

Banāras: Encountering the experiences and expositions of the spirit of place

Rana P. B. Singh

1. Towards envisioning

The sacred bond between person and place is a reciprocal process illustrated in the spatial realm of manifestation (representation in miniature form), visualisation (architecture and the symbolic meanings imposed upon it) and the world of festivities (regulating and reawakening the spirit through rituals). The human relation with nature is realized primarily while narrating the place, understanding the place and becoming part of the 'spirit of place' (*genius loci*). The essence of 'place' consists of components like location, integration of nature and habitat, system of land ethic, and the dynamic nature of its changing value in tandem with the relevant belief systems and the associated interlocking networks. Place is the central nexus where we experience the harmonic relationship between man and nature. Thus the process of understanding a place is a journey in search of the interrelationship between the physical milieu and its metaphysical values.

All my life I have felt close to place. Place speaks. Place talks. Place communicates. Place is a growing organism, a form of being. Place is an interrelated community, playing between Man and Cosmos. Presence of place was real to me long before I knew anything of the forces by which this works. I remember that since my childhood I have sensed 'something' in and around a place. These visible and invisible messages have been a source of real meaning to my life. I have moved from one place to another, yet carried with me the memories and mythic sentiments attached to each place – from nativity (birthplace) to settlement (Vārānasi). I don't know how and why these are always with me. Somehow later in life I learned that place attachment is a human quest for understanding and also a feeling – the immanence and transcendence of a force linking Man and Cosmos.

Of course, we are surrounded by sense objects, but even more by images that are invisible to everybody else, but visible in the landscape scenario. The symbolic expression of place, the set of symbols that gives the people of a culture orientation in space and time, is pervasive in Hindu culture. We find in Hindu tradition that places such as special sites or natural scenarios – rivers, mountains, grounds, sacred buildings, and sacred cities – replicate the forms and processes of the cosmos, thus creating the archetypal landscapes, functioning and regulated through 'faithscapes' – a word I coined but which later was elaborated by Paul Devereux in his book *Re-Visioning the Earth* (1996). In fact, a passion for placement is basic to Hindu

thought on which I was nourished in my childhood. Sacred place as ‘storied place’ is eulogized in Hindu mythology and its oral epics with divine connotation – where myth and *terra firma* intersect. Banāras is such a distinctive place in India, a city known as the pride of India’s heritage and its cultural capital.

The uniqueness and distinctiveness of a sacred place are its special aspects where the *genius loci* and aesthetics of human environment are deeply rooted and maintained by means of *sacred ways* – as reflected in the variety and layering of pilgrimages and associated performances and rituals practiced in Banāras. The quality of the sacred place depends upon the human context that has been shaped by it, with respect to memories, experiences, miracles, and expectations. The city of Banāras is unique in the architectural, artistic, and religious expressions of traditional Indian culture, and is a living example of this cultural whole even today. The cultural heritage of the city is ‘special’ and is an exceptional testimony to living traditions, to be seen and to be believed, in religious faith, rituals, and myriad festivals, traditional forms of worship and belief that are still practiced, and asceticism, spiritual exercises, education, music, dance, handicrafts, and art forms that continue to be transmitted through generations.

A paraphrase of Samuel Johnson’s (1709–84) remarks on London is apt for the city of Banāras: ‘By seeing Banāras, one can see as much of life as the whole of India can show;’ I too have experienced this and spoken of it in my writings. In fact, Banāras is an archetype of all India, but it is full of complexity and contrasts making it too difficult to comprehend for those who stand outside the Hindu tradition. Those who love this city with their hearts and minds will share with me the metaphoric expressions of capturing space, time, and tradition. The city of Banāras has a long history as a center for pilgrimage, for mystics, and for scholastic traditions, while the vast arena of *purāṇic* literature has eulogized and glorified its prime importance.

2. Transformation and march

Born into a traditional farming family (on 15 December 1950) and raised in a small monastery under the guidance of an enlightened saint, Svāmī Saryudās (1855–1972), I was fortunate to learn the interconnectedness of text and context, and also of human beings and the divine Nature in my childhood. After some time had passed, in the late 1970s my quest led me to read the sacred landscape as a text so that I might understand and experience the inherent *genius loci* of Banāras. Ultimately this led me to try to interpret and reveal the meanings, messages, and milieus that were preserved there. This resulted in a constant march – a never-ending journey, which inspired and satisfied the inner quest (*svacetnā*) to walk and constantly encouraged thinking over the arrival, reach, and destination. On this road while walking, people from different parts of the world joined and made our group a companion of seekers, a mosaic of cultures, thoughts and visions through reciprocity of sharing and making pilgrimages together. Of course, I learned the first lesson about the life of the city as an organism when I was a postgraduate student (1969–71) under the guidance of my first teacher Professor R. L. Singh (1917–2001), the author of a pioneering

book, *Banāras: An Urban Geography* (1955); however, I subsequently turned to follow a different path for about eight years until, unexpectedly, on 6 April 1977, I met an American sociologist, Bradley Hertel, who inspired me to serve the cause of my own culture as an insider through discussions of my own experiences, comparing these with the reflections of outsiders from the West. That is how my journey for the deeper quest started and I became a companion in the co-pilgrimage, accompanied on this journey by others from different parts of the world.

With the inspiration, kind support, and invitation of the historian of Indian architecture Jan Pieper (Aachen, Germany), I fortunately attended an International Conference at the Max Müller Foundation Bhawan at Mumbai (Bombay), on 'Ritual Space in India: Studies in Architectural Anthropology,' on 22–25 February 1979. Through the presentation of a paper that dealt with the spatial segmentation of socio-cultural groups in Banāras, a new avenue of companionship and insightful way of learning 'sacredscapes' opened in my life. Through his kindness and generosity Pieper introduced me to Niels Gutschow, a German architect-historian par excellence, who over time became my mentor, inspiration, academic partner, friend, and eternal co-pilgrim in search of the *genius loci* of sacredscapes. Thus my journey on the sacred path and search for archetypal symbolism began again, the first product of which was the paper 'The Socio-Cultural Space of Banāras' (1980). Since then, with the encouragement of and collaboration with Niels Gutschow I realised that my journey had been transformed to study, learn, experience, guide and write about sacred space, sacred time, pilgrimages, cultural astronomy, and so on.

My first paper on Banāras was published in the proceedings-based volume in the Art and Archaeology Research Paper Series (London) in 1980 (Singh 1980), with the support of George Michell whom I first met together with Niels Gutschow at the Mumbai Conference in 1979; later we worked as co-editors of the book on *Banāras: The City Revealed* (2005). My second paper on Vārāṇasī dealing with geographical space and cognitive maps was published in the Frankfurt Social Geography Series in 1982. Afterwards I constantly and regularly followed the co-pilgrimage on the Banāras path, and the experiences, explicit exposition and co-sharing have been narrated in several publications (see the selected list at the end of the chapter). Through Niels I learned that '[b]y walking barefoot one touches the earth, and together with a special reverence for the Earth, the pilgrims experientially receive the essence of being alive in this world that comes from the earth and ultimately returns back to it' (Singh 1998: 57).

