

## Moments of Discovery in the City of Light: Proud tribals, Viśvanāth plays Holī, and the Potter's Taziya

Marc J. Katz

### *A prologue*

My first visit to Banāras was in 1968 as a participant in the University of Wisconsin College Year in India Program. For a young third-year university student every day in Banāras was a day of discovery. And, as I was to learn via many later visits to the Holy City, there remains so much to be discovered. The 'Great Place of Pilgrimage' (*mahātīrtha, mahāsaṅgam*)<sup>1</sup> of Banāras has brought together multiple currents of Indian tradition for at least 3000 years. Reflecting many of these different currents, each neighbourhood (*mohallā*) of the city has a special character and composition of socio-economic, ethnic and cultural diversity. Each *mohallā* has its own particular mix of culture and traditions representing both ancient, less ancient, and more contemporary trends. The cultural matrix, or potpourri, is complex. There can exist no one definitive description of Banāras. Through good fieldwork new revelations are continuously made. More than forty years of observations allow for reflections over cultural/religious change and continuity. Turning the corner in the journey through the streets and lanes of Banāras often challenges older perceptions.

This essay presents three separate 'turning-the-corner discoveries' made in Banāras while researching three independent projects, and spanning a period of more than 40 years: 1) the proud tribals of Pushkar Pond (1986–2009), 2) Viśvanāth Śiva plays Holī (*holī*) (1969–1995), and 3) the Potter's *imambara* and *taziya* of Śivālā (2002–2003).

'Discovery', as used in the title, is a misleading term and actually refers to personal discovery, revelation, or 'moments of awakening'. Neither Christopher Columbus nor Leif Ericsson "discovered" America – it had been already there and populated for several millennia. So, too, my 'discoveries' in Banāras are merely 'moments of awakening' for myself, a Western and Indian educated Indologist, who sorely needed tangible contact with the field in order to clarify, and in many cases correct, classroom and library education. Over the course of time I have had innumerable experiences in Banāras that might be called 'turning-the-corner discoveries'. That is the attraction. Banāras indeed is the 'City of Light'.

1 *Mahātīrtha*, 'Great Place of Pilgrimage' or 'Great Place of Forging the River of Life', i.e., Banāras; *mahāsaṅgam*, 'Great Confluence of Rivers (Minds, Ideas and Souls)', i.e., Banāras.

1. 1986–2009: *Proud Tribals of Pushkar Pond*

As a student I learned that in Indian villages and cities there were people who identified themselves as *ādivāsī* (tribal) with an *anārya* (non-Aryan) ancestry. This was confirmed when researching the ritual dramas, the *lilās*, of Banāras. The boatmen (*mallaḥ*) of Banāras often refer to themselves, and sometimes even title themselves, as Niśād tribals. The legendary Niśād were the liminal tribal boatmen/fishermen who occupied both the Aryan (*ārya*) northern shore and the non-Aryan (*anārya*) southern shore of the Ganges near Allahabad when Rām is said to have started his journey through the microcosmos or sacred circle (*maṇḍala*) of India. Rām was transported to the *anārya* south by Guha, the king of the Niśāds.<sup>2</sup> Boatmen of Banāras still refer to this meeting of Rām with the Niśād king as the divine moment when their ancestors were uplifted through their meeting with God and became *ārya*.<sup>3</sup> Thus the boatmen of Banāras have their given roles as Guha and the Niśād tribals in the community dramatizations of the story of Rām, the Rāmlīlā.<sup>4</sup>

When researching the Rāmlīlā of Banāras (1986–1993) I was surprised to find yet another local community, identifying themselves as tribals, who maintained a long-time and intimate relationship with the Rāmlīlā of Assī. I recorded the following:<sup>5</sup> This community refers to themselves as Goṅṛ and has traditionally served as important participants in the Assī Nākkatāiyā Līlā procession by drawing and servicing the trolleys and holding significant character roles in the floats mounted on these trolleys, known as *lāg* and *vimān*. The floats are constructed together with local metalworkers who expertly arrange a system of metal lattices and supports on which costumed children, representing the gods, are placed. The end result is an artistic illusion of flight, or hovering, above the trolley.

The Goṅṛ resided in a cluster of simple households adjacent to the Pushkar Pond (*kunḍ*) in the outskirting southern Banāras neighborhood of Nagwa. This socially low-caste group with a past associated with tribal culture is perhaps related to the larger Central Indian tribal group known as the Goṅḍ (*Goṅḍ*).<sup>6</sup> The Goṅṛ of Nagwa

2 The *Rāmcaritmānas* of Tulsīdās refers to Guha as the Niśād king of Shringavera, an ancient city on the bank of the Ganges near present-day Allahabad.

3 Katz 2007: 73–82. The term *ārya* refers to those, both tribals (*ādivāsī*) and non-tribals, who have contact with the illuminating knowledge of the Veda. Vālmīki, the sage who authored the first Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* was an *anārya* tribal and became *ārya* in his meeting with the boy-God Rām. Divine knowledge was imparted in the meeting, thus turning the *anārya* to *ārya*.

