Chapter One
Complicit Cosmologies: Hindu ‘Reflexivity’ in Benares

Benares, since time ‘immemorial’ as one of the most visited sites in India and ritually and spiritually experienced by visitors, is also a space that is represented and addressed by a range of cosmologicians. The grammarian logic used is inherently based on shastric hermeneutics and is most apparently depicted in certain colonial and postcolonial popular press’ cosmographs. However, the link between the cosmographs and the logic of Benares as a cosmic Hindu city is not necessarily associated with pictorial representations alone, nor is it limited to popular religious renderings. Besides the archive of (post)colonial as well as anthropological writings and pictorial representations, missionary writings, travelogues, memoirs and hagiographic depictions of Benares — originally published within the colonial reign — along with tracts, maps, images reprinted from earlier manuscripts are also available for analyses (Gaenszle and Gengnagel 2008). Not surprisingly then, recent scholarship makes a case that Benares, as an index of Hinduism as a structured religion, is a production of this discursive reification within the colonial era (see Dalmiya and Stietencron 2007).

However, one may insist that the grammarian ‘cosmo-logic’ has to be seen as part of the religious depiction of Benares that predates the colonial era. I discuss this later in the chapter using Mircea Eliade’s classic formulation, on the centrality of ‘the myth of the eternal return’ (1954). He proposes that every cosmogony, as a primordial inscription of the religious universe, has a very distinct motif of a centre. This centre is not only homologically used within religious symbolism as a ‘metonymic’ link in architecture, representation and sacralization of the ever-new territories, it also continually defines the contours of a relatively ‘profane’ ‘outside’. In other words, while the myth of cosmogony — the birth of the cosmos, is about a creation of a central grammarian theological principle, one must keep in sight that equally omnipresent within it is the latent/manifest principle of ‘death and decay’ (Eliade 1954; Weiner 1976). It is in this context that one can locate the periodic re-returns and architectural and representational refigurations of objects, places and the ‘community’ in religious characterizations. Contextualizing
Eliade’s observation further, let me suggest at this stage few crucial reconceptualizations based on Lacanian formulations.

First is the question of the centre or the *axis mundi* of the cosmology. Mircea Eliade’s conception stated above suggests a co-ordinate of centre that, by its very fixity defines the peripheries. Benares as a city with Kashi Vishwanath representing its cosmologic centre would be an example of this view. Martin Gaenszle and Jörg Gengnagel in their introduction to the city, however, say that since there is a “cosmic dimension” to the founding of Kashi, “it can be elsewhere” (not just in Benares): “Uttarkashi in the Himalayas, Daksinkashi in South India, or else the Kashi in one’s heart.” They call forth Diana L. Eck’s depiction of the city as an “imagined landscape” to argue that the complexity of the place can only be followed if one first observes that in this case “mythology and topography are intrinsically interlinked” (Gaenszle and Gengnagel 2006: 7-8).

**Cosmology and the Unconscious**

In Bruce Fink’s reading of Lacan, there are two registers at which the Real is constitutive of the Symbolic. One is the founding gesture, the birth of the world itself or in other words how the idea of a cosmology comes into being. One can explain this by recalling the famous phrase from the Rg Veda that describes the time before beginning of the Hindu cosmos as that of a ‘sea without light’ (Darian 1978: 53). This unsignifiable, meaningless ‘sea without light’ is the first Real that founds the Hindu cosmos retroactively, providing the contour of the inception of the ‘Symbolic’. This could be further corroborated by noting the hierophantic (signifying cosmic illumination) symbol of the *Shivlingam* which is metonymically associated with the management of a cosmic chaos that lies on its’ borders. This then is the notion of time of the Real, the time of the ‘sea without light’, the time of the primordial. Lacan argues, this undifferentiated time is not memorized consciously by subjects but is remembered in the Unconscious of the Symbolic (Fink 1995: 19-20). With this premise the second idiom of the Real can be outlined. The structure of the Symbolic is based on a signifying chain from here on, which on one hand has the remembrance of the primordial in the unconscious and on the other hand has a series of discontinuous master signifiers. As one already knows, Lacan’s
famous formula with regard to the rereading of the Freudian idea of ‘unconscious’ is that ‘Language is structured like the unconscious’. In other words, the language represents the unconscious. Bruce Fink elaborates the genealogy of the formulation as following:

Lacan states very simply that the unconscious is language, meaning that language is that which makes up the unconscious. Freud is mistakenly thought by many people to have held that feelings can be unconscious, whereas for the most part he held that what is repressed is what he called the Vorstellungsrepräsentanzen, commonly translated into English as ideational representatives. On the basis of the German philosophical tradition underlying Freud’s work and close study of Freud’s texts themselves, Lacan translates it into French as représentants de la représentation, representatives of (the) representation, and concludes that these representatives can be equated with what are referred to in linguistics as signifiers (Fink 1995: 8).

The concept of a master signifier is key for us to move forward. Lacan’s Écrits clearly places ‘originary’ signification, as not only enunciated from the site that thus becomes that of the ‘master’ signifier in narrative analyses, it also informs us, that the enunciation is inherited in the language as the ‘name of the father’ (Lacan 1977: 74). In this inheritance the death of the father, forecloses possibilities of dismantling the ‘master’ in the ‘signifier’ and that in turn becomes the weight of what Lacan calls as the ‘Symbolic’ (Lacan 1977: 74). Translating this idiom in political theological terms, Slavoj Žižek puts it as following:

So what is Master-Signifier? Let us imagine a confused situation of social disintegration, in which the cohesive power of ideology loses its efficiency: in such a situation, the master is the one who invents a new signifier, the famous “quilting point”, which stabilizes the situation again and makes it readable …

He further says that:

the “magic” of the “master” lies in the fact that “although there is nothing new at the level of positive content, “nothing is quite the same” after he pronounces his word (Zizek 2006: 37).

In case of Benares, Lord Vishwanath represents that cosmologic centre as an eternally recurrent divine-double of Shiva (Eck 1983: 138-155). However, the point that I am making is that this ‘centrality’ is not an architectural centre to the city and thus is not
fixed in the geographical sense of the term. This centre can only be reconstructed through language and to the extent language is always-already there referring to nothing less than a cosmology, one follows from the above description that the unconscious intimately structures the cosmologic. When Bruce Fink says that “the unconscious is not something that one knows, but rather something that is known” (Fink 1995: 23), the same could be rephrased as, one doesn’t construct a cosmology, one inhabits it. In other words, how the cosmology works and is ‘eternally recurrent’ in innumerable ways cannot be simply explained as a work of few bigoted Hindu actors. There is something more complex in the process. At this stage, if one were to take Edmund Leach’s formulation that myth is a language to maintain social controversies (Leach 1959: 85), what we have is that there is no linear inheritance of the frame of the cosmology — which of course, is found and structured by myths. The cosmology is as contemporanized through the controversial aspect of the social for every temporal moment as it is for an era. Thus the Lacanian descriptions of metaphor as condensation and metonymy as displacement should be seen in this respect as part of the signifying chain which upset any possibility of linearity of the Symbolic (Lacan 1977: 172-173; Fink 1995: 5).

However, one may ask, although the Symbolic sustains itself with the weight of the ‘name of the father’, what possibly causes the ‘eternal recurrence’ of the metonymies and metaphors within the Symbolic? The answer is Death drive. Lacan in rereading Freud’s notion of death drive argues that like the Unconscious, the drive is immortal, always already there and eternally recurrent in displaced forms (Lacan 1977: 112-117). Thus if one were to sum up, then, first of all a cosmology is not total or absolute, it is based on the hidden register of the Real that causes a discontinuous split. The cosmology is always less than one. Second, any new cosmology cannot be construed as a synthesis of the former. The commonality of features is to be understood in terms of the nature of death drive. How the unconscious (language) shapes the ‘new’, such that it appears as a sublime form of the older cosmology, can only be understood in homological, metonymical capacity. This is true for Freud’s observation in Moses and Monotheism (1939) that polytheism itself is immortalized in the new found cosmology of monotheism, though the latter may not revert to the former. This is what he calls as ‘repetition compulsion’ and Lacan rephrases it as the element of ‘repetition automaton’ of the
Symbolic, or that of the cosmologic in our case. Thus when J.P.S. Uberoi argues that “the total human emancipation of religious man, and not merely any ideal of a synthesis or reconciliation of Hinduism and Islam, was the faith and endeavor of Sikhism from its inception” (Uberoi 1991: 332), he emphasizes the ‘totality’ and the ‘emancipation’. What he misses is that first of all the cosmologic totality does not exist, though cosmologic autonomy may exist. And second there is always a ‘return’ of the ‘remainder’ in the present cosmology from the former one, that cannot be left unexplained. It is this aspect that I wish to capture by invoking the notion of ‘drive’.

In this chapter I seek to elaborate on how the Hindu symbolic reflexively interacts with its own metaphors and metonymies and that of various other cosmologies that it shares. I locate, traditional, modern and postmodern Hindu Cosmological Benares within this premise. I argue that the post modern distinction from the modern is that the river Ganga, which represents the ‘feminine’ regenerative and restorative principle to the Hindu Symbolic, may itself be under a premise of dissolution through pollution and ‘development’. If the launching of ‘Save Ganga’ campaign and quixotic installation of heavy machineries to purify the sewage mess and cremate the dead electrically, represents the modern of Benares as a historical moment, then the unambiguous dashing of that hope marks the end of that modernist stance. I must clarify my use of the ‘reflexive’ here. I am not using ‘reflexive’ in the sense in which it has been used by theorists like Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck under what they call as a “post Industrial”, “reflexive modernization” of the ‘new’ world order. In their view, the new order although haunted by global ecological perils, has otherwise reached an universal reflexive domain where social actors of any ethnic context can look forward to design their life styles, sexual orientation, vocations as they wish (Beck 1992; Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994). In my usage, reflexivity is first of all not necessarily related entirely to a given set of actors. To put it differently, the Unconscious and the drive are significant tools that I use and second, reflexive for me does not mean a positive shift in human history. Rather in my line of argument on the reflexivity of the Hindu Symbolic, the attempt is to show how ideologically the Hindu becomes an iterative idiom in the lives of those who may otherwise be part of different sets of religious cosmologies. This may include not only Buddhism, Christianity and Sikhism but also what are inadequately
referred as to be 'sects'— which are cosmologies as any other religious worldview— like, Kabir Panth and Ravidas panth. This iterative aspect of the Hindu cosmology, is captured through the lens of the politico-theological. It is in this precise sense that I also personalize and pose the question to my ethnographic domain that Hent de Vries asks while locating the political-theological or what has been called as 'theologico-political'. He says:

Is there any relevance or permanence of the theologico-political before and beyond the dual perspectives of (or on) what Assmann terms the 'implicit theology of the political' and the 'implicit politology, sociology, or anthropology of theological or, more generally religious discourses'? That is to say, is there a political theology that is not yet or no longer strictly or simply theological or even political, in the traditional and modern definitions of these terms? (Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan 2006: 24, emphases in original).

In the following discussion, I make an attempt to answer these questions and thus frame my responses within these positive limits. Needless to say, in this process I also construct my central question: how and in what ways the political is theological and vice versa. As I delineate the traditional, the modern and the post modern, their usage has to be seen as part of a master signification which Žižek puts as “although there is nothing new at the level of positive content, “nothing is quite the same”, “after” the epistemological break is conceived” (Žižek 2006: 37).

Thus at this register, the question could be phrased as following. Why is it that Benares was and still is metonymical to the ideological-existential idea of the Hindu civilization in the writings of a range of commentators? Further, two more questions emerge from this. First, how and why did it become the exemplary bases of Hindu civilization, civility and city? Second, if one chooses a perspective of modernity-post modernity to illustrate the colonial construction of Hinduism, how would contemporary Benares be counted as an empirical test ground? The answer, to my mind lies in locating features that are common to both the colonial writings and the post colonial anthropological depictions of the place. A repetitive trope of cosmology-cosmography, that pitches Benares as a Hindu city par excellence is precisely that link which manifestly determines the representations of the city. 
Cosmology, as I have defined it here, refers to a mythic foundational extension of a socio-religious universe while the founding of the myth itself could be called as cosmogonic (Eliade 1954). For example, the myth that Kashi (Benares) is precariously, albeit with divine sanction, balanced on Lord Shiv’s trident and is thus the city that would survive all eventual human disasters, is a founding cosmological principle (Eck 1983). This foundational cosmology, which has spawned multiple similar idioms, also gives ways to corresponding cosmo-graphic realizations of the myth(s). For instance, the four direction of the city and the *mandala* of the organization of the temples is a cosmographic initiative (see Fig. 1 and 2). Another example is the cosmographic representation of the ghats as divided between *shaivite* and *vaishnavite* domains, according to the myths. The myth of Kashi’s centrality to the Hindu cosmos has been oft-quoted in most writings. However, it is in the work of G.S Ghurye (1962), L.P. Vidyarthi and Baidyanath Saraswati (1979) that a triadic representational grid of cosmology, cosmography and everyday religious observances comes to be the mainstay of the anthropological discussion. The ‘connecting link’ and the ‘missing link’ between the above-mentioned work and those of Veena Das (1982), Meena Kaushik (1976), Jonathan Parry (1994) and Ron Barrett (2008) more recently, has to be understood on two levels. The missing link is the absence of an overt Hindu paradigm of faith based anthropological discussions, with which the likes of Ghurye, Sarsawati, and Vidyarthi operated. The connecting link is that the later writings nevertheless borrowed the grammarian logic of what I call here the ‘Hindu cosmos’. The latter’s exhaustive critical discussions around the organization of space, directions, the dichotomy of sacred-profane are based on the unquestioned notion of cosmology of Hindu Benares.
Fig. I. Kashi, cosmograph. Upasana prakashan (Painter unknown). Bettina Bäumer collection, Samvidalya, Abhinavgupta research library, Varanasi.
(Fig. 1 and 2. Notice the circular cordon represented by fortification of temples. While the centre is clearly occupied by Lord Vishwanath's (Visheshvara) temple, the circular cosmos is balanced on Lord Shiv's trident. Ganga is mentioned as "Kashi tal vahini Ganga", which literally means "Ganga, that carries the flow beneath Kashi". Here is also an idiomatic confirmation of the Upper and the Lower. Thus Ganga with the pictorial depictions of the fish, crocodiles, tortoises and the colonial ships marks the mergence of chthonian with the non-sacred. The Upper is also pronounced with the birdlike, winged angelic incarnation that greets the goddess Kashi and a composed sun on the north with features of a man's face. Also in terms of its cosmological position, it is in the west to the Vishwanath's installation, where the sun sets. The centre of the cosmology is represented by a mandala, which has an entry through the ghats of the river. Also unlike the ornithological and chthonian, the entry to Vishwanath temple is represented by the three mythic bovine incarnations. The ghats then are gates to the mandala, which again has its' inside and outside. The only other animal represented here is the Kal Bhairav's dog, which in a way represents the alter ego of the cow, in being the vehicle of the lord of time, who is also the know-it-all of when-where-how of the death of a given Hindu (death is metonymic here to closure of a temporal instance). The Vishwanath temple itself represents a mandala like complex with the vestibule of the entry occupied by the cow(s), which is a feminine metonymic stand-in for Ganga.)
Fig. 2. Inset of the cosmological centre, the frame of the Mandala and its’ peripheries.
Cosmology, Civilization and Civility in Benares

