

# Banaras

## Making of India's Heritage City

Rana P.B. Singh

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# Banaras

## Making of India's Heritage City

by

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foreword by

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**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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## VIEWS ON THE BOOK

“The twelve essays in this book are intertwined in sequel and maintaining continuity of the message that makes the book pioneering and challenging for understanding the most important sacred place (*tirtha*) of Indian culture, a potential World Heritage Site. I am sure this work will serve as resource and role model, as an insightful guide for heritage studies and interdisciplinary ways of looking deeply into cultural landscapes— their multiple layers and networks.”

—*Prof. Niels Gutschow* (from the Foreword)  
South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University, Germany

“No one has spent more years studying the sacred city of Banaras than Rana P.B. Singh, and this volume gives us the fruit of his labours. He has documented the city’s religious landscape and its riverfront, and he views the city not only through the lens of its historical heritage, but he also writes with an eye to its ever-changing present – both the benefits and the threats that increasing pilgrim and tourist travel bring to an age-old city. In this volume, he brings together decades of careful work and makes a strong case for this great city as significant not only for the heritage of India, but for the wider world of visitors who have found this city to be a place of arresting and expansive vision”.

—*Prof. Diana L. Eck*,  
Comparative Religion & Indian Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge, USA

“As the holiest all India’s cities, let alone a site that has probably enjoyed the longest continuous occupation in India, or anywhere else for that matter, it is only natural that Banaras should be world renowned. Yet, for most of us, knowledge about Banaras is fragmentary and anecdotal. Only by exploring Banaras over many years, so as to uncover its multiple belief systems, cultural patterns, spatial territories and superimposed archaeological layers, is it possible to develop a satisfactorily complete picture of the city. Surely no one is better equipped to conduct the visitor on such a voyage of discovery as that tireless pilgrim, the cultural geographer and urban specialist, Prof. Rana P.B. Singh, author of *Banaras: Making of India’s Heritage City*.”

—*Dr. George Michell*,  
London, UK

“The sacredness of Varanasi’s location and topography has been extolled in scriptures since antiquity. Its landscape is still delineated by the ceaseless flow of visitors to this holy center, within its network of pilgrimages, and around its perimeter. ....Here time and space are malleable, and their parameters are ascertained through how one’s consciousness experiences itself within this “sacredscape”. In this volume Professor Rana P.B. Singh draws on his extensive expertise, and decades spent living in, experiencing, and studying Banaras. He melds the methods of modern geography, the social sciences, and humanities, with the enduring cartographic and mythic models that have been fashioned by millennia of Indian religious culture. As a scholar who comfortably inhabits both worlds, his approach does not place these in tension with each other. Rather, in his prose, sentiment, and academic style, he articulates a compelling, informative, intercultural, and interdisciplinary tribute to Banaras and the heritage it bequeaths to humanity.”

—*Prof. Hillary P. Rodrigues*,  
Religious Studies, University of Lethbridge, Canada

“If all *tirthas* are threshold between this and another world, there does not exist a hierarchy among these. Countless local *mahatmyas* indeed claim the uniqueness of specific places and landscapes which surpass all others in acquiring merit. But if there is a spiritual centre of the Hindu World it is indeed Banaras. Not only because it is *avimukta*, “never forsaken by Shiva”, but because of its exceptional role in becoming more than a centre of North India since the end of the 18th century, recovering under the patronage of kings, nobles, scholars, teachers and ascetics from a long period of doom. Prof. Rana P.B. Singh dedicated his life to unveiling the many layers of Kashi, sacred and profane. As a geographer he brought with him the necessary techniques in recording sacred space. But what would have been a faithful recording of data without a profound devotion to the place? Rana-ji had the skills to combine knowledge (*jñāna*) and insight (*buddhi*). This all-encompassing publication represents his magnum opus that brings together the sacred and the profane as a basis to gain for Banaras the title Heritage City.”

—Prof. Axel Michaels,

Acting Director of the Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe in a Global Context”  
South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University, Germany

“This is yet another fine book from the world’s pre-eminent authority on the city of Banaras, adding to an already substantial oeuvre of fine work. Rana P.B. Singh’s deep personal knowledge of the history and cultural geography of Banaras informs every page, and thus this book should find a place on the bookshelf of every student of Indian religion and urbanism, as well as those working to conserve and protect such culturally important cities from unsympathetic development.”

—Prof. Michael S. Dodson,

Professor of South Asian History, Indiana University Bloomington, U.S.A.

“Knowing, interacting and also working with Prof. Rana Singh since last three decades in understanding and experiencing Hindus’ the most sacred place has been a revelation. Along with his several masterpiece books and papers on the landscape and sacred journeys, this pioneering book is a refreshing *tour de vivre* inside the spirit of place under the towering light that guides us understand the in-depth and insightful messages of histotico-cultural development, interconnectedness of cosmogonic frame, variety and multiplicity of divinities making Lord Shiva’s world the complex whole, and all these together result in making mosaicness of Indian culture. This book will serve as a model for future studies in Asia”.

—Prof. Hisayoshi Miyamoto,

Professor of Sanskrit, Toyo University, Tokyo, Japan

“Prof. Rana P.B. Singh is a devoted and outstanding scholar of Banaras — his voluminous studies of the sacred city contributing greatly to its understanding in all its multifarious aspects. His work is not only characterized by deep insight but challenges us to look in new directions and seek fresh solutions to the complex problems of a living city of great antiquity. His knowledge and loyalty has also led him to a deeply felt and tenacious activism in preserving the heritage of the city; and all these aspects of his work are at work in the present volume which should provoke new lines of research.”

