

Vārāṇasī Envisioned: Approaches to the Purāṇic Māhātmyas

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This essay emerges from thoughts about my extended engagement with Vārāṇasī, and with the textual tradition that has been most instrumental in constructing her sacredness, the Vārāṇasī *māhātmya* tradition of the Sanskrit Purāṇas. My goal here is to address a fundamental question of perspective in my own scholarly approach to these texts: whether a critical text-historical study necessarily runs counter to a normative view that holds the *māhātmyas* to be divinely revealed, and the city to be sacred. In other words, I ask the question: can one be a scholar and devotee of the city at the same time?

Vārāṇasī¹ may well be the most famous and revered place of pilgrimage for Hindus in the world, and it has been praised time and again as not merely a holy place, but an eternal source of transcendent experience and salvific knowledge. The textual sources most responsible for establishing Vārāṇasī as sacred are a range of works in Sanskrit known as *māhātmyas* – ‘glorifications.’ Found scattered throughout the vast corpus of the Sanskrit Purāṇas, these *māhātmyas* collectively comprise a ‘tradition’ that represents the authoritative scriptural presentation of Vārāṇasī as a sacred place. Through grandiose descriptions of its many sacred locales and effusive accounts of the worldly and other-worldly benefits derived from performing sanctioned devotions within the city’s hallowed grounds, the *māhātmyas* present Vārāṇasī as not just a premier pilgrimage destination, but as an eternal abode of the divine. This is established through grand proclamations and authoritative statements, but also – and perhaps especially – through the telling of stories. Typical of Purāṇa texts, *māhātmyas* teach and preach through narrative, recounting tales of bygone cosmic eras; tales that continue to animate and empower the place for all time. If we are to understand how and in what way Vārāṇasī is considered to be a sacred place, then the *māhātmya* tradition is an indispensable resource. Cited by temple proprietors and pilgrims alike, the *māhātmyas* are at the core of the construction of Vārāṇasī’s sacred image.

1 A brief note on usage: For the sake of convenience, I use here ‘Vārāṇasī,’ the current official name of the city. Colonial and contemporary writers have generally used the more colloquial ‘Banāras’ (often anglicized as ‘Benares’). The city is also alternatively known as ‘Kāśī’ (as it is in the title of the *māhātmya*, the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*); but this usage is not attested before the seventh century CE or thereabouts. Somewhat confusingly, however, it is drawn from ‘Kāśī,’ which was the name of both the territory (not the city proper) and the peoples which occupied it, as referred to in ancient literature. For additional details, see Dubey 1993).

As essential as they are for the study of Vārāṇasī history, however, the *māhātmyas* are curiously elusive in yielding answers to even the most basic historical questions we ask of them, such as, who composed them, when, and with what general motivations. Technically authorless, the *māhātmyas*, like the Purāṇa genre to which they belong, are part divine revelation and part human composition. Though they consist of conversations between gods and sages in remote cosmic eras, the tradition also recognizes that the earthly version of this revelation diverges from the original and fluctuates in the human realm, adapting to the needs of different times and places (Coburn 1980: 345–6). In sorting through the tortuous strands of manuscript transmission of these texts, it is immediately apparent that the Purāṇas are an extraordinarily messy canon: texts are frequently and liberally edited over time by hands that clearly belonged more to ambitious redactors than to faithful scribes. And while no Purāṇa text is anywhere ‘signed’ by a human author, making it difficult to pinpoint the texts in space and time, I have argued that the texts frequently show awareness of, and provide justification for, the fact that they are uniquely ‘editable’ (Smith *forthc.*).

Purāṇa literally means ‘ancient lore,’ but despite their concern with the past, these texts are far from chronicled history in the modern sense of the term, and far even from other narrative genres of South Asia that have been more amenable to modern understandings of ‘history.’² Within the still-fraught debate of whether or not premodern India was possessed of ‘historical consciousness,’ Purāṇas have rarely entered the discussion.³ And rightfully so: if the criteria for historical writing include historically verifiable events and figures, Purāṇas contain few of either, and where they occur, they are generally obscured – often deliberately so – by the vast sweep of the Purāṇic temporal perspective, where time is measured in cosmic world-cycles and not human years. Most of the events of Purāṇic narratives are set in the remote, presumably pre-historical, or perhaps supra-historical past of bygone ages. Scholars have therefore been more or less unanimous in describing these texts as ‘mythological,’ though sometimes allowing, or hoping, that an occasional nugget of ‘real history’ might be preserved amid the dross of fantasy and legend.

In engaging these texts, I have striven to avoid the positivist separation of false myth and real history. As Daud Ali suggests, ‘the aim of the critic is not to distinguish ‘real’ history writing from counterfeit, but to appreciate the variety of discourses about the past [and] to understand the ontological assumptions, narrative structuring, temporal frames and conditions of production of different types of writing about the past’ (Ali 2013: 239). For the Purāṇas there is certainly much more at stake than the simple recording or recalling of events, and one of my primary goals as a critic of

2 I am thinking here of genres ranging from early narrative genres of the *ākhyārikā* and the *kathā*, to the later Jain *prabandha* literature and Kalhaṇa’s *Rājatarāṅginī*, which represent a shift in style and attitudes toward the past. On the latter see the recent volume edited by Whitney Cox (2013).

