Introduction

‘Benares’: The Cremated ‘Proper’ Name

Death as a category of sociological enquiry has often been studied as a ritualistic event in the context of communities. If one were to describe two basic ways of the many engagements with the idiom of death within social anthropology, the first would be death as a category that is functionally associated with affect and the second, would be a civilizational question of proper disposal through funerary work including grieving and mourning. Surveying the “classical” and contemporary literature on the subject, in my dissertation titled *The Notion(s) of ‘Death’ and the ‘Community’: Rethinking the Social Anthropology of Death* (2005), I show that both ‘affect’ and modes of disposing the dead are tied to each other in complex ways. It is this complexity that I wish to illustrate through the use of the term ‘representation’ of death in this work. The said complexity centres on the interpellation of modes of disposal of the dead and the terms of affect on which the community is said to be found. Emile Durkheim interprets this condition to be that of the foundational logic of religious classification, which he attests, is expressed in the “collective representations” of the community (Durkheim 1965). Why death becomes a remarkable social event is precisely because it evokes the horror of a transient rupture to the solidarity of the socio-religious community and thus it tests the efficacy of the classificatory domains. This test, as it were, is the test of the promise of overcoming the rupture through observation of rituals. It is this careful collective representation of the ritualistic realm that both subdues and mimes the horror of transgression of death. In case of a regular death in the community the onus is on subduing the horror. Equally though, in case of a human sacrifice, there is a recreation of that horror that may be even exaggerated and valourised (Durkheim 1965; Mauss and Hubert 1981). This is the complex domain then, even contradictory and paradoxical, of affect and death within the purview of socio-religious classification and collective representations. The immense significance of Durkheim’s observations, followed by that of Marcel Mauss is in emphasizing the socio-religious foreclosure of ‘death’ as an event. It is not in any context, just a physical conclusion of a manifest senescence of the ageing member of the
community. Far from maintaining an oppositional distinction of a human death and that of an animal, the collective representation inundates a specific set of animal’s death as also within the domain of ritualistic affect. Durkheim and Mauss’s contribution lies in locating the precedence of collective representation over the collective conscience. In other words, affect is within the coordinates of collective representation but its expression is contingent within the normative junctures of time and space. This reading also becomes a productive site to move beyond Durkheim and Mauss’s functionalist paradigm of homogenous causes and consequences, albeit with this basic sociological foregrounding mentioned above. That is, to complicate the categories of personhood, community, religion, tradition, civilizational similarities and differences through the temporal shifts of what one may call as tradition, modernity and post-modernity.

Genealogically, in the corpus of social-anthropological writings on the subject of death, Robert Hertz’s essay “A contribution to the study of collective representation of death” (Hertz 1960) codifies the Durkheimian logic of collective representation with respect to dying and death. In his tripartite division of the shifts in state of the living and the dead, he poses the categories of the dead, his soul and the living person(s) who grieves and mourns for the dead. This division can equally be posed as a tripartite division of the world of living, that of the dead and a liminal space of “intermediate” character that eludes the “proper” inclusion within the categories of the living and the dead, be that of ritualistic time periods before and after death (see also Van Gennep 1960). Hertz’s recognition of the ‘soul’ being greater than just merely an “intermediate” pass-over to the world of ancestors, reiterates the ‘concreteness’ of the intangible and the spectral within the coordinates of the collective representation of death. In the same vein he observes that the one who mourns for the dead within a ritualistic idiom is not limited to weeping and seclusion only, in fact, according to Hertz, the observations of rituals of death across different cultures point to a universalistic iteration of regeneration and restoration. An observation that has been since, used by many social anthropologists to underline and describe the linkages between death and sexuality (Huntington and Metcalf 1991; Bloch and Parry 1982). Thus after the ‘always-already’ primacy of the collective representation, the second basic sociological premise that I use is that of the linkages between death and sexuality.
Using these two premises, I locate Benares, both as the empirical city of dying and the dead and that which precedes this physicality. The latter locates the cosmographic representations of Benares in Hindu scriptural depictions within the theological matrix of Shaivite cosmologies. As noted above, locating the collective representation is to complicate the link between death and sexuality, a register which simultaneously paves way to reconsider idioms of personhood, family, community and above all the definition of a contemporary Hindu Benares through the ruptures and the stabilizing effects of modernity and postmodernity. I map these through a twin focus on first, the postcolonial institution of hospital care in Benares and second through the lens of debates around the death of the river ‘Ganga’. These two sites of enquiry concurrently enable a commentary and rethinking on the institutions of family, community, rituals and religious symbolism in the context of dying and death through the thesis.

It is well established within social-anthropological literature that as cultural spheres have changed, both the ideas of ‘affect’ and that of the ‘proper’ disposal of the dead have undergone paradigmatic shifts in particular contexts (see Clark 1993; Kearl 1989). Let me contextualize the genealogies of these shifts with respect to the empirical domain of Hindu Benares. As mentioned above, death’s function and meaning has to be understood in a knot of language that simultaneously devises work of disposal of the dead and remembrance of the dead amongst the living. In other words death has to be understood not simply as an event but as an iterative, anamorphic metaphor for that which cannot be directly symbolized but has to be expressed and observed nevertheless. In fact death as a metaphor has such a constant presence that it defines everything within the social. So to that extent when it really occurs as a named event, it is already regulated in its every aspect. The exaggerated meaninglessness of death as a possible subjective experience is in sharp contrast with the calm preparedness of the social to handle its’ occurrence when it happens. It is this structured disjointedness of the issue that is the interest of my research work.

In this thesis, I show how the co-ordinates of social-anthropological representations of a Hindu death could be made more nuanced by relocating the institutional continuum of the home-cremation ghat. Further, in going beyond the conceptual efficacy of the life/death opposition based on the homology of right handed/left handed opposition, I
argue that it is the material commonality, though not the uniformity of the hand — the symbol of labour, that unites the kitchen and the cremation as transformative sites within the Hindu cosmology. In developing the domain of Hindu cosmology, I also emphasize that the work of cremation is not simply based on techniques of disposal by the occupational caste group of Doms. It is, according to my conceptual exploration based on a more intimate yet immanent idiom, that is, of exchange of the cosmic ‘fire’ that runs the household of the family of dead, with the ‘fire’ that the Doms’ provide to cremate. Thus a constellation of ‘elements’ devise the narrative linkages and ritual epiphany with respect to a death in the ‘community’ in complex ways than simply following the dichotomy of life and death. For instance, the dead is signified as ‘maati’ (earth) at the ghat. The role of the cosmic element of ‘fire’ I have already mentioned above. Ganga becomes the metonymic persona of a ‘water’ body. I develop in detail, ‘Ganga’ as the ‘feminine’ feature in Hindu cosmology and use that as a mode to provide a cultural geography of Benares as a city. ‘Air’ or ‘prana’ (breath of the ‘soul’) of the dead similarly has been conceptually reconfigured here. If Robert Hertz’s notion of the soul has to be conceptualized with respect to the Hindu cosmos, the semiotic valency of ‘air’ becomes significant.

However, this co-ordinate of social representation of death of a Hindu still cannot be fully illustrative of the ‘ethnographic present’. An even more reflective link that I propose in the thesis is that of a refiguring of the Ghar-Ghat by Ghar-Hospital-Ghat in case of contemporary Benares. I situate all the three institutions with respect to their stances to ‘particular’ negotiations. Home may no longer be the site that offers the ‘fire’ for the cosmic exchange. To the extent that the hospital replaces the home, ‘affect’ and the idea of an impassioned ‘waiting’ for death that Benares has always exemplified — for the ailing old men and widowed women — gets refigured. The Ghat, in this case, Harishchandra cremation Ghat, with an electric crematorium along with the manual cremation site, is under the difficult proposition of severing the link with river Ganga on one hand and the exchange of ‘fire’ on the other. The empirical imperative of the ‘pollution’ of the river and the civilizational question of eschatology involving the symbolic integration of the disposed dead with the living, come to impinge on most aspects of this research. I use the method of multi-sited ethnography, to traverse both the
emic and etic socio-cultural closures in the context of the event of death. As against the dead ends, this traverstion produces a tension that is caught in an ever-regenerative conceptual circle. Taking cue from multi-sited ethnography, I also share grounds with the disciplines of psychoanalysis, theology and science within the framework of sociology (for e.g. Badiou 2005; Ricoeur 1970; Žižek 2006).

In this chapter I begin by contextualizing and explaining my choice of ‘Benares’ as a proper name to the city with respect to other commonly used names. In the subsequent section I introduce some basic concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis to further conceptualize the idea of Hindu civility and civilization while marking ‘Ganga’ to be the ‘mirror’ and ‘archive’ of Hindu subjectivity. This is followed by a brief discussion on the idea of Hindu cosmology. In a critical re-evaluation of anthropological work related to the theme, I reformulate the possible ways of representing both the Hindu cosmology and the position of the dead within it. I conclude by briefly elucidating ‘multi-sited’ ethnography, my field sites and duration of the fieldwork stints. Finally, I end the introduction with a brief description of the schemes of the subsequent chapters.

Benares: “Older than Time”?  

The American humorist Mark Twain in *Following the Equator* (1897, 1989) describes Benares in a presumptuously generous way by calling it “older than history... older than legend” and is equally shaken by the Benares whose “all aspects are melancholy”. What may those aspects be?

It is a vision of dusty sterility, decaying temples, crumbling tombs, broken mud walls, shabby huts. The whole region seems to ache with age and penury. It must take ten thousand years of want to produce such an aspect (Twain 1989: 477).

The summing up is heartening though. He concludes “Benares was not a disappointment. It justified its reputation as a curiosity” (Twain 1989: 479). A century later, the city has appropriated his hoary description of its supposed ‘primordiality’. The premier hospital in the city called ‘Heritage’ introduces itself by way of taking pride in being based in the “ancient” city that is “older than time” and so does the official website.
of Kashi Vishwanath. The official website is also in fact the site where one can have “live darshan” and “e-Pooja” of the ‘supreme’ deity of the city.\footnote{8} This, ‘then and now’ is the register on which we can track another writer, English, not American and characteristically unhumorous.

Aldous Huxley in an essay titled “Benares” (1926, 1991) writes about his visit to the city on a day when Hindus’ had come to the ghats to ritually observe the solar eclipse. The derision for the place and the people is tangentially evoked in terms of the “imbecility” of religion as against the promise of science. This has to be read in the paradigmatic context of nineteenth century discursive reifications, of which both Twain and Huxley are, out of many, just two examples. These writings are part of a perspective, which considers ‘Benares’ — the metonymic parable of the ‘Indian nation’ — to be telescoped in a past of particularity that is neither singular nor universal in its frame of references. It’s an abstraction found at the bank of the river ‘Ganges’. Yet, in the derision, there is a fascination that cannot be sustained merely on a construction of the ‘abjectly’ religious Hindus and their ‘collective representation’. Another writer Rev. Charles Philips Cape in his text *Benares — The Stronghold of Hinduism* (1910) says “Benares is the Jerusalem of the Hindu”, also the “Oxford and Mecca”. Much as the “splendour” of the place inspires him, the people, that is, the Hindus and their caste based insinuations, their refusal to share the food with the white Christians, seem to fail him (Cape 1910: 13-50). His missionary motivation keeps him going and he dreams of the day when the Hindus and Muslims would understand the glory of Lord Jesus and take to Christianity (Cape 1910: 105-107).