—Prof. Pramod Chandra,

History of Art, Harvard University, U.S.A.

“The world of heritage studies and preservation in India has descended, in my lifetime, into the control of ill-educated serving and retired bureaucrats manning different

government bodies and NGOs. It is a world in which shady Indians and foreigners freely move about either to make a quick buck or take control of our heritage. In such a situation, Professor Rana P.B. Singh's book on the religious and cultural geography of Banaras is like a breath of fresh air. Nobody is more qualified to write this book than Professor Singh."

—Prof. Dilip K. Chakrabarti,

Emeritus Professor of South Asian Archaeology, Cambridge University, U.K.

"Rana P.B. Singh's knowledge of Banaras' architecture, alleys, lifeways, histories and mythic undercurrents is unparalleled, grounded in all senses of the word. His humanist geography incorporates the voices of boatmen along the *ghāts*, pilgrims seeking healing, environmental scientists seeking funding, Tantrics seeking Shiva, 19th century European travelers seeking the exotic, and the vibrantly harmonic sounds of the Banaras *gharānā*, a musical school still thriving today. His vision is both microscopic and macroscopic, and his shifts of scale allow us to see 96 *tirthas* along the banks of the Ganga forming a meta-*mandala* into which an insouciant Banarasi lifestyle could be accommodated. There is no better guide to the Banaras that was and is."

—Prof. Rob Linrothe,

Art History, Skidmore College, NY, U.S.A.

"*Banaras: Making of India's Heritage City* makes a compelling case for recognizing cultural landscapes as heritagescapes. This book takes us on a journey through the fascinating city of Banaras by un-layering its cultural complexities. Urban connotations are un-veiled and understood in the context of ritualscape. Rich tapestry of cultural landscape in Banaras is laid out as an important element of national and regional identity that also has an immense universal value. Singh calls for a paradigm shift in the way heritage has been understood from a singular disciplinary perspective and emphasises on using a trans-disciplinary approach. This book will hence be of enormous interest to geographers and urbanists, and to scholars from religious and cultural studies."

—Dr. Reena Tiwari,

Architecture & Urban Design, Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Australia

"No other scholar knows Banaras better than Rana P.B. Singh. Although the holiest city of Hindus has been the subject of voluminous scholarship, his interpretation of its sacred landscape that he calls 'mesocosm' is unique. He takes us to the sites of its ancient past of solar and mother goddess worship where one could connect with the numinous energies of the cosmos. Rana P.B. Singh succeeds in deciphering the layers of this landscape palimpsest by his careful and sustained fieldwork over three decades. The most recent layer of this invaluable heritagescape would be the interventions needed for its conservation."

—Prof. Amita Sinha,

Landscape Architecture, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, USA

"The book is based on more than three decades of intimate acquaintance with the sacred geography and urban culture of Banaras, the paradigmatic pilgrimage city in India. What makes the account of Rana P.B. Singh fascinating reading is that he not only presents a highly knowledgeable and detailed account of the various faces of this rich and multi-layered heritage city, but he also provides a good sense of how it feels

to live and act in this – in many ways – extraordinary place. It becomes clear that this heritage has both a long past as well as a vivid present.”

—*Prof. Martin Gaenszle*,  
South Asian Institute, University of Vienna, Austria

“Professor Rana P. B. Singh has consistently written books and papers of outstanding interest on the holy city of Banaras. These latest works do even more to confirm his outstanding reputation as an urban historian.”

—*Sir Christopher A. Bayly*,  
Vere Harmsworth Professor of Imperial History,  
CSAS, University of Cambridge, U.K.

“This pioneering book and life-long saga presents a model to study making of a heritage city in South Asia through interdisciplinary approaches, architectural designs, cosmogonic frames, layering of pilgrimage routes, etc, where gods play a harmonious role in shaping landscapes and heritage. This is a superb and unparallel projection of blending of the multiple levels, layers, lived spaces and lifeworld”.

—*Prof. Donatella Dolcini*,  
Professor of Political Science and Hindi, University of Milano, Italy

“With the vision of an “outsider” approaching the unknown, contrary to those realities displayed by ancient symbolism and myriads of multi-cultural traditions, festivals and rituals, often taken for granted by the “insider”, Rana P.B. Singh has meticulously managed to penetrate the shroud of mystery and put order to the history, physical, mental and symbolic space of this Great Heritage Site and *Mahatirtha* of Indian Tradition.”

—*Prof. Marc J. Katz*,  
History of Religions, Karlstad University, Sweden



This book is *dedicated to*



## **James Prinsep**

(b. 20 August 1799 — d. 22 April 1840)

The man whose genius discovered the name of Asoka the Great (BCE 272-232), the Buddhist monarch, and Kanishka, another emperor, by deciphering their Brahmi and Kharoshti edicts and coins, placing him above Champollion, the decipherer of Egyptian hieroglyphs. Not only was Prinsep a great epigraphist, but he was also, at the same time, an Architect (Banaras: Mint, St. Mary's Church, Nandeshwar Kothi, etc.), Archaeologist (restorer of the minarets of Aurangzeb's mosque, Banaras), Engineer (builder of Karmanasa bridge and Circular Canal, Calcutta), Artist (*Benares Illustrated*, 35 plates), Cartographer (*Map of Benares*, 1822), Demographer (*Census and Directory of Benares*, 1828-31), Engraver, Scientist (Fellow of the Royal Society at 28; inventor of Evaporometer, Fluviameter, Pyrometer, Assay Balance, etc.), Journalist (editor-publisher of the *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, & *Gleanings in Science*), Chemist (Assay Master of Benares & Calcutta Mints), Musician and Actor. His works paved the path to study this holy city and still serving as light tower.



