

## Ethno-Indology Expanded: Researching mediatized religions in South Asia

Xenia Zeiler

Banāras is often considered to be a microcosm of religious traditions in South Asia, and this perception is partly based on observations of the city's remarkably varied and rich religious life today. On the one hand, we have a large and increasing number of studies based on empirical methods which focus on recent religious practices and developments.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, as many of the flourishing recent beliefs and practices have their origin(s) several hundred years (or more) ago, most of the major textual sources on religion in the city have been translated. But it is a rather new and fruitful methodological approach to contextualize specific themes, and to combine well-grounded textual studies with comprehensive ethnological fieldwork. Such an ethno-indological approach enables us to study religious characteristics and developments by viewing them in their historical-textual as well as contemporary-practical settings. But most importantly, it facilitates the deciphering of transformation processes in the formation of religious traditions.

I first started doing ethno-indological research in Banāras some 15 years ago, in the mid-to-late 1990s. Since then I have often returned to Kāśī, attracted by the city's rich religious past and present, and its unique display of lived religion. In the course of several longer stays in and shorter visits to the city my view on details of the city's multiple realities sharpened. While researching transformation processes in religious traditions, I myself experienced transformations regarding both my academic and personal perspectives and approaches. In my ongoing 'scholarly pilgrimages' to the City of Light and with the support of Ethno-Indology, the diversity of *banārsī* religious histories and present practices revealed itself in a much more intense and multi-layered way than I had expected.

Here, I first want to present examples from two of my major ethno-indological projects. My first research explored the temple of Vīreśvara (Ātmavīreśvar in today's language use) in the center of Banāras. This temple is mentioned already in the formative text *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* from the fourteenth century and is consistently perceived as *kāśīkhaṇḍokta* (lit. 'as told in the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*'). I translated a mythological narrative on the temple and its rituals from the *Śivapurāṇa* as a starting point and then

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1 Most of the contributors in this book have repeatedly published on these subjects with a focus on Banāras. See, for instance, Katz 1993, Keul 2002, Kumar 1995, Rodrigues 2011, Singh and Singh 2006, Wilke 2006, and Zeiler 2011.

conducted fieldwork, including participant observations and interviews, for several months to gather detailed information, especially on the temple's recent ritual as compared to ritual instructions in the *Śivapurāṇa*. By means of this methodical approach, I was able to separate untransformed from transformed ritual practices and to discuss questions of continuity and change of *kāśīkhaṇḍokta* ritual traditions.

My second long project to date applying ethno-indological premises and methods focused on the goddess Dhūmāvātī, and on transformations from her original, textual, Tantric-esoteric, and highly dangerous representation to her recent interpretation as a mainstream and benevolent district goddess, a *mohallā devī*. To analyze her Tantric textual tradition, I translated all the sources on Dhūmāvātī available to me, including for the first time the respective chapters on Dhūmāvātī in the *Mantramahārṇava* and *Śāktapramoda* from Sanskrit. To study the contemporary beliefs, ritual practices, and representations, I undertook extensive fieldwork in the temple of Dhūmāvātī in the *mohallā* (lit. 'district/quarter') Dhūpcaṇḍī for nearly two years. By unfolding developments and transformations starting from Dhūmāvātī's textual origin up to the lived tradition, I was also able to discuss general processes of integrating Tantric heteropraxy into Hindu orthopraxy as well as widespread 'saurmyaization' (lit. 'pacifying/sweetening') and unification tendencies, which often in contemporary Hindu tradition declare minor (wild) goddesses a (mild) manifestation of Mahādevī or Durgā. Additionally, in this project I analyzed the concept of district deities and discussed their characteristics and formation.

But in addition to presenting findings and conclusions from ethno-indological research in Banāras, in this article I aim at another major objective. Concluding the article and my reflections, I shall give an outlook on an expansion or widening of the established ethno-indological approach, which I feel is essential in response to the new situations and actualities of present-day life in South Asia. It is widely visible (and more and more researched) that the influence of modern mass media on society and culture, including religious traditions, is increasingly significant – no less so in South Asia.<sup>2</sup> Consequently I therefore argue to include research on the mediatization of religious traditions as one important issue in the research on present-day religious contexts. As Ethno-Indology explicitly stresses the importance of studying contexts along with texts, it is only consistent to specify the contemporary context accordingly and to include the influential field of mediatization in addition to the already accepted field of practice. Today, religious beliefs, symbols, practices, etc. are (re)interpreted and (re)constructed in modern mass media – such as film (i.e. cinema, TV, VCD, etc.), the press (i.e. newspapers, magazines, yellow press, etc.), the Internet (i.e. forums, homepages, etc.), and digital games (i.e. computer games, console games, etc.) – as much as in historical texts or as in lived practices. I will also discuss how in South Asia, the renegotiated topics presented in the so-called new media are incor-

2 Studies on the influence of new media on South Asian religions include, for instance, Dwyer 2006 on film, McLain 2009 on comics, Scheifinger 2010 on the Internet, and Zeiler 2014 on digital games.

porated by many religious actors in their own belief and religious practice. As such, media discourses today are as important as issues and topics presented in established texts. Recent religion is thus actively reshaped by and in the modern mass media. To amplify the ethno-indological approach in a way to meet this new situation, we thus need to proceed from the study of classical texts plus contemporary context, consisting of recent practices, to the study of classical texts plus contemporary context, consisting of recent practices including mediatized practices and beliefs.

