VARANASI/BENARES: THE CENTRE OF HINDUISM?

A discussion of the meaning of "place" and space

With 6 figures and 5 photos

NIELS GUTSCHOW

Introduction

Kaśi, Avimukta or Vārāṇasi – names for differing spatial entities, names that are also used interchangeably – names that, as Eck (1983, 187f.) observed, "express the various powers and attributes of the city and reveal the dimensions of its sacred authority". Vārāṇasi and Kaśi seem to have been synonymous since the first century AD; Vārāṇasi is also named as the capital of a kingdom named Kaśi. Later, the term Vārāṇasi referred to the urban settlement, while Kaśi represented the sacred realm (ksetra) encircled by the Great Pilgrimage, pañcakroṣīyatā. The name Vārāṇasi seems to convey the notion that the settlement was situated at the confluence of Gāṅga and Varāṇa (Dubey 1993, 331).

During the Muslim rule "Vārāṇasi" was corrupted into Banāras and was as such kept during the British rule, but spelt as Benares. With an official statement, the ancient name Vārāṇasi was restored on May 24, 1956.

Questions about the antiquity of Vārāṇasi often arise, but are not easily answered. Mark Twain wrote in 1898 in his ‘Following the Equator: Journey around the World’: "Benares is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend". These poetic notions resulted in the belief that Vārāṇasi is "the oldest urban settlement of the world". Excavations, however, have proven that a simple settlement of mud structures existed on the plateau near the confluence of Gāṅga and Varāṇa in the eighth century BC, while the first urban settlement patterns evolved in the 6th to 3rd centuries BC, when Vārāṇasi or Kaśi constituted one of 16 small tribal royalties. One of these was of the Śākyas, to which Siddharta Gautama (Buddha) belonged. His appearance in Vārāṇasi and Sarnāth, where he delivered his first sermon, might be dated to around 420 BC. Centuries of ever new invasions followed, with local rulers fostering the Brahmans as religious and legal advisers. As a rising class these Brahmans were very open to incorporate new and alien cults into their own traditions; alien gods were identified with their own deities. Thus a variety of manifestations developed, but no authority to formulate and promulgate dogmas.

After the flourishing Gupta-dynasty (4th to 6th centuries AD), Kaśi probably lost its independence. Pārānic literature refers to the dominance of the temple of Avimuktēśvara in this period; seals from the 6th to 11th century were found with inscriptions that name the territory as Avimukta – the "Never-Forsaken" land. When the pañcakroṣā pilgrimage evolved during the 12th century, the Lord of the Universe,
Viśveśvara, replaced the Avimukteśvara as the central focus.

At the same time, Vārānasi suffered from repeated raids by Muslim invaders (1033, 1194, 1206): chronicles refer to the destruction of thousands of temples. Finally, Aurangzeb ordered the destruction of a number of large temples in 1669 (the one of Viśveśvara among others) and their replacement by large mosques. He even ordered the city to be renamed Muhammadabad.

In 1725 a new Hindu kingdom was established in Vārānasi under the name of Kaśirāj. Since that time new palaces have been erected along the riverbank and temples rebuilt. The British East India Company took over in 1794, but the Mahārājas of Vārānasi remained to play an important cultural and social role. Mahārājas from all over India subsequently established residences in Vārānasi, to such an extent, that by about 1900 almost the entire stretch of the Ganges between Asi and Varanā was dotted with
Fig. 2: Benares: Pilgrim’s map dated 1875 AD, printed from four moulds on white cotton for Kailash Nath Sukul. The map is directed east, thus the Ganges appears on top, Varanasi towards left and Assi towards right. The circle circumscribes Kāśiksetra, the “Sacred Field of Kāsi” with a radius of five *krośa* and an arc of eighty-four *krośa* length (= 269 km). The lettering on the map identifies numerous temples, *mathas*, tanks and wells as potential destinations of the sacred journey.

buildings overlooking the sacred river, which became a symbol of cultural unity. Gradually also, the ghats were paved and architecturally transformed into stepped stone structures. A few remaining stretches were finally paved as recently as 1992.

