fields towards disseminating knowledge about Indian culture, not only in an academic context but also to a larger public. It was under these circumstances that the idea of a conference on Banāras cropped up and materialized into a program intended to appeal to all those interested (academically or otherwise) in India and her culture, and, at the same time, to contribute as meaningfully as possible to the vast corpus of existing Banāras-related scholarship.[2]

The participants in this conference were invited to talk about their past and present research in Banāras, and to reflect on their encounters and experiences in a city that visitors have described as a veritable microcosm of India: multi-faceted and complex, vibrant and full of contradictions. The conference and, for that matter, the resulting volume were conceived as a collection of combined reflections on research interests and personal insights, and as an attempt at evaluating the weight of the 'Banāras experience' for individual biographical histories and academic careers. The scholars participating in the conference came from various disciplines (history, anthropology, South Asian studies, the study of religions, architecture, literature), and their travels to Banāras spanned periods of different lengths: from more than five decades to around four years. The large diversity of approaches and the broad spectrum of voices and attitudes in the present collection's contributions are a direct and natural consequence of this variety.

The socio-cultural universe of Banāras has been and continues to be an inexhaustible treasure chest of themes and topics for scholarly research. The conference and the present volume represent another illustration of this abundance, with themes

1 'India 2011' was the third in a line of similar events after 'Japan 2002' and 'Poland 2006.'

2 The constantly revised and updated online *Banaras Bibliography* prepared by Jörg Gengnagel and Axel Michaels (http://www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/abt/IND/publikation/bibbanaras/bibbanaras.php (accessed on 8 July 2013)), and Chapter 4 in Rana P. B. Singh's *Banaras, The Heritage City of India: Heritage, History, and Bibliography* (Varanasi: Indica, 2009) constitute vast bibliographic resources on Banāras-related scholarship.

ranging from the sensory aesthetics of everyday life to the history of the Marathas in Banāras; from Harishchandra, the 'father' of modern Hindi, to the 'tribals' of Nagwa; from the architecture of the ghāṭs to the works of the Austrian writers Stefan Zweig and Josef Winkler; from 'informative relationships' with research assistants to the mediatization of goddesses; from reflections on public education to a contemporary literary chronicler of Assī; from 'colonial ghosts' in the 1950s to present-day Western travelers.

In addition to its thematic diversity, this volume on Banāras benefits from another strong asset: the voices of its contributors, clearly audible in narrative and reflexive passages in most essays, more restrained in others. These passages and personal vignettes contribute significantly to making the essays hopefully a useful reading also for undergraduates who are considering undertaking fieldwork in Banāras or elsewhere. Solemn moments are not absent from some of the papers either. However, these are rarely moments of undifferentiated praise and they usually have concrete, this-worldly referents: persons, places, and events, or situations resulting from combinations of these elements. Even in the more evocative passages, Banāras (or Kāśī, or Vārāṇasī) is not idealized or glorified as the ancient and eternal place of deliverance, with the contributors contextualizing their reminiscences biographically, socially, historically. With this in mind, the term 'pilgrimage' in the collection's title – chosen initially as a potentially attractive title-theme for a meeting catering to a larger public – sheds much of its religio-spiritual ballast, and the critical undertones in the volume further contribute to its firm grounding.[3]

The construction of the city's sacredness is nevertheless present as a theme in several of the collection's contributions, most conspicuously in the first essay by Travis Smith, who draws attention to what he calls the 'fundamental methodological conundrum' of having to decide between a scholarly and a devotional approach when reading Purāṇic *māhātmya*s ('glorifying texts') of Banāras/Vārāṇasī. This particular genre of texts contains stories from a mythological past that present the city as a place where deities permanently and eternally dwell. They describe, among other things, religiously important sites (a 'sacred geography'), rituals to be performed in particular places, and benefits to be acquired from these devotional acts. For the worshiper (resident or pilgrim), temple owner, and traditional interpreter, the *māhātmya*s constitute the textual foundation of the city's sacredness. The conundrum mentioned by Smith (and quite familiar to many of us working in the study of religions) appears when scholars look at textual histories and 'read between the lines,' analyze the (anonymous) authors' ideological intentions, and establish possible links be-

3 That being said, it should be noted that the combination of the terms 'scholar' and 'pilgrimage' was not entirely uncontroversial among the participants in the conference, and generated a lively discussion in the closing session. And discreet inquiries from potential participants in the run-up to the event asking about the desired tenor of the conference and cautiously warning that their contribution might not be free of critical (under)tones are a telling expression of scholars' awareness of the selective approaches to the topic, as well as of audience expectations.

