

Banāras, the Concept of *tristhalī*(-yātrā) and the Inflow of the Marathas: An alternative view¹

Irina Glushkova

Perhaps ethnic pride as well as scholarly insight led A.S. Altekar to assert that '[m]odern Benares is largely a creation of the Marathas'.² This Maharashtrian Brahman, who was the head of the BHU department of Ancient History and Culture in the 1930s, might have been referring mainly to the gorgeous view of the riverside ensemble of magnificent buildings erected by nobles from Maharashtra both before and even after the defeat of the Maratha Confederacy in 1818. Or he might have been looking beyond the visual evidences of glorious past preserved in the temple and structures of *brahmapurī*-lanes in order to include the more vulnerable Maharashtrian documents and memories, already decaying in a changing political and cultural environment.

Still, it is exactly this Maratha shading of this city that haunted me through my 'scholarly pilgrimages' to Banāras. Initially, in 1990s, at the time of my study of the Vārkarī cult, I explored a number of temples dedicated to Viṭhobā, a Maharashtrian Kṛṣṇa, reacting more to images of the god than to the context of his advent into Kashi or the history of shrines housing him. Later, in the next decade, I visited Banāras as a main link of the *tristhalī* chain, i.e. Kashi, Prayag (Allahabad) and Gaya, identified by Maharashtrian pandits and pilgrims who understood *tristhalī-yātrā* as *tīrthayātrā* par excellence. Finally, after digging up the detailed twists of mythological and historical past, I found Banāras to have been an area of contestation among Maharashtrian princes, generals, bankers, and noble widows for the gains of their own and not only, as most history shows, between Hindus and Muslims, or northerners (Hindu or Muslim) and southerners (Marathas), or any of these and the British.

Altogether the inflow into Kashi of 'dakshini' (*dakhnī*) pandit families has been dated no later than the early sixteenth century, and its consequences have come into

1 I am thankful to Dr Lee Schlesinger for his helpful comments and critiques. I transliterate the gloss *tristhalī* following its Marathi spelling throughout the paper unless I refer to its Sanskrit usage.

2 Altekar 1937: 62. This statement uses 'Maratha' as equivalent to 'Maharashtrian' as had been common in earlier usage. The first gloss eventually came to designate a (member of a) warrior caste and is mostly used nowadays in this particular sense. In this paper, however, I follow the appropriate historical usage, which freely interchanges 'Maratha' and 'Maharashtrian'.

focus in J. Benson's contribution to the 'Pandit' project, S. Pollock, R. O'Hanlon, and C. Minkowski's publications, and A. Vajpeyi's Ph.D. thesis. Moreover, everyone from the British colonial authorities like Warren Hastings, Jonathan Duncan, James Prinsep, and Bishop Reginald Heber to scholars such as Moti Chandra, C.A. Bayly, and V. Dalmia has emphasized the density of Marathas throughout eighteenth and early nineteenth century Banāras. In contrast to most of these authors, I deal with Banāras's past mainly through Marathi-language sources (correspondence, diaries, financial reports, family histories, and court eulogies) and with its bygone Maratha shading through the present activities of the Akhil Bhāratīy Mahārāṣṭra Tīrthapurohit Saṅgh based in the part of Banāras still known as 'Kashi Maharashtra'. This approach to the history and contemporary life of the city produces my 'alternative view,' which helps complement and connect the dominant scholarly accounts of Banāras.

A resident of Banāras and a *jagadguru*, Narayana Bhatta composed his *Tristhalīsetu* ('Bridge to the Three Holy Cities') (Salomon 1985) in the sixteenth century. The text consists of four sections (Sāmānya, or General, Prayāga, Kāśī, and Gayā) and describes the goals and merits of pilgrimage and the rituals to be performed in each of the *tīrthas*. Excluding the introduction, two-thirds of the rest is devoted to Banāras and its sub-*tīrthas*, far outweighing the remaining treatment of Prayag and Gaya. It is in the meaning of 'bridging' the three cities that I started reading through the word *setu* in the title of Narayana's work before shifting to its understanding as a 'bridge' between North Indian sacred places and Maharashtra.

Until the late nineteenth century, the *Tristhalīsetu* went on circulating in Sanskrit manuscripts and concise versions in Marathi. Its impact was still acknowledged three centuries after its composition: Haraprasad Shastri, a Banārasī *mahāmahopadhyāya*, summed up the contribution of Narayana Bhatta in the following way: 'The great Pandit, who infused southern ideals at Benares in all matters relating to Hindu life and Hindu religion in preference to northern ideals current in Kanauj, Kasi, Mithila and Bengal, was Narayan Bhatta, an intellectual giant who not only wrote a vast number of Sanskrit works but organized the colony of Southern Brahmans at Benares, traveled far and wide and founded a family of Pandits who hold their pre-eminence even up to the present moment' (Shastri 1912: 7). The book was accepted as the most authoritative source on the subject of pilgrimage, and eventually, almost three centuries after its composition, was printed nowhere else but in Poona (Pune), the former capital of the Maratha Confederacy, in 1915 (Kane 1953: 582).

