# The Orthodox Banāras or the Purification of Hinduism

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From 1997 to 2006 I spent more than a year doing fieldwork in Banāras. My PhD dissertation (Claveyrolas 2001) and its published version (Claveyrolas 2003) deal with the construction of religiosity through the study of the "atmosphere" of the temple, which may be faithfully conveyed by art. It is often described by observers as an invitation to "come and take a peek". But the atmosphere that devotees encourage you to feel as you enter the temple must be understood as a local and effective construction. Apprehending the temple through its atmosphere means starting with what comes before the rite and putting the religiosity back in the emotional context of the Hindu *bhakti*. The temple is the place of certainty. The atmosphere is functional, because the worshipper finds evidence there of the undeniable divine presence and because of the role it plays in the construction of religiosity. The atmosphere is a dynamic process at the crossroads of the systematic rationalization of temple space and individual, spontaneous Hindu devotion. This atmosphere lies between explicit, intentional communication with the divine and a kind of background noise that is charged with evocative power.

The temple is a totality within itself. If the researcher considers only its ritualistic *raison d'être*, he strips the temple of important aspects of its space, its participants, and its meaning. Not only is it a place of communion with the divine, but the space of the temple also offers an experience of cohabitation with the divine that extends to everyday activities. The temple is the place that makes possible permanent communication between men and gods. To come to the temple is to treat oneself to the experience of Hinduism's Golden Age. The atmosphere, a cocktail of various elements, is the product of a local and dynamic construction that is characteristic of two key modes of the Hindu relationship with the divine in the temple: everyday life and emotional experience.

This work was really a monograph of a temple understood as a relatively independent totality, as a "space apart". I described the various temporal sequences and various inner spaces of the temple compound, trying to consider all the actors. In this way, the work was somewhat different from the many previous studies that focus on Banāras. However, the questions raised – for example: How does a space come to be so religiously potent? – directly evoke a central question of Banārsī studies that this volume certainly is interested in: What makes Banāras such a special place?

*Banāras seen from Mauritius*

In this article, I try to combine an informal, personal, approach to my material with theoretical questions concerning Banāras and the anthropology of Hinduism. I would like to draw from my Banārsī experience but also from the distance I gained by switching to non-Banārsī Hinduism since 2007. I think this distance can make it easier to evaluate misrepresentations that sometimes pervade both local and academic discourses. The ambition is also to gain some insight into the representations of what Hinduism means, and the role Banāras plays in this representation.

I will start with my current research in Mauritius. On this small island in the Indian Ocean, Hindus are a majority. Most are descended from indentured laborers who arrived between 1835 and 1907. Among the original Hindu immigrants, approximately 60 % were of Bhojpuri origin, including some who came from Banāras itself. As I conducted my research among descendants of these indentured servants, studying their temples and religious representations and practices, many anecdotes struck me as suggesting the importance of the image of Banāras, however distorted that image may be. It is on this image, and the all too frequent unwillingness of those speaking about Banāras to contradict the image, that I will focus.

When I attend a Hindu ceremony in a Mauritian temple, I often participate fully. I may prepare the offerings and ritual objects (oil lamps, flower garlands), for instance. On some occasions, I was even allowed to enter the *garbhagṛha* of certain temples, and to perform *āratī* for other devotees. This is not the place to investigate the reasons why I was integrated this way (which was not the case in Banārsī temples during my fieldwork there), but I do know that one of these reasons lies in the fact that my informants knew I had been researching in Banāras. This somehow made me, in the eyes of my informants, an expert on Hinduism. Seen from Mauritius, Banāras is a main point of reference for how Hinduism should be practiced, and I was repeatedly asked, even by Mauritian ritual specialists, to compare what I saw in the Hindu temples of Mauritius with what I had experienced in Banāras.