tween text passages and religious movements' or individual interests in enhancing the popularity of certain sites, thus running counter to the idea of timeless sacredness and revelation stated in the texts and followed by myriads of devotees. Having recognized and acknowledged this – apparently irreconcilable – divergence, Travis Smith points out that the two approaches are complex and fluid in their own ways, and suggests that the boundaries between them might be more permeable than they seem. Two individual perspectives from the second half of the nineteenth century are selected to illustrate this ambiguity when dealing with the *māhātmya* tradition. The first example is the Anglican missionary M. A. Sherring, who spent roughly two decades of his life in Banāras, and his historical study *The Sacred City of the Hindus: An Account of Benares in Ancient and Modern Times* (1868). Though his motivations are multiple, Sherring's is a scholarly work on the city. However, while he (implicitly) acknowledges the mythical nature of the Purāṇic *māhātmya*s and the lack of historical facts therein, he is in line with other British colonial administrators and historians of his time when he exhibits a certain fascination for the reputation and antiquity of Banāras. As a consequence, Sherring's treatment of the city's early history is influenced by the same Purāṇic construction of a continuous sacred tradition reaching far back in time. The second example selected by Smith discusses the experiences of the nineteenth-century Bengali mystic Ramakrishna during a pilgrimage to Banāras, as presented in Swami Saradananda's biography of the saint. Here, too, the perspective and experiences are complex and fluid, ranging from distress at the sight of greed among local Brahmins to ecstatic visionary moments that reaffirm the validity and authority of the hymnic texts extolling the city's sanctity.

The ideas of the uniqueness, centrality, and complexity of Banāras (or, in this case, of a part of it) in relation to the rest of the world are bundled in a passage from a novel composed by the contemporary Hindi writer Kashinath Singh, who metaphorically connects the city's southernmost neighborhood Assī, Banāras, and the world to Pāṇini's Sanskrit grammar, its commentary (*bhāṣya*) and subcommentaries (*ṭīkā*), respectively. As Heinz Werner Wessler shows in his article, in addition to being an allusion to Banāras/Vārāṇasī/Kāśī as a seat of Sanskrit learning (as much as to the 'pretension of brahmanic learnedness'), the reference to Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī* evokes the image of a complex and dense, compact and comprehensive system of rules that has to be learned and explained with the help of auxiliary texts, the *raison d'être* of the latter resting in the existence of the former alone. To Kashinath Singh, Assī and Banāras are such dense socio-cultural systems, characterized by 'topophilic' traditionalism, self-centeredness, and perhaps a dose of hubris, but also affected by rapid transformation, political interests, and exposure to outer, 'Western,' trends and influences. Wessler embeds the analysis of central themes in Singh's novel *Kāśī kā Assī* ('Kāśī/Banāras's [neighborhood] Assī') in a discussion of the author's biography, literary influences, and language. As Wessler points out, one major subject in Kashinath Singh's work is the encounter and interaction between the inhabitants of Assī and foreign visitors seeking to acquire knowledge of and/or immerse themselves in traditional Indian culture, and the dilemmas that arise in the process. The story of a

young foreign woman and a traditional brahmin who accepts her as his disciple illustrates this aspect, being one of the narrative strands in *Kāśī kā Assī*.

Mari Korpela undertook a systematic study of foreign travelers who return to Banāras regularly for extended stays. On the basis of more than fifty interviews, in her dissertation she looked at the ways in which such 'bohemian lifestyle migrants' form distinct, liminoid communities of their own in an environment of tightly-knit networks. In her essay in this volume she focuses on the image of the city in the eyes of these 'Western' (i.e. non-Indian), non-academic, pilgrim-like beholders. From this perspective, too, Banāras appears first of all as ancient, 'holy,' 'spiritual,' representing 'authentic India,' both in terms of her religious traditions and of a lifestyle – selectively – perceived as 'natural.' Korpela shows that the dichotomy of the inauthentic modern versus the authentic non-modern (or pre-modern) discussed in theoretical studies of tourism applies rather nicely here: 'authenticity' and 'spirituality' are the dominant frameworks for the meanings that the sojourners attach to their experiences in Banāras. However, the romanticized views are supplemented in the interviews with observations on infrastructural problems encountered on a day-to-day basis. Perhaps even more noteworthy are the potential dangers thought to derive from the very characteristics of the city that were initially perceived as compellingly attractive and articulated in quasi-scientific terms. The beneficial 'energies' and 'vibrations' are believed by these long-term sojourners to be able to amplify and morph into overpoweringly strong sensations, even possibly resulting in a pathological 'Banāras syndrome.'