Ghurye in his *Cities and Civilization* (1962) lays down the tenets of defining an ancient city based on the notions of pilgrimage and merchandise. In other words, the city is a regulated and organized space that is trafficked by two very different sets of actors. If one focuses on Ghurye's attempt to link cities with civilization and not on the individual definition of these two concepts then perhaps it would be easier to steer his arguments to the context of the present work (cf. Elias 1978, 1982). It can be inferred from his descriptions that the norms with which the pilgrims and merchants come together with the native residents in what could be a fortified, taxed, governed space means that these norms must be based on the civilizational axes. That norm for him is that of cosmology, which is identified by both the pilgrim and the merchant, who may be the same person, but not always.

A structural functionalist reading of the representations of cosmographies of Benares by Ghurye, Vidyarthi and Saraswati informs us in the vein of Malinowski's 'myth as a charter of the institutions' that cosmology could be seen with a veritable function of maintaining the social structure (Malinowski 1948). However, their writings with its assertions on history, values, myths and structural symbolism also provide a conspicuous rupture from a strict functionalist tradition and mark a movement towards the kind of structuralist anthropology that followed. This movement is unambiguously and characteristically consummated in the works of Veena Das and Meena Kaushik and in the writings of the French anthropologist Madeleine Biardeau (Biardeau 1989; Das 1982; Kaushik 1976). Another set of writers like Diana L. Eck and Jonathan Parry identify themselves with mixed conceptual legacies while relying on a detailed description of the ethnographic context (Eck 1983; Parry 1994). Anthropologist Nita Kumar's writings evoke a historiographic interrogation of other writings, which are encompassed as studies of the postcolonial realm of 'Banaras'. To a large extent, she unravels the 'inside-outside' of the cosmological frame, taking the frame itself to be culturally pre-set and foundationally given (Kumar 1988, 1992). A further 'epistemological break' in method, conceptions and representation is brought about in Lawrence Cohen's *No Aging in India* (1998), a multi-sited complex ethnographic commentary on family, senility and language of Nagwa based Banarsis. Ron Barrett's *Aghor Medicine* (2008), coming from the
tradition of medical anthropology, is indebted to conceptual and ethnographic features of Jonathan Parry's work on the economic and cultural aspects of cremation at Benares, ignoring Das and Kaushik's contributions to the same theme. While Cohen radically revises the universalistic underpinnings to the family of the aged/old in Benares and thus that of the city itself, Barrett borrows the cosmo-logic of the city without any critical displacement. Sample the paradigmatic commonness from Diana L. Eck (1983) to Ron Barrett (2008). Diana L. Eck introducing Banaras as the "city of light" evokes the Hindus' emic view of the city, summarily pronouncing "Kashi" as the "whole world itself". "Everything on earth that is powerful and auspicious" is seen to be present in this "microcosm" (Eck 1983: 23).

One should pause here to note the selective and sacralized entitlement of the city, just as definitionally a city conceived with a plan is stripped off the erratic and the unknown. Here, Kashi is construed not as that which has all that is there on this earth but all that is powerful and auspicious (emphases added). If one were to read the cosmograph (Fig. 1 and 2) presented above, the symbolic citations acquire a structuralist meaning in the sense of their inter-relatedness and shared sacredness. The symbols may be arbitrarily chosen but once chosen they become what Lacan calls as the privileged signifiers (point du caption) (Zizek 1989: 103). Eck's account represents the "sacred water" and "all of the gods" to be based here in Kashi. She further says:

All of the eight directions of the compass originated here, receiving jurisdiction over the sectors of the universe. And all of time is here...[.] Thus, all the organizing forces of space and time begin here, and are present here, within the sacred boundaries of Kashi (Eck 1983: 23).

Yet, she says Kashi is not of this world alone. Eck carefully points to the contingent (im)possibility of cross-paths (which is incidentally the meaning of tirtha — pilgrimage) involving Kashi in all three cosmolologic spheres of life, death and immortality or which can be correspondingly also read as that of the human, ancestral and divine respectively.

[Kashi] sits high above the earth on the top of the trident of its lord and protector, Shiva. Kashi is not subject to the relentless movement of the great cycles of time, the eras of universal creation and dissolution. It is the still
center which anchors the perpetual movement of time and space, without participating in the ever-turning world of samsara (Eck 1983: 23-24).

The preceding observation has also been translated at a discursive level to construct Kashi as one that is outside the political history of this world. Eck says:

Unlike other ancient cities, however, Banaras is a city whose political history is little known, it has rarely been an important political centre, and the rise and fall of kings through its long history have no role in the tale of the city’s sanctity told by its own people (Eck 1983: 5).

Further she says, while comparing Kashi with other ancient cities’ ethnographic present that “today Peking, Athens, and Jerusalem are moved by very different ethos from that which moved them in ancient times, but Kashi is not” (Eck 1983: 5). This assertion, which uses the ‘theological’ reference to make a comment on the ‘political’ then fits the line of questioning stated earlier in the discussion: What is the “implicit theology of the political and the ‘implicit politology, sociology, or anthropology of theological or, more generally religious discourses’?” (Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan 2006: 24).9 Ron Barrett instead of configuring anything close to seeking to question the cosmological framework, authenticates and introduces “Banaras” by reiterating and quoting Eck's characterization. He adds:

Just as Banaras is a prototype for sacred India, her sacred features are prototypes for the divine roles of the city as a whole. Foremost among these features are the Ganga and the two famous cremation grounds (śmāshānäs) along her banks (Barrett 2008: 29).

The cosmic legitimacy that Eck provides to the city becomes a paradigmatic backbone to derive things, places, events, issues and people as part of that primordial horizontal sacred ‘complex’. This is precisely the difficulty that Lawrence Cohen comes across when he seeks to study ‘senility’, Alzheimer’s within the “cosmic city”. In his characteristic manner, he writes in No Aging in India: Alzheimer’s, the bad family and other modern things (1998) of “the view from the river” as following:
The river, again. We are in a boat: myself, two other passengers — railway workers from the nearby town of Mughalsarai — and the boatman, who is pulling hard against the current and ferrying us upstream. We are on the Ganges, in Varanasi, and on our left the ghats glide by, flights of some stone steps leading up to the lanes of the city. A few men and women, some quite old and stooped, are bathing. The scene, river, ghats, lanes, boats, and bathers — is clichéd. It has come to stand in for the city as a whole in a variety of registers: religious, touristic, sanitary, scholarly (Cohen 1998: 9).

Clearly, the assumptions involved in both these works structurally direct the thematic trajectories and conclusive tropes. It is in this sense that cosmological frameworks are part of scholarly representational politics. Barrett relies on his construction of poverty, caste discrimination and north Indian traditional patriarchal biases to explain the visits of stigmatized patients of venereal diseases and skin disorders to the Aghorashrams. In the process, the anthropological question of the antagonistic tension between the medicinal paradigms of faith and clinical sciences, the difference with which one must conceive of the postmodern is all taken as a happy given, as if Benares really exists outside the world, sitting on the trident. The work operates on the euphemy of projecting to uphold ‘Aghor medicine’ as an ‘equal’ to clinical medical modes, methods and products. Cohen on the other hand in constructing the Banarsi idioms of ‘modern things’ circumambulates the hospitals, slums, families and seminar rooms across very different parts of the world with a great degree of clarity in deconstructing the ‘all’ of the cosmological Benares. Yet, while his stupendous narrative descriptions may be unparalleled, one must not miss the apparent play of inversion in terms of assumptions. While Barrett takes the cosmological framework as a given, Cohen operates as if “god did not exist”. The challenge I pose to my work is to configure what Slavoj Žižek calls as “the universal exception” (2006). Thus the discussion on the cosmological framework has to involve a traversal of the references, one cannot simply allude to it as Barrett does or elude it as Cohen does. Žižek construes the ‘universal exception’ to be a “kind of short circuit between the universal and the particular”. Further, “it involves the paradox of a singular that appears as a stand-in for the universal, destabilizing the ‘natural’ functional orders of relation in the social body” (Zizek 2006: 183). In the given context, this could be rephrased to argue that the cosmological reference of the universality of Hindu cosmology has to be traversed with
the particular(s) from within that frame itself. One such constant is the master
signification of the ‘death’ of Ganga.

The register of structuralism invoked in the above mentioned works traces the
conceptual lineage of Robert Hertz (1960), Arnold van Gennep (1960), Claude Lévi-
Strauss (1963b) and Victor Turner (1969) amongst other writers. I am of the view that a
slightly varied perspective from theirs’ could be formulated by evoking Lévi-Strauss’s
notion of organization of space that he discusses in ‘Do dual organizations exist?’ (1963a:
132-163). He argues in the essay that the centre and periphery of a given tribe exists as an
organized space with respect to myths and cosmographies of the myths. The centre could
have endless number of similar parallel combinations of inside-outside, domains of male-
female, sacralized-mundane and so on and thus a whole range of peripheries may exist
within the given centre and vice versa. If one reads this observation of Lévi-Strauss with
descriptions of myth, metaphor and metonymy in his elucidation of what he calls as the
“totemic illusion”, the symbolism of a place could be outlined in terms of what I have
mentioned above as cosmology-cosmography combination. It is in this sense that the
organization of the space of Benares as a Hindu city and the ideological maintenance of
the boundaries of spaces within the city through a reflexive use of myths is the
premise of

the analytical assemblage ranging from Saraswati to Das’s work. It is exactly this form of
Kashi that Vidyarthi calls as a “cosmogonic” city that defines the “sacred complex”
which fits the model I have described above. In an anthropological construction, using
myths drawn from religious texts as well as legends borrowed from the derivatives of
those myths, Vidyarthi describes the conception, function and the anticipated
(in)destructibility of the city in Kalyug (see Vidyarthi, Saraswati and Jha 1979). It is
plausible to wonder, how Vidyarthi writing in the twentieth century and relying
methodologically on surveys, questionnaires and “participant observation” in the
representation of Benares of his day, makes a claim over reality while excluding the
cosmologies of the Buddhist, Christian, Muslim and Sikh populations of the city? Not to
mention the sects of the non-brahminical castes and the postcolonial shifts. My
proposition is that this invisibilization structurally follows when a theorist construes any
cosmology as a ‘total’ and ‘absolute’ unit. Hindu cosmology like any other religious
cosmology is inconsistent from within. And the very explication of the ‘inconsistency’,
the primordial ‘gap’, reveals room for another cosmology. It is this aspect of interpellation and complicitness of various religious cosmologies that I intend to communicate when I use the term ‘traversions’. Thus, in case of the analytical tradition represented from Saraswati to Biardeau one could characterize their theoretical limitation of invisibilizing the complexity of inter-religious cosmologic Benares as a symptom of the sociology of exclusion and inclusion. The symptom being, those who are invisible in their account may be there in practice and in residence as émigrés in Benares but they may not be the cosmological dwellers of the city.

Baidyanath Saraswati in a tract titled Kashi: Myth And Reality Of A Classical Cultural Tradition (1975) introduces the problematic of his monograph by offering an extreme close up of dirt, chaos and unruliness of everyday Benares contrasted with the perception of it being the “microcosm of Hinduism”. He professes to offer a “self view” of how the people of Benares themselves bridge these two contrasts and come to negotiate with secularism and modernity. While secularism implies a certain cultural notion of Banarsipan that enables the Hindus and the Muslims to live together and negotiate, modernity implies invigorated political challenges to the traditionally “sacred”. This account in its celebration of Banarsipan, conflates the religious difference of the city residents who may belong to several churches in the Durkheimian sense. To polarize all the residents, only as Hindu and Muslim when there are representative populations of Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists not to speak of various sects, implies that this relation is yet another reductive evocation of the religious contestation. However, even with this dual register of Hindu and Muslim, one must focus on the fact that in his version, the chaos of Benares is essentially a Hindu feature, just as the order and organization of the place is characteristically Hindu. Thus, the Hindu-Muslim relation exists in his analysis, only so far as it is a site of antagonism. That is if one were to look for what constitutes the practical and the concrete of the Vidyarthi’s “cosmological” “sacred complex”, Saraswati’s answer would be that— the homeless cow, the haggling panda, the stinking galis (narrow alleys) and the religiously ethereal sights and experiences, that are both reserved to the Hindu sphere. And that’s how the abstract “cosmological” notion fits with the total play of chaos-dirt and religious-
ritualistic performances of the Hindu ways of life. In all senses of the term, Benares as a living space is organized continually, as a Hindu domain.

