The Grammar of Assī:
Kashinath Singh and globalizing Banāras

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One of the most cherished Indian novels of 2011 brought Banāras back to the literary landscape of contemporary India. The plot of Chetan Bhagat's novel *Revolution 2020* is basically a tragic love story. However, its plot is set in Banāras, and the town is more than just a backdrop for the narration.

> Only the sights and smells of Varanasi came to receive me at the station. […] Even the filthy and crowded streets of Gadolia seemed beautiful to me. No place like your hometown. More than anything, I wanted to meet Aarti. Every inch of Varanasi reminded me of her. People come to my city to feel the presence of God, but I could feel her presence everywhere. (Bhagat 2011: 95)

The enduring trope of 'the sights and smells of Varanasi' hardly needs explanation to any reader, Indian or foreign. Chetan Bhagat relates the awakening sense of spatial belonging of his main character to a deep love for a young woman. Both love relationships end in frustration.

The complicated and sometimes confusing plot of Kashinath Singh's novel *Kāśī kā assī* ('The Assī quarter of Banāras') similarly expresses a sense of belonging to Banāras and a sense of identity. It also has its topographical focus in a traditional quarter in Banāras, next to Godaulia (or, Gadolia, as Chetan Bhagat has it). In this case, it is Assī, the southernmost of the traditional Banāras neighborhoods. The local is the backdrop against which the complicated net of the narrative flow unfolds. The book, however, is not only about a traditional quarter in Banāras and the emotional relationship that a Hindi author has developed towards it. The novel is more than just a literary monument of a neighborhood in Banāras. In this paper, I will focus on the interaction of the foreign world with the people accustomed to the narrow pathways of a traditional quarter of Banāras in *Kāśī kā assī*.

The book is hardly a novel in the traditional sense. There is neither a main character nor a linear plot structure. The five parts of the book, published individually before being collected in this volume, and other, often funny, narratives within the different parts, are in many cases only loosely related to each other. They depict the diversity of communication between inhabitants of Assī, from common insults to intellectual and well-informed comments on world politics, constantly weaving together different layers of stories, including the author's comments and references to the readers. The book is an archive of all kinds of these interactions between the

often obscure interlocutors, mirroring the complexity of the public space of a traditional quarter.

Pappū's teashop in particular is in the center of the web of stories that literary Assī is made of. '*E duniyāvālo*!' 'Oh you worldly people!,' a reference to the rhetoric of the Kabīr-tradiṭion, going back to the most famous poet of the so-called *nirguṇ-bhakti* tradition, is a typical phrase used as an emphatic address to people in the quarter and to the reader as well within the novel (Siṃh 2011: 31ff.). Assī and its inhabitants are the 'worldly people' and the fictive addressees of the author's continuing interventions into the text: they are the focal point of this novel, and in a way they represent the world at large, creating a huge communicative web, including all kinds of direct or more subliminal forms of communication.

The content of *Kāśī kā assī*, however, hardly fits into a brief abstract of one or even a couple of sentences – probably because it lacks a proper (love) story, the temporal structure of which would facilitate a certain linear narration. One individual neighborhood of Banāras – namely Assī, situated at the southernmost end of traditional Banāras – is itself as complex as the famous Sanskrit grammar written by Pāṇini perhaps as early as the second century BC, as Kashinath Singh explains:

> Assī is the 'Aṣṭādhyāyī' [Sanskrit grammar of Pāṇini] and Banāras is its 'Bhāṣya' [commentary]! For the last 30 to 35 years, Americans, mad from capitalism, come here and want the world to become its 'ṭīkā' [sub-commentary] … but would any change ever happen just because you want it to?[1]

The *Aṣṭādhyāyī* is a gesture, on the one hand, towards the holy language of Hinduism, i.e. to the conservative world of learning (and also the pretension of brahmanic learnedness), and on the other hand to the extreme complexity of grammatical rules encoded in the extremely brief and mysterious *sūtra*s and a complex system of cross-references throughout the text, made intelligible with the help of commentaries and sub-commentaries. In this way, Assī becomes the core text, and the rest of the town and world is the commentary meant to explain the core text and existing only in relation to it.