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## VARANASI: LIGHT AND DARK

*Kashi: thou of many names, many glories,  
philic and phobic both.*

*Banaras: where juice is ready every time,  
yet people thirst all the time.*

*Varanasi: city between the Varana and Asi rivers,  
where people enjoy the flowing sewers.*

*Kashi: known as the City of Light,  
also of delight and plight.*

*Smasana: the city of burning corpses,  
making pits of garbage-ashes.*

*Inanavapi: where the well of wisdom lies,  
however always the rumour flies.*

*Holy Tirtha: the city of divine realm,  
now changing to devil's helm.*

*The Abode of Vishveshvara – Lord of the Universe,  
where the people are diverse.*

*Here Police inspector Bhairava lives,  
but all the time people weep!*

*Annapurna assures for giving alms,  
however the dwellers enjoy hemp!*

*Ganesha watches the deeds as witness,  
who can measure people's dullness!*

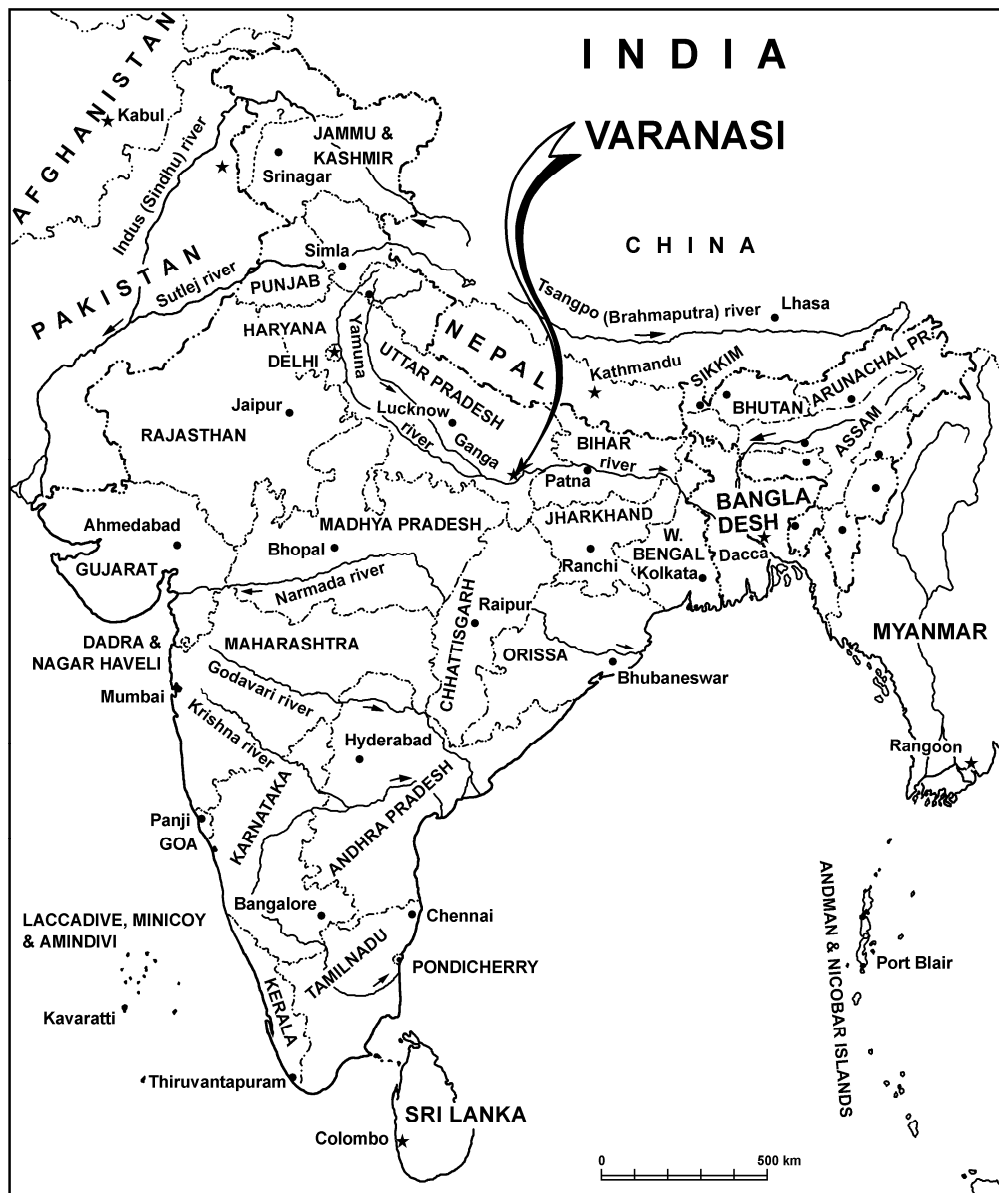
*This is Shiva's "Forest of Bliss",  
yet the motto to kill and kiss!*

*The flowing Ganga calls for eternity,  
worshippers follow the path of disparity!*

