

*Kashi*  
UnSacred ~~Varanasi~~:

*constructing politicized identities.*

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## **Abstract:**

This research diverges away from the sacred narratives which have rendered Varanasi as an ahistorical spiritual construct, and delves into the operative realm of embodied identity politics. With the aim to broaden scholarship which *frames* the intersectionality of political-power, ideological representation and the built environment, this investigation focuses on the politicized appropriation of *Kashi* by the in-power right-wing government under the leadership of India's prime minister, Sri Narendra Modi. Through the articulation of this politicization, the dissertation reveals the masked ideological agendas of the bodies in power which simulate an image of *Hindutva*.

Employing the events revolving around the Kashi Vishwanath-corridor Temple precinct complex as the nexus of analysis, the research contextualizes the bodies in power, in activated sacred space. The research unravels the underlying socio-political and economic structures which lay dormant, but feed the projected timeless narratives of Varanasi. Through the lens of the Kashi-corridor project, the analysis also sheds light on the re-activation of the hegemonic structures of *caste* and *religion* which appendage post-democratic and post-secularist narratives, subverting the voices of bodies positioned in alterity.

By deconstructing the iconography and iconopraxis revolving around the Kashi-corridor precinct, I explore larger existential conditions at global, national, local and bodily scales through the activation of *Identity-politics*, *Body-politics*, *Theo-politics*, and *Noo-politics*, along with the representation of power through the projected built. The archival objects of study originate from varied material sources like images, newspaper-articles, political-speeches, public-presentations, the constructed and even the deconstructed environments. By articulating and unpacking these evidential artifacts, this dissertation surfaces the apparently peripheral threads which are critical to the *sacred* project.

Key Words: Narendra Modi, sacred, identity politics, body-politics, theo-politics, noo-politics, gestures, ideological representation, post-secularism.



*fig.a Narendra Modi Performing the Bhoomi Poojan of the Kashi-Corridor Temple Precinct in Varanasi with the Gyanvapi Mosque in the backdrop, 8 march,2019.*

## *Kashi* UnSacred ~~Varanasi~~:

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*The strikethrough on Varanasi is an act of erasing specific identities of the city to produce a unilateral narrative, strengthening the cause to a Hindu Nation state. Kashi is the archaic name of Varanasi before the Mughal invasions which reinforces the claim to Hindutva.*

## Introduction

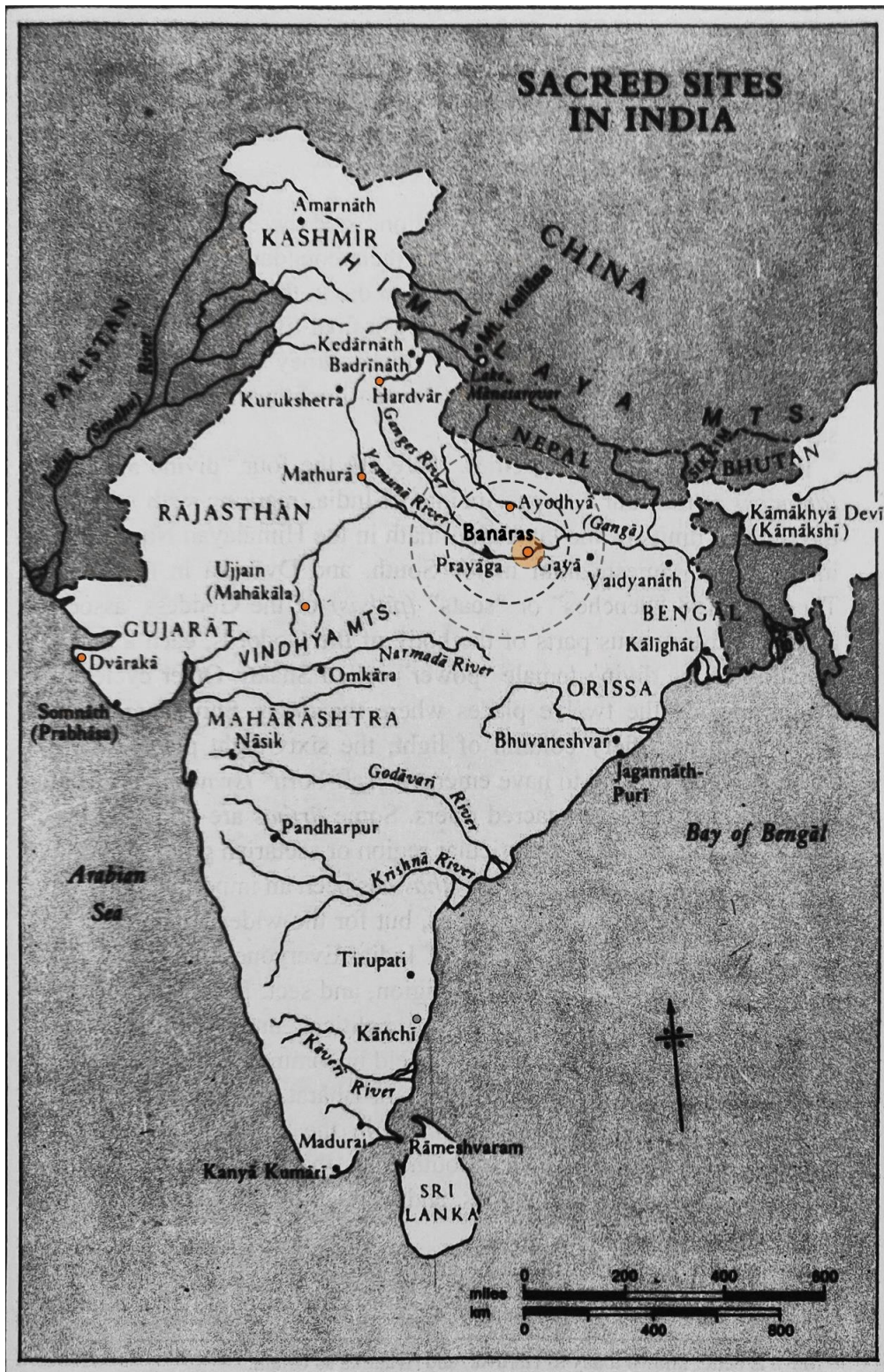


fig.1 The holy Saptapuri temple towns marked in orange.



Fig.2 Image of Lord Ram and Ram Mandir in Times Square, New York, 5<sup>th</sup> August, 2020.

*The course of history . . . can really claim the thinker's attention no more than the kaleidoscope in the hand of a child, where all the patterns of order collapse into a new order with each turn . . . The ideas of those in power have always been the mirrors, thanks to which the picture of an 'order' came about . . .*

*- Walter Benjamin, 1972.<sup>1</sup>*

As I am writing this essay, the echoes of the chants of 'Jai Shree Ram!' are pulsating through the streets of India. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of August, 2020 amidst the pandemic, Narendra Modi performed the bhoomi poojan<sup>2</sup> and laid the foundation stone of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. An image of Lord Ram along with a 3-D rendering of the proposed grand temple beamed on a massive billboard in Times Square, New York (fig.2). Ayodhya, one of the Saptapuri temple towns in U.P, India (Fig.1), is the birthplace of Lord Ram according to Hindu mythology, where pilgrimage provides you *moksha*.<sup>3</sup> Indologist Hans Bakker had concluded that there might have been a temple at the supposed birth spot of Ram built by the Gahadavalas.<sup>4</sup> Under the rule of Babur, the founder of the Mughal empire, this temple was demolished and the *Babri Masjid*<sup>5</sup> was built on the exact site in the sixteenth century (fig.3). The site had been under strict surveillance and constant political unrest due to its contentious

<sup>1</sup> Kim Dovey and Eka Permasari, 'New Orders', *Becoming Places*, 2010, pg. 153.

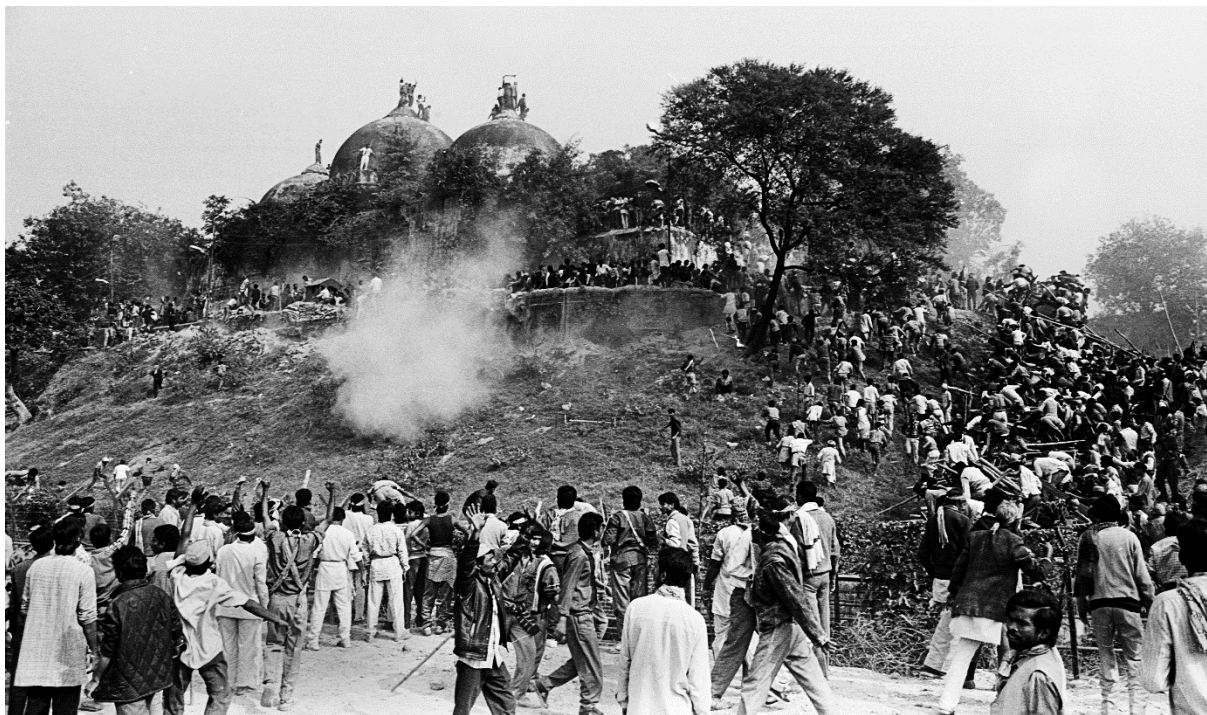
<sup>2</sup> A customary ritual of worshipping the land on which you build.

<sup>3</sup> Moksha: liberation, the transcendent state attained as a result of being released from the cycle of rebirth.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Teye Bakker, 'Ayodhyā: A Hindu Jerusalem: An Investigation of 'Holy War' as a Religious Idea in the Light of Communal Unrest in India', in *Holy Ground: Where Art and Text Meet* (Brill, 2019), pp. 55–78.