3 The literature on this subject is considerable. For a recent discussion, see Shulman and Rao 2011.

these texts has indeed been to understand the particular Purāṇic engagement with the past.

If appreciating the Purāṇic past in its own light were my sole goal as a critic, I could indeed follow Ali's call to sidestep the need to judge between real and counterfeit in examining the Purāṇic narratives. But though I do attempt to appreciate the Purāṇas and understand their internal worldview in my evaluation of these texts, I also utilize them for my own – more positivistic, perhaps – purposes. Indeed, the Purāṇic *māhātmyas* of Vārāṇasī are themselves some of the most crucial sources for Vārāṇasī history that are available to us; and by 'history' here, I mean it in the sense of externally verifiable events and actors, including the authors and redactors of the texts themselves. The *māhātmyas* do not report history per se, but they certainly have influenced it; and I see no reason to doubt that they were composed, redacted and utilized with very particular political and ideological aims in mind, embedded in their respective socio-historical contexts.

But to read the texts this way is, to some extent, to read past, if not directly counter to, the pronouncements of the texts themselves, and seek to creatively interpret the narratives in terms of historical figures, groups and events. While Purāṇic discourse is deliberately supra-historical, it is, at the same time, demonstrably rife with concern for social, political and theological agendas, which can often give us insight into the ideological perspectives of their human composers and redactors. Once again, the Purāṇic *māhātmyas* are among the relatively few sources that we have available for the study of premodern Vārāṇasī history; in order to utilize them for this end, however, the scholar must 'read between the lines' of the narratives themselves. In emphasizing the *māhātmyas*' construction of sacred Vārāṇasī, and examining how they shape and reshape it from text to text in differing historical circumstances, I have already positioned myself, to some extent, outside of the texts.

From a scholarly standpoint, there is no problem with dissecting the textual histories of the *māhātmyas*, linking texts to historical sectarian groups, and seeing the compositional strategies used by the authors to forward their own sectarian views, or to promote particular temples and the like. But this scholarly approach, fruitful though it has been, has repeatedly thrown up a rather fundamental methodological conundrum. At some point, we must face frankly the issue that the scholarly approach directly contradicts the statements of the texts, and thus the faith of countless devotees. The choice seems unavoidable: either we take the devotional approach and accept Vārāṇasī as truly, ultimately sacred and the texts as revealed, or we take the scholarly approach and show that this sacredness is contingent, varied and ultimately constructed; and perhaps even 'imaginary,' depending on the value we assign to this potentially provocative term.

I propose here to acknowledge the divergence between the two positions: they are, indeed, not reconcilable in terms of their respective truth claims. As Thomas Coburn phrases it in a now-classic essay (1980: 352) about the interpretation of the Purāṇas: 'While critical inquiry is not intrinsically antipathetic to the concerns of faith, the point at which the former begins to encroach upon the latter may vary...'

We must admit, at the outset, that text-historical study does not ‘live’ in the same space as the supra-historical time of the Purāṇic *māhātmya* tradition.

Once this dichotomy is straightforwardly recognized, however, it may open up further possibilities to think through its implications, rather than shut down potential avenues of nuanced understanding. I suggest here that, while the dichotomy is real, the boundaries between the scholarly and the devotional are much more fluid and permeable than might immediately be apparent. In order to show this, I wish to examine two classical individual ‘approaches’ to Vārāṇasī, each rather foundational in its own way. Both examples date from the transformative 19th-century colonial era – in fact, they happen to date from the same year, 1868 – where, as one scholar has phrased it, Vārāṇasī was ‘at the crossroads’ of tradition and modernity (Medhasananda 2003). In briefly examining these two examples, I hope to show that both the scholarly and the devotional approaches are more complex and fluid than they might appear, and that they even converge in surprising ways.

M. A. Sherring’s ‘Sacred City of the Hindus’

The Reverend Matthew Atmore Sherring certainly thought that the mythic and the historical were completely irreconcilable perspectives. A senior Anglican missionary in Vārāṇasī, Sherring authored the very first modern critical study of Vārāṇasī: *The Sacred City of the Hindus: an Account of Benares in Ancient and Modern Times* (1868).⁴ A long-time resident of the city, Sherring lived in Vārāṇasī for much of his adult life, passing away there 1880. Sherring’s view of the city betrays the mixture of fascination and disgust one would expect from a missionary working in what was considered the most thoroughly Hindu of cities.⁵ Sherring’s work spawned something of a cottage industry for historical/traveler’s accounts of the city, and also laid the foundation for future, more dedicated historical studies of Vārāṇasī.⁶

4 For a brief overview of Sherring’s life and works, see Katherine Prior, ‘Sherring, Matthew Atmore (1826–1880).’ In *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online ed., edited by Lawrence Goldman. Oxford: OUP. <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25387> (accessed June 8, 2013).