*Doing it the ethno-indological way*

To study the complex and diverse aspects of transformation processes in religious traditions in Banāras and elsewhere in South Asia, it is inevitable that one adopts an interdisciplinary approach. In general, the need to contextualize written sources, i.e. the need to study the anthropology of texts along with the textual sources, has been acknowledged ever since the cultural turn in the humanities. In particular and most importantly, for the study of South Asian religions this has meant acknowledging the interrelations of popular culture and religion (so-called little traditions) and sanskritized orthopraxy (so-called great traditions) and, as a logical consequence, increasingly valuing regional studies, vernacular languages, and fieldwork.<sup>3</sup> In my opinion, to highlight and accredit the intense diversity and complexity of South Asian religious traditions in such a way and to search for and offer new methodological approaches for their study is the most important outcome of the cultural turn in the humanities for indology and for the study of South Asian culture and religion.

Among the new approaches, Ethno-Indology offers an adequate methodology to analyze textual traditions in combination with recent religious praxis and perceptions of belief systems, including for instance the transformation of deities or of religious concepts and ideas. This approach, with its balanced emphasis on textual and historical representations, and on popular, often non-textual and contemporary representations of any chosen tradition, enables us to give detailed answers to questions of (a) enduring transformation processes in general, and (b) the role and status of textual tradition for the development of recent religious praxis and beliefs in particular. The term 'Ethno-Indology' was coined by Axel Michaels, who undertook and supported many studies in India and Nepal. Michaels (2005: 11) commented on the fruitful reciprocal influence of studying text and context:

If, thus, Indology opens up to an intensified study of the contexts of texts, if it also accepts fieldwork as a legitimate, adequate and proper (and not just supplementary) method for an appropriate analysis of the contents, functions and productions of texts, if it tries to combine the results of the textual and contextual studies with anthropological theory, it then situates itself at the confluence of philology, anthropology, and history. It is this confluence which I call Ethno-Indology [...].

<sup>3</sup> See Michaels 2005: 9. For a general discussion on the cultural turn and Indology, see Michaels 2004.

Because I was primarily interested in studying precisely the transformations of religious traditions, Ethno-Indology was my chosen method for all of my major projects up to the present. Another important reason to prefer this method above others was the fact that I never felt satisfied by analyzing just one side of the coin. My academic as well as my personal experience concerning Hindu and Tantric religions clearly prevented me from defining textual evidence as a major or final product of religious developments, or to see older texts disconnected from modern interpretation and lived practice. On the other hand, contemporary belief systems and their representations and practices, more so in South Asia, were never fully comprehensible to me without also intensively tracing their (textual) origin and background. In theory, this was very clear to me already as a student. However, I experienced the full impact of such an approach in practice only during my initial ethno-indological studies in Banāras.

*Researching the past and present of Kāśīkhaṇḍokta traditions: the Temple of Vīreśvara*

The diversity of religious traditions in Banāras and the fact that interpretations of religious priorities shifted (at times extensively) in the course of history was by no means fully apparent to me right from the beginning. Quite on the contrary: my first longer stay in the city, correlating with my first ethno-indological project in the mid-to-late 1990s could have led me to the conclusion that religious practice and ritual in the city's temples had remained remarkably stable for several centuries.

The textual basis of the temple called Ātmavīreśvar today lies in the prestigious *kāśīkhaṇḍokta* tradition. The *svayambhū* (lit. 'self-originated') liṅga, situated above Sindhiā Ghāṭ near the famous temple of Saṅkatādevī, is mentioned several times in purāṇic literature. The most detailed mythological versions are found in *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* 83.1–59 and 10.42–11.34 as well as in *Śivapurāṇa*, *Śatarudrasaṃhitā* 13–15. All mythological versions consistently ascribe a special merit to the liṅga – the granting of a child. According to all origin myths of Vīreśvara, the liṅga was well established in the pan-Hindu context, and devotees from all over India came to worship here, especially to obtain a son. Thus the liṅga's roots can textually be traced back at least to the (early) medieval ages. Not surprisingly, today the temple still relies heavily on this textual authorization and legitimizes its own importance by drawing on the textually sanctioned tradition. This is well known by devotees who regularly visit the temple, but also non-regular visitors are made aware of it in the temple.

