

Formative Encounters? Field notes of Banāras

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Prologue

I must introduce my essay with an explanation: there are so many protagonists in it that I chose not to name their names in the main text. Their relegation to mere footnotes does not mean that I am ungrateful – on the contrary. I am just trying to maintain a certain linearity of my narrative, which is difficult enough even without the names. I feel particularly bad about this when I think of the many Banārsīs who helped in so many ways, shared their thoughts, and opened their homes to me, and whose names are not to be found on the cover of books or in scholarly journals. And then there are, of course, the many teachers, colleagues, fellow sojourners, writers, ‘scholarly co-pilgrims,’ whose names would instantly conjure up the many works authored or influenced by them. The voices and figures of them all are woven into the vivid memories of my stays in the city, and became alive again when, in preparation for the conference, I went through my field notes taken in those months.¹

My essay has three major themes that partially overlap: the circumstances and stages of my encounter with Banāras, the stages in the development of a research topic, and reflections on fieldwork, field notes, and reflexivity. To illustrate these themes, I have included in the endnotes selected excerpts from my field notes. I focus especially on the first weeks of my stay in Banāras, but I will also give brief comments on later developments whenever necessary.

Preparations

My first stay in India in the mid-1990s was spent almost entirely in Banāras. I lived there for nearly a year (with interruptions) and since then I have returned many times for shorter or longer visits, often on a stopover when embarking on fieldwork to

1 I would like to warmly thank Heinrich von Stietencron, Vasudha Dalmia, and Jörg Gengnagel for guiding me to Banāras. For their constant support in Banāras I am especially grateful to Shashank Singh, Rana P. B. Singh, Anand Krishna, Bhagiratha Prasada Tripathi, Virendra Singh, Bettina Bäumer, and Rakesh Kumar Singh. Kamlesh Datta Tripathi and Kedarnath Vyas were of considerable help in various stages during the initial phase of my stay. During the early months in Banāras I was fortunate to meet Falk Reitz, Shrikrishna Pathak, Raj Bhan Singh, Baijnath, Shyamlal, and Bharat, Shamil Vayot, Goutam Merh, Satya Swarup Mishra, James Pokorny, Marc Katz, Pickett Huffines, Niels Gutschow, David Kinsley, Richard Lannoy, Josef Winkler, Mark Dyczkowski, Hans Wettstein, Reinhold Schein, Annette Wilke, John Dupuche, and others.

other parts of the subcontinent. When I went to Banāras for the first time, I had just finished my third year as a student of *Religionswissenschaft* (the study of religions), Indology, and German literature at the University of Tübingen. At the department in Tübingen, students were encouraged to combine the study of religions with one of the area studies offered at the university. And in Indology, the minor I chose as the area of specialization to complement my major, the study of religions, it was quite common during their undergraduate studies for students to go to India for six months or a whole year, mainly to improve their language skills and read classical Sanskrit texts at an Indian university or with private teachers. The Universities of Poona and Baroda were my first choices, and I sent out application letters. While waiting for replies, the idea of Banāras cropped up, gradually became stronger, and finally won out, despite the admission letters that had arrived in the meantime from the two universities. In the weeks before my first encounter with the city, my academic teachers in Tübingen guided me in the preparations for my stay in Banāras by recommending specialized literature, by selecting Sanskrit texts – mainly philosophical writings – to be read with the help of local pandits, and by writing letters of introduction to various scholars, including a professor of philosophy and Sanskrit at the Banaras Hindu University (BHU), and an art historian and eminent cultural personality, both of them well-known and highly respected authorities in their fields and beyond. Further, we also reflected together on what topics might be suitable for a first, exploratory socio-ethnographic study in an Indian context.

A few years previously, I had been part of a research team that studied a charismatic, neo-Pentecostal movement in Tübingen. We observed and participated in church services, visited the movement's meeting places, designed a questionnaire, conducted interviews, and applied other methods of quantitative sociology.² Which means that, although as a young Indology student I found myself understandably enough under the influence of the rather philology-heavy approach of classical German Indology, when I left for India I was also in the fortunate position of having dabbled in a relatively wide range of methods from the methodological toolbox of a modern academic study of religions. In addition to having passed two levels of Hindi and Sanskrit courses and a range of introductory seminars on the cultural history of India, and to having acquired some understanding of philological-historical methods, I also had systematically studied (non-Indian) lived religion. I was still far short of being thoroughly trained theoretically and methodologically when I left for India, but it seems to me now that I was fairly well prepared, even if this was not what I thought at that time.