4 Besides representing Guha and the Niśād in the Rāmlīlā of Assī, the boatmen of Assī have more traditional roles. They propel the effigy of the evil giant snake, the *Kāliya Nāg*, which floats in the Ganges at Tulsī Ghāṭ during the dramatization of *Nāgnathaiyā Kṛṣṇa Līlā*. Boatmen also serve as the protectors of the *svarūp* Krishna who dramatically jumps into the river to battle the snake. (Katz 2007: 51–54)

5 Katz 2007: 56–57, 93–94.

6 See also M. A. Sherring, who speculates upon the Banāras Goṅṛ relationship to the tribal Goṅṛ, or Goṅḍ of Central India, in *Hindu Tribes and Castes as Represented in Benares*, Vol. I, pp. 339–340.

were also called a sub-clan of the North Indian agricultural service and palanquin-bearing caste known as Kahār. They claimed that their caste origin is traceable to the marriage of Śiva and Pārvatī. Their myth of creation, as related in their own oral tradition, was well known by all members of their Nagwa community, including small children. The content of this clan myth also sheds light on the Goṅṛ association with the Nākkāṭaiyā Procession. The following rendition is from Parmeshvari Devi, the elderly matriarch of the Goṅṛ of Nagwa:

The gods in attendance at Śiva's marriage convinced the groom (Śiva) that he needed to find a suitable transport for his bride (Pārvatī) since his own vehicle – the bull Nandī – was unfitting for such a fine lady. Śiva therefore dug up some common clay and formed four piles. From each of these piles arose a bearer: the four progenitors of the four Kahār clans who carried the wedding palanquin, in which Pārvatī rode. The Kahār, even at birth, were very fond of the intoxicating juice of the palm tree, the toddy. When they arrived with Pārvatī's palanquin at the home of Śiva, they were all drunk and immediately fell asleep. Shortly after the bridal palanquin arrived, the goddess Lakshmi emerged from Śiva's house to reward the bearers for their effort. A Baniya (a Vaiśya merchant) stepped forward and explained that the bearers had fallen asleep out of drunkenness, but he would gladly accept the reward for himself. Lakṣmī gave the Baniya the reward of worldly success. She cursed the Kahār with the task of forever carrying heavy burdens and never achieving great wealth. After they awoke from their drunken stupor, each of the four palanquin bearers departed in separate directions each representing one of the four quadrants where the four Kahār clans reside: The Dhuriya departed to the East. The Kharvara departed to the North. The Jaisvara departed to the West. And the Goṅṛiya (or Goṅṛ) departed to the South.<sup>7</sup>

As this legend suggests, the Goṅṛ are said to be people of the earth, and though impecunious, nevertheless a people of great strength. They are proud of their heritage and the mythologically associated role they play in Banāras tradition and ritual. Even today the Goṅṛ are employed for the purpose of bearing the wedding processional palanquins utilized in the Banāras area village districts and by traditional families of Banāras city proper. The female members of the Rāmnagar royal family are carried by Goṅṛ bearers from scene to scene during the performance of the Rāmnagar Rāmlīlā. And, at the occasion of the Assī Nākkāṭaiyā, a large number of processional floats, including the cherubic portrayals of wedding couples, are transported by trolley-rickshaws driven or owned by Goṅṛ. Perhaps most interesting is the long-standing Nagwa Goṅṛ tradition of casting children from their clan in the proces-

7 The creation myth of the Kahār and Goṅṛ was related by different persons on separate occasions, in tape recorded interviews with Parmeshvari Devi of the Nagwa Goṅṛ and various members of her family, on February 10, 1990, and in a tape recorded interview with Raja Rām, a 35-year-old trolley-rickshaw driver of the Nagwa Goṅṛ, on February 10, 1990. Though M. A. Sherring (1974: 340) distinguishes between the Goṅṛ and Goṅṛiya, the local Nagwa Goṅṛ family, and other Banāras informants, make no such distinctions and claim that 'Goṅṛiya' is the local Bhojpuri form for 'Goṅṛ'.

sional roles of Śiva and Pārvatī, artistically displayed in the magical metal *lāg* arrangements of the Assī Nākkatāiyā procession.

The ‘Myth of the Goṅṛ’ was related to me by Parmeshvari Devi, the matriarch grandmother of the largest of the Goṅṛ families of Nagwa. Her name is indicative of her strong Śaiva affiliation. She proudly presented her six-year-old grandson who was honored with the role of Śiva in a *lāg* of the Assī Nākkatāiyā procession of 1989. She explained the personal importance of this role: ‘We believe in Śaṅkar (Śiva) because we received our birth through Śaṅkar.’<sup>8</sup> A crowd of Goṅṛ gathered during the interview. Many, if not most, claimed that they too had in their youth portrayed either Śiva or Pārvatī in the magical *lāg* floats of the Nākkatāiyā. Many photos were produced to substantiate their claims. Parmeshvari Devi and the Goṅṛ of Nagwa were evidently quite proud of their participation within the Assī Rāmlīlā and their inclusion within the community of Tulsīdās.

To what extent the boatmen of Assī and those families calling themselves the Goṅṛ of Nagwa are indeed ‘tribal’ is not the issue. The important point to emphasize is that they maintain an *ādivāsī* ‘low-caste’ self-identity with pride – a working class pride of earning their sustenance through honest hard labor in contrast to the deceitful Baniya in Parmeshvari Devi’s story. And, moreover, they express a deep sense of inclusion within both the Līlā and community of Rām.

Tulsīdās further legitimized the ongoing process of tribal acculturation of his time. Two hundred and fifty years later, tribal acculturation was still in progress and quite apparent in Banāras. M.A. Sherring, writing in the 1860’s, reports that there were as many as 33,000 Vindhya Range Bhar tribals within Banāras (district) struggling through the process of cultural assimilation: ‘In most of the cities and towns, and in not a few of the villages likewise, scattered members of the tribe are found. They exhibit little tribal cohesiveness, or *esprit de corps* [...]’ (Sherring 1974: 373). Today, however, the Kol-Bhīl and Niśād passages of Tulsīdās’s *Rāmcaritmānas* and their dramatization within the Assī Rāmlīlā, primarily carry ‘low-caste’ associations with which a wide range of Banārsī Līlā spectators can identify. The tribal/Śūdra association is an intentional by-product of Tulsī’s theme – perhaps reflecting the presence of more ‘incorporated’, caste-denominated tribals (or Śūdra) than ‘unincorporated’, un-denominated tribals in 16th-17th-century Banāras. I refer to Bhārat’s momentous first encounter with Guha. Bhārat, the divine brother of Rām, is said to have affectionately hugged Guha as he would hug Lakṣmaṇ, i.e. as his own brother. As reported in Tulsī’s *Rāmcaritmānas*: ‘Even a Caṇḍāla, a Sāvāra, a Khāsa, a stupid foreigner, an outcast, a Kol, or a Kirāta, by repeating the name of Rāma becomes wholly pure and renowned throughout the world.’<sup>9</sup>