As much as this high esteem of the *kāśīkhaṇḍokta* tradition and the respective textual and mythological background did not surprise me, something else did. What I did not expect with such intensity was the extraordinary stability of the ritual tradition here. The first thing I discovered in my fieldwork was that, unlike very many *banārsī* liṅga temples known to me, there was a very elaborate and complex daily evening ritual undertaken by the temple's ritual experts, the *pūjārīs*. The official daily ritual routine in the temple includes four rituals that – at least in their basic forms – are quite widespread in Banāras, namely a *pratankālin* (lit. 'revealing

or beginning time') pūjā in the morning, a *bhoga* (lit. 'feeding') pūjā at noon, a *sayankālin* (lit. 'evening time') pūjā in the evening and a *rātrikālin* (lit. 'night time') pūjā at night. Though all of these are performed in an exceptionally detailed way, the evening ritual in particular is outstanding. The temple of Vīreśvara, to the best of my knowledge, is one of only three temples in the city that daily performs an elaborate *saptaṛṣi āratī* (the other two being the city's most visited temples, Viśveśvara and Kedāreśvara). This special form of temple ritual is performed in a number of North Indian Śaiva temples and has its mythological base in a ritualistic offering of camphor flames to Śiva and Pārvatī on their wedding night by the mythological seven ṛṣis, *saptaṛṣis*. The *saptaṛṣi āratī* as performed in the temple of Vīreśvara is based on the purāṇic *ṣoḍaśopacāra-pūjā* (lit. 'worship with 16 steps'), and daily includes all offerings prescribed for this ritual, such as perfume, scent, clothing, flowers, food and light, and climaxes in the ritual presentation of the camphor flame.<sup>4</sup> This waving of flames, *āratī*, which devotees are welcome to attend, is the daily temple ritual's highlight. But it is outstanding not only in terms of elaborateness. It also serves as a direct link to the tradition based on the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*. Daily in this worship, the hymn *abhilāṣaṣṭaka*<sup>5</sup> or the even more detailed version of this hymn, the *vīreśvarastotra*,<sup>6</sup> are recited. Thus, in the *saptaṛṣi āratī*, the textual basis of Vīreśvara is daily directly staged and re-enacted. The ritual's mythological background as well as its importance for the temple (and beyond, for the general structure of *kāśīkhaṇḍokta* tradition)<sup>7</sup> would have passed me unnoticed without the approach of Ethno-Indology.

This is all the more true for a second ritual 'specialty' of the Vīreśvara temple. A particular and very elaborate ritual proceeding at the temple's largest festival, Mahāśivarātri, is performed here. And again, it is based on ritual practice as precisely described in textual tradition. The *Śivapurāṇa* gives a detailed account of how to celebrate the most important night for Śiva worship. Three long chapters, *Kotirudrasaṃhitā* 38–40, advise the subdivision of the night into four periods. For each of the three-hour periods, individual ritual procedures are prescribed. Unlike other temples in Banāras that also extensively celebrate Mahāśivarātri (such as the temple of Viśveśvara) and include a subdivision of the night into four periods but repeat the same ritual in each division, Vīreśvara is the only temple actually performing each division with individual rituals (see Figure 1). To stick this close to the textual prescriptions of sanskritized tradition (and to even surpass the temporarily pre-eminent Viśveśvara, which also heavily draws on the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* for legitimation in Mahāśivarātri ritual) is a clear and openly visible statement about the temple's positioning in this tradition.

4 For a photographic sequence on the ritual, see Gutschow 2006: 21.

5 *Śivapurāṇa*, *Śatarudrasaṃhitā* 13.42–9. In the hymn the ṛṣi Viśvānara praises the boy Vīreśvara, who appears to him right out of the liṅga with lit. '8 verses expressing his desires'. See *Śatarudrasaṃhitā* 13.41.

6 The *vīreśvarastotra* is a supplemented version of the *abhilāṣaṣṭaka* with 17 additional verses. They contain the basic mythological story of Vīreśvara from the *Śivapurāṇa*.

7 For *kāśīkhaṇḍokta* as religious authorizations in pilgrimage practice, see Gengnagel 2005.



Water oblation (*rudrābhiṣeka*) to the liṅga Vīreśvara as part of the second ritual period of Mahāśivarātri

Ethno-indological methods enabled me to trace the background of the temple's recent ritual practices, self-legitimation, and status. Without knowing this at the beginning, my first project in Banāras led me to a temple which still has very strong textual (*kāśīkhaṇḍokta* and purāṇic) bonds that are perpetuated, deployed, and propagated by the temple itself. Probably the most important outcome of this project was that the text and context of sanskritized traditions may very well still correspond without major alterations in Banāras, and that in the case of Vīreśvara (and surely in other cases as well) effort is taken to indeed actively preserve and re-enact the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* background and to disapprove of transformations, especially concerning ritual. Essential rituals and mythologies from the textual tradition defined as *kāśīkhaṇḍokta* are still strikingly alive in the temple of Vīreśvara, with regard to both the daily and the festival procedures.

*Transformations of Tantric traditions: Tantric representations and the Mohallā Devī Dhūmāvātī*

A high proximity of text and context, as found in the case of Vīreśvara, was not to be expected right from the beginning in my second ethno-indological project. For an extensive PhD research project, I analyzed transformations of the Daśamahāvidyā

goddess Dhūmāvātī from her Tantric textual origin to present representations and rituals in Banāras. In my understanding, she not only exhibits one of the most interesting textual backgrounds among the Daśamahāvidyās but also a unique modern representation in Banāras.