Kāśi and the Pañca Cárośyātrā

The pañca cárośyātrā, the circumambulation of Kāśi, delineates the sacred and beneficial “field” (kṣetra) of Viśvanātha or Viśveśvara. The centre of this circumference, however, is not represented by this most important shrine of Śiva in his capacity as the Lord of the Universe, but by the linga of Madhyameśvara, the Lord of the Centre. The name of the pilgrimage comes from the radius of the circuit: five (pañca) cárośa or 17.6 kilometres (Fig. 1). The distance is measured from the central linga to the shrine of Dehalivināyaka, which is Ganeśa in his capacity as the guardian of the threshold of the western entrance into Kāśi and Vārānasi, serving as the protector of the sacred territory.

The idea of a pilgrimage around this mythic territory has survived until today, but it is believed that in the present Kaliyuga, the most deteriorated of the four world eras, the circumference of Kāśikṣetra has shrunk to 25 cárośa. The purānas, ancient collections of myths and legends, tell us that in the golden age the circumference measured 84 cárośa, or 269 kilometres. The pilgrimage map of Kāśi produced by Kailashnāth Sukul in 1875 (Fig. 2) depicts the full circle of the caurāśikṣetrazyātrā, the “84-cárośa-journey”. During the recent movement of Hindu revival a group of ritual specialists from Vārānasi tried to trace the ancient route, travelling by car to each of the 98 places mentioned on the circuit. The true circle of the ancient circuit as depicted on the map symbolically represents the entire cosmos. Even the pañca cárośi pilgrimage around the much reduced space equals the circumambulation of the cosmos.

Kāśikṣetra is defined as space that differs from the profane continuum around it. The Kāśi Khanda tells us that this ksetra is believed to be suspended in the sky, resting on the three prongs of the trident (trisūla) of Śiva. Kāśi is said to be like the sun behind the clouds: you can’t see it although it is there. Parry quotes his informants, saying “the soil is gold, the city is suspended in space and Śiva does wander in it daily” (Parry 1993, 108). In fact, he is represented
in space: Vārānasi is described as a figure with its head at Asī, and its feet at Varanā.

Kāśi remains in the state of the golden age, although only the “divine sight” of a yogi might realize that. But in as much as the time in which it exists is immune to degeneration, its territory is continuously defined through pilgrimages. These are preferably performed during the inauspicious period of an intercalary month, the adhik mās, that occurs every two or three years, but also during those days following full moon in October. The ancient texts do not mention any rules as to how the pilgrimage should be performed, and it was not until the end of the 19th century that resthouses (dharamśāla) were built at five places. These are always attached to the profane space to the left of the clockwise path, while places of worship are found on the right side. Strangely enough, during the dry season these resthouses shelter the pilgrims only during daytime. Around midnight they move onwards for about four hours to seek rest again under one of the huge banyan trees along the route or on the banks of a wayside tank. Hords of young men from the wrestling clubs manage to cover the 88 kilometres in less than twenty hours on the day preceding Śiva’s Great Night (mahāśivarātri) in February. And the hurried pilgrim will choose to go by bicycle, motorbike, car or bus to cover the circuit within a few hours, confining the actual worship to a few prominent places such as Bhimacandi and Rāmeśvara.

Certainly, these pilgrims won’t have time to stop at all the 108 places that mark the route. This is indeed an auspicious number, that can be understood as the multiplication of the nine planets with the twelve months, or the four cardinal directions with the 27 moonhouses (naksāatra). Even the total of the digits is 9, the most auspicious representation of an inherent logic. More probably they represent the 27 moonhouses that are considered as the place of original cosmogony. It is here that death and cremation becomes an act of universal regeneration.

From the ghāt the pilgrim climbs a flight of steps to reach the courtyard of a math. There he or she climbs down again to worship Manikarnikā Ghāt, the ghāt that is considered as the place of original cosmogony. Legends tell us, that some “old” lingas in the “womb of the city” have been forgotten elsewhere and recovered only at the end of the 18th century, a period of strong Hindu revival.