*Cosmologies are Autonomous but have Remainders too*

My concern then is, how does one look at the other religious communities while locating the activities of the life-world of Hindu Benares? As I have delineated above, the simple dichotomy of inside-outside to this domain may not withstand critical enquiry and attempts to simply invert the Hindu cosmologies do not take us to a new symbolic sphere either. In fact if the structural-functional way is to analytically exhibit the coherence of a given cosmology, the structuralist way is to configure every symbolic aspect of the cosmography in a mythically evolved organization. The post-structuralist attempt then could be, borrowing from Derrida’s idea of *differance*, the one that locates competing cosmologies-cosmographies of the city in their never-ending *differance*, without committing to a master-signifier or a meta-narrative (1978). I rely on this post-structuralist formulation but by moving two steps in a heuristic direction which is based on the following ethnographic conflicting possibilities. In locating the presence of multiple cosmologies-cosmographies, I am of the view that the ethnographic ‘present’ could be used to show, how the *differance* is not a discrete entitlement. It implicates people, their conceptions and everyday lives with an ‘interminable’ and ‘irredeemable’ set of antagonisms. Second, instead of looking for an authentic language of Hindu cosmology-cosmography that rests on a humanism that promises an assimilation of all other communities, the analytical way instead could be to traverse the given representations of Hindu Benares and illustrate the antagonisms. These shifts must also be explained further not only in terms of the length and breadth of the movement but also in terms of where it takes us and most importantly once there, what may be the new leaps that may become possible. Thus traversal of the cosmologies of Benares or of cosmologies per se becomes important because, cosmologies expose us to the radical idea that religious Symbolic has a universality built into it. It has a view of a universe with a corresponding politics of immanence of that universe (Eliade 1954; Eck 1983). Still, the question remains how that immanence has to be understood at the crossroad of theology and politics? Before considering how the reflexivity of the Hindu cosmology could be
represented, let me exemplify here what I have already stated above that cosmologies of different religions can never be subsumed by any one religion. In fact the Derridian idea of *différence* is most clear here. Every cosmology is on one hand tied to a ‘remainder’ that it may wish to deny or negate and at the same time the metonymic turn of that particular cosmology cannot be conflated to the remainder. This is another dimension that J.P.S. Uberoi’s exposition of the grammatical origin of Sikhism misses. In explaining why Sikhism didn’t return to the “citadel of caste” he says “it (Sikhism) rejected the opposition of the common citizen or householder versus the renouncer, and of the ruler versus these two, refusing to acknowledge them as separate and distinct modes of existence” (1991: 332). This of course is the metonymic displacement that Sikhism manages, but what about the remainder of caste that nevertheless finds it way in the practiced codes of the religion. Thus the members of *Dera Sachh Khand Ballan* or the Ravidasis, who take Ravidas, the chamar saint contemporary to Guru Nanak, to be an equal to Kabir and Nanak, argue that discourses on caste by the saint are included in the Sikh’s sacred text — Shri Guru Granth Sahib. The exact numbers of words they claim are forty and a verse, that are included in the Shri Guru Granth Sahib (Ravidas’ Amritvani 2000). What is even more corroborative of what I am saying is that the myths narrated about the friendship of Ravidas and Gorakhnath — the premier ascetic associated with the shaivite ‘sect’ after his name — draw a full circle and reiterate the “socially controversial” nature of myths. All that Sikhism seems to move away from reappears in this cosmologic inversion by the Ravidasis, that is, caste and renunciation. Seer Govardhan, Ravidas’s birth place is marked by a temple (built in 1972) and subsequently Benares has come to have a Ravidas’s gate next to BHU’s entrance, inaugurated by the Dalit president of the country K.R. Narayanan. Benares has another temple of Ravidas at Rajghat and a park, recently built by Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati — also a Dalit — who is associated with the ongoing construction (in the year 2010) of a Ghat dedicated to Ravidas. In Jalandhar, Punjab, where the main following of the religion persists, there are temples, hospitals, schools and ashrams. The idiom of an ecological symbol is key to the observation and performance of the myths of sainthood of Ravidas. For instance, Ravidas is associated with a tamarind tree — the particular tree is repeatedly evoked in any hagiography of his birth and days of ascetic penance — and the
subsequent construction of a ‘park’ in his name extends this association. Guru Nanak’s stay in Benares is institutionalized as part of a Gurudwara in Guru Bagh. Again the association to the bagh (garden) comes back here.

After the 24th May 2009 assassination of saint Ram Nand who had accompanied Sant Niranjan Dass to Ravidas Sabha in Vienna, the violence in parts of North India was also strongly felt by the followers at Seer Govardhan in Benares. When I interviewed the residents there in June 2009, there was, on one hand, an assertion that the ‘Khalsa Sikhs attack us because they have come to know that our religion and Guru Ravidas’s sayings are more humanitarian and inclusive’ and on the other, that ‘we need to convince the Sikhs that we are their bhais’ (brothers).

What I wish to show though this brief illustration is that as long as myths are socially implicated through language and symbols, a clear, relativistic cosmologic universe in its totality would never exist. At the same time, it doesn’t mean that one can conflate one cosmology on to another. Indeed, what sustains their separation is the surplus of fantasies that constitute the basic imaginary of liberation and “total human emancipation” as J. P. S. Uberoi would put it (1991: 332). With this illustration we come back to an analyses of the operative logic of the Hindu reflexivity.

Eck’s vivid description of “City of Lights” as precisely representing the luminous, manifest, ever-present conspicuous Hindu bustle of religious observation could be the starting point to our mode of enquiry (Eck 1983). Clearly, one cannot locate the non-Hindu communities in their individually differentiated spheres of daily activities because that only reaches a dead-end of ‘practice’ as different from the ‘rigid structural conceptions’. In order to define the object that links not only the non-Hindu religious practices in one chain, but also provides glimpses to the fractures within the Hindu cosmology itself, I again take a clue from Žižek’s ‘universal exception’ discussed earlier (see p.57). The method involves locating that topological layer within the myth — here of the birth of Kashi — from where an inversion of the myth becomes possible. Žižek while analyzing the theoretical connection between capitalism and the waste that it produces makes a perceptive remark in observing that the unusable excess of waste that capitalism generates could be understood by locating the founding myths of capitalistic efficiency. He says:
The obverse of the incessant capitalist drive to produce new objects are thus growing accretions of useless waste, piled-up mountains of used cars, computers, and so forth, like the famous aeroplane ‘resting place’ in the Mojave Desert – in these ever-growing heaps of inert, dysfunctional ‘stuff’, whose useless, lifeless presence cannot fail to affect us, we can, as it were, perceive the capitalist drive at rest. Here we should recall Benjamin’s insight into how we encounter historicity proper precisely, when we observe cultural artifacts in decay, in the process of being reclaimed by nature (Žižek 2006: 229).

A translation of this mode of inversion would be that what Eck describes as the ‘luminous’, ‘city of lights’ is also according to the founding myth of Kashi, a predominant death-town. Rather then looking at regenerative vitality in this evocation of ‘city of light’ one can equally consider the pre dominance of death and dissolution which may then help us understand restoration and regeneration in a retroactive way, as Žižek points out above.

As my initial impressions of the place subsided, I felt forced to look for meanings of the ruinous remainders of city, in the cultural reconstructions that are offered by contemporary Benares beyond the dyads of Hindu-Muslim relations. The nineteenth century excavation findings by a British archeologist, Alexander Cunningham reconstructs, what appears to be a ruin of truncated idols and monastic architectures that he claims was once the lush ‘deer park’ where Buddha offered his first lessons. Subsequently it is known as Sarnath in Kashi (Benares), with Buddha being resignified as the “lord of the deer”. The bruised idols and artifacts of the museum that exhibits the findings adjacent to the premises with the main Dharamstupa — still sacralised for the traveling Buddhists from different nations — range from icons of Buddha’s family, his disciples to depictions of mixed metaphoric sculptors of pre-Shavite deities.16 Historians have noted Buddha’s movement to Sarnath after his enlightenment at Bodh-Gaya, as his resolute assertion to preach and proselytize henceforth (Gombrich 1988). It is at this register that a comparison between Sarnath as Buddhist city at the contested ‘periphery’ of the Hindu Benares (both the old and new city, I will discuss below) cannot be incidental for a period ranging from late years of BC to 12th century. It is worth considering why Buddhism didn’t find local existential subscription outside few esoteric
schools? This question is certainly not answered by the argument that the whole of the Buddhist reign was demolished by Turkish invasion and plunder. Precisely so because this answer assumes that all that was there to Buddhism were the architectural constructions only. The answer instead has to speculate on the missing materialist and theologically confrontational encounter between Hinduism and Buddhism. This missing link must be related with a certain closure because even though post independence Buddhism was politically revived, it could not go beyond marking its radical distinction from the casteism of Hinduism. Even with the theoretical anti-casteism of Buddhism, the inner ritualistic-religious core remained structurally and mythically connected to the variants of locally lived Hindu ideals. The proverbial "cosmological" presence of Hinduism over Benares then cannot be taken lightly. In other words it is this cosmo-logic of space and cultural vigilance that ensured that Buddhism could not individuate and become an alternative religion in Benares. The geographically peripheral location of Sarnath from Benaras and subsequently almost on a similar topographical plan, the peripheral site of Buddha's Samadhi in Kushinagar from Gorakhpur, home of the militant Kanphatya Yogis speak about the practical concurrence between the cosmologic and the cosmographic centrality of Hinduism (see Briggs 1938). It is in this sense that the religious relics and their architectural location are to be understood in relation with the cosmographic "sacred complex" of Benares.

Persisting on with this genealogical construction, I similarly approach illustrations from what has been called as the Bhakti movement. On the one hand the rise of nirgun pad and the lyrical-musical discourses of different saints appear to be articulated from the lessons learnt by the failure of esoteric Buddhism and the success of heterodox dissonance of Islam through Sufism. Yet on the other hand the influence seems to emerge from the militant ascetic order of Hinduism itself that provided fundamental sites of resistance to orthodox Hinduism or if looked from another perspective, it tried to redefine the orthodoxy of Hinduism. However since both the followers of nirgun pad and the militant ascetic order were mainly non-brahminical castes, it implies that one must construe these acts not only as resistances but also as acts of differentiating and individuating oneself from the priestly class. Between Kabir and Nanak, if a religion could emerge through a pronounced individuation, it was Sikhism. And if one follows J.
P. S. Uberoi’s contention that Sikhism has a martial base to its conception, it is perhaps this site of difference that ensured its perpetuity (Uberoi 1992). Even though its origin elsewhere could be a coincidence owing to historical contingencies, its spread and following and a lack of an established religious denomination in Benares speaks for itself. A very interesting pattern seems to emerge. After Sarnath as the deer park, we have Gurubagh, a 'park' kind of space named after the Guru, Nanak.

The spread of Sikhism moved outside Benares and later on the formation of sects based on teachings of Kabir and Ravidas followed the same centrifugal trend. A detailed account of the migration and movement of the Kabirpanthis' towards Madhya Pradesh and that of Ravidasis' towards Punjab and Rajasthan has been outlined by various writers on the subject (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 2004). The element of Sufism that seemed to have been one of the influences to the Bhakti tradition also does not have any major signature shrine or ideological presence at Benares apart from few minor Dargahs.

Looking at Islam in this context, it would be illuminating to bring Louis Dumont's anthropological elucidation of Hindu-Muslim relations and see Benares as a test ground to his claims. He argues that Hindu-Muslim “co-existence” rested on latent violence, rejection and indifference trained on to Muslims and thus partition should be seen as a logical outcome rather than as an accident (Dumont 1970). It wouldn't be out of place to state that the “medieval” Muslim rulers’ excesses in terms of raising mosques over the complexes of temples in Benares and in North India in general, should be seen as an attempt to negotiate, even if violently, the same share of individuation and autonomy that matched with what Hinduism enjoyed. This is one of the ‘wounds’ that every informant manages to bring into the discourse but then so have writers as varied as Diana Eck and Baidyanath Saraswati. It cannot be stated however that Islam suffered the same fate that Buddhism did with respect to Hinduism or what Sikhism and missionary Christianity suffered later on along with the sects that had emerged from the caste ranks, considering the cosmology of Benares. And perhaps in this case, it would be more interesting to locate how Islam “co-exists” in the sense that Dumont has pointed out. An anecdote from Nita Kumar’s memoirs on her fieldwork at Benares is insightful. She says:
The question of the "actual" and the "proper" feeling of Hindus and Muslims toward each other continued to haunt me throughout my fieldwork. While talking to a Muslim "timepiece expert" I threw in a question to him: "and how would you describe Hindu-Muslim interaction?" "Sister", said he in his quite memorable way, "as far as I know they are not interacting at all! (Kumar 1992: 104).

With regard to Christianity, the ruinous remains in the city are of a nineteenth century colonial cemetery at Chauka Ghat (which is not a Ghat to Ganga) and few derelict churches scattered in the city, which stand in contrast to the Hindu temples that are bustling with devotees. Though, the sector of English medium schools within nuns' convents seems to have grown of Christian missions. And these have adopted the textbook conditions while learning to adapt to the aspirations of Hindu middle classes without any apparent contradiction with the religious tenets of Christianity (Kumar 1999).