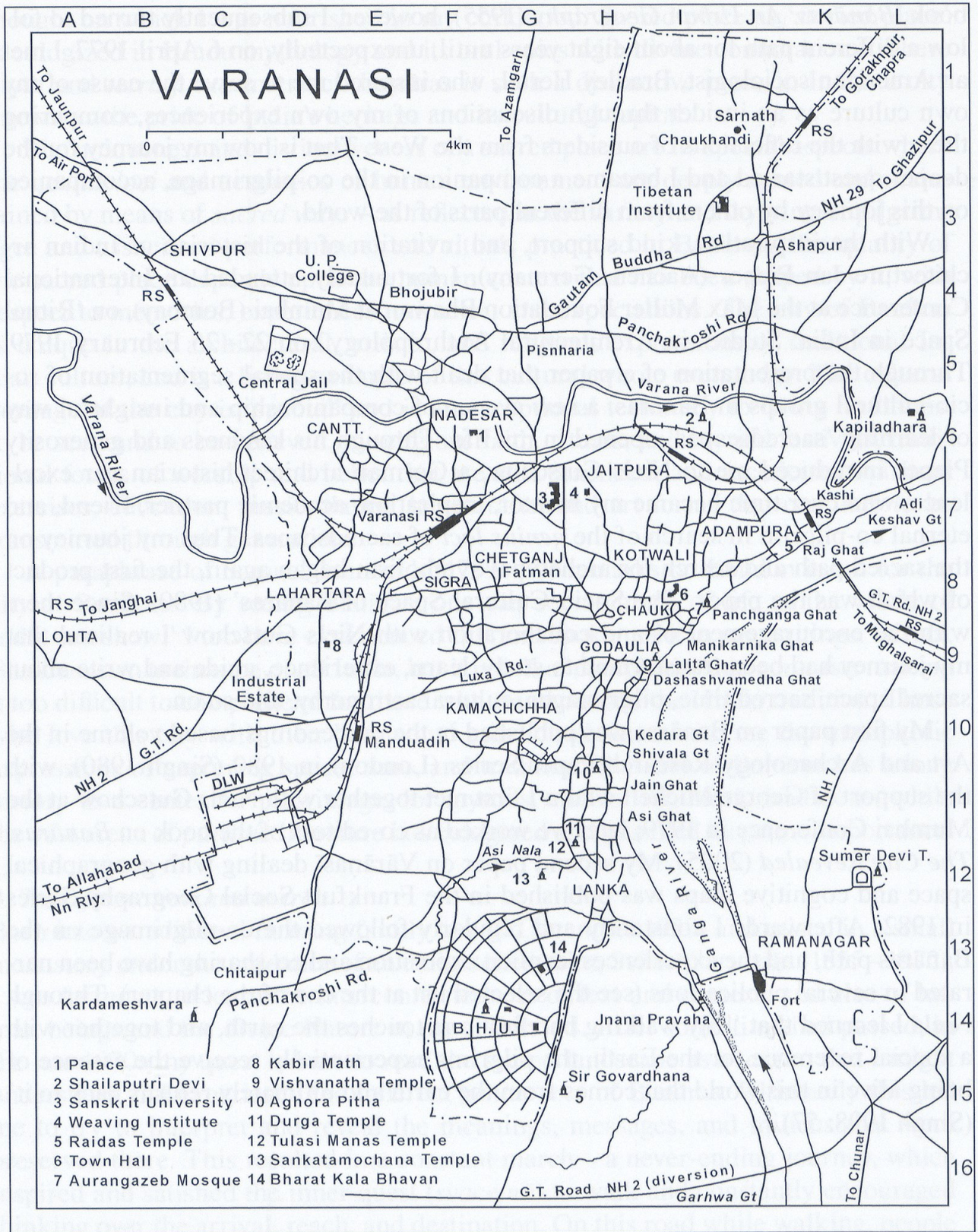


Fig. 1. Banāras: General Map

Through living and experiencing the city, I noted that in Banāras City alone there are over 3,600 Hindu shrines and temples, about 1,388 Muslim shrines and mosques, 42 Sikh temples (*Gurudvārās*), 12 churches, 3 Jain temples, and 9 Buddhist temples, as well as several other sacred sites and places and the scattered remains of images of divinities (Figure 1). Banāras is a cultural mosaic inhabited by 1.45 million people (2011 census), around one-third of which are Muslim. Among the cities of India Banāras is also the most referred to and described in mythologies (see Singh 2009a, 2009b). Devout Hindus say that the three bridgepillars (*tristhalīsetu*) linking the Earth to the Heavens are Prayāga (Allāhābād), Kāśī (Vārāṇasī) and Gayā. This can be revealed through the perception and narration of their distinct images. They express this as *Prayāga muṇḍe* (by tonsure), *Kāśī dhuṇḍhe* (by searching the labyrinth of lanes), and *Gayā piṇḍe* (by offering riceballs to ancestors). Through these steps one can achieve liberation. It is notable here that Kāśī preserved all the above three aspects permanently activated by the devout Hindus and pilgrims paying visits en masse (Singh and Rana 2002/2006: 19). The present paper is the story and résumé of my scholarly *tour de vivre* (pilgrimage) over the last 34 years, 1979–2013.

3. Symbolized space and cosmic frame

Soon after arriving in Banaras in July 1968, I tried to understand Banāras – where ‘always ready’ (*banā*) is the ‘juice of life’ (*ras*)! This ‘life-juice’ flows plentifully here in different colors, varying tones, multiple textures and layers, diverse situations, contrasting conditions, etc. The *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* (KKh, 35.10), the fourth canto of the *Skanda Purāṇa* dated around the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, says ‘The Gaṅgā River, Lord Śiva, and the divine city of Kāśī make the Trinity of grace and perfect bliss.’ The Trinity is symbolized by the three hillocks as the three forks of Śiva’s trident on which the city is built, that is Omkāreśvara in the north, Viśveśvara in the center, and Kedāreśvara in the south. As a student of geography I tried to envision the three hillocks, and after several attempts I easily found the three symbolic hills that according to mythology are the three forks of Śiva’s trident. During the later 1970s my first intuition was that the 84 ghāṭs along the arcshaped Gaṅgā symbolize the integration of the 12 signs of the zodiac (division of time) and 7 sheaths of the body or 7 layers of the atmosphere (division of space), thus $12 \times 7 = 84$. Later, having shared my experiences with others, this sacred number and its connotations have been widely accepted. Among these ghāṭs, the five of special merit are Asī, Daśāśvamedha, Maṇikarṇikā, Pañcagaṅgā and Ādi Keśava. Along these ghāṭs exist 96 Jalatīrthas, symbolizing the integrity of the time cycle (12 zodiacs, or months) and division of space (8 directions), thus $12 \times 8 = 96$. Enjoying boating and sacred walks and making stops at these sites reveal the numerical symbolism and spirit of place that are inherent to the site. Taking a holy dip at these five ghāṭs provides the merit of bathing at all the ghāṭs (see Figure 2). These five ghāṭs also symbolise the microcosmic body of Viṣṇu, respectively as head, chest, navel, thighs, and feet. Thus the area along the ghāṭs is eulogized as Viṣṇu’s body.