Narayana's father, the renowned Sanskrit scholar Rameshvara Bhatta, migrated to Banāras along with other Maharashtrian Brahmans in the 1520s (Benson 2001; Vajpeyi 2004). By 1924 a genealogy of his clan contained 88 names of Sanskrit experts who had established their authority over every field of traditional knowledge (Benson 2001: 107) and whose intellectual authority reached its climax during the seventeenth century (Pollock 2003). Though the *Tristhalīsetu* by no means was the first treatise on *tīrtha-yātrā*, it became so popular that many great scholars, including descendants of Narayana Bhatta, continued to compile summaries of it. Most of

them reproduced the notion of *tristhalī* in titles of their compositions (Kane 1953: 552–84), thus reiterating the ‘connectedness’ of places presumably also connected by a network of Maharashtrian pandits and/or priests, just as they are connected even today by the families of the Devs of Banāras, the Pitres of Allahabad, the Marathes of Gaya, and others from pan-Indian *tīrthas*. After discussions with non-Maratha pandits and scholars of contemporary Banāras and email queries among Sanskritologists outside India, I conclude that it was Narayana Bhatta who coined and successfully promoted the *tristhalī* concept. By combining *tristhalī* with *yātrā*, this term that urges visiting Kashi, Prayag, and Gaya within one pilgrimage came into usage. Moreover, Narayana Bhatta is unanimously credited with exerting his influence for rebuilding during the 1580s the temple of Viśveśvara, which was, after a later demolition, rebuilt by Ahilyabai Holkar of Maheshvar/Indore, another Maharashtrian, in the 1780s.

Scions of the Bhatta family along with other Maharashtrian Brahmans and their messengers circulated between Banāras and Maharashtra providing their local agents with manuscripts for dissemination of the idea of *tristhalī* as a model *tīrthayātrā*. Logically, writings in Sanskrit were meant primarily for those in command of Sanskrit, i.e. mostly for Brahmans. The latter would have paid a visit to Banāras and, after achieving a higher level of distinction or getting a decision on other matters, would have left for their ‘green pastures’ at home. At the same time details about Kashi appeared in the Marathi language, too. Thus, the first *Kāśī-māhātmya* seems to have appeared in the *Gurucaritra*, a sacred book of the Brahmanic Datta tradition of Maharashtra as early as 1578 (Kamat 1950)³. The *māhātmya* text directs everyone to Banāras and abounds in imperatives, ‘Go! Take ablutions! Perform this and that! Get concentrated! Worship Keshavaditya! Worship Adikeshava! Worship Brahmanas! Do not block the way in the tirthas!’ etc.

It could not have been a mere accident that Gaga Bhatta, a great-grandson of Narayana Bhatta, was motivated to compile a pedigree of the great Maratha warrior Shivaji Bhosle and to preside at his coronation in 1674. It could not have been a coincidence that Kavindra Paramananda, a Maharashtrian Brahman and a friend of Gaga Bhatta, composed a Sanskrit epic poem, actually a *mahākāvya*, to record the history of Shivaji’s rise to power. It is particularly important that the poet describes how he had stayed in Banāras when Shivaji commissioned him to compose a poetical biography of the Bhosle clan: ‘Once upon a time / Came the best of brahmins / The poet Paramananda, / On pilgrimage to Benares [...]// The pundits of Kashi rejoiced / To see Paramananda [...]’⁴ Now, has Shivaji ever visited Banāras?

In 1666 Aurangzeb kept Shivaji captive a couple of months in Agra (or in Delhi, as per some sources). Though not much is known about his escape and means of transportation back to Maharashtra, a Maratha chronicler (Krishnaji Anant Sabhasad, in the *Śrīśivaprabhuṣe*) of the end of the seventeenth century narrated the

3 I am thankful for this insight to Prof. Rana P.B. Singh.

4 Cited from Laine 2001: 43.

story of Shivaji's flight via Mathura to Banāras and his stop there for ablutions and other rituals. One hundred years later another chronicler (Malharrao Chitnis, in the *Śakakarte śrīśiva chatrapatī mahārājī*) introduced more details of Shivaji's arrival at Allahabad, his ablutions and temple worship in Banāras and a passage to Jagannath-Puri. A little bit later a third author (Chitnis Khando Ballal, in the *Śivdigvijay*) asserted that Shivaji and his guide made for Banāras and went through the usual routine of worship followed by all pilgrims. From there they went to Allahabad and Gaya and thence to Bengal. By the middle of the twentieth century, popular accounts described Shivaji both as a prison-breaker and a pious pilgrim who performed every prescribed ritual in the three holy cities of *tristhalī-yātrā* after his escape from captivity. But perhaps the first attempt to place Shivaji physically in Banāras comes in the above-mentioned *mahākāvya* by Kavindra, writing in Shivaji's court in Maharashtra in the 1670s. Even though the text is not finished, thus leaving the itinerary on the way home unspecified, the initial reference to Banāras not only converts Shivaji from a 'belligerent hero' to a 'religious' one but also opens the way for non-Brahman Maharashtrians to the famous sacred place of the Doab.

The founder of the Maratha state died in 1680, six years after his coronation, and this is the precise date that C. A. Bayly names for the beginning of Marathas' noticeable entry into Banāras as major donors by substituting for Rajputs. He sums up: 'By the mid-nineteenth century, the majority of temples in Benares were foundations of "natives of the Deccan" within the previous 150 years' (Bayly 2010: II, 137). Even today I can corroborate this statement by finding plaques in various temples, although many have been obliterated and a search for them requires having a good guide of advanced age from the Maharashtrian community of the city. My 'scholarly pilgrimages' found servants, professionally attached to some shrines, and nearby residents who turn out to be of Maharashtrian descent, and these reveal stories hidden behind layers of paint; some temples are still associated with descendants of former princely families (the Scindias, Bhosles, Holkars, Gaekwads or with some clans less known outside Maharashtra, such as the Vincurkars, Pantsachivs, Patwardhans, Pratinidhis, etc.). Some buildings have been recently renovated and are decorated with pictures of Shivaji and Ramdas, a militant saint-poet. The grand palace built by famous Nana Phadnavis, 'peshwa's peshwa', which nowadays houses the 'Kashi Maharashtra Bhavan', though partly dilapidated still impresses by its grandeur from both inside and outside while its storage rooms contain furniture pieces, mirror frames etc. dated from the bygone epoch.



