



Niels Gutschow

Benares – The Sacred Landscape of Varanasi

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The book gives for the first time a comprehensive view of the complex world of India's sacred place *par excellence*. It discusses the immaterial essence of »place« – which in Benares materializes in the shape of *lingas*, deities, ponds, wells or rivers. Thousands of these places represent *tirthas*, crossings between this world and the other. Since the locative aspect of religion is in constant search of places at which to profit from divine energy, Benares (also known as Banaras, Varanasi, Kashi, Avimukta or Anandakanana) represents the entire universe: the *Cardham*, the four corners of the subcontinent, the seven sacred cities of India, the twelve *lingas* of light, all these and many more are found there.

The imagined landscape is documented by 18th- and 19th-century pictorial presentations, which convey a more powerful message than topographical maps based on »true« distances.

Following the footsteps of pilgrims, the book leads through a sacred landscape that seems almost overloaded with imprints of meaning. Countless *lingas* – stones that embody elements of cosmogony and anthropogenesis, as the French philosopher Jean Malaurie states – echo cosmic power.

Beyond a scholarly presentation of pilgrimages and documentation of their routes the book opens up a new view: visually compelling photographs focus on sacred objects like *lingas* as the objects of worship. The presentation of ritual acts transcends the narrow confines of scholarly discourses and is revealed as art.

Niels Gutschow completed his architectural studies with a PhD dissertation on Japanese castle towns before turning to South Asia as a conservation architect with projects in Nepal (since 1971), and as an architectural anthropologist working in Bhaktapur (Nepal), Puri (in Orissa) and Benares. Gutschow first came to Benares in 1962 as a visitor. He returned in search of sacred places in 1975, but only started to resolve the entire sacred landscape in 1990. Fifteen years were needed to complete a comprehensive survey of the temples and pilgrimage routes. Gutschow teaches South-Asian urban rituals at the South Asia Institute of Heidelberg University, but continues to spend a major part of the year in Bhaktapur, Nepal. Among others, he published *Tempel und religiöses Leben in der heiligen Stadt der Hindus* (DuMont 1993; with Axel Michaels) and *The Nepalese Caitya. 1500 Years of Buddhist Votive Architecture in the Kathmandu Valley* (Edition Axel Menges, 1997). His recent publication *Handling Death* (with Axel Michaels) covers death rituals of the Newars in Bhaktapur.

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The Sacred Landscape of Vārāṇasī

Edition Axel Menges

Dedicated to Kedarnāth Vyās and Rana P. B. Singh

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Rāṅmahalghāt, 15th August 2002, and page 2: Sagareśvara,
in a shrine above Gaurikuṅḍa, 5th November 2003)

All photographs by Niels Gutschow and Stanislaw Klimek

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Foreword

My approaches to Vārāṇasī, Kāśī or Benares correspond to the figure of a spiral that has an unforeseeable number of turns. I seem to draw closer to the centre, to the end of the movement – if there is any some centre at all – yet I am sure I shall never be able to unveil the complexity I encounter. Sometimes I feel as if the consecutive rings of the spiral are confused in space, to my surprise crossing each other.

Mythologically, Kāśī has proved to represent the universe: a vast sacred territory that constantly escapes comprehensive analysis. A territory literally covered by layers and layers of meaning and religious practice – collective as well as individual, of an exoteric or esoteric nature.

My first visit to Benares in July 1962 was of a purely touristic nature and as I was by chance staying with a Christian missionary, I could not have been more removed from what the Gaṅgā communicates. In January 1975, I returned with the specific aim of learning from Benares in order to gain a better understanding of the nature of “ordered space”. My research project in neighbouring Nepal at that time was devoted to the “urban space and rituals of Bhaktapur” and I found myself almost compelled to turn to Benares as the hidden capital of Nepal – at least from the ritualistic point of view.

I was extremely fortunate to have gained access to one of the most brilliant Pandits and scholars of that time, Kubernāth Sukul. Born in 1900 in Allahabad, where his father Śambunāth served the government, Kubernāth studied history and joined the Government Pedagogical Institute in Allahabad before he moved to Vārāṇasī in 1958. He donated the house of his grandfather, Kailāsa Bhavan in Cabargaliya, to the Ramakrishna Mission Hospital while he lived near Brahmāghāṭ, where he died in 1983.