*Good and bad: both the apexes everywhere,  
one is free to march anywhere.*

*O Kashi! Bowing we to thy personality,  
bliss and wish for our stability.*

— Rana P. B. Singh



## FOREWORD

My first visit to Banaras in July 1962 was a touristic nature as I was on a trip around the world. My second visit in January 1975 was directed toward understanding and experiencing ‘ordered space’ of a city that was also the secret capital of Nepal, where I mainly worked, where spatial manifestation, ritual and daily life of the devout Hindu, all mixed up in making it a cosmic web. Kubernath Sukul (1900-1983), a man *par excellence* “Banarasi”, had been my major resource of knowledge and source of inspiration in understanding the sacred cartography and multiple layers of space of an ordered microcosm of Banaras. His classics on Varanasi, one in Hindi, *Varanasi Vaibhav* (1977) and another in English, *Varanasi Down the Ages* (1974) are still important for the study of Banaras. Sukul was indeed the first scholar to present lists of sanctuaries and pilgrimages as well as locational maps based on the original 64 inch to a mile survey of 1928-29. All following work is based on his initial studies.

While returning back in 1975, Kubernath Sukul presented me a copy of the *Kashidarppana*, the ‘*Mirror of Kashi*’ (a ‘sacrosanct cognitive map’), printed on cloth by his grandfather Kailashnath Sukul in 1876. The fact that this “mirror” of the sacred realm, the *kshetra* of Kashi, is not a map to guide pilgrims in geographical reality but an image that presents Kashi in its totality within a circle, instigated my further research. Ever since, whether in Darmstadt, Münster, Hamburg or Abtsteinach, the *Kashidarppana* was on the wall behind my desk — my thoughts were always connected to Kashi. One should not forget, that the *Kashikanda* (a part of the *Skanda Purana*) tells us, that already listening to the reading of the text bestows liberation, *mukti*. Likewise, the *Kashidarppana* of 1876, its 18<sup>th</sup> century prototypes and 20<sup>th</sup> century transformations serve as images the seeing of which alone ensures merit, *punya*.

This *Mirror of Kashi* was instrumental in raising questions about the nature and complexity of the sacred cartography of the ordered space of Banaras and also across Banaras: at the same time I worked in Mathura, Puri and Bhaktapur. Continuing my journey I first met Rana P.B. Singh during an International Conference on ‘Ritual Space in India’, at Bombay (Mumbai), 22-25 February 1979; and soon we became co-pilgrims in search of sacred places in and around Banaras. The proceedings of this Conference were published as a special issue of the *Art & archaeology Research Papers* (London 1980) also presenting Rana’s first paper on Banaras, ‘Socio-cultural space of Varanasi’. Only after two years his other paper on ‘Image of Varanasi city’ was published in a German series (1982). In 1987, only a few days after his pioneering article on ‘The Pilgrimage Mandala of Varanasi’ was published, we were marching through Shiva’s night (Shivaratri) to visit Bhairava’s temples and finally to engage in *darshana*, “the divine vision” of Vishvanatha. As pilgrims we tried to experience the dictum established by Barbara Aziz (1978) that ‘maps speak, and through the language of a map speaks the mind of society’. Our friendship and joint pilgrimages crossed three decades of time, and we have maintained our interrelationship and co-sharing in understanding ‘ordering space’ and experiencing ‘spatial manifestation of place’. We walked together and performed co-pilgrimages during last three decades, but somehow nothing published in our joint venture of co-authorship. However, we both contributed on the religious landscape of Banaras in the special issue of an international journal from Germany, i.e. *Erdkunde* (1994); in which

I contributed on 'holy territory and ordered space', and he on 'water symbolism'; and, we both reciprocated our mutual understanding and supports.

During April 20-24, 1991 together with Rana I performed the pilgrimage of the cosmic circuit that delimits Kashi, the outer territory of Banaras, known as Panchakroshi Yatra. Here we both realised and experienced on this pilgrimage the invisible realisation of people's belief and the interaction between devout masses and divine beings. We followed the text, context and the traditions and manners what pilgrims performed, that is taking a vow at the Vyas Gaddi Jnanavapi to complete it, and transcending a purely scholarly approach. Through this joint pilgrimage a whole new world opened up before us. Our bodily togetherness with hundreds of pilgrims, the understanding and sharing of experiences in course of different pilgrimages (*tirthayatras*) continued in passage of time— always in search of 'ordered space' through the sacred pathways of spatiality of time and temporality of space. We experienced several other co-pilgrimages like the Antargrihayatra (7<sup>th</sup> November 1991), the Avimuktayatra (8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> February 1992), and the Kedarakhandayatra (21<sup>st</sup> November 1992). Most of the time we were guided by Kedarnath Vyasa (b. 1932–), a descendant of the great Brahmin family at Jnanavapi whose members are serving as pilgrimage priests for the initiation and start of the journey and at the release at the end of the journey. For several times we performed pilgrimages and visited sacred places and holy spots, which are associated with different *yatras*. Kedarnath Vyas needs not to carry maps or notes. Banaras' sacred topography is in his body and he is so fast and directed at the desired places that it was always difficult not to lose him out of sight.