‘Benares’ then was the new ‘proper’ name in nineteenth century that evoked enunciations by mainly European and some American writers who sought to represent an appropriate address, properties of ‘essences’ for the city’s “people, work and the environment” (Mumford 1924).\footnote{9} Clearly these enunciations drew from existent writings, both shastric and vernacular, and fed back into them as well. Thus came into being sets of significations that operated as the (re)formative registers of nationalistic constructions. These same writings have been critically interrogated by various scholars for elements of orientalization as well as select and reflexive appropriation of symbols and sects,
primarily from dominant motifs within Hindu socio-religious orders (see Dalmia and Stietencron 2007).

My interest in locating these representations is somewhat limited. I wish to reconstruct linkages between what I retroactively construe as the categories of ‘abject’ that were emphasized under the name of ‘Benares’. I hope to achieve this by revisiting subsequent writings, mainly social-anthropological, under the proper names of Kashi, Banaras and Varanasi and using their differences in the signifying chain. I use the category of ‘abject’ based on Julia Kristeva’s exposition in *Powers of Horror* (1982) that it can neither be addressed as a subject nor an object but as a “border” that is “above all, ambiguity” (Kristeva 1982: 9). That is, for the Hindu practitioners as much as for the anthropologist, any search for the categorization of the ‘proper’ and ‘clean’ essentially involves apprehending the material groundwork of daily lives. In other words, the ‘borders’ of the Hindu cosmology can be constructed by showing where and how the ‘ambiguous’, the ‘abject’ contingently resurfaces in the symbolization of any absolute depiction. Thus Benares as the proper name is to convey this inverted domain of the cosmologic link of the Hindu with the corpse, cremation and excrement as represented in the nineteenth century writings. On that note retaining that name through out the thesis should be seen as justifiable, precisely so, as I retain the name for its significations of abject against the non-abject.

Aldous Huxley when writing about the unseemly sight of flesh burning at the cremation ghats, bones sticking out and men tending to the fire with their wooden sticks, displays unease, that is never about ‘burial’ versus ‘cremation’. Rather it is that which is ‘proper’ versus the unease of signifying the abject (Huxley 1991). This is in resonance with what Julia Kristeva has to say with regard to the dead in general: “The corpse seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection” (Kristeva 1982: 4).

Seen through this lens, the discursive significations of nineteenth century under the name of Benares are primarily about constructing ‘God’ and ‘Science’ within Hinduism. This is largely achieved through language. For instance, the Doms as handlers of the work of cremation are eulogized as well as differentiated through language. There is an ‘abjecting’ and a negation of the ‘abjection’ that is endlessly and reflexively sustained. Similarly the *Shavyatris*, who, if classical accounts of sociology is to be believed are
supposed to represent the ‘community’ of the erstwhile dead (Hertz 1960), astonishingly stop using the proper name or their descriptive term of relation with the dead relative as the corpse is carried from home to the Ghat. The moment death is announced, the dead person is simply construed as the ‘maati’ (earth). Ironically, the idea of Shavyatris as community is based on this simultaneous recognition and estrangement with respect to the dead. Of course, they may still be considered to represent the community, if we theoretically agree that the idea of the community itself is based on the (de)abjecting principle and thus its’ borders are always ‘ambiguous’. What is worth noting is that in this function of materially enforcing borders, language is the main vehicle in all domains of the Hindu life, including the cremation, which is reasonably noisy and abusive. It is equally significant to note that the cremation at the Harishchandra Ghat or Manikarnika, another cremation ghat, does not have any recitation of mantra. What exists are physical movements followed as rituals without any incantation by the chief mourner, while the shavyatris are busy commenting on the biographical details of the dead and his family.

In this commentary, there is a sociological contextualization and contempororization of what may appear as an abstract act of cremation to those who are non-shavyatris and just onlookers. The only place and moment, however, that is defined by not only the absence of language but that of symbolic codes itself, in exploring the multi-sited field of the home-hospital-ghat complex, is the morgue. The morgue is a unique place by that logic. One could risk saying that it is the only institutional place where there are no symbols or iconic representations of the divine, in a city where almost every tree, every house and all types of architectural enclosures have at least one installation of a deity or an engraving of a mantra (‘sacred’ formulae). Even the Sulabh Sauchalya (the ‘easy toilet’) at Harishchandra Ghat has calendars representing almost all the deities at its entry. The cabins of toilet bowls however do not have any such representations, and that perhaps explains why there is scatological graffiti inscribed on them.

Returning to the nomenclatures of the city, if one sticks to ‘Kashi’, one knows that one is signifying the construct of the ‘primordial, cosmic city’, the one that is perched precariously at the tip of Lord Shiv’s trident (Saraswati 1975). ‘Banaras’ as Nita Kumar argues is a preferred sign because it coincides phonetically with the ‘vernacular’ or the Bhojpuri pronunciation of the name. It is also used in Hindi writings in the same way
Varanasi is the most recent and closest to the Sanskrit name *Varanasey*, for the city and thus a self-conscious antiquarian purity and properness gets associated to the term at the register of the official and the formal. The word ‘Varanasi’ is said to signify the ‘confluence’ of the river *Varuna* and the Ghat *Assi* (Singh 2002). Adopting either of these names provides an exit and a new starting point, the exit from the improperness of the other terms and re-entry into the signifying chain. I have already offered an explanation for my use of ‘Benares’, so I must add here that my usage of ‘Benares’ is to ‘decentre’ the ‘properness’ of any other name of the city, including that which has been signified under the name of ‘Benares’. Clearly, it is not ‘merely’ about names only. As Lacan says, “the word — already a presence made of absence — absence itself gives itself a name in that moment of origin” (Lacan 1977: 71). This co-extensiveness of absence-presence of the ‘nodal points’ (Lacan’s “point du caption”), the “privileged signifiers that fix meaning in a chain” (Žižek 1994: 250) is what I seek to record here. The same could also be illustrated by the *différance* between the proper names of the ‘dead’. At home it is still referred by the terminologies of kinship and names of endearment and formal association by the ones who are wailing and mourning. The ones who handle the dead, start calling it ‘*maati*’ (earth) and at the ghat too it is unambiguously called as ‘*maati*’. The dead who are immersed in the river are called ‘*madh*’ along with the decomposing carcasses of the animals like cow and other cattle. When people see a corpse floating, with its face decomposed, in third person they signify it as *murda*. At the hospital they simply call it ‘body’ and the *Nagar Nigam* (Municipal Corporation) at the electric crematorium at Harishchandra Ghat calls it ‘*shav*’ — a term that has a complex etymological metonymic link with Shiv, the deity of death himself.

Speaking of proper names of the city, Baidyanath Saraswati writes that he prefers ‘*Kashi*’ (1975). Nita Kumar says, she prefers ‘*Banaras*’ and not ‘*Varanasi*’ (1992, 1998). Similarly Meena Kaushik (1976), Jonathan Parry (1994), Vasudha Dalmiya (1997), Martin Gaenszle and Jorg Gengnagel (2006), Rana P. B. Singh and Pravin S. Rana (2002) all prefer ‘Banaras’, and so does Diana L. Eck (1983) — the veteran writer amongst the above list of experts on the various aspects of the city. However, the State through its’ inscriptions on the train tickets and in municipal and bureaucratic usage calls it ‘*Varanasi*’. Also, what Benedict Anderson considers as an important object that facilitates
the ‘imagination’ of the possible community — the newspapers — call it ‘Varanasi’, when they describe the place of publication (Anderson 1991). The tension between these names alludes to the complexity of the polyphonic anthropological concerns. In yet another way, the same complexity could be communicated by mapping the geographical location of Benares.

Rev. C. P. Cape, writing in 1910, locates Benares on “the left or the northern bank of Ganges, seventy miles below from its junction with Jumna at Allahabad” and estimates the population to be more than “two hundred thousand” (1910: 15-17). Martin Gaenszle and Jorg Gengnagel in their edited volume on Visualising Space In Banaras: Images, Maps and the Practise of Representation (2006), introduce the city as:

... unique...on the west bank of the holy Ganga, which flows in the curve to the north and north-east at this point, the elevated riverfront where bathers face the rising morning sun above an empty landscape — these and similar geographical peculiarities contribute to the special character of the town.

He adds further:

one can say that Kashi has been an important crossroads for more than 1,500 years; it was at the junction of the east-west route along the Ganges and the north-south route coming from the Kathmandu valley, and developed into a major trading centre at least as early as the Gupta period (Gaenszle and Gengnagel 2006: 7).

Later in the introduction, they argue that Kashi is “not really restricted to a geographical location. Kashi can be elsewhere: Uttarkashi in the Himalayas, Daksinkashi in South India, or else Kashi in one’s own heart” (Gaenszle and Gengnagel 2006: 8). Rana P. B. Singh and Pravin S. Rana prominent geographer and traveller respectively from Banaras Hindu University (BHU) introduce Banaras using the lens of postcolonial urban planning in their Banaras Region: A Spiritual and Cultural Guide (2002) as: “Varanasi is located in the middle Ganga valley along the left crescent-shaped bank of the Ganga River”. He cites “Varanasi city” as the district headquarters of the Varanasi district and major part of the urban area, delimited by the census as “Varanasi Urban Agglomeration” that has “seven urban units”. He further informs that in 2001, “the population of the city has reached to 1.5 millions” (Singh and Rana 2002: 27-28).
Diverging from the multiple spatial mappings of the city that yet again allude to the complexity of the postcolonial site of the city, at this stage I briefly locate the methodological co-ordinates of this work. Equally I provide a brief contextualization of Lacanian Psychoanalysis on one hand and the Harishchandra Ghat and Doms on the other.

_Situating Lacanian Psychoanalysis_

J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff in *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (1992) make a case for non-essentialist anthropology by arguing:

> Our historical anthropology begins by eschewing the very possibility of a realist, or an essentialist, history...this is not to say that there are no essences and realities in the world...our objective, like the objective of many others, is to show as cogently as possible _how_ they are constructed: how realities become real, how essences become essential, how materialities materialize (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 20).

It is precisely this essences becoming essential and materialities materializing, this endless 'becoming' that a Lacanian reading of Derrida's idea of _différance_ — "the noncoincidence of one with itself" also captures (Žižek 2006: 11). It is in this sense that I use the concept of _différance_ in the thesis. Here, psychoanalysis as a discipline, particularly through Lacan and Freud, becomes central in complicating the modes of knowledge of the 'becoming' of both 'Civilization' and 'History'. While Psychoanalysis, from Freud through Lacan, makes a case for a 'primordial' grammatical founding of the society that could be in Comoraff and Comoraff's words be termed as "nonagentive power", it also confronts 'history' with the erasures and splits within the several modes of archives of bodies, architecture, institutions and acts of speech that resist "symbolization" (Comoraff and Comoraff 1992: 28; Derrida 1998). 'Non-agentive' power for Comoraff and Comoraff is posed against an 'agentive' one and as the words suggest, they are parallels to structure and agency respectively. I take their suggestion that anthropology cannot be construed to be a commentary on either one of these modes. However, it should be an imperative of the discipline to merge the two in a non-essentialist way. Thus, one could argue that the
recording of ‘becoming’ of ‘essences’ and their ‘materialization’ has to be cognizant of that which resists symbolization. It is in this regard that I use Lacanian psychoanalysis as a method in this work. Also, while the task of anthropology is to establish and record the reflexive and seemingly infinite reflexive links between the “agentive” and the “non agentive” modes of the ‘social’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 23-31), I have strived for a third dimension through the reading of the “Death drive”. Let me quote here Slavoj Žižek’s conceptualization of the Death drive.