Remotely similar selective envisionings of a vibrant, shining Banāras have been going on among Hindus on Mauritius, as Mathieu Claveyrolas shows in his contribution. To a part of the island's inhabitants an imagined Banāras constitutes a model of Hindu orthodoxy which they strive to emulate. The conversion of small plantation shrines into larger structures and the replacement of local, aniconic deities' representations with anthropomorphic statues of deities considered 'orthodox' is often backed by the claim of returning to a purer form of religion. Thus the *bīr* Bram Bābā 're-becomes' Brahmā, and the fact that Bram Bābā and other guardian deities enjoy considerable popularity in the very neighborhoods of Banāras itself is simply ignored. The social and religious complexity of Banāras recedes to the background, while the centrality and prominence of the city as an orthodox Hindu sacred place is emphasized. As Claveyrolas points out, this selective, incomplete, biased perception of Banāras can be found not only on Mauritius, but it pervades other discourses too, sometimes including the academic. The author argues therefore for a more nuanced and carefully contextualized treatment of the city's position and popularity in a pan-Indian network of pilgrimage places, and of its (self-) representation as a millennia-old center of Sanskrit culture and stronghold of dharma, showing that claims to centrality and special sacredness, and to universality and specificity at the same time, are a marker not only of Banāras (the importance of which Claveyrolas does not contest), but of other places of major religious significance as well.

And yet, Banāras *is, has to be* special in so many ways, sympathetic potential

readers of the present collection might exclaim. In his numerous publications Rana P. B. Singh has made a strong case for substantiating this assertion. In the essay included in this volume, the author, eminent 'scholarly pilgrim' and long-time resident of Banāras, looks back on important stages of his personal, experiential, ongoing journey towards understanding, interpreting, and explaining this densely 'storied' and intensely alive place, to the study of which he dedicated more than four decades of his life, and to which he feels extremely closely attached in so many ways. Combining personal insight, the rich eulogical literature, and methods from various approaches and disciplines (cultural, physical, and social geography, but also, for example, cultural astronomy and geometry), Rana Singh illustrates with the help of spatial and cognitive maps the complexity of the multi-layered symbolic, geographic, and socio-religious landscape of Banāras. Śiva's trident (on which, according to mythology, the city is built), the riverfront ghāṭs, divisions of time and space, pilgrimage routes, clusters and groups of interconnected shrines and temples, all this is visually represented and connected to a wide range of other aspects in order to demonstrate the 'uniqueness and distinctiveness', but also the 'archetypal' quality of Banāras, a place described as 'full of complexity and contrasts,' and 'difficult to comprehend' for those outside the tradition. In this essay, as in many of his other writings, Rana Singh also seeks to increase awareness for the importance of sustainably preserving such sites that are 'mirror[s] of human growth,' and invites his readers warmly to a 'co-pilgrimage in and around Banāras, [...] on the cosmic circuit in search of revelation and deeper understanding.'

Sojourns and staying to carry out research in the city can indeed have unforeseen consequences for individual – personal and academic – careers, often generating fruitful, far-reaching insights, as evident in many of the essays in this collection. According to Annette Wilke, her experiences during extensive stays in Banāras were instrumental for 'profound changes [...] with regard to both contents and methods' in her later work. This 'turn' in her approach to both theory and method is captured in her essay's title, that aptly shifts the emphasis from the ubiquitous ['spiritual'-] light-imagery firmly rooted in the traditional designation of the city (*Kāśī*, the Shining, the Luminous) to the sensory expressions and material aspects of religions. Of these, the author focused not on the well known and studied pronounced visuality of South Asian culture/religion, but explored instead its 'sonic cosmos': the articulation and sound of what is spoken, recited, sung – orality and sonality in the widest sense of the terms. The essay summarizes the major themes of an ample monograph in which Wilke (with Oliver Moebius as a contributing author) discusses and contextualizes audible realizations and auditive perceptions of Vedic/Sanskrit texts over the centuries, producing an important contribution to a 'sonic cultural history' of the subcontinent, with wide-ranging consequences for the methodology of studying Sanskrit texts and for the theoretical approach of an applied aesthetics of religion. The author's 'Banāras experience' figures prominently in the beginnings of both the monograph and the essay, as the point of departure and reservoir of data. Another, this time historical, reference to Banāras is the example selected to illustrate the

concept of 'sonic worldview,' namely the 'mantra contemplation' of Bhāskararāya, a Maharashtrian Brahmin and seventeenth-century resident of Banāras, practitioner-scholar and commentator of the tantric Śrīvidyā tradition. Wilke concludes her essay with eight persuasive propositions for perspectives on and approaches to the study of Sanskrit Hinduism.