5 For an overview of early Western impressions of the city, see Eck 1999: 17–19.

6 Later accounts of Vārāṇasī, such as those of later accounts of John Murdoch (1894), E.B. Havell (1903), Edwin Greaves (1909) and Charles Cape (1910) essentially followed the pattern of Sherring’s work, presenting a historical sketch followed by observations on the current makeup of the city. None of these later studies matched the thoroughness and comprehensive character of Sherring’s, and most generally acknowledge their indebtedness to their worthy predecessor. Greaves, for example, affirms that Sherring’s work ‘is still the best book on the subject, though unfortunately it has been out of print for many years, and it is very difficult to procure even a second-hand copy,’ adding that his own work is still useful in presenting a fresh account, as much had changed in the intervening 40-plus years since Sherring’s work was published (Greaves 1909: i). In several places, he refers the reader to ‘Mr. Sherring’ for fuller discussions of particular subjects. See, for instance Greaves 1909: 57, 73. Among dedicated historical studies, the earliest is that of Altekar (1937), which was later followed by the much more comprehensive study of Motichandra (1985), which re-

In developing the ‘ancient’ side of his work on Vārāṇasī, Sherring would have had to make use of the *māhātmyas*. He did so, however, only with great – and undisguised – skepticism. The problem, of course, was that the Purāṇic accounts were simply not reliable for his purposes: the mythical Vārāṇasī would intrude at every turn in his historical researches. The Purāṇic *māhātmyas* were primarily ‘religious’ in nature and only historical in the loosest of senses: they did more fantastic tale-spinning than chronicling. Sherring wrote of this issue generally, but seemed to have these texts in mind:

[...] Unfortunately, Hindu writers have shown a singular neglect of chronology, and an utter distaste for noting and recording historical facts in a simple and consecutive manner. [...] Legendary stories are so intermingled with real events, and the web of the one is so intimately inwoven with the woof of the other, and the two form so homogeneous a whole, that the finest microscopic intellects of Europe, after patient and long-continued examination, have been well-nigh baffled in the attempt to discover which is fiction and which is fact. A few threads of truth have rewarded their pains, and perhaps a few others may occasionally be drawn forth; but that the gaudy-coloured fabric of Hindu history, manufactured by themselves, will ever be satisfactorily separated into its two component parts, is as hopeless as to expect that the waters of the Jumna will ever cease to mingle with the waters of the Ganges. (Sherring 1868: 3–4)

Sherring’s rather poetic dismissal here of the lack of India’s historical consciousness follows a well-worn path of Western thinking about India that, as has been mentioned, still continues to be debated and reconsidered. He, of course, came to the city not as a pilgrim, but as nearly the opposite: a missionary. His aim was to bring the light of Christian gospel and European modernism to a benighted people, ushering in ‘a new era of enlightenment’ which, as he confidently affirmed in 1868 (p. vi), ‘has already dawned upon the land.’ So while he was toiling to study the city’s past, Sherring, all the while, had his gaze fixed ever forward, on Vārāṇasī’s future as a modern city permeated with the light of Christian progress.

But as he focused his missionary efforts on reforming the ‘modern’ city of his own time, Sherring also made a great deal of progress in reconstructing the history of ‘ancient’ Vārāṇasī. The assertion in the *māhātmyas*, and seemingly affirmed with observation, was that Vārāṇasī was an ancient city, and indeed Sherring seemed to encounter the ancient past in the city at every turn. Though there were (and are) few standing structures that could be dated earlier than the seventeenth century, Sherring reports on fragments of temples, statues and inscriptions that stretched back a great deal further in time. Despite the carnage of a handful of violent temple destruction campaigns under various rulers spanning the twelfth and seventeenth centuries,

mains the most authoritative treatment, particularly for the premodern period. Also worthy of mention is the more focused, but wonderfully thorough overview of the medieval religious history of the city of Hans Bakker, found in the introduction to the critical edition of the *Vārāṇasī-māhātmya* portion of the early *Skandapurāṇa* (Bakker and Isaacson 2004).

Sherring discovered tantalizing evidence of some much earlier layers of architecture in certain areas of the old city. Sherring remarks with evident wonder on these and other signs of the remote past, and embarks intermittently on reconstructing, with this evidence, the illustrious past of the great city. And for all his scholarly sobriety and haughty religious disdain, the tone of fascination – might it even be reverence? – is not difficult to detect. He writes of Vārāṇasī:

It is, indisputably, a place of great antiquity, and may even date to from the time when the Aryan race first spread itself over Northern India. Although such a supposition is incapable of direct proof, yet the sacred city must, undoubtedly, be reckoned amongst the primitive [i.e., first] cities founded by this people. When it was first built, and by what prince or patriarch, is altogether unknown. But of its great antiquity, stretching back through the dim ages of early Indian history, far into the clouds and mists of the Vedic and pre-historical periods, there is no question. (1868: 1)

The history of Vārāṇasī plotted out relatively neatly for Sherring, and it is no surprise that it corresponded to the broader narrative of Indian history articulated by the Orientalist scholars who preceded him.⁷ In short, there was an ancient Vedic era of romanticized ‘Aryan’ religiosity, characterized by the Vedic fire sacrifice. This was interrupted for a few centuries of Buddhist pre-eminence, after which the brahmanical tradition responded to the Buddhist critique with the rise of ‘idol worship’ and the great gods of Hinduism proper, whose cults would spread through the medium of the emergent Purāṇas. This period would abruptly end in the thirteenth century, when imperial Islam arrived, with Muslim rule in Vārāṇasī being characterized by intolerance, temple destruction and religious persecution. The prominent temples of the city were destroyed in campaigns of Muslim zealotry, and were often replaced with mosques. On the Hindu side, this corresponded with the nefarious rise of self-serving ‘priestcraft,’ which spurred the popularity of superstitious and magical beliefs canonized in the scriptures of Tantrism. On the other hand it incited a socially conscious reform movement based in vernacular *bhakti* devotionism, which in Vārāṇasī spawned popular figures such as Tulsīdās and Kabīr. On the whole, however, Indian culture was widely held to have been in a tailspin of decadent decline by the time the British arrived; these new sovereigns, it was expected, would usher in a new, modern era holding the promise of social progress, industrialization and Christian salvation.

