

Guides to Śiva's Beloveds: Teachers, friends, and helpers at the sacred threshold of Banāras

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For Omji

Preamble

The intents behind this paper are at least three-fold, although these are closely intertwined. First, as per the themes of the conference where this paper was presented, I wish to provide an homage to the city of Banāras. I do so through references to an assortment of significant individuals – all with some connection to the city – who have guided me in crucial ways in my scholarly and personal life. My second intent is methodological. Here, in part, I wish to illustrate the benefits of using mostly narrative in my presentation, rather than offering a typical scholarly paper (e.g., research findings and arguments in their support) on some feature of Banāras. My rationale for this approach is that narrative is a proven method as an effective form for evoking the substance of experience, as well as capturing facets of human character. And my third objective is pedagogical. In this regard, I hope to inform the reader about some of the charms of Banāras, about some of my published research and related works by others (this is mostly relegated to footnotes), about rationales for and variations in methodology in scholarly discourse (illustrated by the style of my paper), and most importantly, to draw further attention to the people whom I discuss.

Introduction

My first memory of Banāras is of being simultaneously delighted and disconcerted as I tried to make my way through a warren of narrow alleys in search of my hotel. I saw smiling and beckoning merchants – their lips and teeth stained red from chewing *paan*, the ubiquitous betel nut quid I would eventually grow to love. They were selling incense, coloured powders, brass utensils and flower garlands for worship rituals, and a host of other paraphernalia. Occasionally, a mangy dog skittered past my ankles, and I had to avoid the horns of a cow ambling down the cramped lanes, or try skilfully to dodge stepping too deeply into splatters of dung that it had left behind. The year was 1978, and I was in Viśvanātha Galī, the alley just off the broad avenue leading to Daśāśvamedha Ghāṭ, a renowned locale on the banks of the Gaṅgā. At the time I had been travelling in Asia for almost a year, and was seeking directions to the Yogi Lodge, a veritable pilgrimage destination for low-budget travellers like myself. The Yogi Lodge had a choice central location because it was a stone's throw

from the Gaṅgā, and its upper terrace overlooked the most venerated temple to Śiva in all of Banāras, Kāśī Viśvanātha, whose soaring spire gleamed with the over 800 kilograms of gold that encrusted its surface.

Quite honestly, I did not know much about Śiva or anything about Kāśī Viśvanātha at the time, and was simply looking for a budget residence. I probably looked a bit like one of Śiva's frightening cohorts or *gaṇas*, with my long beard and hair that was getting matted. In the spirit of Śiva's *gaṇas*, I did spend almost all of my first night at the Maṅikarṇikā cremation ground, riveted in fascination as bodies arrived with surprising regularity, and were transformed into cinders on the fires before my eyes. In the hours past midnight, with my hair and clothes dusted with ash, and my nostrils full of the smell of the smoke from the charnel pyres, as dogs fought over a piece of bone, I saw a pregnant cow give birth to a calf a few metres away from where I sat. A crescent moon's light illuminated the scene, and dimly reflected off the Gaṅgā, whose flowing waters seemed to witness and testify to the endless cycle of death and life so dramatically juxtaposed and framed for me in that vignette. Perhaps it was at that moment that Banāras left its first deep imprint on my psyche, but I did not know then that I would return repeatedly to this riverbank in the decades that followed. Now it is true that the temple of Kāśī Viśvanātha, the river Gaṅgā, and the cremation grounds are all regarded as beloved by Śiva. However, my paper will focus on two other things beloved to that unconventional, matted-haired, ash-smearing great god, namely, spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*) and the Goddess (*Devī*). More importantly, it will touch upon some of the extraordinary people who have guided me in my understanding of these. Most of these people have some connection with Banāras, which is itself regarded as a city particularly beloved to Śiva. To introduce them properly, I must continue with my narrative.