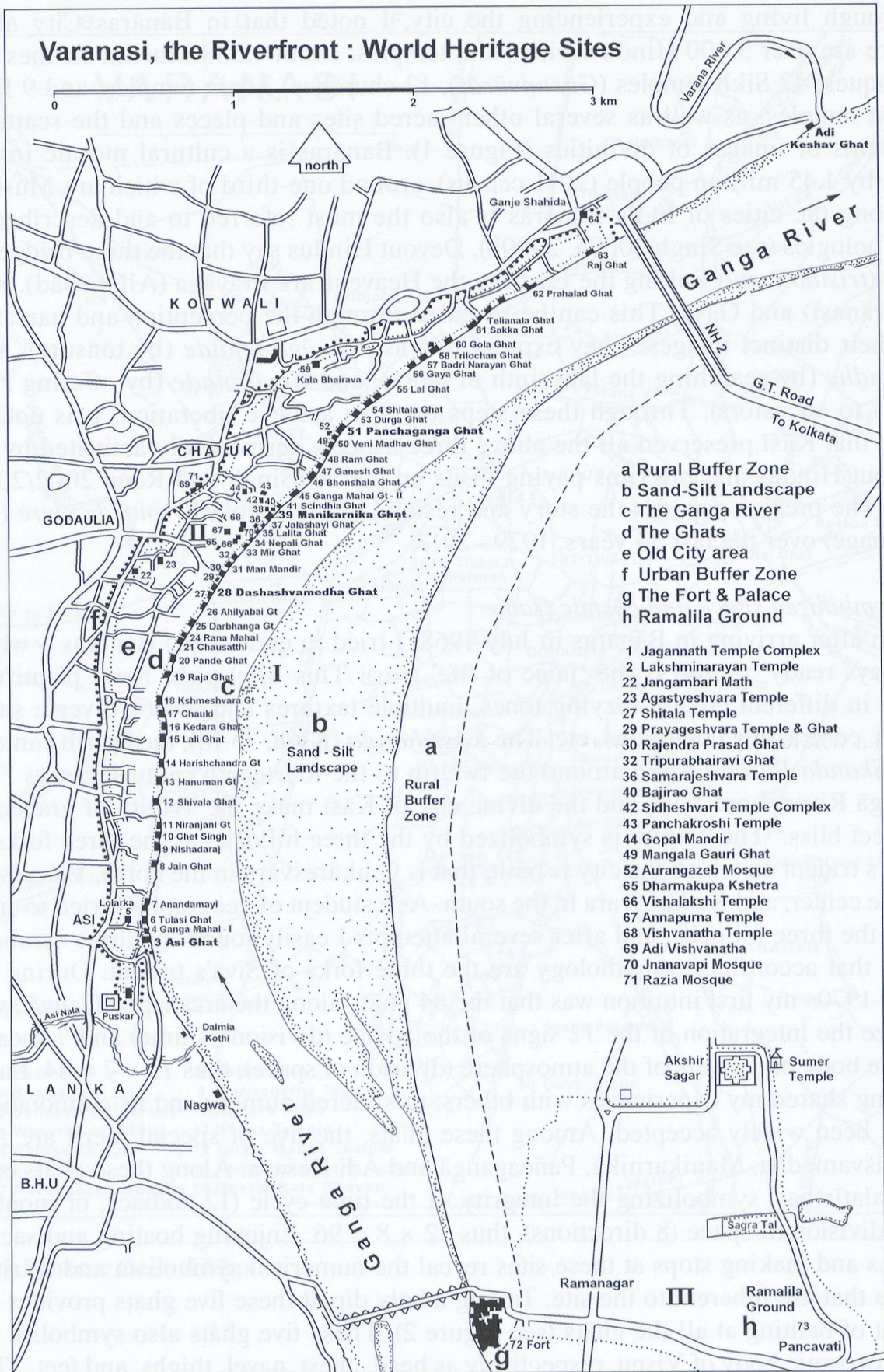


Fig. 2. Banāras: The Riverfront Ghāts at the bank of the Gaṅgā River

Attachment to a place is a prerequisite for developing a sense of the spirit of place. This sense of attachment provides emotional and spiritual sustainability to both individuals and the community. Attachment is an existential and phenomenological experience. The key to the future is in the commitment of human habitants living there who maintain this sense of attachment. Unfortunately, the Gaṅgā is on the way to losing its identity as a river, whose waters once purified the impure. The soul of the Gaṅgā lies in its history; the mind in learning and the body in the Gaṅgā. If Gaṅgā were to go, Vārāṇasī would lose its very being. It is the body that houses the mind as well as the soul.

I saw the lights along the bank of the Gaṅgā; I suddenly realized that was my home, where the earth spirit meets the divine – the revelation of life. I am in love with the holy Gaṅgā, the unique face of the town and its inhabitants, the unutterable solitude of the water, and the sweet security of its banks. I would set up my tabernacle here. I am content to stand still at the age I have reached – me and my friends: to be no younger/no older, no richer/no poorer, no more handsome or ugly. I do not want to be detached by age or appearance. Any alteration, on this earth of mine, in vision or in my home, puzzles and discomposes me.

Like many old and sacred cities in the Oriental world, a metaphysical ideology based on cosmological principles has been a dominant force shaping the cultural landscape of Kāśī, which has posed a deeper quest for me. In the human process of revealing and rediscovering the dialectic nature of wholeness, man has searched the niches and places of interconnectedness where nature, cosmos, and human psyche form a whole and that whole is transformed into the holy. I remember the *Mānasāra*, a tenth-century CE text of Hindu architecture, that mentions the layout of the Hindu city based on the ‘cosmic cross,’ the cardinal points of which are the corners of the universe, thus the whole city is celestial – a cosmogram, a sacrosanct notion commonly referred to in the case of holy cities. Kāśī means ‘where the cosmic light concentrates in circle’ and is a well-known example of the sacred cosmogram; later, using GPS and other means in the late 1990s, I measured and found an extraordinary correspondence. During this period, I reached a milestone with my guide and companion John McKim Malville (b.1934–), an American astrophysicist whom I met on the 13th of January 1993, and through whom I learned the visualization of cultural astronomy and sacred geometry. The symbolic and ritual landscape of Kāśī is a paradigmatic example of self-organization in a pilgrimage system. Pilgrimage circuits of great complexity and variety surround its center and enclose a nest of natural and symbolic cycles, which provide stability for the system and articulate its meaning.

