

## ‘God Has Many Hands’: Unauthorised informants and informative relationships during fieldwork in Banāras

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*Hello! Where're you from?*

The sound of the calls of young men approaching you as you walk along the ghāṭs is familiar to all visitors to Banāras. If you come from Delhi or – worse – from Agra, you will already know that these young men want to engage with you in some kind of Maussian gift transaction. They offer information, access to a temple, quick entrance to something that would otherwise take hours etc., and they do this not for a fixed price, nor completely for free, but for some undefined *counter-prestation*: ‘If you like, you can give something, whatever you like – I’ll be happy, you’ll be happy, we will both be happy.’

Marcel Mauss’s essay on gift exchange still stands as a brilliantly sharp analysis of such economic transactions. At your very first confrontation with such a person you might believe that by accepting his assistance you have just bought a commodity from a salesman – like a cup of chai from the chai wallah. Drink chai, pay the money, and walk away. But that is not what happened. The undefined payment (you forgot to ask about the price from the start) has transformed you from a customer to a *friend*, and therefore you have now entered into a whole series of obligations, each of which depends on the offers you receive (which all may be very helpful). The only way to break out is to refuse his further offers of assistance, which is now equal to breaking a friendship.

As the experienced visitor to India will know, there are also subtler ways. Your new friend may refuse any payment at all. But at some point he will bring you to ‘his friend’s beautiful silk shop’ or he will want you – for your own spiritual welfare – to be blessed by his guru. You buy silks and give donations to the holy man, and he receives commission from shopowner and services from the paṇḍit.

Why do people make economic transactions like these? Because, in societies where economic security is fragile, people depend on networks of relatives and friends for mutual help. Customer relationships are single events, friendships are lasting. Realizing these facts of life, visitors to Banāras ought not treat these young boys with the contempt typical of the inexperienced, ignorant Western tourist, but should try to understand even more of the local social reality and the mindset it generates.

Academics usually avoid the assistance of these ‘commission boys’, as one of my high caste friends called them. Instead, they seek information from more reli-

able sources, such as well-esteemed local paṇḍits, or scholars specialised in their respective text traditions. But as an untrained fieldworker doing fieldwork within the area of everyday temple rituals as I did, it can be difficult to be allowed direct access. Hindu temple ritual is often a socially very exclusive affair requiring both proper Hindu descent and proper initiations. In this situation, the friendship and daily relationship with a group of young unauthorised tourist guides proved to be a valuable source of information for me – not the kind of information that was expected, however, but an insight into the relationship between religion and daily living conditions which is essential for an understanding of Hindu ritual. These friendships became part of a series of extended relationships that included holy men, gurus, and gods. A prior skepticism towards such ‘Babas’ was turned into an understanding of how religious relationships and networks function in a social context of material uncertainty.

#### *Entering into religious relationships*

In his book *Between Heaven and Earth* Robert Orsi suggests we should look upon religion more as a network of relationships ‘between heaven and earth,’ than as one of meanings or belief postulates (Orsi 2005: 5). To do pūjā, for instance, is a series of activities whereby the worshipper serves the deity and often asks favors of him or her. In whichever ways the worshipper translates these activities into beliefs or meanings, his or her acts are directed at someone as in a social relationship. Deities and holy persons have a place in the worshipper’s world and are made present through these acts of service.

But there is a split between beliefs and practices – the latter cannot be translated one-to-one to the former. Gods are made present in acts of worship, but that is not the same as articulating a theory about their existence. Ritual acts are a medium by which gods are brought into a communicative relation with worshippers, but in a discursive medium like philosophical language, for instance, things become questionable and – for some of us – unconvincing.

Even despite this professional skepticism, fieldworkers get involved in the same chains of relationships as their informants are, including the gods they worship. Orsi tells how he was present at a Vodou ceremony in New York, where the Vodou psychopomp Papa Gede – through the medium Mama Lola – spoke tenderly to him in a manner that addressed very personal dilemmas of Orsi’s life, despite the usual very coarse and rude nature of Papa Gede. Students asked Orsi whether he really believed in Papa Gede. But belief is not the point. Involvement is:

Scholars of religion become preoccupied with themselves as interpreters of meanings, and so they forget that we do our work of interpretation within the network of relationships between heaven and earth, in the company of those among whom we have gone to study, in the field or in the archives. (Orsi 2005: 6)