The merits attained by a paścakrośīyāṭra are familiar to every pilgrim. While those sins committed elsewhere are destroyed in Kāśi, those committed in Kāśi are destroyed on an antarghrayāṭra and those of an antarghrayāṭra are destroyed on a paścakrośīyāṭra.

Likewise, a hierarchy of places reflect the sequence of rebirth. Those who die in one of the six other sacred cities of India are reborn in Kāśi. And dying in Kāśi - within the area enclosed by the paścakrośī pilgrimge route – ensures liberation, mukti. At the moment of death Śiva gives them the tāraka mantra which destroys the fruits of past actions. Thus death in Kāśi can be understood as an initiation, with Śiva as the preceptor.

It was said earlier that Kāśi is essentially separate from the non-sacred continuity that surrounds it.
Photo 2: Benares: Linga of Bhimaśāṅkara, the sixth of twelve Jyotirlingas, representing the original one identified at Pune. The linga was "found" below the level of a house along the outer path around the compound of Viśveśvara. On the back wall are the image of Ganeśa/Vināyaka and two ancient sculptural fragments.

the same time the notion persists that Kāśi contains the rest of space. For the inhabitants of Kāśi there is no need for a pilgrimage to the other places, for they exist in Kāśi itself. The linga of Bhimaśaṅkara (see Photo 2), located in the entrance area of a private house just beyond the Viśveśvara compound, for example, represents the jyotirlinga (lit. the immeasurable linga in the form of a light stray) the “original” of which is found at Pune.

Again on a different scale, certain levels of Kāśi are represented in a nutshell, ready to be worshipped in a single act. The act of pilgrimage is thus reduced to an act of worship without the necessity of movement. The Kāśi Khanda text has identified three clusters of 14 lingas each which are meant to be worshipped on new moon days along a bayalialingyātra (lit. “journey to the 42 lingas”). To avoid the burden of such processions, 42 miniature lingas are placed in one large linga (see Photo 3). One level of the sacred infrastructure is thus isolated from the rest and expressed in a single symbol, that in a way represents Kāśi. Many such examples of isolation of certain aspects of space are known. There is even a temple in Vārāṇasi known under the name of Paṇcakroṣi Mandir, but with representations of many more than just those 108 places that punctuate the route of that yatra. The frame of the temple entrance, the side and rear walls bear altogether 272 niches with representations of sacred places of Vārāṇasi and Kāśi. Starting with Hanumāṇ, Viśalakṣidevi, Saptā-varṇa Vināyaka, Manikarnikesvara and Dandapāṇi on the left doorjamb, an imaginary route leads around the temple, covering even the deity dedicated to the pilgrimage, Paṇcakroṣidevi.

As the initiated might perform the yatra within his own body, the Paṇcakroṣi Mandir serves as a tool: 272 gods and goddesses, ghats, ponds and wells are visualized, worshipped and circumambulated in a single act of motion. The walls of the temple are transformed into a vast sacred scene.

Vārāṇasi, as any other sacred place in India is rich in such replications. For example, a goddess by
the name of Vārāṇasidevi represents the city of Vārāṇasi within the compound of Trilocaneśvara, and a goddess at Lalitā Ghāt by the name of Kāśidevi represents Kāśi.

Avimukta – the “realm that is never forsaken by Śiva”

Moving from the paṇicakośiyātra, the most inclusive pilgrimage route, towards the centre and the Ganges, a second route is marked by the nagarapradaksinā (No. 3 on Figure 3). It introduces the term pradaksinā, literally, the “circumambulatory route” around the city (nagara) of Vārāṇasi, that urban entity that spreads between two tributaries of the Ganges, Varaṇā in the North and Asi in the South. Several days of the year, especially the day of the full-moon in the month of Margaśīra (in December), are considered auspicious for this pilgrimage, which concludes with a ritual at Jñānavāpi, the sacred well beside the temple of Viśveśvara.