*Traversion of Hindu Benares*

From the above delineation, one can think of Kashi-Banaras (Benares)-Varanasi complex as a polyphonic religious space of Hindu dwelling propelled by an unconscious of "socially controversial" language of myths, signs and symbols. These spaces while permit segmentation of older cosmologies into newer cosmologies, they also methodologically re-appropriate them. This observation should force us to negate the claims of Hindu passivity and non-violence. The claim of mythic past turned on its head, enables one to see that it is in the historical time that Hindus' have managed to retrieve that orgiastic zone of religious homeland. The cursory reconstruction of the 'cosmic' city through history in the preceding discussions of course requires further qualifications and concretizations. Nonetheless, what I wish to communicate through that reconstruction is that there is a religious cosmological-cosmographic signification of the 'concrete' 'historical time'. As such, the idea of 'messianic Hinduism' cannot be tracked by separating these two elements but by traversing the antagonistic splits, which reveal the *différéance*. One is not making a claim here that Hinduism — in its postcolonial form (s) within the teleologic frame of a nation-state — has always occupied the same site of authority. Taken in its complexity, one can show through historiographic accounts that it
has in fact been historically contested to the extent of never reaching a singularity, where it could directly force any other cosmology to adhere with the Hindu dictum. However, within both of these claims lies a third claim. Even as temples were being razed, contesting religious ideologies were being proclaimed, political mantle-ships were substituted and there were forced movements of Hindu communities from one place to another, yet a theologicopolitical Symbolic operated. It is at this level that one can radically disagree with the modernist scholarly attempts, for instance, being made in Sunil Kumar’s edited *Demolishing Myths or Mosques and Temples? Readings on History and Temple Desecration in Medieval India* (2008). Kumar seeks to provide proof through essays in the said volume that the ‘myth’ of desecration can be calibrated with a technical and bureaucratic correctness of which orders of destructions were carried out and which were resisted, subverted and so on. In this position, there is a modernist faith in distinctions in their discreteness and also in the supposed futility of a category like that of ‘myth’. I have already argued that the cosmology-cosmography framework is not only important to people or to certain orthodox Brahmins. Rather it provides ‘ways’ to think of/about these places, which as I have recounted above are squarely impossible to think about otherwise. Thus invoking Edmund Leach’s contention of myth providing an idiom of maintaining “social controversy”, again, one may claim that this social controversy includes ‘myths’ of violence, myths of violations of the ‘cosmologies’ and the ‘disfigurations’ of the ‘cosmographs’ (Leach 1959: 85). The point then is not to make a contextual plea that Aurangzeb in 17th century and the Hindu right wing in 20th century, both had a limited knowledge of the ‘real’ historical domains and thus they did what they did. This kind of affirmative demand of the social world resonates with Louis Dumont assertions, when Dumont comments on Beni Prasad’s theses on the Hindu-Muslim divide that the two communities never understood each other or made attempts to do the same, as if “understanding” effaces antagonism at some teleological level (Dumont 1970: 89-109). What if, there is a perfect “understanding” between the two communities that some antagonisms between them can never be bridged? The point is that in spite of the distinction of ‘theory and practice’, ‘lack of understanding’ and so on the competing cosmologies of various religious domains exist in an ‘interminable’ tension. It is in this sense of alluding to this tension that I use the proper noun ‘Benares’, which otherwise has
been postcolonially sanitized and classified through various names such as Kashi, Banaras and Varanasi.

To sum up, I argue, even when the notion of Benares as a city marred by desecration of temples is put forth, the point is not to displace the mythic element of violence of the ‘other’. The idea is to traverse it. To claim, that postcolonial Benares is in fact based on the reflexive use of that mythic ‘violent’ past. Again, this is also not to claim that different religions or religious groups do not have their own cosmological frameworks. In fact, the effort is to argue that the multiplicities of different cosmologies of various religious groups do not exist in a state of relativism of different enclaves and sanctuaries. Even when they are geographically, residentially separated the charge of tension and antagonism marks their sustenance on a daily basis. Let me illustrate this with a concrete example.

Diana L. Eck argues that the cosmology of Benares exists in all of India and all of India exists within Benares. Similarly it could be argued for the medieval Muslim saint Ghazi miyan — named after ‘Ghazi’, who was thought to be related to Mohammad Ghaznavi — who has a discursive presence ranging from the hills of Nepal to the ‘sacred complex’ of Benares as well as to cosmologic geographies within Bangladesh and Pakistan (Gaborieau 1972: 92 (quoted in Saberwal 1991); Amin 2002; Visuvalingam and Chalier-Visuvalingam 2006). I will cite three modes of enquires to contextualize Ghazi miyan in Benares.

Satish Saberwal writing on the co-existence of Hindus’ and Muslims’ suggests that they must have had common material interests but there has always been a ground of mutual suspicion that maintained an unbridgeable separation. He argues that this domain of separation has been so internalized that it reflects in religious symbolism, a certain kind of ‘unconscious’ at work (1991: 339-350). He quotes the example of Ghazi miyan’s festival in western Nepalese hills, through the work of Marc Gaborieau (1972). Gaborieau mentions that this fair devoted to the Muslim warrior saint is attended by both the communities but the grammatical feature of the ‘performance’ marks a radical mutual suspicion at the same time. The groom Ghazi waiting to be married to Johra bibi, is militantly disrupted by Hindu gate crashers and the carnival of wedding turns into a mourning with the wedding songs replaced by funerary music. Gaborieau observes that
the trope of sacrificial death that defines the festival of Muharram is metonymically merged with the Ghazi miyan’s sacrificial death. This is interpreted by Saberwal as the meeting of the ‘conscious’ performative play of Muharram with the ‘unconscious’ antagonism with Hindus.

Shahid Amin in an exhaustive study of the myths associated with Ghazi miyan traces the post 1600 renderings within the context of Bahraich, a north-Indian district in the state of Uttar Pradesh that shares its border with Nepal (2000). He also lays out the nuances in terms of family, laws and Hindu-Muslim relations that characterize the Ghazi’s persona. While he is seen as a warrior saint who helps, mythically, to protect the ‘cows’ for the Hindus and is ready to fight for them, he is also seen as a personage who seems to illustrate at least to the Muslims that — even if one sacrifices most ideals for the Hindus’ they still wouldn’t trust (Muslims) or be trustworthy. Amin’s exploration of the myths embedded in historical-political-economic constellations of what has been called the ‘syncretic culture’ or what vernacularly stands as Ganga-Jamanavi tahzeeb, is also to make the point that the syncretic is not without an antagonism. In fact, there is a painstaking illustration of boundaries that structurally exist at every moment of what is otherwise thought as a cultural ‘transgression’. His attempts to record and analyze contemporary (surviving?) ballads that mark Ghazi’s festival could be seen at two registers. One is of allocating ‘myths’ the veritable position of an archive of ‘social controversy’ and two, to find affirmation in the fact that Hindus and Muslims still share this festival.

Sunthar Visuvalingam and Elizabeth Chalier-Visuvalingam (2006: 95-130) map the contested site of discursive and performative meeting of Lat Bhairo — one of the eight hierophantic ‘rupa’ of Shiv — with Ghazi Miyan in Benares. I will discuss the ‘site’ in greater detail in relation to other markers of the ‘sacred geography’ in the next part of this chapter. Let me for now make some points with regard to what has been already said here through the works of Gobineau-Saberwal and Amin.

Visuvalingam and Chalier-Visuvalingam locate the cosmologic incarnation and installation of lat bhairo and find that he is not only seen as the one who has a heirophany of Brahmanicide and consequent repentance, the icon is also associated with the Skull bearing sadhus as its custodian for most parts of colonial India. Later the custody was
invested on to 'satvik' Brahmins. What appears here seems to readily corroborate Lévi-Strauss's contention that a myth can be studied in relation to other myths. In this case the authors figure that historically Lat Bhairav, prior to the "Muslim's invasion" was ritually married to the "well" of Sita. The writers draw attention to the fact that at one level the mutually restricted domains of cremation ghat, household and domain of copulation are perpetually transgressed, in this case through a set of symbolic observances of sacrifice, decapitation and joyous celebrations of God's wedding. At the disputed site today there is a ritual observation of the wedding of Ghazi miyan and not Lat bhairav. Thus, there is a shift from a Hindu ritualistic observation to a Muslim one. However, Ghazis' wedding in the ritual festivity does not get consummated. The commemoration of Ghazi miyan ki baarat annually is to observe the preparatory events leading to the nikah. But just before the wedding is to take place the procession is stormed by a set of rioters who are symbolically supposed to be Hindus. Soon there is a mock killing of the groom and the bride followed by mourning and lamentation. This entire complex of two weddings sum up the metonymy of violence, mourning and religious togetherness in its utmost complexity. It is precisely this register of being together that one wishes to unravel through the emphases on political in theological and vice versa. Visuvalingam and Chalier-Visuvalingam sum it up aptly to say the following:

Unlike the secular ideologies of today the socio-religious paradigms simultaneously encode a commitment to certain transcendental and even esoteric aims which address themselves to universal human aspirations. The identification of death and sexual union, especially as revealed in the syncretic cults of Lat Bhairo and Ghazi Miyan, is very much part of this common symbolic core shared by Hinduism and Islam. Ultimately, this equation does not make sense except as the mythico-ritual projection of a lived experience of "initiatic death" that has come to grips with and inwardly transformed those primary, largely unconscious, undifferentiated energies that are channeled into otherwise structured expressions of human sexuality and violence (2006: 124).

As noted before, the founding myth of Kashi construes it as the city of death, with the mythic allocation of the regenerative and restorative spirit to river Ganga. The Hindu 'Symbolic' in a Lacanian way is adequately represented here. It is important to choose the Lacanian 'symbolic' over the sociological 'normative' to say this because as Lacan
says the Symbolic is a “transcendental function, you cannot remain in it, nor can you get out” (Quoted in Butler 2000: 42). Unlike the normative, which expresses an idiom of what appears to be a consolidated set of rules to follow in the society, the Symbolic’s complexity lies in its acknowledgement of a whole complex of guilt, redemption, identification, transgression, violence and so on for a social subject and not only that of observation and breaking of rules.

As it turns out then, any seeming completion of the Hindu cosmology-cosmography can never be rounded off within a consistent Hindu Symbolic. The ‘discontinuity’ becomes the remarkable feature. The Hindu cosmology of Benares has to be seen within such a ‘symbolic’ system. My argument is the following. In integrating Lacan’s definition to the cosmologic Benares, I argue that the greatest discontinuity that appears today to Hinduism is related with the cognizance that Ganga, the restorative river may die itself. It is this contemporaneous moment that I wish to capture. Needless to say, the debates around the pollution of Ganga are not to be thought on the level of whether it can be saved or not. The question to be asked rather is that in what way can one analytically record the reflections of participants in their religious endearing relationship with Ganga, at the face of the death of the representative maternal super-ego. Before one explores the answer to that question, I seek to arrive at a definition of the Hindu Ganga and death and elaborate on how the contemporaneous moment is that of Ganga’s death. Following the genealogy that I have constructed so far of Benares as a city, I attempt to find another set of theoretical methods to identify the linkages between the cosmologic past and the present.

*The ‘Eternal’ Reoccurrence of the Unsignifiable ‘Thing’*

Freud, writing in exile at a time when Judaism was least assured of its’ future, in his book *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) made that anxiety double edged, and inserted a discontinuity to Judaism’s originary past. Claiming through archaeological findings and locating split ends of legends and religious lore that Moses was an Egyptian, he made two radical conclusions. One, the birth of monotheism is based on polytheistic-pagan complex of religious observances. While monotheism is strictly based on a differentiation and individuation from this lineage, it is also likely to have a reoccurrence of the dead
parental linkages in its own practices. Freud exemplifies this by showing how the Egyptian Moses retained the old custom of circumcision for his followers even when he completely distanced them from the older forms of God (s) and their modes of praying to him. Two, the birth of monotheism appears to be built on the death of the “first one,” who founds the religion. That it is heretical and incomprehensible to the majority of followers of the older religion, why they must now turn to a monadic, unrepresentable form of God. The contribution of Freud is in telling us, why and how they do in fact come to believe in it. Going back to his thesis of murder and guilt amongst the murderers that he developed in Totem and Taboo, he evokes in his “return of the repressed” argument that as Moses was murdered and a century passed with two reigns of polytheistic-pagan religious modes, his symbolic legacy was readopted. This was however possible only under a different religious head with a fervour amongst the migrant followers that ensured the autonomy and symbolic consistency of Judaism (Freud 1939). There is a perfect translation of this observation in Bataille’s theory of eroticism. He suggests:

We must know, we can know that prohibitions are not imposed from without. This is clear to us in anguish we feel when we are violating the taboo, especially at the moment when our feelings hang in the balance, when the taboo still holds good and yet we are yielding to the impulsion it forbids. If we observe the taboo, if we submit to it, we are no longer conscious of it. But in the act of violating it we feel the anguish of mind without which the taboo could not exist: that is the experience of sin. That experience leads to the completed transgression, the successful transgression which, in maintaining the prohibition, maintains it in order to benefit by it (Bataille 1962: 38).

One could ask in the context of this work, what really is that “benefit” in the repeated cycles of transgressions and guilt. Let me go back to the preceding discussion on Freud. Freud’s description underlines that both the transgression against the reigning superego and transgressions in order to reinstate the taboo that has been violated, together, involve a movement away from the preceding social existence and that movement is maintained by violence, latent or manifest. Contemporary Benares has to be seen with the complexity of these movements. On one hand, aspects of those religious institutions that stifled and died or moved out from the purview of brahminical Hindu Benares would certainly be recast in their growth and decay and maintain their individuated autonomy in various
forms. While on the other, Hinduism may continue at its' position by precisely regulating these changes. The crucial thing to note here is that Hinduism uses the cosmologies of the place in a deeply reflexive way. Contemporary Benares is then, not a primordial remainder amongst other things. It is a reinstatement of a ‘Symbolic’ that comes to be more effective after every religious, cultural and political transgression from its purview. Let me illustrate this with the example of the ‘social controversies’ around the installation of the central deity itself.