For this research, I again chose to use the combination of methods from two academic disciplines that I had tried and tested before. To describe, analyze, and interpret the complex transformations of Dhūmāvātī in representations, rituals, and iconography, I first analyzed her textual tradition. Also, with the help of erudite local scholars such as Hemendranath Chakrabarti and Mark Dyczkowski, I translated all the sources on Dhūmāvātī available to me at that time, both printed and in the form of unpublished manuscripts. The most important outcome of this process was a translation with commentary of the chapter *Dhūmāvātītantra*, included in both *Mantramahārṇava* and *Śāktapramoda*, from the Sanskrit for the first time. In general, I was able to present, translate, discuss, and analyze every important textual source on the goddess and to gather information on her original Tantric representation.<sup>8</sup> These studies, of course, were essential to understand the recent ritual praxis and modern representation of Dhūmāvātī in her *banārsī* temple, and to unfold the developments and transformations from her textual origin up to the lived tradition.

In order to study the contemporary beliefs, ritual practices, and representations, I undertook extensive fieldwork in the temple of Dhūmāvātī in the *mohallā* Dhūpcaṇḍī for nearly two years. Using various empirical methods, such as participant observation and interviews, I collected data step by step. As the temple and the presiding goddess had never before been studied *in extenso*, I first collected basic data on virtually all major (and many minor) activities and practices in and around the temple, using primarily empirical, social research methods. I spent hours each day in the temple, attended all festivals, visited all affiliated temples, and spoke to a large number of devotees in the temple and in their homes. Altogether I conducted interviews with 246 temple visitors on their beliefs and ideas on Dhūmāvātī. Questions were asked on the textual background as well as on present rituals, worship, and the general belief system in the temple. All ritual specialists in the temple, i.e. the *pūjārīs*, and members of their families, and 23 devotees with a special connection to the goddess and her temple were repeatedly interviewed individually and at length.

My previous (and at that time ongoing) textual research and my subsequent knowledge of the Tantric textual representation of Dhūmāvātī proved beneficial for the interviews, and obviously motivated my interview partners to share their ideas and beliefs with me. I was and still am very grateful for the welcome given to me in the temple. Without the support, interest, and general acceptance from the *pūjārīs* and devotees of the Dhūpcaṇḍī temple, my fieldwork would never have been possible.

The research on the textual tradition of Dhūmāvātī disclosed a goddess firmly integrated into the Tantric belief and ritual system. From the first reference in

<sup>8</sup> For translations, analysis and discussions see Zeiler 2011: 47–97 and 2012: 169–88.

the eleventh-century *Śāradātilakatantra* (*paṭala* 24, 10–14) onward, the goddess remains remarkably stable in her representation, ritual, iconography, and function for more than six centuries. The most important textual passage for the goddess is a *dhyānamantra* (lit. ‘mantra for reflection/meditation’) in the fourteenth- to the sixteenth-century *Phetkārīṇītantra*. It is still regularly incorporated into texts on the goddess up to the present and gives a clear account of her Tantric textual representation:

She is pale and fickle, angry, of high stature and wears dirty clothes. Her hair is discolored. The widow is rough and has intermittent teeth. She sits on a cart which has a crow in the banner. Her breasts hang down. In the hand she holds a winnowing fan and her eyes look very cruel. She has unsteady hands and her hand shows the gesture of wish-fulfilling. She has a big nose, is exceedingly deceitful and has crooked eyes. Permanently afflicted by hunger and thirst she arouses horror and has her abode in conflict.<sup>9</sup>

This influential *dhyānamantra* strongly influences Dhūmāvātī’s representation up to the present. This is especially true for her visual representation: depictions of the goddess in every modern compilation I traced, as well as most of the paintings of Dhūmāvātī known to me, depict the goddess according to this textual passage.<sup>10</sup> This iconographical and conceptual representation of the exceptionally dangerous and dark goddess corresponds with the *siddhis* (lit. ‘magical skills’) and ritual procedures ascribed to Dhūmāvātī. With no exception, the goddess is closely associated with *śatrunigraha* (lit. ‘restraining an enemy’) and *uccāṭana* (lit. ‘dispelling’), and her ritual is entirely tailored to render enemies inoffensive or harmless. Naturally, iconography, character, function, and ritual mutually influence each other. The harmful, terrifying, and dangerous potential ascribed to Dhūmāvātī stretches across all aspects of her Tantric representation.

Only in the late nineteenth century, in the nearly contemporaneous texts *Mantramahārṇava* and *Śāktapramoda*,<sup>11</sup> does a transformation become visible. For the first time in her textual history, Dhūmāvātī is praised in longer hymns (namely in *stotra*, *kavaca*, *hṛdaya*, *śatanāmastotra*, and *sahasranāmastotra*). These poetic hymns now also contain ideas and beliefs from a sanskritized Hindu orthopraxy *in addition* to the established Tantric exoteric representation and ritual practice. It is quite late in her textual tradition that we first find tendencies of ‘saumyaization’ as well as general unifying tendencies trying to propagate a new identity for Dhūmāvātī as belonging to the pantheon of pan-Hindu goddesses. This goes so far as to partially identify Dhūmāvātī with the virtuous Durgā-Mahādevī, acting in favor of the universe and of human beings. But interestingly, at no point do the attempts at this seem to aim at

9 *Dhūmāvātī-dhyānamantra*, *paṭala* 7 of the *Phetkārīṇītantra*, translated by the author.

