

## Introduction

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“If any Hindu were asked offhand which city he regarded as the holiest in India, he would probably hesitate no less in naming Varanasi than the Muslim would in naming Mecca.”

—Agehananda Bharati (1970:107)

Banaras is said to be such a great pilgrimage place that all 330 million Hindu deities have chosen to dwell there. The steady stream of pilgrims underscores its preeminence for Hinduism and makes clear that every day is a special day in Banaras. Its centrality, however, rests on neither its pilgrims nor its deities but instead is of a primordial nature predating even the gods themselves. The place itself is what renders the city sacred; the temples and illustrious inhabitants serve merely to mark the sanctity of the place. Known also as Varanasi, as Kashi (“The City of Light”), and as Avimukta (“The Never Forsaken”),<sup>1</sup> Banaras holds many special meanings to residents and visitors alike. As Kashi, the city is believed to glow with a divine brilliance that rivals the sun; beautiful and holy, it is often personified as a lovely shimmering goddess. The city is Avimukta, for emotional and devotional attachment to it is “never abandoned” by either its divine or human devotees. It is commonplace for Hindus throughout India to identify with the village or town of their birth even decades after moving away. Displaced Banarasis are especially inclined to see themselves as permanent residents of their former community. The special bonding power of Banaras can be so strong that even after a single visit a pilgrim may identify with the city and never feel fully settled anywhere else.

In recent years a number of India’s sacred cities have been the focus of studies by scholars interested in pilgrimage and, more generally,

sacred space. Illustrative of this by now large body of literature are the studies of Bhubaneswar (Seymour, 1980), Gaya (Vidyarthi, 1961), Vrindavan (Brooks, 1989), and three sites in West Bengal (Morinis, 1984). Reflecting the great geographic range, the diversity of goals, and the respect shown this city by her pilgrims, Banaras has attracted the attention of many scholars, including Eck (1982), who has provided an in-depth historical overview of Hinduism in Kashi; Saraswati (1975), who briefly summarized the city's diversity of religious traditions and overseers of religious practices; and Vidyarthi, Saraswati, and Jha (1979), who enumerated the great numbers of individual sacred sites in Banaras and who also reported on the caste and regional backgrounds of priests and pilgrims. Other scholars, while taking a pan-Indian approach in their studies of pilgrimage sites, have acknowledged Varanasi as having special importance (Bharati, 1970; Bhardwaj, 1973). Still others have focused on a prominent aspect of Hindu practice in Banaras; for example, Sinha and Saraswati (1978) reported on the ascetics of Varanasi, and Parry (1980, 1981) detailed the death rituals performed at the sacred burning *ghats* (riverbanks), for which Varanasi is well known even among Western laymen with only a few mental images of India. More recently, the contributors to Freitag's (1989a) edited volume have provided insightful glimpses into many of the innumerable facets of Hindu worship and its relation to power in Varanasi.

Banaras has attracted so much attention among scholars in part because Hindus consider the city to be a microcosm of all of Hindu Bharat, sacred "India." Banaras is believed to contain within its boundaries not only each of the four *dhams*, or principal sacred sites of the cardinal directions, but in principle every major sacred site of the Hindu landscape; shrines and temples named for the distant sites which they represent have been built in the architectural style of those regions. In addition to seeking out revered sites of pan-Indian importance, pilgrims from many parts of the country enjoy the opportunity of visiting temples maintained by priests from their home state and linguistic community (Vidyarthi, Saraswati, and Jha, 1979:38). These regional attachments to Banaras are reciprocated by references to Banaras in temples throughout India; Bharati (1970:107) illustrates these ties with the example of a temple in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu, in which worshipers crawl through a very narrow passage to symbolically represent the effort required to acquire the merit earned from visiting Banaras. In West Bengal several Shaivite pilgrimage sites are claimed to be "mythically identical with Benares" by pilgrims who "seek to validate the reputation of greatness of their places of pilgrimage by associating their sacred centres with the greatest of the *jyotirlingas*

["lingas of light"] and *svayambhuvalingas* [lingas believed to have appeared by themselves in the primordial past]" (Morinis, 1984: 31-32). Banaras is respected as central to, and as the archetypical representative of, Hindu Place. It is isomorphic with the Hindu world; it contains and represents all that is "Hindu." By visiting Banaras pilgrims may have *darshan* (a sacred glimpse) of all sites sacred to Hindus.

Hindus come to Banaras for the full range of rituals associated with the daily, annual, and life cycles. Death rituals in particular are prominent in the city. Its cremation ghats, the Manikarnika and Harishchandra, are required stops for pilgrims and tourists alike. Many elderly Hindus flock to the city in order to die at special hospices where it is believed they will receive the blessing conferred by Lord Shiva on the souls of all who die within the sacred boundaries of his city. Indeed, Banaras is often described as an expansive cremation ground overseen by the great ascetic god Shiva.