8 Tape-recorded interview with Parmeshvari Devi, February 10, 1990.

9 Growse 1987: 337, Hill 1952: 239–240, Prasad 1989: 371–372. See also Growse’s notation (1987: 337): ‘The word translated ‘*Chandala*’ is in the original *Sva-paca*, literally ‘a dog-cooker,’ i.e. either one who feeds on dog’s flesh, or who cooks food for dogs – ‘a dog keeper.’ *The Laws of Manu* (X.51–56) (Bühler 1969: 414–415) equate the ‘*Chandala*’ and the ‘*Shvapach*’, stating that they both should live outside the village, by the same rules, and perform

The inclusion of tribal elements in the community of Rām, and their union with God, is clearly demonstrated in the final dramas of the Rāmlīlā. Following local tradition, the concluding procession of the Assī Bhāratmilāp Līlā halts for a moment of mutual respect. Rām and his divine brothers, known as *svarūp*<sup>10</sup>, are presented to a low-caste family of Assī boatmen. These boatmen title themselves as Niśād and symbolically represent Guha and the Niśād – for both the audience observing this intimate-level performance and in their own everyday consciousness. Witnessing this paradigmatic event in 1986 was Vinod, a 12-year-old Līlā devotee whose father ferries passengers across the Ganges in the same manner as the mythical Niśād tribal-boatmen. Thus, Vinod received an ancient message of divine and brotherly communion. The didactical experience is known as *sākhya rasa*, the ‘sentiment of love and friendship’, and is found throughout the 16th century text and dramatic production of Tulsīdās. The intentions of the saint’s text and Līlā are identical. The effects are tantamount.

### *An epilogue*

Since 2005 I have held annual workshops on ‘neighborhood studies’ for the students of the Malaviya Centre for Peace Research (MCPR) at Banāras Hindu University (BHU). The students are carefully divided into working groups and each group is assigned a different neighborhood for their study of neighborhood traditions. I regularly visit the student groups in the field while they collect their information. In 2009 I arranged to meet the Nagwa group for discussions at a pleasant teashop with a quiet courtyard near the Ravidās Park in Nagwa. While sipping tea we struck up a conversation with the two brothers who ran the teashop. The question was raised, ‘which communities reside in Nagwa?’ It was mentioned that there were many milkmen (*yādav/āhir*) in Nagwa, and someone asked the young managers (in their late teens or early twenties) if they were Yādavas. Their automatic and unpretentious response was: ‘No. We are *ādivāsī*! We are Goṅṛ!’ There was a sense of unashamed pride in their voice.

Urban development has changed the face of Banāras. What were previously unattractive and easily flooded low lands and bushy fields in Nagwa have been developed. Some clusters of mud hut dwellings still remain. But the simple cluster of village-like

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the same functions. The Shavara (or Shabar) were most likely an Austric/Kolerian tribe of Orissa and Central India and are described in both the Vedas and the Epics (Kane 1974, vol. 2: 96; Walker 1983, vol. 1: 558; vol. 2, 172–176). *The Laws of Manu* (X.22) (Bühler 1969: 406) define Khasha as the offspring of a Vrātya (outcaste) and Kṣatriya. Some editions of Manu refer to Khasha as ‘degenerate’ Kṣatriya (i.e., Vrātya) who have ‘gradually sunk in this world to the condition of Shudra’ through neglect of their Vedic duties and disrespect for Brahmins (X. 43–44. Bühler 1969, n. 44: 412–413). The *Vayu Purana* (II.1.124, Tagare 1987–88: 467) names Khasha as one of the three tribes of the Vindhya descended from the Niśād and created from the sacrifice of Vena. Kol and Kirāt are tribal designations.

10 *Svarūps* are male Brahmin child actors of the Rāmlīlā and the Kṛṣṇalīlā regarded as the temporary residence of the deities they depict. Here the term *svarūp* refers to the reunited four divine brothers, Rām, Bhārat, Lakṣmaṇ and Śatrughna.

homes of the Goṅṛ, which I first visited in 1986, no longer exists. It has been replaced by apartment buildings and upper scale homes. The Goṅṛ had previously occupied this land for generations. Now they were dispersed. I am sorry to say that I do not know if they have maintained, in their diaspora, their intimate relationship with the Assī Rāmlīlā. But, in 2009 I met two proud and self-aware young men (who were probably not even born in 1986) who clearly stated without a hint of shame: ‘We are *ādivāsī*! We are Goṅṛ!’

## 2. 1969–1995: *Viśvanāth Plays Holī*

My first experience of Holī, the important springtime festival of North India, was as a twenty-year-old student at Delhi University in 1969. It was important for us students on the day of wet-color play that besides coloring each other and everyone in our student hostel, we visit our professors. I remember visiting the homes of the anthropology professor M.N. Srinivas and Hindi professor Usha Jain (among others). We playfully smeared them with color, and they us, and afterwards we were invited for small refreshments. There was a strange and wonderful equality and informality to the day. Wandering the campus and adjacent neighbourhoods with Indian students, I was no longer the foreign student but instead a full member of the clan. As we passed through one narrow residential lane an extraordinary meeting occurred. Everyone moving through this lane was first escorted by the residents to a garden, where a large tub of colored water was arranged. No one escaped. Several friendly and strong arms lifted each and every visitor and deposited them into the tub. One after one, each visitor was immersed. No one was excluded. Thereafter, freshly colored with a purplish-red nuance, friendly hugs and snacks were offered. The elder of one of these host families gently hugged me after my baptismal immersion. Holding on to my newly colored arm, he extended his own purplish-red forearm in comparison. He said in explanation: ‘Look! You see: in reality we are all one color! We are the same! Everything else is illusion! Many *ātman* (individual souls), but one *brahmānd* (Universal Soul)!’