The trope is of course first of all metaphorical. The 'grammar of Assī' works like a fixed network of grammatical rules encoded in short textual sequences and their inherent cross-references between them. In other words, a universe of intertextuality is the basis for the construction of meaning. The world around can explain it, comment on it, but any interaction would be a relationship of the center to its periphery. The idea of Kāśī being the center of the world is a famous statement of the *Kāśīmāhātmya* and similar religious texts on Banāras, but Kashinath Singh uses it in another context to explain certain forms of interaction between certain Western visitors and the city's inhabitants.

1 *Assī 'aṣṭādhyāyī' hai aur banāras uskā 'bhāṣya'! Pichle tīs-paiṃtīs varṣoṃ se 'pūjīvād' ke pagane amrīkī yahāṃ āte haiṃ aur cāhte haiṃ ki duniyā iskī 'ṭīkā' ho jāe … magar cāhne se kyā hotā hai?* (Siṃh 2011: 12).

The basic pun is that 'America' turns into the imagined periphery of Banāras. In this article, I will try to follow up this relation between traditional Banāras and the foreign, more or less secular, pilgrim to Banāras with his affinity to certain aspects of Hindu beliefs and behaviors to be recovered in the traditional parts of the town, searching for a loving relation to Banāras and the promises it stands for. At the same time, the introduction of the book says that 'simple people and simple readers are precisely the fertile soil that gives birth to this novel.'[2] The author has therefore no pretentions: he reproduces the narratives he is exposed to. The Hindi *upanyās* ('novel') in general is a much more flexible term than the English 'novel.' Kashinath Singh's *Kāśī kā assī* is in a way a proof of this. There is no question that the author and his critics both perceive the work in terms of the tradition of the modern *upanyās*. Following the cosmic and allegorical dimension of the 'grammar,' the 172 printed pages with their complex set-up of narrations could be argued to fall into the category of a kind of epic text. Kashinath Singh understands himself explicitly more as a chronicler than an author in the introduction – the chronicler of the day-to-day talk among customers in Pappū's teashop. Discussions (*bahaseṃ*) never stop in the shop, day and night, while people – the 'natives of the quarter' (*muhalle ke ādivāsī*) – keep coming and going. These 'discussions' Kashinath Singh declares to be the narrative substance of his book – they contain 'novels upon novels, and stories upon stories.'[3] The intertextuality of the 'discussions' relates to the complexity of the quarter and the town. The individual authors of the many narratives that flow together in *Kāśī kā assī* remain more or less unimportant – a perfect illustration of the 'mort de l'auteur' (Roland Barthes), Banārsī style.

Kashinath Singh (born 1937), a former professor of Hindi at the Benares Hindu University (BHU), is one of the 'four friends' (*cār yār*)[4] and a prominent senior Hindi prose writer of the post-1960 era, even though his publications are smaller in number in comparison to the others. Some of his short stories are, however, perceived as being particularly brilliant pieces of modern Hindi fictional writing. His 'completely personal narrative language,'[5] which grows out of the roots of changing new India, even 'reaches out to Premcand'[6] in importance, as the editor of his collected short stories writes.

Even though this is the case, he hadn't received many literary honors until recently, when he was awarded one of the most prestigious prizes in Indian and Hindi literature, the Sahitya Akademi's annual award in Hindi literature 2011, for his recent novel *Rehan par Raghu* ('Raghu on Loan'). He has continued to publish, particularly in the literary magazine *Haṃs* edited by Rajendra Yadav (Delhi) as well as in *Tadbhav* by Akhilesh (Lucknow), where his short stories and autobiographical pieces were mostly first published in recent years.

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2 *ām jan aur ām pāṭhak hī is upanyās ke janm kī jamīn rahe haiṃ* (Siṃh 2011: 7).

3 *upanyās kā upanyās aur kathāeṃ kī kathāeṃ* (Siṃh 2011: 7).

4 Namely Gyānrañjan, Ravīndra Kāliyā, Dūdhnāth Siṃh and Kāśīnāth Siṃh (Kashinath Singh).

5 *apnī nitāṃt nijī kathābhāṣā* (Vijay Mohan Siṃh, introduction to Siṃh, 2009: 12).