Inner view of the palace of the 18th-century Maratha statesman Nana Phadnavis

But the real treasury of invaluable information with exact sums of expenses remains hidden in Marathi language narratives. They provide the names of donors, building costs for temples and palaces, funding channels for local festivals, etc. in the *tristhaḷī* cities, particularly in Banāras. *Kulvṛtānt*, *caritras*, and *tīrtha-yātrā prabandhs* of Maharashtrian princes, generals, and bankers, as well as account books of the latter jealously compete in enumerating what had been built and by whom, including one's own ancestors, and the cost. As I observed in my paper on pecuniary matters in the pilgrimage of Raghunathrao Vincurkar (born 1824), a prince of Vincur, Maharashtrians on *tīrtha-yātrā* were apparently 'obsessed with money – especially if it belonged to somebody else' (Glushkova 2006: 230). The prince set out on his long pilgrimage after a loss of his wife Kashibai – both 'Kashi' and 'Varanasi' were extremely popular names among Maharashtrian Brahman women in the eighteenth century; so were 'Kashinath' and 'Vishvanath' among men.

All studies by Bayly contain numerous references to the presence of Marathas in Banāras, although the reason for his choice of 1680 to date its beginning is not specified. It may signify 'a discovery' of Banāras by 'lay' Brahmans, who were not immediately engaged in the ritual sphere and did not need training in a particular field or approval from the highest intellectual council of 'the Athenes of the East', as Francois Bernier called Banāras. Shankarji Malhar exemplifies such other Brahmans, having fled to Banāras during hard times in the 1690s. He had been himself a Brahman diplomat and a member of the 'eight ministers counsel' at the service

of Rajaram, a younger son of Shivaji, and after moving north he reemerged as an envoy of the Mughal Emperor to negotiate claims of Marathas for fiscal rights to a few Mughal provinces (Sardesai 1948: 38), thus proving the mundane concerns of his flight to Banāras. Shankarji was in charge of secretarial affairs, and hence had a title of *saciv*, later prefixed by *pant* (from *paṇḍit*). One of his descendants built a Śaṅkar temple in Banāras, as I learned from a family account (Bhagwat 1905), which I traced at the time of my ‘scholarly pilgrimages’ to objects of Maharashtrian background. The temple is still owned by the Pantsachiv family nowadays residing in Mumbai and is perfectly maintained by a local manager.

The Marathas’ success in securing levies from six provinces established vectors for their expansionist politics and resulted in the subjugation of territory beyond their Deccan nucleus. In the eighteenth century a chain of Maratha principalities emerged on the line from Poona to Delhi (and also from Poona southwards), and thus a geopolitical corridor for the movement of Maharashtrians was formed. This power over space extending through Dhar, Dewas, Maheshvar/Indore, Sagar, Jhansi, Ujjain/Gwalior and other Maratha states meant that Maharashtrians could travel safer than any other ethnic community. Where to? Primarily to Banāras because it was the place where the ‘new intellectuals’ (Pollock 2003) of their own kin constantly pressed them to come. It is in this context that we may look at the oldest specimen of the Marathi chronicles, the *Mahikāvātīcī urf mähīmcī bakhar*, dating from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century, which is credited with the first occurrence of the unique ethno-toponymic construct known as ‘Maharashtra dharma’ (Rajvade 1923). It speaks of Kashi as a northern border of the spread of the Maharashtra dharma pointing to Rameshvaram in the south, Dwarka in the west and Tuljapur in the east. This spatial outline might have encircled the territory where the rulings of Maharashtrian Brahmans in Banāras were effective in settling certain disputes. O’Hanlon’s research on judgments about particular rights of various Brahmanic families in littoral Konkan strongly suggests such an interpretation (O’Hanlon and Minkowski 2008; O’Hanlon 2009a, 2009b). These ‘letters home’ were written in Marathi in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by Maharashtrian pandits of Banāras who held their discussions in the Mukti pavilion of the Viśveśvar temple, with which the name of Narayana Bhatta had been closely associated. References to the venue at the beginning of documents were meant to confer authority on them.

It is here that I need to specify that the first families of Maharashtrian Brahmans who settled in Banāras, including that of Rameshvara Bhatta, had come from Paithan, i.e. the ancient town of Pratiśthana on the Godavari river. It used to be a widely acknowledged seat of leading *dhārma-śāstrīs*, who were sought to resolve all sorts of disputes related to communal life and livelihood. Without speculating about the decline of Paithan and mass exodus of its Brahmans, I will quote from Ananya Vajpeyi on the movement of Maharashtrians into early sixteenth century Banāras: ‘[O]nce they arrived there in successive ways of migration and settlement, these brahmanas made Kāśī what it was to become in the memory of modern Indians. [...] Maharashtrian settlers recreated in Kāśī the Paīthan of their historical memory – and

in the process created for the first time the distinctive ecumene of Varanasi' (Vajpeyi 2004: 35–8).

During the reign of Shivaji's grandson (1707–1749), his first ministers/peshwas went on trying to bring under Maratha control the most important *tīrthas* of the Doab, particularly Banāras. They needed it for various ends, including their own legitimacy as Brahmans and de facto rulers. Returning in 1719 from Delhi to Maharashtra, the first peshwa stopped for ablutions in Banāras. Shortly afterwards his religious yearning was backed by diverse real-estate activities and establishment of *hundī* (travel-check) offices by agents of Maharashtrian 'lay' Brahmans and Brahman-warriors. 'In 1735 repairs to the ghats on the Ganga in Banaras were undertaken on the Peswa's orders' (Gokhale 1988: 182). At least one quarter of 80 of these bathing wharves functioning nowadays, including the most remarkable and ritually significant, were constructed or repaired by individuals from Maharashtra, ranging from peshwas to princes, their ministers and royal widows. Among them are Dashashvamedha, Panchaganga, Trilochan-, Brahma, Durgaghat etc., along with those which still bear the names of Maharashtrians or of places under their control, such as Balaji, Scindia, Gwalior, Bhosle, Munshi (a Nagpurian minister), Ahilyabai. There are umbrellas made of bamboo stems and foliage meant to protect from sun and rain local (*gaṅgāputra*) Brahmans waiting for clients at the Ganga bank which are said (by a Bengali author! (Bhattacharya 1999: 251–2) to have been introduced in the eighteenth century by a Maharashtrian Brahman, Narayan Dikshit, a preceptor and caretaker of the peshwa's family and a skillful real-estate agent. These picturesque shelters together with the outline of the riverside eventually started to be used as a symbol of the city and found their way into every guidebook and tourist advertisement. There is still *Dīkṣit kī galī* in 'Kashi Maharashtra' along with numerous temples in nearby lanes, from Bindu Mādhav to Kāla Bhairav, an official guardian of the city, built, rebuilt or established through Maharashtrian patronage.