The Freudian Death drive has nothing whatsoever to do with the craving for self-annihilation, for the return to the inorganic absence of any life-tension; it is on the contrary, the very opposite of dying — a name for the “undead” eternal life itself, for the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain. The paradox of Freudian “death drive” is therefore that it is Freud’s name for its opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis, for an uncanny excess of life, for an “undead” urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption. The ultimate lesson of psychoanalysis is that human life is never “just life": humans are not simply alive, they are possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things (Žižek 2006: 62).

This dimension is the key to reconceptualize the very complex relation of structure and agency itself. This has to be understood in the light of what I use as the idiom of multi-sitedness in this research. That is the common sigh by the shavyatris at the time of cremation: ‘Sabko, ghum phir ke yahin aana hai!’ (after wandering, everyone has to come here one way or the other!). I do not wish to describe how death’s horrendous gravity is realised in that moment of participation in the cremation of a familiar. In fact, I wish to show, how the living are ‘stuck’ in the vortex of materiality that gets reiterated in all of its uncanniness at the time of the death. So, if there is one conclusive insight that I draw from the thesis, it is this, that a death (Hindu death?) in so far understood from the perspective of cremation is a gravid yet affirmative re-introduction of indices of materiality itself, the innumerable and ever-changing ways of the world, as it were. The stark physical metaphor that captures this is none other than the river Ganga. Ganga is what Ron Barrett calls as the “Cosmic Sink” (Barrett 2008). The other side of its’
spiritual euphemistic location is that it harbours the 'partial' remainders of all the Hindu
dead literally. It also has the immersed Sadhus, the carcasses of cows, excrement that
includes spittle from Kulla (gargle with Ganga's water, a practise of the morning bathers)
shit, shorn hair and post nineteenth century, the sewage of the cities on her banks that
includes household, agrarian and industrial refuses, aborted female foetuses, amputated
limbs and other hospital waste. This is not to say that the spiritual can be reduced to this
material register, it is to argue instead that it is precisely in this capacity that spirituality is
cought into this materialist loop.

At this point, let me describe the Lacanian idea of "Symbolic". Lacan says in one of
the oft-quoted definitions of the symbolic:

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 (Quoted in Butler 2002: 42).

Following Lévi-Strauss, and in fact taking Lacan back to Lévi-Strauss, if one takes the
liberty of renaming the universal "human order" to a particular "Hindu order", our context
would be further concretized. To quote further, Lacan says about "symbolic function":

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... 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 2002: 42-43).

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. But before we turn to the analyses of the Hindu
Symbolic to discern the multiplicity within the cosmology, it is required that one spells out
the combination of Real and the Symbolic. As mentioned before, on one hand the Death
drive sustains itself at the level of immortality, undeterred by the biological death, the very
palpitating extreme of the materiality of social existence. Yet, the drive is only the mode,
the excess that distorts the coherence of the symbolic as Real. It is what Žižek calls as the
"disavowed X on account of which our vision of reality is anamorphically distorted"; it is "the very shift of perspective from the first standpoint to the second" (Žižek 2006: 26). Thus though the Symbolic is interminably caught in a never-ending spiral of shifts within the perspectives, what is iterative is the Death drive. This is what I mean, when I say that one doesn’t need to show an alternative ‘cosmology’ of another religious order to prove that the Hindu Symbolic is inconsistent and interminably so. The point is that it is internally inconsistent. It is ‘split’ into multiplicities of perspectives, that are ‘greater than the sum total’ but there is neither a sum nor a total to the symbolic. However, as is well known, Lacan argues that the Real not only resists symbolization, it distorts the ‘symbolic’, and in the process it remains unchanged. In other words, what is threatening about the Real is the way in which it may contingently appear within the symbolic and redefine the gravid nature of material reality. It is precisely this link between the Real and the Symbolic that I approach through Julia Kristeva’s notion of the ‘abject’ (Kristeva 1982). For example, we can never materially experience the making of excrements within our own bodies and may not be horrified as long as its’ disposal is ensured. In other words the boundaries of our bodies are defined not by containing the ‘abject’ but by the ways of disposing it.

To continue with the metaphor of Ganga, what we have here is that the river Ganga as the symbolic space of femininity within Hinduism is construed to be ‘maternal’ to the extent that it ensures at the collective level that it can ingest everything that threatens the Hindu subject. Thus, what is ‘abject’ for the Hindu, which I progressively show in various chapters of this thesis, is in fact one of the way in which the ‘unsymbolizable’ Real is alluded to as a constant that remains ‘hidden’. Now, how is all of this related with the Lacanian notion of the Imaginary? Lacan argues that the ‘Imaginary’ is the ‘specular’ part of the ‘symbolic’ and its’ one and many images. In terms of Language, if the Symbolic is about the endless chain of the ‘signifiers’, the Imaginary is about the ‘signified’ and ‘signification’ (See Alain-Miller ed. Lacan 1988).16 He also says that the ‘Imaginary’ exists with an ‘identification’ by the subject. To that extent it is both disconcerting and alienating, because one doesn’t know why one chooses what one does, yet, it provides a minimal stability of having chosen something, which is again based on endless justifications (Lacan 1977: 1-9).
In our case, the identification with Ganga is the key feature that exists as part of the Symbolic for the Hindu subject. This identification is based on the hoary idioms of the maternal metaphors and notions of maternity and femininity. I have argued in the thesis that the ritual act of cremation is seen as consummated when the last physical remainder of the cremated body is immersed in the river. This act is called as Pravah in Sanskrit-Hindi and Parvah in Bhojpuri-Hindustani. As one can note here, the same act of cremation is caught into a semiotic différence. Instead of pointing to one as more authentic, I argue here that the radical choice of politicization of Imaginaries within the Hindu Symbolic may only happen by pointing, ironically, to the death of the physical river and by that logic the depth of the destructive idiom of the Hindu relation with the feminine. It is in this sense that I relate the Real and Symbolic with the Imaginary.

Lacan in his discussion on the ‘mirror stage’ recalls the Freudian discussion of the myth of Narcissus who falls in love with his own image reflected in the pond (Lacan 1977: 1-9). This identification with the shallow ‘image’— which in turn is fleeting, intransient and if one bows down to touch it, the image in the running water slips through the fingers — is thus materially tangible but inconsistent, split and spectral. This shallow image, ironically, Lacan argues is based on the narcissistic subjective depth with which the mirror’s (water, in this case, as a metaphor for the mirror) image becomes stationed in the identifying subject. I construe Ganga as that mirror which offers the material and ‘maternal’ background for the ‘image’ of identification for the ‘narcissistic’ Hindu subject. As pointed above the ‘Imaginary’ involves both the ‘signified’ and the ‘significations’. In our case the two categories can be illustrated by how Benares and Ganga come together with the Hindu civility and the civilization. Thus before locating the Symbolic within the discussion of cosmology and cosmographies, let me explain the idioms of civility and civilization with respect to the Hindu Subject based in the metonymic Benares. Also I must clarify here that when I use the ‘Symbolic’, ‘Imaginary’ and the ‘Real’ with respect to the Hindu, I am not arguing for a radical relativistic position as against the cosmologies of other religions. I am instead saying that the différence between the cosmologies can be brought at the analytical horizon by agreeing at the first place that religion itself and not any particular religion is at the stake of
enquiry. So, to construct a separate ‘essence’ of Hinduism would be the opposite of what I wish to do here.

**The River as a Mirror**

The river Ganga and the ancient city Benares are often metonymically connected in innumerable representations and are portrayed as a primeval link between the Hindu civility and an order of civilization (Eck 1982). Probing further, if one tries to locate the material basis to this primal link, the empirical context is that of the death of a Hindu person, his/her ritualistic cremation and through that process a (re)incarnation as a maleficent-beneficent spirit. This journey is seen as a social trajectory of the balancing of at least three cosmos — (a) that of the manifestly material domains of living, (b) the physically dead and (c) third that of a netherworld. The language that brings together all the three domains is that of ‘myths’. Lévi-Strauss’s observation in “Do dual organizations exist?” affirms that the living are mythically separated from a spectral dimension of life (Lévi-Strauss 1963). In the same vein, in some social representations the netherworld is invariably also attached with the heavenly or what could be the abode of beneficence, if not the beneficent. The anxious and persistent theological, cultural and material attempts to keep both separate are part of what could be called as the domain of Lacanian Symbolic (Lacan 1977: 71-72). Lacan’s ‘Symbolic’ as a critical concept can be seen as interrogating the conceptual legacies of Durkheimian nature/culture (1963), Evans Pritchard’s nature-supernature/culture (1956) through Claude Lévi-Strauss’s nature/culture, taking into account the critical perspectives on both ‘functionality’ and ‘opposition’.

The myth of the creation of Kashi as a cosmic asylum for Hindus and the iconography of the Hindu god Shiv’s matted hair serving as the fountain of the river Ganga are the quintessential ways in which these representations have been continually depicted (Parry 1981; Bäumer 1988; Biardeau 1994). However, the everyday practises of the living continuously exceed or redefine the limits laid down by any single myth or belief. If one extends this observation using anthropological understandings, then starting from the largely consensual notion that ‘great civilizations arose on river banks’ one arrives at the conclusion that the river exists in people’s lives as a mirror of their selves. In case of
Ganga the magnitude of the signification of the river can be more productively understood if one relates it to the practises of cremation. It is no longer possible then to think of Ganga simply as a river, it rather stands as the ‘master signifier’. In order to emphasize the pervasiveness of the symbol; how it becomes the ‘signified,’ I use the chapter of primordial creation in Rg Veda. Through this, I attempt to establish a link between, work, water, fire, air, earth and life in relation to death.