Conversely, there is on contemporary Mauritius a strong feeling of resentment among Mauritians of Tamil origins (maybe 6 % of the overall Mauritian population) towards Mauritians of Bhojpuri origin. Mauritian Tamils consider themselves outside of Hinduism; they practice "Tamil religion", a category at least partially accepted in the official census. An anecdote might be illustrative here. A Mauritian Tamil priest showed me on his cellular phone a video of Aghori ascetics cutting up and eating dead human cadavers retrieved from the Ganges near Banāras. The priest knew I used to work in Banāras, and showing me this video was a way of telling me that Indian Hinduism (and particularly the Bhojpuri style of religiosity), if it was indeed a standard, also needed to be corrected. He insisted that nothing like this was happening in Mauritian Hinduism. As a matter of fact, neither castes[1] nor asceticism (two "plagues" of Indian Hinduism for local Hindus) are widespread in

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1  On this particular issue my analysis has evolved. After a thorough research I now doubt the disappearance of the caste system in Mauritius (Claveyrolas 2013).

Mauritian society. According to this Mauritian priest, Banāras might well illustrate the "authentic" Hinduism, but this also means backwardness and even savagery. It is worth noting that such an evaluation is reminiscent of ambiguous colonial discourses on Banāras, or even the contemporary image that Banāras has for the elites in places like Delhi or Mumbai.

Beyond this point, I would say that Mauritian Hindus are very uncertain about their faith and practices. They often express doubt about whether they conform to the correct way of practicing their religion.[2] After researching Hindu temple practice in Banāras, observing such an uncertainty came as a major surprise to me. Mauritian Hindus explain that their ancestors, when brought to Mauritius, were cut from India and, from then on, deeply engaged in syncretism with the Catholic-Creole practices of former slaves. However, I would argue that what brings unease to Mauritian Hindus is not to be found in the historical conditions of migration and indentured labor on the plantations. On the contrary, it is primarily to be found in contemporary pretensions to sanskritize Hinduism in Mauritius. When they replace small plantation shrines with new monumental temples (which is a major activity in Mauritius today), Hindu Mauritians say they "go back to basics". But the question is this: What are these basics? What is the norm? I was taught from my early training in Indian studies that Hinduism is not an orthodoxy, but an orthopraxy. What matters in Hinduism is the correct way to perform rituals, and not a unique faith or precise representations based on a unique text. Old persons in Mauritius remember their practices back in the 1950s. This was indeed a syncretism with Catholic practices (candles, crucifixes, pictures of Catholic saints, etc.) but, for the most part, the old shrines that you can still observe in sugarcane fields quite faithfully replicate popular, village-like, shrines in India: unfinished structures sheltered by trees with no attached ritual specialist and with round stones to represent Kālī, the seven sisters, and guardian deities demanding animal sacrifices and alcohol, tobacco and meat offerings. Now Mauritian elites, copying Indian elites, try to install a Hindu orthodoxy based on the assumption that popular traditions were incorrect and thus need to be corrected. And, as is often the case, they claim this orthodoxy is nothing new but, on the contrary, the very reality of their ancestors.

Why such a discussion of Mauritius? Because Banāras occupies a place in this discussion of "orthodox" versus "popular" Hinduism, but at the other end: Banāras, though pervaded locally by popular Hinduism, as is every Indian town, represents in some ways the very orthodoxy that Hindu elites all over India and the diaspora are trying to impose.

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2   For a discussion of the contemporary evolutions of Mauritian Hinduism, see Chazan-Gillig and Ramhota 2009, or Claveyrolas 2010b and 2012.

Hanumān and crucifix in a Mauritian popular shrine

*Banāras or the Hindu profusion of the sacred*

What Diana Eck calls "the locative strand of Hindu piety" (1981: 323) leads me to question the existence of a profusion of sacralized territories in India generally speaking, and specifically in Banāras. A sacralized territory would be a territory thought to carry a religious power and efficacy. In Hinduism, any of the following might be cited as a sacralized territory: the cosmos, the Indian national territory, sacred cities such as Banāras, each and every temple. I was particularly interested in the Hindu way of linking these many territories, which are all, to varying degrees, present in the city of Banāras, where I was doing research. Apart from my main object of study, the Sankaṭ Mocan Hanumān Mandir, I specifically focused on another space, the Bhārat Mātā Mandir, which is dedicated to Mother India (Claveyrolas 2008).