10 For a discussion of Dhūmāvātī paintings from different periods and regions, see Bühnemann 2000: 123.

11 For the background and dating of both sources, see Zeiler 2011: 64–8 and 2012: 176–7 and 181–2.



fully concealing Dhūmāvātī's Tantric identity. On the contrary, it is typical for the hymns in *Mantramahārṇava* and *Śāktapramoda* to propagate both identities side by side. The hymn *hṛdaya*, for instance, states:

Requested by the gods she was born as the destroyer of Asuras. I worship this smoke-shaped one, who mutters and roars aloud.<sup>12</sup>

I worship Dhūmāvātī, who destroyed Andhaka, whose form is darkness, who looks like a rain of smoke and whose bun of hair is untied, the wise one.<sup>13</sup>

Dhūmāvātī is here linked to Durgā – by placing her birth in the mythological context of Durgā's origin in the first verse and by identifying her with Durgā as the destroyer of Andhaka in the second verse – as much as she is linked to her own original textual Tantric background – by calling her a smoky figure uttering unconventional sounds in the first verse, and by presenting the iconographical characteristics of Dhūmāvātī's Tantric visualization as having untied hair and being closely connected to smoke in the second verse. Such an interweaving of Tantric and non-Tantric representations without particularly accentuating one over the other is characteristic for the new hymns in the late nineteenth century. Thus, even though a new sanskritized Hindu identity was partly added to the original Tantric identity, Dhūmāvātī's textual tradition has basically remained Tantric up to the present. All modern compilations on the goddess, without any exception, refer to precisely her Tantric tradition and only extremely few texts actually also include the new hymns.<sup>14</sup> Not one single text goes beyond this, and thus beyond accepting two identities side by side at the most. To compose and include the mentioned hymns in Dhūmāvātī's textual tradition remained the only innovations until the present.

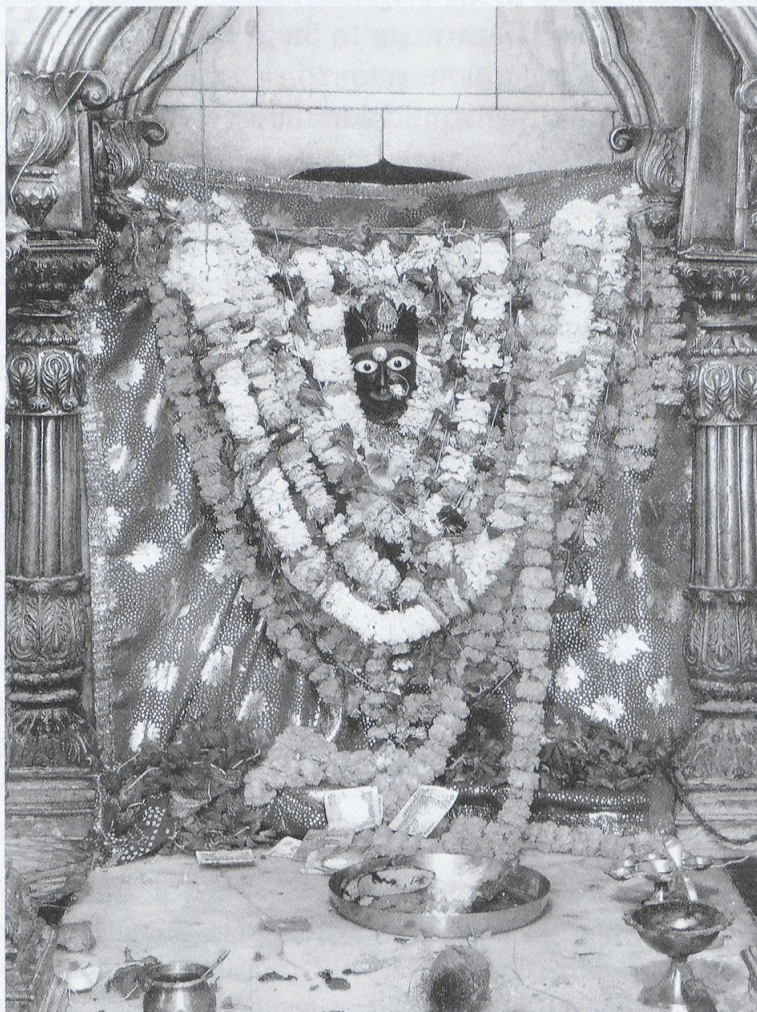
It is all the more interesting to reflect on the outcome of the extensive fieldwork in Dhūmāvātī's temple in Banāras. Owing to the ethno-indological approach, it was possible to verify that the goddess's Tantric background played only a very minor role at Dhūpcaṇḍī, and that her representation underwent extreme transformations. In the *mohallā* named after its presiding deity, Dhūmāvātī rose from a very exclusive and restricted Tantric background to a widely known and highly important status as *mohallā devī* (lit. 'district/city-quarter goddess'). This representation dominates all aspects, beliefs, and practices in her temple. She is assigned a number of functions, for instance she is believed to be responsible for the protection of the quarter's inhabitants and their daily well-being and prosperity. As such, the goddess here exhibits many links to local popular or 'folk' beliefs and practices. This becomes clear, for instance, by looking at the practices of ritual and worship in daily routine as well as in festivals.

12 *Hṛdaya* of the *Dhūmāvātītantra* chapter, verse 8, translated by the author.