The list of potential research topics that I ended up carrying with me reflects the inexhaustible treasure trove that Banāras represents for students of religions, but also the available literature I was able to build on.³ Looking at the list from a distance of

2 See Gering et al. 1994. The coordinator of the project was the sociologist of religions Günter Kehrer, an inspiring academic teacher to whom I remain deeply indebted for his guidance and support over many years.

3 The first book I read in preparation for my stay in Banāras was – quite naturally – Diana Eck's *Banaras: City of Light*. While I remember holding her beautifully written, historical

almost two decades, it also reflects a certain degree of confidence my teachers obviously must have had in my abilities, for which I will always be grateful to them. The list contained a number of options:

- A survey of the complex of temples and other sites on Maṇikarṇikā Ghāṭ, with a special focus on Maṇikarṇikā Kuṇḍ, located in the middle of the ghāṭ, a tank with steps whose waters are said to flow directly from the source of the Ganges in the Himalayas. The myths of origin of the tank, recounted in a number of Purāṇas, are connected to both Viṣṇu and Śiva, and pilgrims to Banāras bathe here after having completed their pilgrimage circuit. The foci of my inquiry would have been the relevant text passages in the eulogical text *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*, and the observation and documentation of the religious and other activities at the site. In interviews, I was to inquire about the motivations and expectations of the visitors to the site.
- An exploration of past and present developments around the Viśvanāth temple, including its history, its various locations, and the priestly lineages connected to it.
- An inquiry into the present importance of Hanumān in Banāras. The popularity of this divinity throughout North India was well known, as was his position as a mediator between the devotee and Rāma. One potential line of inquiry concerned Hanumān as an integral part of a local pantheon dominated by Śiva, while another was related to the social background of Hanumān devotees, who had been depicted in much of the earlier specialized literature as coming predominantly from lower and uneducated layers of society.⁴
- Observing the performance of the Rāmlīlā in Rāmnagar, reading selected passages from Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* and Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas*, and conducting a small survey among members of the audience, especially with regard to the ways in which the child actors are perceived as receptacles/carriers of divinity during the festival.
- A study of the *mahābrāhmaṇas* (funeral priests) at the city's cremation grounds, with a focus on hierarchy, performance, and purity, and their importance and position in the city's 'economy of death.'

(and eulogical) work in high esteem, my teachers in South Asian studies rightly argued for the necessity of complementing the historical approach to some of the sites discussed in her book with ethnographic work highlighting their contemporary religious significance. Other readings included Parry 1980 and 1981; 1994 only later, Lutgendorf 1991, Kapur 1990, and Kumar 1988; 1992 only later. Among the works on Banāras I read during my first period of stay in the city were the edited volume (1993) and numerous articles by Rana P. B. Singh published in *The National Geographical Journal of India* (1987, 1988 and others) received from the author, as well as Gutschow and Michaels 1993 and Gutschow 1994.

4 The idea of approaching this topic from a contemporary, socio-anthropological perspective had its departure point in Heinrich von Stietencron's observations during his many years of fieldwork in Orissa and other regions of India.

- Reading, translating and studying introductory Nyāya and/or Mīmāṃsā texts,⁵ with special focus on their epistemology and argumentation techniques.
- And finally, a less well-defined alternative was contacting specialists on Kashmiri Śaivism (whose contact addresses I carried), and reading and translating relevant introductory texts.

In the end, the topic chose me. Serendipity in anthropology, or the academic study of religions for that matter, is definitely underrated.

