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Politics and pilgrimage in North India: Varanasi between *communitas* and contestation

Abstract

The paper examines the merger of Hindu pilgrimages and the pace of religious tourism in India. The interacting and counteracting two sides of human life, sacred and profane, consequently turn into contestation, seduction and difference; however they meet at different levels in the formation of what the author terms 'mosaicness'. Drawing on decades of experience in the heritage and pilgrimage fields, the author begins by showing the ways in which pilgrimage has been utilized by political groups to assert their own power, and argues that the growth and importance of pilgrimage-tourism may be related to an increased desire among Hindus to assert their identity against an ever more visible Muslim population. Despite such divisions, the author then argues that the creation of mosaicness at important shrines nevertheless may foster communitas, as revealed by the failure of terrorist attacks on Hindu temples in Varanasi to incite inter-religious violence. Last, he uses the case study of Sarnath to argue that the greater value accorded to tourism as an avenue for development reflects a perception that the marketing of pilgrimage sites and religious buildings offers a means of preserving and enhancing the value and visibility of the endangered remains of the past, but often it is marked by a low understanding of a site's historical value and its contemporary relevance. While site managers have implemented revenue-raising plans to preserve the archaeological remains of Sarnath, they neglect to consider the contemporary importance of the site to practicing Buddhists. A better understanding of the multiple meanings of sacred destinations, and the conscious implementation of mechanisms to foster mosaicness, is urged.

Key words:
communitas; pilgrimages; religious tourism; sacred places; Varanasi; Turner; India

Introduction

Religion has played a central role in emotionally and physically moving people and pilgrimage is a direct representation of this. Socio-cultural theorists have pointed to pilgrimage — a religious form of travel often traversing distinctive lands and drawing in a variety of peoples of different histories, cultures, and social status — as a means of unifying a diverse populous. In particular, Victor Turner argued that pilgrimage can even foster a sense of communitas — a feeling of anti-structure, a "recognition of each other's humanity" (Turner, 1974, p. 169). However, when examining the recent history of Varanasi, the most sacred site in India and a destination for about three and half million pilgrims and tourists every year (cf. Rana & Singh, 2011, p. 168), social

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strife and extreme acts of terrorism and disunity among different social groups seem to emerge. On the one hand, inter-religious violence among Muslims and Hindus may point to political-religious motives while, on the other hand, tourism (a "profane" form of visitation) may seem to demean spirituality and to exacerbate socio-cultural disparities, particularly among locals and outsiders and wealthy and non-wealthy members of the community (MacCannell, 1976, 1992; Nash, 1977; Cohen, 1979; Abbink, 2000; Margry, 2000; Vukonić, 2002). This paper closely examines these points of conflict at Varanasi and neighbouring Sarnath from the point of view of an insider, providing a more complex view of where unity and disunity seem to emerge at a major pilgrimage site.

One of the functions of pilgrimage is that it allows pilgrims to satisfy their spiritual quest and understand their cultural heritage while searching for a harmonious relationship between human beings and the sacrality of a given place (cf. Singh, 2011b, p. 37). To its central objectives, like many other ritual actions, pilgrimage fulfils the simple quest of understanding the spirit of place — the activity of travelling (often meaning walking – *pada yātrā*) to a sacred place (*tirtha*) — which is also suited for a communal mass awakening and can therefore be used for political purposes. The mixture of religious and political elements has often captured the popular imagination and is often embraced by the common masses (cf. Ross, 2007, pp. 74-76). Pilgrimage can fuse culture and politics in particularly explosive ways when manipulated by political leaders; they employ it as a type of emotional blackmailing in pursuit of their own goals. That is how pilgrimage can be viewed as both a religious and political activity. In a way, sometimes the notion of pilgrimage promotes cultural contestation and ethnic conflict. Mahatma Gandhi's march to Champaran in 1930 against British rule, and Martin Luther King's 1965 Selma to Montgomery march against American racism opened the minds of the masses to the malpractices and evils in society. In the Indian mindset, such marches called '*yātrās*' (sacred journeys) are propagated as a means to elevate and revive a higher identity of humans in the society and to create a cultural awakening that could strengthen the historical links between social networks. The category of pilgrimage-tourism refers to series of overlapping, interpenetrating ellipses between pilgrimage and tourism (see Turner & Turner, 1978, p. 22); it further resembles the idea that sacred and profane, while of course constituting two sides of life, frequently meet together in individuals' lifeways — not in a simple cyclical way, but spiral form of growth regulated by the force of spiritual magnetism (see Cohen, 1992, pp. 58-60).

India has a history of melding pilgrimage and politics. Indeed, the ancient strategy of *digvijaya* ("conquest of the quarters") was a tactic of imperial expansion where kings would undertake auspicious and powerful *parikramā* (circumambulatory movements), then set out on a type of religious procession through their lands, challenging would-be enemies to battle (Sax, 2000, pp. 39-40). In the contemporary era, religious processions (and associated pilgrimages) have been used as a means for religious awakening which in turn has been used as means to obtain political support for its organisers; Mahatma Gandhi's famous march to the sea salt mines of Dāndi is another example of this (2000, p. 40). Even more recently the connotation of pilgrimage was used for

political motives in 1990 by the Bhartiya Janta Party's (BJP) leader L.K. Advani, who organized a 10,000 km procession of Rāma's chariot (a decorated Toyota van, called *Rāma Rath Yātrā*) that began in Somnath (the well-known site where a Hindu temple was destroyed in CE 1026) and ended in Ayodhya — believed to be Rama's birthplace and another site where the Mughals destroyed a Hindu temple. This 'patriotic' journey succeeded in invoking a range of emotions and gaining support for the BJP's political agenda of demolishing Mathura's 16th century mosque and re-constructing a Hindu temple in its place. Of course, they publically argued that the main objective of this *yātrā* was to "preserve the old symbols of unity, communal amity and cultural oneness" (cf. *The Indian Express*, 14 October 1990) but, actually, this was a well-planned move to gain the support of the masses for their own political authority. Writing on this event, Davis notes that "religious ritual was employed to make political statements about authority" (1996, p. 46). Indeed, after the completion of this yātrā, Advani ruminated on his experiences and stated:

> *It was during the Rāma Rath Yātrā that I first understood the truth of Svami Vivekananda's statement that 'religion is the soul of India and if you want to teach any subject to Indians, they understand it better if it is taught in the language of religion.' It was the Rath Yātrā that made me realise that, if I were to communicate the message of nationalism through the religious idiom, I would be able to transmit it more effectively and to a wider audience"* (cf. Jaffrelot, 2007, pp. 279-301).

As Jaffrelot further points out:

> *the recent decline [after 2006] in popularity of such politically biased yātrās may be attributed to a certain fatigue vis-à-vis an overworked formula. But it also had something to do with the religious overtone of the two most popular yātrās (the Ekātmata yātrā and the Rath yātrā) so far, in a context, that is true, dominated by anti-Muslim resentment and the anti-Mandal agitation. Certainly, the Hindutva forces had been able to recast an old institution — the pilgrimage — in a more attractive way when religious symbols were at stake. Yet, one must not exaggerate the impact of such an instrumentalization either"* (Jaffrelot, 2010, p. 334).

The mobilizing potential of Hindu nationalist *yātrās* such as Advani's can first be explained by the affinities these political events have with traditional pilgrimages, bearing out the essential criteria of Turner's model: Hindu pilgrimage defines a sacred space that is also a civilizational area and those who partake in them form a *communitas*, within which differences in social status are blurred for a certain, limited time, to make way for solidarity among individuals. These two features clearly lend themselves to a Hindu nationalist usage. By characterizing Indian territory on the basis of Hindu *tirthas*, the Hindu nationalists put forth an ethnic definition of the nation at odds with the universalistic doctrine enshrined in India's Constitution" (Jaffrelot, 2010, p. 337)

The growing pressure of tourism, and the consequential development of built structures, are a testimony to current economic gains which often ignores sustainability and processes of harmonious coexistence. All these institutions have their own agendas for promoting development in their own ways, however, they are weakly coordinated when dealing with the tourism industry. The lack of a mass awakening and the public's inactivity are hurdles to the progress of 'civic culture: civic sense', while such civic sensibilities are the vital aspect of a conservation and preservation programme. "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the heritagescape as living organism" (Singh & Rana, 2011, p. 114). There seems to be an ethical gap somewhere in the promotion of (cultural) tourism too. In India, at least, tourism should be carefully developed and promoted in the light of a spiritual perspective, where tourists become pilgrims, and issues like heritage preservation, religion, and sustainability are emphasised as part of the pilgrim's visitation.

Touring is an outer journey in geographical space primarily for the purpose of pleasure seeking or curiosity. Pilgrimage in the traditional sense is an inner journey manifest in exterior space in which the immanent and the transcendent together form a complex phenomenon (Singh, 2006, p. 220). Generally speaking, human beings need both — outward and inward journeys. Hinduism, or more appropriately Sanātana Dharma ('the eternal religion'), has a strong and long-standing tradition of pilgrimage, known as *Tirtha-yātrā* ('tour of the sacred fords'), which formerly connoted pilgrimage involving holy baths in water bodies as a symbolic purification ritual. Faith is central to the desires, vows and acts associated with pilgrimage, and pilgrimage is a process whereby people attempt to understand the divine sphere around them. The number of Hindu sanctuaries in India is so large and the practice of pilgrimage so ubiquitous that the whole of India can be regarded as a vast sacred space organised into a system of pilgrimage centres and their hinterlands (Bhardwaj, 1973, p. 7).

Lacking a concern for contemporaneity, contextuality, participatory observation, analytical experiences and revelation that is common in Indological and classical Indian studies, it is believed that the ancient glorious literary representations and rhapsodies (mythic and mystic) of places, routes and environment are static, 'timeless' and 'unchanging' entities that form the core of traditions. However, more recently preconceived and binary notions are "discarded in order to focus on multiple forms of power and competing claims" (Henderson & Weisgru, 2007, p. xxix). Of course, when undertaking these *yātrās*, often the innocent and largely illiterate pilgrims believe to be following the ways of their ancestors, without questioning the historicity, inherent messages and present contexts of the pilgrimage. Such contradictions generally promote contestation and conflicts between the educated and illiterate pilgrims. This paper uses the example of Varanasi, considered to be one of Hinduism's the holiest places, in the hope that these observations may be taken as diagnoses for sustainably planning pilgrimage-tourism and managing sacred places. The paper presents an insider's perspective based on 30 years of experiences in local and regional pilgrimages as pilgrim and pilgrimage organiser, as an academic and as a long-time activist in heritage preservation.