Statues of dancers and pictures of Shivaji and Ramdas in the inner hall of a Maratha residence

In 1735 Banāras witnessed the grand pilgrimage-cum-diplomatic mission of Radha-bai, a widow of the first peshwa and a mother of the ruling peshwa, and this event led to confrontation between North Indian and Maharashtrian Brahmans in the city (Glushkova forthc. a). In 1736, the peshwa demanded *tristhalī*-cities plus Mathura as revenue lands from the emperor. Since then the demands for *tristhalī*-cities were repeated many times and obsessively articulated as the last will of almost every peshwa. The ‘alternative view’ I adopt in this paper suggests that Awadh’s nomination in 1739 of Balwant Singh as the Hindu raja of Banāras could have been an attempt to outweigh the Marathas’ growing influence in the city and the Doab region. Banāras, Prayag, and Gaya were crowded with physical bodies of Maharashtrians bridging the cities, and the 1740s saw the Marathas’ readiness to capture Banāras by force, while various sources mention the nawab of Awadh’s threat to kill the peshwa Balaji Bajirao. Shocked by the possibility of brahmanicide Maharashtrian pandits of Banāras pleaded with the peshwa for restraint in this matter. In 1743 the peshwa and his 75,000 troops army performed a full-scale *tristhalī-yātrā* and, on completing all rituals, advanced to Bengal. In fact, the surrender of these *tīrthas* would have

meant a disastrous blow to Muslim prestige, and no wonder that eventually, one by one, Gaya, Allahabad and Banāras were secured by the East Indian Company, then underestimated by other rival parties.

By the 1750s, it was still the Marathas who held various towns and roads, guaranteeing their compatriots' safe transit to the cities of the Doab. Calls from Banāras sounded more insistent, and *tristhaḷī-yātrā* became not only a reality but a fashionable and useful practice. Unlike 'service people' who kept going to Banāras 'on business,' the Brahman élite of the eighteenth century went on pilgrimage to Banāras linked with visits to Allahabad and Gaya as a high principle that also enhanced family prestige. This pilgrimage and travel practice spread through Maharashtrian Brahman culture among other social groups. First, other widows of the peshwas' family like Kashibai, Sagunabai, Esubai etc., visited the *tristhaḷī*-cities and made people and powers talk about Marathas. Kashibai, the widow of Bajirao I, and the mother of then incumbent Balaji Bajirao, even managed to quarrel with Balwant Singh, in whose palace she was invited to stay during her pilgrimage in 1746. Later, influential widows from other – including non-Brahman – princely families, adopted the example of Brahman widows of ruling families. On the whole, they appeared not only as pilgrims but as social and political leaders of pilgrim caravans known as *yātrā*. The number of pilgrims forming those caravans could reach up to 40,000. Besides kin and servants, crowds of people from various social groups (*āṭhrāpagad jāt*) were drawn both by religious motives and by perspectives of safe travel under the protection of armed guards. These extraordinary women carried peshwas' letters to the Emperor of Delhi and to the Nawab of Awadh, strengthened ties between the states of the Maratha Confederacy en route and even held diplomatic talks with new officials, including Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of India⁵, and other functionaries of the East Indian Company. I would say that in contrast to widows from Bengal who came to Banāras to die, widows from Maharashtra were enthusiastically engaged in actual politics. Altogether, side by side with military campaigns, processions of pilgrims created a polity-on-the-march with every feature of officialdom and mundane life such as childbirth and thread ceremonies etc., except weddings. It was Banāras that exercised 'its pull over long distances from a static center,' which happened to be a 'political center' at the same time, as per Jacob Heesterman's treatment of the sacred as dynamic by definition (Heesterman 1992).

5 In 1781, at the time of Chait Singh rebellion in Banāras, Hastings' life was saved by the two Brahman ambassadors of the Maratha princely state of Nagpur, 'out of affectionate attachment', as per the notes of a British traveler [Hodges 1793: 52].



Ahilyābāi Ghāṭ, named after a Maratha ruler of the Holkar dynasty, famous all over India for her charity

While the dominance of Maharashtra Brahmins in Banāras from the sixteenth century and the Maratha political impact in the eighteenth century together contributed to Banāras' prosperity, physical form, and 'more southern' patterns of religiosity, Banāras itself became newly implanted into earlier Marathi narratives rooted in the Maharashtra homeland. That is, the pull of Banāras made itself felt in revising the stories of Maharashtra heroes and saint-poets. Not only was Shivaji reported on a *tristhaḷī-yātrā*, but stories of the saint-poets also came to include similar travels. Despite singing of their deep affection for the god Viṭhobā and the *vārī* (pilgrimage to Pandharpur) and despite claiming the futility of visiting other sacred places, many of the saint-poets found themselves propelled to faraway Kashi by interpolations into their hymns and accounts of later hagiographers. Mahipati, a Brahmin from near Paithan who wrote in the second part of the eighteenth century, managed to send Dnyaneshvar, Namdev, and Eknath on prolonged journeys to the sacred places of the Doab, thus confirming the absolute importance of *tristhaḷī-yātrā* as a core value characteristic of pre-colonial Maharashtra society. Such additions became widely

accepted and were even substantiated by various ‘material finds,’ like Dnyaneshvar’s inscription on a stone pillar from Banāras etc. Neglecting allusions to the Pandavas’ circumambulation which the *Mahābhārata* fixed as an ideal *tīrtha-yātrā* though never tested by practice, Maharashtrians of the early twentieth century deciding to go on *kāśī-yātrā* felt inspired by the examples of bhakti poets who in earlier versions of their hymns paid no attention to Banāras (Glushkova 2007, 2009).