**The Three Vishwanaths and the Sociological Forms of the Guardian Deity**

Let me cite two examples here, both emerging from Baidyanath Saraswati’s tract *Kashi: Myth and reality of a classical cultural tradition* (1975). Discussing the Gandhian movement and ideological principle of Varnashrama dharma, he argues that Mahamana Madan Mohan Malaviya, a pious Brahmin took the call and instituted BHU, with the promise of an education of science and technology in the germinal warmth of *Varnashram*. The latter is exemplified according to Saraswati by the fact that BHU has a temple of Kashi Vishwanath and regular readings of *Geeta* are done in the campus. He states that this movement of Malaviya was not taken well by the nationalists and they established Kashi Vidyapeeth as a “national school, for revolutionaries and freedom fighters” (Saraswati 1975: 64). To quote the seeming resolution of the two camps in Sarasawati’s own words, he says:

Those who joined *Vidyapeetha* were mostly anti-Brahman and non-Brahmans. In order to discredit the orthodox *sanatanis* they wanted to put on the brahamic garb, and the *vidyapeetha* enrolled non-brahmans, particularly the so called untouchable castes and Moslems for a course leading to a diploma, called *shastri* — the title obviously derived from the Sanskrit system of learning. Thus as soon as the organizers of the *vidyapeetha* fell into the temptation of the Sanskritic symbols the syndrome of Brahmanic *indrajal* began to operate. And so although the Vidyapeetha produced many Moslem and Harijan shastris, it eventually failed in altering the course of the Brahmanic thought in Kashi. One of the founding members of Kashi Vidyapeetha was Dr. Sampoornanda, a Kayastha by caste, who wrote *Brahman sabdhana*, deriding the Brahmans. But this affected his personal life and political career so intrinsically that he, essentially a liberal *sanatani*, soon was stricken with guilt conscious. In order to expiate his “guilt” he founded
the Varanaseya Sanskrit University with blessings from the Brahmans of Kashi (Saraswati 1975: 64).

Needless to say what Saraswati calls as the *Brahmanic Indrajal* is what typifies the Lacanian symbolic, though it is not just limited to that. Before talking about the ‘guilt’ in the question, if one provides a reading of this anecdote in the taboo-transgression mode of enquiry developed above, the final outcome seems to be a post transgression expansion of the idiom of the Hindu cosmology. One can see that every transgression brings about the presence of the Hindu ‘Symbolic’ with a vengeance but that is only half of the story. The key feature here is to note that how transgression itself gets layered at every register and thus an imagined new movement is already inscribed within the symbolic.

I offer here the empirical example of Vishwanath temple as the concrete sign to exemplify the points made above. The incidence relates to the supposed deconsecration of the primary Vishwanath temple built in 1777 under royal patronage. It was the temple of the principal deity of Benares, Lord Vishwanath, so it was worshipped by one and all. Culturally speaking, the one and all excluded the “untouchables” from entering the premise. Post independence following the protests, “Harijans” were allowed to enter the premise. And the temple is said to receive all caste members since then, representing a “liberal sanatani sacred tradition in Kashi” as Saraswati puts it. He narrates the incidents that followed the “deconsecration” of the idol as follows:

On the entry of the Harijans into the Golden Vishwanath temple, the orthodox Brahmans under the leadership of swami Karpatrijee built a new Vishwanath temple where no one (even Brahman devotees) can enter into the sanctum sanctorum, as is the custom in most south Indian temples; only the priest is allowed to go inside. The organizers declared it as a private temple. The manner in which this temple was built and the lingam of Vishwanath temple was consecrated is significant. The orthodox Brahmans and ascetics who resisted the Harijan entry into the Golden Vishwanath temple were thrown away by the liberals. Immediately after this incident a rumour spread in the city that in the night previous to the entry of Harijans, the Pundits took away the “life force” from the lingam of Vishwanath by performing Vedic rites of *pranaharana*. When the new Vishwanath temple was built this “life force” of Vishwanath was duly infused into the lingam, brought from the Narmada river (Saraswati 1975: 64-65).
Saraswati reflects over the episode by being skeptical of the “life-force” bit but nevertheless sums up by saying “Kashi succeeded in establishing a new temple to preserve the pristine purity of the Brahmanic sacred tradition. The purpose of creating a myth of Pranaharan of Vishwanath indicates the ingenuity of the pandits of Kashi” (Saraswati 1975: 65).

Years later a third Kashi Vishwanath temple was instituted in BHU campus and this one welcomes everyone, independent of caste, religion and nationality. If one were to extend these temples as three concrete illustrations from Benares of how Hinduism is constructed in the contemporaneous moment, one could name the ‘Golden Vishwanath’ as representing the redefined symbolic order of Hinduism, post independence. The second — insular temple and the third, open to everyone, like a museum. All three put together represent two facets of the response to the transgression. They both exaggerate in the opposite direction and if translated in political nomenclatures, the former would represent an obscure post-modern orthodoxy and the latter would mean a new age spiritual commodity. The Kashi Vishwanath at BHU functions as a humanistic souvenir for visitors, an “open secret” to the believers that this is not the ‘real’ thing. It is yet another address for the tourist and the ambitious pilgrim in the city, which we know is also the postmodern of the religious institutions. However, my point is that these two temples, or, in other words, two representations of Hinduism, work reflexively together to keep the idea of Golden Vishwanath operative and it is this element that rounds up the notion of postmodern Benares. It is precisely the Golden temple that is ambiguous here, that can make use of extreme notions of purity and pollution as well as claim to transcend all such notions at its’ own theo-politico discretion. It is in this way that Hinduism, which I am speaking from the concrete context of Benares maintains its symbolic function. Moreover, the observation that the golden Vishwanath is also the temple which has a mosque built by Aurangzeb — said to be done by transgressing the premises of the temple — the co-ordinates of maintaining the entire complex becomes even more tense. In contemporary Benares, Hindus offer milk, garlands, mustard oil and prayers and Muslims offer their namaz under the shadow of the gun of the police. Diana L. Eck eloquently record the preservation of the Lord Vishveshvara through a whole host of mughal empires’ destructing spree under “the reigns of Firauz Shah Tughlaq of Delhi,
Muhmud Shah Shaeqi of Jaunpur and Sikandar Lodi of Delhi” till Akbar oversaw its’ institution and subsequently Aurengzeb in 1669 “tore down” the temple to build Jnana Vapi mosque (Eck 1983: 135). What she further says, is an interesting play on the Sarsawati’s mention of the Pranhara myth:

Half-dismantled, it became the foundation for the present Jnana vapi mosque. According to legend, the linga of Vishveshvara was saved from the temple before it was desecrated by the armies of Aurangzeb. It was thrown by a provident priest into the deep waters of the Jnana vapi. In 1777 the queen of Indore sponsored the construction of the present temple (Eck 1983: 135).

The picture that one gets from the sanctum sanctorum of a temple that once was on the high altar of being touched by select castes only is one that is in a tender frame of possible violations from all sides. But that is to miss the robustness of the symbolic order. My point is that it is in fact in using this situation of tenderness that it not only overcomes the threat but also uses it for its’ own benefit endlessly.

If one were to contrast this image with another from the city, it would certainly come from Buddhism. The difference is not only in the aesthetics and the organization of the space, the key differentiation lies in the fact of the Buddhist “sacred complex” being devoid of this local religious accentuation of political meanings. That further exemplifies the Hindu reflexive use of the cosmologies of Benares. The reason why it is so is not because Buddhism relies on geographical exclusivity. It is rather because this organization of Buddhism does not contest the Hindu symbolic order and thus exists in what could be described as part of the “Bahri alang”, to borrow a term conceptualized by Nita Kumar (1988, 1992). When one of her informants tells Kumar that the people generally go to “Sarnath and Rampur” to have their “picnics” on Bahri Alang, what they explicitly mean is that both of these places may be part of a cultural frame of Benares but cosmologically they exist on the ‘outside’ (Kumar 1992: 83). As I asked people about Sarnath, they did not seem to know about the basic motifs, meanings, legends and myths of the Buddhist Sarnath compared to the spilling details of obscure temples and gods and goddesses in Hinduism that they knew. If you add both of these observations it can be deduced that Bahri alang has to be understood as the ‘outside’ that defines the inside of the cosmologies. To put it even more evocatively, one may bring Levi-Strauss’s
observation in his essay “Do dual organizations exist?” While accounting for institutions that do not fit the cosmological paradigm of ‘function’ he wonders why such features with “zero value” exist. His answer is that such institutions have “no function other than that of giving meaning to the society in which they are found” (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 159). It is in this sense then Sarnath as an example of the bahri alang should be considered. Bahri certainly means outer, but it doesn’t mean outside the cosmologic Benares because as alang would suggest, it is the edge or the support and it is common knowledge that all centers are concerned about their edges. The city risks the percolation from this edge and this percolation has to be attended to so that it remains different from what defines the core of the activity of the centre. In this vein it is also illuminating to note that the aesthetic landscape of Sarnath is constructed through aids of Buddhist nations like Korea, Japan, and Thailand to maintain through their own managements and trusts their respective temples and the organization of the place. This offers an acceptable differentiation of Sarnath as a sanitized religious other-town as compared to the populous Hindu and Muslim dominated areas saturated with sacralized spaces in Benares. What stands for Buddhism is an alienated peripheral archeologically reconstructed remainder rather than a practice that seriously involves any radical import of what ‘the place where Buddha gave first lessons’ could theologically have.

Moving to another register, one follows that the Sikhs have absorbed themselves in the secularized domain of business with a relatively marginal communitarian practice of their religion. The Muslims are converged around their businesses of Banarasi sarees and their religious practices are seen through this lens rather than the other way round. It is not a co-incidence that Nita Kumar, while making the absence of Muslims in Benares visible, traverses through the overt representations of the city with Hindu idioms emphasizes on the Muslims as artisans (1988). Again, it is the taboo of cow slaughter that explains the subdued sale of meat, raw and cooked in the Muslim localities. The most obvious display of this regulation is in the mixed locality of Shivala, where there is not a single shop which sells meat.

The Ghazi Miyan festival (mentioned above) is an interesting space of mixed metaphors. Even though Hindus and Muslims come together on this occasion, the celebration, as it were, is of the enmity between the Hindus and Muslims, with open
lamentations of Muslims mourning the death of their heroes with “funeral music” (Saberwal 1991: 345). In contemporary Benares, where the same festival is observed through a fair, Singh and Rana write in a “spiritual guide” on “Banaras region” that “respectable persons are as a rule absent from this fair, and only persons belonging to the lower strata of both Hindu and Muslim society take part in it” (Singh and Rana 2002: 83). I would argue first, that this is in fact a sociological feature of religious and ritualistic observations in contemporary Benares. Even at the ghats, the majority who come there for “holy dips” are not from the caste elites of the city. And second, with the common occurrence of trances and possessions at the Ghazi Miyan festival, the communication between the Hindus and Muslims should not be reduced to a plain everyday bonhomie. One has to analytically search for another vocabulary to make sense of the event. To reiterate the complexity of the geographical site itself, let me cite Eck on what she has to say of Bakaria Kund where the fair of Miyan is organized:

There is other striking evidence of Vishnu’s presence and prominence in Kashi: the intriguing site of Bakaria Kund in northern Banaras. There, in a plot of ruins which has become a Muslim graveyard, the huge Gupta period image of Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana was unearthed. The image is larger than life-size, and the temple that would have housed it must have been very impressive. Such a temple could well have been supported by the massive stone breastwork that still stands on the west side of the Bakaria Kund. A mosque sits on this extensive foundation today (Eck 1983: 207).

The Vishwanath temple – jyan vapi mosque discussion finds a resonance with respect to this site as well. Thus, repeated emergence of these observances and mixed sites corroborate the point that I am making. Hinduism uses its cosmologies of the place to both maintain a geographical distance as well as a cultural appropriation with respect to the other religions.

It is interesting that Christianity manages to exist within the domain of imparting education. The Central Hindu School within the campus of BHU is matched and at times surpassed by Christian missionary schools that flaunt their achievements in the local newspapers regularly. This ironically speaks of a firm Hindu symbolic apparatus within the middle classes that unambiguously retains the students within its own familial fold and does not conflate education in a Christian institution with Christian education. Thus,
further attesting the thesis that the more laidback Hindu Super ego appears to be, the more vigilant it actually is. And that’s how the new technologies of schooling depend on this evolving relationship. One of the most telling images of my fieldwork is what I observed at the nineteenth century colonial cemetery at chaukaghat. The place is surrounded by Hindu middle class colonies and has only its’ own vast expanse as a relief. At the cemetery there were around a dozen young children from the families of the undertakers’— who have some work, once in a while in redoing a tomb, if someone comes visiting from UK or similar place — being tutored under the concrete space of the biggest tombstone by a young girl. The fact that all of them had taken off their slippers before riding over the tomb’s platform complicated for me the attempt to discern the Hindu-Christian nuances from each other. I am pointing to the fact that if one compares Muslim educational institutions with these Christian ones, the difference emerges in the contrast. While Muslim educational institutions have a religious presence to them, which defines the conduct of everyday education, in the case of Christian institutions, this threat is relegated to the background.

If one were to follow this link of education, one finds that this method of retaining the differentiated domain of alternative religion or a sectarian practice within educational media is common. For instance, the Theosophical Society exists as an institution that runs the Vasant Kanya Mahavidyala under BHU and while there are some phrases in the prospectus drawing from the founders’ philosophy, for most part Madame Blavatsky and Annie Besant are only present in names. It follows then that Blavatsky’s dream of synthesizing her visions with a reading of the Hindu Scriptures in the tradition of mysticism and Besant’s efforts to disseminate Upanishads’ do not find an easy fit with the curricula of the courses taught at the college.