The third route (No. 2 on Figures 3, 4 and 6) is marked by the avimuktyātra, the pilgrimage that encircles Avimukta, the territory that is “Never-Forsaken” by Lord Śiva. Early sources such as the 9th century text of the Skanda Purāṇa already mentioned that the kṣetra or sacred territory of Avimukta “is superior to all other places, including Prayāga, because it bestows most easily release (moksa)” (BAKER 1993, 25). At about the same period, the Linga
Fig. 4: Benares: Delimitation of three different territories, located along the Ganges and extending around central sanctuaries. 1 Viśvesvara, 2 Omkāresvara, 3 Kedāresvara. Each processional route around these territories, called Viśvesvarakhanda, Omkāresvarakhanda and Kedāresvarakhanda respectively is marked by sacred shrines that are attached to the Four Directions of the cosmos. Another processional route defines Avimukta, the “realm that is never left by Śiva”, binding the three central sanctuaries together.


Purāṇa mentions that other tīrthas (sacred places) of North India even come to Avimukta on pilgrimage: they join the Gangā on her way to Vārānasi and assemble at Avimukteśvara. Most eloquently, the Kīrma Purāṇa, another text of the eighth or ninth centuries (Eck 1993, 13), eulogizes the qualities of Avimukta – the territory where sins perish instantly.

The city of Vārānasi is the most sacred region of mine, and is veritably the rescuer of all beings from the ocean of mundane existence.

Noble-souled devotees of mine attached to my vows, O goddess, dwell at that place, with steadfast determination.

This Avimukta (undeserted) region of mine is the highest of all holy spots, the best among all places, and the most excellent knowledge of all kinds of knowledges.

The holy spots of pilgrimage and shrines that are situated elsewhere, in heaven, earth or in cremation grounds are all to be found here.

My city does not rest on earth but hangs in the ether; only the liberated souls can perceive it as such by their mind and not the unliberated ones.
Kedarnath Vyas indeed knows almost every of these symbols are not anonymous, but identifiable: environment - they are found virtually everywhere of those inconspicuous phallic symbols of Siva that have to be visited in a fixed sequence.

Those who dwell in this holy city and constantly remember Kala (death), are purged of all their sins of this world and other world.

Siva, embodied as Kala, destroys all the sins of those who commit them (through ignorance) after taking up an abode in this city.

(29. 21-30, 73-74)

Certainly, Varanasi or Avimukta (both terms are used for Siva’s territory) is “the most sacred region”, because when dealing with a certain place, such literature praises it as if it were the greatest of all: “What is praised occupies full centre-stage for its moment of recognition” (Eck 1993, 3). Not only “Siva destroys all sins”, but the place itself, Varanasi, “is veritably the rescuer of all beings”. In a cryptic way the territory is called the “most excellent knowledge”. It is not the place itself which represents this knowledge. It is rather the knowledge about the quality of the place, handed down by the paranic literature, that becomes a tool towards salvation. This knowledge has to be protected from the ignorant, presumably the enemies of the oeda. Therefore, it is also called “hidden” - accessible only to those who share the knowledge about its existence and qualities.

Today, the pilgrimage encircling and thus defining the territory of Avimukta is rarely performed. We had to resort to the guidance of Kedarnath Vyás, who finds his way without any sign of uncertainty to those 72 gods, goddesses and sacred water sites that have to be visited in a fixed sequence.