<sup>5</sup> Translation: Babur's Mosque

history, which has been a cause of riots and vandalism in various parts of the country. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of December, 1992, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP)<sup>6</sup>, headed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) lead a rally of over 150,000 VHP workers at the site of the mosque for its *reclamation*. The mosque was attacked by the *sevaks*<sup>7</sup>, overpowering the heavily armoured



*fig.3 The Babri Masjid before the demolition. fig.4 The violent attack on the Babri Masjid on 6 December, 1992 when the mosque was demolished. The positionality of bodies equipped with sacred symbols of Hinduism on top of the masjid domes, assert the forces of 'power over.'*

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<sup>6</sup> Vishwa Hindu Parishad is a radical right wing organization led by the RSS.

<sup>7</sup> The term *sevak* in the Hindi language is used to denote a male servant or especially a male attendant in a temple responsible for performing or assisting with the daily rituals of worship. Calling the party workers as *sevaks* positions the work done by them as an act in devotion to god, a mode of theocracy.



security and demolishing the mosque in a matter of hours, even after the stay order from the supreme court for its preservation (fig.4). The act of demolition was the ultimate event in the strenuous struggle for the representation of *theological identity* through the built fabric. Ironically, as the monument symbolic of destruction, was erased through destruction, there were chants that reverberated throughout the country, 'Ayodhya to sirf jhanki hai, Kashi, Mathura baaki hai!' <sup>8</sup>



*fig.5 Varanasi Rally Narendra Modi, 2019. Standing tall above, with the working class looking up, leading the entire rally and projected as the Head.*

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of May, 2019, Sri Narendra Modi was sworn in for the second consecutive term as the prime minister of India. The BJP under the vision of Narendra Modi, replicated its 2014 win in the Lok Sabha elections by surpassing its previous tally, and obtaining a sweeping majority of 353 of the 543 seats, forming the largest single majority government since 1984.<sup>9</sup> After a very *popular* stint as the chief minister of Gujarat for over 14 years, Narendra Modi has gained mass-popularity for his decisive policies supporting anti-corruption and neo-liberalism under the umbrella of 'vikaas'<sup>10</sup>. Feeding this populism, while hiding under these narratives, are the not so hidden neo-nationalist canons which have been mobilized, surfacing right-wing leanings. From *reclamation* of Hindu identities through the return to the archaic names from the Mughal renamed cities (Allahabad to Prayaagraj), the

<sup>8</sup> Translation: *Ayodhya is a mere peek, Kashi and Mathura, we still seek!*

<sup>9</sup> The BJP is a right-wing political party with strong ideological affiliations to the Hindu Nationalist, conservative and paramilitary volunteer organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)<sup>9</sup>, which Narendra Modi joined at the tender age of eight.

<sup>10</sup> Vikaas: growth. The notion of 'growth' is a very contentious in its very grounding in the Indian context. The recurrent use of the term in Modi's orations is critical in the stabilization of his intentions.

passing of the *Citizenship Amendment Act*<sup>11</sup>, the clearance by the supreme court for the *reconstruction* of the temple for Lord Ram over the ruins of the Babri-Mosque, to having priests and religious heads of Hinduism in positions of power, the BJP has been strengthening its propaganda around a *Hindu Nation state*. Modi's exponential rise to popularity can be accredited to a multi-faceted form of politics, with the activation of place, identity and media, at its nexus.

**'Meri Kashi'**  
Expansion of three National Highways to Varanasi & Varanasi Ring Road  
**₹4000 Cr**

Kashi Vishwanath Temple to Ganga Ghats corridor  
**₹600 Cr**

Four-lane highway from Varanasi Airport to City  
**₹800 Cr**

Mahamana Pt Madan Mohan Malviya Cancer Centre & Homi Bhabha Cancer Hospital  
**₹600 Cr**

Sewage treatment plant in Varanasi  
**₹533 Cr**

Trade Facilitation Centre  
**₹305 Cr**

Varanasi Convention Centre  
**₹185 Cr**

Drinking Water scheme  
**₹131 Cr**

36000 LED street lights, 3500 Heritage poles  
**₹27 Cr**

Expansion of Panchkoshi Parikrama Marg  
**₹100 Cr**

Varanasi CNG programme  
**₹50 Cr**

Improving 27 city roads  
**₹28 Cr**

**PM'S KEEN EYE ON INFRA PUSH IN UP**

**Azamgarh**  
As PM Narendra Modi inaugurates/lays the foundation of a slew of projects, and addresses rallies in Azamgarh, Varanasi and Mirzapur on Saturday and Sunday, the focus will be on BJP's political agenda ahead of Lok Sabha elections. TOI brings you some aspects associated with the 3 districts ahead of the PM's visit

- Parliamentary constituency of SP patriarch Mulayam Singh Yadav
- The region is an SP-BSP stronghold. In 2017 assembly elections, BJP won just one of nine seats. SP won five and BSP three
- Area is dominated by OBCs (40%). Dalits make up (18%) and Muslims (16%)

**What's in store**

- An important gateway to east UP, it falls almost in the middle of the 340km-long Purvanchal Expressway, the foundation of which will be laid by PM Modi on Saturday

**Mirzapur**

- The parliamentary seat of Apna Dal conducer and Union minister Anupriya Patel won four, and Apna Dal one
- House to Hindu shrine of Vindhychal
- Dominated by Dalits and tribals, borders MP where state elections are due later this year

**What's in store**

- PM to inaugurate Bansagar Dam, constructed at a cost of ₹3,500 crore during his visit

**Varanasi**

- Parliamentary seat of PM Narendra Modi
- BJP and its allies Apna Dal and SBSP swept all seats in 2017 UP elections. Of eight seats, BJP won six while Apna Dal and SBSP claimed one each

**What's in store**

- PM Modi is expected to inaugurate over 30 projects, including a ring road and Urja Ganga (gas pipeline project)
- The district is proposed to be connected with Purvanchal Expressway through national highway

fig.6 Newspaper clippings from the Economic times and Hindustan times showing Modi's economic investment in UP and Varanasi.

In 2014 and 2019, Narendra Modi stood for the Lok Sabha elections from the *sacred* city of Varanasi, and won both times with a handsome majority. One of the holiest cities of India (fig.1), Varanasi locates itself on the banks of the pious Ganga, where the river takes a bend. Fabled as the timeless city floating over earth, the abode of Lord Shiva, Varanasi is the proclaimed center of the universe in the Hindu tradition. The city has always been a prominent *theological center*, attracting visitors from all across the globe as a representation of the quintessential embodiment of Hindu spirituality. The election of Modi has lent renewed patronage to the sacred Hindu narratives in the context of Varanasi and to the revival of the myth of an *uncontaminated culture*. The notion of place and place-making is a critical domain which has been activated repeatedly by the Modi government under the umbrella of *growth and development*. Since his arrival, Varanasi has received an infrastructure boost worth over three billion pounds, with the projected intentions of

<sup>11</sup> To know more about the CAA: <http://egazette.nic.in/WriteReadData/2019/214646.pdf>

transforming the archaic city into a globally accessible and developed ‘*smart city*’<sup>12</sup> (fig.6). But this development is not a neutral entity, it is drenched in the polarized colours of politics, mobilized for the *stabilization of culture*, which fixes meanings through the inertia of the invested economic capital. The city has operated like a ‘*palimpsest*’<sup>13</sup>, an old parchment that has undergone cyclic processes of imperfect erasures, exposing the suppressed layers of space and time (fig.7). Negating these cyclic processes, is an emergent *sacred project*, the Kashi-Corridor Temple precinct. This research revolves around this very important piece of that parchment, which has undergone perfect erasure and is being reconstructed as a politicized representation of Hindu antiquity on a *tabula rasa*. Envisioned and personally supervised by Narendra Modi, the project is an urban insert, connecting the Kashi Vishwanath temple to the banks of Ganga (fig.8).



fig.7 The built fabric of Varanasi operating as a palimpsest and revealing the juxtapositioning of space, time and culture.

The ideation of place cannot be reduced to a neutral, abstract arena where the everyday manifests. Places symbolize ‘*socially constructed identities and differences - of persons, cultures, institutions and nations*’<sup>14</sup> which can be activated as political landscapes. The Modi Government has been actively commissioning culture so as to embed their political projects and values into socially meaningful forms designed to help create and mobilize national publics. Also, the elite practice of place-making cannot be rendered merely as a problem solving tool through its satiation of function and program. When place-making is activated by bodies in power, these notions surface contestable positions towards unambiguous representations of the socio-cultural landscape. The built environment demonstrates the power of the individuals responsible for their creation and also the nature of that power. ‘*The nation is a narrative performance*’<sup>15</sup>, which Modi has mobilized through the built environment and the selective projections in the media, which form the objects of analysis for this essay. This research aims to demystify the inherent threads which tie Architecture and the politics of power and propaganda in the current Indian context, through the appropriation

<sup>12</sup> Recurrent use of *smart city* on the billboards within Varanasi position Modi as a harbinger of growth, hiding the politics of difference.

<sup>13</sup> Diana L Eck, *Banaras, City of Light* (Columbia University Press, 1999),pg. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Kim Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form* (Routledge, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Homi K Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (Routledge, 2013).

of Varanasi and its built fabric. The past few years since Modi has been in power, have been very critical in the activation of the antiquity of Varanasi as a political construct, and transforming it into a live site for the praxis of various forms of radical politics.