Maharashtrian Sanskrit scholars like Bhāskararāya had been conspicuously present in Banāras since the early sixteenth century, when the first families of Maharashtrian Brahmins migrated from Paithan to the city. Among them was the family of Rameshvara Bhatta, whose son Narayana Bhatta was to become the author of the authoritative work on pilgrimage *Tristhalīsetu* ('The Bridge to the Three [Sacred] Places'). As Irina Glushkova shows in her contribution, the Maharashtrian pandits in Banāras contributed significantly to establishing the practice of pilgrimage to Banāras by their active networks in the region of their origin. From the end of the seventeenth century onwards, Marathas also made their presence felt as major sponsors and builders of temples, palaces and ghāṭs. The movement of Maharashtrians to Banāras was facilitated by the chain of Maratha-ruled territories between Poona and Delhi, and the increasing importance of Banāras (and of the two other cities in the *tristhalī*-chain, Prayag and Gaya) as a pilgrimage destination for various social groups, including members of princely families, turned the city into a politically contested place. In the eighteenth century, the peshwas of the Maratha Confederacy attempted repeatedly to bring the city under their rule. In one of the early Marathi chronicles, Kāśī is even described as situated at the northern border of 'Maharashtra dharma.' While the 'Banāras of the Marathas' dream [...] was not destined to become true,' the city's Maharashtrian history extends forcefully up to the present and reveals itself on various levels. Numerous ghāṭs bear today visibly the names of their Maratha builders (princes, ministers, widows of rulers) and are populated by local Brahmans sitting under the characteristic umbrellas probably introduced by a Maharashtrian Brahmin in the eighteenth century; temple archives and reliefs, figures or inscriptions in temples bear witness to Maharashtrian patronage, and in the part of the city aptly called Kāśī Maharashtra, the author participated in the festival dedicated to Gaṇeśa organized by the city's Maharashtrian community. Glushkova's 'scholarly pilgrimages' to the city and her exploration of its Maratha past through the study of predominantly Marathi-language sources provide a systematic 'alternative view,' thus adding an important chapter to the existing scholarship on the cultural history of Banāras.

Among the prominent examples of the Marathas' lasting architectural legacy are some of the important ghāṭs in Banāras, including a number of impressive adjacent buildings. Ghāṭs, defined by Savitri Jalais in her contribution as 'common architectural device[s] in South Asia [...] at the edge of water bodies and consisting of steps, terraces, and tiers,' have in Banāras a twofold function. In addition to providing access to the river, they were constructed to manage and channel the movement of the Ganges. There are overall around a hundred such ghāṭs at the Banāras riverfront, segments with considerable variations in length and height, many of them popular

gathering places for the inhabitants of and visitors to Banāras. The activities on the ghāṭs include, as is well known, bathing (ritual or otherwise), religious activities, the washing of dishes and clothes, leisure and even sports. In her extensive study of the ghāṭs (in her dissertation) Savitri Jalais combined various perspectives such as the geographical/topographical, socio-cultural (including the religious), historical, and political, aiming 'to understand and analyze the logic behind the formation of this riverfront.' The author undertook detailed cartographic research, studying topographical, urban-layout, hydrological and other maps, and looking at defining factors and elements that have led to the present structures. She measured and drew sections of the riverfront, observing at the same time the life on the ghāṭs and interacting with local people. Jalais describes in her essay how in the course of the many days spent on the ghāṭs a relationship of mutual trust gradually developed, enabling her to use her scales, rulers, and lasers not only unhindered, but enjoying the benevolent support of the locals. As Jalais notes, the formation and development of the Banāras riverfront was influenced in great measure not only by 'symbolic trajectories,' paths leading from the urban milieu, from passages, temples, shrines, and gymnasia (*akhāṛās*) *to* the water, but also by a path *along* the river that forms a part of popular pilgrimage routes. Relatively isolated segments were thus expanded and connected (in order to facilitate, for example, movement to and between the five ghāṭs of major importance, so-called *tīrtha*s, fords or passages between various worlds or levels of the human condition), and the path enlarged due to increasing pilgrimage and other activities over the decades.