As a wanderer and pilgrim in the 1970s I realized that Kāśī contains many sacred routes and territories defined and followed by pilgrims in different contexts; however, five among them are given special consideration in terms of cosmogony, sacred geometry and intensity of visitation. From my own understanding of Sanskrit texts and teachings from *paṇḍits* of Banāras, I found the cosmic *maṇḍala* of Kāśī is delineated by the greater circuit, referred to as the Caurāsīkrośī – of course it is a mat-

ter of investigation when this route was used for pilgrimage! The other four routes form an irregular circular shape, while the covering and outer route is identical to a circle (Figure 3), well illustrated by topographic mapping, initially inspired of course by Niels Gutschow. As authenticated by the texts and experienced by those on pilgrimage, the four inner sacred journeys can be found to meet at Jñānavāpī, the *axis mundi*, from where all those on pilgrimage start by taking a vow (*saṅkalpa lenā*) and where they complete their pilgrimage with the ritual release from the vow (*saṅkalpa choḍānā*). Spatially, the temple of Madhyameśvara serves as the center for the covering circle, and is first referred to in the *Padma Purāṇa* (*Sṛṣṭikhanda*, 65.14–20), a seventh-century text. The pilgrimage to the outer circuit, Caurāsīkrośī, was no longer performed until recently; however, over the last few years it has been revived, partly of course through the initiative of Svāmī Śivānanda, a 95-year-old *sanyāsī* of the Daṇḍī sect. I also took part in this pilgrimage and prepared the first map showing all the sacred places and shrines. With the existence of the above two *axes mundi*, Jñānavāpī and Madhyameśvara, the whole system becomes a complex of interpolation and superimposition for an awakened pilgrim to experience. The core of the inner world is delineated by another pilgrimage route called Viśveśvara's Antargṛha Kṣetra. In between the two are three pilgrimage circuits, namely Pañcakrośī, Nagara Pradakṣiṇā, and Avimukta.

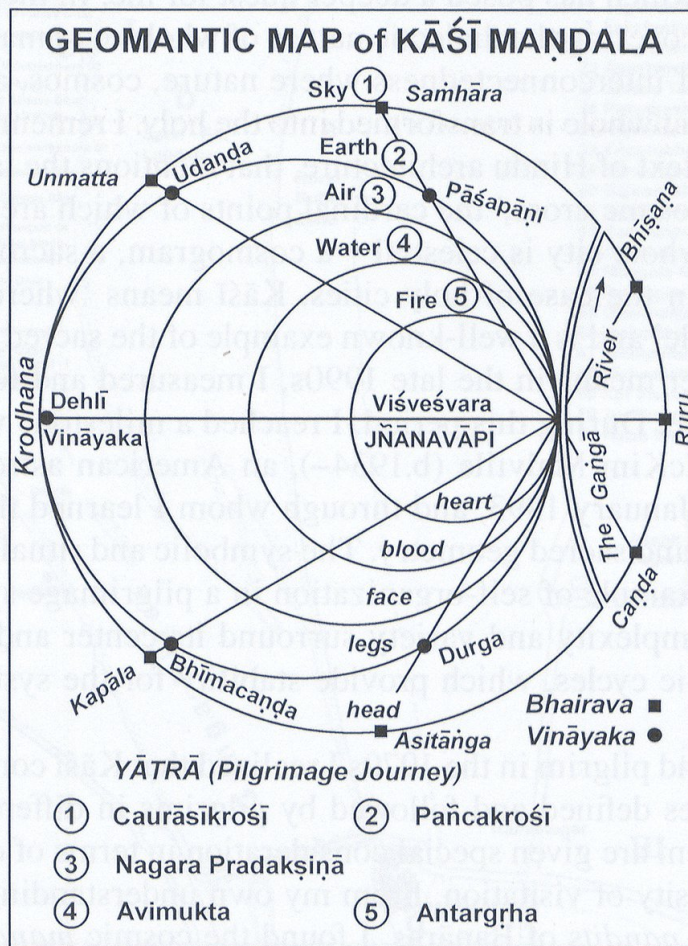


Fig. 3. The Kāśī Maṇḍala: Geomantic Map

These five sacred territories are mythologized as the archetypal manifestation of *macrocosmos*, the five gross elements (*mahābhūtas*), i.e. water (*jala*), land (*kṣiti*), air (*vāyu*), fire (*agni*), and sky (*ākāśa*), which together form life. The corresponding five sacred routes (*yātrāmārgas*) are representative of *mesocosmos*. The body symbolism (associated with the transcendental power and the sheath, *kośa*), or a temple possessing all the important divine images (e.g. Pañcakrośī Temple), is an example of *microcosmos* (Singh 2002, 2009b). I have performed these pilgrimages several times, and continue to do so still, in the quest of experiencing new and insightful experiences in search of the *genius loci*.

4. Śiva's universe

In the quest to know the total number of divine images and forms, it appears that there are around 3,600 images described historically and in the literature of Hindu deities in temples and shrines in the city of Vārāṇasī, as also suggested in several other treatises and mythological texts (Purāṇas). Being interested in the taxonomy of divinities, I obviously noted that according to the KKh in Vārāṇasī there appear innumerable images of Hindu divinities; notable among them are the following: Śiva's form 524, Vināyaka (Gaṇeśa, elephant-headed god, son of Śiva) 74, Śiva's associates 27, Rudra 11, Jyotira liṅgas (light-manifested) of Śiva 12, Svayaṁbhū liṅgas (self-manifested) of Śiva 12, Rṣi liṅgas (sage associated images) of Śiva 7, Devī (goddess) 96, Viṣṇu's form 48, Bhairava 17, Vasus 8, Sun god 14, Hindu planets (*grahas*) 9, sacred abodes (*saptapurīs*) 7, sacred areas (monthly base) 13, sacred land areas 2, river confluences (Asī and Varāṇā to the Gaṅgā) 2, the sacred water spots along the Gaṅgā 96, sacred water pools (*kuṇḍa*) 31, sacred wells (*kūpa*) 22. Of course some of them are lost and some have had their identity transformed, as I found during the pilgrimages and personal surveys; however, the majority of them still exist and are part of the contemporary pilgrimage, visitation, and ritual systems.

Kāśī (Vārāṇasī) is Śiva's city where He roams in an infinite number of forms. According to the KKh there are 524 forms of Śiva, of which 324 still exist and can be identified on the religious map of Kāśī; the rest are still unidentified. Śiva's predominance is well marked in most of the popular pilgrimage journeys (Singh 2009b). Among the 52 main *yātrās* the eight most commonly still in use are: Pañcakrośī Yātrā, Nagara Pradakṣiṇā, Avimukta Yātrā, Viśveśvara Antargṛha, Kedāreśvara Antargṛha, Omkāreśvara Antargṛha, Uttara Mānasa Yātrā, and Dakṣiṇa Mānasa Yātrā. However, the numbers of pilgrims varies according to the importance bestowed by the Purāṇic literature and treatises, and also to the changing attitudes of people towards religious practices. All these *tīrthayātrās* are subject to the sacredness of space and time, especially the auspicious times which possess relatively more capacity to provide merit.