During the prime of the Maratha Confederacy, three out of four *dhāms*, i.e. Rameshvaram, Jagannath-Puri and Dvarka had fallen under the Maratha influence exercised by the Bhosles of Thanjavur and Nagpur and the Gaekwads of Baroda. The fourth *dhām*, i.e. Badrinath, stayed out of reach of any Maratha principality, and it might have been the reason why Kashi came to replace it. A biographer of one of Maratha princely clans explained: ‘There is Kashi to the north, Rameshvaram to the south, Dvarka on the west, and Jagannath to the east. [...] The old belief used to be that whoever makes a yatra to all of them, will gain plenty of merits’ (Bhagwat 1905: 137). Here the attraction of Banāras appears within the Maharashtrian outlook in a set of sacred places different from the *tristhalī*. A Maharashtrian tourist-cum-pilgrim who in 1970s went on a pre-paid tour in an AC compartment named his travelogue *Kāśī rāmeśvar gītā kṛṣṇeśvar*, showing he did not forget the bygone fame of Marathas through their presence in Banāras (Ranade 1998). The first tourist-offices established in Maharashtra also offered guided tours reflecting Maharashtrian interests, and one of its earliest booklets was *Tristhalī yātrā-varṇan arthāt prayāg-kāśī-gayā yātrā* (Kulkarni 1964). This route is frequently duplicated nowadays too, forming a core part of larger itineraries.

In tune with O’Hanlon, I approach Banāras from outside and predominantly through Marathi sources. It was not far from Rameshvaram, which was named the southern limit of the ‘Maharashtra dharma’, in the former Maratha princely state of Thanjavur (now in Tamilnadu) that I came across the *Tristhalī yātreçyā lāvaṇyā* (Mahadick 1951) and discovered the amplitude of Maharashtrian attachment towards the idea of *tristhalī* and Banāras. This poem eulogized the Maratha ruler of Thanjavur, Serfoji II, who had gone on pilgrimage in 1821. The first line of the first *lāvaṇī* (stanza) warns an audience that ‘I will tell a story of a tristali-yatra of Sharabhendra, oh, gentlemen, be considerate to it’. At the end of the same *lāvaṇī* the raja himself announces that he ‘is in a hurry to go on kashi-yatra’. Altogether throughout its 64 chapters, the poem enumerates various places, but it devotes 35 stanzas, i.e. more than a half, to Banāras, its temples and rituals. These 35 stanzas are preceded with two *lāvaṇīs* on Prayag and are followed with two *lāvaṇīs* on Gaya, which is the same sequence of places that appears in a *śāstrik* ruling, even though the raja actually approached the city in the reversed order, traveling via Calcutta.

This example again confirms that Banāras stood as the main component of *tristhalī*, where this idea has been easily equated with *kāśī-yātrā*, which, in its turn, is elevated to the status of *mahāyātrā*. Rules were spread to regulate the routine of the ‘great pilgrimage’: a Maharashtrian pilgrim was instructed to enter Kashi twice or even thrice before and after respective visits to Prayag and Gaya and also

to extend the term of stay during a rainy *caturmās*. These prescriptions of texts and of Maharashtrian pandits of Banāras actually shaped the route leading from Maharashtra to Kashi. Short manuscripts (*pothīs*) in Marathi circulated under the name of *Tristhalī-māhātmya* till the beginning of the twentieth century explaining in simple terms the sequence of events and distribution of rituals among three places. After the fall of the Maratha Confederacy in 1818, Bajirao II, the last peshwa (whose senior wife's name was Varanasibai), went to exile to nearby Bithur and kept on donating for constructions in Banāras. Although Banāras has been provisionally mentioned in the terms of surrender, Mountstuart Elphinstone decided that this was non-acceptable because Banāras was 'the grand resort of all Maraththa pilgrims'. Elphinstone, who had started his career in Banāras in 1795 as an Assistant to the Resident and happened to be the last British Resident at the Poona court, the seat of Maratha power, also urged settling Bajirao II 'either on the East of the Ganges or as far North as may be convenient to diminish the chance of a concourse of Maraththa Pilgrims' (Ballhatchet 1957: 44–5)⁶.