As a relationship between heaven and earth, both poles remain unmediated. Men and women maintain their all too human characteristics despite their interaction with

gods. This easily becomes a problem for all the people who have positioned themselves in the middle of the spectrum in order to claim a part of the divine – priests, sādhus, monks, samnyāsins, etc. To remain there, they have allegedly sublimated their human needs for sensual pleasures, sex, and money. This is a very fragile position, as there is no logical half-way between the two poles. Edmund Leach saw this very clearly long ago:

Consider the following syllogism:

- (1) Since deities are immortal it is anomalous that a god/goddess should reproduce himself/herself by sexual intercourse.
- (2) Since men are mortal it is anomalous that a man/woman should not reproduce himself/herself by sexual intercourse.
- (3) It is therefore anomalous for a god-man either to reproduce himself by sexual intercourse or not to do so. (Leach 1976: 72)

Leach goes on to show some of the many paradoxical solutions to this problem: ascetics who are seduced by a harlot who then turns into a sainted ancestress – or we could add from field experience in Banāras a much more crude example: Tantric Babas who seduce naive female tourists on the ghāṭs pretending the harassment to be a spiritual blessing of the girl. One Russian colleague that I met at Vatika (the restaurant at Assi Ghāṭ famous for its apple pie served with vanilla ice cream) was utterly disgusted and very disappointed by his meetings with these sādhus.<sup>1</sup> He had returned to Banāras to study classical philosophical commentaries with one of the few paṇḍits in the world who is still capable of understanding and explaining the tradition in which he was interested. When he arrived in India for the first time, he approached the sādhus at the ghāṭs expecting to find holiness and deep spirituality. But what he saw was men in ochre robes seducing Western female tourists – if they were not too stoned through hashish. I was surprised that he was surprised. What did he expect? During the five months of my stay in Banāras I was offered everything on the ghāṭs: hashish, opium, young women, young men. ‘What do you want? I can get for you.’ Still, my walks on the ghāṭs and in the small lanes behind them were for me a constant source of spirituality – not spirituality in the spiritual sense, but the spirituality of the diversity of real-life situations unfolding in the religious stage drama which is Banāras. One image comes to my mind: an early morning walk to the river, everything still dark and desolate except for an old Brahmin sitting all alone at the water with worn pages of scriptures, reciting mantras in a steady and rhythmic voice over a small fire that lights up his face in the dark night. If being emotionally touched by such a sight is a sign of being religious, I am a religious man.

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1 Due to the personal character of the information in this chapter most persons have been fictionalized and matters concerning their subject of research, their business, and living place and conditions have been obscured. All stories about them, however, reflect real events and persons.

Although Orsi's emphasis on involvement and empathy can be read mistakenly as a return to an uncritical phenomenology of religious experience, it is far from romantic or uncritical. A religious life is not necessarily a happy life at all. 'For better or worse: what humans do with the saints is not always, or even often, good for themselves,' he writes (Orsi 2005: 2). Orsi wants to replace the meaning-making religious subject of earlier decades of religious scholarship with 'a more tragic figure whose engagements with the world, within particular circumstances of power, proceed through media that may embody meanings *against* him or her. *Persons working on the world do so always in the context of the world's working on them*' (ibid.: 170; italics added).

How then do the religious relationships that I engaged in with Banāras' underclass of young unauthorised tourist guides, their gurus and chosen deities reflect the working of Banāras on them? The following is part of an answer, as far as anything like that can be found for an outsider.

#### *Raju and Manoj*

I first met Raju and Manoj on my first trip to India in 2009. This was a simple tourist trip together with my daughter. On our very first afternoon, we were walking along the ghāṭs from Assi towards Daśāśvamedh when these two young men addressed us. They offered to take us to the Gaṅgā Sevā that night, and to show us temples and other places of interest. 'Why not,' I thought. 'If they get troublesome, I'll pay them some money for their effort, and that's it.' But they never asked for money. When lastly I asked them why they spent their time helping us in this way, they said, 'It's only for our good karma.' I was not convinced.

They took us to the 'Monkey Temple' (Saṅkaṭ Mocan) and the Durgā Temple. We went with them to see the Gaṅgā Sevā. They showed us what tourists are generally shown along the ghāṭs, and arranged an early morning boat trip. But they also took us to several places where they would receive commission. Silk shops. Perfume and spice makers. Raju's guru. 'I go to my guru every day and learn mantra.' Raju was otherwise unemployed and with poor schooling. But he was smart and good at showing tourists around and arranging for boat trips and other excursions.