Considering the fact that the sunlight and the breathing air must have been omnipresent, implies that a water body like that of a river would have to be physically seized and made part of people’s lives and subjectivities through the ritualistic, mythic, religious, mercantile, sanitary and various other significations. In these ways the river acquires a cultural and material chronological embeddedness in a particular civilizational context. The layers of meanings that the river is invested with are unmatched by the abstract conceptions of air, water and fire per se in similar scriptural or mythic contexts (see Baviskar 1995). Anthropologically speaking, moving on from the invocations of the hymns of Rg Veda, elements like water, fire, air are subsequently codified and classified in calendarical terms within the Hindu Symbolic sphere. In this sense while the river Ganga is conceptualized in this work as part of a concrete ‘ethnographic present’ under Ganga as a proper name, ‘air’, ‘water’, ‘fire’, ‘earth’ are contextually developed from the grammar of the scriptural and the mythological discourses. Along the river, including the cremation ghat, the activities may range from observances of ablutions, immersion of the dead, prestations and sacrifices of hair as well as fluids like blood, fat, milk to bathing, washing and irrigating. Ganga then is a recipient and a participant witness to the civil processes of communities that live by her body which swells, shrinks, dries, consumes bathers and has a speculative mythological life of her own (Vidyarthi, Jha, Sarsawati 1979; Eck 1983; Gombrich 1988; Hertel and Humes 1993; Freed and Freed 1993, 1998). In this way the river can be seen as a witness to the process of civility by her people. It becomes an alienating excess and surplus that contains the threat within the promise of regeneration and restoration. This complex continuum of the Ganga in Benares and people’s practises reiterates its hoary location in the ways in which social actions are (were) meaningfully understood by the participants, the observers and the empathetic outsiders.
To come back to the aforementioned importance of death and the observation of mortuary ceremonies and rituals to this complex, one can simultaneously underline an ironical relationship between the mirror and the civility. Every death in society also brings a fundamental human lack to the fore, i.e., the dead have to be remembered by the living. The dead are inhuman to the extent that they are no longer likely to be tied to the earthly memories or matters with the same concerns of 'practical ethics'. They could be visualized as restorative as well as threatening. At the cosmological register, the realm of the dead put together is seldom conceived as that of beneficence only (see Freed and Freed 1993). Yet, anthropological writings have also shown us that it is equally true that the erstwhile dead may never slip out of an idealised beneficence. In fact they are constructed as to be inimitable and indomitable in their refusal to be outside the 'symbolic', the mnemonics of the social is in fact structured by the spectral as it were (see Leach 1959). In other words, the fantasmatic and the abysmal together constitute the social reality that cannot be reduced to the Symbolic only. Thus this tripartite grid of the river Ganga, the city Benares and the civility of participant people have convergence only in the diverse meanings that people attach to their relationship to these three realms. This convergence as well as the diversity of meanings is interrupted intermittently by death. The extraordinariness of the event of death lies in the irrevocable physical loss. In a shift from the classical representation of death through rituals and cosmographies, the elements of new meanings have found place through science, rationality and pragmatism more or less with a conclusion that death is an end (see Derrida and Vattimo 1998). The world though, which has more dead than the living and would be always hinged on this asymmetry, severing of the dead from the living means that on one hand the living would wish to know the final meaning of death so as to contain it, and on the other hand, since death is experientially incommunicable, this finality of meaning would remain forever elusive. In this strange way, death as a feature, gives immortality to meanings and memories. This is the crux of the Lacanian interpretation of the Freudian death drive. He argues that a drive has no similarity with a physical death, nor should the death drive be seen as a compulsive chase of death. The relation of death with the drive is to argue that death is never complete and absolute, it 'remains' living, and almost obsessively unaffected as a drive (Lacan 1977: 111-113).
This perspective enables one to argue that since death is open to people's understandings of what it means to them, it also becomes a liberating metaphor of an event that gives way to the new and the changed, notwithstanding, the loss and truncation of the loved, repulsive and the distant. This dual movement leads us into an empirical situation that characterizes the present world, where death is perceived to leave us oscillating into the extreme registers of depressive vacuousness on the one hand and the violent newness to be anticipated and accepted on the other. With this knowledge in the background, if one may survey various strains of theories ranging from functionalist, psychoanalytic, structuralist to poststructuralist, one emerges with certainty that death's metaphoric references have been detached from the physical event of dying. It is at this theoretical level that I wish to evoke the river Ganga in its present polluted form as a mirror to urban civility, which is the point of convergence for Hindus in India, and attempt to represent the memories, enactments and new meanings that people may seem to recall or invent while squarely facing the death of the river itself. Along with it is a continuum of other 'losses', which is ethnographically constructed — that of rituals, of open air cremations, of the varieties of 'traditions' and occupations.

_Civility and the Idea of Civilization: Mapping Benares_

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy sought to look for answers to the question _What is Civilization_ (1989) within a framework of the Hindu-Buddhist Symbolic. He argues that civilization is an aesthetic search for a thoughtful and 'just' form of being, retrieved by expunging the colonial-industrial impressions. This purity or ethical creativity, for him, is also in contrast and in opposition to the 'civilizing mission' of the colonizers. His attempt is to try and counter this so called mission in the Indian context by instituting an original spring of creative rootedness through the cultures of Hinduism and Buddhism (Coomaraswamy 1989). Similarly Radhakamal Mukherjee, talking about civilizations in general and occasionally slipping into a desire bound with the Indian (eastern as opposed to the western) context says:

If we presume ... that in our growing World age we shall have either one Noetic system and one Civilization or the extinction of civilization altogether, the symbol and value system of mankind must be harmonized and unified
before the massive forces of contemporary science and technology can destroy what they patiently built up including their own ideological foundation. [...] Oriental civilization, through its intuitions and visions of metaphysics, art and mysticism, should supplement and correct what are now selling throughout the world as the “clean” and unassailable universals of the scientific and mathematical genius of the west (Mukherjee 1964: 201).

These accounts are interesting not only for their representation of two more or less similar discourses within the idea of the East and India within it, they also point to a certain kind of ‘civility’ that seems to be the practical unit of civilization. ‘Civility’ seen as part of the ‘city’ where the ‘city’ cannot be directly conflated to the ‘urban’ only (see Pocock 1960). In a careful examination of these claims, one finds that they are talking about self-conscious aesthetic and spiritual practises, which in certain ways are defining features of the ancient cities. Ghurye’s synopsis on Cities and Civilization clarifies this distinction further. In his Cities and Civilization (1962) he argues that cities in certain senses, at one level of social life, owing to population and pragmatism of various kinds are more reflexive than the rural milieux. On another plane they are possessive and insatiable — of their pilgrims’ locales, tombs, gardens, forts, economic domains, architectural wonders, political residences, offices and pleasure hunts. Ghurye remarkably displaces the register of the urban-rural discourse (notwithstanding the fact that there always remains a residue of ‘rural’— which is the epistemological index of the ‘barbarians’, prehistoric and unsignifiable) of cities, in arguing that the inception of civilizations has been on civility and civility is central to the being of cities. However, a crucial question is: how much ‘time’ should pass before one may call a social context to be part of a civilization? Is the origin of who stays in that social context a condition for the concerned person to claim the civilizational ownership? Would the civilization round itself off at any given moment and consider the new comers as late comers or liabilities? Perhaps, the answer that one can provide to these questions is that civility is re-marked by shocks of death and decay, which it utilizes to reconstitute itself. As already pointed out, civilization is resilient in it’s representation of the reality of the immortal condition of death. It is as ongoing as death is. I turn here to examine two more perspectives of the idea of the city. First is what Michel de Certeau claims as a summing up of the urban question vis-à-vis ‘The City’, which otherwise has been frequently the subject of
discussion discussed in threadbare details at numerous occasions (see also Lefebvre 2000 and Visvanathan 2001). Michel de Certeau says:

The "city" founded by utopian and urbanistic discourse is defined by the possibility of a threefold operation:

1. The production of its own space (un espace propre): rational organization must thus repress all the physical, mental and political pollutions that would compromise it

2. The substitution of a nowhen, or of a synchronic system, for the indeterminable and stubborn resistances offered by traditions; univocal scientific strategies, made possible by the flattening out of all data in a plane projection, must replace the tactics of users who take advantage of "opportunities" and who, through these trap-events, these lapses in visibility, reproduce the opacities of history everywhere

3. Finally, the creation of a universal and anonymous subject which is the city itself: it gradually becomes possible to attribute to it, as to its political model, Hobbes' state, all the functions and predicates that were scattered and assigned to many different real subjects — groups, associations, or individuals. The "city," like a proper name, thus provides a way of conceiving and constructing space on the basis of a finite number of stable, isolatable and interconnected properties (De Certeau 1984: 94).

The above immediately reminds us that the stretch of bureaucracy, interrogation and change must have been part of different civilivities before they could become part of the present world. The question that follows is that when cities create a symbioses of different civilivities, what would it mean to talk of a contemporary civilizational juncture? Here 'civility' has to be understood as an epiphenomenon. An assemblage of customs, practises and habituses that exist based on the invisible or visible co-ordinates of religious and material paradigms. To answer this, we can turn to classical sociologists who ironically underlined the dreadfulness of cities while remarking on the inevitable coming of this instrumental application of rationality. In the euphoria of thinking of the just, rational, pleasurable city, the writers simultaneously spoke of its obverse too. Durkheim talked of 'anomie', Marx of 'alienation', Weber of 'disenchantment' and Simmel talked of the 'blasé' personage of the new civility. Clearly then, the ever reconstituting civilizations have been aware of the dead and the death within all of its
ranges. Only it has become a second hand consciousness, which the mainstream of our
civilities has been sceptical to accept and reorganize lives accordingly (see Seale 1998).

Here Benares offers a unique theoretical challenge in so far its' proper name is
mythologically united with death. The various cosmographies put forward by authors like
Baidyanath Saraswati, L.P. Vidyarthi, Diana Eck, Jonathan Parry and Rana P.B. Singh
forces us to think of the maps and the cartographies of the city with the twin emphases on
myths and the work of death in the city — widows and sadhus waiting for death, funerary
industry and cremation (Vidyarthi, Jha, Sarsawati 1979; Eck 1983; Parry 1994; Singh
2002).

Taking cue from Martin Gaenszle and Jorg Gengnagel (2006) in their reconstructing
and “visualising” the images, maps and practises of Banaras within the symbolism
involving myths, theology as well as contemporary socio-political contestations, I have
developed and relied on another set of perspectives in the thesis. Firstly, I make a
deliberate attempt to look at the cartographies and cosmologies of the city of Benares
through the idiom of death. This means that Harishchandra Ghat becomes the city within
the city that takes me to where all of the work-of-death operates. In empirical terms, the
very centre of city of Benares then gets represented by cremation ghat, electric
crematorium, morgue, Aghorashram, Lolarka Kund and no longer the sacralized
Symbolic of Hinduism can be seen to be meaningful without this representation.
Secondly, on a socio-political register I show that every reconstruction of the
cosmography also invariably assumes the city to be “essentially” Hindu, in both its
primordial and contemporaneous sense depending upon the reflexivity of the author. I
argue that this reconstruction operates on a double topology. On one hand it makes
invisible the Buddhist, Muslim, Sikh, Christian presence in a cosmographic sense. On the
other hand, the very fact of their presence and emergence in the city also points to the
sociological inadequateness of cosmographic representation. However, this double
register should not be seen as that of a theory and practise or that of ‘wrong’
representations as against the ‘correct’ ones. The antagonism between the two is the very
kernel of Benares’s reality. In other words, there is a political and a reflexive use within
the Hindu Symbolic of occupying coextensively in terms of the representative will, a
latent or a proactive definition of the city of Benares. It is at this register that one can
understand the paradox of the presence of various religions, *Ganga-jamanavi tahjeeb* and a space of 'communal' harmony as against the embedded possibilities of violence within the communities. Two examples that may illustrate the point are the Vishwanath’s temple sharing the premise with Gyanvapi Mosque, and the Lat Bhairav’s compound being the place claimed for the annual Ghazi Miyan festival (Gaenszle and Gengnagel 2006: 95-130). My effort is to precisely bring this evocation through the perspectives mentioned above to bear upon the empirical sites in this research. At this stage let me briefly conceptualize the notion of the cosmology as part of the Hindu Symbolic.

*Conceptualizing the Notion of Hindu Cosmology*

In colonial constructions the ‘Hindu’ has often been construed as the ‘abject’. Homologically speaking, the ‘civilization’ and Benares as a city has been constructed as one where the ailing old men and abandoned widows wait for their deaths (see Mahajan 2003). The corpse getting cremated in the open is the spectacular centre of the abject figuration of the civilization. As against locating these representations in terms of Judaeo-Christian self and the Hindu Other, I instead traverse the idioms of abjection with respect to Hindu Benares to be able to reconstruct a materialist cosmology. A cosmology that envisages a moment of radical suspension of the Hindu divine which in tum becomes an imperative to redefine the social. The reason why I do not wish to locate the ‘self-other’ modes of enquiry is because following Derrida’s notion of *différance*, I am convinced that either a Judaeo-Christian or a Hindu Cosmology cannot be seen as an absolute domain. They are to be understood as interminably split from within, endlessly (Derrida 1978; Žižek 2006).