Since 1991 when Vyas guided us for the first time to the Panchakroshi Mandir and with access to copies of the 64 inch to one mile map we intensified our search for places which was facilitated with the translation of the *Kashikhanda* in 1996 and 1997 by G.V. Tagare. In follow-up years, during 1999-2002 friends from the Heidelberg University, Axel Michaels, Jörg Gengnagel and Martin Gaenzle worked within a broader framework of a project called 'Visualising Space in Banaras', sponsored by the German Research Society (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft). Rana Singh had been the chief collaborator from Indian side and *much more*: without his guidance and support I would never have been able to locate those hundreds of places inscribed and visually presented by reliefs in the niches of the Panchakroshi Mandir. My tribute to Banaras has been offered in my book *Benares* (2006).

During last thirty years Rana Singh has published extensively on Banaras and its vicinity, in fact, more than anybody else. This includes an anthology, a cultural guidebook, seven books, an extensive bibliographic book and more than sixty research papers. Based on his long services to this holy city, his *magnum opus* on Bibliographic book on Banaras (2009) is released at the beginning of this year, which would certainly serve as the resource-tank for any researcher. And, the present book would serve as sequel to the above. Since more than a decade he has been busy as an activist, constantly being involved in creating an awareness regarding the potential of the unique urban fabric of Banaras as a World Heritage Site. May he succeed in persuading the general public and administrators of the Central Government and the governor and the bodies of the municipality to prepare the ground for getting the 'Ganga Riverfront and Heritage of old city of Varanasi' inscribed in the World Heritage List of UNESCO!

The present book is a broad synthesis of a variety of information. Rana presents data and thoughts that deal with the making of Banaras as India's heritage city. He is covering themes like the geographical and environmental setting, the growth and

expansion of urban fabric, the frame of ordered space that allows us to see Kashi as a cosmogram – the place where “Shiva and his family members” were instrumental in the creation of multiple layers and pilgrimage territories. Rana was pioneering in realizing the role of solar shrines and the spatial orientation of their locations as a result of astronomical phenomena experienced and observed by the devout Hindu scholars in the past. He also prepared the ground for presenting the status and role of the Mother Goddesses, their locational patterns and symbolic orders. Finally, Rana has raised the issue of the riverfront as a “heritagescape”, that is the *ghats* (embankments) and the associated cultural heritage (tangible and intangible), the critical appraisal of the issue of contestation and movements that took place during last decade in documenting and understanding the riverfront.

The twelve essays in this book are intertwined in sequel and maintaining continuity of the message that makes the book pioneering and challenging for understanding the most important sacred place (*tirtha*) of Indian culture, a potential World Heritage Site. I am sure this work will serve as resource and role model, as an insightful guide for heritage studies and interdisciplinary ways of looking deeply into cultural landscapes — their multiple layers and networks.

Niels Gutschow

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Vijayadashmi: 28 September 2009.

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## PREFACE: A CALL FOR CO-PILGRIMAGE

The sacred bond between person and place is a reciprocal process illustrated in the realm of manifestation (representation in abbreviation), visualisation (architecture and the symbolic meanings imposed upon) and the world of festivities (regulating and re-awakening the spirit through rituals). The human relation with nature is realised primarily while narrating the place, understanding the place and becoming part of the ‘spirit of place’ (*genius loci*). The essence of ‘place’ consists of components like location, integration of nature and habitat, framework of circulation, system of land ethic, and the dynamic nature of its changing value in tandem with the relevant belief systems and the associated interlocking networks. Place is the central nexus where we experience the harmonic relationship between man and nature. The process of understanding a place is a walk in search of interrelationship between the physical milieu and its metaphysical values.

All my life I have felt close to place. Place speaks. Place talks. Place communicates. Place is a growing organism, a form of being. Place is an interrelated community, playing between Man and Cosmos. Presence of place was real to me long before I know anything of the energies by which this works. I remember that since my childhood I have sensed “something” in and around a place. The visible and invisible messages have been a source of real meaning to my life. I have moved from one place to another, however carried with me the memories and mythic sentiments attached to the place. I don’t know how and why this is always with me. Somehow later in life I learn that place attachment is a human quest for understanding and also a feeling — the immanence and transcendence of a force linking Man and Cosmos.

We are surrounded not by sense objects but by images that are invisible to everybody else. The symbolic expression of place, the set of symbols that gives the people of a culture orientation in space and time, is pervasive in Hindu culture. We find in Hindu tradition that places like special sites or natural scenarios, rivers, mountains, grounds, sacred buildings and sacred cities replicate the forms and processes of the cosmos, thus creating the heritagescapes. In fact, a passion for placement is basic to Hindu thought. Sacred place as ‘storied place’ is eulogised in Hindu mythology, or oral epics, with divine connotation – there intersects myth and *terra firma*. Banaras is such a distinct place in India, known as pride of India’s heritage city and the cultural capital.

The uniqueness and distinctiveness of a place are the special aspects of a sacred place where *genius loci* and values of human environment are deeply rooted and maintained by means of *sacred ways* – as reflected in pilgrimages and associated performances and rituals. The quality of the sacred place depends upon the human context that has been shaped by it, with respect to memories, experiences, miracles and expectations. The city of Varanasi is unique in the architectural, artistic and religious expressions of traditional Indian culture and is a living example of this culture even today. The cultural heritage of the city is ‘special’ and is an exceptional testimony to living traditions, to be seen and to be believed, in religious faith, rituals and myriad festivals, traditional forms of worship and belief that are still practised, asceticism, spiritual exercises, education, music, dance, handicrafts and art forms that continue to be transmitted through generations.