Historical purview

The built architecture and environments of the temples, shrines and monasteries associated with different gods, divinities and local demigods and folk-gods (*loka devatā*) are the major objects of veneration in South Asian pilgrimage. These objects and sites have suffered in maintenance as India's grandeur, ancient traditions and primacy in conveying spiritual messages to the world have gradually ebbed away. Through the passage of time, the differences between religious and ritual performances, and spiritual awakening have been lost; in fact, rituals superseded the spiritual. This development process led its adherents to believe that religious places are intrinsically sacred and possess spiritual values from where the devout Hindus charismatically get their wishes fulfilled.

In spite of the message of communal harmony and brotherhood, after the death of Prophet Muhammad in CE 632, Muslim armies raided outlying settlements in the northwest of India with the religiously intentioned destruction of Hindus' religious buildings such as temples, shrines and monasteries. From the 9th to the 15th centuries successive waves of ethnic Muslims entered the subcontinent — Arabs, Turks, Afghans, Persians and Mongols looted the palaces, treasuries and temples, but it was the settled merchants and other colonists who slowly spread the new religion (Knipe, 1991, p. 64). The Arabic *Qur'ān*, which was revealed through God's messenger, the Prophet Muhammad, identifies "Islam's primary aim to be the establishment of a single community with a single law — an abode of Islam (*dar al-Islām*), in which religion and polity are one" (cf. The *Qur'ān*, 10.25 and 6.127), i.e., a doctrine of the unity of God that has no place for iconography, let alone myths, symbols and rituals celebrating the dynamic multiplicity of the divine.

The Mughal dynasty (1526-1707) in South Asia had strategically tried to fulfil the dream of a *dar al-Islām* through destruction of Hindu monasteries, temples, pilgrimage sites, and iconography and transplanting their own built structures, traditions and culture. The fanatic emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707) ruled by confrontation and declared Islam as the empire's only religion; he constantly destroyed Hindu temples, including the major temples at Ayodhya, Mathura and Varanasi. But, by 1800, the Mughal Empire had all but collapsed in the face of British incursions and colonisation and, with it, the dream of a *dar al-Islām* too.

During the British period, religious performances were used as means for raising awareness of, and fostering societal unity against, colonial rule. In India religion is more like a cultural symbol that fully fits the Hindu psyche and politicians often use it for their own vested interests and to maintain their authority. But, as a pluralistic society, many times these strategies conflict. The masses rarely thought critically, instead they accepted religious happenings as phenomena that maintain their continuity since the ancient past. Of course there exist differences in opinions about the degrees and intensity of the relationship between religion and politics in the cultural arena (cf. Sax, 2000).

The World Hindu Council (VHP) extends their agenda for controlling several disputed mosques by strongly arguing for transforming the important mosques in the holy

cities of Ayodhya, Mathura and Varanasi (Banaras) into their original Hindu temples. Historian Eaton (2000) clearly shows that cases of destruction of places of worship were not restricted to Muslim rulers. He recounts numerous instances of Hindu kings having torn down Hindu temples, in addition to Jain and Buddhist shrines. He says that these must be seen as, above all, powerful symbolic political acts. Other Hindu sacred places equally suffered destruction in the rule of Aurangzeb in the 17th century, with mosques built over their ruins, such as Krishna's birth temple in Mathura and the rebuilt Somnath temple on the coast of Gujarat. Neo-Hindu revivalism and the creation of a (political) Hindu identity have largely embraced the VHP's movement to destroy those Muslim monuments built on the razed sites of ancient Hindu temples.