But Banaras is much more than a preferred place for Hindus to die. With its profusion of *kunds* (sacred ponds) and three rivers, Banaras is permeated by holy, life-giving waters. It is a special place for the living who pour into the city to live life in the most sacred setting and manner possible. The day begins for many Banarsi Hindus at the numerous bathing ghats along the sacred Ganges River, which attract thousands of visiting pilgrims in addition to pious residents even on nonfestival days. Bathing in the Ganges at Varanasi is believed to be especially purifying and auspicious, in part because the waters touch the holy banks of the refulgent city, situated at its unusual juncture where the Ganga winds northward before resuming its easterly course.

Many of the most common religious activities at Banaras, especially Brahminical traditions modeled according to Sanskrit texts, have been discussed elsewhere. Although these traditions are unquestionably important, Hindu religion is much more than what is recorded in Sanskrit texts and overseen by the Brahmin priesthood. Many nonBrahminical, non-Sanskritic traditions have long been and continue to be of considerable importance to their participants without being accorded scholarly recognition as "mainstream." The point is that in Hindu society outward displays of ritual practice vary widely even within a rather narrowly delimited setting; there are many streams of Hinduism, each with its distinctive characteristics and each in its own way a significant part of the whole.

Attempts to arrive at a holistic understanding of Hinduism are therefore doomed to failure if one defines the search in terms of a few rigidly applied criteria. As Chaudhuri (1979:18) has observed, Hinduism is "a way of life" which, as such, provides guidance for daily life as

well as for larger cycles—the week, lunar month, year, life cycle, and still other temporal frameworks. This is in marked contrast to the worldviews of many modern Westerners, for whom the distinction between sacred and profane tends to be much sharper and religion is temporally and spatially a largely compartmentalized institution. With the much broader scope of religion in India, activities which for Westerners might be secular are commonly viewed by Hindus as sacred, so that the distinction “has very little relevance in the Hindu context, since these are not antithetical in Hindu belief and ritual” (Das, 1977:114). Thus, the study of Hindu ritual practice necessarily extends well beyond temple visits, prayer, and pilgrimage to include what might strike some outsiders as decidedly extrareligious activities: theater, wrestling, language, and so on.

The continued interest in the ways that religious practices in Banaras reflect and shape practices throughout and beyond India prompted us to bring together a collection of readings focusing on the current cultural practices and living religious traditions of that city. Rather than examine Banaras’s place in traditional ideologies, as others have done, or focus on specific contexts of its recent history, such as the politics of power, this volume offers the reader an in-depth view of many facets of current Banarsi culture seldom examined, as well as a thorough treatment of one of the most popular ongoing religious traditions of India as found in the City of Light: the *Ramlila*. The essays here make clear that Hinduism is a complex reality that often integrates the aesthetic, social, economic, political, and “religious” spheres of life.

The diverse themes and fields of the authors of this book are unified in several important ways. Each author provides an understanding of some aspect of Hindu religion as practiced in what is widely regarded as its most sacred center. Together, the individual chapters celebrate the great breadth of religious practice in Banaras. All of the authors have recently conducted fieldwork there and present firsthand observations of its living traditions.

We begin with three explorations of the *Ramlila*, or “play of Ram,” an annual reenactment of Ram’s epic journey as recorded in the *Ramayana*, literally “journeying of Ram.” Although there are many versions of this epic, the *Ramcharitmanas*, composed by the sixteenth century poet-saint Tulsidas, is the regional favorite in Banaras and is the source on which the Ramnagar *Ramlila*—by far the longest and largest of the presentations in Banaras—is based. Richard Schechner and Linda Hess focus on this dramaticization of Ram’s struggle with the demon king Ravana. The Ramnagar *Ramlila* requires thirty-one days for its single annual production, whose scenes shift from place to place

rather than remain confined to a stage in the conventional sense. On some of the more important days, this play is viewed by upwards of seventy-five thousand spectators, many of whom are so engrossed by the events portrayed that they do not distinguish between current and past time, between the actors and the gods they represent, and between spectators of the "play" and witnesses of the "actual events." Staged across the Ganges from Banaras in Ramnagar—literally "Ramtown," a reference to the play—the Ramnagar *Ramlila* is sponsored by the king of Banaras, whose palace is there rather than in Banaras proper, as Schechner notes, for the military advantages afforded by that location. Although the Ramnagar *Ramlila* is the most famous, there are hundreds of performances of the "play of Ram" in Varanasi: Thomas Parkhill examines the great variety of *Ramlilas* held in numerous neighborhoods throughout the city.