13 *Hṛdaya* of the *Dhūmāvātītantra* chapter, verse 17, translated by the author.

14 For compilations on Dhūmāvātī after the late nineteenth century, see Zeiler 2011: 85–97 and 2012: 182–8.

Daily, the *pūjārīs* conduct two simple rituals in a manner widespread in the temples of Banāras. Both are based on the purāṇic *pañcopacāra-pūjā* (lit. ‘worship with five steps’). The iconographical presentation of Dhūmāvātī also widely corresponds to the usual way of presenting the statue in the city’s goddess temples: she is preferably dressed in red or yellow and is adorned with a crown, ornament on the forehead, and nose-ring (see Figure 2). This clearly denotes her as a prosperous married goddess (as opposed to her Tantric status as portentous widow). Besides, the festivals celebrated in the temple also account for the closeness of the goddess to local and only partly sanskritized traditions and for her status as *mohallā devī*. In particular, lifecycle rituals and rites of passage, including wedding rituals, regularly take place in the temple. This proves how thoroughly Dhūmāvātī is understood to be a benevolent district goddess who is also responsible for the family affairs of her devotees. This was further confirmed in interviews with devotees, who consistently mentioned wishes for their business to flourish (as a basis for the material welfare of their family), for family prosperity, and to have children as their most important requests to the goddess. All mythological origin stories in her temple also stress the bond of goddess and quarter.



*Dhūmāvātī statue in her temple in Banāras*

In the process of Dhūmāvātī's transformation into a *mohallā devī* there are primarily two tendencies at work. Both are widespread in Hindu religious traditions. First, the recent developments in the temple Dhūpcaṇḍī are characterized by the tendency to integrate Tantric heteropraxy into Hindu orthopraxy. Though such processes are at an advanced stage in the temple, they are not yet fully concluded – rather, as in the case of the textual development, Dhūmāvātī's exoteric and esoteric representations and ritual practices at present exist side by side and are still being continually negotiated. This is especially indicated by the Tantric ritual practices conducted by a small number of devotees and some *pūjārīs*.<sup>15</sup> Second, like many other 'wild' goddesses, be they from a Tantric or a 'folk' background, Dhūmāvātī is liable to attempts of 'saumyaization' and unification, declaring her a (mild) manifestation of Mahādevī or Durgā. Thus the processes of transformation initiated in the late nineteenth century's textual tradition also have an effect on the Dhūpcaṇḍī temple. But it is important to note that the transformations here go one step further than the texts – important are not only 'saumyaization' and unification, but remarkably these processes are intensified in contemporary religious practice by declaring Dhūmāvātī the local presiding deity. In the concept of *mohallā devī*, a benevolent, caring, and protecting representation is already understood per se.

During my research I became aware that the functions and impacts of district deities, in Banāras and elsewhere in South Asia, stretch beyond the religious field in a narrower sense of the word. These deities also play an essential role for the general image and self-perception of the community in a city quarter, i.e. for the development, formation, and negotiation of identity. In Banāras, beside *banārsīpan*<sup>16</sup> as a city-wide lifestyle and a feeling of identity expanding beyond the borders of single quarters, we also find *mohallāpan*,<sup>17</sup> an awareness of identity in the neighborhood and community, in the quarters themselves. A powerful and well-regarded *mohallā devī* is not only important as an identification factor for the inhabitants in a certain quarter, but also for the presentation beyond the quarter, i.e. for the positioning of the *mohallā* in the city and for the delimitation of areas. Yearly festivals for district deities, which are not only visited by inhabitants of the quarter itself, also present the community beyond its own *mohallā*. Internally, in the quarter, district deities (and their festivals) sustain *mohallāpan*, and externally, in the city, they support inter-communal communication and, with this, *banārsīpan*.

Dhūmāvātī meets all these requirements; she is a prime example of a well-regarded and influential district deity in recent South Asia. Regardless of her very specialized textual representation depicting her as an exclusive Tantric deity with a very limited and exceptionally dangerous sphere of action, she was successfully transformed into a widely respected, benign, protective goddess with a sphere of action meeting the needs of her present devotees. As far as we can say, since the early nineteenth century, she has been presented in a new multifaceted and rich representation

15 See Zeiler 2011: 293–308, 319–27 and 342–7.

16 See, for instance, Katz 1993: 26–8 and Kumar 1995: 72–82.

17 See Katz 1993: 177.

in her *banārsī* temple. To me, the research on these radical transformations from text to (recent) context opened new, deep, and intense insight into the complexity and diversity of the city's religious traditions and practices. But it especially also revealed to what extent a textual tradition can be altered. This specific ethno-indological research made it very clear to me that new conditions, such as changes in communal structures or new requirements of devotees, have an essential and direct influence on transformations in the pantheon and in the belief systems of contemporary South Asia. Necessarily, changes of setting provoke a redefining of established religious patterns, deities included.