6 *Premcaṃd ko chū rahī thīṃ* (ibid.: 7).

His first collections of short stories were published in the 1960s (*Sūcnā*, 'Message', *Sudhīr Ghoṣāl*, [nomen proprium], *Ādmīnāmā*, 'Hymn on the Man'), followed by the first novel *Apnā morcā* ('Our Front,' 1972) on the revolutionary students' movement at the Benares Hindu University from about 1967 onwards, which Rana Singh uses as 'source material for the interpretation of the students' culture in Varanasi during the late 1960s' (Singh 2004: 285). 'Collected short stories' (*Saṃkalit kahāniyāṃ*) were published in one volume in 2008 (Siṃh 2008b, 2nd edn, 2009). The title is misleading, since it contains only a selection of short stories and – interestingly – the fourth part of *Kāśī kā assī*, *Pāṃḍe kaun kumati tohem lāgī* ('Brahman, what stupid idea has befallen you?' – see further below) as an independent *kahānī* and the last of 17 short stories.

It should be noted that Kashinath is the younger brother of the famous critic in the world of Hindi literature, Namvar Singh, and the elder brother plays a very important role in his life, as described in his autobiography (Siṃh 2008c). They both share a very simple and rural background. Their parents in Jīyanpur village in Uttar Pradesh actually had three boys. The middle son took over the farm, while the elder and the younger sons turned to the world of Hindi literature, one as a critic and the other more as an author of fiction, though both were based in academic studies. Kashinath and Namvar have always been on good terms with each other, personally and politically. The elder Namvar in particular is a staunch Marxist, and in particular among the predominantly rather conservative citizens of Banāras is especially disliked for his deviation into left-wing politics.

The perception of Kashinath as the 'brother of Namvar' followed him his entire life until today, and the association with his brother – including the allegation of being patronized by him – may well have harmed his career. Even though Kashinath was much less politically engaged, both in his writing and as a citizen, the brothers never fell out over political issues or indeed for any other reason. However, in his autobiographical writing, Kashinath considers it a special and courageous deed that the Sanskritist and Pali philologist Karunapati Tripathi at Benares Hindu University had accepted him as his PhD student: 'When the whole town declared me untouchable because I was the 'brother of Namvar,' he accepted me, even though the people were against it.'[7]

The PhD thesis was the final step in a successful academic education that started at the intermediary and undergraduate level in the BHU, when he lived with his brother in the same household. Unlike his brother, who later left the BHU and took up positions around Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and finally at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi, Kashinath stayed behind, became professor of Hindi literature, and never showed any ambition to continue his academic career anywhere else.

Much of Kashinath Singh's writing is directly autobiographical (particularly Singh, 2008c), and even in his fictional texts the autobiographical element is some-

7 *jab pūre nagar ne 'Nāmvar kā bhāī' hone ke kāraṇ mujhe achūt ghoṣit kar diyā thā to logoṃ ke virodh ke bāvjūd unhoṃne apnāyā thā* (Siṃh 1993: 18; Siṃh 2008c: 18).

how present. At the beginning of *Kāśī kā assī*, the novel is on one occasion called *saṃsmaraṇ*, the common term usually reserved for autobiographical memories with literary ambitions (p. 11).

Among the characteristic elements of both genres in Kashinath's writing are the constant references to readers, mostly as 'friends!' (*mitro*) or 'brothers!' (*bhāīo* or *bhāī logo*) etc. Also very common are references to his readers in the imperative: 'Listen!' (*suno*). This is a style to be found in much of his writing beyond the 'novel,' including his biographical texts. The location of many of his short stories is the historical Assī quarter in Banāras, where for most of his life he lived close to Lolārka Kuṇḍ, and the social and rhetorical interaction of traditionalism and modernity of strange inhabitants and visitors to Assī. As Vijay Mohan Singh observes, even though *sthānīytā* (a term difficult to translate: 'localism,' 'being rooted in a certain place,' perhaps including some sort of 'topophilia'[8]) of some sort is very important in his writing, he has left behind the limitations of his circle in a much more profound way than the other post-1960 authors.[9] In the introduction to the stage version of *Dekh tamāśā lakṛī kā* ('Look at the Spectacle, the Wooden One'), Kashinath Singh speaks sympathetically about the *Banārsīpan* ('the air of Banāras') of Arun Pandey, who had prepared the manuscript for that version.