In this ambiguous place, poised between the status of a temple and of a museum, a visitor (or shall I say devotee?) told me: "Taking the vision [*darshan*] of Bhārat Mātā [indicating the marble map used as a divine image] is like going all around India. And travelling in India, this is like a pilgrimage because the land is sacred". Thus the temple/museum of the Banārsī Bhārat Mātā would offer a kind of pilgrimage experience of the totality of the Indian universe. We can identify the Hindu nationalist rhetoric with this rather odd temple. On the one hand, the national territory, even more than a sacralized territory, is assimilated to the divine body itself. Ramaswamy cites Aurobindo telling Tagore this is "not a map but the portrait of Bhārat Mātā; its cities and mountains, rivers and jungles form her physical body" (quoted in Ramas-

wamy 2006: 176). On the other hand, the nationalist ideology aims at encouraging the pilgrim-citizen to incorporate this idea of nation by means of the devotion to Bhārat Mātā, and by means of the pilgrimage understood as an enforcement of the territory as national body. We are already close to the manipulation of pilgrimages as political tools by Hindu nationalists claiming a Hindu national territory, which Gandhi, among others, had also done in his day.[3] From a pilgrimage circumambulating the cosmos symbolized by the Indian territory, we pass to a circumambulation around India, which is considered a total and exclusively Hindu territory. This is quite close to the definition of communalism proposed by Louis Dumont: "something like nationalism, but where nation would be replaced by religious community" (1966: 377). Ostensibly travelling in a national territory, "communalist pilgrims" claim a Hindu territory, just as Dumont points out when mentioning that "the communalist individual gives his community the allegiance he owes to his nation" (ibid).

We certainly know the importance of "travelling" on a Hindu pilgrimage, whether we consider the experience of wandering between sacred places on a spiritual voyage, or sacred sightseeing of modern pilgrims as tourists. The Hindu pilgrimage basically means walking around the Indian territory. The multi-secular pilgrim tradition has only been strengthened by the development of roads, train and plane networks, and other infrastructure. (Tīrtha)yātrā means both "pilgrimage" and "journey", and air travellers, like pilgrims, are called yātrī. Numerous specialized agencies are used by today's Indian rural and urban inhabitants to charter whole buses in order to travel up and down the Indian territory. Ann Gold (1988), who participated in such a journey, gave a wonderful description of it as "sacred sight-seeing", thus associating the trip (*going there*) with the sometimes very fugitive experience of the arrival point (*having been there*). To go on a pilgrimage (moving) is already to earn merit; performing ritual actions at the site relies on a mechanical efficacy that only punctuates the central experience of circulation. That is probably why those coming to Banāras from a long distance only stop there for a few hours, with traffic jams and shopping taking as much time as ritual activities per se.

The yātrā acts as a link in a complex network of sacred places, be it sacralized landscape (mountains or rivers), or temples and cities. Bhardwaj notes that "the Grand Pilgrimage exposed in the Mahābhārata encompasses the whole Indian subcontinent. Not only a yātrā, it is a parikramā [circumambulation] of the Hindu cosmos" (Bhardwaj 1999). This means that a pilgrimage is not meant to be only a visit of this or that temple or city, but, most importantly, it is a journey, ideally a circular one (Claveyrolas 2010a).

At any rate, how can circulation between different territories be justified when they all claim to represent the totality of the universe? The Hindu world is fond of the proliferation of divine representations, promoting a complex logic of substitutes. We know the legend of Gaṇeśa and Kārttikeya, vying with each other to see who could more quickly circle the universe. Ganesha decided to walk around their divine

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3  See for instance the study of patriotic pilgrimages (*deśbhāv kī yātrī*) by Brosius (2009).

parents, Śiva and Pārvatī, symbolizing the totality of the universe, and was declared winner. This logic of substitution is, indeed, performative. Other recent forms of pilgrimage tell us the same story, such as the *cār dhām* pilgrimage, which symbolically encompasses the totality of the Hindu territory in that it passes by the four cardinal cities of Hindu India (Badrinath in the North, Puri in the East, Rameshvaram in the south and Dvaraka in the West).