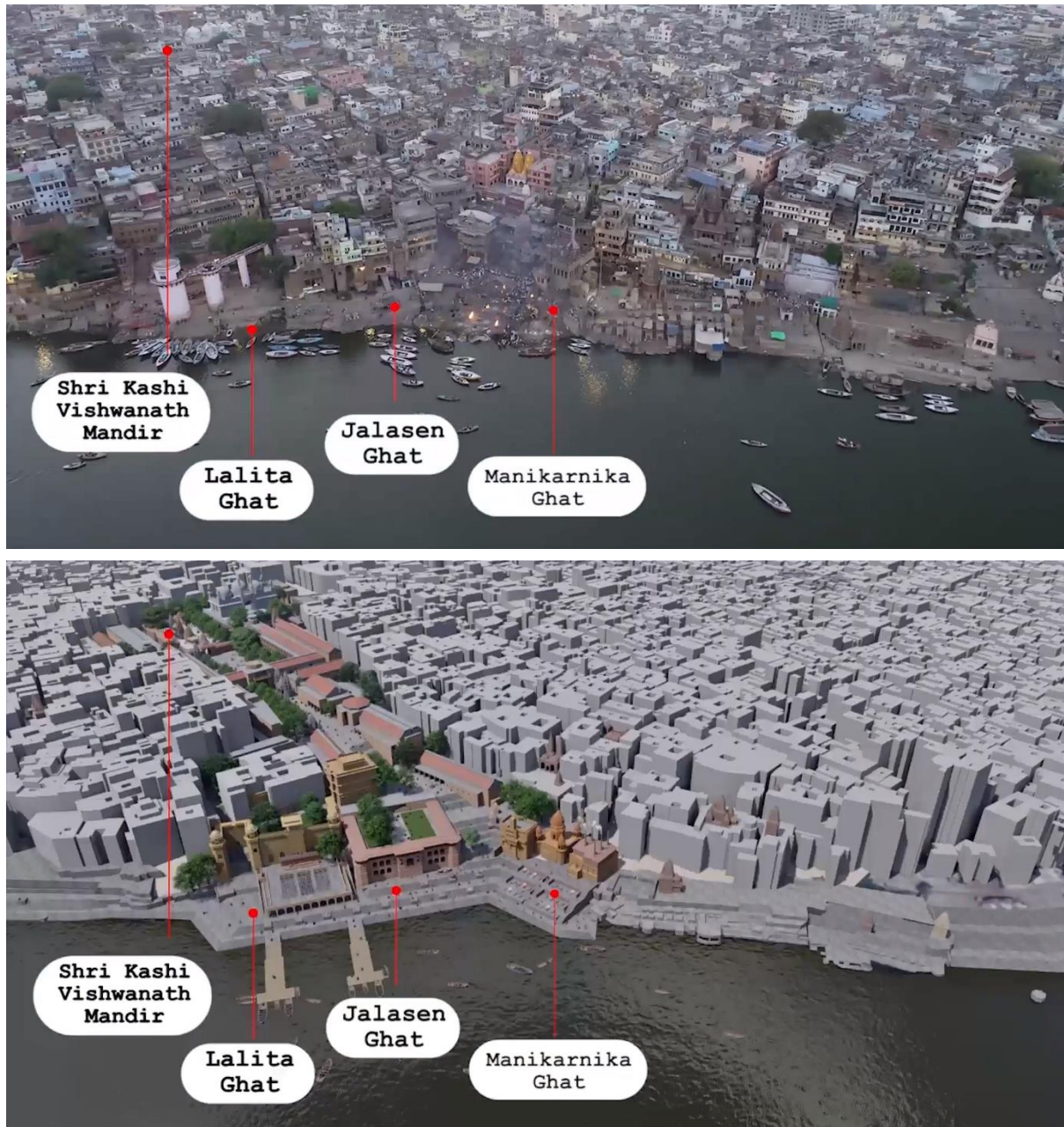


fig.8 The proposed design for the Kashi Vishwanath-corridor Temple precinct complex.

The unilateral narratives of the *eternal sacred* have abstracted the concrete manifestation of Varanasi to an extent that they have shadowed the embedded pragmatic socio-cultural structures of politics. Diana Eck mentions in the book *Banaras City of Light*<sup>16</sup>, how Varanasi

<sup>16</sup> Eck.

was '*rarely an important political center*'<sup>17</sup>, and the rise and fall of kings through its long history has had no role in the tale of the city's sanctity told by its *own* people, and this tale has received new found patronage in the emergent narratives around the city, with the Kashi Vishwanath Temple, at its nexus. The recent scholarly discourse around Varanasi by Madhuri Desai, has shed light on the '*cultural and political tensions*'<sup>18</sup> that persisted between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to produce a heterogeneous physical construct. This research furthers this discussion in shifting away from the spiritual narratives, and materializing a current moment in its political realization, and surfacing why the city is a potent site to explore various forms and scales of ideological representations.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

The atmosphere in India since the rise of the radical right-wing conservative politics has carved a potent space for the exploration of the intersectionality of place, projection, power and politics. Just like the polytheistic traditions of the Hindu belief system, power also manifests in several dimensions. The practices and mediations of power are malleable and fluid and many a times masked. Through this essay I intend to localize various forms of power which are constructed from the '*contingencies of site and society*,'<sup>19</sup> activated through the multi-valent forms of politics, and elucidate the processes revolving around the built environment in the production of place, in an *old-new space*. Employing the kaleidoscopic lenses of urban sociology and ethnography, architectural history, and various forms of politics in the localized Indian context, I ask the following questions: How do bodies in power mobilize place-making, iconography and iconopraxis for the construction of identities and to assert power? How does the current ruling body in India practice bio-politics by employing the Hindu narrative attached to Varanasi to strengthen the claims to a Nation state? How does this rhetoric subvert the voices of peoples who find themselves at the bottom of its hierarchical structures?

With the temple-precinct project still under construction, I analyze the events leading up to its construction, to decolonize Varanasi from its sacred narratives, and transcend it into the realm of the real. The research is structured to shed light on how events revolving around the Kashi-corridor project are activated as portal objects in larger narratives of politicized representations in place and time. To produce the final image of the jigsaw puzzle, one starts at the edges. In a similar way, the essay is divided into four sections where each section caters to one event each: 1. The Selection of the site, 2. The process of land acquisition and demolition, 3. The publication of the design, and 4. The foundation laying ceremony. The events are all relatively closely bound, yet they act as triggers to various temporal shifts ranging from the Mughal to the present time scale. The essay constructs itself around identitarian ideas that are mapped onto territories at operative scales which vary from the bodily to the global. Every chapter manifests as two parallel journeys in which the close analysis of the specific event in the current historiographical moment in time, carves an entry

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<sup>17</sup> Eck.

<sup>18</sup> Madhuri Desai, *Banaras Reconstructed: Architecture and Sacred Space in a Hindu Holy City* (University of Washington Press, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Kim Dovey, *Becoming Places: Urbanism/Architecture/Identity/Power* (Routledge, 2009).

point into the multifaceted edifice of iconography and icono-praxis at larger scales. Each chapter focuses on a specific form of power, which acts as a scaffold around which broader discussions are constructed.

Chapter one, 'The Location of Struggle: *The identity-politics of place*', is the entry point into contextualizing the site through its layers of historicity. Following the Foucaudian approach, it examines general history that includes segmentation, discontinuity, and its inherent contradictions. The section lends voice to the diasporic roots of the oriental *other*, and brings these ethnographic discussions in context. Employing the conceptions of *cultural hybridity* and third space by Homi Bhabha<sup>20</sup>, I challenge the unilateral narratives of Hindu Varanasi and bring into focus the politics of recognition in a religiously inflected post-colonial context. Mobilizing the concepts of identity politics and mutual contamination, this chapter sheds light on identity-politics a post-secularity.

Chapter two, 'Bodies of Resistance: *The body-politics of caste*', sheds light on the events revolving around the land acquisition processes in play, for the construction of the temple precinct. The acquisition and demolition of the *unsacred* buildings from the context also involved the displacement of oppressed bodies, that are sites on which social constructions of differences are mapped. The chapter explores the forces of surveillance and authority by tracing the ideological intersectionalities between the concepts of Michel Foucault's *body politic* and the hegemonic structures of *caste* which prevail in the Hindu Tradition. Employing the concepts of *hegemony* by Antonio Gramsci and locating the *subaltern* in the context of Varanasi, the chapter surfaces the practice of the radical politics of subversion.

Chapter three, 'Aesthetics of Democracy: *The Theo-politics of architecture*', explores the published design of the Kashi-corridor precinct along with the selection process of the architects involved in the project. Employing the concepts of *framing*<sup>21</sup> by Kim Dovey to surface the nexus of architecture and power, I closely unmask the role of the *design gestures* in producing selective identities. The chapter borrows from Walter Benjamin's concept of the aesthetization of politics in his critique of fascist regimes which unpack ideological intentions in the construction of national identity.

Chapter 4 'Megalo-media: *The Noo-politics of representation*' takes Modi's speech on the foundation ceremony of the Kashi-corridor project as the point of departure and explores the role of image and media in the assemblage of politics and iconopraxis. I deconstruct artefacts projected in media like newspaper articles, political speeches and billboards to surface practices of soft power and *noo-politics*. Exploring the values derived from speculative place-oriented boosterism<sup>22</sup>, the section also sheds light on how the bodies in power are activating the *sacred* project of the image saturated landscape of Varanasi for the processes of *Nation Branding* and projecting a selective image of what *India* is, in the pursuit of National Utopia.

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<sup>20</sup> Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (routledge, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form*.

<sup>22</sup> Kajri Jain, 'The Hand Bag That Exploded: Mayawati's Monuments and the Aesthetics of Democracy in Post-Reform India', *New Cultural Histories of India: Materiality and Practices*, 2014, 139–79.

The chapters in themselves might appear as disparate entities which might not homogenize, but the seemingly divergent theoretical discourses of these different knowledges, soundly based within their own paradigms, may be useful to a multiplicitous understanding of built form. Such a pluralism is especially necessary for a multi-faceted interpretation of reality and its projected representations. The practices of power as mediated in built form are multi-dimensional, they cannot be simply addressed as forms of representation, lifeworld experiences or spatial structure; rather places are constructed, experienced and understood within the tension between these paradigms.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the intention of this essay is not describing the linear history of the construction of the built environment, but instead surfacing the discursive *vertical* ideas and perceptions that shape the transformation of the built environment as a *material document*.<sup>24</sup>

Throughout the research, I mobilize Soja's conceptualization of *third space*, that comprehends the dualism of both the material and intelligible dimensions of spatiality and look for multiple perspectives to construct the knowledge of spatiality. This essay is not envisioned as a pessimistic critique of the temple precinct or the bodies in power, but rather the intentions are to produce a multifaceted understanding of the agency of image and built form in activating multivalent forms of power. With democracies all over the world observing a shift towards the ideologies of right-wing populism, the critical examination of social structures as products of power relations between hegemonic and subordinate cultures and its reflections in spatial constructions, positions the research within the domain of this leitmotiv of contemporary post-colonial political scholarship.

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<sup>23</sup> Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form*.

<sup>24</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Archaeology of Knowledge', *Information (International Social Science Council)*, 9.1 (1970), 175–85.

## The Location of Struggle: *Identity-politics of place*



fig.9 Manikarnika ghat, 1905. The image reveals one of the many instances of the juxtaposition of the various layers of topography, economy, rituals, the built fabric and the spectacle of everyday life.

Kashi. Avimukta. Anandavana. Rudravasa. Mahashmashana. Banaras. Benares. Bunarus.<sup>25</sup> The multiplicity of names only scratches the surface of how deeply layered and complex Varanasi is as a symbolic, phenomenal and embodied urban construct (fig.9). To grasp the identity-politics of place embedded in Varanasi, one must uncover the historical layers leading into its construction. The city has grown radially outwards where the earlier settlements developed around the three hillocks, Vishveshwara, Kedareshwara and Omkareshwara (fig.10). The topographical features have an embedded microcosmic order which have come to define Varanasi through the narratives of *sacred geography*. The city itself is a multi-nucleated labyrinth of journeys, where the narrow serpentine lanes produce a dense juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane, where the rituals of theology coexist with the rhizomatic practices of everyday life. These pathways intersect with circumambulatory routes which symbolize zones of increasing sanctity (fig.10), piercing through the urban fabric of the city. The fabric trickles down towards the river, where the city meets the riverbank at the threshold of the stepped ghats. There are 87 ghats on the banks of Ganga, all

<sup>25</sup> Kashi: the city of light, Avimukta: the never-forsaken, Anandavana: the forest of bliss, Rudravasa: the city of Shiva, Mahashmashana: The great cremation ground, Eck.



with a unique character reflecting upon the various patrons who have produced individuated expressions of the different sects, none of them older than 1600 AD. The ghats when seen at a macro scale, produce a panorama that reveals the hybridity of antiquity and relative modernity in the built fabric, negating the narratives of Varanasi being ‘*older than legend and history combined*’<sup>26</sup>. The recent scholarship around the actual built fabric of Varanasi has surfaced the Colonial and Islamic *contaminations*<sup>27</sup> inflicted upon the cultural wealth and character of the city, surfacing inherent flaws in the timeless narratives of the proclaimed ‘*living text on Hinduism*’<sup>28</sup> revealing syntactical *errors* which make apparent the *cultural pollution* of the unvarying urban fabric.