Schechner explores the mythological and contemporary significance behind the performance of the *Ramayana* at Ramnagar, presented annually for the past 150 years. The Ramnagar *Ramlila* is at once epic in scale and breathtaking in theatrical detail, reflecting the scale and cultural significance of the *Ramayana* itself. All of the performances of the *Ramlila*, but especially that of Ramnagar, transform observers into what Schechner calls "participant-pilgrims," who over the course of the play follow Ram's *lila* (play) by journeying to many sacred places represented by this particular microcosm of the Hindu world. For the *nemi*, or devotee, what takes place is not mere theater; it is more real than life itself. In elevating the play to "hyperreality," the actors along with observers become participants in the life of Ram, and ritually construct his divine world and actions anew. While the *lila* is actually under way, the *svarups* ("true embodiments") portraying Sita and Ram are Sita and Ram, and the devotees on hand for the performance are the citizens of Ayodhya. As at other *Ramlilas*, the Ramnagar audience actually sees and hears their gods. The *Ramlila* of Ramnagar changes city to theater, and theater to mythic geography, providing the means to bring devotees inside Ram's world to offer them darshan.

In addition to fulfilling communitywide religious functions of the *Ramlila*, the performance at Ramnagar serves a political end for the king of Banaras. Schechner explains that the worldly power of the king of Banaras and the transcendent power of the king of Ayodhya are linked: just as Vishnu-Ram strides through space to reestablish his lawful authority in all the three worlds, so the maharaja of Ramnagar stakes out his territory through the *Ramlila*, proclaiming in effect that the physical landscape and the *Ramlila* belong to him. This occasion for annually reminding his subjects of his authority is neither coincidence

nor casual choice. The spatial isomorphism so prominent in the *Ramlila* is paralleled by the temporal match between the celebration of Ram's power and the king's power. That both are kings, and, like other royal castes throughout northern India, hold weapons *puja* (worship) at this time is further basis for royalty in general and the ruling family in particular to reassert their links to the gods who legitimate their worldly authority. What we see here is a kind of play within the play in which family, caste, and broader Hindu community all have shared bases from which to celebrate the *Ramlila*.

The theme of levels of meaning, so evident in Schechner's opening chapter, is even more pronounced in Hess's discussion of her own journey through the many "frames" of the *Ramcharitmanas*. Banaras, the *Ramcharitmanas*, and the lila are inextricably intertwined, she explains. Participants in the *Ramlila* performance, just like the readers of the *Ramcharitmanas*, are encouraged to give up their preconceived notions of space and time and experience for themselves the divine lila and *maya* (illusion). In the *Ramcharitmanas*, Tulsidas has "found a way not just to tell but to show" what he means. The narrators of Ram's story are themselves players within the lila of the *Ramcharitmanas*; the creation of these multiple narrative frames separates orders of reality, thus permitting the order of "reality" to be thrown into question. And so it is with the *Ramlila*. Just as there is no clear separation of the narrators from the story, so there is no clear delineation between the world and the performance; or between audience and actors. The observers not only see the drama unveil itself to them, but through their actions they participate in and help construct reality. During the course of the month-long play, the "mythic world" becomes progressively more vivid and real, while the "ordinary world" fades into an unconvincing imitation of "reality."

To fully appreciate the social significance of the Ramnagar *Ramlila*, we need to go beyond the enormity of its temporal and spatial dimensions and the importance of its many levels of meaning to view it in its broader social context. As with Banaras in the context of India as a whole, the Ramnagar *Ramlila* is important as much or more for being an archetypal representative of the complex whole of which it is a small part as for its centrality within that whole. Thus, the principle of encapsulated layers of meaning which is so vividly made manifest at Ramnagar is replicated, albeit on a much less grand scale, in hundreds of *Ramlila* presentations performed elsewhere in the vicinity and throughout northern India.

The layered organization of meaning and structure in *Ramlila* performances is reflected in innumerable ways in Hindu culture in the



principle that Dumont (1980:239–45) has identified as “encompassment.” He explains that a concept may operate at different levels of meaning, narrower ones being distinct from and yet incorporated into broader ones. “At the superior level there is unity; at the inferior level there is distinction, there is . . . complementariness or contradiction” (Dumont, 1980:242). For example, *religion* in a more limited sense of such activities as puja and fasting can be seen as distinct from other social institutions of education, politics, and so on. For most “Hindus” their religion is more inclusive. For many, Hinduism is a way of life. Thus, *Hindu religion* in this broader sense encompasses *religion* in the narrower meaning. Dumont’s analytical framework, which is built on layers of meaning, is employed by Ostor (1980) in his study of Hindu ritual practices and is evident in many of the essays in the present volume.