Arrival, and a note on my field notes

Armed with a great deal of advice, addresses, letters of recommendation, and specialized literature, I arrived in Banāras in the fall of 1994. When I went through my field notes and began writing this paper, I realized that, until recently, I have not had the occasion to assess more thoroughly the impact of my early encounters and experiences in the city. Reflecting on these first weeks and months in Banāras I tried to reconstruct and re-imagine events that may have contributed to my developing relationship with the city and with India, and influenced my biography, academic and personal. I also discovered in my records a number of features discussed in the specialized theoretical literature on field notes, for instance the fact that, especially in the early periods of my stay, my taking notes had the function of providing reassurance: I had gone to India with a task (or several tasks), found myself in unknown territory, and had to find my way through Banāras, and all that had to be documented and reflected upon. Thus my field notes turned out to be a combination of journal and running log written at the end of each day, of data and hard facts, ideas, and sketches, but also of brief vignettes with reflections and musings that were somewhat more elaborate, almost of a literary nature. So, I am using the term ‘field notes’ to designate various kinds of notes. My journal entries and the vignettes are an integral part of the field notes, that *contain* data (directly relevant ‘hard data’), and at the same time *constitute* data, as they describe and document my thoughts and reactions in the field. From the very beginning I seemed to have been overly conscious of the importance of my notes, and as a kind of precaution against losing them, I used two notebooks, and recorded my thoughts and observations alternately. Going through my records, I did not have the impression that I had been using them as some kind of a Malinowskian garbage can. I did not seem to have experienced feelings of serious inadequacy and angst, due perhaps also to the fact that my fieldwork was meant to be of the exploratory type, and there was no real pressure to meet a deadline, which was an ideal state of affairs. That being said, I have to add that, re-reading these notes after many years, I found interesting insights (along with some forgotten material), but I also came upon passages I did not like. While the genuine openness and curiosity, and the resulting effervescence of thoughts and impressions in those early

5 Such as Annambhaṭṭa’s *Tarkasamgraha*, Jayantabhaṭṭa’s *Nyāyamañjarī*, Laugākṣibhāskara’s *Arthasamgraha*, Kṛṣṇayajvan’s *Mīmāṃsāparibhāṣā*.

months were clearly palpable in many entries, I was often taken aback by the naiveté of the 24-year-old me emerging from those lines in some cases. Reading, or better, perceiving what is in one's field notes, while deconstructing and reconstructing (con)texts, is indeed like reading back over one's own life.⁶

Encounters

As I already mentioned, my research topic found me. From the end of September, I stayed for a while in the southernmost part of the city in a guesthouse on Assīghāt, frequented by scholars and writers. The place seemed to be a good starting point for crossing the river to Rāmnagar to observe the Rāmlīlā, to deal with the registration formalities at BHU, and to use the library at the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS). In addition, it promised the opportunity to interact with other researchers. However, for a week or so in the beginning of my stay there, I was the only guest, the main reason being an outbreak of plague in Gujarat, with some cases reported in Banāras. My host and I frequently dined together, and on one of these occasions, hearing about my potential interest in Hanumān, he confessed to being a long-time and ardent devotee of this deity. From that point on, our extended conversations over dinner often centered on this topic, and I became increasingly sensitized to many aspects connected to the simian god. Over the weeks that followed, I started reading up on the subject, using initially mainly the library of the AIIS and later the university library as well. In addition to some older specialized literature, I was thrilled to discover inspiring recent and ongoing work on the topic, the author of which I was fortunate to meet some time later.⁷ In the meantime, I had moved to the house of my Sanskrit teacher in Śivālā. In addition to language classes (Sanskrit with him, Hindi with another teacher to whom I am deeply indebted), long walks on the ghāṭs, observations of the cremation grounds, regular visits to the nightly performances of the Rāmlīlā, and to the nine temples that were central to the autumn Durgāpūjā, I began exploring the narrow lanes of the inner city, keeping an eye open for Hanumān shrines and trying to engage in conversation the people I saw worship the deity.

The notes of those early weeks in the fall of 1994 record heavy activity, with the making of many new acquaintances, Indian and Western, and the deepening of already existing ones. The head of the family that had virtually adopted me on the first night at the Rāmlīlā inquired on our second meeting what food they should prepare for me next time for the obligatory picnic. A BHU linguistic professor whom I approached at one of the Hanumān temples invited me into his home. My first host, the guesthouse owner, regularly invited me for dinner at his place, and continued to

6 See on these and related issues, for example, the contributions in Sanjek (1990).

7 Philip Lutgendorf's essays on Hanumān always made for fascinating reading, especially important to me being his essay 'My Hanumān Is Bigger Than Yours,' published in the year of my first stay in Banāras. In the following years he wrote more essays on the topic, before his intense and long-standing research on Hanumān materialized in a monograph published in 2007.

share with me stories from his family history and insights into his personal experiences with Hanumān. I met and became friends with a German scholar of Indian art history, I made the acquaintance of British writers and journalists working for the BBC, and had long conversations with an Indologist and her psychologist friend from Switzerland. The list could go on and fill a whole page or more. Of course, the inconveniences of everyday life did not pass unnoticed. In my records, one can read descriptions of the filth in the streets,⁸ the loud construction work at the house of my new landlord, the ubiquitous and mischievous monkeys, the slightly Kafkaesque attempts to register at the Banāras Hindu University,⁹ or the hours-long money-