Guides to Śiva's beloveds

The next day, I found myself walking in the baking hot afternoon in the direction of Banaras Hindu University (BHU). It was then that I first came upon an impressive looking maroon-red temple, whose shape reflected into the waters of a square tank beside it. I found it essentially deserted in the mid-afternoon heat, and was pointed by a boy who watched after one's shoes, to the upper terrace of the quadrangle that surrounded the structure. A horde of mischievous monkeys scampered around, and since their attitude, their droppings, and the scorching floor were too off-putting to me and my bare feet, I hurriedly left the site, and made my way to the cool waters of the Gaṅgā near Assī Ghāt. The young men who ran the Yogi Lodge later told me that I had seen 'the monkey temple.' I had no idea at the time that this temple was dedicated to the goddess Durgā, who would become a focal point for studies that would occupy me for most of my scholarly career. Of course, I did not know then that I would even have a scholarly career.

I had come to Banāras during the course of my Asian travels because it was known as an important religious centre for Hindus who bathed in the Ganges river at dawn. However, I had timed my arrival because I had heard that the Indian born

religious teacher Jiddu Krishnamurti was supposed to be giving talks somewhere in the city at that time. Thus Krishnamurti was indirectly one of my first guides to the sacred city of Banāras. I had read a few books by Krishnamurti while at university, and resonated with his message that one should learn about life through experience, and not blindly follow spiritual teachers, including him, or their teachings, including his own.¹ He pointed to the need for a radical psychological transformation through a profound realization about the deluding nature of thought. I was totally hooked on the notion of such a realization, be it *nirvāṇa*, *mokṣa*, spiritual liberation, or psychological transformation, but did not really know what exactly it meant, or how to go about attaining it. My *samsāric* wanderings in Asia were centrally linked to this quest, but did not involve desperately seeking out gurus or ashrams to join.

I liked Krishnamurti's approach, precisely because it undercut tradition. It was for this reason that I had travelled hurriedly from Manali to Banāras, arriving in the middle of the period of the few days during which Krishnamurti's talks were supposed to have been delivered. To my dismay, a gentleman at the local chapter of the Theosophical Society informed me that Krishnamurti had fallen ill and decided to cancel the last days' discourses. In essence, I had missed him. 'But if you go up to Rājghāt, early tomorrow morning,' the Theosophist said, as if to assuage my disappointment, 'you might be able to see him getting into the car as he leaves.' I shook my head in disbelief as I thanked him for his help. I was trying simultaneously to digest the disappointment of having missed the talks, and processing the psychological and emotional effect of the helpful Theosophist's suggestion. He was suggesting how I could get a glimpse of Krishnamurti, almost as if one might take *darśana* of a deity or a saintly figure. And was this why I had actually wanted to see Krishnamurti? Would hearing his words and seeing him in the flesh have been markedly different from reading his teachings in a book – especially given the nature of his message, which was to not be preoccupied with religious teachers and their teachings? I quickly found myself delightfully freed from the disappointment. As scholars we might reasonably argue whether or not Krishnamurti's notion of radical psychological transformation is identical with Patanjali's idea of *kaivalya*, or akin to the Buddhist notion of *nirvāṇa*, and so on. However, they are all regarded as spiritual liberation, whatever its true nature might be, and spiritual liberation is deeply beloved to Śiva in his persona as the *mahāyogin*, *par excellence*.

So my first encounter with Banāras had actually connected me to the goddess Durgā and to Krishnamurti, two major focal points of my subsequent scholarly work, even though I had not the faintest inkling at the time that I would be doing any schol-

1 Some months earlier, while staying in Madras (now Chennai) at the Theosophical Society Headquarters, I learned a bit about Krishnamurti's life with the Theosophists, who had found him as a teenager and groomed him to be an influential spiritual teacher. To their surprise and dismay, after a pivotal spiritual awakening, Krishnamurti had left the organization that was founded on his behalf, and disbanded his followers, but continued teaching about self-reliance in the quest for transformative realization. On Krishnamurti's life see Lutyens 1975, 1983 and 1988.

arly work in religion, much less on goddesses or on notions of liberation.² In fact, the encounters were ephemeral, even negative, for I missed Krishnamurti's talks, and had a lack-lustre experience at the Durgā temple.