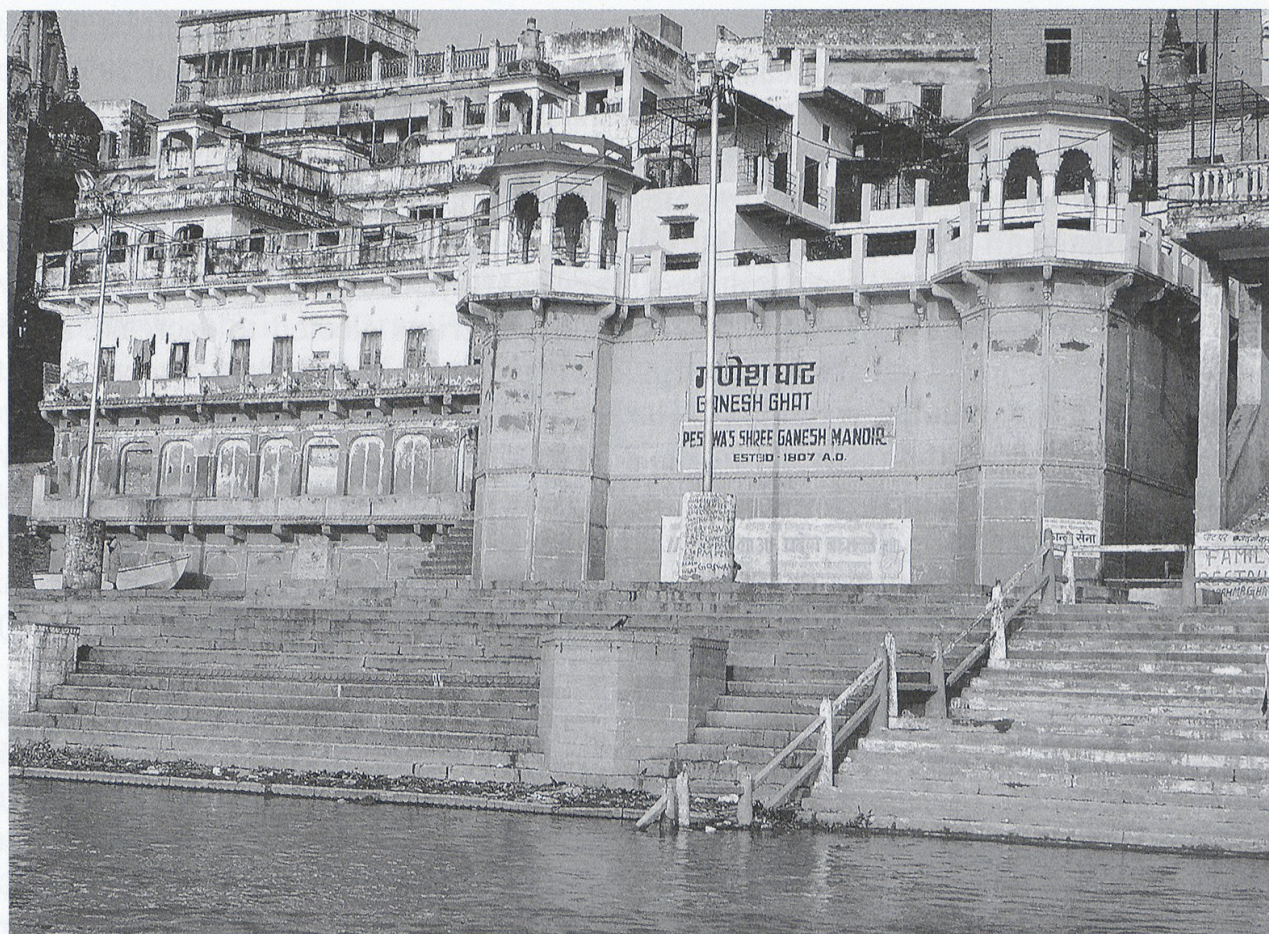
Although the priority of Banāras as a politically contested place started to diminish by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the idea of *tristhalī* had already taken its roots in the Marathas' consciousness. The biographer of another Maratha prince in the mid-nineteenth century explains that 'anyone who moves towards Gaya [for memorial rituals] cannot skip Kashi and Prayag which are situated very near by. They are great kshetras, and it would be a wrong [decision] having come so far to go back without visiting them. That is why at the moment of departure from one's home, one should realize that turning to [these places] is unavoidable' (Tryambakkar 1964: 208).

The Maharashtrian Brahman Altekar was by no means the first to have noticed that contemporary Banāras was mainly constructed by the Marathas. He was following Duncan, Heber, Prinsep, and the Bengali Bholanath Chunder among others who recognized the Marathas' involvement in the making of the city and its atmosphere. Duncan, a British resident in Banāras (1787–1795), had to routinely deal 'with the violent and arrogant proceedings of the Indian princes, especially the Marathas and their followers, either residing at or visiting Benares. His political proceedings contain many references to the activities of the Marathas, particularly of Scindia and the Nagpur family, and the enormities they committed in Benares' (Narain 159: 163). The resident reported to his seniors, 'It seems too evident that the Marhattas conceive themselves either entitled or permitted to set up in Benares an Imperium in Imperio under which it becomes very difficult to carry on any administrative whatsoever' (ibid.: 164). Enmity with Maharashtrian Brahmans even inspired Bharatendu Harishchandra to satirize them 'for their greed, [...] the conspiracies required to net maximum patronage' etc. in the Marathi language part of his play *Premjoginī* (Dalmia 2011: 96n).

6 Notwithstanding Elphinstone's 'strong objections to addition to the number of the Princes at that city' the Governor-General in Council after all decided to allow Chimnaji, the last peshwa's brother, to reside at Banāras [Ballhatchet 1957: 49].

Moti Chandra touches upon the theme of Marathas in his *Kāśī kā itihās* (2003), and each of Bayly's studies repeats this theme, e.g.: '[B]etween 1760 and 1830 the Mahrattas poured wealth into Benares, Allahabad and Hardwar, constructing large numbers of religious buildings and feeding a whole new generation of priests in these centers' (Bayly 1973: 44). He notes that the majority of temples existent by the mid-nineteenth century in popular pilgrimage-places had been built during the preceding 150 years by folk arrived from Deccan (Bayly 2010: II, 136–7), and that 'in the year 1786, as many as 170,000 Maratha pilgrims elected to increase their merit by traveling to Allahabad in an opulent armed convoy' (ibid.: 127), naturally with double or triple entry to Banāras. The British General Governor reported about thirty thousand Maratha residents in Benares in 1817 (ibid.: 137), and the city was regularly visited by armed 'Mahratta' pilgrimages of up to 2,00,000 men; by 1820 'Mahratta' chiefs and nobles constituted eight per cent of the population (ibid.: 144). Prinsep, an Assay Master at the time of the first census of Banāras (1828–1829) discovered 11,311 Maharashtrian Brahmans from 11 subcastes (Prinsep 1996: 13), and this number amounted to one third of the Brahmanic population of the holy city as per Dalmia's calculation (Dalmia 2001: 94). In the nineteenth century, as Dalmia shows, and in the early twentieth century, as is evident from the foundation stages of the Benares Hindu University with its Maharaja Sayajirao Library and Shivaji Gyms, Maharastrians still felt their special bonds with the city to which they had contributed so much in spirit and wealth. Altogether the Marathas' attraction to Banāras and some other *tīrthas* of all-Indian significance ended only after the 1857 Mutiny, but their involvement with these places was unerringly recognised till 1947 after which a new era of regional self-identification began.