Far from idealizing the traditional set-up of society, he is a close and at the same time loving observer of the people in Assī, made up not only of the proverbial simple 'man on the street,' but also of 'artists, drawers, journalists, leaders, and citizens' (Siṃh 2011: 20). Kashinath Singh's prose itself is in a way emanating from and transcending the grammar of the *muhallā*: his plots set off from the close-knit social fabric of Assī and its obscurantism, its self-centeredness and exposure to globalization, its traditionalism and rapid change – in short, its shortcomings and its human depths as well.

Perhaps the most significant and somehow poetic statement on topophilia in the book is the following passage:

> Finally, take it as having happened by force or by choice, I have selected this town for my living! A town of an unending humming of praise the Lord! A town of Sufi-singing and all kinds of struggling and noise! A town, in which a loincloth may be laid out on one shoulder or used to bind a turban. A town, in which people meet in front of the Pan shops from morning to evening to talk and laugh. A town of swear words over swear words, ritual washing places, of the rich, of the slogans in praise of Shiva and hand clapping.
>
> A town more beloved than one's life.
>
> A town uncomparable worldwide.
>
> A town – star in one's eyes.
>
> A town always enjoying itself.
>
> Help – it's my town!

8 Tuan 1974; referred to by Singh 2004: 142ff.
9 Vijay Mohan Siṃh, in Siṃh 2009: 11.

'Help!' because it was a town and a heavy mortar at the same time, into which I kept stuck my whole life voluntarily, having smashed my head into it. It always reminded me of my father who expressed his love in the language of beatings – the more love, the more beatings. Whenever I think of this town, it stands in front of my eyes like Akbar in the film *Mughal-e Azam*, flushing, it appears heavily breathing to me. These eyes, spitting fire out of anger, trembling body, rumbling voice. One can hear: 'Anarkali, Salim won't let you die and I won't let you live!'

This Akbar was nobody else than the Hindi department and Salim was my Assī, the people from Assī, my educated and non-educated friends and the boys with whom I studied and whom I taught and who never understood that Akbar was somebody else than the most astonishing man and master standing and sitting among us.[10]

The small poem included in this part of Kashinath's memory writing in prose reminds one of Nazir Akbarabadi's (1735–1830) famous 'secular' poetry, his praise of Agra and its common people in the beginning of the nineteenth century. This seems to be a conscious reference to Akbarabadi, a conscious reference to the tradition of the Hindi-Urdu literary urban eulogy tradition, the so-called *Āgrānāmah*, a kind of declaration of love to Agra and its people, their shortcomings notwithstanding. Nazīr became well known among post-independence connoisseurs of Hindi through the play *Āgrā bāzār* ('Agra Market') by Habib Tanvir, which was first performed on stage in 1954 and evokes the poetry of Nazīr. Habib Tanvir, who stands in the tradition of a kind of Brechtian street theater, is well known for his brand of folklorism combined with Marxism.

Secondly, there is a reference to the famous film *Mughal-e Azam* ('The Greatest of the Mughals'), a 1960 Indian period epic film directed by K. Asif and produced by Shapoorji Pallonji – for many years the most commercially successful Bollywood movie based on a historical love story between Prince Salim (the future Moghul Jahangir) and Anarkali, a Hindu girl. The liaison is disapproved by Salim's father Akbar, which leads to an ongoing conflict between father and son and ends tragically. To be in love with Banāras is similarly like a socially unacceptable affair.