The Pañcakrośī Yātrā, the intercalary month (*malamāsa*), falling every third year, is the most auspicious time and attracts around a million pilgrims from all parts of India (Singh 2002, 2009b). I myself have performed this pilgrimage five times for the full five days and over 300 times in a shorter form using a vehicle for a day.

5. Cosmic frame and the place of Ādityas (Sun) shrines

During my childhood (late 1950s–early 1960s) when I was living a monastic life, I was taught by my master Svāmī Saryudās that the Sun is the basis of all living beings on earth, that the Sun’s energy might have been conceived as motherly power in the animistic beliefs of former times, and, probably due to this perception, worship of the Sun in the form of a goddess would have started somewhere in the remote past. However, Sun shrines and images are projected as male. The location of Sun shrines has a strong cultural and astronomical association and a secret mythological narrative. During 1993–6 while working with Kim Malville I realized this, which helped me to understand the cosmic frame of the sacredscapes of Vārāṇasī. Of course, although at present Sun worship is not so prominent in the ritual landscape of Kāśī, the Sun god is regularly visited and worshipped together with other major gods like Śiva, Viṣṇu, and the goddess.

Through field survey and mapping (using GPS) together with Kim Malville (January 1993), I found that out of 14 Āditya shrines, 10 lie approximately along an isosceles triangles formed by Uttarārka (no. 14), Karṇa (no. 3), and Khakhola Āditya (no. 11). The longest side is established by the Karṇa and the northern sun, Uttarārka; this line represents the cosmic north with a little variation of only 1.14° eastward, which is negligible in human cognition. The two opposite sides of the triangle are 2,001 m and 1,997 m, respectively, equal to within 0.2 percent, which is comparable to the precision of our GPS data (see Singh 2009c: 181). The shrine of Madhyameśvara lies inside the triangle, a mere 45 meters away from the center of the 2.5-km long north–south side. The geometric regularity of the Ādityas combined with our discovery of the center of the Āditya triangle encourages us to believe that we have recovered the sites of many of the original Sun temples (see Figure 4).

From the combination of texts (mythologies) and contexts (personal surveys), I have observed that a number of the Ādityas are associated with specific astronomical events and solar symbolism. Demystifying these narratives and with support of field observations, a fresh understanding came to light. Further south, Mayukha Āditya (no. 9) describing an event when the Sun left the sky, with only his rays remaining, may be associated with the total solar eclipse that was visible in Vārāṇasī in CE 1054.

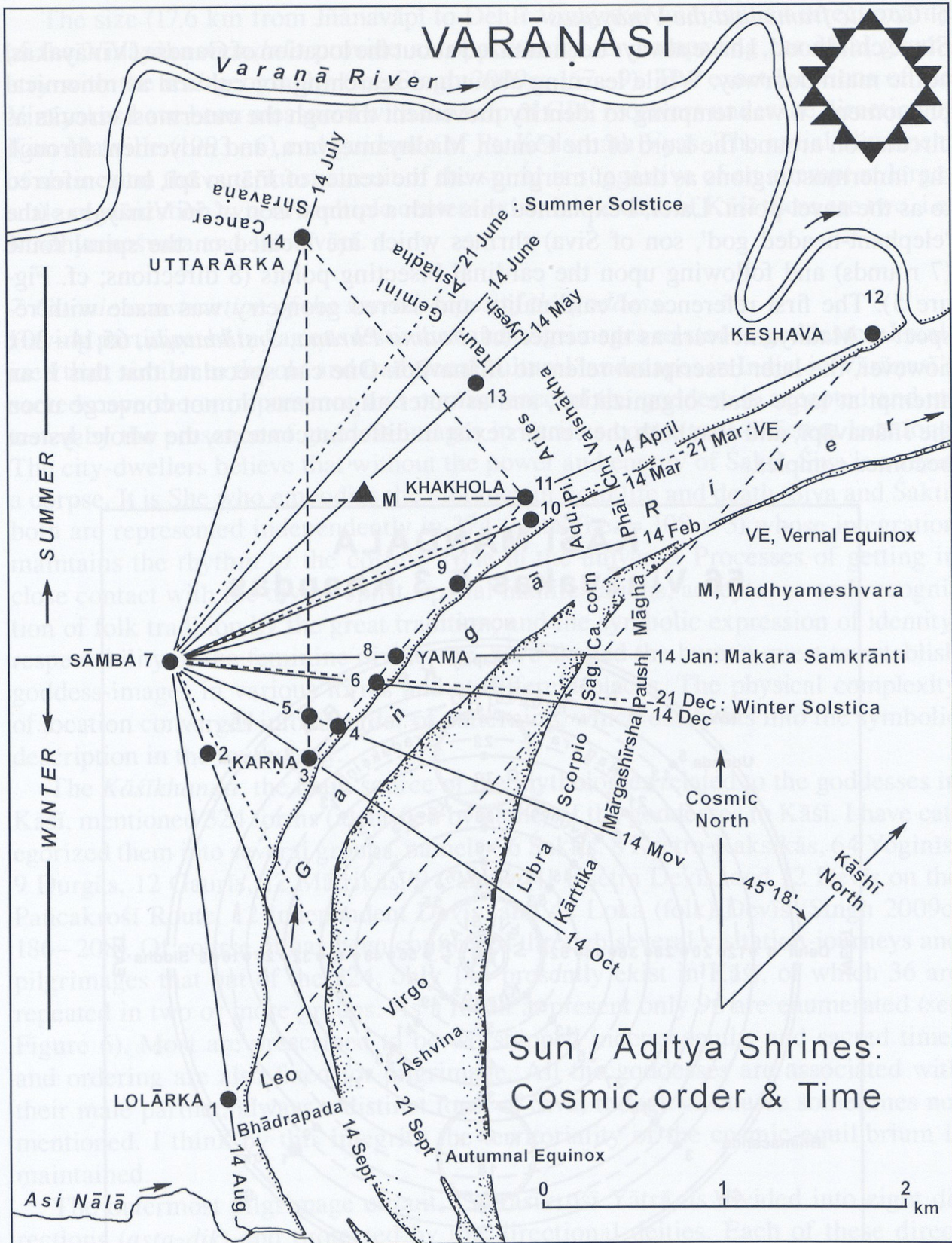


Fig. 4. Varānasī: The Sun temples and the alignments.