8 'Stronger than usual it strikes me that, everywhere and anytime, people constantly spit, or blow their nose, or produce other things that end up on the streets. The main alleys seem to be somewhat cleaner, but even there the large heaps of waste collected daily by the sweepers are often nothing else than well-received gathering places for cows, dogs, and crows, who quickly and efficiently scatter everything, thus rendering the sweepers' work completely futile. In some of the narrow bylanes the stench never goes away. The residents throw their garbage on the street, and at every turn one comes across emaciated, defecating mongrels, goats, and calves. In the early mornings, the flat riverbank between Assī and Nagwa is lined with locals relieving themselves, and some parts of the ghāṭs are used as public toilets later in the day as well. The patches of stagnant water near the Ganges are used as trash receptacles and stink to high heaven, or, at least – at the slightest east waft – most certainly to the balcony where I usually sit and have breakfast.' The lines that immediately follow this passage seem to fit (on a very basic level) rather well into the idealizing projections found sometimes in past and contemporary imaginings of Banāras, as discussed, for example, in Travis Smith's presentation at our conference ('A Kṣetra Beyond Time: Traditional and Scholarly Imaginings of Vārāṇasī's Past'). So, here is how I continued, seamlessly: 'But in the Ganges dolphins are playing gaily, as do the ragged little children flying their kites over the neighborhood's rooftops. The colorful, rustling kites tug at their strings, soaring higher and higher, to altitudes from where all such details as filth and excrement are blurred, blending into an ever-impressive bird's eye view of Vārāṇasī, the eternal city on the Ganges' (The green diary, October 1994). If there was any tongue-in-cheek attitude between these lines – and I very much hope there was! – unfortunately it is not very conspicuous.

9 'Today I had actually planned to submit my application of formal affiliation with the BHU. First I had to get it typed in three copies. I was able to persuade a young man in a typing office to do me the favor of preparing the copies for me right away, which he swiftly did. Then I hired a cycle rickshaw and rode to professor T.'s residence, who acknowledged in writing (on my copies) that the application was justified: 'forwarded, Prof. T., date XY.' I then went to BHU's Central Office, from where I was sent directly to the Faculty of Sanskrit Learning and Theology, where I asked for an audience with the Dean. The Dean went through my papers and found them all right, which he noted down on the application (forwarded, Prof. P., Dean etc., date XY). I went again to the Central Office, to submit my papers to the Registrar. There, I was directed successively to a number of different employees, to all of whom I explained the purpose of my visit. Finally, the person who seemed to be in charge of such cases said that, unfortunately, the Dean should have written that he endorsed my application, instead of only 'forwarding' it. Therefore, he could not process my request. I hailed another cycle rickshaw and rode back to the Faculty of Sanskrit Learning and Theology, where the Dean graciously agreed to receive me once again. I explained to him what had happened, he studied my papers thoroughly once again, made a few phone calls, and

changing procedures at the bank. But – if one trusts the notes, and I do – these were marginal issues. Much more elaborate is the treatment, for example, of the pleasant ride on one of the large, canopied boats on the last evening of the Durgāpūjā. The sight and sounds of the countless processions carrying goddess images to the Ganges and immersing them in the water is one of my most vivid memories from that time. Other such moments recorded in my notes are, for example, the re-enactment of the mythological sequence from the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* in which Kṛṣṇa subdues the snake Kāliya by dancing on its many heads,¹⁰ or the nocturnal return by boat from Rāmnagar after a fascinating, pleasant evening spent immersed in the crowds, watching the performance of Rāma’s story.¹¹

wrote then two more lines on the application. Finally, in the late afternoon, my three copies ended up on a desk in the Central Office, and for now, from tomorrow, BHU will be closed for eight days of holiday’ (The green diary, October 1994).