The other source of Kashinath Singh's strange *sthānīytā* is Phanishvarnath Renu (1921–77) and his so-called *āmcaliktā*, even though the location of Renu's stories is mostly North Bihar. *Āmcaliktā*, usually translated as 'regionalism,' designates a particular style in Hindi fiction usually centered around strange characters in North Indian villages and small towns. Renu's fiction is sometime underestimated in Indian criticism, where it is understood as some kind of romantic folklore, as for example in Shivkumar Mishra's *Hindi Literature: A Brief Account*: 'His [Renu's] limitations start from the point where he leaves behind the Premcand-tradition and gets encapsuled in the magic of the manierism of regionalism and turns into a 'regionalist.''[11]

10 Siṃh 1993: 19 and Singh 2008c: 22ff.

11 Miśra 2009: 118 (… *unkī sīmāeṃ vahāṃ se ārambh hote haiṃ jin binduoṃ par premcand-paraṃparā se haṭkar ve āṃcaliktā ke rūpvād ke jādū meṃ baṃdh kar 'āṃcalik 'ho uṭhte haiṃ*).

This statement, I think, completely ignores the critical content of Renu's *āṃcaliktā*. It could also be used against certain features of, for example, Premcand's famous last novel *Godān* ('The Gift of a Cow'), which – similar to Renu's novel *Mailā āṃcal* (The Dirty Border') – develops its plot from the parallel worlds and interaction between the town and its imagined modernity, and the imagined backwardness of the village. Similarly, it would be a clear misunderstanding of Kashinath Singh to interpret his narration of the people coming and going in Pappū's tea shop as creating an idyllic space without critical social or political content.

Assī is the microscopic image of traditional Banāras as a whole, and Pappū's tea shop is again Assī in a nutshell. The most important ingredients of communication here remind one of the chapter 'City of the Good Life' in Diana Eck's *City of Light*:

> They call it *mastī* ('joie de vivre'), *mauj* ('delight, festivity'), and *phakkarpan* [sic – should be *phakkaṛpan*] ('carefreeness'). [...] Everyone knows that Banāras is a good place to die. And it is precisely this fact that makes it a good place to live. (Eck 1983: 304)

Mastī is present in Kashinath Singh's novel, but at the same time the world and its problems are very much alive in the talk among the customers in the teashop. Their interactions are full of comments not only on local but also on national and international politics. 'The experts may have explained globalization, liberalization, multinationalism – and many other kinds of -izations in their own way, but Lāṛherām has understood them in his own way.'[12] People regularly comment on party politics in an ironic way, such as: 'In which party are you nowadays?' – an ironic hint at the constant changing of party membership among certain politicians (Siṃh 2011: 44).

People actively follow the preparations for elections, and discuss hot issues (Siṃh 2011: 72). Hindutva and secularism is a constant subject. One of the recurring points of discussion is the traditional poetry contest on Holi (*kavi sammelan*) that the Hindu-nationalist BJP wants to stop, because it is not in favor of the kind of mockery that is an important ingredient of the event (p. 19). Holy men are a constant object of mockery, as in the following cryptic Sanskrit couplet line: *ayaṃ mahātmā karpātr daṃḍī, yadā-kadā gacchati dālmaṃḍī* ('This great soul Karpātr, the ascetic, sometimes goes to the red light district') (Siṃh 2011: 6). The Hindi original plays with the rhyme towards the end of each line. Over the whole novel, hints at religion occur quite regularly and are often ironic in content.

Kāśī kā assī, first published in 2002, can be read as a declaration of love to Banāras and the strange humanity that populates it. It consists of fictional as well as non-fictional narratives, loosely connected without a continuous plot. One of the important subjects in the whole of Kashinath's writing is the interaction of the traditional quar-

12 *'Globalāijeśan', 'libaralāijeśan', 'malṭīneśanalāijeśan' – aur bhī dūsre ḍher sāre 'āijeśanoṃ' ko vidvānoṃ ne apne ḍhaṃg se samjhā hogā, lāṛherām ne use apne ḍhaṃg se samjhā* (Siṃh 2011: 105).

ter with Western visitors and their preoccupation with Indian culture. According to a communication with Kashinath Singh, the story of the young Western woman seeking to intrude into the world of traditional Hindu and Sanskrit learning in Banāras is made up of elements of the interactions between foreigners and the indigenous population of Banāras, but in itself is fictional and not an account of real characters. However, the story of Lāṛherām and Catherine (p. 104ff.), who as a couple turn into kinds of commercial sellers of Indian (Hindu) wisdom, is, according to Kashinathji, a fictionalized form of 'a real story.' The brief narrative episode concerning two people from Sweden in Indian *khadi* dress is similar in character (Siṃh 2011: 77). Much of the narration is made up of conversation between people meeting over cups of tea in Pappū's shop on Assī Road or occasionally at 'Kedar, the tea-seller' (*Kedār cāyvālā*, p. 16, 39 a.o.), and the author is himself a character in this context.