Coming back to Banāras, every temple is itself a substitute for the universe. This explains why it is circumambulated. The *pañcakrośī* temple is one of the best examples of this logic of substitution. A duplicate of the Kāśī territory, it is meant to grant the same merits (*punya*) to the devotee going round the temple and its 108 niches as to the pilgrim experiencing the *pañcakrośī* pilgrimage and its 108 shrines (Gutschow 1999). The omnipresence of the divine in Banāras (Michaels 2006: 131 f.) is stated in texts as well as in local discourses. Even urban structures, apart from temples and *kunḍ*s (Maṇikarṇikā or Lolārka Kuṇḍa, for example), are often presented as direct creations of a deity's *śakti*. Many anecdotes testify to this omnipresence of the sacred. For example, individuals, and even animals, are supposed to have obtained *mokṣa* inadvertently, just because they happened to be in the Banārsī territory. Legends also have it that, in Banāras, the cohabitation of men and gods is so perfect that every action is devotion; sleep is meditation, and conversation is mantra (Eck 1981: 338).

It seems to me that this is quite an exemplary case of the absence of profane space in India (Sax 1990), and of the consequent impossibility of even thinking about the profane. Indeed, the proliferation of substitutes for sacred territories parallels this non-separation of sacred space from any other type of space. Anywhere in the Kāśī territory, but also anywhere in the Indian territory, you are always in the same world, a world shared by gods and men. But how is it possible to enjoy sacredness if non-sacredness is unknown? As Eliade put it: "No world can be borne out of the chaos of homogeneity" (1959: 22). Once the relevance of the profane category is rejected for all of Hindu India, once the whole territory is understood as sacred, what about the homogeneity of this sacredness? Is the Hindu territory organized according to relative degrees of sacredness? Even if some Banārsīs insist that there is no real need for temples to communicate with the divine, I would like to know what kind of experience, available to the pilgrim crossing the threshold of a Banārsī shrine, will be sufficiently convincing, when he knows that what is outside the shrine, the very territory of Kāśī, already stands for the ideal sacred space?

In the Hindu temples themselves, the repetition, accumulation and superposition of devotional practices, not necessarily synchronized, is not uncommon. The performance of an *āratī* (offering of light) can go undisturbed while mantras are recited, *bhajans* are sung, or bells rung at the same time. I argued that this polyphony of devotional sounds reflects the Hindu logics of endlessly soliciting the divine, and increasing the potential efficacy of devotion. This probably fits with Annette Wilke's discussion (in this volume) of how sounds structure the world. In any case, it seems possible to parallel this idea with the escalation of sacredness in Banāras. Marie-Louise Reiniche, in her discussion of the Tamil city of Kumbakonam, pointed to "the

anarchy and multiplicity of temples [...] that can go as far as the overlap of one on the other, and the entanglement of their respective processional routes" (1985: 103). The number of pilgrims or devotees is one of the best indicators of the efficacy of a sacred site. In quite the same way, pilgrims and Banārsī residents praise the multiplicity of shrines concentrated in a unique place. The redundant effect resulting from so much sacredness is not chaos, but the very sought-after evidence of the omnipresent sacred.[4] For all these reasons, Banāras is often considered a paragon of Hindu sacredness. But what is Hindu "sacredness"? Is there at all such a thing as Hindu "sacredness"? I was repeatedly taught about the irrelevance of the sacred/profane dichotomy in Hinduism...[5]

All along their way around Banāras, pilgrims are experiencing and constructing the paradigmatic sacred territory of Kāśī (Singh 2002). Walking clockwise along the *pañcakrośī* route, the pilgrim finds, on his right, the pure space where *mokṣa* can be gained. But what about the left side? Can it be considered an "impure" space? The pilgrim will indeed defecate there, and he will definitely be caught in the cycle of rebirths if he dies there. This rapid sketch is a way to state that the *pañcakrośī* route delimits a rupture between an exterior and an interior. Crossing this boundary, even unwillingly (taking the wrong road, for instance) represents a sin that might destroy all merits associated with the pilgrimage (Gengnagel 2006: 151).