Manoj's English was much better than Raju's. He told us that this was due to the fact that he was an orphan, growing up at the local Mother Theresa Centre at Śivālā Ghāṭ. He worked in a weaver's shop as an apprentice, work for which he received no money but some training. We visited his workshop and learned about the different weaving techniques. In the evening they introduced us to one of the places with live music, the wonderful Music Paradise Hall in the small lanes between Śivālā and Assi Crossing. The program that night was excellent. My daughter talked with the tabla player who suggested she should come for lessons. She did – and had to buy a tabla.

Raju and Manoj were good company. They showed us places we would never have had a chance to see for ourselves. We stayed with them for most of the week we were in Banāras. They never asked for anything. But I guess they got a little from the

silk shop, the perfume maker and perhaps Raju’s guru. They also had several other new Western friends to look after besides me and my daughter. Everything seemed to be about making contacts and networks. We exchanged email addresses, and we received regular updates from them.

I returned to Banāras in 2011 to do fieldwork on the iconography of the Śiva liṅga and the ritual practices related to this the most central representation of Śiva. Śiva liṅgas are ubiquitous in whole of India, but more so in Banāras than in any other place. I took photos of all types of liṅgas I came across on the ghāṭs, in lanes and in building recesses. But I soon realized the need to learn the details of the pūjā (worship ritual) that is offered to the liṅga in temples and private houses. Generally it is not easy to get close to the temple pūjās performed for the liṅga. One may be allowed to enter many temples, but to sit and study the pūjā at close quarters in the inner sanctum of temples will often require special permission gained through private contacts or friendships with influential people. Even then it may be difficult, as these friends know very well that temple priests (pujārīs) and temple trust officials often are skeptical about non-Hindus being so close to the liṅga. The idea seems to be that non-Hindus, especially by being non-vegetarian, may bring pollution to the temple. Our knowledge of proper temple conduct is mistrusted, and it is sometimes assumed that we have not bathed or cleaned ourselves properly. This strikes Westerners as somewhat hypocritical, especially after having observed the hygienic standards of ordinary bathrooms in guest houses and restaurants as well as at sacred sites – not to speak of open sewers and the carcasses of dogs and rats in the river or in the streets. But the difference is that Hindus have undergone the *samskāras* (rites of passage) of birth and childhood, have received the proper mantras, and have been born to Hindu mothers. Besides, pūjā can be a very intimate affair: people come to the temple with strong desires to help or for protection, and foreign onlookers who do not blend in and who do not know how to behave properly during the pūjā worship are disturbing elements.

At that time, my good friend, Professor Rana P. B. Singh, head of the Department of Geography at Banāras Hindu University, suggested a visit to a small temple, the Siddheśvar Mahādev Mandir located inside the Goyankā Sanskrit School, behind the Assi Crossing.<sup>2</sup> It is a very small, intimate temple dedicated to Siddheśvara Mahādeva, a liṅga of a rather rough grey stone. The liṅga is considered *svayambhu*, self-created, and therefore without ornamentation, iconographic details, or lines, apart from the light marble base in which it is placed and the brass snake that is attached to it.

2 The temple is mentioned as number 889 in the list of ‘Divinities & Locations’ in Singh (2009: 412).



The entrance to the Siddheśvar Mahādev Mandir

To learn the pūjā details I needed a guide who would be willing to follow me to the temple and do the pūjā together with me. Again I turned to Raju. I had met him very soon after I arrived in Banāras. He was hanging out at Assi Ghāṭ together with his friends, most of whom were unemployed like him and therefore either engaged as unauthorised tourist guides like Raju or as cycle rickshaw drivers, or did nothing at all. I also met Manoj again. He had shaved his head, leaving only a tuft of hair. I learned that this was because his mother had died, and he had performed the cremation rites – probably the most inexpensive ones. People told me that Manoj's mother was one of the miserable beggars living beneath the shelter at Assi Ghāṭ. No one had told me this before. She was sick, but Manoj had no money to get her to a doctor.

At the start of this visit I felt uneasy about receiving more unasked-for assistance from these guys, but on the other hand they were good company, and – again as we know from Marcel Mauss – to reject an invitation, even for a cup of chai, can be an expression of disrespect. In Banāras a cup of chai is not only that. It is a setting for conversation and for exchange of favors of a different kind. I needed a bicycle, and before I had given it a second thought, Raju had a bicycle for me. He had rented it from a friend, one of the cooks in the Bread of Life bakery, and he had made an arrangement with a particular cycle shop along the main road between Assi and Śivālā

Crossings, that I should go to him (and only him) if I needed any repair. On asking for the price, the answer was the well known ‘You’re my friend.’