Ravidas’s religious organizations and their initiatives have also registered a shift towards starting hospitals, schools, colleges and vocational centres. After setting up a 200 beds Hospital and an eye care hospital in Jalandhar, Punjab, Ravidasis have set up a “modern” school in Fagwada, Punjab, on the name of Saint Sarwan Das — the saint who institutionalized Ravidas’s birthplace in Seer Govardhan, Benares. Interestingly, the guiding principle of the school is geared more by socio-economic concerns than theological, exemplified by Sarwan Das’s saying, “our community can not prosper
without being educated” (Amritvani 2000). In Benares itself, UP’s Chief Minister Mayawati who also inaugurated a bridge as Ravidas’s setu and was instrumental in getting a park and a ghat constructed on Ravidas’s name, has started a notable centre where dalit youth can be trained to compete for Union Public Services Commission’s examinations.

Ravidas, unambiguously identified himself in his verses as a ‘chamar’. A caste community that worked with leather and was traditionally stigmatized for its occupation of skinning animal carcasses. His followers, although not all are Chamars, tend to see themselves as a homogenous group. The fact that most followers are based in relatively prosperous Punjab and some are based abroad — Canada, UK, Germany, Australia, US, New Zealand with respective Ravidas’s temples there — there is an unmistakable emphasis on the social mobility of the caste communities traditionally attached to Ravidas. In case of Kabir, with his ‘ambiguous’ grammatical origin as ‘either Muslim or Hindu’ there is much value attached to his name, life and messages. However, in terms of social appropriation, the caste communities that follow Kabirpanth do not seem to have inherited this controversy, as all the sectarian members are Hindu. It is also worthwhile to mention that while Ravidas’s theo-political centre has come to be in Ballan, Jalandhar, Punjab and not in Benares, for the Kabirpanthis, it is mainly Madhya Pradesh and reasonably low profile religious centres anchor them. Kabir’s birthplace in Benares on the other hand is caught in litigations over the property allocated to the trust. It was pointed out to me by some local people that one of the ponds to which Kabir is mythically associated in terms of his birth stories, is taken over by a soft drink company, which plans to open a bottling plant there. In the summer of 2008, they were just filling in the trenches. While there still remains a bounded location that is still claimed by the trust, that in itself is caught in litigation over the succession of the Gaddi. It has an idol of the child meant to grow up as Kabir, emerging over the lotus leaves. There is also a temple adjacent to the pond which has an idol of Kabir, but this one represents a halo over him and the aural condition of a divine incarnate. The hall has a set of volunteers who take turn to sing Kabir’s sayings throughout the day, without break and the songs are aired through the loudspeakers planted on the top of the temple. One of the neighbours’ residing close to the place, Anil, who in fact introduced me to the Ashram, told me that
this singing and the morning-evening walks are two connections to this place that people in the neighborhood have apart from the occasional festivals that happen here when some of them volunteer to clean and serve. There is an oft-quoted link between the adoption of Kabir by Muslim weavers' caste made by scholars on Kabir and they also claim that many followers of Kabir took to Islam spurned by Hindu indifference. However, when I raised this with the religious head Ardhnam Saheb, he told me in categorical terms: "Kabir is an incarnation, bhagwan we worship him, and the associations that are made with nirguna, adi-granth and Islam are scholarly fabrications". It is outside the scope of this work to delve on the scholarly linkages' to the empirical presence of Kabir's teachings in contemporary Benares but this assimilation in Hindu idioms must not alarm anyone and indeed they just exemplify the reflexivity of Hinduism that I have developed as a perspective here. This gets even more conspicuous in the case of the saint Ravidas. Locating his address in Benares, Hawley and Juergensmeyer say:

A long and complicated city (Benares), like the religious tradition it symbolizes, it opens at its southern extremity onto the spacious grounds of Banaras Hindu University, and for most people it stops there. But just beyond the high wall that surrounds the university, at its back gate, there is one more settlement, a dusty little enclave called Sri Govardhanpur. It is the last collection of houses before the country begins, and there is a reason that it has grown up where it has. This is a village inhabited almost entirely by untouchables, outcasts. Even in a secular India committed by its constitution to the abolition of untouchability, their pariah identity still has its geographical symbol (Hawley and Jurgensmeyer 2004: 9).

Notwithstanding the provocative use of 'untouchable' and 'pariah', this observation still confirms the fact that the peripheral spaces of the Hindu cosmographs were the liminal spaces occupied by the religious iconoclasts. Their birthplaces are at the borders, the lines that define the intermediate categorizations. As I have noted above, the writers direct that there is a Ravidas's temple in Sri Govardhanpur, built up with the help and funds of his devotees, mostly dalit, living in Punjab or else abroad and are relatively prosperous to have backed the project. There is also a temple funded by Babu Jagjivan Ram, who shares the dais allocated to saint Ravidas that is being built up by his trust. In between a Ravidas park and a Ravidas gate have come into being. It is worth noting that
unlike the temples, the park and the gate occupy a central position in the city and both are not sacralized and don’t appear to be in an iconographic contestation as the arrangement of Jagjivan Ram’s temple’s sanctorum is. According to Hawley and Juergensmeyer:

Jagjivan Ram’s temple says many things. First and foremost, of course, it says that Ravidas belongs on the highlands along the Ganges as much as any other god or saint. Fortunately Jagjivan Ram’s political connections enabled him to acquire from the government the land necessary to make such a statement. Second, the temple says something about Ravidas’s place among the other Bhakti saints of north India: it puts him right in the center. Near the temple’s entrance a picture of Ravidas was for many years flanked by others depicting Kabir and Surdas, and in the sanctuary one finds not only a central altar dedicated to Ravidas but an ancillary shrine to Mirabai. Third, the structure states that the relation between the veneration of Ravidas and India’s major religious communities. Spires on each of the corners symbolize Sikhism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, and in their midst one glimpses the great spire to Ravidas. The message is that what Ravidas represents stands at the center of all the great religions, and illuminates them equally. Hinduism is notably occluded (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 2004: 21).

In the thesis, I argue that it is not that Hinduism is occluded. It is precisely in its unrepresented absence that it captures this entire representation as a Hindu henotheistic structuring of deities or religious significations. Thus it is important to maintain a conceptual différence between the varieties of religious presences that are allowed centrality in Hindu “cosmology” in the context of Benares.

_Shifting Centres and the New Religious Circumferences_

Does this mean that Benares as an orgiastic Hindu organization of space, _Puja-patha_ and _mauj-masti_ is constant and the geographic centre of its own centrality has remained unchanged? The answer is an emphatic “No”. The ghats aligned on the lines of Shiv’s and Vishnu’s territory is one example. Without going into historical details of how two sides of the Rajghat have been represented as a divide and how the patrons of Vishnu have chosen to create Ghats and temples on the north while the _shavites_ on the south, one can use the mythic motif of organization of space for further analyses. This of course is a simplified reading of the structures of the ghats. If one were to instead fall back to Lévi-Strauss’s plea of taking the routes of the myths then I think one finds a more productive
way to understand the place (Lévi-Strauss 1963a: 150). It is true that there are more Vishnu temples in the North to the Rajghat but many dom informants convinced me that further north from Adi-keshav temple, the cremation ghat at Khadak vinayak ghat was the archaic ghat where bodies were burnt. This could only have happened within a sacralized geography patronized by the Shaivites. So Doms’ information must help us transcend the postcolonial neat empirical demarcation of the geographical Shaivite and Vashinavite sections. As the Doms at Khadak Vinayak mourn the loss of those days and pity those who think Manikarnika and Harishchandra ghats were primordially there, they also suggest that the activity at Manikarnika ghat was promoted in late colonial period. And over time the Doms managed to make a network to retain these places. If one were to mark a stretch on the ghats that are still given to daily activity then it would be from Assi to Manikarnika. The other side of Rajghat bridge is adi (primeval) and thus, by that logic should have been revered, but instead has become a ruin, waiting for a pilgrim or a horde of Shavyatris to come by. Two other ethnographic sites that I describe below capture similar pre-occupations.

The Kharak Vinayak Ghat that was considered to be the most pious place to cremate awaits for dead bodies today. In June 2008, on occasions when I was there, the doms mentioned that on an average they have been getting just a body or two in a day. This was when the newspapers were reporting that because of the heat wave, there was a virtual jam at the cremation ghats, like Manikarnika and Harishchandra. Also, the ones who came to this part of the bridge seemed to be very poor. One cremation to which I was a witness took the whole day. The old woman who had died was laid on the wooden pyre set up by the doms. The bereaving relatives themselves got the wood. The delay was over the doms demanding a thousand rupees for the fire, which they finally brought down to a hundred odd rupees. The second event I witnessed occurred at Rajghat Bridge one evening. The bridge was being used by a cart puller to throw the dissected bodies wrapped in clumsy shrouds that were either refuse from post-mortem or medical studies. On enquiring about the incident, I received reluctant replies, which were in conformity with each other, and concurred, with my own observations. These two incidents signify a desacralization that is useful for us to remember. However, if the unspoken is to be given sociological evidence, there must be a reflexive “return” to the “cosmological” idea of
Benares that must grant these neglected spaces to be more important than ever before. And indeed, one of the prominent geographers of the city is precisely doing this in locating what he calls as the “pancacroshi pilgrimage” (Singh 2002). The search for a “pilgrimage archetype” as he calls it goes through the ‘left over remainder’ of a long, obscure corridor that ramifies the city in the middle and opens up finally into the Adi-Vinayak, punctuated by many idols and temples in between. There was also a controversy around the originality and the reconstruction of the path. That ranged from Singh blaming the Mughal rulers in their supposed role of obliterating the path to hailing a Brahmin, “Mahadev Bhatta” who in early twentieth century took upon himself to recover and revive the route (Singh 2002: 36-37). This exemplifies a postmodern attempt of sacralizing what within a sphere of modernity could have become a heritage site or ‘things’ of the museum. If one compares this reconstructed journey with Buddhist idols and shrines that languish in the Sarnath museum, the contrast becomes clear. However, the larger point is that notwithstanding the old and the new, the Shaivites and the Vaishnavites, the brahmanical and the non-brahminical, Benares represents a contemporary reflexivity amongst its tropes of religious, cultural and political practices that maintains a whole range of internal differentiation with an acute degree of flexible coherence. Call it a subtle or manifest “inner violence”, the greatest empirical test of this dictum is that what dies in Hinduism is incarnated back. This reinstatement of the larger symbolic order is simultaneous to any transgression begot by religious dissent, political protest or constitutional reform.

Given the preceding discussion on the cosmologic reflexivity in the organization of the modes and spaces of the city and the ghats, I now seek to use the same method to elucidate the cremation ghats at a generic level and Harishchandra ghat in particular as an ethnographic example.

Is it the case that in this reflexivity, one could bypass the threat that manual cremation practice itself is going through, in an ideological shift from the doms’ manual skilled work of burning the dead to relatively instantaneous electric cremation. One of the features that are displaced in this shift from the manual to the electric cremation is the suspension of the ritual of circumambulating the burnt dead’s ashes in the still warm
manual cremation fire and smashing of the earthen pot after the circumambulation from left to right.

How can you circumambulate the electric pyre? The answer is certainly not easy and linear to this conflict. And as questions of environmental degradation and protection become more complex with more and more actors and agencies involved in it, the difficulties would only rise. However, if one were to take the certitude of the informants seriously, there are two things that come to the fore. One is that manual cremation is going to go on as long as the burning is not questioned. An electric crematorium could be there but the State clearly knows as do the people that if manual sites could be banned, others will emerge and this would continue. If one were to take this observation of the people seriously, it is easy to make sense of the electric crematorium at Harishchandra Ghat. One of the most important way its’ working could be defined is that it does not work, that is, it is not meant to work. This then is another example of what Lévi-Strauss calls as an institution of “Zero value” (Lévi-Strauss 1963a: 159), whose function doesn’t exist except making other institutions meaningful.

The electric crematorium doesn’t work most of the time. The reasons are varied. Erratic electricity supply is one. When on an average the city gets twelve to fifteen hours of supply this appears plausible to everyone. Doms ‘control’ the place and it is again easy to understand that this is against their profession in as direct and unsympathetic way as it could be. The man who controls the switches and oversees the electric cremation is a government employee and is not necessarily a Dom. There are only two pyres and one of them does not work. This is a contrasting image, when the regular traffic of dead bodies on a routine day is more than forty on both the ghat,s which may increase in extreme weathers or on certain peculiar or ‘ominous’ days. Then there are categories of people like the politician, the high status Brahmin, and other notables who are cremated on a decorated and raised platform called Charan Paduka at the manual cremation sites. Such differentiation does not exist at the electric crematoria. Just as not working of the electric crematorium is part of the acceptable logic of things, similarly when ‘it’ works, there are people who exactly use those reasons not to cremate their dead. One of the oft-cited reasons was that it is meant for poor people, who are charged a standard fee (in June 2008 it was Rs. 500) and have only the ‘disposal’ of the dead in their mind and not ‘cremation’.
It is obvious that this idea of poor cannot be hinged on the logic of 'class' in this sphere (cf. Sharma in Visvanathan 2001). Here it would be translated in terms of caste. This leads us, in my view, to the complicated relationship of the dead with his surviving living community (see Hertz 1960). In this context it could be translated as the relationship between the shav and the shavyatris. From my reading of what the informants told me, it is of course 'caste' that decides who would not get cremated at the electric crematorium, but it is also true that people of several castes have ended up there and the reason they say is how the ones who come to cremate (Shavyatri) choose to get over with it. I would explain the elaborate link between the shav and the shavyatri in the next chapter, meanwhile we return to the electric crematorium (see Lewis 1961 and 1969).

In June of 2008 the chimneys were being installed and how could there have been an electric crematorium without chimneys? The answer that many respondents gave was that open-air cremations never had any such thing so why the closed ones should have. The organizing dimension of the electric cremation is not a 'new' rationalization altogether, but just simply a shift from manual to electric pyres. The ones who go with their dead to the electric crematorium ensure that they subvert the ways of the machination and introduce the reflexive adopting of ritual conformity. Once the body is burnt they bribe the operator to come down and give them the particular ashes of their dead from the pile of the unclaimed ashes lying from before.