*Mediatized transformations of Hinduism: the Temple of Śītālā*

Not surprisingly, fieldwork in Banāras is also included in my present research project. But for this research, I will apply a new, amplified, and widened ethno-indological approach. In order to credit the recent developments and changes in South Asia, i.e. the increasing influence of modern mass media on religious traditions, I will broaden the interdisciplinarity already inherent in Ethno-Indology and include media-analytical approaches and methods in my research on recent transformations of Hindu goddesses. In the *banārsī* context, recent Hindu beliefs, symbols, and practices are being (re)interpreted and (re)constructed, especially in the press, in films and TV serials, on devotional music videos on VCD ('video compact discs'), and increasingly also on the Internet and in digital games. These new media serve as platforms for renegotiations, which may have effects reaching from the consolidation of existing religious structures, beliefs, and practices to their complete restructuring. In either case, it is important to note that for many religious actors today the tenor of information given in a popular devotional music video is just as important and formative as information in a classical established text. In fact, it is one of the first outcomes of my recent studies that information on, for instance, deities, their iconography, mythology, or established ritual which is expressed in popular media such as film or music used on a daily basis is more important to many religious actors than the information presented in established texts. With the emergence of new media, not only a new quantity, but also a new quality of (re)negotiation is taking place.

There is no question about the massive impact of mediatization processes on religious traditions. This is true also for Hinduism in South Asia as well as in a global context. For western contexts, mediatization is an established concept that has been defined as a process with immense influence on society and culture:

Today, we can say that mediatization means at least the following:

- (a) Changing media environments [...]
- (b) An increase of different media [...]
- (c) The changing functions of old media [...]
- (d) New and increasing functions of digital media for the people and a growth of media in general.
- (e) Changing communication forms [...] (Krotz 2008: 24)

It has been rightly argued that this also necessarily implies consequences for researching religion in the age of modern mediatization:

Religion, we argue, cannot be analyzed outside the forms and practices of mediation that define it [...]. [T]he point is to explore how the transition from one mode of mediation to another, implying the adoption of new mass media technologies, reconfigures a particular practice of religious mediation. (Meyer and Moors 2006: 7)

Here, I want to present one example of research on mediatization in a contemporary *banārsī* religious context. To illustrate possible (re)negotiations in modern mass media and their high relevance for recent religion, I chose one type of media: the very popular VCDs with devotional songs. My study focuses on one music video in which the singer, the Bhojpurī superstar Manoj Tiwari, praises the temple of Śītalā at the banks of Gangā. In the music video *Śītalā Ghāṭ Pe Kāśī Mem* ('On Śītalā Ghāṭ in Kāśī') from 2009, we find several levels of negotiations of religious authority, including the authority of religious experts, the authority of the temple as a religious institution, and the authority and pan-Hindu influence of the goddess herself.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, the goddess Śītalā has a long history of negotiations and transformations, even before the age of modern mass media. Originating from a non-urban, non-brahmanic and only partially sanskritized background,<sup>19</sup> she was transferred into urban settings and now has also been successfully incorporated into the sanskritized tradition. Although this development started centuries ago and is accounted for in the texts,<sup>20</sup> processes of mediatization in the last thirty years obviously strongly supported and still support the negotiation of a 'new Śītalā,' a goddess transformed in order to fit in modern mainstream Hinduism. For instance, along with the spread in urban settings, the goddess was also successfully established as a goddess for the middle classes. Probably in connection with this, her traditional sphere of action was expanded and Śītalā is increasingly believed to govern new diseases besides smallpox, including AIDS.<sup>21</sup> Central to such negotiations of new functions, practices of worship, and the general status of the goddess in a pan-Hindu frame are questions of religious authority on several levels.

In his music video 'Śītalā Ghāṭ Pe Kāśī Mem' (2009), Manoj Tiwari sings:

It is the bank of Gangā, it is the Kāśī town of Bābā Bhole, and there is Śītalā Mātā's temple at the bank of Gangā. Then how could there be no faith? [...]

Mother Śītalā is the mother of the whole world and she is the happiness provider to the world. If any trouble will come in this world, if any trouble will come in this world, immediately I'll inform mother, I'll go to bend my head there at Śītalā Ghāṭ in Kāśī. [...]

18 *Śītalā Ghāṭ Pe Kāśī Mem* in the devotional VCD-album *Bāḍī Śer Par Savār*, T Series, New Delhi, 2009.

19 See, for instance, Wadley (1980).

20 See, for instance, Stewart (1995).

21 See, for instance, Ferrari (2010).

I'll go to the Durgā temple of Durgākunḍ to have darśan [...]

Hey! I'll offer food to mother Annapūrṇā and to Sankatmocan.

By closely analyzing the narrative and the visual presentation of this music video, we can identify a complex structure of authority negotiations (see Table 1). Of course, the goddess herself is a major figure of religious authority, set in the mythological frame of the Hindu pantheon. Second, the Śītalā temple at Śītalā Ghāṭ and its status among important temples and, as such, in the general religious landscape of Banāras is an object of negotiation in the video's narrative. Third, the temple's *pūjārīs* are visually set in scene in the video as the only authorized religious experts. Questions of authority are relevant on even another level. The video stages one of the most important Bhojpurī-language superstars, Manoj Tiwari, who belongs to the Bhojpurī-speaking community that constitutes the largest number of Śītalā devotees in general, and certainly the largest in Banāras. He is often perceived as 'one of us' and his appearance in the video surely adds authority to the information presented for many listeners.