Images of the ghāṭs are most likely to sink deep into the memory of those who spend time in Banāras. Vasudha Dalmia introduces her essay with recollections of the ghāṭs and the river, recurring motifs originating in an early childhood visit and revived on subsequent stays. They, together with memories of old, widowed relatives and an urn with ashes, of joyless devotional songs, lone sadhus on the silent, timeless river, and the impressive evening ritual at the Viśvanāth temple, evoke the composite image of a city associated with 'death, solemnity, filth, and holy grandeur.' The author describes how she first encountered the work of Bharatendu Harishchandra, 'the young merchant prince of late nineteenth-century Banāras,' incorporating a chapter on Harishchandra and his attempts to introduce performance culture to North Indian stages in her dissertation on contemporary drama. Some years later she returned to Banāras, having recognized that the figure and work of Harishchandra were pivotal for understanding the complex processes leading to the formation in the second half of the nineteenth-century of a Hinduism that was traditionalist and modern, exclusive and expansive at the same time. Vasudha Dalmia includes in her essay glimpses of research conducted in the archives and libraries of the city, encounters with erudite, dedicated, and supportive scholars, and the ways in which 'Banāras grew on [her] as [she] began to view it through Harishchandra's eyes.' Following the completion of this project and the subsequent move to a new academic environment, her studies led the author again to Banāras, this time to work on novels written by Premchand in the opening decades of the twentieth century. With some of their central themes,

Premchand's Banāras novels *Sevāsadan* and *Karmabhūmi* 'literally stormed the citadel that was the holy city of Kāśī,' with critique directed against the institution of marriage fixated on caste and dowry, or with the unambiguous positioning in favor of the city's Dalits (who finally succeed in entering a temple from which they were previously barred) and working poor. The time spent in Banāras in connection with the work on Premchand's novels included readings on the city and its culture in those decades, walks through the Banārsī neighborhoods in which the novels were set, and peaceful days of writing in a hospitable guesthouse on the river. The final passages of the essay are reflections on the personal impact of the author's Banāras-related work. Vasudha Dalmia writes about how the exploration of the many layers in the city's cultural history contributed to a better understanding of 'what went into the making of [her own] world.' And there is another remarkable sentence here in which the author sums up her motivation to return to Banāras, a veritable leitmotif to all 'scholarly pilgrims': 'This combination, of being an insider as well as an outsider, of understanding and not understanding, has taken me back to the city again and again.'

Contributors to this volume have often included warm words of gratitude to individuals connected to Banāras whose guidance, advice, and support were instrumental for the successful outcome of their research projects. The title of the essay by Hillary Rodrigues refers to some of the – frequently overlapping – relationships between the researcher and the people they come into contact with before going to or while being 'in the field' in different stages of their work. The figures of the author's 'teachers, friends, and helpers,' 'guides to Śiva's beloveds,' are embedded in a narrative that extends from his first encounter with Banāras and the following extensive research work on goddess worship conducted in the city to more recent or 'ongoing scholarly pilgrimages.' Rodrigues begins this story with vivid descriptions of his impressions on arriving for the first time in the narrow lanes of inner-city Banāras as a young, low-budget traveler on a year-long trip through Asia, spending his first night in the city at the cremation ghāṭ, and visiting the next day the temple of Durgā, the deity that would become the main focus of his research. Atmospheric accounts of episodes and encounters from the eventful doctoral fieldwork conducted more than a decade later take the reader in a procession to Lāṭ Bhairava's marriage at Kapālamocana tank, on an auto-rickshaw journey to Chunar and Vindhyachal, to the daily and seasonal rites at the Durgā temple, and to the musical performances at the annual temple festival. During the year spent in the city, the author documented elaborate temple and domestic rituals dedicated to the goddess, glimpses of which are given to the essay's readers, and he read relevant liturgical texts. The study of the texts and the work on the ritual worship of the Devī took Rodrigues back to the city many times in later years, too. While the author's numerous other projects and publications are not directly connected to Banāras, 'that remarkable city was the trunk from which these branches sprouted,' he writes towards the end of his narrative essay that has features of a veritable *Bildungsroman*, being at the same time an homage to its setting, Banāras, and to its numerous, affectionately remembered, supporting characters.