The pilgrimage starts with a vow at the Avimuktesvara, a līṅga that represents Śiva as the master of the territory that is never forsaken by him. It is one of those inconspicuous phallic symbols of Śiva that seem to have been scattered over the entire urban environment - they are found virtually everywhere (Photo 4)! All the more it seems surprising, that most of these symbols are not anonymous, but identifiable: Kedarnāth Vyās indeed knows almost every līṅga by its specific name. In fact, the līṅga of Avimuktesvara had been replicated, most probably in course of the 19th century to revive the notion of the ancient centre it represented before the rise of the Viśveśvara, Śiva in the form of the “Lord of the Universe”, after the twelfth century. The replica is housed in a small niche north of the Aurangzeb mosque which dominates the heart of the city - since the last riots in 1993 heavily fenced in. But the “original” place of the līṅga is still remembered. There is a spot on top of the mosque’s plinth with signs of soot, traces of light offerings to the primeval Avimuktesvara which is said to have had its temple there until its demolition was ordered by Aurangzeb, the 17th century Moghul. This kind of memory of “place” is probably unique and characterises the South Asian notion of space. In a way, a līṅga represents “place” and therefore may not easily be translocated. The inherent quality of that place is immutable, cannot be transferred. Should a change occur in the environment, whether by force or not, the tendency prevails to direct the required ritual to the place of origin, as that is perceived as the “real” one. On the other hand, replicas are common, spreading the qualities of sacred sites over the entire subcontinent.

The pilgrimage of the avimukta-yātra starts – as the paścakroṣiyatra does at the underground sanctuary of the Manikarnikāśvara and the guardian to be worshipped at the outset of the sacred journey, Siddharināyaka. The first 18 places are located along the Ganges, upstream to the centre of the southern realm of Varanasi, Kedarēśvara (No. 17) and its respective guardian (No. 18). From there the route leads away from the river and follows roughly a radius of 2000 metres around the centre represented by the līṅga of Avimuktesvara. The route reaches the Ganges again at the temple of Hiranyakarbhēśvara (No. 35) and leads down to Mahēśvara (No. 52) at Manikarnikā Ghaṭ, the cremation ground. Again 18 places mark this stretch of the river, mostly high above the banks and in most cases identical with those visited in the course of the other pilgrimages. With the līṅga of Gāṅgēśvara (No. 59) the central compound around the mosque is reached, which is first circumambulated (No. 59-67 = Viśveśvara). After having worshipped Viśveśvara, the pilgrim returns again to the outer circuit (Nos. 68-71). Only after having worshipped five guardians (Gaṇēśa in the form of Vināyaka, collectively numbered as 71) does he finally reach Avimuktesvara.

Four times an imaginary centre that had been superceded by the mosque is circumambulated in a unique sequence: The pilgrim is led near to the final destination, passes by it, encircles it again and

This city is reputed as a crematorium, and spoken of as ‘avimukta’, never deserted by me, O lovely one. I destroy the world by assuming the form of death at this place.

Of all hidden places, O goddess, this one is dearest to me, resorting to which, my devotees virtually enter into myself. All deeds like charity, repeating of names, sacrificial offerings, deeds, penance, meditation, studies done in this place become imperishable.

Sins accumulated by one through thousands of births instantly perish when he enter the Avimukta city of Varanasi.

This knowledge has to be protected from the ignorance, whether by force or not, the tendency prevails to direct the required ritual to the place of origin, as that is perceived as the “real” one. On the other hand, replicas are common, spreading the qualities of sacred sites over the entire subcontinent.

The pilgrimage of the avimukta-yātra starts – as the paścakroṣiyatra does at the underground sanctuary of the Manikarnikāśvara and the guardian to be worshipped at the outset of the sacred journey, Siddharināyaka. The first 18 places are located along the Ganges, upstream to the centre of the southern realm of Varanasi, Kedarēśvara (No. 17) and its respective guardian (No. 18). From there the route leads away from the river and follows roughly a radius of 2000 metres around the centre represented by the līṅga of Avimuktesvara. The route reaches the Ganges again at the temple of Hiranyakarbhēśvara (No. 35) and leads down to Mahēśvara (No. 52) at Manikarnikā Ghaṭ, the cremation ground. Again 18 places mark this stretch of the river, mostly high above the banks and in most cases identical with those visited in the course of the other pilgrimages. With the līṅga of Gāṅgēśvara (No. 59) the central compound around the mosque is reached, which is first circumambulated (No. 59-67 = Viśveśvara). After having worshipped Viśveśvara, the pilgrim returns again to the outer circuit (Nos. 68-71). Only after having worshipped five guardians (Gaṇēśa in the form of Vināyaka, collectively numbered as 71) does he finally reach Avimuktesvara.