The theoretical questions that emerge from these descriptions so far are in fact two sides of the same cosmological topology i.e., does Hinduism has a pregiven cosmological 'core' to its existence in Benares or it operates with a method of reflexively redrawing the core and periphery endlessly while using the several progressive layers of the cosmology to this end? In the second case, which is the methodological imperative I have outlined here, it is of significance to ask, what if these cosmologies of Hinduism find themselves in a theoretical deadlock, which may force about a range of veritably new Hindu 'Symbolic'? The basic requirement is to understand the reflexivity that has come to be part of the contemporary Benares, which distinctly separates it from a classical Hindu domain of extreme purity and caste discriminations.

In light of these questions let me briefly recall the arguments made earlier in the chapter and then move forward toward an answer. The first observation is that every
cosmology persists with its own sociological register of differentiation. For example, the *Kabir panthis* have an elaborate code of dresses for their students and different rank holders in the organization. The students and devout followers are expected to wear white, and so are the heads of the organization. The one who heads the religious order (in rotational order), wears a long conical cap, and is tonsured completely — as a remarkable feature of asceticism. Their religious observations may appear Hindu like but are subtly differentiated again in terms of their modes of praying and ingredients used. Similarly the Ravidasis, wear long running beards and their hair is turbaned and as J.P.S. Uberoi points out, the fact that their hair is not matted has a significance (1991: 320-321). Uberoi construes that the significance in the context of Sikhism is that a Sikh individual has to maintain a persona of a renunciate with the discipline of a householder. In the case of Ravidasis the element of ‘renunciation’ thus appears as complex as it is hinged upon the cosmologies of both Hinduism and Sikhism. Similarly their religious observations have mixed metaphors from Sikhism and Hinduism, but they do not overemphasize either.

This level of cosmologic differentiation and normative autonomy is just one element. The main feature that sustains this differentiation of any cosmology from the other is its ‘imaginary’ of radical emancipation. For instance, one of the informants at the Ravidas’s ashram, while explaining the universal nature of Ravidas’s formulations told me that *Chamar* is a compound word made up of *Cha* for *Charm* or skin, *Ma* for *Maans* or flesh and *Ra* for *Rakt* or Blood. In his words, Ravidas construed everyone to be a *chamar* because, as suggested, it simply means skin, flesh and blood. This universalistic conception is the radical imaginary which sustains the difference between any two cosmologies. However, the key to this level of the imaginary is yet another response to the Real that is conceptualized by the Hindu originary language of religious significations. This Real, as stated earlier, operates at two levels. One is that of “the sea without light” which is the temporal primordial that has given way to the idea of the human world itself. And second is what I call as the abject — the things that are neither strictly subjective or objective. The point that I have tried to illustrate is that every new cosmology like for example the ones discussed above Buddhism, Sikhism, Ravidas Panth, Kabir Panth are responses to the ever recurrent Hindu Real. The conditions, with which Christianity and Islam co-exist, are also that they invariably have to borrow the
modes of dealing with the Real in the Hindu way of life. Or else they may risk being conceptualized as Real in totality, generating new varieties of fundamentalism in each religion. As long as they propose new Imaginaries of sublimated emancipation, they persist as radically different from the Hindu religious ideals. However, the Real of the Hindu, the 'hidden' register that provides an inconsistency in the Symbolic, appears to haunt these radically new cosmologies as well. It is in this sense, the Hindu reflexivity appropriates every new cosmological Imaginary because the Hindu Real runs common to every cosmological sphere.

J.P.S. Uberoi points out that every 'emanicipatory' drive against Hinduism, uses the mode of 'renunciation' to distance itself from the inhumaness of caste requirements. Sikhism managed to transcend this regression to renunciation by renunciating renunciation itself (Uberoi 1991: 329-332). He also points out that in the symbolic codifications of the five symbols of the Sikhs, the Sixth is left unstated. This unstated dimension to my mind could be loosely translated as that of the Real of sexuality. I have exhaustively discussed this point in the last chapter (see pp 25-27), so let me come to the point directly. I am of the view that when renunciation becomes a prominent trope of resisting the division of caste in Hinduism then the norms of handling of the abject like excreta, corpse, menstrual fluid, semen which are implicated within the everyday observation of caste manage to find their way back in modes of renunciation too. In other words, the more extreme the mode of renunciation becomes, the household, family and the implicative domain of caste practices become correspondingly subtly embedded into each other. Thus to my mind, Sikhism's triumph over renunciation is only half the story because it retains the element of sexuality or the other name of the Real uncodified. What we have here is the structuring of the Hindu abject with respect to death and sexuality. If one recalls here Huntington and Metcalfe's observation in Celebrations Of Death (1991) that in every society death is an occasion for sexual excesses, manifested through funerary dances and metaphors of regeneration in their erotic ballads, we find that the aspects of death and sexuality could be connected at the level of unconscious in this particular way. Only, the symbolic, good-humored aspect could be integrated in the symbolic, the aspect of the Real would persist and evade symbolization. It is in this strict sense that one could argue that the idea of Hindu Civilization could be attested not by the
hoary ideas associated with the scriptures but simply in terms of how it construes the abject and deals with it. It is important to underline here that anything is not abject by itself. It is the unsymbolizable dimension of the Real that decisively confers it as the abject. Pursuing the theme of sexuality and death as aspects of unsymbolizable Real, we come to another link with the Hindu Symbolic and that is of the idiom of rebirth. The fact that re-birth is something which is beyond the strict control of the individual, there is recognition that structures have an aspect of the unconscious within them. Second, as Gananath Obeyesekere in his *Karma and Rebirth* (2002) points out, every philosophy of rebirth within the Hindu-Buddhist complex is associated with, on one hand a complete liberation from the world, and second, that of negotiation with the form of life that one may assume. The first ‘emancipation’ from the endless cycle of birth-rebirth could be read as a victory over the Real — the sea without light — that grounds the mortal world of suffering. The second is a reference to the contingent aspects of Real, dealing with the various abject, whether one would be born of a particular caste order or in another species of animal world altogether. Thus, should one not consider this ‘Imaginary’ of complete and total emancipation from this world, not just once but for all future possible returns to human life as to be the master signifier of all Imaginaries? That while ‘your’ emancipation from this world would be complete, your family and community would persist in the same endless implicative cycle of caste regulated dealing of the abject. Here, we turn to the concrete metaphor for the vehicle of liberation, ‘Ganga’ the salvific river. What happens to the Hindu Symbolic when this meta-signification of the Hindu Imaginary, of liberation from the order of rebirths and reincarnations comes to face a historical juncture of the death of the river itself?

*Pravah and Parvah*

As I have already stated, Ganga is the material archive of the abject, or borrowing Ron Barrett’s nomenclature, she could be called as the “cosmic sink” (Barrett 2008). Every thing that cannot be integrated in the symbolic order of everyday life and is thus considered threatening, is disposed in the river. From animal carcasses, to aborted foetus, the corpse of the ascetic to medical waste, excrement to dead idols and so on are immersed in the river. Thus, one could argue that the ‘symbolic’ aspect of every domain
of the living has a parallel decomposing, faceless abject. However as I have pointed out, this should not be taken as a reversion to the classification of the Hindu domain in terms of life and death or the right-handed and the left-handed. Because what is crucial here is the ironical feature that Ganga is considered as restorative and regenerative. Thus there is an element of transformative handling of the abject things that is involved in between. This is illustrated best in the disposal of the dead Hindu. What I have presented here is the semiotic double of Pravah/Parvah. Pravah in English may mean ‘to continue the flow’. The ritual act of pravah, is considered to be most important and all the manual cremations are culminated with this act. Now with the electric crematorium reducing the body to ashes only, the pravah is of this ash. In a manual cremation, when the body is burnt to its’ maximum, a final unburnt remainder is saved from being reduced to ashes. The body part that is to be thus saved is classified on the basis of the sex of the dead. For men, it is the flesh attached to the long bone of the femur while for women it is the hip bone with the half-burnt flesh attached to it. The retrieved unburnt bone with the flesh sticking to it is thrown into the river using an improvised wooden tongs by the chief mourner. Then the circumambulation and throwing of the earthen pot full of Ganga’s water over the place where cremation happened mark the end of the cremation. The notion of pravah in its’ shastric connotation refers to the part of the body going through Ganga to Gangasagar, a journey which is later on replicated at the time of offering Pinda to the dead ancestor (see Bloch 1983 and Parry 1994). An anthropological analysis, relating it with “elements” may mean that this unburnt flesh clinging to the last bone represents that the flow of time is above us in its divine violence. The flow of water matches this transforming capacity, just as the flowing of air into the fire participates in a similar violence that transforms the dead body that still shared the features with its earlier existent physical form. Now reduced or shall we say, creatively transformed into this hideous remain, which has become truly anonymous, such that, not even the dead’s relatives can identify it, should they stumble upon it in the river is the last aspect of humanity, i.e. anonymity. The sacred fire dismembers memory and the river everyday carries away many such mortal fragments, which the Ganga renders as a particle of common humanity. This is the physical equivalent of the unsignifiable ghost. However there is an interesting aspect of pravah that complicates its semiotic field and that is in
its' cultural context of usage. The most common word or one can say the proper noun for cremation is parvah, the Bhojpuri word that offers us a shift in the meaning and the measure of cremation. Parvah being closer to the Urdu word that could be termed as ‘care’ in English although it is not care directed towards any specific person or element, it is the drive of affect itself. In this case, it is not the memory of the erstwhile living that is now part of Ganga but the remembrance of Ganga itself in a mode other than that of “cosmic sink” that should be the reading of parvah. It is in this dual context of pravah and parvah that we now look at death and Ganga.

**Faith in Obverse Relation with Death?**

Jacques Derrida in an essay on Søren Kierkegaard tries to reach out for a definition of the religious act or more properly what he calls as “Mysterium tremendum. A frightful mystery, a secret to make you tremble” (1998: 151). Quoting the discussion on the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham and extending it further, he comes to relate the idea of faith or what Kierkegaard calls as the ‘religious’, essentially with secretiveness. He says:

> Our faith is not assured, because faith can never be, it must never be a certainty...(.) The secret truth of faith as absolute responsibility and as absolute passion, the ‘highest passion’ as Kierkegaard will say (is that); it is a passion that, sworn to secrecy, cannot be transmitted from generation to generation. In this sense it has no history. This untransmissibility of the highest passion, the normal condition of a faith which is thus bound to secrecy, nevertheless dictates to us the following: we must always start over. (.) Each generation must begin again to involve itself in it without counting on the generation before. It thus describes the non-history of absolute beginnings which are repeated, and the very historicity that presupposes a tradition to be reinvented each step of the way, in this incessant repetition of the absolute beginning (Derrida 1998: 171).

This may direct us to develop linkages between faith, death and Ganga. The first hypothesis is that death could be perceived as an obverse of the “frightful mystery”. Here I wish to move away from the anthropological description of dying-death-ritualistic observation as one structured unit. One needs to separate the existential realm of dying and the modes of understanding ‘dying’ from the description of the dead as an abject thing to be disposed. So one of the ways in which the people at the cremation ghat depict
a dead person in their conversations is by reiterating the certainty of what is to be done to the dead. Not just acknowledgement of death, but the entire expression of cremating the dead could be seen as a public act par excellence. It is not the mysterious prayer of the faithful that in a crowded temple differentiates everyone in the way they relate with the Absolute, subjectively with their individual secretive selves. The hours' long act of cremation is an unembarrassed reiteration of the certainty of death, a meticulous and exaggerated public display. It is in this sense that the 'dead' is also an impersonal abject-object to be mercilessly yet aesthetically disposed. If any notions of relatedness were to persist and the certainty of death itself was to be in a tremble, then a cremation wouldn't happen the way it does. If looked at from this point of view, it makes sense to know that Shavyatris who come along to the funeral do not necessarily mourn in an expression of grief that could be identified with loss. Instead the cremation ghat is a site of grotesque jokes. People discussing anecdotes of everyday lives and how death as an event makes a mockery of individual’s plans and their magnificence in social spheres. One cannot say the same for the other two forms of disposal of the dead i.e., sinking the body tied with stones or abandoning it in the water as cattle are disposed. While the former is used as ritual disposal for the saints who wished jalsamadhi and those who die at the time of celebrations in the family, the latter is a common method of throwing the aborted foetus and bio-medical ‘waste’ that includes amputated limbs and surgically removed organs. There are of course various in-between forms as well, where the dead are half-burnt and then the pravah is conducted. There is a burden on the relatives of the dead then to ensure the public expression of pravah and merely disposal, never qualifies for the ‘certain’ death. However, there is still a certainty that has to be resolved by those who dispose any which way, and that is the certainty of death itself. We know from anthropological accounts that this certainty also creates the horror of the abject and the reason why people must not keep, possess or relate with the physical form of the dead. The death in this sense creates a radical negation of the act of faith. The act of faith being expressed in the ‘wait’ for the prayer to be answered. The relatives are to ensure that this moment is unambiguously understood and resolved accordingly. So one may say that it is death that redefines or reinvents the modes of religious faith and puts every horde of shavyatris in a particular position to negotiate with what they could do to ensure a proper cremation.
Needless to say, again an individualistic differentiation comes into play for every cremation. Thus the anthropological argument that at the time of death the moral community is in crises and rituals are to be followed to ensure the reproduction of the community misses half the story. That other part of the story is that it is primarily a religious crisis and one's modes of faith in the symbolic elements of the religion are to be reflexively reinvented. If this were to be true, wouldn't the greatest exemplification come through the analytical exploration of the death of the river Ganga itself? On a Lévi-Straussian register of “Who will shave the barber?” (Lévi-Strauss 1966) if one were to extend the question that has already been asked by Meena Kaushik in the form of “who will cremate the Dom?” (Kaushik 1976) the next question may not be “who would cremate the dead mother Ganga?” but it would be a set of two questions. These are, “how would we know the ‘certainty’ of Ganga’s death and how would the suspended faith be reinvented to enable the Shavyatris to cremate the abject dead mother? In other words, it is in this way that the providential pravah — the order of social life, the representative flow of cycles of life depicted through the flow of the water in the river comes to face the parvah — the care that is involved in reinventing the suspended faith.