As a microcosm of the whole, Banaras encompasses the Hindu world. However, in keeping with the salience in Hinduism of inclusiveness over exclusiveness, Banaras is not alone in this respect. In fact, microcosms of the whole are present in cultural regions throughout the country (Dimock, 1963:1-5; cf. Morinis, 1984:47), so that even while perpetually encompassing all other sacred sites, Banaras is itself encompassed. What then makes this city so special? Banaras is to the many other sacred pilgrimage sites of India what the Ramnagar *Ramlila* is to the many other performances of that epic play and what the Ganges is to other sacred rivers. More than any other *tirtha* (pilgrimage site), it is looked to as representing the essence of Hindu place, values, and customs; that is, its claim to supremacy lies not in its uniqueness but in the fullness with which it embraces and portrays Hindu place, values, and ways.

The common depiction of Banaras as an embodied being layered in *koshas*, or sheaths, offers a parallel view of layered reality and encompassment. The city is conceived by devout pilgrims as an embodied spirit. As such, like humans, it is layered in five *koshas*. The *koshas* of Banaras demarcate pilgrimage routes around various representations of the city that differ in the size and intensity of the sacred power present (Eck, 1982:350–57). In the middle is the Shiva temple of Madhyameshvara, “Lord of the Center,” which is known as the “navel of Kashi.” The innermost of the *koshas* is Vishvanath, followed by Antargriha, Avimukta, Varanasi, and finally Kashi. Each of these serves as a pilgrimage route. The visitor who has only time to follow one of the smaller routes feels ebullient because the region encompassed is so very sacred. The pilgrim who makes one of the more strenuous journeys around the more extensive *koshas* is pleased to have

been able to encompass the sacred city in a more elaborate manifestation. In the structure of the five koshas, Banaras encompasses itself as well as core ideas of Hinduism. The koshas are five in number, the most sacred number in Hindu cosmology. The length of Kashi, the outermost kosha, is five kroshas (a unit of distance equal to about two miles) and is punctuated by 108 sacred sites, a number sacred in Hindu cosmology as representing the twelve months times the nine *graha* (planets), that is, as representing all of time and space. For this reason, the *Pancha Kroshi tirthayatna* of Kashi or "pilgrimage of the five kroshas," has been a prominent pilgrimage route for many centuries.

Thomas Parkhill shows that just as the Ramnagar *Ramlila* is the means by which the maharaja attempts to "stake out" and sanctify his territory, so the many neighborhood *Ramlilas* are means by which residents ritually claim and maintain their neighborhood in the City of Light as their own Hindu Place. Ordinarily completed over nine nights rather than a full month, the neighborhood *lilas*, like the even grander Ramnagar *lila*, are epic dramatizations that emphatically assert the sacredness of Hindu Place — both in general, that is, of Bharat, or India, and in the specific site of that portrayal: individual neighborhoods for most *lilas* and, in the case of the Ramnagar *lila*, the whole of Banaras.

Banaras is best known as a center of Hindu culture and tradition, but, significantly, fully one-quarter of its residents are Muslims. Her neighborhoods do not divide neatly into discrete Muslim places and Hindu places. Therefore, as Parkhill has found, when some Hindus in Muslim-dominated areas have performed the *Ramlila* to claim and maintain the neighborhood as Hindu Place, their attempts have met opposition from Muslims who see their own sacred places within that space "desecrated." The martial theme of the play is itself a factor contributing to the tension between these religious communities. This tension is paralleled by long-standing interreligious antagonism that has been known to surface elsewhere at the time of other annual reenactments celebrating military heroes, such as during parades honoring monkey general Hanuman, a key figure in the *Ramlila*.

This capacity of rituals to both unite and divide is also evident in disagreements among Hindus over how *Ramlilas* should be performed, Parkhill contends. For some, any perceived innovations in lighting or amplification, script, or personnel—traditionally all male and all Brahmin—change the *Ramlila* from potent ritual into diluted theater, which in particularly degenerate form is referred to scathingly as "disco *lila*." Drawing on his observation of numerous neighborhood *Ramlilas*, Parkhill examines the variations in form and the tensions between those



who find certain changes repugnant and those who welcome innovation. This division within the Hindu community is paralleled in other celebrations elsewhere in northern India in which efforts to modernize religious traditions are viewed as vulgar and insulting to some orthodox celebrants.

Out of consideration for the complexity of the *Ramlila*, with its many roles, days, and sections, several resources have been provided in the Appendices to help orient the reader. The first of these offers a brief description of the key events portrayed on each of the thirty-one days of the Ramnagar *Ramlila*, and the next summarizes the seven *kands*, or sections, of the *Ramcharitmanas* on which this version of the *Ramlila* is based. The third appendix is a glossary of short biographical sketches of the major characters of the *Ramayana*, and the fourth is a glossary of many of the more common terms in the present volume. Other terms used less frequently are defined within the text of individual chapters.