Generally speaking, legends – but also contemporary discourses – abound with anecdotes stating the virtues and dangers of the frontier that is more or less delimited by the pilgrimage route. Śiva himself was not forgiven for his brahmanicide (after having chopped off one of Brahmā's heads) until he crossed the *pañcakrośī* route; only then was he able to shed the divine head that had been stuck to his hand for centuries. And many Banārsī residents fear to cross the Kāśī border, because accidental death there would deprive them of *mokṣa*.

To the pilgrim, circumambulation (*parikramā*) of Kāśī defines the sacred city as a separate place, a place apart with specific conditions for acquiring access and protection. The two river-borders, the Asī ("the sword") and the Varaṇā ("the warning one"), explicitly play this role of protector.[6] This is quite close to the separation of sacred and profane spaces as Durkheim defined them: "Sacred things are those protected and isolated by proscriptions; profane things are those to which these proscriptions apply and which much be kept distant from the first" (1960: 56). The formula is quite clear and seems to apply even in the Indian case. However, the Hindu

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4  The fact that Hindus duplicate this logic in Mauritius, punctuating each and every corner of the national territory with a shrine or monumental temple, proves highly controversial in the Mauritian multi-ethnic context.

5  For a critical discussion of the absence of the "profane" in India, and the resulting difficulties in using the "sacred" outside of the classical dichotomy, see Herrenschmidt 1989: 196–205.

6  Other examples abound, for example the Hanuman temple in New Delhi where the monkey-god's martial representation is linked with his status as *kṣetrapāl*, guardian of the territory. But, here, the territory is none other than that of the Indian capital city to be protected against Pakistani attacks! (Lutgendorf 1994).

thinking prefers the articulation of hierarchized totalities to any strict duality. Gods are definitely not absent from the left side of *pañcakrośī* route, and indeed, one will find many shrines there. Thus it seems better to focus on the relative superiority of the Banārsī territory than to oppose it to any profane space.

*Banāras and the myth of uniqueness*
We know that Hindu sacred places, whether they are temples or towns, are called *tīrtha*, crossing places between the worlds of gods and men. Banāras, reputed as one of the most famous Hindu sacred cities, is quite logically known as *mahātīrtha*, the great *tīrtha*. In fact, Banāras is often presented as the center of the universe, its very navel. Further still, Banāras/Kāśī claims to include all other pilgrimage sites and, in fact, the whole Hindu territory and universe. That's why, for instance, the main pilgrimage route around Banāras is marked by temples standing in all cardinal directions, and others symbolizing each Hindu sacred city. Being both center and totality of the universe, Banāras claims to be the ideal microcosm of the Hindu territory. No wonder such pretentions are found in local representations of Banāras carried by devotees, pilgrims or residents. No wonder either that the idea is omnipresent in normative texts describing the Kāśī territory and ordering local pilgrimages (*Kāśīkhaṇḍa*[7] and *Kāśīrahasya*[8]).

However, one must acknowledge that scholars have sometimes failed to keep their critical distance with such local representations (Eck 1983 and 1985; Kane 1941; Vidyarthi et al. 1979). The result is that even academic texts repeatedly display and transmit what became a kind of obvious fact when talking about Banāras, which is often compared with ancient Jerusalem or Athens, and is considered the obvious and eternal representative of Hinduism. Banāras would thus be the Hindu sacred city, the Hindu pilgrimage site, the city of Śiva, the city where rites for the dead and ancestors should be performed. It is viewed as unique and un-rivaled. The city is held to be, as Eck once stated, "the prototypical place for illuminating the whole Hindu vision of the world" (Eck 1985: 41). In other words, one can wonder what the exact role of scholars is in the very construction of this ideal image of Banāras.

Some have criticized this idealized vision. Bakker (1996: 32), for instance, insists on the historicity of the town, which helps avoid the mythological accents of a-historical visions. The case of Diana Eck is also illuminating. In 1998 she wrote a fascinating article criticizing her initial position (in the early 1980s) on this precise aspect. She came to the conclusion that Banāras is, in the end "not the center but *one among the many centers* of a polycentric landscape, linked by pilgrimage routes" (1998: 166, my emphasis).