6. Cosmic frame and the Vināyakas

Since childhood, I have always been amazed about the location of Gaṇeśa (Vināyakas) at the main doorway. While learning about and searching for cultural astronomical phenomena, it was tempting to identify movement through the outermost circuits as circulation around the Lord of the Center, Madhyameśvara, and movement through the innermost regions as that of merging with the center of Jñānavāpī, later referred to as the navel-point. Later, I explained this with a comparison of 56 Vināyakas (the 'elephant-headed god', son of Śiva) shrines which are located on the spiral route (7 rounds) and following upon the cardinal bisecting points (8 directions; cf. Figure 5). The first reference of cardinality and sacred geometry was made with respect to Madhyameśvara as the center (cf. *Padma Purāna*, *Śṛṣṭikhaṇḍa*, 65.14–20); however, the later description refers to Jñānavāpī. One can speculate that this is an attempt at large-scale organization, and as outer alignments do not converge upon the Jñānavāpī, and also both the centers exist in different contexts, the whole system becomes complex.

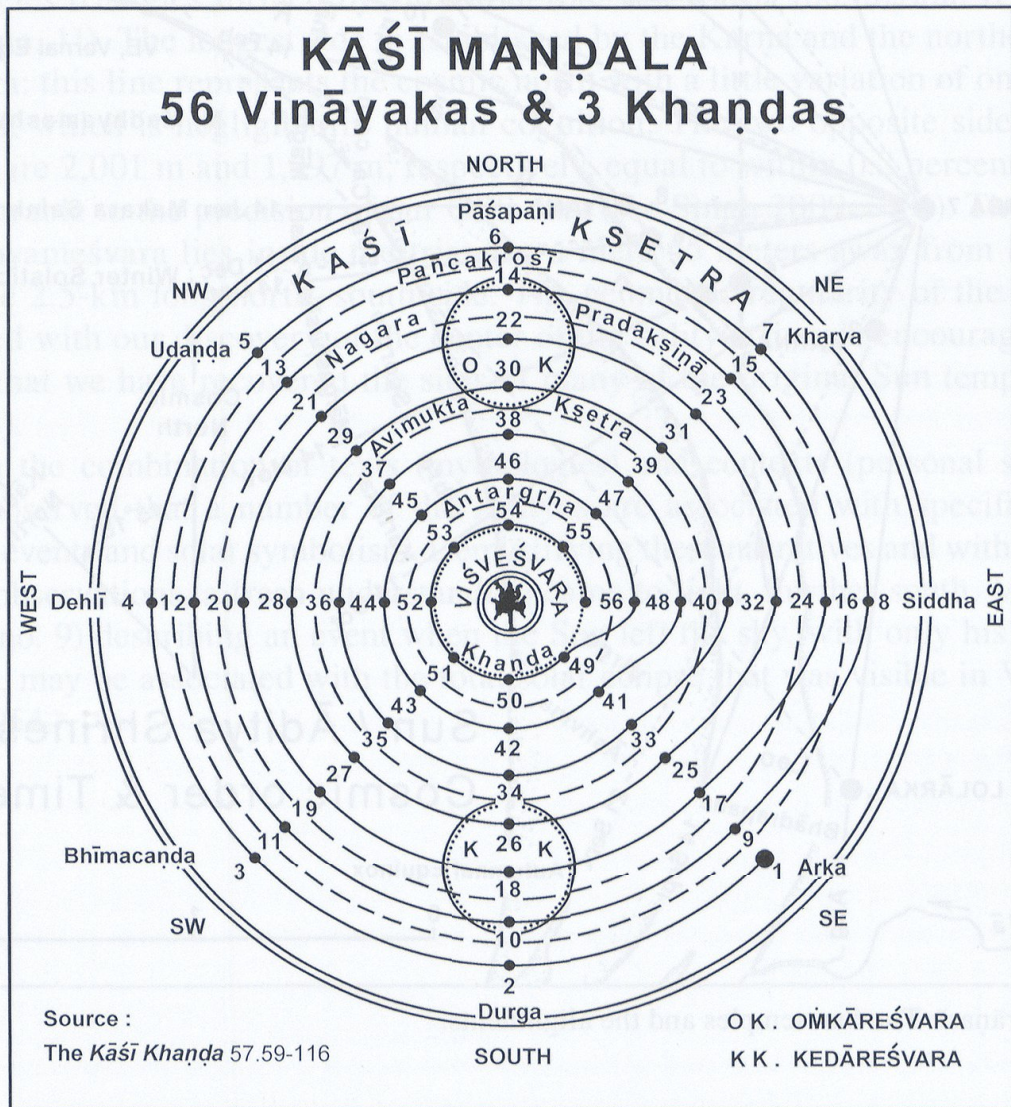


Fig. 5. Vārāṇasī: The alignments of the Vināyaka shrines.

The size (17.6 km from Jñānavāpī to Dehlī Vināyaka) and explicit directionality of the Vināyaka *maṇḍala* provide an opportunity for comparing the ideal geometry with the real geography (see Singh 2009c: 167–9). The exact locations of the Vināyakas have been measured with the help of GPS receivers under the direction of Kim Malville (1993–6) and guidance of Pt. Kedarnath Vyas. The radial alignment of shrines on the outermost circuit of the spiral is suggestive of an attempt at large-scale organization, where multiple centers exist; in the case of Kāśī there are two, i.e. Madhyameśvara and Jñānavāpī.

7. Cosmic construction of the sacredscapes of the goddess

Having participated in various festivities and pilgrimages related to goddesses, I realized that, similar to the old and traditional cultural landscapes in India, in Vārāṇasī's sacredscape the omnipresence and omniscience of the goddess is accepted and attested by the presence of goddess-images in various contexts at different locations. The city-dwellers believe that without the power and energy of Śakti, Śiva is a *śava*, a corpse. It is She who embodies the vibrancy of both life and death. Śiva and Śakti, both are represented independently in 324 forms (i.e. = 108×3) whose integration maintains the rhythm of the cosmic cycle in the universe. Processes of getting in close contact with the divine spirit, spatial manifestations, acceptance and recognition of folk tradition by the great tradition, and the symbolic expression of identity, respectability of the feminine divine, etc. have shaped the human quest to establish goddess-images in various forms and at different places. The physical complexity of location converges into an order of patterning, which easily fits into the symbolic description in the mythology.

The *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*, the main source of the mythologies related to the goddesses in Kāśī, mentioned 324 forms (identified by name) of the goddesses in Kāśī. I have categorized them into several groups, namely 96 Śaktis, 8 Kṣetra-Rakṣikās, 64 Yoginīs, 9 Durgās, 12 Gaurīs, 12 Mātrikās, 9 Caṇḍīs, 41 Kṣetra Devīs, and 12 Devīs on the Pañcakrośī Route, 12 independent Devīs, and 42 Loka (folk) Devīs (Singh 2009c: 186–208). Of course, it has been confirmed through several visitation-journeys and pilgrimages that out of the 324, only 144 presently exist in Kāśī, of which 36 are repeated in two or more groups. As a result at present only 96 are enumerated (see Figure 6). Most are prescribed to be worshipped independently, and sacred times and ordering are also fixed for pilgrimage. All the goddesses are associated with their male partner, always a distinct form of Śiva, though of course sometimes not mentioned. I think by this integrity the territoriality of the cosmic equilibrium is maintained.