This small study exemplifies the extent to which existing structures and beliefs may be negotiated in modern mass media. In the case presented here, we first find a clear propagation and consolidation of existing personalized authorities, namely of the temple-owner family Paṇḍey, which belongs to one of the most influential temple-owner families in the city with administrative shares in many important temples. The family provides all *pūjārīs* in the Śītalā Ghāṭ temple, and some of them are visualized in the video. Second, the video actively tries to increase or upgrade the existing institutionalized authority of the temple by directly equating it with other major temples in Banāras. But the video goes even further and, like many other recent VCDs with devotional songs for goddesses, places Śītalā in a particular setting, namely that of praising the pan-Hindu Mahādevī Durgā. By defining Śītalā as one aspect of Durgā and by *de facto* equating both goddesses, the already existing mythological authority of Śītalā is massively strengthened. Accordingly, in the eyes of her devotees, Śītalā is part of the pan-Hindu pantheon. Thus this music video particularly contributes to the forming of a 'new Śītalā' in recent Hinduism. Even though it stages a specific *bānārsī* background, it is received by a large audience, far beyond the city. Future research will have to verify precisely how this new information is integrated into individual beliefs and practices by the religious actors themselves.

Table 1 Music video ‘Śītalā Ghāṭ Pe Kāśī Mem’ by Manoj Tiwari, 2009. Authority negotiations implemented in the video and levels of authority

Authority negotiations implemented in the video	Levels of authority
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Direct visual embedding of the official <i>pūjārīs</i> from the owner family in the video</li> <li>• Embedding the temple into local temple hierarchies in the narrative, linking the temple to the pilgrimage centre Banāras (Durgā, Annapūrṇā, Sankatmocan)</li> <li>• Embedding Śītalā in a VCD praising the panhindu Mahādevī Durgā (VCD ‘Bāḍī Śer Par Savār,’ lit. ‘She Who Rides a Lion’)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local level, temple-wide: personal authority (of religious experts as exclusively in charge)</li> <li>• Regional level, city-wide and beyond: institutional authority (of the temple as influential shrine)</li> <li>• Pan-Hindu level, nation-wide: mythological authority (of the goddess as supra-regional, pan-Hindu deity)</li> </ul>

*Conclusion: a vote for expanding Ethno-Indology*

From my first visit on, there was no doubt that Banāras was going to affect and shape me on an academic as well as a personal level. I owe innumerable magnificent experiences and astonishing insights to the city and its lifestyle, and *banārsī* friends have had a large impact on me. In this article, I have primarily concentrated on how my academic research in the city underwent reflection and progress.

During my recurring visits for ethno-indological projects, one of the issues I increasingly became aware of was the change based on mediatization in everyday life. The intensified media production, use, and reception has led to a complete rearrangement of the religious setting in Banāras in the last 15 years. For instance, while there were nearly no signs of the new media in and around the temple of Dhūpcaṇḍī in the major phase of my fieldwork from 2002 to 2006, the first thing I came across while visiting the temple in 2010 was a video shoot for a VCD, with devotional songs, staging the goddess and her temple. The goddess, who was not very important beyond the *mohallā* before and whose representations were negotiated within this specific frame, is now propagated and renegotiated on a very broad, in fact pan-Hindu, scale. Such developments finally led me to fundamentally reconsider my research interests and foci and, along with this, my methodological approaches to studying South Asian religions.

To research South Asian religious traditions in view of the new realities of present-day life means relying on the well-proven approaches – with amendments to address those new realities. As religious beliefs, symbols, practices, etc. are (re)interpreted and (re)constructed in modern mass media as much as in historical texts or as in lived practices, Ethno-Indology has to include the study of modern mass media as a new domain in the study of context. This extension or specification of the contemporary context seems all the more consistent regarding the acknowledgement of contexts, which is a priori inherent in the approach. To study in practical terms new media and their effect on South Asian religious beliefs and practices, Ethno-Indology needs to draw on methods from a number of disciplines,

including, for instance, methods from visual anthropology and from the analysis of film, audio and web material in addition to the established methods of ethnological fieldwork.

Apart from this, it seems to me that there is one more reason to argue for an expansion or widening of the approach. I pointed out earlier that, in my opinion, Ethno-Indology offers a solid methodology to study transformations in South Asian religious traditions – be they Hindu, Tantra, Jain, or other. But Ethno-Indology in fact is also a solid methodology with which to study the complex and multifaceted structures of recent religion. As much as the established approach contextualizes texts – by studying recent practices and interpretations around these very texts – it also, of course, contextualizes recent practices – by studying their historical textual base(s). This seems important to me as thorough research on the influential field of mediatization of South Asian religions should best be undertaken with attention to the scriptural bases of the beliefs, symbols, practices, etc. which are (re)interpreted and (re)constructed in modern mass media. A large number of the (re)negotiated issues in the so-called new media based on established texts and both textual backgrounds and new mediatized interpretations necessarily have to be studied in relation to each other. In the study of recent South Asian religious traditions it is therefore, in my understanding, as essential to keep the textual backgrounds and bases of recent mediatized issues in mind as it is to accept that today's contexts are widely mediatized. An expanded Ethno-Indology draws attention to these reflections and offers a fruitful approach for researching South Asian religions, from historical textual as well as recent textual, practical, and mediatized perspectives.

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