Four times an imaginary centre that had been superceded by the mosque is circumambulated in a unique sequence: The pilgrim is led near to the final destination, passes by it, encircles it again and
reaches it only after paying respect to a fivefold threshold represented by the Vinayakas. The complexity of the gradual approach seems to mirror an adaptation to the changes in the sacred topography. Viśeśvara (No. 67), at present considered the centre of Vārāṇasi, in course of the route appears to be just one of the many forms of Siva, followed by Annapūrṇā, his female counterpart (No. 68).

As in all other cases, the number of places that mark the route, seventy-two, and the fact that half of these are located along the Ganges, is open to various speculations. Nine times eight is as an auspicious number as 108: it stresses the spatial impact and at the same time incorporates the centre.

On a different level of speculation one would have to argue about the meaning of three mounds (No. 21, 26, 32) that seem to mark the boundary of the territory of Avimukta. Topographically very prominent, these mounds, located almost exactly along the above mentioned circuit of avimuktayātṛā, seem to have been used since the earliest times for the establishment of sanctuaries. It is as if these mounds could be interpreted as the three spokes of Śiva’s trident (trīśula). As was said in the Kiśma Purāṇa: The city “hangs in the ether” – it balances above earth on the trident.

Antargṛhayātṛā – the pilgrimage around the heart of the city

The innermost pilgrimage (No. 1 of Figures 3, 4, 5), literally “the route inside the house”, encircles the very core of Vārāṇasi, the centre of which is represented by the holiest of the holies, Viśeśvara or Viśvanāth, that form of Śiva that has spiritually
dominated the city since the twelfth century. However, similar to the circuit of the centre, two more pilgrimages lead around the southern (No. 3 on Figure 4) and the northern (No. 2 on Figure 4) quarters of Vārānasi, with the temples of Kedāreśvara and Omkareśvara respectively as centres. Such a threefoldness of processional routes again seems to support the notion of the complexity of Vārānasi’s spatial organisation.

As no place can be identified as the ultimate and only centre, no territory is the only “innermost” one. It is up to the individual and his or her perception of spiritual relationships, as to what is recognised and through ritual treated as the centre. Although there are three parallel or even competing notions about the “innermost” territory, the antargrhayatra seems to bind these three together, leading from the topographical centre towards Kedāreśvara and returning from Omkareśvara to that centre (Fig. 4). While the Kedāreśvara Khaṇḍa pilgrimage is still performed, the pilgrimage of the Omkareśvara Khaṇḍa has survived only through literary sources. Singh (1987, 500 a. 1993, 58) has traced the route according to the description provided by the Kāśi Khaṇḍa, the text of 11624 verses that had been in the process of formulation during the revivalist Hindu empire of the Gāhadavāla dynasty in the twelfth century (Eck 1993, 10). By the 17th century so many of the 108 places along the route had been destroyed or even hidden away from the Muslim invaders, that the pilgrimage ceased to be performed. It was only during the recent movement of Hindu revival, that a group of priests managed to trace the ancient route to restore the long forgotten fabric.

The antargrhayatra remains as the most common of the three khandayātras, also considered to be a precondition for the yāтра encircling Kāśi. The pilgrimage is easily completed within a day, preferably
on the day preceding full-moon in February, October or November, most auspiciously however on the occasion of Śiva's dark night, śivarātri in February.

After preparatory rites at the temple of Viśvesvara which is also the final destination, the pilgrimage starts with the worship of the goddess Manikarnikā-devi. Before moving upstream the bank of the river, the pilgrim first turns North through the narrow lanes around the busy temple of Śaṅkata-devi, high above the Bhonsalā Ghat. On his way, the pilgrim also turns towards the Ganges to offer aksata, raw rice, to the waters in remembrance of Śiva in the form of Jarasaridhesvara (No. 8), the linga of which no more longer exists as it sank into the river during one of the yearly inundations. In this case, not even a replica ensures a material continuity. It is just the place that is remembered.