Therefore, however awed by the ‘clouds and mists’ of Vārāṇasī’s antiquity Sherring was, it was in the future, not the past, that he saw hope. He was quick to temper any reverential feeling for the past glories of Vārāṇasī with biting – indeed, damning – criticism of the entire culture:

⁷ Essentially, the model follows, with some additional nuance, the original periodization of James Mill, whose landmark 1817 *History of British India* divided India’s history into three periods, the ancient (Hindu), medieval (Muslim) and modern (British). His larger argument held that Indian society had remained relatively stagnant and unchanging since its inception – the ancient coming of the Aryan race to the subcontinent – and had failed to develop the qualities of rationalism and individualism. See, for example, Thapar 1968.

[J]ust as we do not admire a man who is a hundred years old, unless he has lived a life of integrity and uprightness [...] we must withhold our admiration from a city or nation which [...] has drawn out an existence of wondrous length, but [...] in respect of those higher qualities which mainly distinguish man from brute [...], has, for many ages, been in a stagnant and unprogressive condition. (1868: 343)

It is apparent that, in critiquing Vārāṇasī, Sherring means to critique all of India, for ‘Benares represents India, religiously and intellectually, just as Paris represents the political sentiments of France’ (1868: 341–2). He also asserts,

It is certain that the city is regarded, by all Hindus, as coeval with the birth of Hinduism [...]. By reason of some subtle and mysterious charm, it has linked itself with the religious sympathies of the Hindus through every century of its existence. (1868: 1)

Vārāṇasī here is held up as the representative symbol of all of Hinduism, which itself was representative of India, Islam having been deemed a foreign imposition on the ‘real’ India.⁸ This view is not at all unique to Sherring, but he follows a very strong trend. As Vasudha Dalmia (1999: 54–55) explains, ‘Kāśī’s reputation as a religious centre [...] acquired a multi-dimensional authority with British administrators, travelers and historians, who initiated the development of a parallel western tradition of the significance of Kāśī.’ Perhaps the most important way in which Vārāṇasī was deemed significant was its status as an iconically ‘Indian’ city.

Sherring’s insistence on looking upon Vārāṇasī as primordially Hindu had precedents in British colonial thinking. In the 19th century, Vārāṇasī was a crucial nexus of colonial interactions: it was one of the prominent sites where the very articulation of Hinduism itself was contested, formed and re-formed. Countless pivotal events in the formation of Hinduism took place in Vārāṇasī during this period: from the founding of the Benares Sanskrit College, to the well-publicized debates of Ārya Samāj founder Dayānanda Sarasvatī with local *paṇḍits*, to the very creation of the Hindī language.⁹ The British lavished an extraordinary degree of attention upon Vārāṇasī. In terms of sheer population, it was one of the largest Indian cities during much of the colonial era, even without calculating the steady crush of pilgrim traffic.¹⁰ It was never an administrative center for the Company in the mold of Calcutta, Madras or Delhi; indeed, while these great Indian cities of India were in large part built by the British, Vārāṇasī was, of course, a thriving city long before the British

8 Writing some decades after Sherring, Edwin Greaves acknowledged that the city’s population was then as much as 25% Muslim. But insisting on Vārāṇasī’s character as a Hindu stronghold, he added that ‘here is nothing peculiarly characteristic about the Mahomedans [...] which indicates they are likely to alter the religious life of the city, or of India’ (Greaves 1909: 97).

9 Dalmia 1996 and 1999. On the creation of Hindī, see King 1992.

10 Vārāṇasī was one of the most populous cities in India in during much of the colonial period, when it was one of only a handful of cities that boasted a population of over 100,000. According to the 1871 census, it was the fifth most populous city, following only Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Lucknow. See Singh and Rana 2002: 28; Waterfield 1875: 12.

arrived. The city was therefore marked early on as being distinctively ‘Indian,’ and more particularly, despite a substantial Muslim population, Hindu.

For Sherring and the British, Vārāṇasī was also ‘typically Indian’ in that it was also a crowded, stinking, disease-infested mess. The population density was considered quite absurd for that era, and when combined with the fact that the city boasted a large number of lakes, ponds, rivulets and bathing tanks – mentioned in the Purāṇas as sacred sites – the propensity for disease and epidemic was great. Indeed, there are several reports of epidemics occurring throughout the colonial period, a matter of some concern for the local colonial administrators (Medhasananda 2003: 455). The unsanitary conditions prompted the undertaking, in the 1820s, of one of the most dramatic public works projects ever attempted in the city: a complex drainage system featuring the construction of a vast underground drain known as the Matsyodarī Tunnel, an architectural marvel of the time.¹¹