Joseph Alter explores the daily routine and philosophy of life of the Banarsi wrestlers. The Banarsi wrestler lives an ascetic life of discipline for maintaining his health. Through diligent adherence to all aspects of his daily regimen, the wrestler pursues spiritual and social goals through activities which for Westerners are usually individual and mundane pursuits. No part of his routine is considered unimportant. Diet, exercise, defecation, cleansing one's teeth, hair, and body, leisure activities, and sleep are all governed by a set of guidelines specific to the wrestler's regimen. Adherence to this way of life requires an extraordinarily high level of commitment which is reinforced by wrestlers' frequent contact with each other and common repulsion by what they see as decay in Hindu customs and values.

The wrestling and related dietary and other practices that set these men apart from other Hindus are physical expressions of what in fact remains a spiritual quest. This is so because the men see their wrestling—and all that that activity implies—more as a means to discipline, mastery of the body, and spiritual attainment than as an end in itself. Competition is part of the routine, but defeating one's opponent is not a paramount concern. Macho invidious displays of one's physique have no place in these wrestlers' lives. Instead, the Banarsi wrestler employs physical means toward developing spiritual purity in his own life and, in turn, in broader society. Alter asserts that the idealized culture of Banaras in general and the figure of the Banarsi wrestler in particular are each a "somewhat self-conscious response to rampant, generic modernism that threatens to undermine a prized way of life." As Parkhill explains, tradition-minded Banarsis oppose "disco *Ramlilas*"

which make use of electricity for lighting and amplification or which include nonBrahmins and women as players. Like the strong opponents of change in the performance of the *Ramlila*, the Banarsi wrestlers oppose change which could be seen as distractions from a spiritual life; for them degeneracy is found in "Bombay cinema halls" and "disco mentality." These they regard as unwelcome expressions of "crass commercialism and immoral materialism," which make the maintenance of the "idealized Banaras" a greater challenge and all the more significant of a goal. Parkhill relates that when one neighborhood *Ramlila* encountered communal violence, the *Ramlila* organizers spirited away the svarups of the gods on the shoulders of Banarsi wrestlers. Like Hanuman, the epic hero of the *Ramayana* and patron deity of all *akharas* (public gymnasiums for wrestling), Banarsi wrestlers function as self-conscious protectors of the ideal Hindu order against all threats, whether from outside or inside the Hindu fold. The result is that "the moral physique of the Banarsi wrestler takes on the character of an icon juxtaposed to the degenerate world of filmy fashion." In contrast to the degenerate hedonism which they wrestle to oppose, Banarsi wrestlers follow a utopian path of moral physical reform, a path which offers a vision of power, self-control, and devotion for themselves individually but, more importantly, for society as a whole. Theirs is not primarily an individual or physical pursuit; it is a spiritual and overtly nationalistic quest to preserve Hindu customs for the benefit of present and future generations.

Our focus on Hinduism in Banaras is broadened to include the bearing of Hindu and Muslim starting points on the collective memory of relations between these communities. Myth and history are commonly fused in accounts of the deeds of military leaders. The heroes of one side are villains to those on the other. Such divisions are the subject of Mary Searle-Chatterjee's chapter on Hindu and Muslim collective memories of Ghazi Miyan, an eleventh-century Muslim warrior-saint, and Aurangzeb, last of the great Moghul emperors. These figures function as "symbolic archetypes" which are open to interpretation and deliberate manipulation in the writing of history. Accounts vary appreciably even within each religious community as various factions of Hindus and Muslims develop and promote their own particular mythological representations of these figures' histories. As Searle-Chatterjee demonstrates, many of the mythic portrayals of Ghazi Miyan and Aurangzeb by both Hindu and Muslim communities share similar value systems, which ironically leads them to offer conflicting conclusions as to what is historical fact. For instance, Muslim portrayals of Aurangzeb denying his alleged iconoclasm and of Ghazi Miyan

described as a protector of Hindu women against Hindu atrocities reveal a pronounced desire to make both Muslim figures acceptable not only in Hindu society but also within the Muslim community, which has internalized assumptions from the larger Hindu community about acceptable and laudatory values and behavior. Incendiary Hindu indictments of Muslim violence, particularly attributed to Aurangzeb, have been used by various political parties to help win large blocs of communal votes by alienating the two religious groups. Because of the historical importance of Ghazi Miyan and Aurangzeb in their own right but, perhaps more significantly, because of the part their myths play in shaping the collective ego of both religious communities, these myths have evoked strong feelings, including fear, among Muslims, and righteous anger among Hindus, who have valorized their own folk heroes such as Shivaji.