In 1969 I took many snapshots with my newly purchased, and easily handled, Kodak Instamatic. I wanted to record all the colorful events of that mind-changing day. Someday, I told myself, I would make a film. After having subsequently re-played Holī many times in the sacred city of Banāras, I finally arranged financing for a Holī film in 1994–1995. I immediately set about researching the topic. Of course I was already well familiar with the now classical anthropological assessment of *lāṭhī*-Holī in Mathura district as presented by the University of Chicago anthropologists McKim Marriott and Victor Turner. But ever since that eventful baptism in the Holī of 1969, I had felt that there was indeed more to the celebration than simply a moment ‘ritual inversion’ where the lower echelons of society were allowed to run amuck and rule for a day. I had felt the *communitas*. But I had experienced an ‘all-inclusive’ *communitas*. It was more than an instant of liminality.<sup>11</sup>

11 Holī in Mathura district (Uttar Pradesh), where women commonly beat men with sticks

I sought the advice of many Banārasīs. I posed the questions: ‘How do you celebrate and play Holī? What is the significance of Holī? Who celebrates Holī? Why? What should I include in a film on Holī?’ I asked temple priests and persons well acquainted with orthodox (*śāstrik*) ritual and literature. I asked high caste Banārasīs, middle caste Banārasīs, and low caste Banārasīs. I asked women and children. The major criteria was that they should be born Banārasī. I interviewed formally educated Banārasīs and those without education. Westernized friends and acquaintances residing within the protective walls of the new colony estates or the Banāras Hindu University, many of whom were not ‘true Banārasīs’, could not understand my purpose. The same response could also come from those who had turned their backs on what they regarded as merely ‘folk (*laukik*) tradition’, and rigorously avoided the street fairs (*melā*) of Banāras. They asked me: Why research and make a film about Holī – a vulgar and dirty event for the low caste and ‘lumpenproletariat’? This is not the true Indian tradition, they insisted. But many ‘true Banārasīs’ residing in the heart of the city, regardless of caste and class, seemed to understand my purpose and encouraged me to look at the wonder of Holī – the rejuvenating springtime ritual in all of its facets.<sup>12</sup> A picture slowly emerged revealing a sequence of related ritual events, which may be called the Holī season. The greater Holī was much more than an isolated event of wanton drunkenness, debauchery, and wild color play. In its entirety, Holī could be seen as a healthy series of welcome annual rituals resulting in a symbolic cleansing, melding and renewal of a multi-cultural community. It became apparent that Holī is not merely a festival for the low-caste, but for all.

As is common for major ritual festivals, there are a number of preparatory Holī rituals that serve both to awaken the anticipation and to underline the importance of Holī. The preparatory rituals of Holī are often communally inclusive and begin approximately a month prior to the lighting of the Holī fire. The Basant Pañcamī and Sarasvatī Pūjā are considered to be the starting point of the springtime Holī season. Basant Pañcamī is literally the fifth day of spring and the start of the two-day festival for the goddess of the arts and education, the Sarasvatī Pūjā. The occasion is traditionally observed in homes and in most educational institutions of Banāras.<sup>13</sup> The Sarasvatī Pūjā is characterized by the central role of community youth (as in Holī) and their street-side establishment of extravagantly decorated clay Sarasvatī images in provisionally erected tents for worship (*pūjā paṇḍāl/maṇḍap*) in almost every neighbourhood of the city.<sup>14</sup> These public “neighbourhood celebrations” are

(*lāthī kī holī, Mathura kī holī*), is described by Marriott (1968: 200–212). See also Victor Turner’s commentary in Turner 1977: 185–188.

12 Encouraging voices included Veer Bhadra Mishra (d. 2013), the former *mahant* of the Sankat Mochan temple (Katz 1996).

13 Christian missionary schools and Muslim madrasas do not normally organize school celebrations of the Sarasvatī Pūjā. However, many Christians and Muslims (and students of these schools) will join in the celebration either as individuals or as active members of a Sarasvatī Pūjā society.

14 Students of the Malaviya Centre for Peace Research (MCPR) at Banāras Hindu University

mostly organized by student societies and youth organizations – often created by the neighbourhood youth for the sole purpose of performing the Sarasvatī Pūjā. The Sarasvatī Pūjā is an important exercise in communal inclusion encompassing all sectors of Banāras society. Many, if not most, of the Sarasvatī clubs and societies are multi-ethnic/class/caste and represent all the four *varṇa* and the many *jāti* of the neighbourhood.<sup>15</sup> The concluding ritual procession is generally held on the evening of the second day when the clay statues of the goddess are carried in revelry and pomp through the community to the riverside ghāṭ and a final dissolving immersion in the Gaṅgā. The play with dry color powder during this closing processional phase of the Sarasvatī Pūjā is a forewarning of the wanton gaming during the oncoming celebration of Holī. It is also generally understood that the Sarasvatī Pūjā colors only represent a ‘smattering of the spring’ that is unleashed in full glory at the time of Holī. Immediately after the conclusion of the celebration of Sarasvatī, community youth will meet and start planning their next ritual adventure: the organization of the community Holī fire and celebration. Immediately after the Sarasvatī Pūjā, one finds that in the open spaces of Banāras neighbourhoods the Holī bonfire heaps are already in place. And though these piles of burnable refuse are at first small, they noticeably grow in size day by day.