*Is Life Opposed to Death?*

Veena Das (1982) and Meena Kaushik (1976) in locating the efficacy of rituals through *Shastras* and the practises of doms respectively are anthropologically communicating that there are Hindu cosmologies, within which every ritualistic act is intelligible. Even caste based particularities are transcended in a structural sense of the term. Kaushik argues that Doms’ ritualistic observations are homologically similar to the ones observed by other caste communities (Kaushik 1976). Both Das and Kaushik reformulate the
purity/pollution distinction, conceptually put forward by Louis Dumont (1980) and that of pure/impure suggested by M. N. Srinivas (1976) to that of life and death. The latter being based on Robert Hertz’s (1960) universalistic distinction of the right-hand and the left-hand respectively. In other words, their reformulation posits a notion of Hindu cosmology that is performed through idioms of caste based affiliations but it is not impinged on the caste identity directly. In talking about the performative one could also observe that in the distinction of the right and the left, the material symbol of the hand is common to both directions. One should not reduce the dexterity of the right hand to biological disposition. Rather one should see it through the category of differance, that is, the hand which is “the most tightly controlled and trained part of the human body” (Žižek, 2006: 13) is also caught into a parallel and discontinuous symbolic space, referring to an antagonism that persists in materialities of religious observances. In other words, while the hand is the upmost life affirmative symbol of labour and production yet one cannot say that both the right and the left hands can be subsumed within the common ambit of labour. Instead labour itself operates with a fundamental antagonism where life and death co exist.

The Co-extensive Inside-Outside in the Hindu Frame
Diana L. Eck (1983) and Baidyanath Saraswati (1975) construct the Hindu cosmologies very differently from both Das and Kaushik and introduce Islam and Christianity in their analyses as two introjections into the Hindu religious practises. While Saraswati does it by imposing an anthropological model of ‘sanatan’ dharma and posing Kashi as an exemplary citation of the same, Eck offers a testimony of “violations” by Islamic rulers through her accounts of desacralization of Hindu temples (1983). One has here a complex interpellation of competing religious cosmologies. What is nominal in Das and Kaushik’s accounts finds it way in Eck and Saraswati’s versions exhaustively and this introduction of the ‘violent’ in these modes of analytical constructions redefines the cultural spheres of Benares as an anthropological construct. It should be emphasized that both Das and Kaushik are not so much concerned with Benares but with the Hindu cosmology per se. Jonathan Parry (1992) similarly uses the same frames of cosmologies as that of Das and
Kaushik to make sense of rituals and economic practises at the time of cremation in Benares.

While all of these writers consider the cosmology to be an absolute category, for Parry Aghories\(^2\) are unusual figures who provide a cosmologic view of Hinduism through their methods of appropriating the categories of abject within Hinduism. For example, the aghories attempt to transcend caste based distinctions by privileging what Das and Kaushik have maintained as the realm of death as opposed to that of the life. The aghori, according to Parry, lives on the dead, intoxicants, excrement and transgresses sexual taboos (Parry 1994: 9, 263-290). I take Parry’s introduction of the aghori figure in the cosmology of Hinduism as a key, to argue, that Harishchandra Ghat, the site of my fieldwork becomes this ‘ambiguous’ and ‘discontinuous’ meeting point of the pious dead and the aghori. Every Hindu dead is pious because as Das argues Hindu death is considered as a sacrifice (Das 1982). And the coming of the aghori at the same place introduces a cosmologic play and performance where the ‘abject’ is constructed and the ‘borders’ of Hindu cosmology are drawn and redrawn endlessly. By the same logic the domi\(^3\) become the chroniclers, handlers and witnesses of this meeting of the dead and the aghori, of the re-constructions of the abject over time. Ron Barrett, a medical anthropologist, takes this frame of ‘cosmology’ as a given and comments on the acts associated with the aghories in what he calls as their post-reformation period, when they have given up ‘alcohol’ and overt consumption of dead human flesh and ‘shit’ to take care of the new ‘abjects’. The new ‘abjects’ being the leprosy patients, those with sexually transmitted diseases and so on (Barrett 2008). However, as one knows all such modes of inversions invariably reiterate the legitimacy of the normative, thus the cosmology of aghories is quintessentially Hindu.

**The Place of “Inversion” in the Cosmology**

In speaking of inversion as a mode of thought and practise, J.P.S. Uberoi’s construction of origin of Sikhism based on a symbolic inversion of the lives of the militant Hindu ascetics within the domain of Varnashramdharma is another key link for me to move forward (Uberoi 1997). To my mind, J.P.S. Uberoi’s discussion on the origin of Sikhism has a clue for us in terms of how one can think of the Hindu symbolic. Using the
Theoretical premise of "inversion" within structuralism, he argues, Sikhism as a religion differentiates itself by inverting the Hindu idiom of renunciation (Uberoi 1997: 327). Thus Sikhism as a religion is based on the double negation of what he calls as the "renunciation of the renunciation".

Uberoi goes on to list the five symbols of Sikhism based on this immanent premise. The Kesh (hair) for Sikhs, required religiously to be unshorn, unmatted and clean and the Kangha (comb) is further illustrative of the fact that the hair has to be kept clean. He thus pairs Kesh and Kangha (comb) and constitutes the symbolic function of this pair within what he calls as inversion of the Hindu "sanyasyoga". The kirpan (dagger) is to symbolically personalize marshal bases to the Sikh, who is avowed to be so as a householder, unlike the Hindu Sadhus, who are militant as renunciates. It could also be paired with the kada (metal bracelet), which is again a symbol of restraint over the use of the kirpan (dagger). This complimentary pair represents the inversion of the "rajayoga". The fifth symbol that of Kachh (long shorts or underpants), according to Uberoi has a unitary double of itself but it is not signified (Uberoi 1997: 328-332). He argues that the unstated claim here is that the "uncircumcised male member" is not to be put under the religious requirement of renunciation and celibacy but that of what he calls as "manly reserve" over the sexual desire. The fifth symbol with its absent or unsignified pair represents the inversion of Hindu "grihastayoga" (the domain of the household) (Uberoi 1997).

There are two things that I draw upon from his analyses. One, as is commonly known, inversion as a method ends up legitimizing as given, what it claims to invert from. In Uberoi’s discussion the Hindu idiom becomes that of varnadharmashram, where the Hindu ascetic orders are understood in contrast to the germinal warmth of Hindu households. The fact that Uberoi traces the tradition of mainly shaivite sectarian sadhus, who may be varied as nath yogis and aghories, should not be seen as an invisibilization of the Hindu familial and cosmic configurations of caste, man and woman, rich and poor, life and death and their transcendence. However, the key insight that I borrow from his discussion is that the sixth element or the corresponding pair to the Kachh is left ambiguous in the symbolism of Sikhism. This unsignified aspect as Uberoi would have it, in relation to the absent-present complimentary pair of the Kachh, in my view has to be
construed as a *dimension*. Thus, if one were to revise Uberoi's contention, one could argue that it is not that *only* the *Kachh* is not paired with and its' metonymic association is left unsignified. The point is that all the complimentary pairs are only signifiable to the extent that this third dimension is inherently there in the background. That is, this unsignified register which is co-incidently about sexuality and determination of the symbolic through the idiom of sexuality, not only topologically grounds the fifth Sikh symbol, it grounds *all* the pairs. It is the immanent register, the "hidden" constant, which provides and enables the "split" within the signified domain of Sikhism.

We know from Lacan that this "hidden" register that "remains the same in all possible universes" and as also the one that resists "symbolization" is his notion of the Real (Žižek 1999: 78). Using this premise of "inversion" that Uberoi employs, how should one think of the Hindu register then? The answer is that, since even in "inversion" this immanent aspect resists "symbolization", it must be this immanent aspect of Hinduism that runs parallel to its stabilizing registers. The closely knit and well classified *Varnadharmashram* is then radically and "interminably" “decentered” in the Hindu Symbolic. It is in its perpetual "hidden" presence of the "Real" that the Hindu Symbolic is discontinuous and it is this link, this possibility-impossibility of the relation that has to be captured to locate the materialist idiom of the Hindu Symbolic.

It is in this vein that the fire of the Hindu kitchen and the Hindu pyre get related, the goddess of prosperity Lakshmi sitting on a white flower gets related with her antinomian double of Kamla, the maintenance of the Hindu world in its chaos by Lord Shiv is radically disrupted by the decapitating Kali, as a founding gesture for another cosmological frame (see Kinsley 1997). In terms of everyday practices, open defecation comes together with taboo on nudity and intoxication and sexual practices come attached with the transgressive realm of rituals of heterodox *sadhus* (see Uberoi 1991: 320-332; Kristeva 1982: 79-83; Kumar 2006: 255-278).

**Reconsidering the Ritualistic Event of Death**

Veena Das (1976), Meena Kaushik (1976) and Jonathan Parry (1994) in different ways have contributed to the study of the ritual exegeses attached to the understanding and handling of the Hindu dead. While all three borrow the reconceptualization of the
Srinivasian distinction of pure and impure in terms of life and death respectively, their explanations on how rituals and the observers can be understood varies.

Das uses Sanskrit scriptural sources such as, Dharmaranya Purana and the Grihya Sutra, to delineate the meaning of ritualistic enactments in terms of directions of right and left hand, taking Robert Hertz’s exposition in *Death and the Right Hand* (Hertz 1960; Das 1982). Kaushik has recorded the way Doms of Benares handle the dead and also their own ritualistic observation for dead in their own family, which more or less mimes the ritualistic observations of the upper caste in a minimalistic way (Kaushik 1979). Parry diagnoses a ‘homology’ between the Hindu body and the Hindu cosmos that is represented by the sacred geography of Kashi. In his work he shows that Hindu rituals of death metonymically evoke these symbolic registers and thus the living, the dead and the divine are all within an abstract cosmos albeit separated by their karma and incarnations (Parry 1981, 1994).

All three accounts, although written from different standpoints, manage to exhaustively explain the symbolic weight of ritualistic enactments and the grieving period. However in their accounts there seems to be a nagging reluctance to make sense of the colonial intrusion, the anthropologist as the scientific-rational initiate, the political upheavals in everyday terms of caste politics and on a larger level that of nationalism and anticolonialism. Let me illustrate one ritualistic episode to argue the case. Hindu customs of burning the dead over the wooden pyre starts with the Dom handing over sacrificial fire to the main mourner, who puts it symbolically in the mouth of the dead and gradually lights the entire pyre. The chief mourner and the rest of the mourners are audience to the theatre of work and unsentimental labour, in which the Dom keeps tossing the charring dead body over the pyre so that after the skin and the organs and the entrails, the soft bones are also reduced to ashes. This continues for hours. When the pyre is reduced to a smouldering ash and most parts of the dead are turned to ashes, there is a symbolic perambulation of the pyre by the chief mourner and there is a ritual to break an earthen pot of cold water over the warm ash, lest the dead —now an ancestor — be feeling burnt. However, there is a small portion of the dead that is saved through the burning. The burnt flesh is still stuck to a femur or another large bone and this is anticipated and expected, which is why there is a ritualistic occasion allocated to it. The Dom locks the unburnt part
in his pair of logs that he used to toggle the dead over the burning pyre and hands the forceps with the physiological residue of the dead to the chief mourner. The latter rushes to the bank, swings the forceps as a ritualistic requirement and gifts the last part of his dead relative to the river Ganga. This is called pravah — gifting the last of dead to the current of Ganga that is going past. Since there is a long queue of mourners waiting for their dead to be cremated, the Doms’ also half burn the dead and accelerate the rituals at times. This translates into more alms/fees, and results in throwing half burnt bodies in the river. Again, for different social and religious concerns, murdered bodies, untimely deaths, children’s bodies, aborted female foetuses, amputated limbs and hospital remains of surgically removed body organs never reach the cremation grounds. People dump them in Ganga and disappear. Further, at the end of each day, notwithstanding the Pravah, the ashes of the entire day are also washed into the river. I hope to show in the thesis that this realm of practise is as much within the co-ordinates of colonialism, post-colonial ‘governmentality’, modernity and sanitation, as it is within that of religious observances and the ritual activities.