10 ‘The venue was the area at and around Tulsīghāṭ, and when I arrived there well ahead of time, I was surprised to see that a large number of people, boats, and police personnel were already present at the site. I tried to secure a higher spot to have a better view of the event. A young boy in an orange-colored attire standing on a balcony seemed to have been chosen to play the role of Kṛṣṇa. He wore jewelry and an elaborately adorned headgear. After about an hour, the performance began. In the meantime, the audience had increased to around 6–8,000 people, if not more, a more exact estimate being difficult due to the fact that spectators were standing on every level of the neighboring ghāṭs, too, and more and more boats crowded with people gathered around the spot. The performance itself was rather brief: ‘Kṛṣṇa’ pretended to play his flute, then crawled from his balcony onto a sturdy wooden pole that was fixed with ropes to several surrounding buildings, plonked into the water, and resurfaced riding on a mockup snake pulled by several young men. They all swam to the shore, where ‘Kṛṣṇa’ was garlanded by the Kāśī nareś, the *mahārājā* of Banāras, who had made a spectacular entry shortly before the play commenced. After they swam another round, ‘Kṛṣṇa’ and the ‘snake’ left the water and an *ārtī* (offering of light) was performed, the addressee of which seemed to have been both Kṛṣṇa and the goddess Gaṅgā. Then, everything was over. The actual performance did not last longer than maybe 15 minutes, but many people in the audience had perhaps spent altogether more than four or five hours to prepare, come to the site early, watch the performance, and return home. I quickly changed my position to have a better view of the dispersing crowd. Many people were dressed festively, and I also noticed that there was a special area in the middle of the steps that had been reserved for women, an area from which they had an unobstructed view of the performance. On the margins of this space and on the neighboring ghāṭs still covered by the thick sediment of silt washed up by the river in the monsoon, stood mostly men. The balconies and even the rooftops of the adjacent buildings had served as stands for spectators eager to watch the Kṛṣṇalīlā, Kṛṣṇa’s play. Now that the performance was over, a dense crowd poured into the much too narrow lanes leading from the ghāṭ area to the main street, where all traffic was instantly and hopelessly brought to a halt. In spite of some slightly chaotic moments, the atmosphere was serene, and I ‘swam’ effortlessly with the crowd until I reached home’ (The green diary, November 1994). A few weeks after watching and recording the event I discovered a detailed description of the Kṛṣṇalīlā in Katz (1993: 52f.), in a copy I had received from the author at the beginning of my stay.

11 After a long and detailed description of the Rāmlīlā proceedings, and of the scenery at and around the event, I concluded the day’s notes with a vignette on the boat ride on the Ganges

Hanumān

The pages of my notebook reveal how the idea of Hanumān as a research topic gradually took shape: summaries of and reflections on the long, meaningful conversations with my host in the first days of my stay; a preliminary, very selective list of the locations of Hanumān temples my interlocutor considered significant; reports of my attempts to locate these temples along with short descriptions of the sites; reflections on the reactions of random partners in conversation to my bringing up for discussion the topic of Hanumān. Then the idea suddenly gained momentum after a meeting with a dynamic and highly knowledgeable cultural geographer, who took my – until then still somewhat half-hearted – project seriously and offered generous and enthusiastic support, a support that would develop over the years to become a long and fruitful collaboration. The next day, on his recommendation I visited a traditional scholar and respected authority on the city's religious topography living right in one of the important religious focal points of the city, at Jñānavāpi near the Viśvanāth temple. Although obviously busy with other commitments, the pandit guided me in the space of less than half an hour to nine or ten Hanumān shrines in his immediate neighborhood. Until then, I had not been fully aware of the fact that so many places of worship were dedicated to this deity. Eager to see more, I was therefore extremely delighted when these two eminent local experts (the cultural geographer and the pandit) agreed to help me explore the inner city's narrow lanes in search for Hanumān temples.¹² The encouragement and guidance I received from them in the early stages

from the Rāmnagar side to the southern ghāṭs of Banāras: 'It is almost midnight and time to leave. Day seven of the Rāmlīla is over. We are advancing slowly but steadily through the crowd, making our way towards the riverbank where countless boats are waiting. 'Our' boat is white, and looks elegant and quite new, too. I take my shoes off and am allowed to sit in the front. We have to wait. It takes half an hour until Baijnath gathers all his passengers, around 25. In the meantime, the elephants are brought to the watering place nearby. [...] The Ganges is dark and sullen, and the plunging oars are sucked in by her waters, and released again with a gurgling sound. A voice from the back of the boat begins to chant 'Sītā Rām, Sītā Rām', and instantly, many more voices reply, and the tune is passed on to the neighboring boats, never ceasing again until we reach shore half an hour later. It is almost full moon, and the city is asleep, nestled to the river. We reach Assīghāṭ, and everybody descends. I am looking for my shoes and find them finally under Baijnath's little grandson, who sleeps on them soundly ...' (The green diary, September 1994).