Indeed, Banāras plays a prominent role in the Hindu pilgrimage network, and it is even possible to grant a certain primacy to the city. But even then, and despite its current international reputation, Banāras is not the capital city of Uttar Pradesh, nei-

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7   One of the sections of the *Skandapurāṇa* (perhaps compiled around the 13th century).
8   The third section of the *Brahmavaivartapurāṇa* (16th century).

ther is it the main city of that state. The British were not that interested in Banāras. As a result, the city has not followed the same path as Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai or Delhi, and the colonial models have not pervaded its urban organization, which is more centered on the ghāṭs than on the British-styled cantonment model. Nor did the British vest Banāras with significant political or administrative power.

This more nuanced vision of Banāras is not entirely contradicted by the Indian perspective. The city's popularity as a pilgrimage destination is a relatively recent development. Bhardwaj notes in his study of Hindu pilgrimage sites that other towns, such as Pushkar or Gaya, were long preferred to Banāras (1973:41, 65; see also Freitag 2006: 242). Travis Smith (in this volume) also explains very well how sacred texts do not support Banāras's pretensions to be a stronghold of Sanskrit culture. Banāras seems to have been inhabited for thousands of years, according to archeologists (9th century BC), and it indeed stands at the crossroads of ancient commercial and cultural routes. But, while the Chinese monk Xuan Zang mentions Kāśī in the 7th c. AD and describes its one hundred temples, Banāras probably waited until the 17th century to develop an urban center around pilgrimage and religious trade. And we know that, until the 19th century at least, pilgrimage in Banāras was only performed by a minority of individuals, coming mainly from nearby districts, because of the concrete difficulties associated with travel, and because other sacred cities, and other, closer, pilgrimages were available, which offered similar efficacy and religious virtues. Srinivas (1976: 321), for example, explains that in Karnataka, even in the first half of the 20th century, a pilgrim coming back from Kāśī would be a surprise.

I would insist that this absence of any clear primacy for Banāras is not only a matter of historical evolution. In fact, every Hindu sacred city ideally represents both a shrine and the cosmos.[9] Every Hindu sacred city embodies the whole Hindu universe. Furthermore, even if Banāras encompasses all other Hindu sacred sites in its sacred territory, it is itself duplicated in other places: Kancipuram, for instance, might also be called a navel of the Hindu world. Not only does Kancipuram claim to be the "Southern Banāras", it also claims to be superior (Reiniche 1990: 197). Among many other instances, Anne Feldhaus (2003: 178) quotes another pilgrimage site, called Rāmtīrtha, in Maharasthra, that Śiva is said to prefer to Kāśī.

In fact, Banāras claims to be a specific *tīrtha*. It is Mahāśmaśāna (the great cremation ground) which brings an end to the cycle of rebirths (*saṃsāra*) for those dying within it and performing the proper cremation rites. Once more, this religious function is not exclusively a characteristic of Banāras: all seven Hindu sacred cities (*saptapuri*) are said to be granting liberation (*mokṣadāyak*) and one also goes to Gaya to perform the rites to ancestors, for instance (Eck 1985: 50). This is in fact a logic of successive imbricated models: each of the other six sacred cities grants whomever dies in its territory the favor to be re-born in Banāras which, eventually, grants final liberation. My point is that, in the logic of the Hindu pilgrimage network, one must remember, more

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9  Among many others, see Burghart 1985, Gaborieau 1992, and Porcher 1985 for examples in
   Nepal and Kanci.

than the uniqueness of Banāras, the hierarchized articulation of many individualized microcosms, going hand in hand with specificities. It is worth noting that this individualization process of sacred sites is sometimes radical. The very mythology of Banāras sometimes contradicts the idea of a model Hindu city and claims, on the contrary, the identity of an anti-model, for example that Banāras is governed by principles contrary to the Hindu dharma. I would point to the religious organization of the city's geography, with a cremation ground right in its center. Elsewhere a cremation ground generally signifies extreme pollution and is relegated to the city margins. Is this ultimate evidence of the very efficacy of Banāras to grant *mokṣa*?[10]