Traditionally, in ethnographies on the subject, death was largely perceived to be a communitarian loss. The dead individual was mourned as a loss to the persona of the community. Death in a given community called for ritualistic, existential and material communion, which temporarily equalled the survivors in grief and relatedness. Thus death has different meanings to the living because of the communitarian responses to it. This establishes that death is primarily a material experience of the living, shared or negated by the respective community as the case may be. However, the contemporary sociological literature suggests that the present world has gradually moved away or has been displaced through our practises from this basic relationship of the dead and the mourners (Clark 1993; Kearl 1989). The situations created by accidents, suicides, illnesses, epidemics, and ethnic strife immensely complicate the way we think of the dead and the living. They simultaneously unsettle the meaningfulness of rituals, the perception of well rounded linkages between person-community-cosmos, belief in divinity, benign ancestors/mythic benefactors, everyday stability and the universality of any singular faith-system. If one locates the growing concerns over the disposal of the dead and the environmental urgencies, the elimination of the decomposing, decaying dead body seems
to further push us towards thinking of individual’s death as a sanitarian and bureaucratic issue more than that of transcendental loss (see Dickenson, Johnson and Katz 2000). Thus the premise of this thesis is that the present world has no straight-forward link between a death and whatever contingent description we may have of a residual community.

As mentioned in the preceding discussion, death as an event is based on an insistence of material-corporeal as well as spiritual and emotional loss. However, there were (are) various ways in which ‘death’ also acquires the metaphoric reference of restoration and regeneration. That is more or less to say that different cultures have had various nuanced parameters to ensure that their cosmic balances are maintained. The one, who dies amongst us, goes to the world of the dead. Our loss is also a sacrificial gift to the ancestral world, who may decide to come back to the clan, community in the form of newborns and thus the cycle continues (Bloch and Parry 1982; Das 1976, 1982; Hertz 1960; Huntington and Metcalf 1979; Kaushik 1976, 1979; Parry 1981, 1982, 1994; Robben (ed.) 2004; Rosaldo 1989, 1993; Turner 1969, 1974; Van Gennep 1960). People seek to reiterate and maintain this balance through various ritualistic and customary practises. A critically informed reading of the literature on the subject reveals that this precarious calibration through myths, ritual, acts, and other practices, including mourning and rejoicing does not lead to stability.25 Thus the structural-functionalist and structuralist accounts claim of this restoration of stability has to progressively give way to an analyses that sets to record the gradual shift in the precariousness of the registers of social existence. For the Ilongots of Manila, Renato Rosaldo claims that a death in their community bursts open a rage amongst the bereaving kin of the dead and it is only satisfied with a successful head hunt of anyone who is not the kin of the dead (Rosaldo 1989). Similarly, Beth A. Conklin says for the Wari’ of Rondonia, Brazil, before they were incorporated into the Brazilian mainstream and were forced to abandon or translate their practice of ‘compassionate cannibalism’ into other acceptable methods:

the world of Wari’, persons, revolved around arrangements in which partners repeatedly traded positions as predators and prey, eaters and eaten, willingly letting themselves or their relatives be symbolically “killed” at parties or literally eaten at funerals (Conklin 2001: 45).
Here also, as in the case of the Ilongot, grief seems to be the precursor to the cannibalistic act (when it used to happen). But in both cases a careful reading of the ethnographies points to the fact that headhunting or cannibalism are not conclusive events. They are in fact a reminder to the survivors that the dead is an end, a finality but death in itself is not so. Thus the ground link is that cultures having been through different historical epochs have lived with the precarious awareness that \textit{death is immortal}. That is, the metaphoric and metonymic references of death hinge on people’s lives incessantly.

If cultures are humbled and humbling in their realization that the idea of death is immortal, it becomes apparent that cultures must have links to understand one death after another. This link must be of the material concerns and the aesthetics that emerge out of those practices that seek to preserve the dead, the dying and the new born people, persons, technologies, things, and places. This is what connects or disconnects civility to the civilization, through an intermediate category of community.

In conclusion one may argue that if death is to be seen as a metaphoric reference in the present world — signified by the polluted Ganga in this case — severed from the stable and well rounded community then the attempts to capture meanings of this transforming civility has to move away from death as physical, ritualistic, personified sacrificial and regenerative event only. It has to be seen as a metaphoric event that demands of the people to redefine their memories and the past and in turn accept, negate and struggle with this civilizational juncture.

\textit{Pravah and Parvah}

Among other things, two motifs central to this thesis are those of \textit{Pravah} and \textit{Parvah}. The former, which in Sanskrit means the uninterrupted flow, if translated in the Lacanian sense of the measure of Symbolic, \textit{Pravah} could mean that along with death and decay the idea of society persists in its reflexive nuances of mythological, theological, scientific and religious imperative.

In this work I take Ganga, the theological-mythological personae to be the one that holds the axial role of maintaining the \textit{Pravah} of Hinduism. I argue in the thesis that Ganga construed as the “feminine principle” or what Ron Barrett calls as “cosmic sink”,

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would essentially, immortally exist, independent of the river’s death (Barett 2008). This implies that even if the river were to go extinct, the Hindu Symbolic would not get extinct. It would merely ressignify the registers of symbols, myths and rituals. However at the same time, if one follows the Bhojpuri-Hindustani term for Pravah, the anxious side of the imminence of Ganga’s death and the precariousness of the Symbolic attached with daily material events in her context become apparent. The Sanskrit term Pravah becomes Parvah in Bhojpuri — the language used by the shavyatris. The shift in meaning could be noticed here. The first construes Ganga to be metonymic to the one who carries the uninterrupted flow of the Hindu Symbolic. The second term Parvah is anxiously bridled with the ‘care’, attention and urgency that the disintegrating Symbolic attached with the physical river needs. In Lacanian terms, both Pravah and Parvah are part of the same topological layer but they are to be differentiated in the modes and meanings. To a large extent, a delineation of this difference with regard to the themes listed above unites the entire corpus of this research work. From “ashes” to “care”, from the several contexts of entropy to the questions of the regeneration of the river, Pravah and Parvah embody the boundary of this thesis in conceptual terms.

**Multi-Sited Ethnography**

Moving beyond the classical methods like comparative method, discernment of ‘social fact’ through causal linkages, pregiven categories of stratification, or rereading scriptural interpretations to find the seamless narrative of continuity in cultures and communities, my effort in this research is to locate death (the reason for meaning making) as an accidental event. In other words, I am of the view that there cannot be a causal link that is self-explanatory nor can there be a co-incidental coming together of meanings in any anthropological recording. Let me evoke Marcus’ discussion on Clifford Geertz’s incorporation in the Balinese community through an apparent ‘pretension’ of ‘being on their side’ when the Balinese police comes to crack on the ‘cockfight’ that they were engaged in to exemplify. Marcus recalls:

In 1958, Geertz and his wife moved to a remote Balinese village to take up, in the tradition of Bronislaw Malinowski, the sort of participant observation that has given distinction to the ethnographic method. Unfortunately, their
initial efforts to fit in were met with marked inattention and studied indifference: "people seemed to look right through us with a gaze focused several yards behind us on some more actual stone or tree." However, their status changed dramatically about ten days after their arrival, when they attended a cockfight that was raided by the police. Geertz and his wife ran from the invading police along with the rest of the village, and when they were finally discovered by a policeman and questioned about their presence, they were passionately defended by the village chief, who said they belonged in the village and did not know anything about any cockfight. From the next morning on, their situation in the village was completely different: they were no longer invisible, and they had indeed achieved the kind of relationship that would allow them to do their work and eventually produce the account of a cultural artefact [...] — An account that became a widely assimilated exemplar of a style of interpretive analysis in which deep meanings are derived from the close observation of a society's most quotidian events (Quoted in Marcus 1997: 1).

Marcus in the same essay "The uses of Complicity in the changing Mise-en-scene of anthropological Fieldwork" (1997) makes a stringent critique of anthropologists' obliviousness to the 'complicitness' through which they manage to 'become' part, in whatever ways, of the community they are studying. This critique is well placed and seen along with Marcus's other significant essay "Ethnography in/of the world: the emergence of Multi-sited Ethnography" (1995) makes a tremendously important intervention in order to make the anthropologist manifest in all his/her good-bad faith within his/her ethnography of the respective 'field'.

He goes on to argue in his essay on 'Multi-sited ethnography' that one needs to be a 'circumstantial activist' in a 'complicit' manner within one's field to be able to honestly use the secure-insecure techniques available, so as to make the narratives of fieldwork intricately woven around the use of these techniques and not pretend that the anthropologist has a mystical existence amidst his 'field'. I have taken his suggestion that a site of study can be illuminated contextually and the connection very often may not be that of globalization or imperialism, as Marcus himself observes. I also affirm his suggestion that the research no longer can be conducted for a patrimonial audience, be it the subaltern or the bourgeoisie, it has to have an ambiguous and murky audience who may be as complex as the agents of the field itself, in their subjective demands. So, my
research work takes cues from these suggestions and the framework is largely in accord with his demands.

However, I have one disjunction with his argument and that puts me in a corner with respect to the anticipated stability that one is expected to feel after having arrived at a methodological framework. If one goes by Marcus’s critique, there is of-course an urgent need to make the ‘camera-eye’ — here the anthropologist — part of the reflection. But there seems to be something more urgent. And that urgency seems to be the idea of ‘belief’ itself. Anthropology is a work on the edge like many other works in the contemporary world, but what distinguishes it is its ability to renew the paradigms of ethics through a transformative ‘belief’. The distance between ‘belief’ and ‘disbelief’ or scepticism seems to be a distance between life and death. So when one is calling forth a participation that is meant to find the invisible line that divides and the invisible line that does not, is it not possible that one may find oneself in the domain of the unknown then and now.

To my mind, the ‘ontological’ distance that the anthropologist maintained for all these years was not a naïve or dishonest concealment, it was something more fundamental. It was almost a will to preservation. The present times, in their demands are asking for more than that they think they are and that’s why I am posing this research with the argument that in order to make sense of one’s relation with one’s field one has to constantly wrench with the basic conceptual question of sociology of religion — what ‘belief’ in itself means in a transformative practise of everyday?

Places and Duration of the Study

The Doms at Harishchandra Ghat are a key link in establishing the multi-sitedness of this study. Harishchandra Ghat is one of the two main cremation ghats in Benares, the other being Manikarnika Ghat. I chose Harishchandra Ghat for the simple reason that it has an electric crematorium and a multi-storey Hotel as part of the same complex. Doms themselves are a diverse occupational group, taking part in different occupations like working in the hospital, selling funerary items, working in factories and also in lower rung government services. Those involved with the occupation of cremation are about 60-80 families. In terms of lineages are even fewer who wait for turn to take charge of the
cremation. The ones whose turn appears could also sublet their work to the poorer kin amongst them.