- 12 'We combed the narrow lanes of the central and northeastern neighborhoods in the old city, searching for Hanumān temples. Well, actually, only rarely did we search, for most of the time the pandit headed purposefully and energetically from one site to another, and seemed to find in the most impossible places exactly what he was aiming for: tiny, beautifully ornamented shrines, small statues in private houses, dark interior courtyards, or even underground. [...] We continued for seven or eight hours, arriving finally at one of the northernmost ghāṭs, Prahlādghāṭ, where we found another series of temples well worth seeing. From the sites visited, I found the Mahāmṛtyuñjaya temple complex highly interesting, as well as the temple in Ādampura (Hanumān Phāṭak). All in all we must have recorded between 25 and 30 temples and shrines of Hanumān, a fruitful day indeed' (The black diary, October 1994). The generous support extended by Rana P. B. Singh to scholars working on Banāras

of my fieldwork were invaluable and literally set me on track. Not only did we locate and plot a first batch of Hanumān shrines and temples, inaugurating what was to become over the years a systematic survey of religious sites related to this deity, but I received a practical demonstration of fieldwork tailored to this specific environment, including, for example, how to find and interact with potential interlocutors at the sites.



Hanumān shrine in the Mahāmṛtyuñjaya temple complex

Over the coming months, Hanumān became one of my constant preoccupations.¹³ I read everything that was available on the subject, spending many days at the library, trying to understand the development of the figure from the earliest times.

cannot be overestimated, and his numerous publications on the city's religious geography have long become essential reading. Pandit Kedārnāth Vyās has authored an important book on processions and religiously significant sites in Banāras (Vyās 1987, discussed, for example, in Gengnagel 2005). I am greatly indebted to both of them.

¹³ According to my notes (and my recollections), I went daily to Sanskrit and Hindi classes, and took sitar lessons two times a week. In addition to reading specialized literature and some works of important Indian authors (such as Premchand's *Godān*, for example), I also seem to have read (or re-read) numerous European, Russian, American authors, reflecting in my records on the importance of these works for regrounding a periodically drifting, punctually and tentatively native-going me. Among my other constant activities were the observation of numerous festivals and the attending of many cultural programs. And I made brief trips to places in Rajasthan and Orissa, which contributed to the rounding off of my first Indian experience.

Is Vṛṣākapi from the Ṛgveda a possible forerunner? What is Hanumān's role in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*? And in Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas*? How has the divinity evolved over the centuries, to achieve such obvious popularity in the present day? I was hoping to be able to reconstruct a history of Hanumān and his worship by looking at relevant texts, but also at architectural, iconographic, epigraphic, numismatic, and other sources. At the same time I felt excited about the prospect of exploring a thriving religious tradition, in addition to looking at testimonies of the past. Through the survey of various areas of the city, through the plotting of locations of shrines and temples (helped at first by the local experts and later on my own), I explored and discovered Banāras step by step. Soon, a dense grid of places of worship dedicated to Hanumān emerged, along with an awareness for their always complex, but different socio-religious environment. I finally selected two sites, drew up a questionnaire, and conducted a first – and quite tentative – sociological survey. By interviewing (with the help of a young local research assistant) dozens of visitors to the temples and shrines, a picture of Hanumān emerged that went far beyond the often very general and stereotyped remarks found in specialized literature.¹⁴

There were other perspectives, too. My emerging research in these initial weeks of my first stay did not pass unnoticed among the people with whom I had regular contact. Impulses for further inquiry came not only from my own intense involvement with the topic, but often arose from casual conversations. And, being constantly in the field over a longer period had the advantage that I was able to follow stories as they developed. One of these was to become especially important: the replacement of a damaged Hanumān statue in a small temple owned by my first host, and the ritual consecration of the new image. The planning process for the event had already begun when I arrived in Banāras. Various sculptors were commissioned to produce drafts and sketches of the new statue, conforming to the specifications given by the temple owner. Then, successive versions of the statue were created over several weeks, first in clay, then in plaster of Paris, before the final image was carved in sandstone. The family priest determined auspicious times for the ceremony, based on astrological calculations. A date was set, the old statue was ritually immersed in the Ganges, and the temple was renovated. The consecration ritual itself (performed in the first days of July 1995) turned out to be very elaborate and was three days long. I was fortunate to be able to document the entire event on film, and the description and analysis of the *prāṇapratīṣṭhā* ritual later became the first part of my dissertation that addressed ritual, historical, and sociological facets of the Hanumān cult.