Another example: Banāras challenges ordinary *dharma* rules. Such rules are supposed to precede and subsume human rules, but also divine rules. But in Banāras, *dharma* is abolished and even reversed. *Varnāśramadharma* is theoretically supposed not to be valid anymore; liberation is accessible to anyone dying in Kāśī, whatever their social status. Quite in the same way, it is customary to say that in Banāras "the tiger and the antelope are living in harmony". Such an image should not serve as a model in the Hindu world, which is founded on a hierarchical order in which everybody should live according to their predetermined status. Marie-Louise Reiniche, in an article subtitled "The Hindu invention of otherness and sameness" (1988, see also Reiniche 1990: 206), demonstrates how such inversions characterize the process of inscribing the universal deity (Śiva, for instance) in a precise locality (the many names and forms Śiva will take in each and every localized shrine). Finally, local representations describe Banāras as settled on top of Śiva's trident, which is neither on earth nor in heaven, and Banārsī residents are envied not only by men but also by gods. Similarly, Banāras is traditionally thought to be free of the degenerate Kali-yuga contingencies. Such a definition of Banāras as a time and space fundamentally apart, neither model of the human world nor duplicate of the divine world, invites us to moderate the representation of the city as a Hindu ideal microcosm.

As a first conclusion, I would like to make my point clear. Banāras has indeed been, at least for a few centuries, one of the most prominent Hindu sacred cities among Hindu pilgrims. There is also this well-known tendency for every sacred place to represent itself as the model and center for the national religious universe. In such a context, I wish to focus on the Banārsī territory as one among other nodes in the Hindu sacred network, with the following specification: As is the case for other sacred places, Banāras articulates both the claim to be universal and a strong pretension to be specific.

*Banāras, orthodoxy, and the definition of Hinduism*
Partly because of its sacredness, Banāras is a cosmopolitan city. In Banāras, you can find people from various parts of India, from various caste backgrounds, speaking various languages, but also practicing various religions. As a result, there is also a

10 Jörg Gengnagel casts some doubt on the historicity of this centrality of Maṇikarṇikā (personal communication, June 2011).

sociological truth in the representation of Banāras as a microcosm. However, Banāras is also said to host a very un-representatively high proportion of Brahmans. And it stands in many ways as a representative, not of India, nor of Indian Hinduism, but of orthodox Hinduism. This is not the popular image that Banāras projects of itself, whether in the realm of religion or in music, to take two examples. First of all, one must not forget or underestimate the conjunction of many religions in Banāras. The Buddhist tradition in Sarnath is well known. But the Muslim community (a very large minority) also has (and has long had) a decisive impact on the Banārsī economy and culture. Secondly, the Hindu aspect of the city is biased toward learned, textual, and Brahmanic practices. Popular culture, in the form of shrines and deities, for example, is omnipresent in Banāras, but the popular side is all the more forgotten in favor of the mythological perspective of Banāras as a unique and eternal Hindu sacred city.
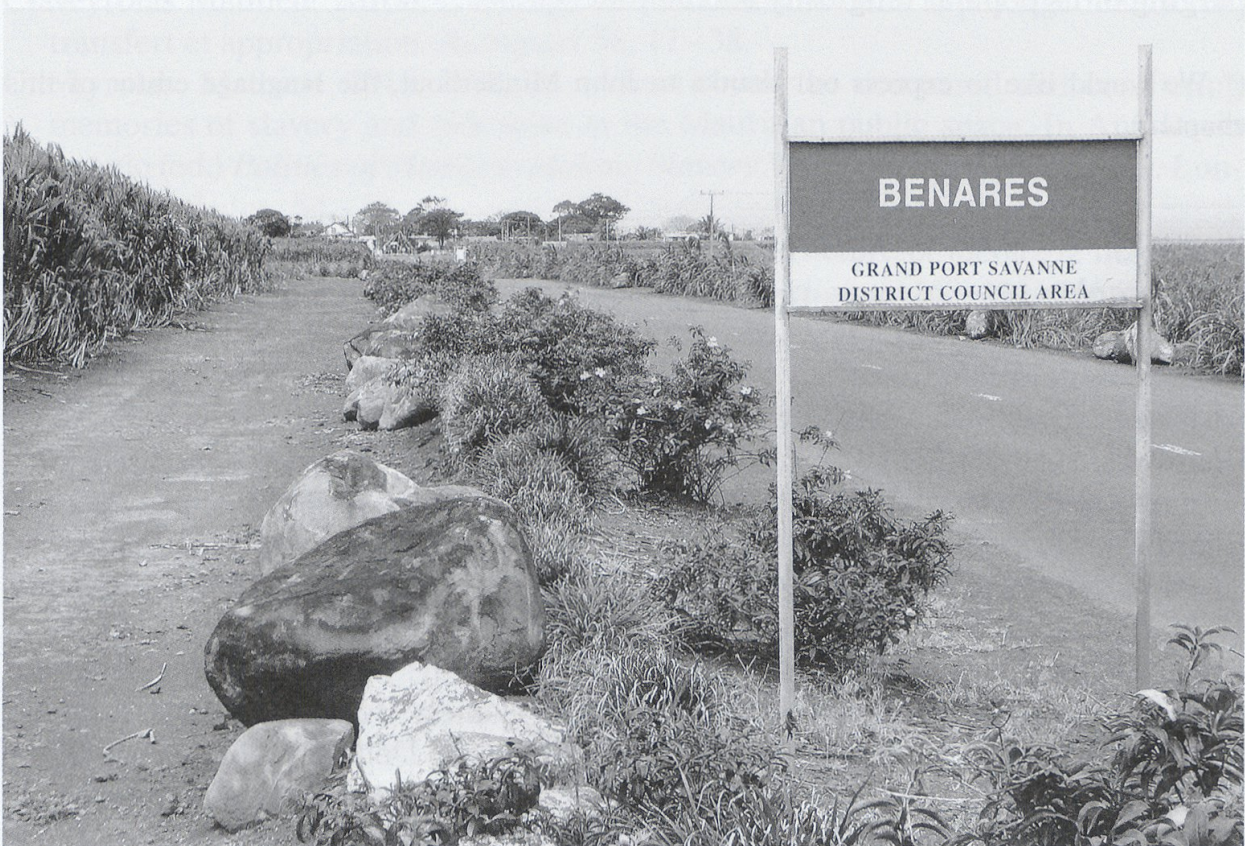