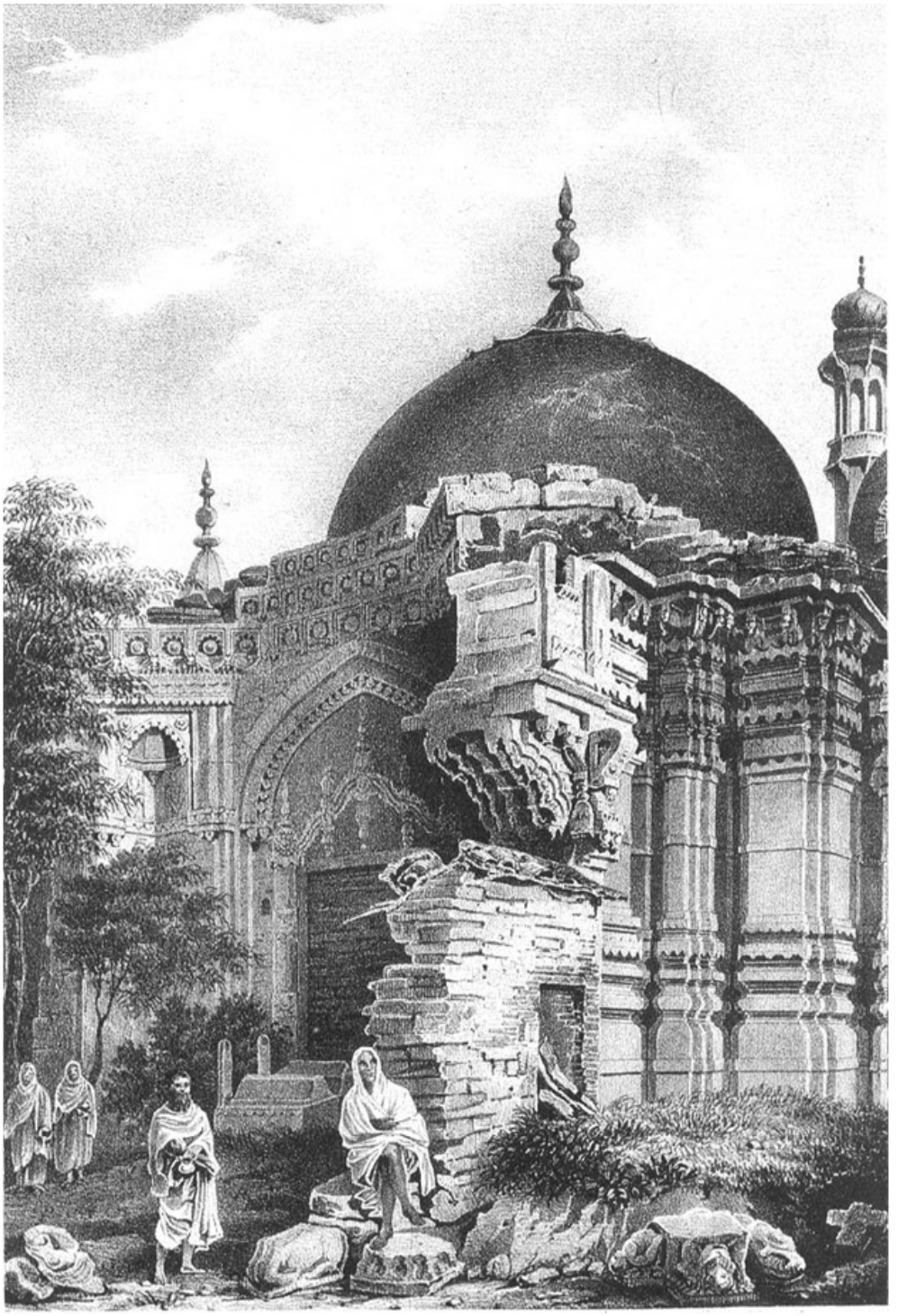
Travel for pilgrimage purposes is an important part of Hindu doctrine and millions of adherents travel throughout India and from abroad each year to participate in enormous festivals, pilgrimage circuits and ritual cleansings. With the revival of traditional Hinduism during 1950s, pilgrimages became more popular. Of all domestic travel in India, over one-third is for the purpose of performing pilgrimage (cf. Rana & Singh, 2011, p. 177). The growth and importance of pilgrimage-tourism in India may be related to an increased desire among Hindus to assert their identity against an ever more visible Muslim population. Such competition emerged more actively after the destruction of Babri Mosque at Ayodhya on the 6th December 1992 by conservative Hindu nationalist groups who wished to build a temple on this sacred site, which is assumed to be the birthplace of Lord Rāma. This act of aggression resulted in civil disturbances throughout the country. Since then large numbers of Hindus have become more conscious of their Hindu heritage, resulting in increased participation in traditional rituals, celebrations, the construction of temples, and of course pilgrimages (cf. Singh, 2006).

Varanasi

Varanasi (popularly called Banaras), known as the most sacred city for Hindus, lies on the banks of the holy river Ganga (*Ganges*) in north India. For several thousand years, pilgrims have cleansed themselves of their sins here and sought release from the cycle of rebirth. Hinduism, deep and mystical, is perceptible everywhere here: in a decorated doorway, in a glimpse of glittering temple, in the sound of a sacred bell, in the chant of the priests and in the fragrance of flower oblations.

The sense and spirit of holiness embedded in Banaras has attracted people from various sects and religions like Vaishnavites, Shaivites, Tantrics, Buddhists, Jains and even Muslim Sufis. For many of the adherents, this is a special place of pilgrimage. In Banaras alone, there are over 3000 Hindu shrines and temples, about 1400 Muslim shrines and mosques, 12 churches, 4 Jain temples, 9 Buddhist temples, 3 Sikh temples (*Gurudvārās*) and several other sacred sites and places. This is the only place in the world where such a huge number of Hindu and Muslim sacred places co-exist.

Figure 1
THE ANCIENT VISHVANATHA TEMPLE IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY



Front (east) is mosque, the back (west) temple debris (after James Prinsep, 1833)

One of the most sacred places in Hinduism is the Kashi Vishveshvara (also called Vishvanatha), dedicated to Varanasi's patron deity. First built in CE 490, it is Varanasi's

oldest temple. However, in 1194 it was destroyed by Qutub-ud-din Aibak, the military governor of Ghazani's Muslim empire. Later at this deserted site Razia Sultana (CE 1236-1240) built a mosque. The Vishveshvara temple was rebuilt at a different site in 1585 under the patronage of Todar Mal, the finance minister under the throne of Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605). The demolition of the famous temple of Vishvanatha and its replacement with a mosque in 1669 by the order of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707) has become a subject of constant conflict between Hindus and Muslims. Aurangzeb did not just build an "isolated" mosque on "a" destroyed temple. He ordered all major temples to be destroyed, among them the Kashi Vishvanatha and had mosques built on a number of the cleared temple sites (Fig. 1). Even today, the old Kashi Vishvanatha temple wall is still visible as a part of the walls of the Gyanvapi (Jñānavāpī) mosque with which Aurangzeb replaced the temple. However, part of the back portion was left as a warning and an insult to local sentiments. Panikkar offers a more political variation on the theme that the Kashi Vishvanatha temple was destroyed to punish the temple priests for breaking purely secular laws: "the destruction of the temple at Banaras also had political motives. It appears that a nexus between the *sufi* (Islamic mystics) rebels and the *pandits* (Hindu priests) of the temple existed and it was primarily to smash this nexus that Aurangzeb ordered action against the temple" (1994, p. 73). Unfortunately, the eminent historian quotes no source for this allegation, but he indirectly helps politicians to play the malicious role in promoting conflicts between the two religious groups.