A week prior to the festival of Holī, wherever one turns in Banāras there are indications of spring and Holī. One reliable sign is that the neighbourhood Ashok trees have blossomed in colorful glory. In the early morning hours the shopkeepers of the bazaars rearrange their stalls and begin displaying the implements of Holī play: color powder, squirting instruments, and festive hats. In the adjacent rural areas, the play with color has already had its soft start. Milkmen and villagers, who supply the city with foodstuffs and wares, are seen bicycling into the city in clothes spattered with red color. Wherever one wanders, in all neighbourhoods of the city, from dusk to dawn, one finds multi-caste groups (*maṇḍal*) of friends and neighbours, cheerfully gathered in some residence or public place where they passionately sing the folk songs of the season. These are the teasing songs of love and spring, the *phagua* and *viraha*, and the (often lewd) melodies known locally as *holī* and *kabīr*.

### *Raṅgarī Ekādaśī*

Researching and understanding the day known as Raṅgarī Ekādaśī in 1995 was definitely a ‘turning-the-corner awakening’ for me. Four days prior to the burning of the Holīkā fire, and five days prior to the play with colors, the Holī festival is officially started by the deities of the city. The day is known as Raṅgarī Ekādaśī, the Colorful Eleventh. This is the eleventh day of the lunar month of Phalgun. On this

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(BHU), working under my supervision in 2009 recorded sixteen Sarasvatī clubs/societies in Nagwa and twenty in the Assī neighborhood known as Bhadaini.

15 For the communal inclusive aspect of these clubs and societies see Katz 2007: 220–260 and Katz 2005. Fieldwork research conducted under my supervision by the MCPR at BHU during 2005–2010 has reconfirmed the communally inclusive aspects of a majority of Sarasvatī Pūjā clubs and societies in south Banāras.



day, the deities of Banāras symbolically receive a spattering of the red colored powder known as *abir*. Even the temple ponds, such as the famous pond of Maṇikarṇikā Ghāt, will be colored.<sup>16</sup> These ponds symbolize the divine womb, the mother deity, from whom all life is brought forth. A popular Banāras event, drawing many observers, is the annual draining and subsequent coloring, with handfuls of red *abir* powder, of the important Maṇikarṇikā Kuṇḍ – said to be the first pond and first place of pilgrimage in Indian tradition. The melodious Sanskrit ceremony is performed under the leadership of one of the famous and most respected Brahmin Pandas of the city. Both the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* of the *Skandapurāṇa*, and the *Śivapurāṇa* state the ancient Maṇikarṇikā Kuṇḍ to have been carved from the earth by Viṣṇu himself. Using his discus, Viṣṇu dug the pond in his very first act of creation. He filled the cavity with the sweat of his toil, producing the first life-giving water. Śiva, the paramount protector of Banāras, witnessing this accomplishment danced so jubilantly that his earring fell into the pond. Therefore, this sacred water and the first place of Hindu pilgrimage were named *maṇikarṇikā*, the Jewelled Earring.<sup>17</sup>

Symbolically, as stated in the *Śivapurāṇa*, the fruit of the Maṇikarṇikā womb are the all-inclusive creations of Puruṣa in the form of Viṣṇu, together with his consort, personified Prakṛti. It is written that the Universal Soul, the *nirguṇa* (attributeless) Brahman, creates a being with attributes, the *saguṇa* Śiva, who divides himself into two, thus forming his female consort, Śakti. Śiva and Śakti create the male Puruṣa (said in this text to be Viṣṇu) and female Prakṛti who were given the task of creating the universe. But there was no world to serve as a base for them to perform their penance (*tapas*), and generate the cosmic meditative heat needed for creation. Śiva therefore created the holy city of Banāras (extending five *krośa* = *pañcakrośī*) the first earth. After performing austerities in the newly created city of Śiva (Banāras), Puruṣa/Viṣṇu thereafter began his creation, digging the Maṇikarṇikā Kuṇḍ with his discus. He brought forth the waters of creation (*kṣīrsāgar*), Brahmā (from his navel), the Cosmic Egg and, as is told in the Rīg Veda, divided himself (i.e. Puruṣa) into the four classes (*varṇa*) of mankind. I agree with Diana Eck that Banārasīs are especially proud of Maṇikarṇikā Kuṇḍ and are very much aware that it was here, according to Hindu tradition, that all creation began – including the all-inclusive creation of the community of Man/Woman (the four *varṇas* from Puruṣa/Prakṛti).<sup>18</sup>

16 See the 1995 Raṅgarī Ekādaśī at Maṇikarṇikā Kuṇḍ (Katz 1996).

17 Eck 1983: 240–251. Tagare 1996: 236–238.

18 Eck 1983: 240–251, Shastri 1969: 1340–1343. The *Śivapurāṇa* states that Śiva created Banāras as Prakṛti and Puruṣa's creative base: 'Then a beautiful city endowed with requisite articles, the auspicious essence of brilliance extending to five Krośas was created and established by Śiva devoid of attributes [*nirguṇ*, my notation], in the firmament near the Puruṣa' (Shastri 1969: 1340). The Pañcakrośī pilgrimage of Banāras honours this creation by means of a five-day walk around the five-*krośa* border, a distance of approximately 55.2 miles. For a description of this pilgrimage see Singh and Rana 2002: 161–174. For the Rīg Veda myth of Puruṣa and the creation of the four categories (*varṇa*) of Mankind see Doniger 1981: 29–32; Griffith 1992: 226–228.