The theme of the conference at which the original version of this paper was delivered was 'Banāras Revisited: Scholarly Pilgrimages to the City of Light.' Our papers and the conference itself played upon the term 'revisited,' for we were intellectually revisiting a city that had a marked influence upon most of the participants who had at least once visited it. And yet I purposely chose to begin with my first visit there, in order to play further with the notion of repeated visits, both physical and intellectual. As for 'pilgrimage,' it most certainly is pregnant with meanings for pilgrims and religious studies scholars. There are, of course, many uses of the term. In common parlance, one might make a yearly pilgrimage to the doctor for a medical checkup, or to visit family members over the holidays. More obviously, we use the term in its religious context for such obvious endeavors as undertaking the Hajj, or the Way of Santiago de Compostela, or the journey to Pandharpur, to Kataragama, or circumambulating Banāras through the Pañcakrośī pilgrimage. In the context of that conference, the usage was again playful, drawing more upon a secular sort of intent, for scholars, especially those who study religion, are most certainly expected to keep arms-length from admission of fully (i.e., religiously) participating in any type of religious activity. So, we certainly were not supposed to have been on real (i.e., religious) pilgrimages to Banāras, the City of Light. They were 'scholarly pilgrimages,' for reasons such as study, or to conduct research.

Here, too, I opted to take certain liberties with the title of the conference's theme, although I do not think I strayed far beyond its parameters, if at all. My decision was informed to a degree by theorists such as J. Z. Smith and Catherine Bell, who have suggested that categories such as 'religion,' or 'ritual,' and by extension, 'pilgrimage,' are scholarly constructions in the first place.³ We construct labels which we then attempt to apply in order to categorize human activity and experience. Pilgrimage, then, is first and foremost an intellectual category constructed by us to circumscribe certain human behaviors. My first visit to Banāras was in many ways a classic religious pilgrimage. Without knowing it or labelling it as such, in my deeply personal and all-encompassing quest, I had actually journeyed from the Himalayas, along the path of the Gaṅgā, to Banāras, to meet with a spiritual teacher who might help point me to my goal. Without knowing it, I had also embarked upon the first phase of my scholarly pilgrimages to Banāras, for both Krishnamurti and the Durgā temple would become foci of subsequent research. The choice of my paper's title also

2 My earlier works on Krishnamurti include Rodrigues 1997 and 2001.

3 See, for instance, Smith (1988: 233), who argues that scholars construct the category of 'religion' as an object of study, much as we construct the discipline of 'religious studies.' In a similar vein, Catherine Bell (2009) points out how 'ritual' is a category also constructed by scholars as part of the modernist enterprise. I am sympathetic to Donald Wiebe's (1991) critique of Smith, when he suggests that Smith may almost be erroneously implying that scholars somehow construct the phenomenon of religion in the process.

plays upon the Hindu tradition of *paṇḍas*, the ubiquitous pilgrimage priest-guides, who are so crucial to the character of Banārasī life.

Almost 12 years later, in 1990, when I arrived in Banāras to conduct my doctoral fieldwork, my attitude to the city was quite different from when I had previously travelled there. In 1978, I was more centrally concerned with finding myself, similarly I suppose to what Mari Korpela (2010) has found among the attitudes of some long-term Western residents of Banāras. By 1990, Banāras had changed. Originally, one of its most memorable sounds was the tinkling of the bells of its many bicycles and cycle rickshaws. But these had diminished and yielded to the beeps of scooters and motorcycles. Ironically, despite these changes, I had almost the same grim experience at the Durgā temple on a hot afternoon on the first day of my scholarly fieldwork in 1990 as I had 12 years earlier. The temple looked absolutely devoid of life and activity, except for the bands of monkeys on the rooftop, and I began to despair about why I had chosen that site as the base of my participant-observation studies on the goddess Durgā for the entire year ahead. The memories of my first visit 12 years earlier now rushed back with greater vividness, and I wished that I had more clearly remembered how unappealing that experience had been.

After spending a few hours admiring the architecture of the temple, which still did not show much activity, I made my way over to the home of Om Prakash Sharma, who lived just across the street. Sharmaji, or Omji, as he was known to virtually all the scholars who have ever visited Banāras, was one of the city's many extraordinary citizens. Omji, who was from Himachal Pradesh, was originally employed by Professor Jonathan Parry of the London School of Economics, to serve as a research assistant for Parry's work in Kangra. Omji later relocated to Banāras to work with Parry on the Aghorī sect. Omji walked the banks of the Gaṅgā, meeting people, setting up interviews, assisting in translations, and so on, and in the process became a research assistant extraordinaire.⁴ A few weeks after the conference at which a version of this paper was delivered, I received news from Professor Rana Singh that Omji had passed away. I felt saddened by the news, but heartened to realize that I had spoken about him in my presentation at Trondheim. Just days before his death, I had also chatted fondly about him while in Portugal with the scholars Mariana Caixero and Fernando Cardoso, both of whom knew Omji and his family. I dedicate this paper to his memory.