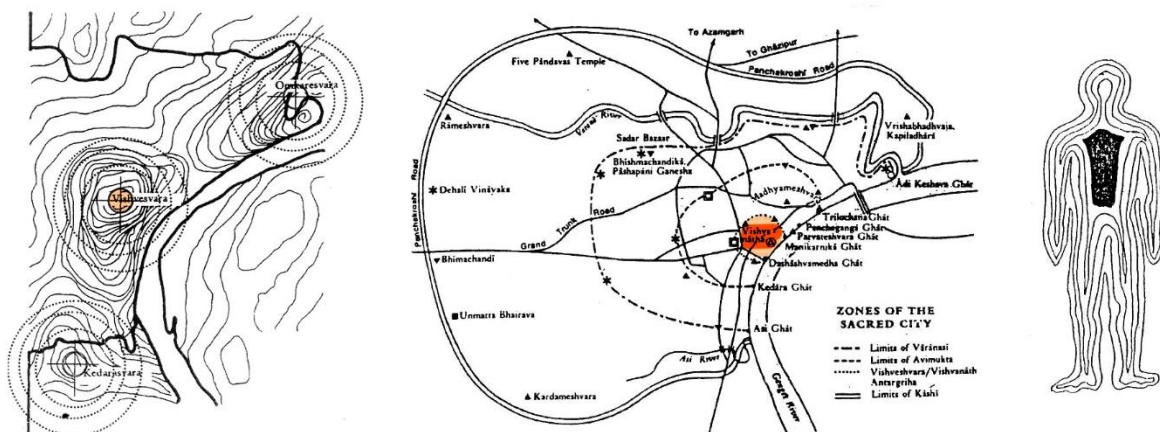


fig.10 Mapping the sacred geographies of Varanasi, and the layers of circumambulatory pilgrim routes symbolising the five sheaths of the human body i.e. the bodily order is mapped on the topological order. Vishveshwara temple marked in orange positions itself as the core of the human body on the urban scale.

However, these universal narratives of eternal Varanasi are plagued with discrepancies which surface the tale of destructions and reconstructions when the layers of history are unmasked. Varanasi over centuries, has been subject to waves of Islamic invasions in the pursuit of theological, economic and physical domination. But the reduction of its constant destructions and reconstructions to Islamic invasions conjures a reductive image of the interaction between the two dominant religions of India. Even though the Invasions were symbolic of the hegemonic intentions of projecting theological-supremacy, many aspects of the evolving Hinduism were materialized under the reign of the inclusive minded Islamic rulers<sup>29</sup> which has been critical to the stabilization of the Hindu Tradition. The puranas<sup>30</sup> written in the context of Kashi are often articulated as fabled representations of negotiated pasts. These

<sup>26</sup> Mark Twain, *Following the Equator: A Journey around the World* (Courier Corporation, 1989).

<sup>27</sup> The bodies in power are projecting the ‘other’ built fabric contaminating the archaic hindu realm.

<sup>28</sup> Eck.

<sup>29</sup> The argument developed in the essay in no ways intends to legitimize these oppressive forces of invasion or mask the hegemonic forces in play, but rather acknowledge the presence of parallel narratives which feed into the construction of the socio-spatial domain, which the bodies in power are trying to suppress.

<sup>30</sup> Collection of mythological tales which were the foundations for the dissemination of the Hindu religion.

myths were concretized in various khands by many authors who approached these puranas selectively, producing multivalent identities of Varanasi, pointing towards a perpetually mobile and fluidic nature of culture. The *Kashikhand* of the Skanda Purana<sup>31</sup>, the seminal collection of texts which documented the sacred geographies and established many of the ritualized practices of the Vishveshwara tradition, was composed in the political context where the reign of Indo-Islamic Tughlaq and Sharqi sultans was conducive to the growth and proliferation of pilgrimage in Varanasi.<sup>32</sup> Two of the largest temples in Varanasi were built in the 15th and 16<sup>th</sup> century which were funded by the Mughals to gain trust and allegiance for the unification of the *social-topographies*<sup>33</sup>. Even though the gestures had an undertone of cultural superiority, this amalgamation of cultures blurred the lines of the Hindu-Islamic binary, producing a *notional context of resistance*. Undermining the polar perception, which poses identities as opposite, authentic, and ethnically essentialist entities, this blurring delves into the realm of *third-space*<sup>34</sup> and is perceived as a site of struggle and negotiation.<sup>35</sup>

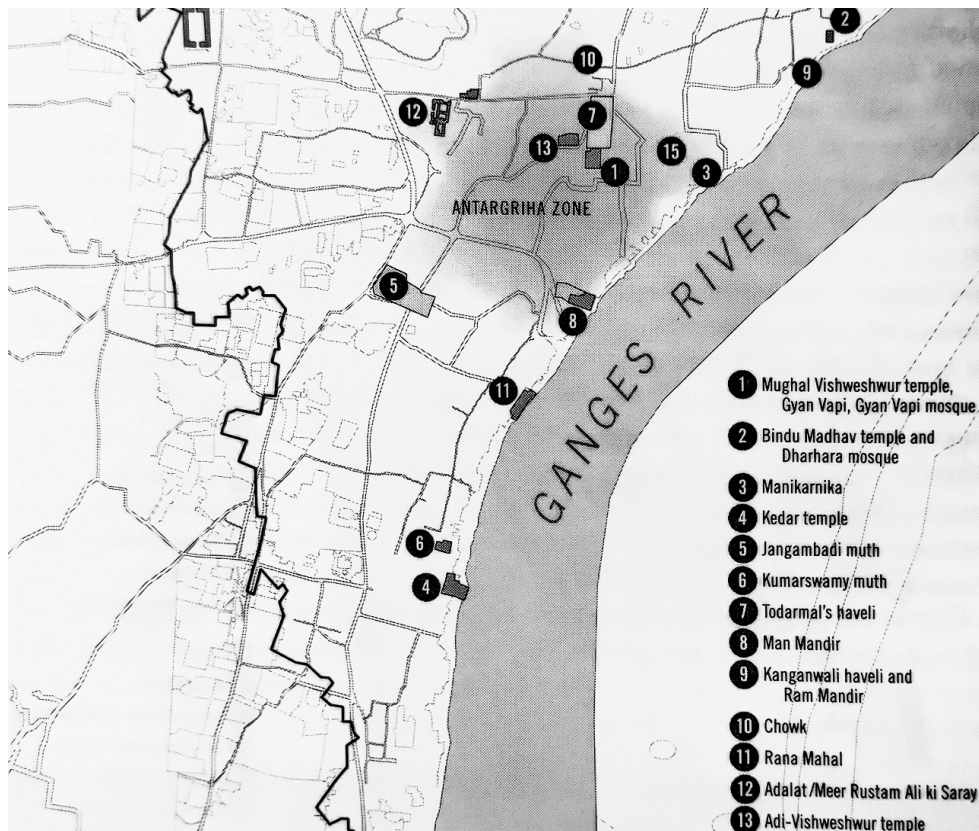


fig.11 The map denoting the Antagriha zone, recreated in *Banaras Reconstructed*, Madhuri Desai, which is the exact site of the Kashi-corridor temple complex.

<sup>31</sup> Desai.

<sup>32</sup> Madhuri Desai, *Banaras Reconstructed: Architecture and Sacred Space in a Hindu Holy City* (University of Washington Press, 2017) p.26.

<sup>33</sup> Desai pg.29.

<sup>34</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

<sup>35</sup> Homi Bhabha and Jonathan Rutherford, 'Identity: Community, Culture, Difference', *The Third Space*, 1990, pg. 211.

Pilgrim routes and the notion of pilgrimage were critical to the urban consolidation of religion. Being one of the Saptapuri cities, the journeys lived through the streets of Varanasi were critical to the project of liberation. Rather than constructing monuments of embodied theology, the journeys were concretized to expand the thresholds of the sacred domain (fig.10). There were several pilgrim routes which were textualised and then embedded into the city's built fabric, but one of the key routes remains the *Antagriha yatra* (fig.11). The Antagriha is a reference to the *inner sanctum*<sup>36</sup> of the city, where the pilgrimage revolves around the Kashi-Vishwanath temple. With renewed interest in kashi khand, the sacred imagination contained within these texts became a loose blue print that would shape the city's built environment.<sup>37</sup> The growth of the city has been modelled according to the cosmic spatial order described in the Kashikhand, where the Kashi Vishveshwara temple finds itself positioned at its geographic center (fig.12), which is the site of the upcoming *sacred temple precinct project*.

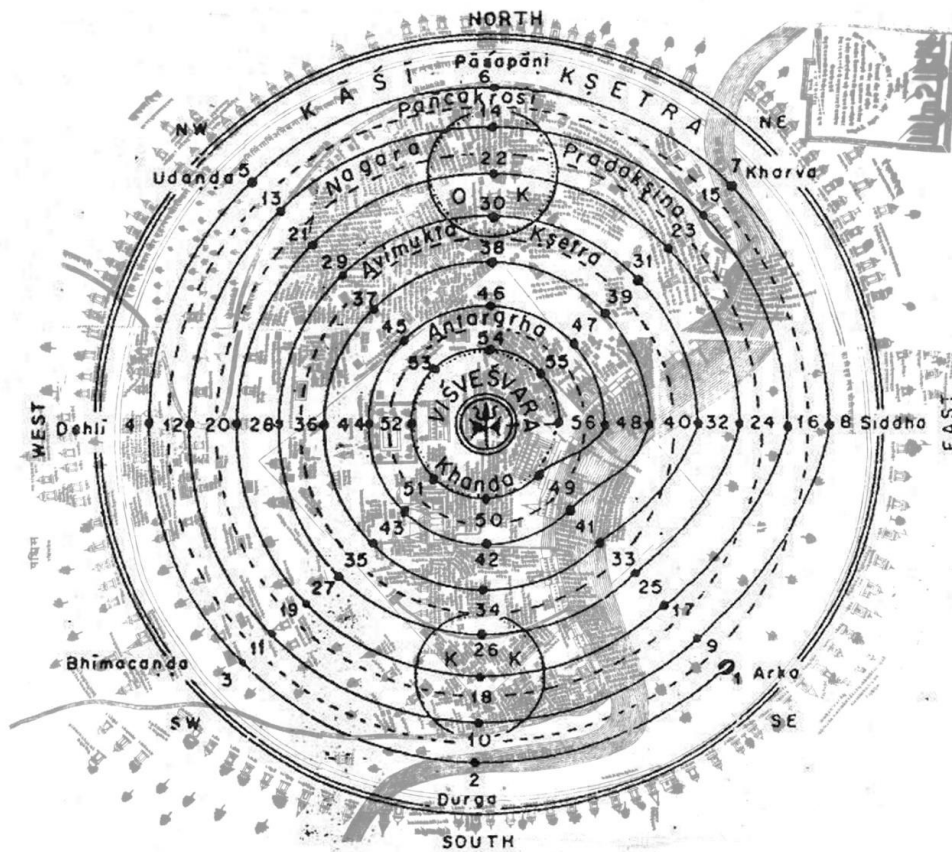


fig.12 The diagram of the kasha khand overlapped with the pilgrim map, with the geographic centre the position of the Vishwanath temple.