On 7th March 2006 a Muslim terrorist group exploded twin bombs in the compound of Sankatmochan temple, which is dedicated to Hanuman the "*Monkey God*" and is the second most important temple of veneration. The bombs resulted in 15 deaths and 70 injuries. It was carefully planned to provoke the devotees and the devout Hindus and others alike. By the next morning, residents of the city — Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians — demonstrated peaceful outrage against the acts of terror. Burka-clad women, Muslim traders and Muslim clergy were not only visible in their protest and grief, but could also be seen offering prayers at the temple. This helped to re-establish and maintain the cultural harmony and brotherhood in the society. In the above incident, the integration of Hindus and Muslims has proven to be a model of harmony. The analysis of this event confirms the centrality of 'civil society' in minimising the potential for communal violence, but also significantly emphasises the vital role of human agency in understanding the processes by which peace is maintained (cf. Williams, 2007).

Recently a bomb was detonated on 7th December 2010 close to Shitala temple at the main ghat of Varanasi, resulting in 3 deaths and 38 injured. The blast occurred a day after the anniversary of the demolition of Ayodhya's Babri Masjid mosque on 6th December 1992, which led to nationwide religious rioting that killed over 2,000 people. The Islamist militant group, Indian Mujahideen, later claimed responsibility of the blast in an email to Indian media. According to newspaper reports, the Indian Mujahideen claimed that had carried out the blast as a revenge for the supposedly "biased" Babri Masjid verdict of 30th September 2010. Every evening, Sankatmochan temple

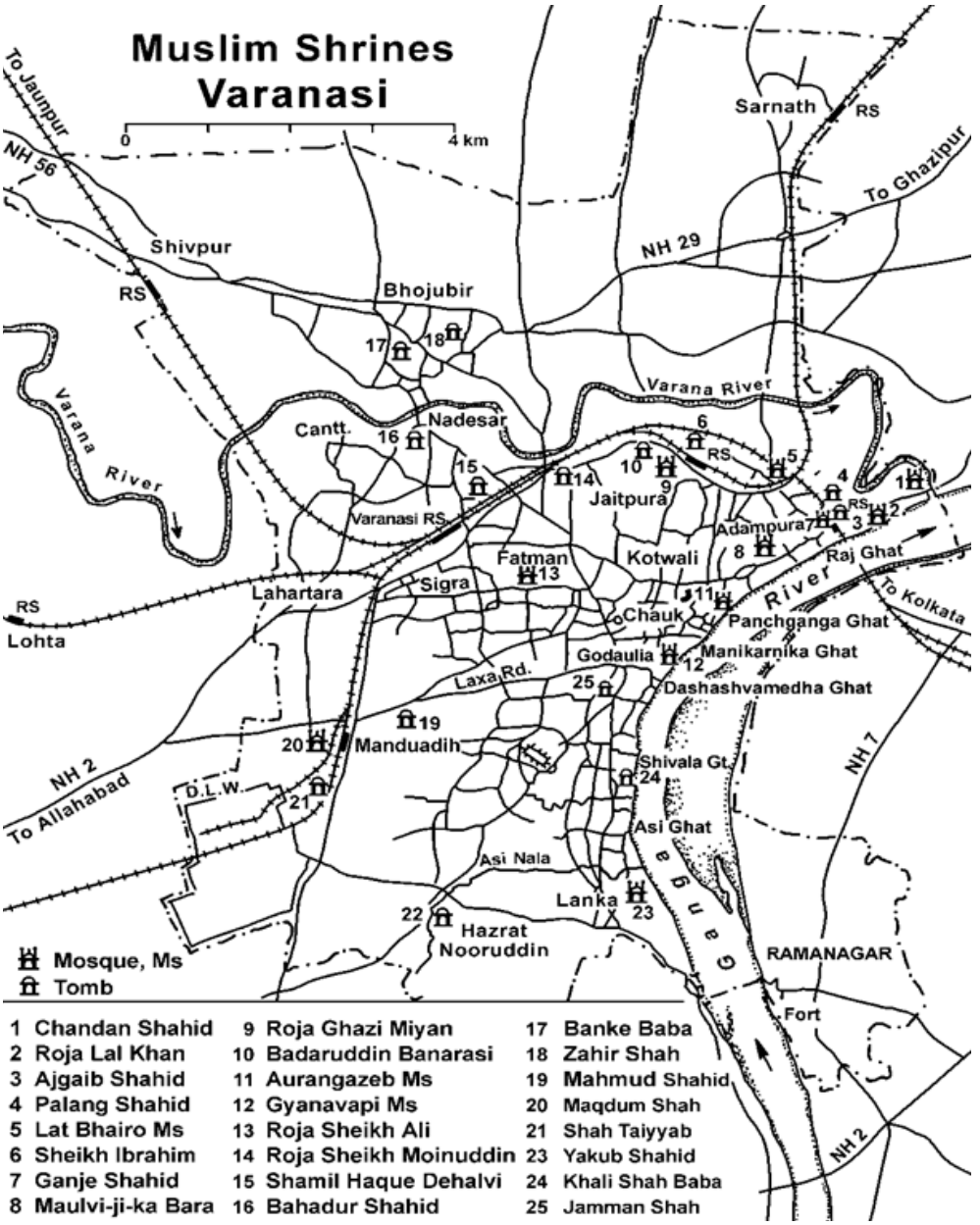
and the Shitala ghat each attract over two thousand devout visitors. In both incidences, the intension was clearly to disturb the harmonious coexistence of Hindus and Muslims; but it was opposed by the deep sense of mutual cohesiveness of both the groups. The Muslim religious leaders met their Hindu counterparts and issued a joint appeal to maintain peace and harmony, which resulted in a great success. Consequently within a few days after these incidents, life returned back to normal and tourism seemed in no way to have diminished.