The paraphrasing of Samuel Johnson's (1709-1784) remarks for London is well suited to the city of Banaras: "By seeing Banaras, one can see as much of life as the whole India can show". In fact, Banaras is an archetype of all India, but it is full of complexity and contrasts resulting too difficult in comprehension for those who stand outside the Hindu tradition. Those who love this city with heart and mind will share with me the metaphorically expressions in terms of capturing space, time and tradition. Since the city of Banaras records a long experience in history as centre of pilgrimages and mystics, the vast arena of *puranic* literature have eulogised and glorified this place to prime importance.

The old city centre and other important cultural and religious places (heritagescapes) are today enclosed within the modern city and are seriously threatened by pressures of modernisation and development. The religious, philosophical and cultural heart of India, Varanasi, or Banaras as it is popularly called, or Kashi as the ancient centre of the city was called in the religious context, is the most important pilgrimage destination of the Hindus. The Sarnath zone, which is within the wider city precincts, is extremely important for Buddhists the world over. The culture as seen and lived here is a rare heritage asset for Indians and for the citizens of the world, contributing to the cultural, philosophical and intellectual knowledge of Indian culture and the cultural community of the world.

Since the first stage of human evolution, the idea of mystical power of place has been part of human consciousness. The identification of a place as sacred is never essentially one of individual recognition; actually, the place is never 'chosen' by humans, it is merely discovered by them — to provoke the Eliadean perspective. In some way or another the 'spirit of place' attracts and reveals itself to a human, and that is how s/he merely 'finds' it, though the process of discovery becomes easier when one follows the *spiritual path* and deeper quest for interaction.

Humans have used all their senses to search for places where divine beings manifest their power. Several such stories are mentioned in ancient mythologies. We learn from history that archaic people sought meaningful ways to link reality and psychic feeling in order "to combine empirical facts with imaginative fancies and to think in rhythm with their feelings and feel in rhythm with their thinking" (Herberger 1972: 16). Going back to history in a search for holistic theory we find the idea of *theoria* — an ancient way of grasping experience that involves all the senses and feelings and ultimately how humans express themselves: *human talk*. The will to sacred journey involves a surrender of self to the divine, a kind of soul healing.

The **key** is a small thing, really, but its power is great. The key is *genius loci*. To every place, there is a key — direct communication with the inherent meanings and messages of the place. When the key is lost, the place is forgotten. Mythologies, folk tales, continuity of cultural traditions, the quest to understand what is beyond — all are the facets of **crossings**. In Indian culture the crossings are the **tirthas** ('*sacredscapes*') where one transforms oneself from the physical to metaphysical. To cross is to be transformed. On the ladder to cross from one side — physical — to the other end — metaphysical — the sacred places serve as rungs. The setting of the proper ladder relies on a secret principle — that the vertical can be attained only by strict attention to the horizontal. The ladder provides the way of ascent through care and deeper quest. A spiritual walk is the ladder, sacred ways are the steps, and human understanding is the destination. Thinking together is a new vision. Going together is a new start. Walking together is a real march. Realising together is the final destination — enlightenment. Without a pilot, one gets lost in madness, illness, or death. Without a way a pilgrim or traveller gets lost in the route. The way is a 'spirit' — spirit is an



eternal sight for passing on the path in the right order. This is a message of 'heritage ecology'.

By spiritual walk, can we regain certain understandings that have been forgotten? Why not? These understandings would help us to a certain extent regain our balance inwardly (spiritually, and psychologically) and outwardly in terms of ecological cosmology. This book is an attempt to serve as a key, a way and a companion on this march towards crossing and soul healing, and ultimately to understand the making of heritagescapes of Varanasi.

The devout Hindus say that the three bridge-pillars interlinking the earth to the heaven are Prayaga (Allahabad), Kashi (Varanasi) and Gaya. This can be revealed through the experiences of their distinct images. They express this as *Prayaga munde* (by tonsure), *Kashi dhundhe* (by search in the labyrinth lanes), and *Gaya pinde* (by offering rice-balls to ancestors). Through these steps one can get liberation. This triadic framework of India's cultural tradition is narrated in this companion book of spiritual walk and communication with heritagescapes. There are many ways of expressing the vividness and contrasts of *Kashi Kshetra* (territory), its cultural heritages and its exposures. This publication is a humble attempt to present the ways in making, means in maintaining, processes responsive to change, factors responsible in creation, and their resultant scenes and scenarios that make the city of Banaras the heritage and capital city of India. The stories are described with a view to experiencing the deeper meanings and messages. Through the present one can feel the 'process of becoming', which reminds us that:

The future of Present is in the past,  
The future of Past is in the future,  
The future of Future is in the present;  
Ultimately, Present makes both past and future.

It is our wish that you and we will either meet in the lanes of Banaras, or, even better, that we will perform co-pilgrimage in and around Banaras while walking on the cosmic circuit and communicating with heritagescapes.

**Banaras:** where "always ready" (*Bana*) is the "juice of life" (*ras*)! This "Life-juice" flows in plenitude here in different colours, varying tones, multiple textures and layers, diverse situations, contrasting conditions, etc. It is the blending or "complex mixing" of these, which makes up the mosaic of culture known as Banaras, the City of Lord Shiva.

Shiva's liquid energy flows in the form of the Ganga river, and he is represented in the iconographic form of the lingam. The residents of Banaras believe that Lord Shiva and his associates live invisibly in the rhythm of the city, but that only the enlightened one can experience and reveal this.