The author and Christiane Schaefer together with Kashinath Singh (second from left) and family members

The meeting of East and West is the particular focus of the fourth of the five parts of *Kāśī kā assī*, under the title *Pāṃḍe kaun kumati tohem̩ lāgī* ('Brahman, what stupid idea has befallen you?': pp. 116–32). The 'stupid idea' is the teaching of Sanskrit and the renting out of rooms to foreigners. This part of the novel, which I have already mentioned as being published among a selection of 17 short stories in 2008 (Singh, 2009b), has formed the plot of a stage performance, which was played in several

towns of North India and can be found on youtube.com under the title 'Kāśīnāmah.'[13] The story itself – part of the book, but practically an independent narrative within the narrative – is partly written like a film script, with notes and suggestions for cutting etc. Foreigners and the interaction with them are very much present in Assī, either as 'normal' tourists, paying guests, or even as people directly involved in religious activities. 'Astrology and the paying guest – these are the supports of living for the local Brahmans' (p. 116). Kannī Guru – a short form of 'Kashinath,' the author imagining himself as being the cunning intermediary – is full of praise for the Sanskrit teacher Dharmnāth Śāstrī, who works as a part-time teacher at a school, and offers a place to live to a French girl, Madeleine (Banārsī-style given name: 'Sāvitrī'), who would like to study Sanskrit in Banāras with a teacher and guru (p. 117ff.). The guru (*ācārya*) finds himself in a dilemma: he urgently needs extra income since he has to marry off his daughters – a fact that the intermediary makes him constantly aware of – while at the same time he is prepared neither to teach a Western young woman nor even to let her stay at his house as requested by the prospective student who is completely ignorant of the social conditions and the traditionalist mentality of the teacher.

Even though he at first simply bursts into laughter on learning of Madeleine's desire to learn Sanskrit (p. 120), the offer is a serious temptation for him, since he will be able to make some extra income with the young lady as a paying guest. Even though his wife constantly calls her *raṃḍī* (prostitute) in Hindi, he is deeply moved by the fact that the deal might help him collect money in order to be able to pay the dowry for his daughters' marriages. The world of the Western young woman and the teacher are completely disparate. The guide plays his role as the interlocutor between the two. While the separation of these two worlds is an established fact for the teacher, who has no aspiration of his own to bridge the gap, the foreign prospective Sanskrit learner does not reciprocate this distinction. She naively believes she can cross the divide and enter the world of the Banārsī Brahman.

Under the pressure of the circumstances, the Brahman becomes ready to rent out the single room on the flat roof of his house, but then the problem of a proper toilet for the foreigner arises. Finally, he has to agree to have a toilet constructed at the spot where he used to have a small place for worship. The construction of the toilet somehow resembles Baka's dream of the introduction of the water closet in India in the early novel of Indian writing in English, *The Untouchable* (1936) by Mulk Raj Anand. At the end of the novel, this technical innovation appears to Baka as the tool to free him from his duty to clean the public latrines.

There is neither a happy end nor any other kind of solution to the conflict between the inherited sense of honor of the conservative Brahman and the brutal economic

13 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsSz5dc0w0U, and http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&v=tazEe-JIhGg (5.6.2013). The first part of the novel was also adapted for stage by Arun Pandey and approved by Kashinath Singh himself (Siṃh, Pāṃḍey 2008a). The announced release of a 2012 Bollywood film on the basis of the novel under the title *Mohalla Assi*, starring Sunny Deol and directed by Chandra Prakash Dwivedi, is still in the pipeline during the writing of this article.

necessity. He finally has to accept defeat. There is no alternative but to accept the paying guest with all its consequences: the teaching of Sanskrit to the foreign woman marks a decline rather than an affirmation of the tradition.

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