Dana Sawyer has studied in depth the Dandi ascetics, so named for their habit of carrying the *danda* (bamboo staff). From the time immediately following his initiation, "the Dandi will carry this staff without letting it touch the ground for the rest of his life, at which time he will be buried with it." Dandis are an all-male, all-Brahmin sect founded by Shankara, the ninth-century C.E. *Advaita* (literally, "nondual," that is, monistic) philosopher. They are an important sect and are respected for their commitment to Shankara's philosophy and intense asceticism. All Dandis are Brahmins, and most complete the three earlier stages of life of student, householder, and hermit before entering the fourth, that of the *ramta* (wandering) ascetic. Thus, in addition to their orthodox philosophy and rigorous asceticism, the fact that Dandis are high caste and older and more established in society at the time of initiation all contribute to their high prestige among ascetics. Although these basic facts about Dandis are not in dispute, Sawyer is struck by the wide gap between popular images of Dandi monastic practices rooted in the precepts of Sanskrit texts and their actual way of life.

Banaras boasts the largest population of Dandi *sannyasins* (person who has entered the fourth and final stage of life), sheltering some two to three hundred, who are roughly one-quarter to one-half of the total number of Dandis in India and close to a fifth of all the ascetics in Banaras. The wandering of Dandis makes greater precision difficult to obtain. However, as Sawyer points out, the number of Dandis in any one place is ephemeral and therefore not central to an understanding of the Dandis' presence in Banaras. After close observation of dozens of Dandi *maths*, or monasteries, Sawyer recognized a clear disjunction between the ideal monastic structure enjoined by traditional sources

and the actual monastic structure necessitated by what he terms "guruism," or the emphasis of oral transmission as the source of Dandi authority. "Dandi monastic complexes originate and develop around charismatic gurus rising within their brotherhood," with the result that monastic structures are themselves naturally short-lived. Shankara set up principal learning centers headed by Shankaracharyas or "teachers of Shankara," who are always Dandi sannyasins. In principle, Dandis throughout India are to affiliate with and follow the teachings of the Shankaracharyas and be subject to their leadership. However, the actual relation between the maths and these centers is minimal today. In actual practice, maths are only loosely affiliated with Shankaracharyas. The appearance and subsequent rise and decline in the prominence of a Dandi math depend on the charisma and leadership skills of each new guru in charge of the site rather than on leadership exerted at a distant Dandi center. Only rarely are these gurus closely affiliated with the traditional organs set up by Shankara. Dandi maths are established and may rise and soon or eventually fall with the appearance and disappearance of the charisma and leadership skills of the gurus associated with a particular site. Sawyer maintains that Shankara may have been aware of a significant gap between the ideal and the real Dandi monastic structures even during the time of the founding of the sect but that academicians in much more recent times have failed to recognize this distinction. He urges that future scholarship on this sect rely on ethnographic inquiry in addition to textual analysis.

Banaras is known as an ancient site of worship to various deities. However, it is also a living city. Despite the city's great age, very few of her temples are themselves more than several hundred years old. Most of the major temples are reconstructions; others are wholly new structures. Sawyer's observations on the ebb and flow of Dandi maths hold in general for Hindu temples. What begins as a minor worship site of only local interest can develop quickly or evolve more slowly into a site enjoying regional or even pan-Indian prominence. The specific pattern at any one temple reflects changes in the popularity of the principal deity of the site and the popularity of the temple's initial and subsequent priestly overseers. New temples must compete with more established temples for pilgrims' patronage; in order to attract them, religious officiants at the various sites promote their temples as "ancient" or "special." Cynthia Humes examines the traditions of worship dedicated to the increasingly popular goddess Vindhyavasini at six sites in Banaras, paying particular attention to the *mahatmya*, or "glorification," of each place in Kashi believed to be inhabited by this goddess.

Underscoring the principle of inclusiveness in Hindu ritual practice, Humes also points out in her study that a temple constructed near an already prominent temple may benefit from this juxtaposition because visitors to the better-known site may choose to also visit other nearby temples. In fact, throughout the Hindu world and not just in Banaras, the interest shown by visitors in one temple is more likely to heighten than to detract from interest in nearby temples. Newcomers to the study of Hinduism may find this puzzling but need to keep in mind that the Western pattern of nonoverlapping congregations whose members have undivided loyalties does not hold for most Hindus. Instead, the worship sites with which any Hindu identifies are ordinarily many in number and may but need not include a dominant site, may but need not be a well-defined set in the mind and behavior of a given devotee, may but need not remain unchanged over many years, and may but need not match the configuration of loyalties to particular gods and temples that are of special interest to other family members.