This grand project may indeed have improved the living conditions for residents in this rapidly growing city, but it would also dramatically affect its religious geography. A perusal of the Purāṇic *māhātmyas* will show that some of the primary features of the sacred geography described in the early literature are natural lakes and ponds, which would swell and overflow in the monsoon, reshaping the landscape of the city with each change of season. Many festivals and rituals had been linked to these aqueous phenomena. In certain years of heavy rains, the old Matsyodarī rivulet which ran through the town would fill up and reverse the flow of the Brahmanālā and Mandākinī streams which normally feed it, overflowing into neighboring ponds and beyond, so as to completely encircle in water the central sacred hill of the old city where the famous Avimukteśvara and Viśveśvara shrines stood, an event that was understood as being particularly auspicious (Eck 1999: 116–17). The construction of the drainage system had the result of swiftly rendering a great number of sacred water places dry and barren. Hence even as this city was marked as being distinctively ‘Indian,’ the British colonial presence was active in altering it dramatically attempting to clean, modernize and enlighten the city.

As C. A. Bayly has shown, the status of Vārāṇasī as being fundamentally Hindu in the eyes of the British owed much to the fact of the earlier unification of India under the Mughals. Geographically and socially, ‘Benares was ideally placed to act as a crossroads between different linguistic regions. Pilgrims could now actually make the journey recommended in the medieval Purāṇic cosmologies and epics. The Benares *pāṇḍas* (bathing priests and genealogists) now reached out westward for custom amongst the kings of Rajasthan and later, Maharashtra, while newly rich

11 The Matsyodarī drainage project was led by James Prinsep (1799–1840), a British civil servant known for his deciphering of the Brāhmī script, and perhaps just as well for his long-time affection for Vārāṇasī. Prinsep himself designed the Matsyodarī Tunnel and personally oversaw its construction (Medhasananda 2003: 430–438). Prinsep also produced a series of drawings depicting various idyllic scenes of the city, and these endure as some of the only surviving visual representations of the city from that period. These are collected in Prinsep 1831.

Bengalis came from the east to make their home in the holy city' (Bayly 2000: 99).¹² Vārāṇasī had also been a site of considerable intellectual exchange and religious patronage, especially from the early 16th century, when Maratha Brahmins and patrons began to arrive in droves, and a revitalization of the city began (O'Hanlon 2010). Thanks to this resurgence, the *māhātmyas* too enjoyed much wider circulation; and in the discourse of the *māhātmyas* the city's sacredness was pushed back deeper in to the 'clouds and mists' of time.

But as much as it was a continuation of its image built in earlier times, the era of British colonialism also aggressively introduced new models for imagining the religious status and history of Vārāṇasī. 'They adopted the Puranic self-representation in part, while historicizing and further stylizing it in their own post-enlightenment and early romantic cultural and political terms' (Dalmia 1999: 55). The contrast between Sherring's complete distrust of the Purāṇic representation of Vārāṇasī and the wholehearted adoption of the idea that Vārāṇasī was 'co-eval with Hinduism' could not be starker. And clearly, Sherring was not at all alone in these strangely contrasting beliefs.

Refining the Vision of Vārāṇasī's Past

While an empiricist historicism was supposedly a modern mode of thought distinct from the mythic idealizations of the Purāṇas, Sherring's assumptions about Vārāṇasī's past far outstripped his evidence. Sherring (1868: 10) claims that '[p]revious to the introduction of the Buddhist faith into India, [Vārāṇasī] was already the sacred city of the land, – the centre of Hinduism, and chief seat of its authority.' Even putting aside the anachronistic use of the term 'Hinduism' here, this was certainly not the case. Vārāṇasī is ancient, certainly: it already had a long history as one of the great cities of the subcontinent when Buddha taught his first sermon in nearby Sarnath, and archaeological evidence suggests that the city has been continually inhabited since at least the eighth century BCE.¹³ But evidence for it being a locus for brahmanical or other 'Hindu' praxis in this early period is almost nonexistent.

This view of an essentially Hindu Vārāṇasī persists in the city's image in popular consciousness today. But for a city that is assumed to be an ancient seat of Hinduism, the paucity of references to Vārāṇasī in the early literature – the Veda and other related orthodox brahmanical texts – is striking. Early brahmanical sources are almost completely silent on Vārāṇasī as a city, and the same largely holds true even for the more comprehensive and chronologically later *Mahābhārata*. Only in the latter text, in fact, is there an explicit reference to Vārāṇasī as a holy place sacred to Śiva; but even there it merits only a single verse buried deeply in a long list of *tīrthas*.¹⁴

12 This latter point is particularly relevant when considering the pilgrimage of Ramakrishna with Mathuranath Biswas, discussed below.

13 Singh 1985: 245; Bakker 1996: 33.

14 The *Mahābhārata* section on pilgrimage (*Tīrthayātrāparvan*) contains only a passing reference to Vārāṇasī (3.82.69), mentioning two Śaiva sites. See Bakker 1996: 33.