In preparation for Holī, on the occasion of the Raṅgarī Ekādaśī, the waters of the Maṅikarṇikā Kuṇḍ are first drained and then allowed to naturally replenish from the natural underground water source (a process of spring renewal). The pond is respectfully treated as a hierophany and the fresh waters are colored red, as are all forms of godhood in the Holy City on this day. Another ever-present symbol of divine motherhood, the cow, also receives garlands and splatters of color. Throughout the city the cow-herding Yādavs tenderly garland their cows and anoint them with dashes of red powder. Most Hindus will say that the ‘One God’ appears in many different forms, each form depicting a different aspect of divinity. On Raṅgarī Ekādaśī, each and every temple image, each and every *liṅga*, each and every aspect of divinity, both male and female, receives a splattering of red color. On Raṅgarī Ekādaśī, all godhood is united. Color serves as the dominating attribute, physically unifying and connecting all godhood into One. And soon, in the rollicking color play of Holī, all mankind will follow suit.<sup>19</sup>

The most prominent deity of Banāras, the creator and protector of the holy city, Viśvanāth Śiva<sup>20</sup>, his wife Pārvatī, and their elephant headed son Gaṇeś, are the major divine actors of Raṅgarī Ekādaśī. The bronze images of Viśvanāth Śiva and his family are normally kept in a secluded temple room within the residential palace of the high priest (*mahant*) of the Viśvanāth temple. Only on this day are the doors opened to the public. A large crowd of devotees will gather in the narrow lane leading to this abode. Due to the limitations of physical space, merely a lucky few will gain admittance to the chambers. Admittance is made on the basis of first come, first serve, and though normally only Hindus are allowed entry, the event is all-inclusive in that no one is denied entry due to religion, age, caste or gender.<sup>21</sup> Once inside this well-guarded and private chamber of the official Viśvanāth statue, the lucky few kneel before the deities and leave small offerings of incense and flowers. Most importantly, to help initiate the Holī festival, they gently sprinkle the images with red powder. Then the *mahant* and the priest of the Viśvanāth temple rotate flames

19 *Holī Hey: A Festival of Love, Color and Life* presents the ‘coloring of all godhood’ on Raṅgarī Ekādaśī, 1995 (in order of appearance in the film): the coloring of the Maṅikarṇikā Kuṇḍ; a Yādav milkman of Assī garlanding and splattering his cow; a priest of the Durgā Kuṇḍ temple complex coloring the statues of a small Śiva temple; the temple priest of the famous Gaṇeś temple, Durga Viṅṅyak at Durgā Kuṇḍ, splattering the statue of Gaṇeś with red color; the anointment of a large Śiva *liṅga* at the Lolārku Kuṇḍ by several Brahmins; the coloring of the statues of Viśvanāth Śiva, Pārvatī and Gaṇeś at the palatial home of the *mahant* of the Viśvanāth temple and during their procession in Viśvanāth Lane. The procession unites the three statues with the *jyotirliṅga* of Viśvanāth Śiva inside the Viśvanāth temple. This unification of *saguṇ* and *nirguṇ* Śiva is performed only on Raṅgarī Ekādaśī when all godhood is united in color.

20 *Viśvanāth*, Śiva as the ‘Lord of All’. The term refers to the *jyotirliṅga* of the Viśvanāth temple of Banāras and to Śiva as the Lord of Banāras. Viśvanāth is also known as Viśveśvara, another epithet having the same meaning.

21 In 1995 the *mahant* of Viśvanāth Temple generously gave me permission to observe and film the events described here (Katz 1996).

and incense in front of the deities, a ceremony known as *āratī*. The gods are said to be awakened and honoured by the *āratī* flame. Thereafter Śiva and his family are ceremoniously carried by the temple priest to the main chamber of the Viśvanāth Temple – a distance of approximately 50 meters through the narrow lane. The procession moves slowly through the ocean of devotees clogging the lane. When united with the famous *jyotirlinga* of the Viśvanāth temple<sup>22</sup>, the statues will remain there until the close of the Holī festival. Each year thousands of devotees attempt to witness the procession of Viśvanāth Śiva's family as they are carried on the palanquin throne (*ḍolī*). The lucky few in the lane cheerfully throw handfuls of Holī colored powder at the statues. The narrow lane is filled with both the cheers of the spectators (*hara hara mahādev!*) and puffs and clouds of powder color. After the dramatic installation in the temple and symbolic unification with the *jyotirlinga*, another *āratī* is performed. The blessing of Śiva and his family is said to be endowed in the *āratī* lamp, which in an act of brotherhood is taken from the sacred inner chamber and out again into the congested Viśvanāth lane. The lamp is passed through the crowd where many of the city's jātis and members from all the four varṇas will be present and waiting. In anticipation they pass their hands over the flame, feel the warmth and 'take *āratī*' (*āratī lena*). Symbolically Viśvanāth Śiva, with the heat of this flame, gives his blessing to all. After the conclusion of this drama, and the cheerful color play with Viśvanāth Śiva, the Holī season is officially inaugurated in Banāras.

### 3. 2002–2003: *The Potter's Taziya of Śivālā*.

*Muharram* designates both the first month of the Islamic calendar and the commemoration ceremonies for Imam Husain<sup>23</sup> and his fellow martyrs of Karbala in 680 C.E. In South Asia this commemoration is a *de facto* anti-war declaration where the multi-ethnic community declares that the atrocities of Karbala, the cruel treatment and slaughter of men, women and children, should never happen again. Muharram brings together the multi-ethnic community. My first research on the Muharram of

22 *jyotirlinga*, 'linga of light' a self-illuminating *liṅga* and manifestation of Śiva. There are 12 recognized *jyotirlingas* in India, and the *liṅga* of the Viśvanāth temple in Banāras is one of them (Eck 1983: 107–109, 120–125, 290–291). The *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* of the *Skandapurāṇa* gives supreme importance to the *jyotirlinga* in the Viśvanāth temple: 'May all the groups of Devas, Sages and Ganas listen. I shall speak the truth and that to for helping others. Nowhere within the worlds of Bhuh, Bhuvah, Svarga, Mahah and Jana [i.e. the known worlds of the cosmos and paradise, my notation] is there a linga equal to Vishvesha.' And 'There is no linga equal to Vishvanath' (book IV. ii. 99. 49–51; Tagare 1996: 448). The *liṅga* of Viśvanāth, the water of Maṇikarnikā, and Kāśī (i.e. Banāras) are stated to be the three most important essentialities of this world: 'Lifting up the hand, I assert again and again that, in this world having the three Vedas, only three things are essential: Vishvesha Linga, Manikarnika water and the city of Kashi. This is the truth, threefold truth' (book IV. ii. 99. 61; Tagare 1996: 449).