Anyhow, it was me who needed help. I asked Raju if he knew anyone who would follow me to the temple, do pūjā, and teach me the details. It took a while to explain. Why would anyone want something like that? But having once understood the idea, he grasped his mobile and made a phone call. ‘I called Vijay. He’s a very high Brahmin, very high Brahmin. Five minutes, he will be here.’

### Vijay

Vijay is a man in his twenties like Raju and the other guys. His English is understandable, but not good enough to show he has had a proper schooling. He is very helpful and sincere. I tell him what I want. We find a place to sit, and he tells me the details of pūjā, what things to bring – the correct leaves and flowers related to Śiva, a pot for water, camphor for waving lamps, etc. We find a pūjā shop, buy a nice pot and a small amount of camphor. We meet early next morning, collect Ganges water in a Coca Cola bottle (Vijay regrets this choice of container), and buy bel leaves (from the wood apple tree), madar flower garlands (made of white crown flowers), grass (for Gaṇeś), dhātūra (thorn apple fruit) and marigold garlands. We enter the temple and both approach the liṅga. Vijay’s body language expresses his slight discomfort as he feels the attention of the priest and the other temple visitors on this strange sight: me, a Westerner, closely watching Vijay by my side doing the pūjā while imitating all his movements to the best of my ability – grasping with my left hand around the right arm which is stretched out holding the leaves or flowers correctly with the thumb and two middle fingers, gently slipping these items one by one onto the top of the liṅga, then lighting lamps and incense and doing āratī. Of course my pūjā is not fully correct as I do not know the specific mantras. But *oṃ namaḥ śivāya* is always safe and appropriate. I realize that what I am after is not the correct style of worship. I can read about that in classical texts like the ‘Pūjāprakāśa’ of the *Vīramitrodaya* by Mitramiśra. What is exciting here in Banāras is to study how people in actual daily practice do the pūjā, and it seems that Vijay is quite knowledgeable.

Vijay has been brought up in a Brahmin family in Ballia close to the border with Bihar. His father was a railway employee who also taught Vijay proper worship. Unfortunately both parents died recently, and this has left Vijay and his two brothers with a lot of problems – primarily because they are all unemployed. One brother and a sister have had a good education but still have no job. Vijay takes short-term jobs in guesthouses in Banāras but frequently returns home to the shared house in Ballia to try to find a way out of their poor financial situation.

During the next couple of days we visit his friends, and together we meet with a paṇḍit who gives advice on all kinds of personal issues. Vijay inquires about a mantra he has received. He wants to know if it can be effective for ‘family things,’ by which he means a solution to their poor financial situation and his brothers’ unemployment. We also visit his astrologer friend, Nitesh, who is busy with a waiting room full of clients. Some need to settle a date for a wedding, others need advice on

how to avoid a huge claim for payment of a debt. It is also Nitesh who explains to me the true meaning of the many finger rings that Indian men wear, not as an expression of excessive male vanity as I suspected, but as means of protection based on a connection between individual horoscopes and specific precious stones – another very common fact that is rarely taught in university textbooks on Hinduism.

Vijay suggests that I come and stay with him in Ballia in spring during the *navarātri* festival. He will be performing *pūjā* for Mother Durgā every day ‘to protect the house and the family,’ and together we will visit some of the main temples in the area. For me this is a chance to stay with a family during the ritual, so I welcome the invitation. Every day Vijay takes an early bath, puts on a beautiful yellow garment (*dhotī*) and starts worshipping with a *havana* (fire altar) in front of his small altar. He wants me to assist him by reciting the Mahāmṛtyuñjaya Mantra (RV 7.59.12), which is considered by most people I spoke to an especially potent mantra for preventing or curing serious disease or hindering other life-threatening situations. Many of the more educated Hindus would never allow it.