It is not only that the city or the region is infrequently mentioned, but the earliest mentions in the Vedic literature regard the place not as a bastion of Vedic culture, but quite the opposite. Writing several decades after Sherring, A.S. Altekar is, to my knowledge, the first author to note the distinctly disdainful way in which the city was referred to in the literature of the late Vedic period. He notes that in the *Paippalāda Samhitā* of the *Atharvaveda*, a healing spell calls out a fever from a patient and directs it to fly off to afflict the peoples of Kāśī, along with Gāndhāra and Magadha (Altekar 1937: 1). He also notes the eastward journey of Videgha Māthava and the sacrificial fire (Agni Vaiśvānara) to the lands up to the Sadānīra River (modern Gandak), reported in the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, as evidence that ‘Aryan religion could make only slow progress in Eastern India owing to the stubborn religious, and perhaps also political, opposition of its inhabitants there’ (1937: 2). Vārāṇasī, we are thus informed, was part of the eastern frontier lands that accepted the Vedic sacrifice at a comparatively late date. Putting aside for a moment Altekar’s problematic assumption of an ‘Aryan religion,’ this verse, as several scholars have noted, does indeed seem to be a narrative marking of the acceptance of the Vedic sacrificial cult by various eastern kings of the late Vedic period (Witzel 1987: 26).¹⁵ From the perspective of Vedic orthodoxy, the Kāśī region was considered a frontier for much of its early history.

Kāśī seems to have been a region in which the *yajña* was not only late in being adopted by the local rulers, but even after it was, it remained rather uncertainly established. This is made explicit in another section of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, which states that the Kāśī clan had ‘lost’ the foundational *agnicayana* rite after the defeat of the Kāśī king Dhṛtarāṣṭra by one Satānīka Sātrājita. Upon this defeat, the Kāśīs are said to have lost the fire ritual for ten generations.¹⁶ Along similar lines, a cycle of legends about the ancient Vedic ruler Divodāsa, an early king of the venerable Lunar Dynasty, associates him with the city of Vārāṇasī. Throughout the many variants of this narrative tradition, Divodāsa is consistently depicted as having had to leave the city, only to have his descendents reacquire it after a gap of some generations. While later versions of the story attribute Divodāsa’s absence to a curse and introduce the figure of Śiva, early versions in the *Mahābhārata* and *Harivaṃśa* depict Divodāsa as being routed by his non-Vedic enemies and chased out of Vārāṇasī (Smith 2007).

15 Witzel is careful to caution that this passage should not be read as evidence for the migration (and certainly not the military invasion) of Indo-Aryan tribes, but rather for a much later Sanskritization process whereby certain chieftains would come to accept the authority of the sacrifice.

16 *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 13.54.19, cited in Motichandra 1985: 16. See also the discussion of Witzel (1987: 26). It should also be noted that the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* has been parsed into several distinct layers of composition, hence the section which a given quote appears in would be significant for purposes of dating. Yet the fact that the Kāśī region was something of a frontier remains true throughout.

While M.A. Sherring's work on Vārāṇasī provided the basis for modern historical studies of the city, it is clear that his vision of the past was colored by his own religiously motivated aspirations for delivering Vārāṇasī, and India, from the darkness of false doctrines and a stagnant civilization that had failed to evolve. Vārāṇasī was the 'belly of the beast' for Sherring's mission; the place in India where the forces of darkness were most deeply entrenched, where the need for Christian, rational enlightenment was greatest. Yet he believed so strongly in his mission that he toiled tirelessly, working toward the vision of the city that he imagined for the not-distant future.

As the very epitome of an Indian city, Vārāṇasī was the perfect place to conduct missionary work; if also, for Sherring, the most challenging.¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, he saw the Christian gospel as the harbinger of all things good: modern civilization, rationalism, independent thought, material uplift and the elevation of character; in short, 'progress.' Both the 'ancient' Vārāṇasī Sherring attempted to reconstruct in his scholarly endeavors, and the 'modern' Vārāṇasī that he administered to in the 19th century fell short of these ideals, and the reality of this was extremely distressing for him. Sherring frequently seemed frustrated by the immense task before him, his grand mission to help rescue the city and its inhabitants from error. The condition of the people of Vārāṇasī clearly distressed him:

[t]here is no sentiment more depressing than that which is produced by the study of a people that have declined from bad to worse; from one abomination to another; from one system of evil to others more and more opposed to truth, to reason, and to God (342).

Yet while he despaired over its past and present, he remained ever hopeful for the future of Vārāṇasī, and that of India:

While I look with profound regret on much of the past history of India, I look forward to its coming history with strong hope and confidence. The sacred principles of progress, which have raised the western nations of the world to that high position of civilization and greatness which they at present occupy, have already reached this land, and begun to operate on its inhabitants.¹⁸

The Vārāṇasī described by the venerable grandfather of modern historical studies of the city was, to a surprisingly large extent, a hyperbolic imagining. Moreover, while Sherring's view of Vārāṇasī was certainly influenced by broader colonial interactions and British assumptions, they were inherited also, ironically, in part from the very *māhātmya* tradition that he so deeply distrusted. It was the *māhātmya* tradition that deliberately constructed an image of a continuous sacred tradition that made Vārāṇasī and Vedic orthodoxy coeval, despite it being very much on the periphery of the Vedic world throughout much of its ancient history.

17 See, for example, Sherring 1868: 357.

18 Ibid., 344.

We see then that at least one scholarly approach to Vārāṇasī – the one that Sherring embodied – is complex and motivated by several other factors other than the dispassionate culling of facts. Sherring was a man of great passion, and in his own way felt a profound connection with the city that influenced his scholarly perspective on it. In terms of his relationship to the texts, his dogged insistence that the two streams of myth and history could not be ‘demingled’ proved to be true: not only in Vārāṇasī historiography, but in his own practice as well.