23 Husain ibn Ali (626–680) was the second son of Ali and Fatima (the Prophet's daughter) and thereby the Prophet's grandson. Shia tradition recognizes Husain as the Third Imam (Leader). He was martyred in 680 at Karbala, in present-day Iraq.

Banāras was ongoing during 1986–1991. In 2002 the research resumed as preparation for a film highlighting the Banāras Muharram. One day I literally stumbled upon a remarkable story, over two hundred years old, heralding multi-cultural interface in the southern Banāras *mohallā* known as Śivālā. The story portrays a young Hindu potter (*kumbhār*) who first listened to the ‘other’, in this case the neighboring Muslims of Śivālā, then experienced empathy and a kinship with the ‘other’ and thereafter joined in their celebration:<sup>24</sup>

The neighborhood of Śivālā, near Assī in southern Banāras, is a community of Hindus, Sunni and Shia Muslims. Alim Husain, a retired bank manager, traces his family’s Shia origins to the holy Iranian city of Moshad. For more than 200 years, at his family prayer chamber (*imambara*<sup>25</sup>), an important service (*majlis*<sup>26</sup>) has been performed, (first by women and then by men), re-establishing each year at the start of the month of Muharram, a most remarkable model shrine (*taziya*<sup>27</sup>). The *kumbhār kā taziya* – the paper and bamboo ‘Potter’s *taziya*’ is modeled after a Hindu temple and the typical round cupola of an Islamic tomb (*mazar*) is replaced by a *śikhar*, a Hindu temple tower.

Alim tells this story: Several hundred years ago, the young son of a Hindu potter was deeply moved by the Muharram story and songs of sorrow. He decided to make and display a clay *taziya*. The boy’s father didn’t approve of his son’s unorthodox behavior and put a stop to his ritual. Soon thereafter, the son became seriously ill. No medicines or treatments helped. Exhausted from nursing his only son, the father fell into a deep sleep. He dreamt that a grand person came to him and said that the sick boy had shown him love and devotion. But now that this was no longer allowed the stately man had come to take the boy with him to heaven. The father recognized his mistake and promised that he would never again stop his son from expressing his love and compassion for Imam Husain and the Karbala martyrs. When he awoke, the boy was cured.

24 The story of the Potter’s Taziya of Śivālā, as told by Alim Husain, a leader of the Shia community and resident of Śivālā (Katz 2004).

25 *Imambara*, ‘place of the Imam.’ A shrine dedicated to Imam Husain and the martyrs of Karbala. Most Shia homes of Banāras have a room, or a section, which they call the *imambara*. Here they keep their Koran, a small permanent *taziya*, model coffins for Imam Hasan and Imam Husain, and the flags or banners dedicated to the martyrs of Karbala. The room is often large enough to hold family prayer gatherings known as *majlis*. Community *imambaras* are larger in size to accommodate larger *majlis*. They might also have larger processional *taziyas* on display during the Muharram.

26 *Majlis* are religious gatherings featuring poetical songs (*noha* and *salam*) and stories heralding Imam Husain and the martyrs of Karbala. *Majlis* occur in private homes, religious centers and public places.

27 *Taziya* in South Asia: a model tomb (*mazar*) of Imam Husain. The *taziyas* of Banāras are either temporary (made of paper and bamboo) or permanent (made of metal and often adorned with precious and semi-precious metals and gems). *Taziyas* are taken in procession, becoming movable *mazars*, and serving as the focal point of worship and remembrance during the Muharram.

The belief is that Imam Husain had appeared in the potter's dream. He reappeared in the dream of a 'nawab', a noble of Śivālā who responded by donating land for an *imambara*. In yet another dream, the ancestor of Alim Husain, was requested by the grandson of the Prophet to help the Hindu potters and serve as the proprietor of their *imambara*.

So every year on the third day of Muharram, a unique paper *taziya*, formed as a Hindu temple out of respect for the Hindu potters of Śivālā, is carried through the narrow lanes of Śivālā from the home of Alim Husain to the Potter's Imambara near the Hariścandra Ghāt.