Entry sign of a Mauritian village named after Banāras

Let me return to Mauritius. Mauritians used to worship a stone-like deified ghost named Bram Bābā, who is not unknown in Banāras and the Bhojpuri surrounding area (Coccari 1989). But, in more recent and orthodox temples in Mauritius, Bram Bābā has been replaced by images of Brahmā, with the attendant iconography.[11] Most devotees in Mauritius are convinced that Bram Bābā was only a misspelling of Brahmā by igno-

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11 The same process can also be seen in Bihari shrines in India (personal communication, Rana P. B. Singh, October 2011).

rant and illiterate laborers deprived of the wise teaching of Brahmins. If I were to tell my local informants that what I see in Mauritius is indeed Hinduism as practiced by Bhojpuri village people in the 19th or early 20th centuries, and even in contemporary Banārsī popular shrines, the comment would not be well received. Nor would they believe me if I dared to say that the fact that their ancestors came from Banāras does not mean they were the bearers of a learned culture and religiosity.[12] They want to hear about anthropomorphic images sheltered in finished structures, with vegetarian rituals conducted by Brahman priests reciting Sanskrit mantras. This is what Mauritian Hinduism is looking for, this is the image of Banāras they have, because this is the image most Hindus (Banārsī or Mauritian) are most prone to consider attractive.[13]

In the meantime, during all this process of constructing such an incomplete image of Banāras, the imagined Banāras has lost its complexity, mainly through the purging of its popular religiosity and culture.

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12 Such statement by no means intends to say that there is any reason not to be proud of one's ancestors' popular culture. I simply note that, in the Mauritian contemporary context, the invention by descendants of indentured laborers of a dreamt learned culture carried by their ancestors, stands in the end as a major obstacle to social cohesion of the polity and is exploited as a major strategic tool in order to exaggerate the differences between the two Mauritian communities: descendants of Indian indentured laborers and descendants of African or Malagasy slaves.

13 I would add that I suspect my status as an outsider and a scholar may have exaggerated this tendency to promote and put forward such a distorted image of Banāras.

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