Along with laying down the concrete sociological moment of contemporary Benares through the help of participant observation, interviews, questionnaires and tracts of information available at various religious centers, I posed the question to everyone regarding Ganga’s death and the subsequent chapters are further explication of those responses. As illustrated in this chapter, the difficulty of understanding death in the current social world cannot be overcome by merely noting the rituals and their meanings or by locating one place and recording the sorted out activities. Multi-sited ethnography enables one to at least ‘figure’ the difficulty. Gradually one realizes that though one can talk about Ganga’s death, there is an absolute refusal by the respondents to confront the question, and then ultimately it is in a roundabout way that I approach the issue. So as most of the shavyatris joke and put it in the Heideggerian way pointing at the cremation Ghat that ‘you may go anywhere, be high or low, reach the altars of social mobility or totter at the bottom but you have to come here in the end’ — “ghum phir ke sabko yahin anna hai” (After wandering, everyone has to come here, one way or the other). It is at this register and methodological initiative that I can argue that the cremation ghat —
Harishchandra Ghat is my field of endless re-returns, through mappings of different corners, parts and institutions of the city in order to corroborate the disintegration of the older Symbolic forms of Hinduism and homological ways in which the new ones have been envisaged in the city.
1 Cosmological as a category of people don’t exist. I instead use the term here in denoting the political imperatives of the theological signification. My concern is to show how religious writings, interpretations, popular conceptions, missionary and travel writings (during the colonial reign) as well as postcolonial anthropological and historical writings, foundationally assumed cosmo-logic as the starting point. Rana P.B. Singh, a geographer from BHU, to an extent, could be considered as a postmodern ‘cosmologist’, if there ever was one. What he does in his extensive work is in fact based on the claim that the ‘scared geography’s representation’ is a literal one. This possibility embedded within this kind of assumption is double edged. On the one hand it takes cosmographs constructed in their pictorial signification and mechanically reproduced during the colonial period as to be the ‘originary’ ones, and on the other there is a search for a completion. This completion is undoubtedly not to be found in the present age Benares and that becomes an easy and uncritical site for Singh to allocate the losses to invasions, outsiders and so on. In one of his characteristic initiatives, he revives the cosmographically correct map of the ‘Panchkrosi Yatra’ in Benares and goes on to create a homology between the ‘yatra’ (pilgrimage), as to be an attestation of Kashi as a Mandala and the Mandala itself to be based on the bodily symmetry of Lord Shiv. Not only is there an attempt to delineate the cosmo-significants literally through the scriptural and the discursive, even when in his book he observes the historical changes though the pre-mughal to postcolonial domain, there is also an attempt to resacralize the forgotten, lost and the truncated. Needless to say, as the resacralization happens, there are counter-claims to the place and its significance. And these ‘sites’ of contestations in their methods, exemplification and reflexive appropriation is what I have tried to illustrate in the chapter (See Singh 2002, See also a critical review and the inclusion of the paradigm of modernity with reference to Panchkroshyatra by Geengnagel 2006: 145-163).

2 One illustration is incorporated later in this chapter.

3 I have mentioned Annette B. Weiner in the context of her revistations of Malinowski’s Trobrianders because to some extent their work together captures a fundamental aspect of anthropology, that of ‘life-cycle’ as a key category to study. While Malinowski retained the birth-marriage-death triad, what Weiner does, is, to invert it to re-interpret it in terms of death-birth-marriage. This inversion is theoretically productive for Weiner because she realises that Malinowski in his earnestness had left invisible the domain of women’s work. When she locates funerary work as the centre of women’s work, she not only makes ‘death’ as the starting point but also the cosmological principle that sustains the matrilineal society of Trobrians’ through the regeneration of spirits reproduced by women (1977). This again brings us to the note of cosmologies and how one must make anthropological shifts in cognitivizing them while at the same time not succumbing to telescope the communities in an unexplained past. If Weiner moves away from Malinowski in locating women’s work and labour, she concurs with him in telescoping Trobriand in a cosmological past in her ethnography, a place which otherwise had served as an airbase for the Allied forces in the World War and subsequently which operates as ‘tourist island’ for the connected nations. It is in that context that I make a shift to Psychoanalysis and ‘Freud through Lacan’ to develop a critical perspective on the birth-marriage-death (in whichever order) and the cosmologies involved.

4 Panth is the emic category that is usually purported to mean a ‘sect’, but this shouldn’t be the benchmark because Sikhism is also called as a Khalsapanth but is not referred to be a sect but a religion. I propose cosmology to be the index of religion and use ‘sect’ only with a sociological qualification. Kabir Panth is found on the recorded sayings of Kabir and mythic anecdotes of his birth, life and death and similarly Ravidas Panth is found on the sayings of Ravidas and the subsequent interpretation by various saints. Both of these cosmologies involve saints as renunciates and there is a particular caste group that constitutes the main following, however as A. M. Shah puts it, as a rule no ‘sect’ is either constituted by one entire caste group nor by only one exclusive caste group (See Shah 2006).

5 Jagmohan Mahajan has selected and edited a volume titled Ganga Observed: Foreign Accounts Of The River (1994, 2003). Most excerpts invariably linger on the association between Ganga, Benares and the Hindu. Not that these accounts exhaust the list of writers or the innumerable number of writings which
more or less insist on this link, including that from Huxley to V. S. Naipaul as well as the register of postcolonial nationalist accounts that celebrate and perpetuate that link exaggeratedly.

6 *Mandala* is a geomantic figuration that has well classified four sectors within an imagined circle. Further the internal divisions can be extended in the multiple of four.

7 If one were to construe a genealogical link between the works of Ghurye, Vidyarthi, Sarasawati, and Coomarswamy with later anthropologists like Searle-Chatterjee, Das, Kaushik, Parry and Kumar, there isn’t an overt and manifest analytical conversation that exists between these two set of writers. So to attempt one, is to assume the difficulties that prevented others to create that genealogical and analytical linkage. I hope to point out the difficulties if I do not succeed in making any productive link otherwise.

8 What one means here by ‘strict’ functionalist tradition is an emphasis on ‘function’, ‘need’ and a ‘mechanical’ solidarity amongst other characteristic features of the anthropological canon that Structuralism inherited with varying degrees of skepticism.

9 Louis Dumont provides a critique of Henry Sumner Maine’s characterization of the Indian village as unchanged over time — a thematic ‘construction’ of certain states like that of India, which was also shared by Karl Marx amongst others in their writings (1970). The way out, according to my theoretical perspective is not simply to point out the everyday practices of commerce, caste, exogamy etc. to emphasize the unclosed features of these spaces. That of course takes the debates to a certain distance but the more radical exercise is to borrow the orientalist logic. That is, in other words to go back to Maine and Marx and to discern the logic of cosmos upon which they based their assumptions. It is only through traversing the orientalist construction and not merely by negating them that one can reach towards a theoretically productive movement. It is here that the metaphors of ‘spectre’, ‘haunt’, ‘ghosts’ and ‘entombed silence’ become registers of making sense of change and perceived status quo. Jacques Derrida captures this aspect magnificently in his *Specters Of Marx* (1994).

10 ‘Both’ here could have two references. Eck and Barrett as two or in terms of positions them being part of one paradigm and then it is Eck-Barrett and Cohen. The latter represents an evasion, not inversion so much, of the Eck and Barrett’s position.

11 I have delineated my conceptual use of traversion later in the thesis. However, at this juncture, I wish to clarify its literal use. The Hindu idiom of *Tirtha* (pilgrimage) also operates on a crossing-of-paths that involves the laid out domain of myths that structure norms of sacrifices, penance and spiritual rewards. I pose the idea of ‘traversion’ as an atheistic double to this concept of ‘tirtha’.

12 The discussion of sects that involve brahminical as well as non-brahminical castes is taken up by Sarasawati and Sinha, which I would discuss in the accounts to follow.

13 The notion of *banarsipan* is discussed extensively by Nita Kumar in her work and I would engage with this concept in relation to Saraswati’s work later in this chapter.

14 As mentioned in chapter one, I use traversion as a concept borrowed from Lacan’s work. He argues that the proper ethical reading of a symbolic universe, constituted by myths and images is possible not by being completely taken up by the fantasy but by maintaining a distance with its fantasmatic core so that one can “going-through, traverse the fantasy” (see Žižek 1994: 82).

15 The various versions of the myths start by saying that Ravidas was waiting for Gorakhnath to come. Once he came it was an unusually hot summer afternoon, Gorakhnath said to Ravidas that ‘you do not even have a tree that can provide shade to the traveller’. Ravidas sent Goraknath for a bath in Ganga and when he returned there was a huge tamarind tree, under which Ravidas was waiting.
16 It is stark enough to let go unnoticed that the images of Shiva in the museum are of Ardhangeshwar as well as a rare idol representing the trinity (Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh). And if one compares them with the living images in the city that is euphemistically known as the land of Shiva, it is the lingam co-joined to the yoni that are worshipped everywhere. This differentiation could be further underlined by the fact that the empirically present lingam-yoni/Shiv-shakti exist in popular imagination as lingam only.

17 As one of the interviewee said at the math founded at Kabir’s birthplace that the gaddi of Kabir is in Madhya Pradesh.

18 The volume has essays by Richard H. Davis, Romila Thapar, Richard Eaton and Finbarr B. Flood.

19 Also see Sumathi Ramaswamy’s “Enshrining the Map of India: Cartography, Nationalism and the Politics of Deity in Varanasi” (2006).

20 Sunthar Visuvalingam and Elizabeth Chalier-Visuvalingam narrate the myth of Lat Bhairo as following: “After having emerged from the pillar of fiery light (jyotirlinga) to violently cut off the head of Brahma, the skull bearing (Kapalika) Bhairava wandered about for twelve years to expiate his brahmanicide, fell into a tank appropriately named “the liberation of the skull” (Kapal mochana). Yet even after his absolution, the “black” (kala) Bhairava remained at Kapalmochana as the “sin eater” (papa-bhaksana) to devour the impurities of pilgrims to the city of final liberation” (2006: 98). The lat signifies the pillar, which stands as the testimony of the punishment inflicted to Bhairava. Also see endnote numbered eight.

21 Sunthar Visuvalingam and Elizabeth Chalier-Visuvalingam contextualize the historical and topographical setting of Lat Bhairo as following: “The Lat Bhairo temple is one of the eight temples of Bhairava, collectively known as asha-bhairava, i.e., “the eight-fold Bhairava”. The Lat Bhairo is a pillar that was completely leveled during the Banaras riots of 1809. Today this Hindu icon is a mere stump, 3 feet and 7 to 8 feet high, that stands on a slightly elevated stone platform in the midst of a Muslim “prayer ground” (idgah), where the devout of both faiths continue to pray and offer their respective sacrifices. Entirely encased under protective copper sheeting installed after the riots of the British district magistrate, the pillar is separated from the idgah only by a small enclosing brick wall. Just outside the wall and to the north is the adjoining “well of Bharata” (bharatkupa), the youngest brother of Lord Rama. To the south of this terrace, 5 or 6 metres below, is a large tank named Kapalamochana, a strong well built structure with stairs and foundation of solid stone. Hindus bathe here, for the tank is reputed to cure women of sterility and bathing daily for 40 days can even remove leprosy. There are also some sacred trees: the branch of a tulsi tree that was uprooted during the riots, and particularly a pippal and neem tree, whose “marriage” all over India is a Hindu prolongation of the Vedic sacrificial symbolism of the (union of) asvattha and the sami trees” (2006: 98)

22 Primarily vegetarian.

23 The entire quote is as following: “The symbolic function is not new as a function, it has its beginnings elsewhere than in the human order, but they are only beginnings. The human order is characterized by the fact that the symbolic function intervenes at every moment and at every stage of its existence”. "The symbolic function is for you, if I understand it correctly, a transcendental function, in the sense that, quite simultaneously, we can neither remain in it, nor can we get out of it. What purpose does it serve? We cannot do without it, and yet we cannot inhabit it either." Further he says "If the symbolic function functions, we are inside it. And I would even say—we are so far into it that we can't get out of it." (Quoted in Butler 2000: 42-43).


25 As John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer note, “Kabir” is a Muslim name, a Quranic name for Allah, though he has been hagiographically associated with a Hindu way of life. The caste group 'julaha,
weavers mainly, also have had that historical ambiguity about their caste status. While they are considered as Muslims, in being so, they are said to have 'converted' from their earlier Hindu religious identity (2004: 37). It is also said that when Kabir died, both Hindus and Muslims wished to have the final rites according to their own convictions and there was a quarrel about this. To their dismay they realised that his body has turned into a heap of flowers.

26 The place where the pond is, is called “Kabir Praatataya Dham” suggesting that Kabir hierophantically took birth here. The common stories at Lahartara, where this place is in Benares, claim that Kabir was abandoned by someone as a young born and was found floating on lotus leaves when a Julaha childless couple saw him and adopted him.

27 Reference is to the Biblical story of Abraham being told in a dream that he must sacrifice his only son. On the appointed day, at the Mount Moriah, when Abraham is about to sacrifice Issac, in absolute secrecy, without any communitarian, familial following, the son is replaced by a ram, with divine intervention.

28 Metcalf and Huntington (1991) have shown this long ago to be a feature of many communities of the Indonesian islands as well in Celebrations Of Death: The Anthropology Of The Mortuary Rituals.