Ramakrishna’s Golden Vārāṇasī

On January 27, 1868 – as it so happens, the same year that Sherring’s *Sacred City of the Hindus* was published – Ramakrishna Paramahansa, the charismatic 19th-century Bengali mystic, embarked on a pilgrimage to Vārāṇasī. The pilgrimage was sponsored by Ramakrishna’s ardent devotee and supporter, Mathuranath Biswas, known familiarly as Mathur Babu. Mathur Babu was the manager of the Dakshineswar Kālī temple, built in 1855 by his mother-in-law, the pious and well-monied Rani Rashmoni. Ramakrishna had been the temple priest, until his frequent spiritual ecstasies prevented him from attending to his duties, and began to earn him a reputation as a divinely inspired saint.

On pilgrimage, Mathur Babu traveled lavishly. In addition to Ramakrishna, his guru and most honored guest, Mathur also brought perhaps a hundred or more friends, family members and servants, along with Ramakrishna’s own aged mother and his ever-present younger cousin and attendant, Hriday. Four full railway cars were reserved for this entourage, and along the way from Calcutta to Vārāṇasī, these chartered cars were detached from the main train for an exclusive journey. This was a pilgrimage fit for royalty.

Mathur Babu, as it turns out, also gave in charity on a scale befitting a royal pilgrim. At several stops at holy places along the way to Vārāṇasī, Mathur Babu arranged for feeding the poor and giving of gifts to the local Brahmins. This he continued in Vārāṇasī on a grand scale, honoring the Banārasī pandits, famous throughout India for their wisdom and austerity. During the feast, however, a bitter squabble broke out among the pandits. While the specific details have not come down to us, it is not hard to imagine it being a dispute over rank and privilege among the many Brahmin lineages represented.¹⁹ Seeing this gesture of pious magnanimity devolve into a display of prideful greed and pettiness was distressing in the extreme to Ramakrishna, whose childlike innocence and finely tuned spiritual sensitivity were legendary. Finding such base worldliness in the holiest place on earth immediately moved him to tears. Whimpering, he spoke aloud to his divine mother Kālī: ‘Mother, why did you bring me here? I was much happier in Dakshineswar’ (Saradananda 2003: 609).

But this was not the only Vārāṇasī that Ramakrishna saw during his visit. Attuned to the spiritual as he was, he would go on to have a host of divine, inspiring

¹⁹ See Parry 1994: 75–150.

visions in Vārāṇasī. Once, when passing by boat near the famous Maṇikarṇikā Ghāṭ, he went into an ecstatic state while watching the bodies being cremated. He later confided to his devotees that he saw the matted-haired Lord Śiva himself drawing the souls out from the burning flames and whispering the liberating mantra in their ears, while Kālī untied the karmic knots which had bound them to the cycle of birth and rebirth. It was true: to die in Kāśī, Śiva's favorite abode, was to be liberated instantly (Saradananda 2003: 610).

Another time, Ramakrishna saw in a vision that the entire city was luminous and made of gold: every last temple, tree, stone and pebble of the place was pulsing with spiritual power. He saw that 'the real Vārāṇasī is luminous and full of spirituality while the external one is but its shadow.' This, at first, was rather inconvenient for the childlike Ramakrishna, who insisted that Mathur Babu have a palanquin take him across the Asī rivulet that traditionally marks the southern limit of Vārāṇasī's sacred zone, whenever he needed to answer the calls of nature: he could not defile the golden city by pissing on it. Fortunately for matters of practicality, this overwhelming experience eventually receded: Ramakrishna's biographer and monastic disciple, Swami Saradananda, reports of his master, that 'when that particular mood came to an end, he did not need to do that anymore' (ibid.).

Swami Saradananda's biography of Ramakrishna was among the first, and one of the most fascinating. It is at once a biography and a theological treatise: in it he explores Ramakrishna as not just an enlightened spiritual master, but as a divine avatar, a World Teacher for the age. For Saradananda, each episode in Ramakrishna's life has significance, as the avatar acts out his divine drama for the benefit of humankind. The author spends some time analyzing the significance of the vision of golden Vārāṇasī. He explains:

The subtle form of the city had been made golden by the priceless love and faith of innumerable ascetics and devotees throughout the ages. The real Vārāṇasī is luminous and full of spirituality while the external one is but its shadow. (Ibid., 609)

For Saradananda, then, the real Vārāṇasī is its subtle 'golden' form, a sacred zone of pure spirituality, and the place of gross worldliness where pandits pridefully squabble over petty honors is, perhaps, merely a veil. Furthermore, Ramakrishna's visions both confirm and extend the pronouncements of the scriptures. Saradananda reports that the pandits in Mathur Babu's entourage verified his vision of Śiva liberating souls at Maṇikarṇikā Ghāṭ, telling Ramakrishna that 'the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* mentions that Śiva confers *nirvāṇa* on those who die at Vārāṇasī, but does not explicitly state how. Your vision clearly elucidates how this is accomplished. Your visions and experiences have surpassed even the scriptural records.'²⁰

This is a key point for Saradananda. The scriptural statements of *māhātmyas* like the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* are authoritative, but they are subject to an even higher authority: the direct experience of spiritual virtuoso like Ramakrishna. Here it is apparent

²⁰ Saradananda 2003: 611.

that a reverent, devotional approach to the city is not necessarily one of slavish dependence on the authority of the scriptural tradition, but it is something that can be continually renewed, extended, rediscovered and modified.