4 Parry's work includes *Caste and Kinship in Kangra* (1979) and *Death in Banaras* (1994).



Dr. Om Prakash Sharma (Om-ji), co-ordinator of Karlstad University's Centre for Indian Studies, pictured with the author's daughters at Gaṅgā Mahal, the study centre's mansion overlooking the river Gaṅgā at Assī Ghāt.

Omji had assisted my thesis supervisor, Professor David Kinsley, in his work on Hindu goddesses. Kinsley loved Banāras and conducted much of the fieldwork for his studies there.⁵ I must certainly include Professor Kinsley (or David, as he preferred to be called) as one of my many guides to Śiva's beloved city. Beyond being a major contributor to the movement that spearheaded the study of Hindu goddesses by western scholars, Professor Kinsley was a gifted teacher. His scholarly writing was lucid and engaging, and he also took time to produce materials that would benefit undergraduates.⁶ Kinsley was celebrated by a number of scholars who were inspired by his work. In an anthology edited by Rachel McDermott and Jeffrey Kripal (2003) he was designated as 'the father of Kālī studies.' A festschrift edited by Professor Rana P.B. Singh (2010) includes articles contributed by myself, Xenia Zeiler and Annette Wilke. Kinsley played a pivotal role in inspiring my own efforts to produce pedagogically useful materials for novice students – something that has been oc-

5 For instance, see Kinsley 1986.

6 See, for instance, Kinsley 1982.

cupying perhaps a bit too much of my time of late. Such work is often a labour of love or necessity, because it can be enormously time-consuming, and does not typically receive the recognition from peers and administrative heads that it deserves. And yet, without decent introductory books for budding students, and materials that might inspire them to take up the study of religious traditions more seriously, we risk undercutting the successful development of our disciplines.⁷

At the time of my first meeting with Omji, I was unaware that he was actually a devout Śākta, and thus an invaluable aid in my work. Although he assisted a number of scholars simultaneously, such as my colleague, Christopher Justice, who was then studying death hospices in the city (Justice 1997), Omji always found a way to make time for me, and help me with my research. On that first encounter, when I expressed my concern about the lack of activity at the Durgā temple, he reassured me that I only needed to be patient. To assuage my thirst for witnessing some dramatic religious rituals, he soon sent me off to witness a rite in which an icon of Lāṭ Bhairava is carried in procession at midnight to the Kapālamocana Kuṇḍ, to consummate his marriage with the goddess who abides there. And so, within days of my arrival in Banāras, I found myself wandering with swarms of raucous devotees down alleys in the middle of the night. This would be a far more common occurrence in the months that followed, but on that first occasion, it was quite unsettling. I had no real idea where I was (this was not a ritual I had previously researched), and found myself following a large metal head carried on a palanquin, which stopped dozens of times, at which points a bare-chested priest conducted theatrical *pūjās* with blazing fire and alcohol offerings, and showers of red powder flung onto the crowd. That night's experience was enough to quell my anxiety and yearning for dramatic rituals. I had very little idea about what was going on, but I was left with a thousand questions. Who was Lāṭ Bhairava in relationship to Śiva? Why was he marrying the pond of water where, in myth, Śiva supposedly dropped the severed head of Brahmā that had been attached to his hand? And why were there no foreigners around witnessing this amazing ritual? I soon discovered that my own research would entail plenty of lonely, painstaking work in the months and years ahead.⁸

I do not mean to make myself out to be more naïve than I actually was. In fact, I was much more familiar with India than most young scholars who arrive there to conduct fieldwork for the first time in their lives. After all, I was born in India, and had lived in parts of Maharashtra and Gujarat until the age of eleven. And a little over a decade before my doctoral fieldwork sojourn, I had spent about a year and a half in South Asia of my three years of wandering around in search of *mokṣa*. Moreover, I had read a lot in the intervening years. However, it is one thing to have read

7 Pedagogically oriented works that I have produced include *Introducing Hinduism* (2006), *Hinduism – the eBook* (2006), and *Introduction to the Study of Religion* (2009), the latter co-authored with John Harding. I have also co-authored with Tom Robinson *World Religions: A Guide to the Essentials* (2005), and the eBook, *World Religions Reader: Selected Texts and Symbols* (2010).