The first recorded Hindu-Muslim riot was reported in 1809 at Lat Bhairava and, after a 121-year gap, the second major riot took place there in 1931. Several such incidences occurred in the cities of north India. Yet Banaras was relatively immune from such upheavals for two main reasons. First, the majority of its Muslim population (80%) belongs to the Momin Ansaris caste (mostly weavers), a Sunni sect who converted from the low-caste Hindu craftsmen during Mughal rule, but who still maintain close relationships with Hindu silk merchants, who serve as their patrons. This patron-worker interdependency strongly supports Momin Ansaris' livelihood and quality of life, and it maintains traditional inter-generational reciprocity with respect to socio-economic and extent religious scenes. Moreover, the impact of a great medieval saint-poet, and reformer Kabir (CE 1398-1518), who himself was from a Momin Ansari family, and preached a type of syncretic fusion of mystical Islam and Hinduism, also strongly promoted brotherhood and mutual cohesiveness between Momin Ansaris and Hindus. Second, Varanasi boasts a large presence of many Muslim leaders in the Congress Socialist Party, which sparked the peasant movement in Eastern Uttar Pradesh, and was a young Nehru's experimental testing ground for making Banaras and Allahabad sites for peaceful coexistence (cf. Raman, 2010, pp. 17, 136, 286-287). As a center for Hindu spirituality, the priests, the travellers, the pilgrims and the Sanskrit students remained a humming crowd engrossed in their own world of rituals, seeking salvation and *moksha*; it was this "innocuous *Hindutva*" [a term which refers to Hindu nationalism as cultural, religious and political force in modern India and mostly propagated by conservative Hindus (cf. Raman, 2010, pp. 18, 143)] floating in the stratosphere that altogether helped to maintain the peace and harmony. And, again after a seventy-five years of gap, there was unsuccessful plan for riot. Such harmonious integrity between Hindus and Muslim has helped sustain the growth of religious and cultural tourism, domestic and international.

Since 2001, Varanasi's Old City and Riverfront has been attempting to become listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site, but its nomination process has been marred with conflicts between Hindu and Muslim factions. The Muslim faction seems to suspect that, under the guise of protecting heritage, the largely Hindu government will try to interfere in their sacredscape. They fear that their Islamic heritage would be marginalized and point to the Archaeological Survey of India's interest in describing their living mosques as monuments. The five historical mosques (at Jnanavapi, Venimadhav Ghat, Raj Ghat, Koila Bazaar, and Chaukhambha) are still in use; they are also historical structures whose importance are shared by these two communities since they were built during Mughal period on the debris of famous Hindu temples (see Fig. 2). These

all are architectural and historical treasures and defined as heritage resource that can be used in both contexts — for both present-day rituals and as a historical destination for other visitors.

Figure 2
VARANASI: IMPORTANT MUSLIM SHRINES



As time passed, as officials at the State and Central governments changed, and after many of the local officials had been transferred to other cities, it seems the whole intense exercise for inscribing the '*Riverfront and Old City Heritage Zone of Varanasi*' has been in vain. Recently, some preliminary attempts by the UNESCO Delhi branch, coupled with pressure from the Central government, have been made to restart the

process. However, only bureaucratic formalities and proclamations have thus far been made; nothing consequential has come out of it (Singh, 2011a, p. 247).

It is notable that the initiatives made by local NGOs, experts and eminent citizens of the city to propose the nomination of the old city centre of Varanasi for inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List has activated the sensitive and positive response in the city administration to think of preservation of cultural heritage. People say that a mass movement of awakening (*chetnā mārch*) is required for the reverential development that may led to awareness to preserving cultural heritage, which will be a resource for tourism. But it should not turn into fundamentalism, nor should it cause any damage to secular life (Singh, 2011a, p. 251).

Sarnath

In order to help living beings gain control of their minds, the Buddha began the first turning of the Wheel of Dhamma at Sarnath, the north-eastern part of Varanasi city (cf. Fig. 2). He taught the *Middle Way* that avoids the extremes of pleasure and austerity, the *Four Noble Truths*, and the *Eightfold Path*. Among his five disciples, Kaundmya was first to understand and realise the teaching; Ashvajit was the last. The other three were Bashpa, Bhadrika and Mahanaman. All eventually became *arhats*, spiritual practitioners who have acquired certain stage of sainthood, or Bodhisattva. The teaching included in the collection known as "Turning the Wheel of Law" began here in Sarnath in 529 BCE, and extended over a period of seven years. Other teachings, such as those on the Vinaya and on the practice of close placement of mindfulness, were given elsewhere, but the Wheel was turned twelve times at Sarnath. From the time of the Buddha monastic tradition flourished for over 1,500 years on the site of the Deer Park.