Some informants told me that Harishchandra Ghat was the oldest Ghat and the only one where cremation used to happen. It is only in the colonial reign that Manikarnika Ghat came into being. I could not verify this claim. However, at another cremation Ghat, the Khadak Vinayak on the other side of the Rajghat Bridge in Benares, the Doms corroborated the antiquarian feature of Harishchandra Ghat but claimed that Khadak Vinayak is even older! This is the characteristic nature of the ‘information’ that I came across through out my work and to a large extent this is the way in which Doms helped me shape my notion of ‘multi-sitedness’. I did this by not directly hinging the Doms of Harishchandra Ghat as human agents of change but by locating their chronicling of what they witness as well as witnessing their labour, life and observations in the ‘ethnographic present’. Thus in the thesis there are no narratives allocated to a set of informants but their accounts have been taken as directives to think and rethink about the existent anthropological literature on signs, symbols, associations, actions and representations that come to fore.

The ‘multi-sited’ fieldwork was done in various locations/geographies across the city. While Harishchandra cremation Ghat was the nodal site, it simultaneously included sites within itself like the electric crematorium, gomtis where Doms’ sell funerary items, Hotel Sonmony and also the temples and (Krim) Kunds at the ghat. The other field sites were the Heritage Hospital, Kina Ram Aghorashram, Lanka where funerary items are sold in few closely stacked stalls, the Kabir ashram, and Seer Govardhan, where a temple is dedicated to Saint Ravidas. Again, there are further sites within these sites and consubstantial nature of this aspect would become clearer in the analytical discussions in the chapters.

My fieldwork of approximately fourteen months has been interspersed over a period of four years between 2005-09. The fieldwork started in August 2005 when I first went to the Kina Ram Ashram and subsequently to Heritage Hospital and Harishchandra Ghat. I spent four months in these locations in the city until November 2005. In 2006, from May to June and again in December, I mainly focussed on the Ghat and went back to the Hospital. The summer of 2007 was spent at the Ghat and the Electric crematorium. In the
month of December the same year I followed up the shops at Lanka. In 2008 again in the summer months, I went to the ashrams' of Kabir, Ravidas and Kina Ram. In 2009 in the months of May and June I again pursued the ashrams and the Sankat Mochan Foundation, while all along I kept visiting the Harishchandra Ghat in these stints. As part of ‘multi-sited’ methodological framework, part of my effort was also to locate texts by the Microbiologists’ Ernest Hanbury Hankin (1865-1939) and Félix d’Herelle (1873-1949) on Bacteriophages in Ganga’s water.

The techniques used within this multi-sited ethnography — to underline the multi-sitedness again, during stints in 2008 and 2009, I stayed at Prof. Bettina Bäumer’s residence at Samne Ghat that was mainly an in-house library that further shaped my interests during the fieldwork — primarily rely on the open-ended interviews of the Doms and the habitants of the Harishchandra Ghat and some other ghats. I contrast this classical technique’s usage by simultaneously incorporating the electronic archives of blogs on travel, tourism and personal experiences of tourists at places like cremation ghats of Benares. Similarly, I use newspaper archives and more classical biographical resources on the scientists involved in the discovery of the ‘benign’ bacteriophages that keep the Ganga water pure. The thesis also provides a photographic recording to illustrate the contexts of data collection in the penultimate chapter.

**The Scheme of the Chapters**

Below is a brief summary of the chapters of this thesis. In Chapter One, I look at the literary representation of death-Kashi-Hindu civilization in the writings of Baidyanath Saraswati, Diana L. Eck and Jonathan Parry. Through their writings I provide an understanding of the cultural contexts in which Benares and the cremation ghats can be thought of. I also contrast these empathetic and nuanced writings with the description provided to the empirical events through pamphlets and tracts published locally that highlight the precipitation of certain events that symptomatically manifest the antagonism within the various representations of Benares. One such event that captures the discussion is the genealogy of the emergence of three Vishwanath temples, with the claims that the ‘original’ was deconsecrated following the entry of dalits within its premises. The orthodox decided to install through a pran-asthapan\(^{26}\), another Vishwanath temple that
would be only restricted to the twice horns. Subsequently, another Vishwanath temple was constructed within the premise of Banaras Hindu University in order to placate the contested demands and this temple is not only open to Hindu caste members but also to Muslims and Foreigners (Christians?). The three temples, if one were to paraphrase Lévi-Strauss in the vein of his usage of raw-boiled-fried (Lévi-Strauss 1983), illustrate the geographical, cosmographical and ideological registers within which the definition of Hindu Benares can be put forth. Similarly if one looks at the Ravidas’s temple, Kabir’s temple at his birth place and Nanak’s gurudwara marking his arrival in the city, another homology of the same order can be constructed. Yet again, if one looks at Labhairav/Ghazi Miyan compound, the sub city of Sarnath and the Christian Cathedral at Chauka ghat, one is able to, in fact create a triad. Thus the cosmographies of Hinduism in this thesis are analysed firstly with reference to its’ caste and purity idioms, and secondly, in relation to the emergence of religious critiques like that of Kabir and Ravidas and their contemporary places in the Hindu cosmography. Finally, I am concerned with the interface with Islam and Christianity that is popularly associated with ‘medieval’ excesses and colonial habitation respectively. Needless to say, the internal divisions could be similarly pitched on separate layers of this triadic explanation.

In Chapter Two, I use the methodological idiom of multi-sited ethnography in its vernacular translation. While Chapter One deconstructs the Hindu cosmographies in their inventive claims with the stubborn insertion of the asymmetrical remainders back into the maps, here I take the sighs of the Doms’ and the shavyatris at the sight of cremation saying ‘sabko ghum phir ke yahin aana hain’ (after wandering, everyone has to come here, one way or the other) to be the translatable version of multi-sitedeness of Harishchandra Ghat itself. Going beyond the literal, I use various authors to anthropologically decipher the meaningfulness of this utterance: ‘sabko ghum phir ke yahin aana hain’. I argue in this chapter that ‘sabko’ while literally means everyone, the reference is not so much to cremation as to emphasize that everyone is fated to die. This ‘everyone’ (sabko) is then after this universalistic claim related to the spectacular event of cremation within the Hindu cosmological framework. ‘ghum phir ke’ in a literal way could be simply taken to mean ‘in a round about way’. Only when one explores the anthropological connotation of the terms in its ethnographic context, a whole layer of
meanings emerge. 'Phirna', as pointed by Nita Kumar's discussion on the daily ablutions and waste disposal culture amongst the Benaresis, is basically a culture of 'men going out' in the morning to do what is euphemistically referred to be the “diyva niptan” (‘cosmic ablutions’). If one attaches 'ghumna', which means in the cultural sense to participate in the labour and jouissance of the world, to 'phirna', then what one gets is the domain of cultural practise that ranges from excretion to sexuality and in the process involves other things. It is with this hint that I trace the linkages between Harishchandra ghat and the hospitals from where I argue, the new dead come and not from their houses. I similarly follow the links between the aghorashram and the ghat and argue that not only the half burnt pyres' planks are associated with the ashram and the cremation ghat, there is a mythic link which develops a greater imagination of a new world based on a hierophantic kinship. This developed kinship brings about the relation between Lolarka Kund, Aghorashram and the Harishchandra Ghat and is also the moment at which multi-sited ethnography shows its efficacy.

In Chapter Three, I discuss the ecological crises of the river pollution through three elements. One, an ethnography of a biologically indestructible thing called 'polythene'. Through the history of the coming of 'polythene' in daily usage to the days of banning it, polythene is at once a symbol of the promise of chemical modernity and also an experience of the phantasmic success of that promise. A stance, which I develop through Lacan that fantasy as motif, if comes true, is a culturally traumatic thing (Žižek 1997). Translated in terms of culture, if the immortality represented by the polythene were to come true for the immortality of human beings themselves, it would be an equally traumatic thing. Thus instead of harping on the commonplace criticism of polythene, one must elevate it as a cultural object of post modernity par excellence. Continuing with this, I also look at the trajectories of Ganga Action Plan (GAP) and various other Save Ganga committees and look at the hoary description or eulogy of the river Ganga's purity. I specifically pick the debate on the Bacteriophages, which are considered to be the viruses that parasitize on the bacteria in the river water and thus keep it pure. These bacteriophages are also to be seen as cultural symbols posed by various spokespersons of the river as a 'divine' things or the 'scientific' evidence for Ganga's divinity. To carve the element of symbolic correspondence, I also look at the metaphoric weight of the virus
along with the discussions on the Bacteriophages and show how mortality through parasitism can be understood through sociology of science and symbols. On the other hand, the relation between that of the bacteria and the virus is that of microcosmic perpetuation of life and death itself. I draw extensively from the theologian Raimon Panikkar to illustrate his notion of ‘cosmotheandric experience’ by posing it to the so called ‘natural’ organisms like bacteria and virus as well as social objects like polythene. His distinctions are posed with theoretical observances of Lacan and Slavoj Žižek and this appears most prominently in inquiring the operative logic of stalemate between Ganga action Plan and Sankat Mochan Foundation. This is where I also offer an alternative reading of private and public sphere based on Immanuel Kant’s proposition.

In Chapter Four, borrowing from Guy Debord’s (1995) deprecation of spectacle and capitalism, I explore the Christian basis of his theory and at the same time use his notion of ‘spectacular separation’ with regard to the Harishchandra Ghat. Based on rereading of Jacques Derrida’s idea of *différance*, I apply Lévi-Strauss and single out most objects and institutions of the ghat in sequential manner starting from the river. There is a drawing of information and comparison of images from different parts of the city in the vein of Lévi-Strauss’s idea of comparing myths to understand the meaning of any one (Lévi-Strauss 1983). In other words, I argue that the multi-sitedness of any particular image or event on the ghat could be exhibited by locating a persistent search for relatedness with the rest of the city. So while, in Chapter one there is movement from the ghat to the city, in this case the city and at times, to the extent, post-modern notion of ‘global’ can be used heuristically, I bring ‘all’ to the ghat to in fact exaggeratedly construe their *différance*.

In the same chapter I also manifest the difficulty of separating tourism from pilgrimage in the context of the present day Benares and the resolution to my mind appears in locating the hermeneutic changes in the new architectures at the ghat. In this regard I take the examples of Hotel Sonmony and the electric crematorium.
Endnotes

1 ‘Benares’ the colonial name to the city used by European American writers in late eighteenth and nineteenth century has been discarded for other names like Banaras, Varanasi, Kashi, Varanasey. There are more names in the fray, for example, Rana P.B. Singh and Pravin S. Rana (2002) argue that the city is also called as ‘Avimukta’, ‘Anandvana’, ‘Rudravasa’, ‘Mahasmashana’ apart from ‘Kashi’, ‘Varanasi’ and ‘Banaras’. According to them ‘Benares’ is the “distorted” form used by “Britishers” (Singh and Rana 2002: 30). I argue that the first set of names used here are more of adjectives than ‘common’ names of the city. The difference between the two has to be observed. Rev. M. A. Sherring ((1868) 1975) showed us way back that all names of the city (Benares) are tied in meaning with either a king’s name, confluence of rivers or other sociological concerns. The names are not attached with abstract notions of death, liberation or sacrifice.

2 I use the category of ‘affect’ to designate communitarian and familial relatedness and that of ‘proper’ to indicate a supposed holistic observation of rituals pertaining to death.