Once Mark Twain famously commented (1897: 480): "Banaras is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together". Banaras is not the story of bricks and stones; it is in fact a living history in itself. A son of the soil and an experiential writer (Kamal Gupta 1986: 79) describes the city metaphorically in terms of capturing space, time and tradition:

Banaras either of the past, or of the present, and would be of the future, was a historically important city of the past, and is of the present, and would be of the future. Banaras is not only a city, but also a culture in itself. Looking this city is easy, recognition difficult. Touching it is easy, capturing difficult. Making portrait is easy,

transformation on the mental canvas difficult. In this way, in spite of easiness in outlook, in appearance it is a city of dignity, infinity and complexity.

Describing the historicity and inherent power of preserving continuity, Sherring (1868: 7-8) writes:

Twenty-five centuries ago, at the least, it was famous. When Babylon was struggling with Nineveh for supremacy, when Tyre was planting her colonies, when Athens was growing in strength, before Rome had become known, or Greece had contended with Persia, or Cyrus had added lustre to the Persian monarchy, or Nebuchadnezzar had captured Jerusalem, and the inhabitants of Judaea had been carried into captivity, she had already risen to greatness, if not to glory. Nay, she may have heard of the fame of Solomon, and have sent her ivory, her apes, and her peacocks to adorn his palaces; while partly with her gold he may have overlaid the Temple of the Lord. Not only is Benares remarkable for her venerable age, but also for the vitality and vigour which, so far as we know, she has constantly exhibited. While many cities and nations have fallen into decay and perished, her sun has never gone down; on the contrary, for long ages past it has shone with almost meridian splendour. Her illustrious name has descended from generation to generation, and has ever been a household word, venerated and beloved by the vast Hindu family.

During the 11th to the 17th centuries Muslim invaders destroyed the city at least four times. However, it survived and was repeatedly revived; the sites and holy spots were re-searched, the monuments were re-paired and re-built and the spirit was again re-awakened to re-unite with the primordial. In this way the eternity of life has survived in spite of several ‘superimpositions’, or attempts to submerge it.

The multiple personalities of Kashi are projected as:

*City of light*, where every day the sunrise reflects on  
the crescent moon-shaped Ganga River,  
and finally illuminates the river front;  
*City of delight*, where high degrees of pleasure and joy are experienced;  
*City of plight*, where ups and downs always make life full  
of frequent and sudden changes;  
*City of might*, which possesses the power of feeling and attraction;  
*City of sight*, which allows clear vision to emerge where humanity and divinity meet;  
*City of right*, where all the human deeds are righteously assessed  
by the patron deity Shiva, who then blesses and curses accordingly.

The *Kashi Khanda* (35.10) says, “The Ganga River, Lord Shiva, and the divine city of Kashi make the Trinity of grace and perfect bliss”. The Trinity is symbolised by the three hillocks as the three forks of Shiva’s trident on which the city exists, viz. Omkareshvara in the north, Vishveshvara in the central part, and Kedareshvara in the south. Blessed by Lord Shiva, Bhagiratha brought the goddess Ganga to the earth, she who provides vital life to Kashi as well as to the wide range of the plains. The mythical figure Divodasa became a divine king of the city, but finally handed it over to Shiva. Lord Shiva left Mount Kailash and settled here in a variety of forms. There are more than three thousand forms of Shiva *lingas*. By Shiva’s power the city has grown as a seat of knowledge. Over fifty Sanskrit schools are still preserving the ancient traditions. Many other educational institutions have grown up here as well. Presently there are seven universities or university-level institutions, viz. the Banaras Hindu University, Sampurnananda Sanskrit University, Mahatma Gandhi Kashi

Vidyapith University, Central University of Tibetan Studies, Udai Pratap (autonomous) P.G. College, Agrasen (autonomous) P.G. College, and Jamia Salfia Darul-Islamia, an Islamic university. There are also hundreds of active cultural institutes and religious establishments, traditional schools, music, dance and art forms that have spread to the world, local artisan and handicraft products in textiles, wood and metal work. The city has always played a special role, at least since the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE in promoting education – debates and dialectics, both religious and spiritual – traditional medicine (*ayurveda*), yoga, astrology. Further, the pattern of spatial transposition of holy sites is unique in the sense that all the important holy centres of India were replicated here before the 12th century. Varanasi can, in fact, be considered a living symbolisation and a living expression of Indian culture and traditions in all its religious rituals, in its multi-ethnic artistic traditions, in its architectural treasures, in its life-expressions, in its particular relationship with life and death, in its traditional schools where Sanskrit and the sacred texts are still taught and in its multicultural and multi-linguist population.

The spiritual magnetism of Banaras had attracted the Buddha here in the 6th century BCE to 'Turn the Wheel of Law'. By the turn of the 3rd century BCE, the great Buddhist king Ashoka had built a monastery township that flourished till the 11th century CE. Later, due to destruction by the Muslim invaders and by fire it turned into ruins. Now, after quite some time, the restored Sarnath has become a place of pilgrimage for Buddhists, and a place of spiritual tourism for others. In Banaras city alone, there are over 3300 Hindu shrines and temples, about 1388 Muslim shrines and mosques, 12 churches, 3 Jain temples, 9 Buddhist temples, 3 Sikh temples (*gurudvaras*) 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.

The city is also known as the 'City of Good Death' and the place where ancestral souls can gain final release. The fires of cremation remind one of eternity, and Lord Shiva whispers the sacred verse (*mantra*) of liberation to the souls of the dead. Along the *ghats* (stairways) pilgrims perform ancestral rites to the Ganga and give donations, a rite by which they are said to get 'reservation' in Shiva's heavenly abode - not only for their own soul, but also for the wandering souls of their ancestors. For the living there are many varieties of monasteries where one can satisfy his/her spiritual quest.