Sarnath and its archaeological site is considered a special sacred place for the Buddhist adherents and is one of the most venerated and compulsory places of Buddhist pilgrimage. However, a special fee of Rs 100 (or US $ 2) is charged for visitors from abroad in the archaeological site. Moreover, the pilgrims have not been allowed to perform their rituals like lightening the candles and incense in the nearby environs since 2005. Surprisingly, only a few have complained about this and the majority do not support the Buddhists who contest such charges and rules. This decision and control by the Archaeological Survey of India has persuaded conflicts and many Buddhists I have spoken with express humiliation at these developments. In fact, the trend to charge an entrance fee to Buddhist sites began in Southeast Asia and it was only after India's immediate neighbour Sri Lanka made it compulsory for devotees to pay an entrance fee in 2003 that India too followed suit. But the Buddhists feel that such charges together with other neoliberal agendas under 'secular policy' are against the basic ethics and philosophy of "peace, justice and equality among all beings" that the Buddha gave to this world (cf. Geary, 2008, p. 12). In the name of secular policy, the government of India has threatened the emotion and cultural traditions of the Buddhist minority, despite the fact that both the *Constitution of India* (Part III, *Article 25-28* of the Fundamental Rights), as well as the Declaration of Human Rights (*Article 29-30*), specifies that adherents of all religions have the freedom to worship unconditionally without restrictions.

There is an urgent need that the Government of India should review its archaeological laws and make suitable changes in respect to its sacred sites, particularly Buddhist sites. For this they can use the guidelines under UNESCO World Heritage Site that refers to 'cultural heritage', 'cultural landscapes' and 'intangible resources' – all of these pertain to the continuity of traditions and performances that evolved from the historical past. The case of Mahabodhi temple at Bodh Gaya is an example that promotes cultural integrity and honour to the Buddhists; a visit to this site, where the Buddha reached enlightenment under the *bodhi tree*, is one seeped in sacrality, a harmonious intermingling of prayers, chanting, and meditating by a diversity of pilgrims and tourists. Yet Sarnath lacks the serenity and spirituality of a Buddhist site; all one can see at Sarnath are busloads of tourists being given a guided tour. At most they may spend an hour or two chanting in the name of religion, despite its lack of spiritual setting. Sarnath has been deprived of its spiritual relevance by a very short-sighted Governmental Administrative System through their political vision. But a new movement may have begun. On 9th October 2007, a petition was circulated that stated: "We demand that the Government reconsider its total dominance on the site and share administration by way of creating a Managing Committee comprising of Indian Buddhists as well offering the Buddhists pilgrims from all over the world the liberty to perform their rituals over a period of days or weeks and to stop charging an entrance fee."

Contextualising Turner's *communitas*: Perspectives and prospects

In this paper, I have briefly examined the ways that pilgrimage and their associated holy sites have been manipulated, co-opted and contested by diverse political factions in Northern India, paying particular attention to Varanasi and its "suburb" Sarnath. This urban complex is an extremely holy site to, and populated by, Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Muslims — not to mention those of other faiths, New Age pilgrims, and secular travelers who are attracted by its historic and cultural properties. Although Varanasi has, throughout its long history, seen its share of religious and political factionalism, marginalization and destruction, surprisingly, current efforts by fringe religious groups to create divisions among the city's different groups have been futile, while efforts to designate the city as a World Heritage site of "universal value" (UNESCO, 1972) have created mistrust and contestations. How can these be explained?

In India, at least, pilgrimage has a distinctive capacity to draw individuals from different places, statuses and even beliefs together into larger and more harmonious groups. Indeed, "Hinduism" is an amalgam of many sub-traditions that often support and appropriate each others' deities, devotional traditions and practices, such that it can be considered a mosaic: it is a form of sacred wholeness where the 'commonalities' (*sama-janya*) are shared by all, while 'distinctiveness' (*vishishtvya*) of these beliefs and practice is maintained by the individuals, but 'desperateness' is not encouraged (see Singh, 2011b, p. 26). The creation of such a mosaic, at least in the temporary sense when undergoing a pilgrimage, corresponds closely to Turner's notion of *communitas*, a sense of communion and common purpose similar to the collective human bond (1969, pp. 96-97). It can be considered *anti-structure* (Turner, 1982, p. 44), a transcendence of the daily experience of social structure which, particularly in India,

rigidly orders society. Turner further specified that communitas exists on a sort-of continuum: *existential communitas*, where this feeling of oneness emerges spontaneously; *normative communitas*, when such spontaneous group cohesion becomes organized into "a perduring social system;" and *ideological communitas*, which is often a discursive, utopian model by religious or political groups for the optimal conditions to create *existential communitas* (Turner, 1969, p. 132; Turner & Turner, 1978, p. 135). Turner further remarks that "the relationship between social structure and *communitas* varies within and between societies and in the course of social change," and "this quality of communitas in long-established pilgrimages becomes articulated in some measure with the environing social structure through their social organization" (1974, pp. 166-167, 202). This suggests a dialectical relation between structure and *anti-structure* (Turner, 1967, p. 129), "so that in a sense *communitas* is not structure with its signs reversed, minuses instead of pluses, but rather the *fons et origo* of all structures and, at the same time, their critique" (Van der Veer, 1988, p. 59). In this frame its very existence puts all social structural rules in question and suggests new possibilities of quests and understandings. Of course, in a way, *communitas* "strains towards universalism and openness" (Turner, 1974, p. 202). Indeed, commenting on *existential communitas* in the small workplace, Letkemann comments that it can be found in unanticipated settings, given certain conditions, and that those conditions are more widely distributed than is commonly acknowledged (2002, p. 267). My personal experiences of last over thirty years strongly support this conclusion: During the auspicious span of time when devotees perform pilgrimage, there are many cases where Brahmin priests do not oversee or dominate religious performances, and pilgrims may create social homogeneity by breaking the usual norm of social and ritual hierarchy.