Persuasive arguments for the combination of textual studies and fieldwork in the study of religious traditions in Banāras are put forward in Xenia Zeiler's contribution in which the author presents her ethno-indological approach in two major research projects. The first project dealt with the Vīreśvara/Ātmavīreśvar temple, mentioned already in the authoritative fourteenth-century *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*. With the help of detailed textual and extensive ethnological studies, by comparing present-day ritual practices with the instructions given in an early text on this temple, changes in these practices became evident, leading to a more general discussion of *kāśīkhaṇḍokta* ('as told in the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*') traditions. In her second project, Zeiler looked at the traditions connected to the goddess Dhūmāvatī and the transformations in the representation of this deity. While in early references in texts such as the eleventh-century *Śāradātilakatantra* and the *Phetkāriṇītantra* (fourteenth–sixteenth century) the goddess is described as dangerous and terrifying and forms part of the Tantric ritual system, in the nineteenth-century *Mantramahārṇava* and *Śāktapramoda* the first tendencies pointing towards the integration of Dhumāvatī into a pan-Hindu orthopraxy become visible. In this case, too, the author conducted extensive fieldwork (for almost two years) studying the lived tradition, collecting data on all major activities of the temple, participating in festivals, and interviewing a large number of devotees in addition to all the ritual specialists of the temple. Zeiler's indebtedness to the latter is gratefully acknowledged, and is another example of the openness and the supportive, genuine interest that researchers are regularly met with by Banārsī individuals and institutions. In the concluding part of her article, the author looks at the mediatization of religious traditions in Banāras, proposing to expand the ethno-indological approach by adding to the study of textual sources and contemporary practices the examination of their (re-)interpretation in modern mass media.

Modern media play a major role in the work of Marc J. Katz, whose essay on 'turning-the-corner discoveries' in Banāras contains references to the documentary films he produced on the elaborate celebrations of Holī and Muharram in the city. The author's experience of Holī, the spring festival of colors, began many years before the making of the film. Over the years, and after many instances of festive color play, the fascination for the connected ritual events of a multi-faceted festival season, with preparatory sequences and processions starting about a month before the main ritual event, the Holikā fire, materialized in a long-term research project. The essay describes ritual events taking place five days before the well-known play with colors, on the day of Raṅgbarī Ekādaśī, the Colorful Eleventh, when 'each and every temple image, each and every liṅga, each and every aspect of divinity, both male and female, receives a spattering of red color,' including the waters of Maṇikarṇikā Kuṇḍ and the main deity of the city, Viśvanāth. In the course of the work on another major project, focusing this time on the Banāras Muharram, the author came across a ritual commemorating a Hindu potter joining in the Muharram celebrations two hundred years ago. Every year, the *kumbhār kā taziya*, a model shrine in the shape of a Hindu temple, is established at the site called the Potter's Imambara, which then becomes a gathering place not only for members of the local Muslim community but also

for Hindu men and women. A third 'moment of discovery' described in the essay occurred in connection with the exploration of the yearly dramatization of Rāma's story, the Rāmlīlā. Here, Katz looked into the history and mythology of a low-caste group of regular active participants who identified themselves as *ādivāsī*s (tribals). These and many other topics explored by the author during his numerous stays in Banāras over a time span of more than four decades illustrate the colorful cultural mosaic of the city as well as the distinct character of its different neighborhoods. Systematic fieldwork in these *mohallā*s leads to the challenging of perceptions acquired in the classroom and in libraries by students in South Asian studies, providing the 'sorely needed tangible contact' with lived traditions, writes the author. And the most likely outcome of such work includes continuous new 'revelations,' 'moments of awakening,' and the realization that 'there can exist no definitive description of Banāras.'