<sup>36</sup> Desai p.27.

<sup>37</sup> Desai p.77.

### Temple-Mosque Binary:

The temple, like Varanasi itself, has undergone repetitive destructions and reconstructions through various Mughal invasions, which has buttressed the value of its cultural importance (chart.1). The original temple was destroyed for the last time by the Mughal ruler Aurangzeb, who constructed on its foundations the Gyanvapi mosque, with the back façade of the temple still intact (fig.13). The destructive gesture of the demolition of the temple and the erection of the mosque produces symbolic connotations of *power over* the Hindu demographic. As Glover notes, physical appropriation and, at times, destruction, of a previous regime's buildings were ways of *asserting authority and power*<sup>38</sup> which was both politically and religiously charged. The Kashi Vishwanath temple now standing, was built adjacent to the mosque by Ahilya Bai Holkar in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (fig.14). This generates a very unique condition where two very holy centers of Islamic and Hindu importance co-exist next to each other, densely surrounded by the profane fabric. The site with such a problematic history of erasure now exists with shared multiplicities manifesting a place which becomes another ground for corralling difference within the realm of the cultural.



*fig.13 The Gyanvapi Mosque with the back wall of the demolished Kashi- Vishwanath Temple.*

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<sup>38</sup> William J Glover, *Making Lahore Modern: Constructing and Imagining a Colonial City* (U of Minnesota Press, 2008).

11 <sup>th</sup> century	Construction of Vishveshwur temple by Hari Chandra.
1194	Destruction of the temple by Qutb-ud-din-aibak in Muhammad Ghuri's Rule.
13 <sup>th</sup> century	Refurbishment of the temple by a gujrati merchant.
1351	Destruction of the temple by Firoz Shah Tughlaq.
1585	Todar Mal rebuilds the temple
1669	Destruction of the Temple by Auranzeb and construction of Gyanvapi Mosque.
1780	Construction of the temple adjacent to the mosque by Ahilyabai Holkar.
1828	Baizabai Scindhia constructs the low roofed colonnade for the Gyanvapi well roof.
1992	Supreme court mandates protection of the Gyanvapi Mosque after demolition of Babri Masjid.

chart.1 tracing various constructions and destructions of the Kashi Vishwanath Temple.

The temple itself is an eclectic confluence of Hindu and Islamic styles. The temple form reflects a deliberate reference to an archaic language by placing twin shikharas over identical garbha-griha that face each other across a shared mandapa<sup>39</sup> (fig.14). The central space between the shikharas is covered with a dome which is a characteristic Islamic architectural element. The temple reflects the Mughal legacy of Varanasi embedded in its built fabric. Reciprocally as the Mosque was built on the foundations of the temple, the spatial order inside the mosque reflects the Hindu cosmogony. The back wall which is still the ruin of the temple constructs a *hybridity*<sup>40</sup> of the two identities. The resemblance of many ghats to the Mughal fort-palaces, and this cross-breeding of Indo-Islamic styles in the pervasive architectural elements make evident that even though an *Ancient Kashi* is being eternalized through its static textual and oral folklore, it is a reconstructed *Hybrid Varanasi* which lives and is experienced. This produces a unique condition where different and contested groups share the built or natural landscapes, claiming symbolic and tangible *sovereignty* over it.

The co-existence of the mosque and the temple in this context has a contentious history which the bodies in power are trying to rewrite. The Modi government is practicing a radical form of Identity politics by mobilizing built spaces to reconstruct historiographies. Narendra Modi contesting his Lok Sabha elections from Varanasi unpacks the politics of place, re-activating the vexed history of the Hindu-Muslim binary. These binary conditions which

<sup>39</sup> Desai p.83.

<sup>40</sup> Bhabha and Rutherford.



*fig.14 The Kashi Vishwanath temple with the Gyanvapi mosque in the background. The central dome is a replication of the domes present in the Gyanvapi mosque.*

when are activated in the political domain, pave ways for the concretization of inflexible animosities between the two dominant theological cultures of India. Even though Varanasi is proclaimed as a quintessentially Hindu town, around 30 percent of the population in Varanasi follows Islam as their religion. With over 1200 Islamic monuments and shrines sporadically spread throughout the fabric of the city, the projected *other* has received negligible representation in the narrative of the city. These representations either are suppressed under the Hindu narrative or are activated as production sites for conflict, keeping them in the stare of activation. These cultural encounters have acted as mediating forces in shaping the material culture of Varanasi, in reality producing a hybridity which the bodies in power are trying to suppress, propelling the nation towards *post-secularity*.

'A claim to history is an integral part of modern identity formation.'<sup>41</sup> Stråth has argued that a central concern of European nation states in the nineteenth century 'was to mobilize and monumentalize national and universal pasts in order to give legitimacy and meaning to the present and to outline the future culturally, politically, socially.'<sup>42</sup> In criticizing the politics of recognition, Bhabha points out the reproduction of hegemonic culture that conditions the legitimization of the *other culture*. The neo-nationalist canon which has been re-activated by the Modi government is mobilizing selective historical myths of origins to concretize a cultural and symbolic order coherent to the Hindu mission. In none of the spectacularly orated speeches of Modi, has he addressed the presence of the *diasporic other*, directly. But rather he has re-activated the historical domain, indirectly calling them the '*enemy*'<sup>43</sup>, teleporting that historical narrative into the domain of the present. The naturalization of rituals and its historical narratives as eternal allows for a faux acknowledgement of authenticity which propagates the exercise of power through these forms of identity-politics.

Even though Bhabha places the conception of third space in the colonial context, the notions of the construction of identities through cultural contamination is a potent analogy to analyze the hybrid space of the Kashi Vishwanath Temple-Gyanvapi Mosque duality.<sup>44</sup> The selection of the Location of the Kashi-Vishwanath temple produces layered complexities in the socio-spatial domain. As mentioned earlier, the temple-mosque precinct is located in the geographical and symbolic center of the city. The selection of this zone for the construction of the temple precinct is an act to exercise authority, to control the center is to control power. The neighbouring of the temple and mosque allows for the re-activation of the Hindu-Muslim binary, packaging the past to produce selective identities pitted against a common enemy, the scapegoat of Hindu populism, the *oriental other*. The right-wing is attempting to erase the presence of the Islamic identity, and reclaiming its apparently unpolluted origins. The Kashi-corridor project through land acquisition of the entire fabric around the mosque and the temple is an act of political polarization through the activation of exclusion. After the Babri Masjid Incident, the Gyanvapi Mosque has been under constant threat due to its unsettling history. Because the Mosque precinct was surrounded by a heavily stressed built environment, the urban fabric with its narrow lanes didn't allow for the mobilization of a mob. With the acquisition of land around the temple and the mosque, the mosque stands inside a jail like barricade wall, confined and exposed at the same time, in a cluster of temples and Hindu shrines, which has uncanny similarities to the events leading up to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. Although the narratives produced by the bodies in power are locating Varanasi paradoxically as an ahistorical construct, the city through its existing and demolished built fabric narrates a story of *shared identities* in the interstices of *colliding cultures*.

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<sup>41</sup> Jain.

<sup>42</sup> Hagen Schulz-Forberg and Bo Stråth, *The Political History of European Integration: The Hypocrisy of Democracy-Through-Market* (Routledge, 2014), LXII P.26.

<sup>43</sup> Narendra Modi speech on the foundation laying ceremony, 8<sup>th</sup> of march, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (routledge, 2012) p.113-114.

## Bodies of Resistance: *The Body-politics of Caste*



*fig.15 Aerial view of the cleared land between the Mosque-temple precinct and Manikarnika Ghat, Fortune India Magazine.*

There is a popular saying in Indian politics, ‘*the road to Delhi passes through Lucknow,*’ which is the capital of the State of Uttar Pradesh (U.P). Apart from housing various sacred temple towns of spiritual importance like Mathura, Ayodhya, Allahabad Prayaagraj and Varanasi, the state positions itself as a key player in the domain of Indian Politics. With 80 of the total 543 parliamentary seats, UP has the largest quota of governmental representation in the quest for central power. In the 2009 elections, BJP managed only 10 of the 80 seats under the vision of Lal Krishna Advani<sup>45</sup>. The shift in leadership to Narendra Modi and the relentless grass-root level propagation by his current home minister and right-hand Amit Shah, mobilized a gigantic turnover, winning 71 and 62 of the 80 seats in the 2014 and 2019 elections respectively. The appropriation of powerful *caste-based politics*<sup>46</sup> has been critical in establishing power in U.P., where over 60 percent<sup>47</sup> of the population is categorized as other backward classes and *the untouchable* Dalits. These archaic forms of divisive mechanisms which segregate the Hindu society into rigid social groups are still an active form of identity creation and exclusion, which are employed recurrently in the domain of politics. As Anpanman Rao highlights, the evolution of Indian democracy has been

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<sup>45</sup> Lal Krishna Advani was the instrumental BJP figure in the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

<sup>46</sup> Caste is a form of social stratification characterized by endogamy, hereditary transmission of a style of life which often includes an occupation, ritual status in a hierarchy, and customary social interaction and exclusion based on cultural notions of purity and pollution.

<sup>47</sup> For more information on caste demographics refer [https://censusindia.gov.in/Tables\\_Published/SCST/dh\\_sc\\_up.pdf](https://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_sc_up.pdf)



distinguished ‘not by the elimination of caste discrimination, but by its implication in a new form of violence,’<sup>48</sup> and the emergence of new means of regulating the ethnographic discussions of caste order. The caste system in India just like the Hindu culture, has been transforming and evolving through the historiographical chapters of the Indian Society and concretized in different political climates.

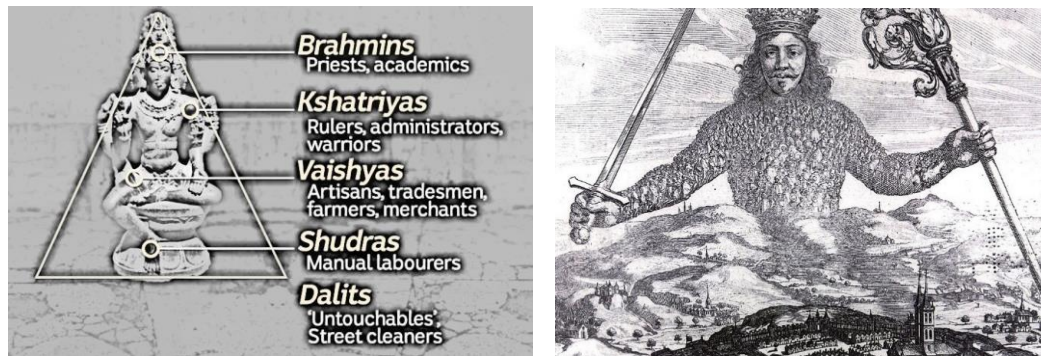


fig.16 The notion of Body-politic in the eastern and western traditions. The caste system represented as different parts of the body, with the Brahmins at the helm and the Dalits excluded.