The 84 ghats along the arc-shaped Ganga symbolise the integration of the 12 signs of the zodiac (division of time) and the 7 sheaths of the body or the 7 layers of the atmosphere (division of space), thus  $12 \times 7 = 84$ . Among these, the five are of special merit: Asi, Dashashvamedha, Manikarnika, Panchaganga and Adi Keshava. Yet the whole stretch of the Ganga provides shelter and means of livelihood to thousands of people, such as boatmen, *ghatias* (priests at the *ghats*), seller of ritual items and flowers, and tourists too. The sunrise at the bank of the Ganga provides a scene of transforming colourscape. Every morning around twenty thousand people take a holy dip, but the bathers' number near to a million on special occasions like the full moon in October-November (*Karttika Purnima*) and on solar and lunar eclipses.

The natural setting, the spirit of place, and the continuity of cultural traditions have all blended together to create and preserve a unique lifestyle known as Banarasi. This lifestyle has manifested itself in a musical tradition known as the Banaras Gharana (style). Many great musicians and performing artists have been born here and still regularly return to visit and to perform their art for the public as tribute to the spirit of the soil. Layers of time and traditions are superimposed one upon the other, but the essence of the life has maintained its continuity. Recently some of the old festivals have been revived in the original style, despite some modern touches.

The Vedic sacrificial alter is connected to the transformation of energy from heaven to the earth — “I am Heaven, thou art Earth” (*Brihadaranya Upanishad*, 4.4.3). A place thus is transformed into a sacred place, showing how a macrocosm can be transferred into a mesocosm, and further reflected into the human body (microcosm). This process of transformation may be called sacralisation. Eliade (1959: 11) writes, “Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane”. He designates this act as the act of manifestation of the sacred, i.e. hierophany. It makes a space become something else, while continuing to remain itself and also continuing to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu. A sacred place’s spatial structure is visible in its archetypal layout, where metaphysical prototypes and heavenly patterns of material things meet (Singh 1993: 161). Walter (1988: 75) writes:

Any sacred place is a specific environment of phenomena that are expected to support the imagination, nourish religious experience, and conveys religious truth. It organises sight and sound, introduces light to present clarity and order, or makes things dark to suggest unseen presence and hidden power.

That is how a sacred place is both an environment of sensory phenomena and a moral environment for mankind. Banaras presents one of the best examples in India. After all, the present day scenario of culture and landscape in Banaras face the problems of chaos, crises, contextuality, contemporaneity and corroborateity, nevertheless it maintains consistency, contemplation, contingency, coalition and continuity — correspondingly linking the memorial past, existent present and visionary future.

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All my life I have felt close to place. Place speaks. Place talks. In late 1970s my inner quest mobilised my sight and vision for reading the *genius loci* of Varanasi, ultimately trying to interpret and understand the meanings, messages and milieus preserved there; this resulted into a constant march, a never ending journey. On this road while walking, people from different parts of the world joined and made our group a company of seekers, a mosaic of culture, thought and vision. The first and foremost wanderer who inspired and persuaded me to follow this path of sacred journey is my German friend Prof. Niels Gutschow whom I first met during an International Conference on 'Ritual Space in India: Studies in Architectural Anthropology', at Max Müller Foundation, Bombay (Mumbai), 22-25 February 1979; and soon we became co-pilgrims in search of the *genius loci* of sacredscapes in and around Banaras. In the same conference I met two other great personalities who worked on 'sacred space' and also on Banaras, they are Prof. Jan Pieper, and Prof. George Michell. In course of time, I intensively worked together with them and learnt different perspectives to study and understand Banaras. While marching on the above path I met Prof. Axel Michaels in an International Conference on 'Banaras as Place of Pilgrimage', University of Bern, Switzerland, 25 May 1993, with whom I again collaborated from Indian side in his directed project on 'Visualising Sacred pace of Banaras' under the auspices of Heidelberg University (Germany) in 1999-2002. As summing up celebration the South Asia Institute at Heidelberg had organised an International Symposium on 'Visualized Space: Constructions of Locality and Cartographic Representations in Varanasi' during 22-25 May 2002, where I gave a keynote address and benefitted from scholars from all over the world working on Banaras, including so many young researchers.

Banaras: where 'always ready' (*Bana*) is the 'juice of life' (*ras*)! This 'Life-juice' flows in plenitude here in different colours, varying tones, multiple textures and layers, diverse situations, contrasting conditions, etc.; its history is rooted in my own *tour de force* during the last thirty years, 1979–2009. My first paper on Banaras was published in the proceedings-based volume in the *Art and Archaeology Research Paper Series* (London) in 1980, followed with the second paper on Varanasi dealing with geographical space and cognitive maps published in the proceedings in the *Frankfurt Social Geography Series* in 1982. Since then my path has been widened and many companions have joined at different stages, in different turnings and in different ways. During 1998-2000 under the auspices of University of Colorado Project on 'the Cultural Astronomy and Sacred Space in Banaras', I worked with the famous astrophysicist Prof. John McKim Malville, and our collaboration flourished in several publications; this helped us to understand the link between the mythological and the scientific endeavours. During 1999-2003, working in the UK- DFID project on 'Land use changes in the Peri-urban areas around Varanasi' has also helped me in reflecting upon the expansion of the city.

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