Banāras doubtlessly has the capacity to arouse a wide range of (often contradictory *and* simultaneous) sensations and emotions. Reinhold Schein presents in his contribution two Austrian writers whose literary works reflect their experiences in the city. During a trip to India and South-East Asia in 1908/9, Stefan Zweig visited Banāras and wrote an account of his impressions and observations, published in March 1909 in a Viennese newspaper. Zweig's article goes beyond being a mere travelogue, as he uses the descriptions of the inhabitants' daily life and religious practices as departure points for reflections of a more general nature. The writer's experiences in the encounter with Banāras (and India) are ambivalent. Reinhold Schein points out that Zweig is deeply impressed by the dedication with which the city's inhabitants and the pilgrims perform their religious activities. To Zweig, however, this fervor is an explanation for and an expression of a fatalistic attitude both with regard to submitting to foreign powers and the constraints imposed by the caste system. The writer is empathetic and anxious to understand the religious and social way of life in Banāras. At the same time, he cannot avoid certain misconceptions such as, for example, interpreting yogic practices as expressions of atonement for sins committed by the practitioner. Influences of Zweig's experiences in Banāras and India can be found in a number of his later writings as well, especially in his *Die Augen des ewigen Bruders* ('The Eyes of the Eternal Brother'), which Reinhold Schein discusses in some detail. The second Austrian writer introduced in the essay is Josef Winkler. His extended visits to Banāras resulted in the book *Domra: Am Ufer des Ganges* ('Domra: On the Banks of the Ganges'), a work described best as a diary-cum-travelogue. The focus of the book lies on the everyday activities at and around one of the city's cremation ghāṭs, where Winkler spent several hours a day for a number of months, 'fascinated by the contrast between the rituals of death and cremation and the sprawling life that unfolded itself at the same time just next to the funeral pyres.' In long passages abounding with attributive adjectives the narrator describes minutely the process of transformation of corpses into ashes, the work of the low-caste specialists in charge of the cremation, the playing and bathing children, the animals on the ghāṭ. The extremely detailed, comment-less descriptions of Banārsi ghāṭ and street life contain many scenes that are potentially repulsive to

the reader. In interviews Winkler emphasized that the precision and beauty of the language were paramount, while the common categories of beauty and ugliness did not matter to him. In the concluding part of his remarks on Winkler's book, Reinhold Schein points out that it makes the reader feel 'the close proximity of life and death as an indivisible totality,' even if, in the end, one 'remains puzzled by the scenes and rituals described.'

The 'Banāras experience' can be deeply transformative and often on various levels, as shown by Nita Kumar in the reflections on her 'academic pilgrimages' to the city. Her essay takes us through interconnected 'lessons' ('anger,' 'pain,' 'imagination,' and 'love') learnt over more than three decades of intense and complex involvement with the place, lessons that are the 'fruits of that pilgrimage.' The section titled 'Anger' is about personal histories of Banārsī artisans and their descendants, about backwardness, knowledge, and modernity, about educational reforms and frustrations with their failure and its consequences, and about practical action. In 'Pain,' Nita Kumar reflects on her experiences and challenges resulting from the observation of teacher–child interaction in hundreds of classrooms in connection with education research she conducted in Banāras. Major problem areas that became obvious in the process were the poor motivation and other shortcomings of the educators, inappropriate space, and the 'school–home divide,' where 'the vast resources of techniques, narratives, symbols, systems that exist in children's home lives are not imaginatively used by educators.' Included in this section is a condensed and impressive account of the author's emotional responses and stages in the course of decade-long research projects in Banāras. 'Imagination' contains a brief outline of the economic and cultural history of the city, reflections on the historically plural location of education (school and home/neighborhood), and an emphasis on the affirmation of this plurality as an empowering element in the schooling of children today. Towards the end of the last section ('Love'), in which Nita Kumar concludes both a historical and a deeply personal narrative on education, research, and her multiple and intertwined perspectives on Banāras as an educator and a historian/anthropologist, she writes about how she moved from loving 'her' artisans, from being 'genuinely fond' of them and having 'high regard for their qualities' to 'the love that cares enough to probe further as to what they actually are in the many dimensions of their identities and what they want to become. And the love that then dares to interact and interfere [...].'

From personal histories of Banārsī artisans and their families to the stories of 'commission boys' on the city's ghāṭs: Mikael Aktor discusses in his essay the 'informative relationships' he engaged in with tourist guides during fieldwork in Banāras. Western visitors to the city who are approached by these young men and are offered information and help, enter – by accepting the offer – into longer-lasting relationships with them, becoming thus part of the guides' larger network of friends and relatives. These relationship networks usually include 'holy men, gurus, and gods,' too. The essay offers insights into the ways in which such networks function in a specific social context often characterized by economic uncertainty. After having met two young guides during his first trip to Banāras, Aktor asked for their help two years lat-

er when he returned to the city for fieldwork. The theme of his research project was the iconography of and the rituals connected to the Śiva liṅga. The brahmin friend of one of the guides was called upon to help with the correct performance of the ritual, who then invited the author to spend the time of the *navarātrī* festival in the young brahmin's native village. There, in addition to observing the performance of rituals, Mikael Aktor interacted with his host's friends, was asked for financial advice, and joined his host's NGO. Back in Banāras, the author learned about his guide-friends' financial and personal problems, and was then introduced to an aged Swami widely admired for his ascetic lifestyle and spiritual guidance. At the Swami's residence he witnessed the distribution of free food to the poor, stemming from donations to the Swami's ashram. Reflecting on the various relationships he engaged in during his fieldwork, Aktor highlights not only the centrality of close networks on which many people in Banāras and in India are dependent, but also the importance of co-opting religious actors ('holy men and gods') in such networks, who then act in many ways as dynamic forces, transforming 'each person in such a voluntary network [...] [into] one of God's many [helping] hands.'