### Varna and Jati:

The European structure of caste works as a coalition of the *Varna and Jati*<sup>49</sup> systems in the Hindu tradition. The Varna system was a framework for grouping people into classes based on their occupation which then later transgressed social boundaries of cultural stabilization. The Brahmins (priests) enjoyed the apex position in the cultural hierarchy. They were followed by the Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), the Vaishyas (farmers, merchants and artisans), and Shudras (the labour working class) (fig.16). The *Varna* categorization implicitly had a fifth element, dislocating a certain people outside of its scope, such as the indigenous tribes and the *untouchables*. This chapter brings into the scope the suppressed voices of resistance of this fifth element, *othered* within the Hindu politic. The collapse of the Mughal era in India saw the resurgence of the affirmation of regal and martial form of the caste ideal, *reshaping the apparently casteless social groups into differentiated caste communities*<sup>50</sup>. The colonial rule strengthened this reshaping in its most vicious form, making rigid caste organization a central mechanism of administration by offering administrative jobs and senior appointments selectively to *higher castes*. Social unrest during the 1920s led to a change in this policy with the addition of positive discrimination in the form of reservation. Though the post-colonial India entered the caste scape illegalizing negative caste discrimination, the vestiges of the *caste politic* still remain active, evoking the domain of the body-politics of caste.

<sup>48</sup> Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Univ of California Press, 2009).

<sup>49</sup> Varna: type, order, colour or class. Jati: several communities within a specific caste.

<sup>50</sup> Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), III P.26-27.

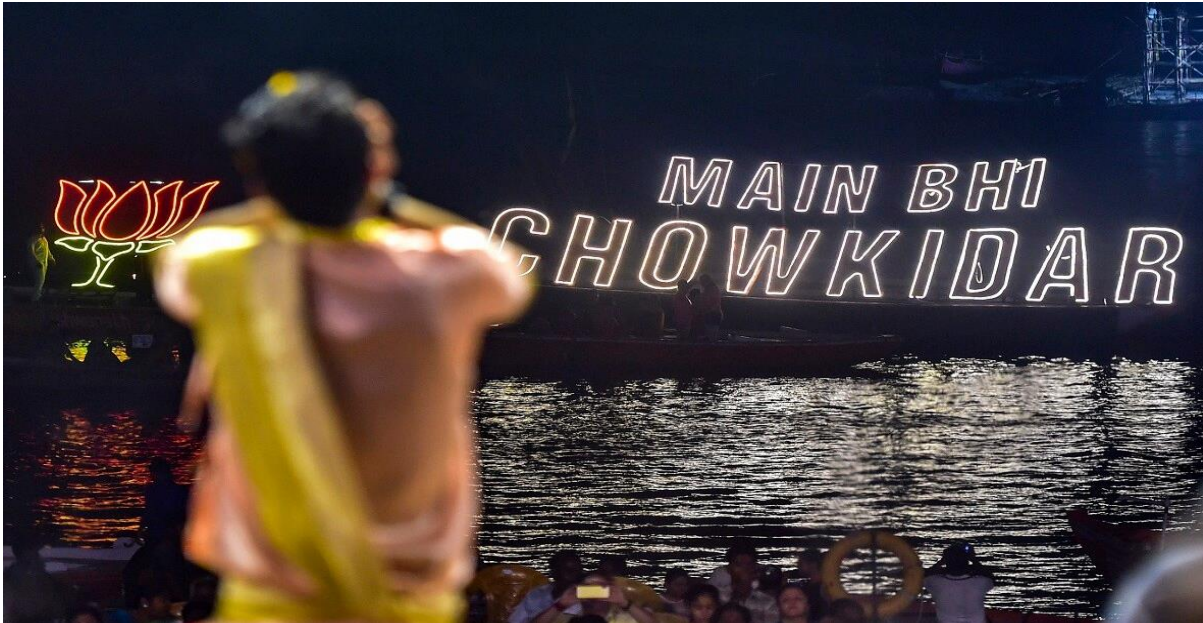


fig.17 The Main bhi chowkidar slogan with the lotus symbol of BJP.

It is impossible to think about Hindu Nationalism, including its image cultures, without thinking about the question of caste.<sup>51</sup> On the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2019, the eve of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's election rally for the Lok Sabha polls, Varanasi was greeted by a sea of saffron, with thousands of Modi supporters taking to the streets to get a peek of their leader. Amidst the rallies and rituals on the banks of river ganga, floating on a boat was the campaign slogan 'Main bhi Chowkidar (I too am the watchman)' (Fig.17). The slogan was a response to the 'Chowkidar Chor hai (The watchman is a thief)' jibe coined by the Indian National congress in the attempt to ignite corruption allegations in the Rafale aircraft military deal with France. The Chowkidar is considered to be a derogatory profession mostly occupied by the lower castes. By calling himself *chowkidar*, Modi amalgamated himself into the identities of the excluded lower castes, activating Gramsci's notion of *hegemony*<sup>52</sup> where the decisions then taken by him then became coherent to the interests of the community, even when they weren't. He assumed the voice of the *sub-altern*, lending agency to non-coercive structures of authority and employing them as political subjects. The Kashi-Vishwanath temple precinct with its physical positioning and the hierarchical layers of caste embedded in its everyday rituals and activities is an active site where hegemonic forms of power are asserted and buttressed.

### Caste context:

The Kashi corridor temple precinct site connects the Gowdaliya marg<sup>53</sup> and the Manikarnika Ghat<sup>54</sup> bracketed by two narrow lanes trickling down almost 80 feet towards the river. The area demarcated for the precinct sprawls approximately 150 meters by 350 meters (fig.18), 12

<sup>51</sup> Jain.

<sup>52</sup> Antonio Gramsci, 'History of the Subaltern Classes;(Ii) The Concept of "Ideology";(Iii) Cultural Themes: Ideological Material', *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, 2006, 13–17.

<sup>53</sup> which is the widest road in the Varanasi town area

<sup>54</sup> The most active crematory grounds in the world

acres approximately, boasting a 20-meter-wide movement corridor, with the temple located on its visual axis. The construction of the precinct required a massive demolition of the stressed built fabric, along with displacement of the inhabitants for which over 500 families and 100 small businesses have been evacuated and over 290 multistoried buildings in that patch have been destroyed, houses which have been occupied since generations.<sup>55</sup> The two sacred centers of life and death i.e. the Temple and Manikarnika Ghat<sup>56</sup> propel specific kinds of occupations and in turn shape the demographic inhabiting the spaces around them, highlighting the confluence of the two extreme ends of the Varna System, conjuring the *Hindu Hegemony*. Space is related to power in a way that it is critical to the social production and reproduction of difference. ‘*Placemaking is an inherently elite practice*’<sup>57</sup> in the way that it is determined by those in control of power and resources. The term elite represents all the sections of a society which have political and economic agency whose interests are centralized over the powerless other. It shows the interests of people in empowerment and freedom and the interests of the state in constructing social order.<sup>58</sup> The binary opposite to this *elite* as placed by Guha<sup>59</sup>, is the *sub-altern*.

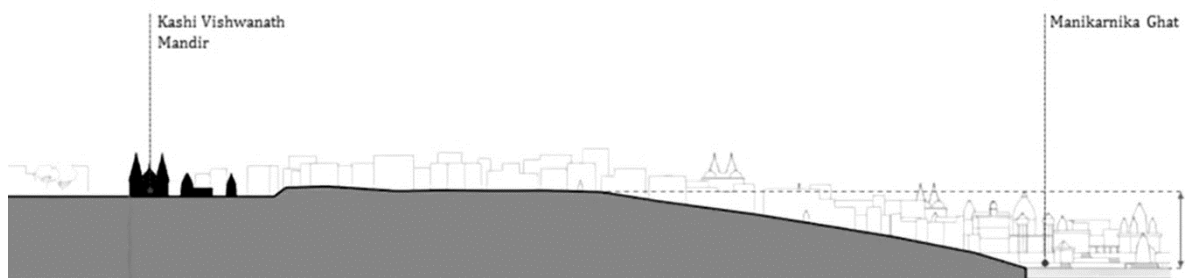


fig.18 The figure denoting the topography and marking the two ends of the temple precinct which area also the centres of life and death.

Majority of the settlements which fall within the demarcated precinct are low-income households<sup>60</sup> which are either illegal constructions, or rented/owned by the Dalit community. The Dalits are the untouchable caste, the bodies excluded out of the Varna system of categorization. All the rituals that have to be performed in the crematory process can be performed only by a *Jati* of the Dalit community known as the Doms. Cursed for eternity according to Hindu mythology, they live in the vicinity of the Manikarnika Ghat, around the Bhramanal gali, right within the temple precinct. Surrounding the temple were a few elite households and havelis, owned by high-priests claiming rights to the physical and visual domain around the Kashi-Vishwanath temple. For the task of land acquisition and demolition,

<sup>55</sup> Vishal Singh in an interview on Kashi Manthan <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78NkqpGa0I8&t=11s> 15 jan 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Manikarnika Ghat is the most active crematory Ghat in the world.

<sup>57</sup> Kim Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form* (Routledge, 2014) pg.47.

<sup>58</sup> Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form*.

<sup>59</sup> Ranajit Guha, *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986-1995* (U of Minnesota Press, 1997).

<sup>60</sup> Bimal Patel in the presentation of signify: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hHSlal0oe8&t=1255s>.

The Shri Kashi Vishwanath Special Area Development Board (SKVSADB) was formed in 2018, headed by Mr. Vishal Singh (fig.19). One of the ways the people living in the precinct were displaced was by paying compensation twice the price of land to the owners and between the range of 1 lac and 10 lac rupees to the tenants of shops to remunerate the vested interests of owning land in the sacred space.<sup>61</sup> The priest elite, because of education and agency were able get their voices heard receiving a much higher compensation, positioning the Dalit community as the subaltern, a subordinate negative position, of disempowerment, without *social or political agency*.<sup>62</sup>



fig.19 Image of Vishal Singh posing on the rubble of the demolished built fabric positioned standing taller than the shrines at the back, Fortune India Magazine. The numbers mentioned here have almost doubled in terms of the expenses.

Certain gestures of coercive power places certain sections of the community under conditions of surveillance while privileging other kinds of peoples and actions. The constant policing of bodies<sup>63</sup> through the gaze of aerial surveillance, drone mapping and the use of brute violence activate *bio-disciplinary power*<sup>64</sup> which acts on and through the body to constitute docile subjects and operate through the regimes of naturalization and the eradication of deviance. As

<sup>61</sup> <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/supreme-court-clears-last-hurdle-in-way-of-pms-kashi-corridor/articleshow/69998423.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>62</sup> The information I have collected is an outcome of various interviews as there is no data in the public domain which is accessible.

<sup>63</sup> Jain.