Conclusion: Kaleidoscopic Visions of Vārāṇasī

Ramakrishna's experiences of Vārāṇasī are fruitful to compare with Sherring's very different experiences of the same city, in the same historical moment. The first thing to note is a surprising similarity: both Sherring's scholarly approach and Ramakrishna's devotional approach are characterized by a deep, personal engagement with Vārāṇasī, evoking rather profound emotions; both were deeply affected by the city, though in very different ways. Sherring lamented deeply over the ignorance and squalor that he saw, and when he writes of the glories of Christendom that he sees in Vārāṇasī's future, he is clearly inspired. Ramakrishna, for his part, was moved to tears at the worldliness he experienced in this most holy of cities; but his epiphany of seeing the golden Vārāṇasī was ecstatic.

More specifically, the emotional potency related to the city, for both Sherring and Ramakrishna, seemed to arise from a fundamental conflict in competing 'visions' of the city that each had experienced. For Sherring, it was the contrast between the horribly backward state of Vārāṇasī's past and present – the city as a place of ignorance and disease – and the shining vision of Western enlightenment that he glimpsed for Vārāṇasī's future. For Ramakrishna, the contrasting visions were, of course, that of the mundane, worldly Vārāṇasī where the pandits squabble over money and rank, and the Vārāṇasī made of pure gold that was revealed to him while in an ecstatic state.

What can we take of these divergent but overlapping experiences of Vārāṇasī? First and foremost, we must recognize that the ways of experiencing the city are perspectival and changing, and intensely personal. There is no one way to experience Vārāṇasī, even within a single individual. Scholarly and devotional approaches may bleed into each other, even as they conflict. And perhaps this conflict is productive of deeper emotional exchanges with the city, whatever may be the ultimate goal of these experiences. Neither Sherring's nor Ramakrishna's respective engagements with the city are necessarily typical of 'scholarly' or 'normative' approaches to Vārāṇasī. Ultimately, there is no singular approach to Vārāṇasī, and each approach, when examined, can be shown to have multiple ideals, motivations and methodologies.

Finally, both Sherring and Ramakrishna take unexpected tacks with respect to the authoritative *māhātmya* tradition that is the source for the tradition of Vārāṇasī's sacred character. With his aggressively positivistic historical approach, we would expect Sherring to completely reject the *māhātmyas* as mythical fancy, and he does. It is fascinating, then, when we find that his view of the city seems rather profoundly influenced by the Purāṇic ideological construction of the city as fundamentally 'Hindu.' It is similarly surprising, perhaps, to see the fluidity with which the Purāṇic statements are treated in the case of Ramakrishna: certainly, the 'scriptures' are respected, but the ecstatic experiences of a great saint serve to validate and even

further clarify them. And there is no doubt that for Ramakrishna's biographer Swami Saradananda, at least, the ultimate validity of the *māhātmyas* derives from the experiences of great masters like Ramakrishna, who can see behind the veil of the mundane to grasp the world of the spiritual, ever-present behind it.

And neither is the vision of Vārāṇasī as sacred that emerges in the *māhātmyas* homogenous. It varies – sometimes rather dramatically – from text to text. It is through a careful examination of the rhetorical strategies that each text employs that we can get a hint of their authors' theological and political agendas, sectarian affiliation. Looked upon from this perspective, how can these texts be said to comprise a monovocal 'tradition' at all? On the one hand, there are consistent themes that appear, such as the *kṣetra*'s association with Śiva, and the idea that death in Kāśī grants instant liberation from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. On the other hand, these are not mentioned in every text, nor are they necessarily present in the early tradition.

What is Vārāṇasī, after all? Is it the impossibly polluted and overcrowded city that appears as if its population outgrew its infrastructure long, long ago? Or, is its fundamental identity that of the eternal abode of Lord Śiva? There is the Vārāṇasī of legend, and the Vārāṇasī where real people live and visit, work and play. The legendary Vārāṇasī is frequently located in the past for many, and for Sherring the ideal Vārāṇasī was in the future; but for some, it is immediately and intensely present, at least for those with the eyes to see. What Ramakrishna's experience shows – with amazing vividness, at that – is that one's perspective on Vārāṇasī depends on one's approach and attitude; and that it can vary dramatically from moment to moment.

The *māhātmyas* of Vārāṇasī present us a kaleidoscope of shining visions of Vārāṇasī that are very deliberately designed to evoke a sense of awe. While these visions may often compete and conflict, none need invalidate the other, for all are invaluable for a full study of this fascinating city. And even amid the cacophony of voices represented in these texts, they still very consciously cohere as a unified tradition that looks upon Vārāṇasī with a sense of profound awe and reverence. And even as I have analyzed, parsed and sometimes relentlessly deconstructed this tradition, and even as, like Sherring and Ramakrishna, I have encountered obstacles and frustrations in studying the city and its *māhātmyas*, I am happy to report that, in my own humble approach to Vārāṇasī, that sense of awe and reverence has not been diminished.

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