The *Kashi Khand*, or "section on Kashi" in the *Skanda Purana*, is one of the most important Sanskrit mahatmyas of Banaras. This purana or "ancient story" describes a temple in Banaras devoted to Durga, known as Vindhyavasini, the Goddess of the Vindhyas. Humes notes that of the six sites where Vindhyavasini is worshiped today in the sacred city, four claim to be the temple mentioned in the *Kashi Khand*. Officiants at the other two temples offer alternate sources of authority to confirm the illustrious origin of their temples in more recent times. These attempts to sanctify particular temples recall the performance of the *Ramlila* not only to honor the gods but also to sanctify worshipers' neighborhoods; both phenomena are ways to establish devotees' sites as sacred Place.

While holding in common the most popular *puranic* myths pertaining to Vindhyavasini, worship of this goddess at her six Banaras temples reveals marked caste and regional variations. One temple in particular, located in the northern part of the city, has become very prominent because of the rising popularity of its "guru," a Khatri woman believed to be blessed with the gifts of divine healing and a special connection to Vindhyavasini. She performs specific Khatri practices at her temple, which have been conducted at the prominent Vindhyavasini temple in the Uttar Pradesh village called Vindhyachal for hundreds of years, and encourages others to do so as well. If her popularity continues, these practices may gain widespread acceptance among devotees of Vindhyavasini belonging to other castes. In another case, economic factors have clearly affected the prominence of a privately

owned "ancient" temple opened to the public in the 1970s in order to obtain donations needed for its physical upkeep and land taxes. Thus the history of the Vindhyavasini temples of Banaras demonstrates that text-based and oral claims of a site's special significance blend with charisma, economic considerations, and location within the broader sacred geography of the city to shape the pilgrimage process.

Ratnesh Pathak and Cynthia Humes discuss worship at the well and temple complex of Lolark Kund, the "Pond of the Trembling Sun," through examination of puranic and folk mythology, historical references, and their own fieldwork. Pathak and Humes first describe this prominent Hindu place and then turn to the variety of functionaries who work there, one of the earliest worship sites in all of Banaras (Eck, 1982:177). Determining the history and understanding the present practices at Lolark Kund are elusive goals which are made difficult by the age of the site, by the fact that much of its history is oral, not written, and by the overlapping meanings and interpretations that are plausible for the same act of worship. Lolark Kund, like the *Ramlila* and the mythic portrayals of Muslim military heroes, is best understood in terms of many layers of meaning, no one of which is unambiguously correct to the exclusion of the others.

Contrary to what one might expect at this temple site ostensibly dedicated to the *aditya* (sun deity) Lolark, today his Lord Shiva, "Lolarkeshvara," is more popularly worshiped. The worship of Surya the Sun, and his many forms, such as Lolark, gradually began to decline in the thirteenth century, just as the popularity of Shiva began to rise. Although most devotees no longer perform the pilgrimage to the twelve *adityas* in Banaras, which involved tracing one's way to this and to the other eleven sites in Banaras associated with each of the twelve portions into which the sun god divided himself, many still frequent Lolark Kund. Why this is so is in part explained by the layering of traditions that have built up at this site. Shared associations with light, fire, and heat, and with benevolence and fertility, have led the Sun and Shiva to become fused to some degree at Lolark. These attributes of those gods make Lolark a center for infertile couples who come for the healing power of the fiery water of the kund, where they bathe and leave offerings which include fruit and vegetables symbolizing the fertility they seek. Many of the women who come to Lolark Kund do so to "marry" Shiva in addition to bathing in the fructifying pond, a symbol of sexual union. This interest in achieving conception through sacred water is an ancient one which draws visitors to other sites in Banaras and peaks at Lolark Kund during the Chath Mela, an annual religious fair that attracts tens of thousands of pilgrims. Many visitors come for



other reasons: there are daily bathers at the nearby Tulsi Ghat who stop by to pay their respects to Shiva at Lolark Kund, and in smaller numbers parents come with their young children who receive *mundan* (ritual first haircut).

The religious functionaries at Lolark include the Brahmin *panda* (pilgrimage priest), *karinda* (Brahmin servant and substitute of the *panda*), *bhaddar* (a lower-ranked Brahmin priest), *Nau* (barber), and *Mallah* (boatman). Pathak and Humes analyze the ritual activities of each specialist, the religious goals and rituals of visitors to Lolark, and the distribution of offerings among the various functionaries. They also give attention to claims that there was a mid-nineteenth-century power struggle between factions of *pandas* seeking control of the site and discuss the establishment of new shrines by *pandas* who appear to have been motivated by economic self-interests. Increases in the size of pilgrimage priests' families have led to economic pressures which have been resolved through increased vigilance over the collection of funds at the temple complex and by establishing new foci of worship at the site. Lolark is attracting a growing number of visitors, especially urban dwellers who are better able to support the site with their offering. Such increases in pilgrims and donations often result in charges that *pandas* are corrupt. These charges are neither more common nor more valid for *pandas* at Lolark Kund than for their counterparts at other major worship sites.