8 An excellent study of this ritual is found in Visuvalingam and Chalier-Visuvalingam 2006.

D. C. Sircar's *The Śākta Pīthas* (1948), or Diana Eck's *Banāras* (1982), and thereby to know intellectually that mountains and ponds may be worshipped as *liṅgas* and *yonis*, and quite another thing to see the modes of those beliefs and forms of worship actually in practice. I quickly began to rethink what the Durgā Kuṇḍ, the sacred tank beside the Durgā temple, actually was, beyond simply being a place for devotees to cool off and bathe before entering the temple. I also began to look more closely whether or not there still were or had been wells, caves, springs, or ponds at the sites of other goddess temples, whose natural geographic features might have changed through urban developments, and I still constantly look for the juxtaposition of *liṅga/yoni* symbolic features in tantrically oriented religious sites.⁹

Omji was always aware of the many festival activities that took place virtually daily throughout the city, and through his guidance, I came to have a much richer understanding of the religious life in and around Śiva's city than if I had just focussed on Durgā and her temple. I have some vivid memories of some of our field trips together, such as a journey of over a hundred kilometers sharing the driver's seat in an auto-rickshaw. We went first to the fortress at Chunar, the city where much of Banāras' temple stone is quarried. We continued our journey beyond Chunar to Vindhychal, the site of the renowned temple to the goddess Vindhyaśinī. Dr. Marc Katz, a fellow participant in the Trondheim conference, could certainly share innumerable tales about his involvement with Omji in Karlstad University's Swedish Study Centre for Indian Culture Program. Omji was a veritable *paṇḍa par excellence* for generations of 'scholar pilgrims' to the City of Light.

It was not long before I found that the daily, weekly, monthly and annual cycles at the Durgā Kuṇḍ temple, or Durgājī, as it, or she, is known to most Banārasīs, ebbed and flowed like the seasons. There was much more to the activities at the temple than I had originally thought. The temple came to life during morning and evening *āratis*, the collective rites of adoration, and more so on Tuesdays and Saturdays, when devotees sought the Devī's protection from the pernicious influences of the inauspicious planets Maṅgala and Śani, respectively. And tens of thousands of votaries visited the temple during the spring and autumn Navarātras, in the months of Caitra and Aśvina.¹⁰ Another great celebration at Durgājī was the *śṛṅgāra*, loosely referred to as the birthday of the goddess and the annual temple cleaning and decoration festival. Although the festival at the Hanumān temple of Sankat Mochan is more renowned, for three days the Durgā temple also stages music and dance celebrations that run almost through the entire night. To my surprise, these performances were staged for the Goddess, with the human audience being of secondary concern to the temple organizers.

It was at the Durgājī *śṛṅgāra*, that I first encountered a longhaired and bearded

9 For instance, sites outside of India that vividly demonstrate these features of sexual symbolic polarity, and which have been sacralised precisely because of it, include Vat Phou on Lingaparvata mountain in southern Laos, Kbal Spean in the Kulen Hills of Cambodia, and Huong Tich cave in Vietnam.

10 Studies I have published on the worship of Durgā in Banāras and the Durgā Kuṇḍ temple include Rodrigues 1993 and 2010.