When I met Kubernāth, he had just published his book *Varanasi Down the Ages* (1974) and was in the process of preparing his *Vārāṇasī Vaibhāva* (1977), the pioneering directory of sacred places in Vārāṇasī which he based on topographical maps, traced from the 64 inch map surveyed in 1928–29. Sukul provided me with his many small booklets that listed Bhairavas, Gaṇeśas, and Durgās, and he patiently explained to me how to locate the related temples and shrines. Finally, he presented me with a copy of *Kāśīdarpaṇa*, a ‘picture map’ named *Mirror of Kāśī*, printed on cloth by his grandfather Kailāsanātha Sukula in 1876. This ‘image’ has been hanging on the wall of my study ever since, but it was to take 25 years until, with the help of my friends at Heidelberg University, I was able to contribute to a wider understanding of what Kubernāth’s grandfather wanted to express with the presentation of a “mirror” (*darpaṇa*).

I returned to Vārāṇasī in October 1976 with the express purpose of undertaking the Pañcakrośīyātrā by taxi, but the haste of my venture was corrected by unknown powers that obviously invited a more humble approach at that time. Flooded canals blocked the unpaved road, so I had to wait 15 years for a new chance. In 1987 I returned to roam around the “night of Śiva” (Śivarātri – on the occasion of new moon in February) under the guidance of Elizabeth Chaliier-Visuvalingam, visiting Bhairavas and finally Viśvanātha for *darśana*, “engaging in divine visions”.



Śmaśāneśvara at Gaighāṭ. In the company of thirteen votive lingas while a death ritual (śrāddha) is performed on 17th April 2003.

Below

The large liṅga encircled by a snake, a regular attribute of Śiva, submerged by the floods of the Gaṅgā on 14th August 2002.



*An urban scene: a bull seeking comfort beside a fire at
Brahmāpuri
Photo 11th December 2001*



*Opposite
Babua Pandeyghāt. On the occasion of Sūrya śaṣṭhī (21st November
2001) the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York were
painted onto the paved slope of the ghāt – recalling the tragic event on
11th September 2001.
Photo 9th December 2001*



Kedarnāth Vyās (right) in conversation with Chini Lal Pandya in an arcade of the courtyard between the shrines of *Catuṣṣaṣṭhidevī* and *Bhadrākālī*.
Photo 14th August 2002

The decisive turn in my relationship to Benares occurred in 1990 after Klaus Rötzer made copies of the 64 inch map available to me. Only on the basis of that map, which documented every lane and courtyard of the historic core area, was I able to locate places and map processional routes topographically correct. From the beginning, the aim of this procedure was to compare topographical mapping with pictorial representations of space and to translate topographical reality into diagrams. I undertook my first pilgrimage from 20th to 24th April 1991, during an intercalary month in a leap year – the most auspicious time to perform the *Pañcakrośīyātrā*. I considered myself fortunate to have had Rana Pratap Bahadur Singh as my companion and co-pilgrim (as he used to say). I first met Rana in February 1979 at a conference on “Architectural Anthropology” in Bombay that was convened by Jan Pieper in the Max Müller Bhawan. Born in 1950 in Majhanpura in Bihar, Rana studied geography at Banāras Hindu University, completed his doctoral dissertation in 1974, and has been teaching there ever since. His pioneering article on The Pilgrimage Mandala of Varanasi/Kashi (*National Geographical Journal of India* 33, 1987) tied him inextricably to the sacred geography of Benares.

In the same year, Kedarnāth Vyās published comprehensive lists of groups of gods and goddesses, *liṅgas*, wells and *ghāṭs*, as well as places visited along processional routes (*Pañcakośātmaka Jyotirlinga Kāśīmāhātmya evaṃ Kāśī kā Prācīna Itihāsa*, 1987). He was born in 1932 as the son of Rāmaśaṅkar Śukla and grandson of Vaijanātha Vyāsa (who had inherited the rights of the throne of Muktimanḍapa). After his grandfather died in 1968, Kedarnāth was asked by Pandit Kallulāla Gauḍa to compile a book that would guide pilgrims along the *Antargṛhayātrā* (7th November 1991), *Avimuktayātrā* (8th and 9th February 1992), and *Kedārahayātrā* (21st November 1992). He did not need to carry maps because his topographical knowledge was stunningly perfect. Both the map that provides orientation in this world as well as the map that refers to the inaccessible world beyond visible realities is carried in his mind. With an exceptional pace he moved through the narrow lanes of Benares to arrive at any place we wished to find that stands for “religious translocality” (Michaels 2001, p. 192). Rana and Kedarnāth deserve to be called the successors of Kubernāth Sukul for preserving traditions of place that were only partly transmitted by the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*, the 14th century text that eulogizes the qualities of thousands of locations. After centuries of unrest and destruction, only a fraction of these places can be located in today’s urban topography, which was reconstructed again after the end of the 18th century.