The missing ethnographic self

I returned to Banāras three years after my first stay with a clearly defined research project related to Hanumān. Notebooks were filled this time, too, over a period of more than six months, and as tempted as I have been to include observations on these

14 Keul 1998. This survey served as the pilot study for the more comprehensive survey (with 344 interviews) that was part of my dissertation thesis (Keul 2002).

field notes in the present paper as well, I have decided to postpone this exercise for a later occasion. What is noteworthy, however, is the fact that both my extended stays in the city generated copious amounts of notes: lists, addresses, sketches of locations, descriptions of rituals and temple life, and interview records, but also reflections on – or stories of – my experiences, reactions, encounters. Looking back at the circumstances in which the dissertation took shape and the material on which it was based, and relating all this to the resulting text, I now feel that the outcome could (should?) perhaps have been slightly different. And I do not mean the frustrations we often have when we read our own former work and find it inadequate for some reason or another. In the light of the re-reading of my field notes, I am slightly disappointed and even perhaps feel some regret for having produced an overall standard type of descriptive, objectivist text (in spite of some clearly qualitative passages), being already well aware at the time that in ethnographic accounts subjectivity is unavoidable and a balanced reflexivity desirable. The existence of an ‘anthropologist self’ had been acknowledged for quite some years when I was writing the dissertation.¹⁵ Having made this remark, I have to emphasize that the work, the perspectives chosen, and the methods applied within it turned out not to be to my detriment. It was favorably received and evaluated by a number of scholarship and hiring committees, and its importance for my subsequent academic career cannot be overestimated. The problem that I have, from a distance of more than fifteen years after starting work on that text, is that I am not sure anymore whether I really intended or attempted to be more experimental and reflexive in my writing at that time. I remember tentatively submitting a couple of rather heterogeneous chapters to my doctoral advisors in the early stages of the work, but I cannot recall their reaction anymore, or mine to theirs. So, one can only speculate whether the monograph on Hanumān would have turned out differently had it not been conceived as a dissertation thesis.

Formative encounters?

After two long and several shorter stays in Banāras in the mid- and the second half of the 1990s, my Indian experience continued. I went on to work on other topics in different regions, carrying out field research in Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, and Mumbai, but also in other parts of the subcontinent. Outside of South Asia I conducted fieldwork in connection with projects on Romanies in East-Central Europe and on a new religious organization in Japan. In more recent years I returned to Banāras exploring the transformations of the Yoginī traditions there.¹⁶ In most cases, research was carried out combining various methods, including ethnographic and philological-historical. Naturally, my early experiences in applying these approaches had a far-ranging impact on later work. If we narrow down the focus strictly to data collection (observation, interviews), analysis, and interpretation, the sociological survey conducted among Hanumān devotees

15 Among the early key publications on reflexivity in anthropology are Rabinow 1977, Crapanzano 1980, Ruby 1982, Clifford and Marcus 1986.

16 See Keul 2012.

was chronologically speaking not the first such attempt, as it followed the study of the evangelical movement mentioned before. However, it was in a close temporal proximity to the research in Tübingen, and was to a certain extent (in terms of lines of inquiry, evaluation methods, etc.) even modeled on it. Given these overlaps, the Banāras survey can be seen – with some imaginative power – as an indirect continuation of that earlier study, only under different circumstances and without the team of colleagues. Zooming out again to a wider angle, it was in the Hanumān pilot project in Banāras in 1994–5 that I had for the first time the opportunity to *combine* methods, tentatively at first, and to expand the approach and test its viability during my second stay three years later. The high relevance of the ‘Banāras experience’ becomes more apparent when looked at from an even broader, or holistic, if I may, perspective. It comprised a demanding, multi-faceted, and intriguing socio-cultural environment that constantly challenged whatever book knowledge I had, that facilitated communication and the fruitful exchange of ideas in many directions, that forced me to improve my logistical, organizational, and improvisational skills in everyday life and in my research, and that tested my adaptability and resilience. Of course, I cannot be sure whether I have become a better scholar because of my work in Banāras. But my stay there definitely made me eager for more.