Westerner, who showed up to watch some of the musical performances. He looked very much at home in Banāras; he certainly seemed at home with the city's temple and music culture, as he pressed his way to the front of the audience, sat in a choice position, and then kept time to the *tāla* of the *rāgas*, with which he seemed quite familiar.¹¹ It turns out that this Western music aficionado was none other than Dr. Mark Dyczkowski, who was himself an accomplished sitar player, and was then just beginning to gain international recognition through his early publications on Kashmir Śaivism.¹² Dr. Dyczkowski possessed the generosity of spirit that is so characteristic of the residents of Banāras. He was happy to share his knowledge with anyone who was interested, and organized scholarly talks where established visiting scholars or junior researchers could share their findings with each other. Over the decades I have had many opportunities to meet with and learn from Dr. Dyczkowski, especially as I discovered that Durgā had many more Tantric associations than I had previously imagined.¹³

My access to the Durgā temple was greatly facilitated by Parasnath Dubey, the late *mahant* of Durgājī, and in particular, his youngest son, Raju, who is now, together with his four brothers, one of the major stakeholders in the ownership of the temple. I developed my taste for Banārasī *paan*, after chewing dozens of quids with Raju, and with Om Prakash Agarwal, another friend and indispensable guide to the Goddess. Om Prakash was trained as a lawyer, but practices only nominally. Instead, he runs a *bindi* and bangle souvenir store, on the premises of Durgājī, which caters mostly to female devotees who want to leave with some costume jewellery for themselves or toys for their children after a temple visit. Om Prakash always had a place for me to sit by the front of his store, and plied me regularly with cups of *chai*, and quids of *paan*, as we chatted about all and sundry. His shop's location was directly to the right of the sacrificial pit that faced the main entrance to the inner courtyard of the temple. And so from where I sat, I often had the best view of the only officially sanctioned location in all of Banāras, where blood sacrifices may be performed.¹⁴

11 At the time, I knew next to nothing about Indian classical music, having only appreciated some Ravi Shankar and Alla Rakha, through videos of their performances at the Monterrey Pop and Woodstock Folk Festivals. To learn something more about Indian music, I eventually began to study bamboo flute (*bansuri*) with one of Vārāṇasī's then young shehnai teachers, Sohan Lal (aka Chandra Kant Prasad) and thus began to enhance my appreciation for the rich musical and dance traditions in the city.

12 Mark Dyczkowski's works at that time included: *The Doctrine of Vibration* (1987), and *The Canon of the Śaivāgama and the Kubjikā Tantras of the Western Tradition* (1987). He was in the process of publishing *The Stanzas on Vibration* (1992), and *The Aphorisms of Śiva* (1992).

13 Dyczkowski has since produced other outstanding works, most notably his editing, translating, and annotation of *Manthanabhairavatantram: Kumārikākhaṇḍaḥ: the section concerning the virgin goddess of the Tantra of the churning Bhairava* (2009), in six volumes, three of which contain the Introduction.

14 Over the years I discovered that Om Prakash Agarwal was not just a businessman, but a devout Śākta, who attributed much of his success to the beneficence bestowed upon him by the Devī. In a reversal from what I had originally assumed, about the relationship between women and goddesses, as opposed to men, his wife was sceptical of excessive interest in

I have taken time to talk about persons such as Om Prakash Agarwal, Om Prakash Sharma, Parasnath Dubey and his son Raju because they exemplify a benevolence of spirit and a capacity to teach and share that does not only belong to certified teachers and scholars. In this vein, another remarkable figure in my development was Mr. Manindra Mohan Lahiri. Mr. Lahiri was a Bengali zamindar, who lost much of his landholdings after Bangladesh separated from India. He and his family retired to Banāras, and live in the Bengalī Ṭolā district of the city, where they host one of the few remaining domestic celebrations of the Durgā Pūjā. By this, I mean an elaborate style of Durgā Pūjā, with a full polychromed unbaked clay *pratimā*, the tableau that depicts Durgā and her great lion slaying the buffalo demon Mahiṣa, which will be worshipped over three days during the autumn Navarātra, in the style that is mostly seen in communal public venues throughout the city.¹⁵ It was not long before Mr. Lahiri discovered that I was deeply invested in the study of the Devī, and the entire family began to assist me in every imaginable way. I thus had the opportunity to witness first hand and up close every feature of the Durgā Pūjā rite, from the *bodhana* and *adhivāsa* (the awakening and anointing) rites prior to the first day, to the *visarjana* (immersion) rituals on the final day.