3 In this sense ‘accident’ is the most radical category that upsets this preparedness around the handling of the named deaths. However, in so far as death could be covered in every other known way, ‘accident’ as a parallel category is constantly present within the modes of disposal and proper mourning that a culture may have.

4 Ghar refers to Home and Ghat refers to the Cremation Ghat.

5 The English dictionaries Webster and Oxford define ‘traverse’ as “to lie in a cross direction” and to “travel or extend across or through”. I use the word here in this semiotic sense although with a conceptual distinction that I wish to add. In Lacanian terms reality is not only sustained by ‘Phantasy’. The Phantasmic register is embedded within the reality and any attempt to maintain an opposition between reality and fantasy as two discrete categories would render reality itself as to be meaningless. Yet, fantasy is, as Slavoj Žižek argues a “moment of closure”. It helps the subject “avoid the radical opening of the other’s desire”, Thus if one “traverses the fantasy”, one is “confronted with the other’s impenetrable desire” (Zizek 1997: 31). In this case, I am posing traversal not simply to suggest that the colonial phantasmic construction of Benares is a closed articulation but to go further and confront the radical possibilities that emerge out of this interface between different colonial and postcolonial representations. Thus as a perspective in the thesis, when facing a depiction or representation of Benares that appears to be stereotypical with respect to the ‘orientalization’ of Benares, I do not offer the alternative versions of the same. Instead I use the given to move forward and in the process I show the particularity of the stereotype.

6 My engagement with Lacanian Psychoanalyses is not at all to arrive at any psychological truth claims. In fact as is well known Psychoanalysis as discipline, quite like Sociology could be considered anti-psychology and against biological reductionism. I use it rather to show first, that reality is not constituted by a neat classificatory regimen of meanings nor can it be determined by Language only, in so far language or any significatory system itself only partially succeeds in communicating. The two other dimensions of unsignifiable chaos and the sublimated, at times ‘tragic’ outcomes — the so called ‘quilting points’, are to be equally considered. Thus the ‘structure’ that I am using here, through the conceptual legacies of Lacanian psychoanalyses becomes a structure that is first of all always, infinitely and interminably “inconsistent” with itself as it is based on the ‘hidden’ constant of the ‘gap’ or ‘void’ of the Real and second in this inconsistency it maintains the subject as the radically “decentred” one and never fully realized and subjectivity as an ‘interiority’ that again cannot be fully articulated in a signifying chain. It is rather the functions of the Symbolic, Real and the Imaginary that informs my usage of these concepts rather than any ‘essence’ that one may allocate as ‘positive content’ of either of these categories.

7 The oft quoted line is the following: “Benares is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together” (Twain (1897) 1989: 482).

Mark Twain is one of the most prominent among the other American travellers to Benares. With respect to the European travellers there are many and of distinct professional dispositions. In the subsequent chapters I discuss some of these travellers and their accounts. One writer whose work I discuss more extensively is Ernst Hanbury Hankin (1865-1939), a British Microbiologist who supposedly found the ‘self cleansing’ ‘viruses’ in Ganga’s water and who also wrote on the geometric pattern of Islamic architecture, which he called “Saracenic architecture” and towards the end of his career spent most of his time recording flight patterns of birds in India and England.

I have taken the idea of “people, work and environment” from Lewis Mumford’s classic Sticks and Stone: A Study of American Architecture and Civilization (1931). I find the conceptual field created by these three categories as useful to think of a ‘city’ sociologically. Of course, more registers get introduced in the process of ‘knowing’ the city.

In doing so I follow the Marxian anti-evolutionary stance that George Lukács evolves in The Ontology Of Social Being: Labour (1980) that is ‘the anatomy of the ape’ can only be retrospectively understood by having known the ‘human anatomy’ (Lukács 1980: iii). Similarly the ‘cosmological’ frame of Benares, which is being pushed to primordial ‘chronotope’ during the colonial reign, according to me, can only be understood by locating it in the concrete ‘ethnographic’ present, when supposedly ‘history’ itself is seen to be dead even for the staunch ‘liberal’ observers of timeframe (see Fukuyama 1992 for the thesis on ‘end of history’ and Žižek 2006 for one of its’ critique).

Shavatris are the relatives, friends, familiars, well wishers who carry the funerary procession from home or hospital to the ghat with the dead on the bier. I take the term from the municipal usage. It is not used as such by the people themselves.

I use the Derridean concept of différence to connote the ‘minimal gap’ that can not be bridged and in its existence this ‘gap’ produces an antagonistic tension that cannot be either brought to a level of opposition or unitary discretion (see Derrida 1978 and also Žižek 2006).

The ‘madh’ is an interesting category. It is here one can say that the ‘face’ of the human is corroded and that signifies a loss of the ‘form’ of ‘humanness’ itself. A person who died untimely, a person who died of poisoning, a murdered individual and so on, who could equally have been a family man, a vagabond or a sadhu, they all come together with the carcasses of the animals as their faces become decomposed. This aspect of the “epiphany” of the ‘face’ of the “other” within the context of the ‘neighborly love’ has been theorized by Emmanual Levinas (1979). He remarks that the ‘face’ is the lynchpin of the recognition of the other and thus all ethical gestures could be traced in this recognition. Slavoj Žižek (2005) however dismisses this account by arguing that the ‘face’ of the neighbor cannot be the singular site of piety, it reveals with a violent ‘tick’, an uncanny monstrosity that is open ended.

It has to be very clear that I am not talking in this thesis primarily about ‘dying’ or ‘waiting death’. When I say, I take the Doms’ version of multi-sitedness, I mean that I start where the Dom does. The work of cremation with respect to other things, from the shrouded and faceless dead person, called maati (earth) to the ways of the ‘Symbolic’.

Steven G. Darian’s recounting of the myth of Ganga’s marriage could be of structuralist interest. He writes about the King Shantanu stumbling upon a “lovely woman, ripe, with long dark hair and skin like inside of a seashell,” at the bank of a river. Without knowing that she was “Ganga” herself, he proposes to marry her. She agrees on the condition that he would never interfere in what she does, the moment he would, she would leave him. The king agrees and they marry. Through the marriage, eight sons are born but to the King’s dismay, his wife takes each one of them after their birth and immerses them in the river to death. Unable to take it any more, when the eighth son is born, he wonders if she is going to observe the act for this son as well, he interrupts her. She explains that all seven sons were accursed and they couldn’t have lived in the human form, or it would have been too painful for them to live as humans because they were accursed celestial figures, so she killed them and sent them to paradise. She also says that the eighth son was not a celestial figure so she didn’t need to kill him, but she leaves the king nevertheless because he
’interrupted’ her. This myth reminiscent of the Euripides’s ‘Medea’ figure, suggests the same “uncanny” version of the ‘feminine’ (Darian 1978: 31-32).

This is the first Seminar by Lacan, where he develops the three registers of Symbolic, Real and the Imaginary. In terms of the ‘mirror stage’, Miller also comments on the double bind with which the identifying subject is both narcissistically overjoyed and alienated by the superficiality of it’s own image. He refers it as ego-ideal and ideal-ego respectively.

There is no much difference between the cremations of a male or a female body at the Ghat, though in preparing the funeral the differences could be there dependant on the marital status of the female body. An unmarried, just married and widowed woman’s funeral may be decorated differently. At the Ghat though the Doms told me that the part of the body, which is immersed in the river after cremation as part of Pravah, is different for men and women. For men it is flesh on femur, while for women, it is the hip joint that is immersed in the river. However, the Doms also told me that this is not strictly observed. Since the body of the dead is shrouded, what is considered before cremation is whether the dead individual is a social person or not. This personhood and status of personhood is also linguistically affirmed by the shavyatris. Thus, the onus of discerning the mode of cremation lies on the shavyatris themselves. The dead bodies of infants are not cremated and similarly that of old people at the time of a wedding in the house are just immersed in the river. Though in all of these conditions, I must add that the presence of the Hospital as an institution changes the modalities of how the dead is decorated and cremated.

There are innumerable myths associated with the origin of the city as well as with almost every temple and deity. The grammatical signifiers in the myth of Kashi however could be three key features: Shiv, Ganga and Death.

The theme that remains common in all of these disciplines is ‘myth’ as a key conceptual category. One could argue that ‘myth’ immortalizes the dead. This is true as much of Durkheimian Functionalism as that for Levi-Straussian Structuralism. Freud’s engagement with myths in Totem and Taboo is a psychoanalytic entry into the theme. Psychoanalysis, however, affirms the immortality of the dead through not a psychological emphases on the reoccurrence of unexplained ‘guilt’ and ‘horror’ within the co-ordinates of oedipal complex, but the very idea of the ‘unconscious’ as the immortal sphere that is inscribed by death and life, dead and living co-extensively. Jean Luc Nancy (1991) as one of the exemplars of Post-structuralist writings ponders over the key question whether we have reached the death of ‘myth’ itself. And his answer is that death in the contemporary world is caught into this dual anxiety: one the dead is seen to be really dead, which is not the case and second the myth that ‘myth’ is dead, in itself is a myth and this realization comes across to the grieving subjects in a traumatic post event cue rather than a preordained social realization. The common theme that one can draw from here is that modes of dying and awaiting death are different registers as compared to the question of ‘death’ itself. In other words the ‘dead’ never really die and it is this context that structures the lives of the survivors. However, this has to be further qualified by noting that how the dead ‘continue’ to live, is basically inscribed by the living and it is in this sense the metaphor of death in an obverse way explains the metaphor of life. The ‘arbitrary’ and ‘hollow’ nature of ‘words’ as signifiers can be attested by saying that there is nothing behind the word ‘death’, just like any other word, only in relation to the ‘signified’ and the ‘signification’ that one can find its meaning.

I am using Hindu-Buddhist Symbolic at an analytic register of homology with Judeo-Christian. However there are risks involved in these combinations so I would nominally use this nomenclature (see Derrida 1998: 1-78 on a similar discussion in Derrida and Vattimo ed. Religion).

Both ‘practise’ and ‘habitus’ are borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) conceptualization. However I do not pitch ‘practise’ as outside the ‘structure’, and I take ‘habitus’ more in the psychoanalytic frame of the subject who has a singular experience of being integrated into the Symbolic through oedipalization and its resolution.

Aghories are Shavite practitioners of extreme acts like (symbolically) consuming flesh of the dead, coprophagy, meditating while perched on the corpse at the cremation ghat. Their theological function is to
efface the distinction between the 'pure' and 'impure' by adopting the impure as the highest pure. Needless to say, this reiterates any construct of the 'pure' as much as any other mode of maintaining the classification.

23 Doms as described by Kaushik (1976) are mainly the 'traditional' professionals who do the work of cremation. Since they are theologically associated with a work of this kind, which brings an unavoidable dealing with the Hindu corpse, the Aghories consider them as 'GuruBhais' (putative brother kin of the same ascetic order). In empirical terms, here no Dom has been known as an Aghori. My research also points out that contemporary Benares doesn't corroborate that all Doms are involved in funerary work.

24 There is a reference to this episode in Kaushik (1976, 1979) and Parry's (1992) work but the interpretation is limited here to the context of Mukhaagni only (the Sacrificial Fire). The argument put forward here is informed by my fieldwork at the Harishchandra Ghat.

25 I am making this claim based on the critical enquiry I pursued on the subject in my M.Phil. Dissertation titled Reconceptualizing Social anthropology of Death submitted to CSSS/JNU in 2005.

26 Pran-asthapan. Pran in Sanskrit means the 'vital breath' of life and asthapan means to install, in a concrete place.