More historical evidence is available in printed documents and unpublished papers from archives of ex-princely clans in Central India, Maharashtra and South India. There are still remnants of that ideally organized network of cooperation and rivalry of Maharashtrian *upādhyes* of the *tristhaḷī*-cities who wait for pilgrims from Maharashtra. It is to the family of the Devs and their contacts from the Akhil Bhāratīy Mahārāṣṭra Tīrthapurohit Saṅgh that I owe many thanks for their hospitality and insights during my fieldwork in Banāras, Allahabad and Gaya. My informants from the Brahman community of 'Kashi Maharashtra' half-jokingly told me a legend that their forefathers had been invited for ancestors' rituals to Gaya in times immemorial and had been so generously paid that they could not proceed any further south than Banāras. It was in the narrow lanes of 'Kashi Maharashtra' that I joined in gripping celebrations of *Gaṇeś-caturthī* organized by the Maharashtrian community of Banāras. Because of the peshwas' particular attachment to Gaṇeś, this festival had become a popular household celebration among Maratha nobility, a temple event in Maharashtra and in the famous '56 Gaṇeś temples' now mentioned in every book on Banāras.



Gaṇeś Ghāt

One can guess or rather dig into temple archives and find under layers of paint the names of the donors, most of whom would prove to be Maharashtrians⁷. Niels Gutschow traces this kind of ‘Marathas’ involvement on the example of the Pañcakrośī Mandir, for the origins of which neither dates nor donors are known. Still the temple priest ‘identifies the movable figure of the riding warrior in the lower southern niche of the entrance space as the one who ‘400 years ago’ came from Maharashtra to establish the temple’ (Gutschow 2006: 120). The equestrian figure with a miniature wife behind him is strikingly similar to images of the god Khaṇḍoba from Jejuri (south of Pune) of whom the Holkars were the greatest admirers. The history of the *pañcakrośīyātrā*, which is not evident in earlier literature on Kashi, abounds with references to Maharashtrian names in more recent time. For example, Bhagvantrao Pingle planted trees along the route in the nineteenth century to provide pilgrims with shade (Tryambakkar 1964: 76), and Vishvanath Shastri Datar almost 100 years later suggested transportation for pilgrims’ luggage in order to make the circulation more attractive and thereby to raise income for temples situated on the route (Vidyarthi et al. 1979: 90).

7 As the number of ‘56’ comes from *paurāṇik* sources, those Gaṇapatis were (re)established as their material evidences. References are scattered in Marathi language sources referring to names of donors, amount of donations etc.

A complication of proposing my ‘alternative view’ of Banāras is that to substantiate it I must dwell on the history of Maharashtra. Scholars of Banāras proper should definitely be aware of the name of Lakshmidhara Bhatta, *rājguru* and influential minister of the Gahadavalas of Kashi, when it was a political center of the twelfth century Kanauj. Lakshmidhara had authored the *Kṛtyakalpataru*, a digest interpreting various aspects of dharma. One of its sections, the *Tīrvhivivecanakāṇḁa*, had dealt with *tīrvhas* and had been lost until its miraculous discovery in the 1940s in the private library of the Nagpurian Bhosles, once the most powerful and influential Maratha princes. It is worth mentioning that it was published nowhere else but in the Gaekwad Oriental series, in Maratha-ruled Baroda. Since then, the *Tīrvhivivecanakāṇḁa* has been accepted as the first treatise on the subject of *tīrvha-yātrā*. It looks as if it had found its way into Maharashtra in the thirteenth century and was put to use by Hemadripant, a prime-minister to the Yadava kings of Devagiri, located at a short distance from famous Paithan. Unlike other parts of the Hemadri’s compendium, the *tīrvha* section is not available, but it is tempting to frame a hypothesis that, similar to other sections, this one, too, might have heavily adopted from the work of its predecessor, and thus spread the information on Banāras and a transit from there to Prayag and Gaya, which had been the main subject of Lakshmidhara’s *Kṛtyakalpataru*. As was painstakingly established by Richard Salomon, many passages of Narayana Bhatta’s *Tristhalīsetu* were word by word copied from earlier authors, including Lakshmidhara, but unlike them he did not just repeat the three names but connected them within a single notion of the *tristhalī* and the network of Maharashtrian Brahmans from the three cities.

I am not aware of other examples in the history of South Asia of the *tristhalī/tristhalī* concept being so literally exploited and elevated to an axiological matter within the mindscape of Marathas and their politics. In his work Narayana Bhatta also encouraged pandits to interpret questions unspecified in sacred texts on their own and recommended actual examples as setting up precedents, ‘Other religious duties of pilgrimage also are to be observed, as they are learned from the practice of refined people’ (Salomon 1985: 261). It was the Maharashtrian nobility, from peshwas to their generals to royal widows, who acted as ‘refined people’ and led caravans of pilgrims-cum-warriors through Maratha-controlled areas towards the *tristhalī*-cities.