<sup>64</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Vintage, 2012).

the reports from various news-papers, magazines and online platforms show, the communities were almost terrorized into obeying instructions and fulfilling the interest of the state. In an interview to The Wire magazine, some of the Dalit workers raised issues regarding the curbing of their fundamental rights. *'They are uprooting us. We aren't leaving by ourselves... We don't have the power to strong arm the government nor can we talk to them. When Modiji had come for the foundation laying ceremony, we were all locked into our houses, like we were some kind of terrorists, don't get out, don't show your face. Stay in your houses, don't come on the terrace. If we can't even see Modiji, how will he talk to us?'*<sup>65</sup>



fig.20 The signage of Dr. BR Ambedkar, a central figure in the fight against casteism in post-independence India standing in front of a demolished Dalit household, Varanasi.

Regardless of the *asymmetrical visibility*, Modi remains the patriarchal figure, he is Modi *ji*<sup>66</sup>, the 11<sup>th</sup> avatar of lord Vishnu, the national hero as the voice for all the Hindu communities *casting a universal mold*<sup>67</sup> for all people and classes. Contextualizing the concepts brought forward by Spivak in *'Can the sub-altern speak?'*<sup>68</sup>, and positioning the east-west disjunction as the elite-subaltern binary in the Indian context, one can decode the silences in the surfaced narratives of the Dalits. Even though the Dalit communities were tenants or at times illegal residents, the communities have been critical in sustaining the causality of the narrative of moksha and sacredness for centuries, through the operative forces of labour. Jagruti Rahi, a Varanasi resident and social worker critiques this corporatization of religion and questions

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSGEH6di2cQ&t=210s>

<sup>66</sup> Ji is a symbol of respect used in the Hindi language. (sir)

<sup>67</sup> Sumit Sarkar, 'The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies', *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia*, 2002, 400–429.

<sup>68</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', *Die Philosophin*, 14.27 (2003), 42–58.

the model and understanding of development: 'if you move thousands of people away forcibly from the daily livelihood but make a wonderful street up to the village, is that development?'<sup>69</sup> This dislocation would see them moving almost over 10 kilometers away from their area of work detaching them from their place of livelihood and destabilizing their bodies which are conditioned in a specific *spatio-social geography* (Fig.20). The irony is that they are being displaced for a temple precinct when they still have to face violence and are still looked down upon if they enter temples, positioned as passive subjects, surfacing an *inner-othering*, within the bracketed whole of the social order of Hinduism.



*fig.21 An example of the confluence of the temples and the profane fabric within the Kashi-temple precinct.*

The demolition of the houses has revealed engulfed hidden temples, which were built over to protect them from the Mughal and Islamic invasions. Though the revelation of the hidden temples and their restoration would contribute to the theological essence of the site, the non-sacred built-fabric are important pieces in the construction of history which contribute to the antiquity of Varanasi. The layers of archaeology which unpack in the discovery of temples, erase vital pieces of history which are selectively being rewritten through this erasure of the built fabric. (fig.21) Within eighteen months, the entire area has been flattened with a capital consumption of over 450 crore rupees. The demolition enhances the visibility through pilgrimage and also the public expression of piety with the absence of profane fabric which used to contain the saturation of Hindu shrines. The demolition and displacement also erases the images of poverty and filth, so that the new image can be disseminated by the production of stamp-post like *imagibility* and the spectacle of brand.

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFy76Jt6VLE&t=4s>



fig.22 'sabka saath, sabka vikaas' (support of all, growth of all), painted on a street hawker cart in saffron with the BJP logo of the Lotus.

With hoardings of 'sabka saath, sabka vikaas'<sup>70</sup> (fig.22) painted all over the city, this selective identity formation paints an ironical image of the intentions of democracy. At no stage in the realization of the project of the vision, have the people of the place been involved. Democratic transparency would demand a series of public consultations where feedback from the public becomes critical information for a bottom-up design process. The entire process of land acquisition has been conducted in secrecy with minimal media coverage. The bodies in power have adopted for a veil of opacity, where the decisions have been projected on to the passive bodies without any true form of public consultation or participation. Whatever information I have been able to gather is either from leaked presentations, interviews or some unofficial data circulated on social media. There is no public exhibition or publicly accessible website where the holistic data on the project can be studied by the members of the public. The unprecedented haste shown by the government in the land acquisition and the speed of construction has pushed the project over the tipping point where it has become a fait accompli.

<sup>70</sup> Translation: support of all, growth of all



*fig.23 Before and After images of the demolished site for the projected Kashi-Vishwanath temple precinct project.*



## Aesthetics of Democracy: Theo-politics of Architecture



*fig.24 Narendra Modi with Ar. Bimal Patel (front) and Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath in the Kashi Vishwanath Temple Precinct.*

The site has been chosen, the context has been erased. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of March, 2019, Narendra Modi shared the design of the Kashi-Vishwanath Corridor precinct via his twitter handle<sup>71</sup>. For the design of the Kashi-corridor temple precinct, the firm Hasmukh C. Patel Architects (HCP) have been chosen under the design vision of their principal architect, Dr. Bimal Patel. Even though the proposal is a religious construct there are layers of politics embedded in its design. As Vale points out, *‘architecture is first and foremost a statement of an ideological program that concisely symbolizes the political power of the state which imposes a certain collective identity and not another.’*<sup>72</sup> When presenting the proposal, Dr. Bimal Patel surfaces the very visible pragmatic parameters of logistics and issues of security, encroachments and cleanliness (fig.25). But the inherent politics of place making cannot be subsumed under the neutral forces of function and program. It is critical to decode these architectural and urban *gestures* which authorize and stabilize forms of identity and place by shaping a representational world. Through the rigorous analysis of the aesthetics of its materiality, I intend to unmask the social ideology embedded in its structural genotypes. The cognitive mapping and appropriation of icons as an embodiment of communities probes a research into the spatial readings of formal vocabularies which surface the interplays between meanings and practices along with the performative aspects of symbolic signification.

<sup>71</sup> Appropriating social media and mass culture to disseminate self-constructed images of the self.

<sup>72</sup> Lawrence Vale, *Architecture, Power and National Identity* (Routledge, 2014).

**FOR AN EASY ACCESS TO KVT**

UTTAR PRADESH

Marnikarnika ghat

Kashi Vishwanath Temple

GANGA

Lalita Ghat

► Pilgrims will get direct access to KVT from Manikarnika, Jalasen and Lalita Ghats through this corridor

► Entry of VIP vehicles, physically challenged persons will become possible through Chhattadwar point

**COST FACTOR**

₹600cr sanctioned by the state government so far for the project

₹190cr allocated to the KVT administration

Rehabilitation of tenants, including shopkeepers of the buildings being purchased for the corridor, is proposed in the project

166 buildings identified to be removed for creating the corridor

58 buildings purchased so far while process for other 60 is in progress

46 ancient temples, library and buildings of architectural importance to be preserved in corridor area

fig.25 The newspaper clipping from the Times of India highlighting the precinct.

525K SQ. FT.

THE TOTAL AREA OF PRIME LAND ON THE GANGA'S BANKS THE AUTHORITIES WILL CLAIM AFTER THE PROJECT IS COMPLETE.

70%

OF THE PROPERTIES WERE EASY TO ACQUIRE AS THE PROJECT OFFICE WAS OFFERING TWO TO THREE TIMES THE MARKET RATE.

THE PATHWAY, WHICH WILL DECONGEST THE WAY TO THE TEMPLE, IS LIKELY TO HAVE A PILGRIM CENTRE, TOILETS, A LIBRARY, CAFES, AND A MUSEUM.

fig.26 Image a) showing the narrow streets leading up to the Kashi Vishveshwara temple before the demolition, highlighting the need for decongestion. b) showing the illegal construction on the ghats where the Dom community is living with open sewers built over the Jalasen Ghat which is within the precinct perimeter.

In the seminal text of space knowledge and power, Foucault<sup>73</sup> elucidates the morphosis of the positionality of architecture, coincidental to the rise of European nationalism. The neo-nationalist cannon employed by the Modi government has mobilized architecture and town planning as agents which affirm the position of the state as an organization that enforces territorial, social, political, and cognitive order, which molds norms and rules by means of domination, exclusion, and selective inclusion mechanisms. Architecture and urban design *frames* space, both literally and discursively. *Framing implies both the construction of a world and of a way of seeing ourselves in it—at once picture and mirror.*<sup>74</sup> But when religious architectures are funded by the state, they resurrect a selective embodiment of communal representation and activate the *Theo-politics of Architecture*.

The proposal positions itself as an urban insert, cutting through the multi-nucleated pathways which have under laid the phenomenal experience of the city’s topographies for centuries. Contradicting the urban grain of the built environment, the proposal slices through the fabric as an axial monolithic monument, producing a *deep structure*, the terminology coined by Hillier and Hanson<sup>75</sup> under the *space syntax*<sup>76</sup> umbrella. The primary form of syntax analysis proceeds from a technique of mapping buildings into a cellular structure using the external entry points as a base. The proposal is governed by a linear structure, where one has to traverse many segments to reach the core of the design (fig.27). The positionality of the temple on the central axis of the insert centralizes the Hindu tradition, shifting the Mosque to the periphery<sup>77</sup>. The lateral spread rather than height again invokes the historical sites of the Egyptian temples and *the raw territoriality of state power*<sup>78</sup>.

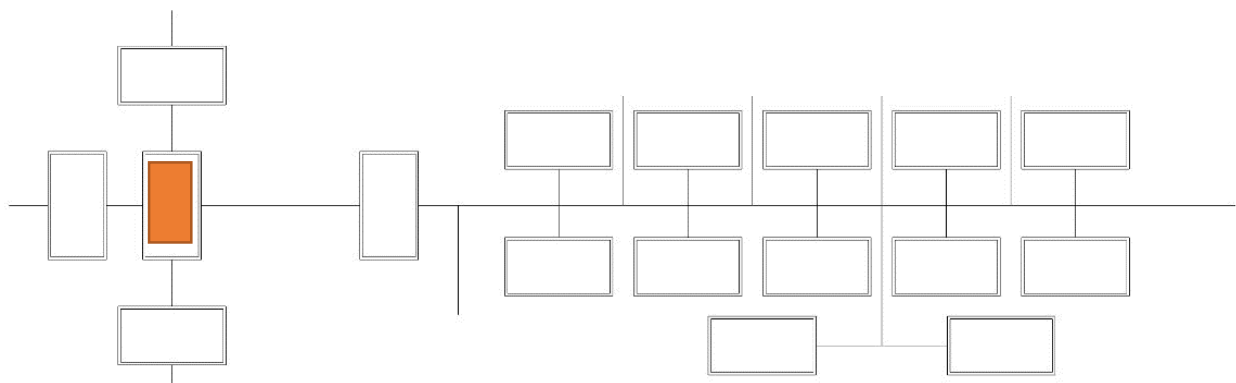


fig.27 Space syntax diagram of the proposed design revealing a linear structure, with high policing.  
(The temple marked in saffron.)

<sup>73</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘Space, Knowledge and Power (Interview with Paul Rabinow)’, *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, 1997, 367–80.

<sup>74</sup> Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form*.

<sup>75</sup> Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson, *The Social Logic of Space* (Cambridge university press, 1989).

<sup>76</sup> Although space syntax originated as a neutral analysis tool, my usage of the technique originates from Dovey’s usage of space syntax to analyze political structures embedded within various architectures.