Each day Vijay’s friends drop by. They are very close and Vijay repeatedly mentions them to me as his ‘underwear brothers.’ I’m intrigued. My Hindi is still not particularly good and I guess something is missing in my understanding so I ask him about this strange idiom. He writes down the Hindi expression and I look it up in the dictionary: ‘*laṃgoṭiyā yār*, m. a close friend, literally a friend related to the loin cloth,’ hence Vijay’s expression ‘underwear brothers’, but what mystical connection exists between a loin cloth and close friendship never becomes clear to me. They spend hours sitting in Vijay’s bed talking about the state of the world and sipping chai. Except for one – a sweet-vendor – all are unemployed. When not in Vijay’s house, they walk around on other visits and – maybe because of my stay – tour the temples. In the morning Rajesh, the sweet-vendor, takes me on his scooter to the nearby Bramhān Durgā Temple. We buy *prasād* related to Durgā – red cloth, coconut, etc. – and we quickly make our offerings in front of the beautiful old black metal image with big gold-coated eyes and leave.

Vijay asks me if I have any ideas as to how he may get money for renovating the shared house and turn it into a guesthouse. The bank has refused him any loans until he has at least 200,000 Rs in his account. There are no easy solutions. In fact, most of his petty jobs in guesthouses were unremunerated. For the time being, he tries to make friends with Western tourists and make them interested in supporting his non-governmental organization (NGO). Some do.

During the *navarātri* festival I sense tensions in the family. Vijay thinks that his daily *pūjā* helps the family, but the brothers find it waste of time. On the other hand, Vijay tells me that one brother wasted a lot of the family’s money gambling. The strained financial situation thus typically affects both their religious life (Vijay’s ritual efforts) and attitudes towards it (his brothers’ skepticism). It also triggers a lot of creativity in the building of relief NGOs of various kinds. Everyone walking the streets of Banāras will notice the frequent street signs of large numbers of NGOs, many of which are without any real foundation except as an income for the founder.



Vijay has set up such an NGO that hands out free early morning chai on the ghāṭs on the days of the new moon. During my stay at his home he asks me to join, which means paying an enrolment fee of 500 Rs plus similar annual fees. Some of his other European friends are already members and of course I become a member too. He arranges a photo session at his house together with his brothers and friends and with me as an honorary VIP member. The photos will be used to promote the NGO. He asks me to dress in a nice white *kurtā* set, put on a Nehru hat (made of paper though) with a garland around my neck and *tilak* on the forehead, and to pose for the camera while signing some kind of important-looking document or book with the rest of the party gathered around me. A banner with the name of the NGO has been hung over the table, but it does not stay up and appears lopsided on the photos. Nevertheless, they were content with my performance and kept telling me that I look like Gandhi.

After Vijay and I returned to Banāras, we met nearly every day for the rest of my time there. As a last trip we did the Pañcakrośī (the pilgrimage circuit that encircles the city of Banāras) together on Vijay’s scooter – though just the highlights. The roads are very bumpy – so much so that I ended up with bruised ribs from bouncing around on the back seat of his scooter.

*What does Raju want from me?*

At this time, which was near the end of my stay in Banāras, Raju seemed to change. Earlier he would never express personal needs – ‘It’s for my good karma.’ But now he meets me with a desperate expression on his face. ‘I’m not happy,’ he tells me. I know that he wants both a motorcycle and a laptop. I have told him to try to get enrolled for a real education as an official tourist guide for which he would also need money, and I have suggested that I might support him economically with the enrolment fee if only he is serious about it. So what does he want now? For the first time in our friendship he asks me to lend him some money. He is in trouble it seems. When Vijay gets to know about this – that Raju has asked me for money – Vijay takes action. I get my money back from Vijay (not directly from Raju), and Raju does not approach me again. Instead Vijay reveals to me the truth about Raju. He has become more and more entangled in financial troubles. He knows that many of the young female tourists that he takes around as their guide easily become attracted to him and he has regularly been involved in love affairs with more than one of them at a time. This has been going on for a long time, but now it is serious because a Czech woman he has been showing around told him that she is pregnant and is insisting that he, as the father, must pay her child support. Raju’s family of course does not know anything about this, but as he becomes more and more embroiled in another person’s financial situation, it is difficult to hide. I did not see him again, and I do not know if his friends raised the money or if they persuaded the woman to have an abortion.