The outermost pilgrimage circuit, Caurāsīkrośī Yātrā, is divided into eight directions (*aṣṭa-dik*) and protected by the directional deities. Each of these directions is regulated and controlled by goddesses of the cycle of time (i.e. 12 zodiacs/12 months), called Śaktis ('power goddesses'), thus their number reaches to 96 (i.e. 8×12). With the help of a topographical map I found that it covers a circumference of 184 miles/296 km, and symbolizes the circumambulation of the cosmos.

While this journey had rarely been performed, over the last few years it has been revived, although only in parts. This is further substantiated by my fieldwork and pilgrimages.

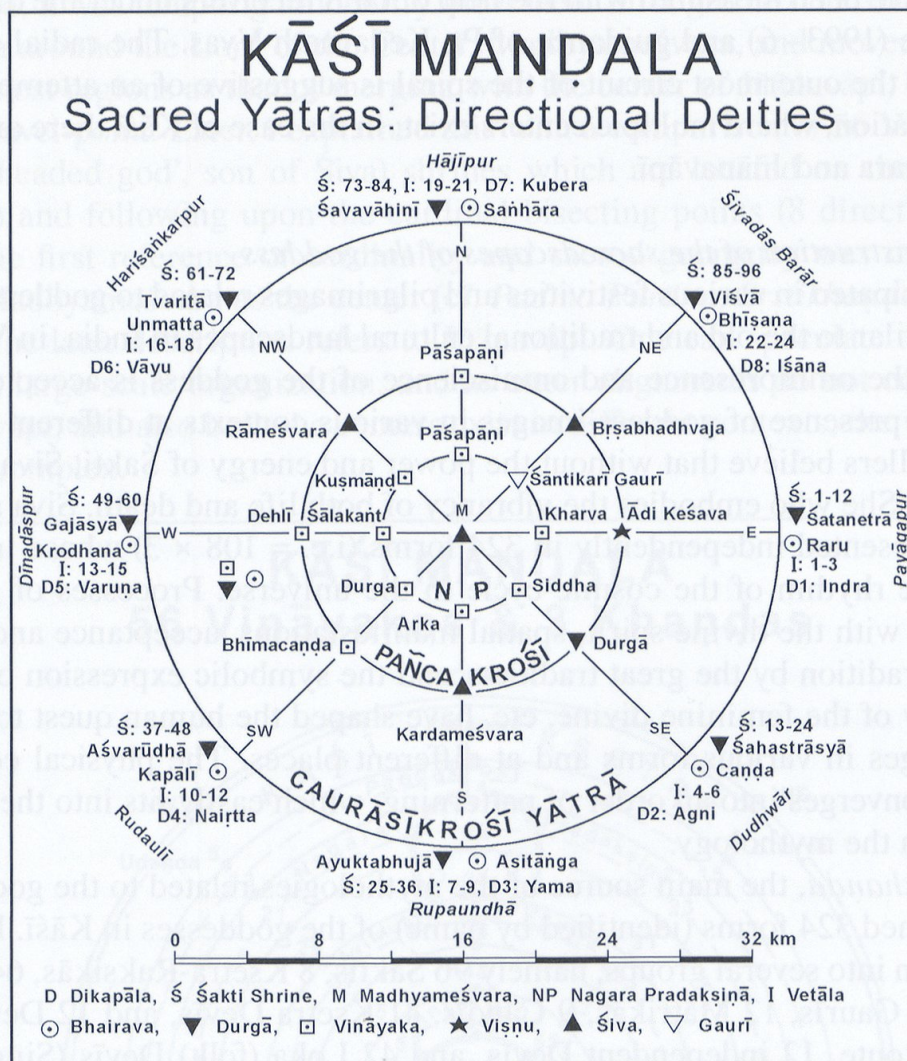


Fig. 6. Kāśī Maṇḍala: Sacred Yātrās, Directional Deities and Śakti shrines

With the help of Pt. Kuberanath Sukul I discovered that the location of shrines and deities along the sacred route is depicted over a cognitive pilgrimage map as *maṇḍala* prepared by his grandfather Pt. Kailashanath Sukul in CE 1875. Of course, many of these goddesses and their shrines are described in different contexts too; their full and systematic listing is given in the KKh (72.3–13 and 97–9). This can be compared with the generalized *maṇḍalic* map that I developed (see Figure 6) which shows positive correspondence.

8. Vision of the sacred: images of Kāśī in ancient literature

I find that in Hindu tradition places such as special sites or natural locations, rivers, mountains, grounds, sacred buildings, and sacred cities replicate the form and process of the cosmos, as illustrated in the symbolic descriptions that I have represented

in the form of sketches inspired by an inner quest. In fact, a passion for placement is basic to Hindu thought. The sacred place as a 'storied place' is praised in Hindu mythology and oral epics, with divine connotations of the intersection of myth and *terra firma*.

From a review of the literature I found that the *Nāgarakhaṇḍa* of the *Skanda Purāna* describes the territorial form of the sacred city as it was in the four mythic eras (*yugas* in Hindi cosmology). Thus, the shape of Kāśī was like a trident (*triśula*) in Kṛta/Satya (an era of 1,728,000 years), a disc (*cakra*) in Tretā (1,296,000 years), a chariot (*ratha*) in Dvāpara (864,000 years), and a conchshell (*Śaṅkha*) in Kali (432,000 years). These four forms clearly indicate stages of population and territorial growth through the sites of various shrines (Figure 7).