So even if I am somewhat reluctant to conclusively answer the question regarding the formative influence of my first stay in Banāras, I obviously tend towards the affirmative. Perhaps it would be useful to wait another twenty years, try to operationalize this rather fuzzy concept of ‘formativity,’ and then include in the analysis all my field notes (future ones, too) produced in various cultural contexts. (Whether one would want to do this to one’s field notes is, admittedly, another question.) Relieving these reflections of the momentousness they seem to have acquired, but keeping the personal tone, I would say that my first experiences in Banāras in 1994–5 were doubtlessly enriching in many ways, and I would not want to miss them. The logbook of that journey is brimming with opportunities, and I embraced many of them and also squandered some. One of the regrets I have is not having been able to maintain a lasting contact with warm-hearted people I encountered along the way. An image that often comes to my mind is an interior courtyard, a cot in one of its corners, close to the entrance of a Hanumān shrine, the frail and bent frame of the aged owner and *mahant* of the shrine as he sits there for hours in a row, listening attentively to the questions I hesitantly ask of devotees and encouraging the more reluctant ones to answer them. I fondly remember our conversations during afternoon hours when nobody came to worship and there was no one to ask. It was almost as if he had made my little research project his own, and I can still sense his unassuming, matter-of-fact support, warmth, and calm wisdom after all these years. Another regret of mine is not to have abided by the advice of one of my senior Banārsī teachers. When he saw me struggle with all those philosophical texts on logic and those on Vedic sacrifice, he said: ‘Why don’t you read more *kāvya* [literature/poetry]?’ There are indeed moments when I think that perhaps I should have listened to him and dedicated more of my time to the reading of, say, Kālidāsa’s works.

Instead of an epilogue

I conclude my reminiscences with two excerpts from my records, trying to accomplish two things at once, as they are also meant as pointers to further similar passages in the footnotes to this essay. I found numerous vignettes in the notebooks, impressionistic scenes focusing on a moment, an individual, or an episode from my day-to-day encounters with the city and its inhabitants. There are longer ones, like the description of the Rāmlīlā nights, or of scenes on the cremation *ghāt*. Others are much shorter, virtual one-liners, some of which make absolutely no sense to me anymore. While the following brief sequences are not going to sound particularly original or new to an audience with experience in India, in these and other pieces I believe I have found the (wide-eyed?) freshness with which I seem to have perceived Banāras during my first weeks there.

The man who never stands still

One can see him often, somewhere between Assī and Godaulia, the man who never stands still. I got the impression that he is something of an attraction in the area, because few practice this kind of asceticism around here. The man who never stands still, never stands still. Even when not moving from the spot, he is permanently walking without advancing. The man who never stands still is obviously Śaiva, because he wears his hair in dreadlocks, has a topknot, and carries a trident. His body is smeared all over with ash, which gives him a grey-bluish tinge. His clothing is colorful and consists of innumerable small pieces allowing the skin to shimmer through everywhere. Orange predominates, but there are many other vivid colors as well. Around his ankles he wears small bells that are constantly ringing – a sign that he does everything correctly. I assume that if these bells stop tinkling, that would be a breach, and would mean a major setback on his way to liberation. I wonder how the man who never stands still solves this problem at night, when he sleeps. Or does he sleep at all? Anyway, it would be very, very interesting to introduce him to a colleague of his, another ascetic who has stationed himself on Assī not far from where I live, and whom I call ‘the man who always stands still.’¹⁷

Ek lifāfā! (An envelope!)

‘Ek lifāfā!’ said the little boy, as he reached up and laid a coin on the counter that towered high above his head. The post office clerk, who was sitting on a low and squeaking chair, did not hear the little guy, nor could he see him, for even if the boy had stood on tiptoes he would not have been able to reach his hand through the window. He kept repeating tenaciously and with increasing vigor: ‘Ek lifāfā! Ek lifāfā!’ Then he glanced at me and smiled. He gave the impression of being proud to carry this responsibility, to have been sent out with an obviously important assignment, and looked very much determined to accomplish his mission. And now he stood

¹⁷ The green diary, November 1994.

there, with his engaging smile and his oversized and worn-out red sweater and blue trousers. ‘Ek lifāfā!’ he said once again, to everybody in the room. I reached out and lifted him up, and he did not seem to mind or to be surprised at all. The post office clerk – an elderly, good-humored man – looked at us expectantly over the rim of his glasses. The boy cleared his throat, held out the money and articulated: ‘Ek lifāfā!’ The clerk reached into a drawer, and pulled out an envelope. Then he took and examined the money, and finally – slowly and carefully – handed over the desired article. The boy took the envelope and wiggled his hips, signaling that my help was no longer required. I set him down, he skipped to the door and was gone.¹⁸

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¹⁸ The black diary, November 1994.

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