The linga of Śuḷaṭankeśvara (No. 11) guards the southernmost “corner” of the inner territory along the Ganges, from where the circuit leads around the centre for a distance of 300 to 400 metres. Some sanctuaries are located in new buildings, integrated into private residences (No. 15), and in one case, a complete temple is virtually transformed into a residence (No. 49, Īśaneśvara, Photo 5), the linga rising in the middle of the “living room”. Only 15 of the total of 77 shrines along the route are identifiable as temples, complete with vestibule and sikhara tower above the sanctum. Eight of the 56 lingas along the route are “hidden” away below the present level of the city. One of these (No. 27, Pitāmaheśvara) can only be imagined below the road, as the staircase down is accessible only on the occasion of śivarātri. Having finally completed the outer circuit, the pilgrim embarks upon six more circumambulations, following a spiral-like movement towards the final destination, the Lord of the Universe.

More than any other type of movement, the spiral conveys the idea of a gradual approach. While the circumambulation represents a more clearly arranged
task, perhaps even controllable, the spiral stands for a complex process which is less apparent. In the case of the antargṛhayātra, this process certainly reflects "the yogic idea that in order to attain union with the god, the adept’s life-force must cross through seven centres or circles ranged along his spine", as Parry (1993, 106) wrote. Again, Kāśī’s identification with the human body is obvious: the pilgrim’s action completes a "journey" through the spinal circles or cakras, putting him in direct contact with the transcendental world. The notion of seven circles also appears on an all-encompassing level: seven concentric rings, each described by a set of shrines dedicated to Ganeśa, the Lord of the Thresholds, encircle the same centre as the antargṛhayātra refers (Eck 1983, 187/188; Sukul 1974, 100f.; Singh 1993, 51 deal with some of the more of the many symbolic associations of the number seven). The Vināyakayātra, a pilgrimage that covers these 56 shrines of Ganeśa, then, represents another spiral-like movement towards the centre, starting with the pāncakroṣṭiyātra which is defined by the outermost set of eight shrines (Fig. 3). The spiritual fortification of the sacred centre by these sets of guardians seems to refer again to the notion of the “most excellent knowledge” that has to be preserved and the fact that Vārānasi is “hidden”: certainly, the place has to be protected and Ganeśa acts as the ideal protector.

Conclusion – The idea of the centre

Is Vārānasi/Kāśī really “the” holy centre of India, or would it not be better to call it “one” holy centre of a religion that has basically no centre? Is Kāśī not “one” tīrtha out of many which have long been the goal of pilgrims?

Parry (1993, 109) argues, “the idea that India, Kashi and Manikarnika are all ‘nāvels’ at the centre of space is paralleled by a comparable image applied to Palestine, Jerusalem and the Temple.” Of course it is, in the literature of high praise, but there are other tīrthas which claim equal merit, and in Kāśī itself there are competing notions about which place should be considered as the real “navel”.

Let us first discuss the uniqueness of Kāśī, Vārānasi and its present centre, the temple of Viśveśvara. The first replica of Viśveśvara was already established within the temple precincts of Pattadakal in the 9th century under the name of Kaśīviśvanātha. Another temple was built in 1627 on the central square of the city of Patan in Nepal. Its founder, king Siddhinarasimha Malla even abdicated in 1652 in order to undertake a pilgrimage to be able to worship the “real” Viśveśvara in Vārānasi. And after the temple had been destroyed by the zealous Aurangzeb in 1669, a minister of Siddhinarasimha’s son built another Viśveśvara on the same square in 1678 to serve as a valid substitute. During the 19th century, Nepal’s prime ministers even ventured to create a replica of Vārānasi, obviously in a surge of justification of their disputed power. They lined the riverbanks with temples and ghats and interpreted the landscape to mirror the Ganges with its two tributaries.

Such an intervention may well be placed near to Parry’s comparison with Jerusalem, as European medieval towns were seen as replicas of Jerusalem. The way of the Cross and the place of Golgotha were quite easily transferred to share the event of Christ’s suffering everywhere.