However, since my research and experiences recounted here are on the macrocosmic and structural side of pilgrimage, this paper can only really speak to normative communitas — that is, the way that institutions have attempted to "routinize" (Weber, 1946, p. 297) individuals' sensations of existential communitas. I have shown how particular authorities and social actors have been able to draw on pilgrimage — whose meanings, individualized experiences, and practices are as varied as its participants in India — to mobilize and unify disparate individuals, groups and political subjects. Yet, if our examinations delve beyond the newly formed group experiencing normative communitas, we see that the formation has often — but not always — been coupled with acts of political exclusion, marginalization or scapegoating of another group, and may even lead to the destruction of that group's sacred site. This corresponds with critiques of Turner's notions that have pointed to instances when social structure still exerts itself during pilgrimages, particularly when pilgrimages are used for political or ideological purposes (Sallnow, 1981; Eade & Sallnow, 1991), especially in India (Morinis, 1984, p. 274; Stanley, 1992, pp. 79-81; Llewellyn, 1998; Maclean, 2008; Lochtefeld, 2010). Indeed, India has cultivated a form of politicized pilgrimage based on *digvijaya* ("conquest of the quarters"), which has been used to unify such people against others: Gandhi used it to unify the Indian people against imperialism and human rights violations, while others, such as L. K. Advani, used it to bolster the power of their particular political party, the BJP. Indeed, the BJP's procession of Rama's char-

iot certainly unified a varied group of people from different levels of society and across geographic regions who have their own local devotions and deity worship, but it did so specifically and purposefully to mobilize them against another group — the Muslims — and thus to build the authority for his political party. No doubt, some of the masses felt this unity among their fellow participants, ignorant to the larger political machinations at work. But this is not really anti-structure; it is not people coming together to oppose the daily constraints of social structure. Rather, it is a process of elements in the society creating a larger and more inclusive social entity. In short, it is social structure creating another, albeit larger, social structure — a national political party.

Conversely, at Varanasi, one of the most sacred cities in India populated by Hindus of all sects, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains and Christians, and visited by at least 3.5 millions Eastern and Western spiritual pilgrims, New Age tourists, and cultural travelers every year (cf. Rana & Singh, 2011, p. 168), was the site of multiple strategic bombings by fringe Islamic factions intent on creating the same sort of "conquering in quarters" between the religions. While similar attacks in places such as Ayodhya and Mathura have succeeded, what is unique is that, in this holy city — which, in the course of its extremely long history, has well seen its share of political and religious factionalism, strife, subjugation and destructiveness — these bombings did not achieve their stated purpose. Rather, it did not have an adverse impact on the number of pilgrims and tourists, nor on their devotional practices. More importantly, it did not divide them against each other, but they continued on with their rites without conflicts between them. This certainly points to the continued existence of a form of existential communitas among those people who come here for their own spiritual devotions. This was not simply passive, though, after the bombing at Sankatmochan temple, groups marched together in a show of support for harmonious coexistence, and after the bomb at Shitala ghat religious leaders came together to urge peace and mutual respect. It points to the fact that ideological communitas also was experienced, that there exists a recognition among a diversity of people that this site has a spiritual relevance that transcends religious or political factionalism, that it has special powers that are given freely to all devotees to share.

However, such notions must be inculcated, they have to be learned. This learning can come on an existential or individual basis — one can participate in pilgrimages and devotional activities at the temples and ghats with dissimilar others or, at least, watch different pilgrims doing their oblations together. It can come through a normative manner, by participating in processes that are framed with this narrative. Or, it can come through an ideological basis, through the actions of its spiritual leaders and site managers who, rather than fostering unity at the expense of excluding others, do what Varanasi's religious leaders have done after the blast at Shitala ghat. They stood up, together, and extolled an ideal: that this place is sacred to all and that all must work together. It is through these discourses and practices that idealistic communitas is fostered.

It is for this reason that the continual failures of Varanasi's World Heritage nomination process are such a disappointment (cf. Singh, 2011a, pp. 242-246). UNESCO's plan is to create "peace in the minds of men" (UNESCO 1945), a sense of "unity in diversity" at these sites by revealing their universal and transcendent value (cf. Di Giovine, 2009, 2010, 2011). But the process, politicized as it is, seems to devolve into factionalism and mistrust. On the one hand, they fear that the ways in which the site is contextualized and various monuments (temples, ruins, and natural features) are valued will marginalize some groups. On the other hand, the current and projected management and preservation plans seem to privilege historic "monumentality" over living traditions at these sites, such as the Buddhist ruins at Sarnath and Muslim mosques in Varanasi. Management plans that recommend charging blanket entrance fees and which, favouring secular tourism over serious devotional pilgrimages, also create contestation and conflicts. Indeed, with the growth of global tourism and a widespread interest in seeing culture in the mirror of history and tradition (cf. Timothy & Olsen, 2006, p. 4), religious heritage resource management becomes a critical issue in two primary ways: protection and maintenance of sacred sites and the survival and continuity of pilgrimage ceremonies that preserve centuries old human interactions with the earth and its mystic powers (see Verschuuren, Wild, McNeely & Oviedo, 2010). Fostering a so-called rediscovery of forgotten common cultural heritage and practices at sacred places that centered on reverence to and harmony with the Earth as source and sustainer of life, a balanced conservation and management plan of such holy sites would be a strong step in this direction. The recent events in which Varanasi's mosaic of different pilgrims, locals, and secular tourists maintained existential, normative, and ideological *communitas* in the face of divisive terrorist attempts should be a testament for those preparing UNESCO's nomination and management plan that such sacred sites have the capacity to create "unity in diversity." Varanasi is speaking; the nomination body simply has to recognize what it is saying.

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