The result of the pilgrimages I undertook in the early nineties resulted in a small booklet published together with my friend, indologist Axel Michaels in 1993 (*Benares – Tempel und religiöses Leben in der heiligen Stadt der Hindus*).

A new chapter in the exploration of Benares opened when Kedarnāth Vyās guided us to the *Pañcakrośī* Mandir while we were performing the *Antargṛhayātrā* in 1991. The temple with its 273 niches turned out to be a “built map”, designed to duplicate the essence of Kāśī’s religious infrastructure on the walls of a single structure. The plan of the temple was surveyed by Bijay Basukala on 12th December



Opposite
Tilabhāṇḍeśvara. A congregation of women, singing devotional songs and dancing in honour of Śiva on the occasion of the last Monday of the month of Śrāvaṇa.
Photo 19th August 2002



Two wall paintings near the temple of Kālabhairava, sponsored by Chota Lal Kesharvani from Calcutta and executed by Gopināth Penter on 7th May 1999.

Above

Śiva's head in the form of a liṅga, the third eye, jñānanetra, in the centre of his forehead, and Gaṅgā originating from a lotus on his head. His son Gaṇeśa rests comfortably in a yoni, the symbol of the female aspect. Gaṇeśa's mount, a rat, is seen among flowers, a conch shell, a garland (rudrākṣamālā) and the water-jar of an ascetic (kamaṇḍalu).

Opposite

Śiva depicted as an ascetic, resting on a tiger skin inscribed in a liṅga, his lithomorphic form that demonstrates the generative principle.

Photos 17th August 2002

1993, drawings of all niches followed in 1999, and the sections of the temples were completed in December 2000. The reading of the inscribed evidence started in 1993 and could only be completed after the analysis of a recording on 23rd February, 2000, that also provided the correct sequence of niches according to the daily circumambulation performed by the priest in charge, Puruṣottam Lal Dīkṣit.

In the meantime, an interdisciplinary research project was set up at Heidelberg University under the title "Visualized Space". The first motive for this was to shed light on the *Kāśīdarpaṇa* in order to understand the origin, meaning and possible function of the pictorial map that had fascinated us over a period of 25 years. After more elaborate maps emerged from the Victoria & Albert Museum in London and from the National Museum at Delhi, it became clear that we would be dealing with hitherto unknown realities. The rules of the two-dimensional codification of these maps had to be unveiled. The indologist Birgit Mayer-König and historian Nutan Śarmā laboured away deciphering Kailāsanātha Sukula's "written map", which since early 2002 is available as an interactive CD accessible in the internet¹. Jörg Gengnagel, also an indologist, concentrated on the London and Delhi maps in the light of literary sources, while Axel Michaels worked on aspects of Sukula's and Kṛṣṇacandra Śarmā's maps. The anthropologist Martin Gaenzle covered the Nepalese microcosm of Benares, which can be traced throughout its centre, and the art historian Joachim Bautze concentrated on pictorial representations – water colours, wood and steel engravings, lithographs and early photographs of Benares.

The scope of my work widened when in 2000 panoramas of the 19th century surfaced at the British Library and the Museum der Kulturen in Basel. Subsequently, Stanislaw Klimek, a photographer from Wrocław, produced a full panorama of the Gaṅgā view, based on 108 individual photographs taken on 21st November 2000.

This diary of events and work schedule explains how the current volume evolved into a presentation of mental, built and topographical maps, images, and finally panoramas which at times also wanted to be understood as maps.

As indicated before, my work would not have been possible without the almost devoted patience of my revered co-pilgrim Rana P. B. Singh and the guidance of Kedarnāth Vyās. The Nepalese team, Anil and Bijay Basukala and Nutan Śarmā, accomplished detailed architectural surveys in order to present 'places' within their built context. Rabindra Vasavada and Hemant Sarna were helpful companions during final fieldwork in April and November 2003.

The team in Heidelberg stimulated the ongoing discussion and enabled me to look beyond the narrow confines of my trade as an architectural historian, and the German Research Council (DFG) kindly supported the ongoing research from 2000 to 2002.