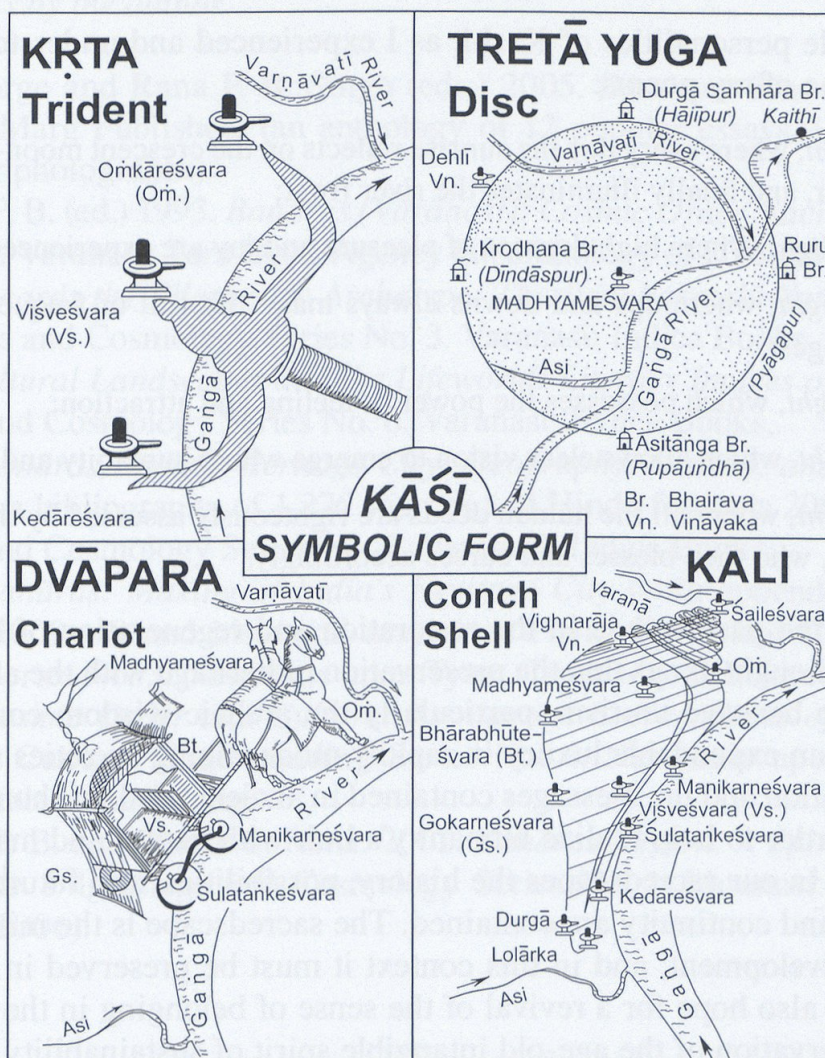


Fig. 7. Kāśī: The Symbolic Forms

9. An epilogue and nearness to destination

Over the course of about four decades, I came to understand that local mythologies (*sthalapurāṇas*) are superimposed to justify the historicity and religious merit, and after the passage of time it finally became part of the contemporary tradition. Fur-

ther, in the chain of 'existence–maintenance–continuity' the superimposition of the various divinities took place in the long span of history, a process that is ongoing even today and also is an impartial part of popular tradition. One can easily see a variety of images in different forms in most of the temples, at road-crossings, river/stream bridges, and shrines, from the omnipresent form for general well-being to the terrible or specific form worshipped for particular purposes.

As noted, during the eleventh to the seventeenth centuries Muslim invaders destroyed the city at least three times. However, it survived and was repeatedly revived; the sites and holy spots were sought out again, the monuments were repaired and rebuilt, and the spirit was again reawakened to reunite with the primordial. In this way the eternity of life has survived in spite of several 'superimpositions' or attempts to submerge it.

The multiple personalities of Kashi, as I experienced and understood them, are projected in one of my poems:

City of light, where every day the sunrise reflects on the crescent moon-shaped Ganga River, and finally illuminates the river front;

City of delight, where high degrees of pleasure and joy are experienced;

City of plight, where ups and downs always make life full of frequent and sudden changes;

City of might, which possesses the power of feeling and attraction;

City of sight, which allows clear vision to emerge where humanity and divinity meet;

City of right, where all the human deeds are righteously assessed by the patron deity Śiva, who then blesses and curses accordingly.

Working over the past decade in the restoration and regeneration of heritage sites, I felt a line of thought exists that the preservation of heritage with the aim of promoting sustainable heritage tourism, particularly the archaic wisdom contained in sacredscapes, is an expendable luxury in rapidly modernizing societies such as India. But modernization and the messages contained in ancient wisdom should be allowed to coexist in order to help realize humanity's link with nature and maintain the vibrancy of life. In our sacredscapes the history, possibilities, and future prospects of our existence and continuity are contained. The sacredscape is the mirror of human growth and development, and in this context it must be preserved in a sustainable way. One may also hope for a revival of the sense of belonging in the light of 'eco-ethics,' a preservation of the age-old intangible spirit of sustainability, and recognition of our identity in the context of heritage sites.

Let me express what I experienced and in a way revealed too. A spiritual walk is the ladder, the sacred ways are the steps, and human understanding is the destination. Thinking together is a new vision. Going together is a new start. Walking together is a real march. Realizing together is the final destination – enlightenment/revelation. Through a spiritual walk, can we regain what we once understood but have now

forgotten? Why not? What we once understood would help us to a certain extent regain our balance inwardly (spiritually and psychologically) and outwardly in terms of ecological cosmology. It is our wish that you and I will either meet in the lanes of Banāras, or, even better, that we will undertake a copilgrimage in and around Banāras, walking on the cosmic circuit in search of revelation and deeper understanding where humanity meets divinity (see Singh and Rana 2002/2006). I realized that the rituals and social actions, while no doubt at the core of continuity and the maintenance of locality, nevertheless possess inherently the message of universality.

Selected books by the author

- Michell, George and Rana P. B. Singh (eds.) 2005. *Banāras: The City Revealed*. Mumbai: Marg Publishers (an anthology of 12 popular essays, illustrated with 133 colour photographs).
- Singh, Rana P. B. (ed.) 1993. *Banāras (Vārāṇasī): Cosmic Order, Sacred City, Hindu Traditions*. Varanasi: Tara Book Agency (an anthology of 20 essays).
- 2002. *Towards the Pilgrimage Archetype: The Panchakroshi Yatra of Banāras*. Pilgrimage and Cosmology Series No. 3. Varanasi: Indica Books.
- 2004. *Cultural Landscapes and the Lifeworld: Literary Images of Banāras*. Pilgrimage and Cosmology Series No. 6. Varanasi: Indica Books.
- 2009a. *Banāras, India's Heritage City: Geography, History, and Bibliography* (including a bibliography of 1,276 sources and Hindu festivals 2006–2015). Pilgrimage and Cosmology Series No. 8. Varanasi: Indica Books.
- 2009b. *Banāras: Making of India's Heritage City* (with appendices on Hindu Festivals 2009–18 and historical accounts). Planet Earth and Cultural Understanding Series No. 3. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- 2009c. *Cosmic Order and Cultural Astronomy: Sacred Cities of India*. Planet Earth and Cultural Understanding Series No. 4. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Singh, Rana P. B. and Pravin S. Rana. 2002. *Banāras Region: A Spiritual and Cultural Guide*. Pilgrimage and Cosmology Series No. 1. Varanasi: Indica Books (2nd edn. 2006).

I am grateful to the Government of India for having granted the Research Fellowship Scholarship Scheme during the years 1981–82 and also to the Society of Sanskrit Studies, Delhi for their generous award to fund Prof. Shrivastava, my supervisor at the IITU, for his ever helpful support, and also Prof. Tripathi who introduced me into the world of the non-Jāt Kashmiri Saivism. Moreover, I had the great chance to study with Pandit Hemendra Chandra Varshni part of Lakṣmīdhara's *tantrasamuccaya* of the Śaivaśaikhya or the golden system of the Śaivaśaikhya as described in Śaikhya and Śaikhya's commentary on the *tantrasamuccaya*. I express my particular gratitude to him.