In a related context of extending help to individuals or communities, Paul Younger evokes in his contribution the work he did for the Bhoodan (*bhūdān*) or Land Gift Movement in the village of Chittapur, near the Banāras Hindu University (BHU) campus. Younger came to India in 1957 as part of the International Studies Program, enrolling in the BHU. After a brief account of the history leading to his decision to travel to India and his choice of Banāras, the author describes his early experiences at the university, the memorable encounters and interactions with co-students, scholars visiting the university and its International House (Bharati, Panikkar, Scrima, Staal, Potter and others), and teachers at the BHU (among them, Raj Bali Pandey, V. S. Agrawala, V. S. Pathak, A. K. Narain, T. R. V. Murti). The accounts include reflections on the British legacy discernible in the 1950s in what the author calls 'the tail end of the missionary era in Banāras,' but also in the structure and scholarly style of the university. Further examples of that legacy are the setting and the turbaned servers at a Delhi garden party at which Prime Minister Nehru and Vice President Radhakrishnan were present, and the student protests 'structured like a Gandhian fast' and entangled in local politics and conflicts typical of the last decades of British rule. Moving into a student residence, the author became acquainted with those parts and aspects of the city his fellow Indian students knew best: not the ghāṭs or well-known temples (such as the Viśvanāth), but places like 'the Bengali widow houses, the famous Banāras hospices nearby, and the hangouts of various male and female ascetics.' It was also a student colleague who took Younger to Chittapur, more precisely to the residential area of the low-caste *camārs*, or leather workers. Sometime later he was asked by the leader of the Bhoodan movement to assist the villagers in implementing the movement's plans. After finishing his exams, Younger moved to the village and helped build a culvert, earning the love and respect of Chittapur's *camār* community. The part of the essay dealing with the author's stay and work in Chittapur offers insights into local social and religious structures. After his early ex-

periences in the late 1950s the author returned frequently to Banāras, feeling always 'like coming home.' He guided and supervised students who conducted fieldwork on various aspects of Banāras, and who became scholars and teachers themselves. For them, as for many of us others, 'Banāras turned out to be a golden opportunity, but we never learned exactly what we thought we would.' The city, writes Younger, 'welcomes [her] adopted children with as much warmth as if they were her own, but [...] one has to be prepared to let her make a place for you where she will.'

And she did make a place for me, too. Following a first, almost year-long, fruitful stay in the mid-1990s, I have been a regular visitor to the city for the last nearly twenty years now. My essay is an attempt to recollect preliminaries and circumstances of the trip to Banāras, and to look back to the early period of that first stay, relying mainly on field notes taken during that time. As a student spending an academic year abroad, one of my main objectives was language study, the other being to observe and experience as broadly as possible aspects of the thriving cultural activities in Banāras, with a focus on religion. The notes from the first weeks spent in the city included the stages of my settling in, as well as the gradual emergence of a more clearly contoured research project. After a series of serendipitous encounters and events, the worship of the extremely popular simian deity Hanumān became the main theme of my research in Banāras for several years to come. Touching on issues concerning research methodology, the essay contains some reflections on the extent to which records of such composite nature, a combination of data and diary, of descriptive and impressionistic vignettes, could/should have been used more systematically in the scholarly texts resulting from my stay, contributing thus to a more explicit thematization of the researcher's positionality and situatedness. Re-reading notes and recollecting early and later fieldwork experiences in the city also led to attempts at assessing the formativity of these stays, on both a personal and academic level, raising questions that need (and will hopefully receive) more thorough attention. The field notes did confirm, however, a fact that cannot be prized highly enough, and without which neither considerable parts of my work nor this collection in its present form would have been possible: In those early weeks as well as later I benefited immensely from the support of Banārsīs who readily and generously shared their thoughts and experiences with me, and who helped me navigate and comprehend – at least to a certain degree – a fascinating world of which I feel I have become a part.

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