*‘God has many hands’*

One of the young men in the gang frequently sees a Baba who lives in his ashram in an apartment a 10–15 minute scooter ride from Assi Ghāṭ. He and the others want

me to meet with the holy man. One evening we all go, with me as usual on the back seat of Vijay's scooter. Here I must confess that I have my own story with Indian holy men to tell. When I was young back in the late 1960s/early 1970s, I got involved in a Yoga movement in my hometown of Copenhagen. The movement was centered round one of the many gurus that came to Europe and the USA at that time with the expectation of converting the young generation from blind Western materialism to ancient Indian spirituality. They came to the West as a second wave of Hindu missionaries intent on fulfilling Swami Vivekananda's call:

Up, India, and conquer the world with your spirituality! [...] Spirituality must conquer the West. Slowly they are finding out that what they want is spirituality to preserve them as nations. They are waiting for it, they are eager for it. [...] They have searched every corner of the world and have found no respite. They have drunk deep of the cup of pleasure and found it vanity. Now is the time to work so that India's spiritual ideas may penetrate deep into the West. Therefore, [...] we must go out, we must conquer the world through our spirituality and philosophy. (*The Complete Works of the Swami Vivekananda*, 33: 276–7, quoted in Hay 1988: 76)

But as it happened, most of these Hindu teachers came with very little knowledge of the life of young people in the West or of Western societies in general. Their experiments with this young generation therefore had many unforeseen and unfortunate consequences besides the spiritual benefits that individuals might have experienced. These consequences were most frequently related to failed demands for sexual continence, to authoritarian Hindu norms regarding the upbringing and schooling of children, and to clashes with Western values such as critical and independent thinking that young people were not easily inclined to give up, besides, of course, the different expectations of material wealth.

After years in a monastic-like yoga and meditation center with a guru who, like others, got caught up in a self-imposed status as infallible knower of truth that became increasingly strained by his open support of traumatic right-wing views of the recent history of Europe and of ideas of human sexuality (including my own) that in Europe had been discarded as unhealthy long ago, I quit the movement – and started on an academic study of religions. With the baggage of this old experience my acceptance of meetings with holy men in Banāras was not uncritical.

We arrived at the building and went up to the second floor where the Swami had his private apartment. We were made to sit outside on the stairway and were told that the Swami would come and speak with us through bars between the stairs and the hallway of his apartment. The Swami was a frail old bearded man in a white shirt and bare legs. Having been presented to him by my friends, he handed me – through the bars – a copy of his passport issued in 2010. According to this copy his name was Swami Sivananda, and he was born in Behala, West Bengal, on the 8th of August 1896.<sup>3</sup> 'I am 116 years old,' he told us again and again. This information only

<sup>3</sup> Later back home in Denmark I gathered more information about this Sivananda. His ashram

added to my already distanced attitude to holy men in Banāras. He also handed me a printed card presenting himself as follows:

Ever joyful Baba is free from diseases, desire, lust, attraction, attachment, tension, contemplation, pride and has no materialistic urge or need. Baba never takes fruit or milk. Baba never accepts money or any kind of donation from any person for his personal use.

During our conversation he went to and from between his chair at the bars and the private rooms of the apartment from where he brought photocopied notes with health advice about the ‘miracles of fasting’ as well as invitations to come and eat:

You are whole-heartedly requested to take Rice Prasad (Rice, Dal and Vegetables) at 1 P.M. free of cost on any Sunday. Please note that Swami Sivananda is not at all willing to accept your donation for his personal life.

How is that? A man praising the miracles of fasting and at the same time keeping an ashram dedicated to feeding anyone who comes to his door? And how can he feed these many guests without accepting donations of money?

My friends told him about my work in Banāras, while I remained mostly silent and listened to the conversation. They asked Babaji about their very real problems, but the standard answer was ‘surrender completely to Lord Viśvanāth’ or ‘meditate wholeheartedly on the feet of God and remember His name. The Lord sees you always and cares for you.’ One of Vijay’s problems concerns one of his brothers who has not been successful in finding a wife (or is it actually Vijay himself?). Vijay asks the Baba to suggest a woman who might meet Vijay’s brother. But Babaji is shocked at this request. His women disciples in attendance reply that ‘Babaji never enters into such affairs.’ Nevertheless he goes to his room and comes back with a note to Vijay with a mantra that is supposed to solve family problems. Later, on our ride back to Assi, Vijay remarks, ‘I don’t need a mantra, I need energy.’ I start reflecting on the incongruence between the real problems encountered every day and the religious solutions offered by men like our Babaji. What is it worth? We are, however, invited to return, and take our meal the coming Sunday.