Despite having previously read various books on the ritual, such as the studies by Ghosha (1871) and Östör (1980), I was still overwhelmed by what I saw. I became intrigued by the actions of Pandit Nitai Bhattacharya, the Lahiri family's extraordinary ritualist, who performed *mūdras*, recited prayers, moved around the image, anointing it, dressing it, propitiating it, and so on with a dazzling array of offering materials from incenses, waters, oils, flames, and foods. And he did so with extraordinary grace and dexterity, reading from a text at times, or reciting from memory. What was he saying? What was he doing to himself and the images with his fingers and with those gestures? What was he drawing on the floor? What did those implements and items symbolize? Since he mostly spoke Bengali, I was eventually directed to Pandit Hemendra Nath Chakravarty, by whom I am graced to have been mentored.

Pandit Chakravarty was a student of the renowned Tantric scholar Gopinath Kaviraj, and served as the main *paṇḍita* for the research branch of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) in Vārāṇasī. An expert in Kashmir Śaivism, particularly the *pratyabhijña* system, he assisted numerous scholars in their studies of Tantric and Puranic texts, including David Kinsley, Patricia Dold, and David Peter Lawrence.¹⁶ My own work with Pandit Chakravarty was different in nature, because I sought him out for the study of the ritual worship of the Devī, during the Bengali-styled Durgā Pūjā. As well as being a scholar, Pandit Chakravarty had performed the ritual (either as the

religion in general, and didn't think much of the time and energy Om Prakash gave to his regular rites of worship through the course of a year. Om Prakash was always enthusiastic to show me sites of interest, or to discover them together, and we spent much time over the last decades on his motorcycles careening through narrow alleys in the city to some small temple or some potentially helpful informant's home.

15 See Ghosha 1871 and Östör 1980.

16 See for instance, Kinsley 1997, Dold 2009, and Lawrence 2008.

main ritualist or as the *tantradhāraka*, the assistant) dozens of times, and was able to share with me the nuts and bolts of actions in the celebration of that elaborate *pūjā*, as well as offer insider interpretations of the meanings of particular activities in the ritual process. It took several meetings per week for about half a year, and daily meetings for weeks at a time over the course of a decade, before the liturgical details of the *pūjā* were sufficiently uncovered, and the litany collated and translated.¹⁷ Within that litany, the Goddess is often addressed with the refrain, '*Śaṅkara prīye*,' 'the beloved of Śaṅkara (Śiva),' and this phrase was the inspiration for the title of my paper.

While my studies with Pandit Chakravarty and with the Lahiri family taught me much about Bengali Hinduism in Vārāṇasī, with its intriguing blend of Tantrism and Vedic orthodoxy, my studies with Pandit Bhagiratha Tripathi (aka Vagish Shastri), offered me insights into the life of a more traditionally (i.e., Vedicly-oriented) orthodox *brāhmaṇa*. Pandit Tripathi, or simply Guruji as his western students called him, offered a system of learning Sanskrit that he entitled Vāg-yoga, the Yoga of Speech, which was strongly centered on the sound of the language.¹⁸ Since I was primarily engaged in an anthropologically oriented research on the goddess Durgā, my Sanskrit studies with Guruji that year were mostly an excuse to avail myself of his company and knowledge about aspects of Hinduism. I never ceased to be amazed by the breadth of his knowledge, and his enviable easy access to the content of Sanskrit texts.

However, I had an eye-opening experience early one morning when I arrived at his home in Śivālā, and saw his wife and several other women engaged in an elaborate rite in the courtyard. There was a huge assortment of fruits and other offerings, kitchen utensils, and the like, incense, lamps, and coloured powders. When I went up to see Guruji, I respectfully touched his feet, sat on the cushion on the floor of his library, and asked. 'What is Mātājī doing down there?' 'Oh, some women's ritual,' he replied, and was unable to tell me much more about what was evidently some sort of a *vrata* that his wife was performing. This was evidently part of a women's ritual tradition passed down from mothers to daughters and mostly unfamiliar to even an erudite *paṇḍita* schooled in the textual tradition. I was poignantly reminded – and this realization has been subsequently confirmed on numerous occasions – how the complexities of practices within Hinduism do not simply extend to different sects or regions of South Asia, but may be evident even within the same household. It is through such experiences, in which the complexities of practice can open us to learn about the nature of a religious tradition, as well as because of my interests in