Beth Simon concludes the volume with her treatment of the relationships among language choice, religion, and self-concept in Banaras. Banarsi Boli, the regional dialect of Banaras, reflects longtime Banaras residents' sense of selfhood, their shared culture, and their attachment to Banaras itself. Many Banarsis also maintain ties to other parts of India through their residence in ethnic and linguistic neighborhoods. Through their use and identity with Banarsi Boli, Banarsis are integrated across these regional identities. In addition, Banarsi Boli is a vehicle for integrating Hindus and Muslims into a common community.

Banarsi Boli, however, is commonly regarded as "a kind of Hindi" and consequently is associated with Hindus. This link between language and religion has been both sharpened and obscured by a streamlining of the Census of India categories for recording the mother tongue. Since 1961 the census has merged into "Hindi" eighteen dialects which it previously differentiated. Bhojpuri, of which Banarsi Boli is a variant, is one of those dialects. Also since 1961, the census has distinguished between Urdu and Hindi, which were previously treated as the same. As a result of these changes, the census in recent decades

has shown many fewer bilingual and multilingual speakers, and Hindu-Muslim differences in mother tongue are much greater in recent censuses than in earlier ones. This apparent increase in the ties between language and religion in Banaras and elsewhere in India is due in part to the fact that "Banarsi Boli" is no longer recorded for members of either religious community. Further, since Muslims identify more often as Urdu than as Hindi speakers, introducing the distinction between these close variants of the same language resulted in noticeable linguistic differentiation between Hindus and Muslims in 1961. In more recent decades the number of individuals recorded as Urdu speakers has dramatically increased. These changes in census-taking practices have resulted in distributions that differ considerably from one decade to the next, even though the actual languages spoken may not have changed. The sum of these changes in recording procedures and census results provides an important illustration of our recurring theme of levels of meaning. What for some observers is a distinct language may for others be a dialect. In any event, since Hindi encompasses Bhojpuri, which in turn encompasses Banarsi Boli, the existence and importance of the latter can be overlooked if one views language only in terms of very broad levels of organization.

Simon's discussion of the linguistic diversity in Banaras emphasizes the importance of bilingualism in that city and, more specifically, of the phenomenon of code-switching, which Gumperz (1982:59) defines as "the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems." Simon differentiates between unmarked code-switching, in which movement between Hindi and Banarsi Boli occurs rapidly and unself-consciously within the same sentence, and marked code-switching, in which the speaker makes an intentional shift in order to achieve a purpose, which may be to be more emphatic or to call attention to one's religious or Banarsi identity. The popular use of marked code-switching in Banaras is evidence of overt efforts by Banaris to use language to maintain their identity with Place, whether conceived as shared sacred Hindu Place, or as secular and multi-communal. Especially in its unmarked form, code-switching strongly suggests the presence of a "deep cultural knowledge" of Banaris' unrecognized but strongly felt ties to their city. Shared attachments to Banarsi Boli support common bonds of residents across other lines of cleavage including those of religion, language, and region of origin.

Banaris are continually reminded of their ties to their sacred city through their daily ritual baths, the prominence of many of her temples and other sacred sites, their participation in the *Ramlila* and other annual

festivals, the large number and variety of sect members and religious specialists, the steady stream of pilgrims, and other more subtle means, including their patterns of speech. Each of these themes is the subject of one or more chapters of the present volume. The three opening chapters on the *Ramlila* can most readily be seen as having a related focus. On a more general plane, some of the other chapters are also linked by such recurring themes as the transformation of mundane place into sacred Hindu Place, the fusion between textual and oral traditions, and the tension between those who wish to preserve old ways and those who advocate change. Despite observable differences in ritual practices and even important differences in values, in a very fundamental way, Banarsi Hindus, like Hindus everywhere, display a deeply felt unity amidst diversity within and across their many identities—as individuals, as residents of a neighborhood, as Banarsis, and in still other identities.

### Notes

1. Eck (1982) explains other of the numerous epithets of Banaras, an Anglicized version of *Varanasi*. The origin of *Varanasi* is commonly linked to the names of the rivers Varuna and Assi, which together with the Ganges define its limits (Bharati, 1970:107), but Eck (1982:26–27) suggests a slightly different derivation, that the name comes from *Varanasi*, the earlier name for the Varana River.