On Sunday we are received by the women disciples who are busy cooking the meal. We notice others also coming to eat. They look poor and very much in need of a good meal. While waiting, the women disciples tell us more about the Baba. He grew up in a very poor family. Hunger was a daily condition. Throughout his childhood he – like so many other children even in today’s India – had to go to sleep at night with an empty stomach and a gnawing hunger. Later as a young man he made the decision that he would dedicate his life to the goal that no man should ever experience that kind of hunger. Having spent years in monastic training, he established his own ashram in which he combines his own ascetic eating habits, which involve

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or his disciples maintain two different web pages about his activities: <http://sivanandababa.org/> and <http://sivanandaparivar.com/>.

frequent fasting with a generous distribution of food to everyone who comes to his house. I am sincerely impressed at how this terrible childhood experience of hunger got transformed into a determination to offer food for others.

Looking around the room I see heaps of vegetables and sacks of rice etc. on the floor. I ask the disciples how Babaji can afford this generosity without receiving any money. How is all this food purchased? Vijay answers quietly 'God has many hands.' He elaborates while on the scooter going back after the visit: 'One man buys a bag of rice, another man a bag of dal. Like this.' Finally I get the point. People come to Babaji's ashram with food which they offer to the ashram, not to Babaji. From this food the meals are prepared and poor men and women get a free meal. Babaji maintains his regimen of fasting and modest eating in order not to create the impression that the food is for him.

It strikes me that there is something I did not understand until now. In a country where resources are shared so unequally as in India, where most of the population struggles with basic needs related to keeping a family and securing proper schooling for their children or medical care, and where millions of young men are unemployed like Raju, Manoj, Vijay, and their friends, religion is inseparable from the material conditions of life. People are left with their own solutions. They depend on close networks, living with the help of friends or of friends of friends. When there are no immediate material solutions available, holy men and gods are invited to become members of the network. Mantras may not solve people's real problems, but food certainly can. In order to mobilize that kind of voluntary mutual effort that is required for distributing food in a population where few have any economic excess, strong religious role models like the fasting Babaji and his ideals of self-surrender to God serve as a dynamic force. Each person in such a voluntary network becomes one of God's many hands. More often than not someone is the receiver, at other times he or she is the hand that gives.

### *Rudrābhiṣek*

I ended my stay in Banāras by performing a Rudhrābhiṣek at the Siddheśvar Mahādev temple where I had been doing pūjā together with Vijay. I found that many of the persons I was dealing with on a daily basis – my Hindi teacher, travel agent and others – perform this ritual regularly. The ritual is regarded as a prevention of adversities for the period to come – the length of the period depending among other things on the price for the ritual you are willing to pay. This of course is never articulated as a payment for a service but as a freely given donation received by the priests – we are back where we started with Marcel Mauss. As a fieldworker studying how liṅga pūjā is performed, the Rudrābhiṣek is valuable, because in this ritual the worshipper is placed in the role of the pujārī, only assisted by professional priests who pass the ingredients to the worshipper and recite the mantras. During the ritual I would do all the services, pour Ganges water and milk over the liṅga, offer flowers, incense, lamps, and many other services.

I was well prepared, obeyed the rules, and turned up in a brand new kurtā set and

turban. The ritual is intense as one, for instance, is required to stretch out the right arm for more than 20 minutes holding a metal horn that is filled with milk and has a nozzle at the bottom, from where the milk is sprayed on the top of the *liṅga*, all while constantly reciting *om namaḥ śivāya*. The whole ritual lasted about an hour and a half. Professor Rana P. B. Singh, who had advised me to visit this temple earlier, was present together with his wife and son, and documented everything with photographs. After the ritual I handed the donation for the priests through my friends, not to the priests directly.



The author performing the Rudrābhiṣeka ritual in the Siddheśvar Mahādev Mandir on May 11, 2011. Photo by Rana P.B. Singh

The ritual left me in a mood that cannot but be described as devotional. While in Ballia together with Vijay and his family, I had asked them what quality in their opinion most adequately characterizes Hinduism. They agreed that devotion (*bhakti*) is the essential quality. That morning I took my last walk along the ghāṭs. I went up to Lalitā Ghāṭ, visited the small Gaṅgā temple just above the water level (in the dry season) and climbed up to the platform at the Nepālī Temple from where there is a broad view over the river and the city. In the afternoon I sat at my home ghāṭ, Śivālā, watching the buffalo owners bathing their buffaloes in the lazy river, thus bringing them relief from the scorching sun of Banāras in May.

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