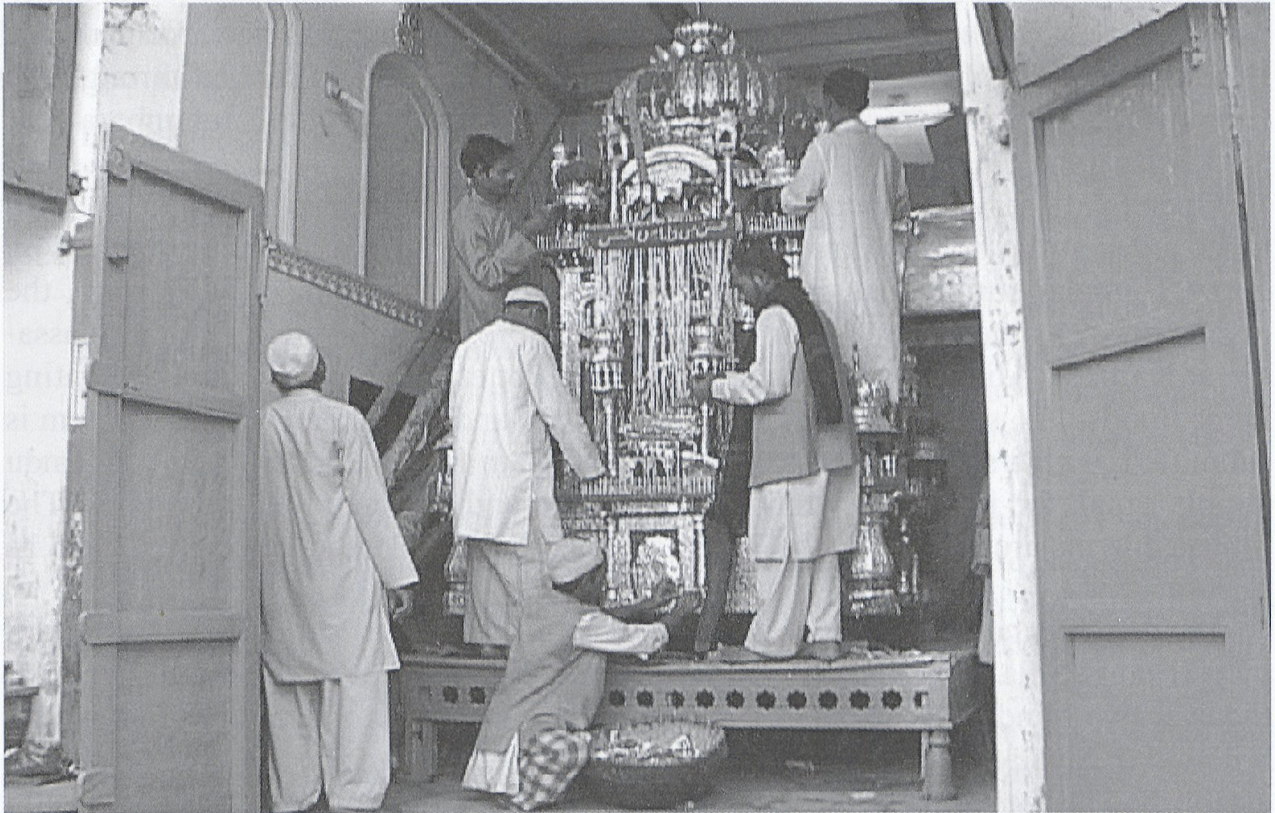
Open to all, services honoring the martyrs of Karbala, known as *majlis*, are held twice a day at the Potter's Imambara during the first ten days of Muharram and on every Thursday throughout the year. On the night of the ninth of Muharram, the night known as the Shabi Ashur<sup>28</sup>, the night before the anniversary of the massacre at Karbala, Alim Husain stands next to the Potter's Taziya for hours presenting items (foodstuffs, sweets, cloth) from Shia, Sunni, and Hindu devotees. Each item is submitted, with a short prayer, to the spirit of Imam Husain. Reminiscent of Hindu temple ritual, the items are symbolically blessed and returned to the devotees. The returned items are referred to by Hindu devotees as the blessed leavings of God, as *prasād*.

My documentary film *Banāras Muharram and the Coals of Karbala* (2003) depicts Hindus, Shia Muslims, and Sunni Muslims (primarily Bareilvi/Bareilli Sunni) at the over two-hundred-year-old Potter's Imambara located in the multi-ethnic neighborhood of Śivālā. Side-by-side they pay their respect to a *taziya* that was originally established by the local Hindu caste of potters. The Hindus participate as they would in any Hindu temple: chanting prayers, lighting incense and placing foodstuffs and sweets in front of the model tomb of Husain. These items are reverently consumed as blessed *prasād* by family and friends. Hindu men and women are depicted together with Shia and Sunni men and women, listening to the gripping Muharram songs of sorrow as they are melodiously performed by a group of Shia women.

For the first ten days of Muharram the Potter's Imambara becomes a major community gathering point in Śivālā. Here the Potter's Taziya is annually established. Here collective sorrow is expressed over the ill-deeds performed at Karbala – emblematic of ill-deeds evermore performed by men. The tenth of Muharram in 680 C. E. was the day of massacre. At 4 p.m. the final death blow is said to have been delivered and Imam Husain, the last surviving man in his troupe, was martyred. Devout Shia neither eat nor drink until after 4 p.m. The day is known as the Ashura. It is a day of burial. The *taziyas* of the homes and community, together with their decorative garlands, are laid to rest. The streets of Banāras are congested as hundreds of *taziyas*, and symbolically the martyrs of Karbala, are carried by the young men of the

28 Shabi Ashur, the ninth of Muharram. This is the eve of the Tenth of Muharram, the day of the final massacre at Karbala. Ashur(a) is the tenth in Arabic and often refers to the day of massacre.

community in funeral processions to the burial sites. Crowds gather on rooftops and along the lanes and thoroughfares to witness the spectacular processions. The public generally shows respect, some by touching the *taziyas* and hoping to receive a last-minute blessing.



Restoring the *Raṅga kā Taziya* of Banāras. From Marc Katz, *Banāras Muharram and the Coals of Karbala* (2003)

Earthen burial sites for Banāras *taziyas* are all referred to as ‘Karbala’. Most *taziyas* will be taken to the large Shia compound in the center of the city and known as Fatma Dargah. Paper *taziyas* are deposited in a burial pit located in a peripheral section of the complex. Permanent *taziyas* are first stripped of their tinsel decorations and garlands (which are deposited in the pit), covered with cloth and returned, without processional cheer, to their *imambara*. They will be stored until it is time to refurbish them for the next Muharram.<sup>29</sup>

The inter-religious Potter’s Taziya of Śivālā, and many other paper *taziyas*, are not buried in the central Fatma Dargah. Their funeral processions wander through neighborhoods in another direction: They move towards the Ganges and a water burial. Hindus call this form of burial *visarjan*, a final immersion into the river of life. Throughout the Ashura afternoon and night, *taziyas* flow through the neighbor-

<sup>29</sup> See the restoration and procession of the famous Raṅga kā Taziya, established 1759 (wall inscription at the Raṅga kā Taziya Imambara) and maintained by the Sunni Barelvi community as shown in Katz 2004.

hoods and streets of Banāras: New and ancient, large and small, paper and permanent, spectacularly electrified and simple. Shia, Sunni – and even several Hindu processions – merge into an ocean of unity and mourning. Thousands of participants and spectators witness the symbolic melding of the processions and divergent communities into one super procession: one Banārasī community, one Banārasī identity. The result cannot be misinterpreted. Ritually, despite a myriad of ethnic and cultural nuances, Banārasīs become one with each other.

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