While Kāśī and the Viśveśvara were widely replicated to share their sacred qualities, in Vārānasi itself the primeval Viśveśvara has various manifestations. The first temple might have been destroyed in 1194, but in the 19th century it was reconstructed and named as Adiviśveśvara, the “primeval” one. In 1585 another temple was built some 100 metres southeast of the first one. Destroyed in 1669, only part of its sanctum survived as the rear wall of the mosque which replaced the temple. These ruins, however, continued to be worshipped, even after a new temple was built in 1777 nearby. The story is even more complex: temples form only the shells, it is the linga which carries the notion of Śiva’s presence. It is said, that in 1669 the linga of Viśveśvara fled the polluting destruction, seeking refuge in the Well beside the temple, which later came to be known as the well of wisdom (Jñānavāpi). The attending priest maintains that in the 19th century pilgrims used to make their vow “above” the well with the primeval Viśveśvara as witness. Today this vow is done at the priest’s throne beside the well, while a betelnut represents the linga.

There are many more competing legends. For example, there is one linga kept in a private house near Lolarka which is said to have been rescued by its inhabitants in 1669.

A new Viśveśvara was established at Mir Ghat in 1958 because conservative Brahmins argued that the untouchables, having gained access to the temple according to the provisions of the Indian constitution, polluted the linga. And in 1962 the largest temple of Viśveśvara was completed on the campus of the Banaras Hindu University.

While substitutes of the Viśveśvara spread all over the sub-continent, other tīrthas were replicated in
Fig. 6: Benares: Processional route defining the territory of Avimukta, the “realm that is never left by Śiva”. The route is dotted by 71 temples and shrines before it ends at the tiny temple of Avimuktesvara. Three hills along the line of a suggested circle (No. 21, 26, 32) serve as topographical landmarks guarding the ancient territory.

Varānasi itself. In such a world of interchangeability it seems difficult to determine a “real” and undisputed centre. Even the centrality of the cremation ground at Manikarnikā, where the world was first created, is disputed: the tank (kunda) at Kedāra Ghāt is thus called Ādimanikarnikākunda, the “primeval” one. Parry (1993, 106) quoting his informants, says that “it is widely held that those who die in Kedār-Khanda are granted a more immediate and unconditioned ‘liberation’ than those whose death occurs elsewhere”.

Among Hindus a “dispute” does not create a dogmatic confrontation, as every region or community follows a different perception. There is certainly a quest for the “real” and “primeval” centre, but the search for it has a varied outcome.

Strictly speaking, a māndala is “a circle separating a particular area from its surrounding”. The enclosed area is protected from malevolent forces. Especially this is true for the spatial entities Kāśi, Avimukta or Antargrhi. The yātra described earlier mark the boundaries of sacred space on different levels, the sanctity increasing step by step. As diagrams, māndalas are used as a “support of a concrete ritual or an act of spiritual concentration” (Ellade 1952, 54).

The adept penetrates the māndala by yogic techni-
quires. In the same way the pilgrim passes through the protective circles defined by the Guardians of the Thresholds on his sacred journey towards the inner sanctum of the sacred field (kṣetra).

It was said earlier that Kāśī is apart from the rest of the world, apart in terms of space and time. At the same time Kāśī encompasses the rest of space. While the pilgrim moves along the defined route, he or she (most of them are women!) not only moves along the outer circle of the mandala: the pilgrimage also attains the quality of a circumambulation of the entire cosmos! While the first notion is based on an opposition of inside-outside, the second surpasses this division. The mandala then represents the cosmos – Kāśī is the cosmos.

The sacred journey does not imply a centredness, as it is all-encompassing, addressing the entire space. Whether Madhyamāśvara, Avimuktesvara or Viśvēvara, the journey has still a cosmic quality. As a cosmos, however, Kāśī reveals a hierarchy of space that refers again to the circles the adept penetrates, pointing again to the centredness: it is the space of Antargṛhi that warrants complete union with God 'as water with water.'

References

AV, Atharva Veda. (1895) Bombay.