17 This work is written up in Rodrigues 2003. Another related piece is Rodrigues 2005.

18 I wrote a vignette about my first encounter with him in *Introducing Hinduism*, and *Hinduism – the eBook*, my introductory textbooks on the Hindu tradition. I met him on his terrace catching the cool breezes of the evening, and introduced myself and asked if he would be willing to teach me Sanskrit. 'Have you studied any Sanskrit?' he asked. While I began to respond that I had studied it for several years, he interrupted by asking me a question in Sanskrit. I was puzzled and taken aback, because although I knew he was speaking to me in Sanskrit, I had never taken an oral approach to the language, and didn't know what he was saying. 'You don't know Sanskrit,' he said bluntly. 'We shall start at the beginning.'

pedagogy, that I successfully pitched to Routledge the notion of a series of textbooks entitled *Studying Religions in Practice*, which I currently edit.¹⁹

Routes of my ongoing scholarly pilgrimages

There are three main threads to my work these days. One thread is the pedagogic one, which developed through the influences of David Kinsley and the many teacher guides that have touched me through these decades. In this area, my work includes the aforementioned textbooks such as *Introducing Hinduism* and *Studying Hinduism in Practice*, although I have also recently co-written a primer on theory and method in Religious Studies, and have completed a Reader with my colleague, John Harding. A second thread is my work on undefined seekers of the enlightenment experience, which develops out of work on Krishnamurti's teachings. I recently published a paper in *Pacific World* (Rodrigues 2007), and have a book chapter on Theosophical Buddhism and how it played out on Krishnamurti's childhood in a recent publication entitled *Little Buddhas* (Rodrigues 2012). And the third main thread is my ongoing work on the goddess Durgā. I recently published a paper tracing the tantric history of the Bengali styled Durgā Pūjā (Rodrigues 2009), and am still completing my large study of Durgā in South Asia. I have already begun field research on the cult of Durgā in Southeast Asia, notably examining vestigial traces in Cambodia and Vietnam, along with living traces in Indonesia.

Length does not permit me to mention the dozens of other Banārasī friends and mentors who could quite easily have been included in this paper. Nor has it allowed me to convey more than a fraction of what I would like to have said about each of those whom I have mentioned. Despite the wide variations in their livelihoods, lifestyles, and personalities, there was a certain something that they all seemed to share. This was an attitude to life which is an admixture of humor, carefreeness, surrender, and a sort of intoxication with the flavours, or *rasa*, of existence. Perhaps this is why some people make a Hindi pun about the name Banāras as meaning 'making *rasa*' (*bana rasa*), where *rasa* may be construed as anything from consciousness-altering substances, to the crucial essence of all things, especially those at the heart of aesthetic and spiritual experience. Nita Kumar descriptively evokes this Banārasī attitude of carefree intoxication (*masti*) so well in her *Artisans of Banāras*.²⁰ There

19 Initially, Routledge would have liked something to rival the excellent Princeton series *Religions in Practice*. However, even a cursory examination of that series reveals that the contributions therein are mostly not about actual practices, but deal with texts that talk about practice. The first two volumes in the *Studying Religions in Practice* series have already been released. These are *Studying Hinduism in Practice* (Routledge, 2011), edited by me, and *Studying Buddhism in Practice* (Routledge, 2012), edited by John Harding. Unlike the Princeton series, these are written by experienced scholars especially for novice undergraduates just beginning their studies in religious traditions, and focus on religion and the study of religion as it is actually practiced. Each contribution begins with a personal narrative written by a scholar describing their raw experience when engaged in studying some feature of religious practice, and then segues into a discussion of some feature related to the narrative.

20 See Kumar 1988. Her narrative of her initial fieldwork experience is found in Kumar 1992.

is a saying that no *sannyāsin* will ever go hungry in Banāras. One could reasonably extend that by saying no one hungry to learn more about religion will go unsatisfied in Śiva's city. Although the branches of my current projects do not directly focus on Banāras, that remarkable city was the trunk from which these branches sprouted, and many of the city's remarkable citizens and scholar-pilgrims have been, or continue to be sources that inform and inspire my work.

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