As per my queries among North Indian pandits in Banāras in late 2000s, *tristhalī-yātrā* has not been an incentive to Hindus of North India, notwithstanding the separate pull of each of the three cities for various ends. Moreover, the ‘city of light’, as per its cliché image in North India, has not even been the first choice for many North and West Indian regions, as is apparent from various studies, e.g. of Gujarati pilgrimage practice by David E. Sopher (Sopher 1987) or of Himachal Pradesh and parts of (former) Uttar Pradesh’s preferences by Surinder M. Bhardwaj as reflected in his tables of ranking of Hindu sacred places (Bhardwaj 1983: 101, 103, 106–10, 113).⁸

8 Recent news on free pilgrimage for senior citizens (aged 65 and above) in Madhya Pradesh published in *The Indian Express* (12.04.2012) enumerated 14 sacred places included in an approved list with Kashi placed on the seventh position between Vaiṣṇodevī and Tirūpati.

Similarly *tristhalī-yātrā* is not known to be popular to the south of Maharashtra either as a term or a practice. While recording his field experience of the late 1940s M.N. Shrinivas directly referred to Banāras in a retrospective assumption: ‘I am fairly certain that over 50 years ago, only a few Rampurians, most of them Brahmins, had heard of the famous pilgrim centres at Tirupati, Madura, Rameshwaram and Banaras, and even among them probably not more than one or two had visited them. In those days, a pilgrimage to Banāras was regarded as a hazardous enterprise though much less so than in the nineteenth century when a pilgrim’s successful return from it was a fortuitous accident’⁹ (Shrinivas 1980: 320–1). V.N. Rao and S. Subrahmanyam expressed their dismay¹⁰ by having found almost no long-distance pilgrimage-literature in Tamil or Telugu for the period prior to the beginning of the nineteenth century, though they referred to ‘ideal’ Brahman students who ‘must have undertaken [this travel] in medieval period, even if none of them have left us accounts.’ (Rao and Subrahmanyam 2006: 354).

Contrary to the so-called ‘Rampurians’ from Karnataka and ‘ideal’ students from the South, Maharashtrians, and Maratha Brahmans in the first instance, were well indoctrinated for visits to Banāras in the form of *kāśī-yātrā*, i.e. *tristhalī-yātrā*.¹¹ This concept also found its way into colloquial Marathi in a variant pronunciation as *tirsthalī* where it also means ‘vexatious or vain journeying from place to place; running hither and thither on fruitless errands’; as ‘separated and distantly-situated state (of places necessary to be visited, of articles hourly wanted etc.)’; as ‘scattered state (as of one’s business lying in several parts or places): unsettledness or dissipation of mind’.

To conclude: According to Bayly, the growth of pilgrimage ‘reflected the unity conferred on India through the consolidation of the Mughal Empire’ (Bayly 2010: III, 142). Unlike him, Rao and Subrahmaniam were unable to trace Tamil or Telugu texts prior to 1830 that would be related to travel practices in these regions. Nevertheless, they came to the conclusion that it was ‘the East India Company that held

9 This assumption does not correspond with the data on Mysore based Lingayats who maintained a major institution (*math*) in Benares that expanded during the years 1707 to 1780. ‘It purchased more urban property in Benares, having already established itself in Gaya and Allahabad’ (Bayly 2010: II, 141).

10 ‘Why was there no travel-literature in Tamil or Telugu in an earlier period?’ (Rao and Subrahmanyam 2006: 308). The authors analyse a Telugu text entitled *Kashiyatra charitra* published in 1838, never mentioning that the itinerary of Enugulu Virasvami, a Brahman and Madras court interpreter, resembles the *tristhalī-yātrā* of Serfoji II, a Maratha prince of Thanjavur, which the latter had undertaken about a decade earlier, after almost two years of intensive correspondence with British authorities in Madras.

11 These documents and narratives as published in Apte 1919; Bhagvat 1905; Gadgil 1883; Godse 1974; Joshi 1939; Khare 1898–1899, 1909, 1912; Mahadick 1951; Pantsachiv 1936, 1939; Sardesai 1933, 1934; Tryambakkar 1964, etc., etc. and found in manuscripts provided a source material for my study ‘Mobility and Endeavour: Theory and Practice of Tīrtha-Yātrā’ (2008, in Russian). Parts of this study are available in English (Glushkova 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008, 2009, forthc. a, forthc. b).

the space together, provided security, and was the guarantor of traditional circulation of water from Kashi to Rameshvaram' (Rao and Subrahmaniam 2006: 355). Thus they bring us back to the geopolitical dimensions of the 'Maharashtra dharma' as conceived in the earliest of the Maharashtrian chronicles. Contrary to Bayly and Rao and Subrahmaniam, whose judgments reflect their regional bias, my 'alternative view' shows the actual practice of *tristhalī-yātrā* by the Marathi-speaking community, and not merely its awareness of this idea, to have been a product, first, of ongoing contacts of the Maharashtrian pandits of Banāras with the land of their origin and later of the expansion of the Maratha Confederacy in the eighteenth century led by Maharashtrian Brahmans. Consequently, the guarantor of pilgrimage through much of India was neither the Mughal Empire (though it had been earlier helpful to its Rajput allies) nor the East Indian Company (which was supportive to Indians in their service) but the Maratha Confederacy and its princely states, which provided a geopolitical corridor of safety leading to the Banāras of Marathas' dream which was not destined to become true.

Every time I visit Banāras on a 'scholarly pilgrimage', singling it out from the *tristhalī* entity and bridging it from Maharashtra by traveling through former Maratha principalities of Malwa and Hindustan, my 'alternative view' sharpens my vision and cries for a systematic study of the city, not the one known as the 'city of light' but the one which happened once to be a frontier post of 'Maharashtra dharma' and which was looked upon as a creation of the Marathas.

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