<sup>77</sup> Board CEO Vishal Singh in his post demolition interview mentions how an area of 30 meter by 350 meter was demolished just the place the temple on the central axis.

<sup>78</sup> Jain.

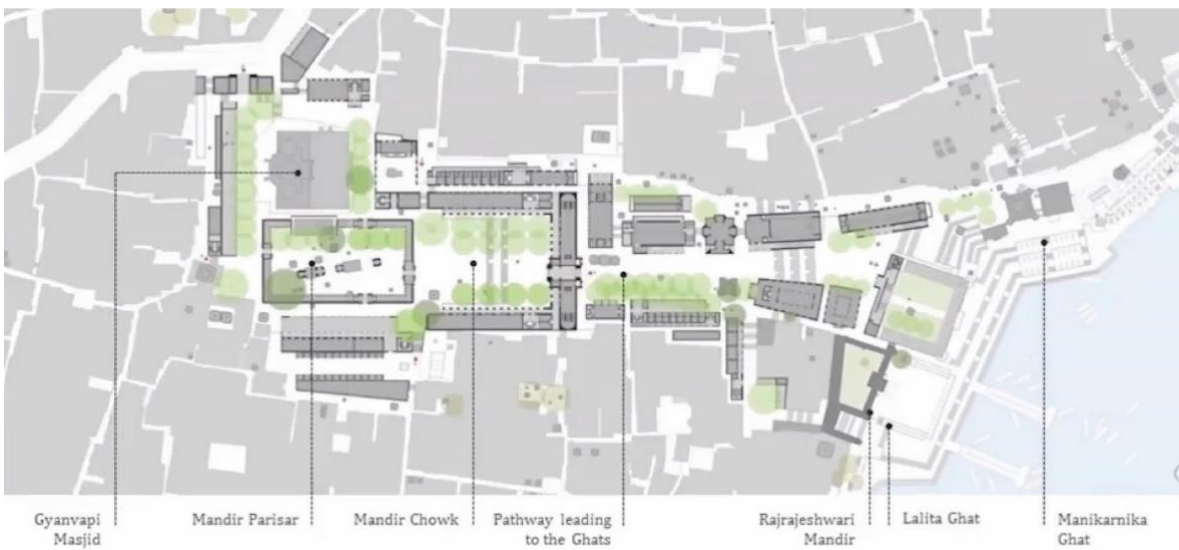


fig.28 Images depicting a) the aerial surveillance map, b) the proposed urban insert.

## Approach

The mode of access to the temple-mosque precinct before the erasure used to be through the multi-nodal fabric of the city. One had to pass through the narrow alleyways, navigate through the filth and dirt on the streets, and interact with the produced chaos of layers of building over. Varanasi as a religious city, was built on the coexistence of both sacred and profane architectures. The temple was surrounded by a heavily stressed urban fabric where the daily life intersected with the visual landscapes of the sacred. The proposal directly connects the Gowdaliya Marg to the temple complex possibly eliminating the interaction of the tourists with the fabric of the old-city. The act of producing this event in isolation from the context allows for the manifestation of a *selective image* of the city, i.e. a clean, spacious Hindu territory, which gets imprinted in the psyche of the tourists. Even though the older approaches are still accessible, the construction of a central entrance acts as an orientation device, which structures the experience through the precinct. The façade projected with this re-orientation is the memory that the tourists take with them as the embodiment of the city.

## Mandir Parisar

The Mandir parisar (temple premises), is the inner most sanctum of the proposal. The design wraps the Kashi-Vishwanath temple with thick high walls, which hinder visibility for the pilgrims who cannot afford to visit the temple and *creates privileged enclaves of access,<sup>79</sup> amenity and community*. The proposal engulfs the Gyanvapi well into the walls of the enclosure, establishing another form of *power-over* (fig.29). The boundary walls perform a dual function: they enclose a much larger area, becoming the dominant mass in reference to the mosque, and mask the cultural contamination by disrupting *visibility*. The entry to the Mandir is marked through four gateways, which are positioned in the four orthographic directions. Even though Bimal Patel mentions that the axes of the gateways are in line with the axis of the temple, it is not really the case. The gateways proposed align with the orthogonality of the proposed design, rather than accommodating the angles and kinks in the built fabric, deploying a strict pure geometry on the parisar, projecting strong forces of dominance and authority.

## Mandir Chowk

The Mandir chowk is the civic space outside the Mandir parisar (fig. 29) The naming of the open space as Mandir chowk activates the theologizing of public arenas, stabilizing selective cultural identities. The Gyanvapi Mosque precinct is also placed in this Mandir chowk, framing it within the cultural domains of Hindu theology. Even in the walk-throughs uploaded for the project, the aerial views highlight the temple precinct with yellow boundaries, where the Mosque is now framed by theological infrastructure, activating a politics of indirect exclusion and isolation. Bloomer and Moore describe bodily experience in relation to architecture: *‘If the landmarks in the external environment are very close to us, like a nearby wall, we perceive our body as having shrunk, while if we are oriented toward an opening in a great space by a doorway, window, vista or park, we perceive our body as having expanded.’<sup>80</sup>* The drastic difference in scale that one feels when they move from the narrow alleyways to the temple complex evokes a sense of an overwhelming grandeur. The vast access to sky magnifies the proportions of the public space carved out of the dense city fabric. The bracketed buildings surrounding the Mandir chowk frame the Mandir parisar adding layers of points of control accentuating its relationship with power. The proposal operates as a *reversed building<sup>81</sup>* creating a public space in the core of the design, surrounded by inward looking buildings. The syntax of such buildings *reverses the traditional power relation by locating their powerless visitors<sup>82</sup>* in the deepest cells within the structure where they are placed under surveillance, enclosing the visitors as a collective body with Hindutva as its orientation.

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<sup>79</sup> Neve Gordon, ‘On Visibility and Power: An Arendtian Corrective of Foucault’, *Human Studies*, 25.2 (2002), 125–45.

<sup>80</sup> Kent C Bloomer and others, *Body, Memory, and Architecture* (Yale University Press, 1977) p.43.

<sup>81</sup> Hillier and Hanson.

<sup>82</sup> Kim Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form* (Routledge, 2014) p.22.

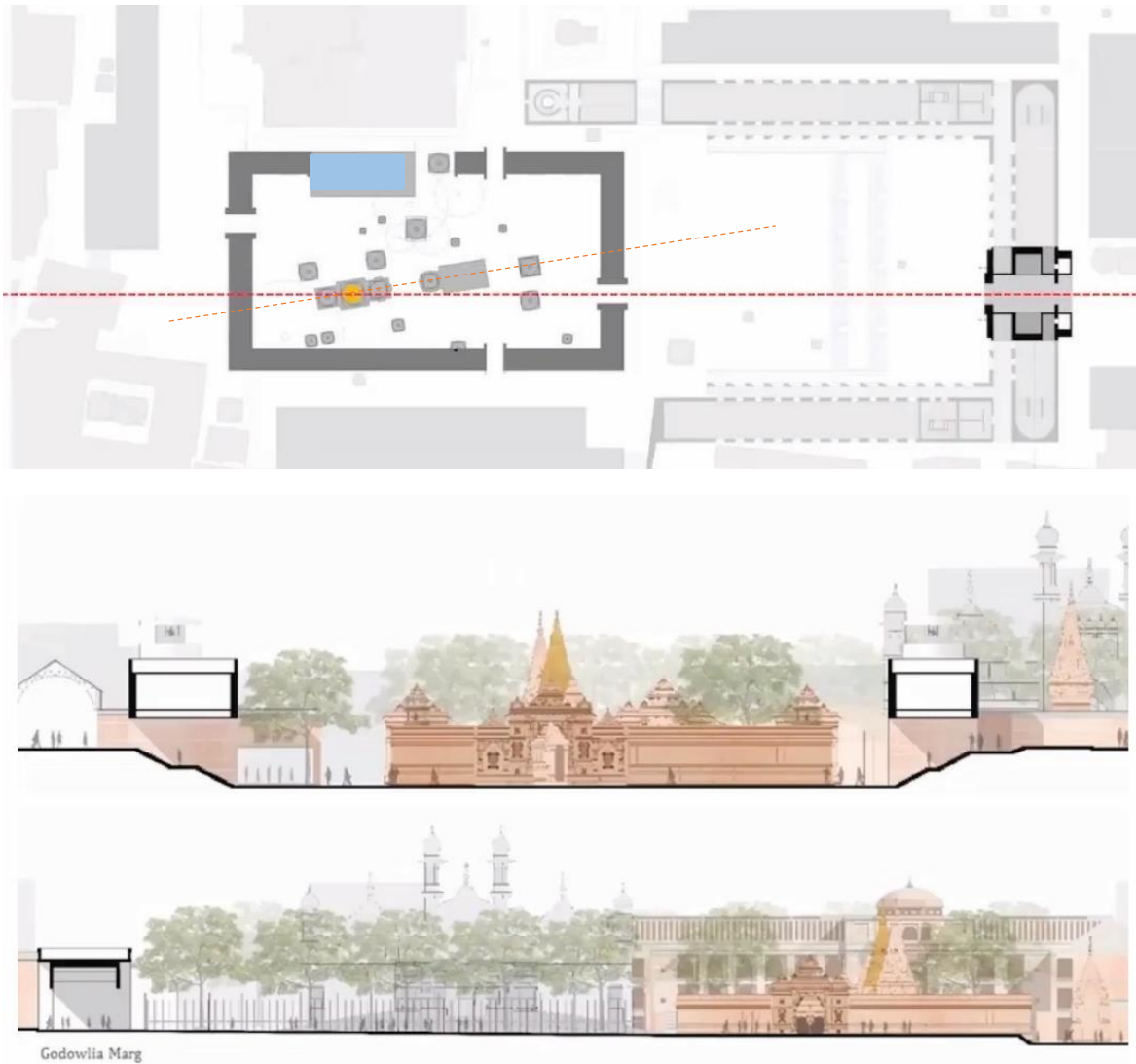


fig.29 The image highlights the engulfing of the well (blue) into the parisar and the orientation of the Mandir. The high walls hiding the temple and the bureaucratic buildings surrounding the temple as agents of surveillance. Appropriating trees to hide the Mosque from the visual domain.

### Path of the pilgrims

As discussed in chapter one, the Antagriha pilgrim route existed as a circumambulatory path wrapped around the Kashi Vishwanath temple which became the spatial order of the city. With the strong axiality of the temple complex cutting through the urban fabric, the patrons with their movement curated against the spiritual embodiment are displaced away from the *theo-spatial* experience of the route (fig.30). The linear path of steps leading up from the ghats frames a visual corridor towards the Kashi-Vishwanath Temple. The profane fabric which was destroyed for the construction of the temple complex accentuates the presence of various temples along the path. The design proposes various tourist and pilgrim facilities like washrooms and storage units which aids the patrons in their pilgrimage and append the larger cause of spirituality. But the construction of infrastructure comes with a hike in prices during the visit, with the *commodification* of God and making it unviable for the economically

backward. The design proposes refurbishments and a facelift of the ghats, with shifting the sewage towers behind, clearing the ghats. The area cleared will be converted into a stage where performances can be orchestrated, strengthening the *spectacle* of Hindu Varanasi (fig.33).

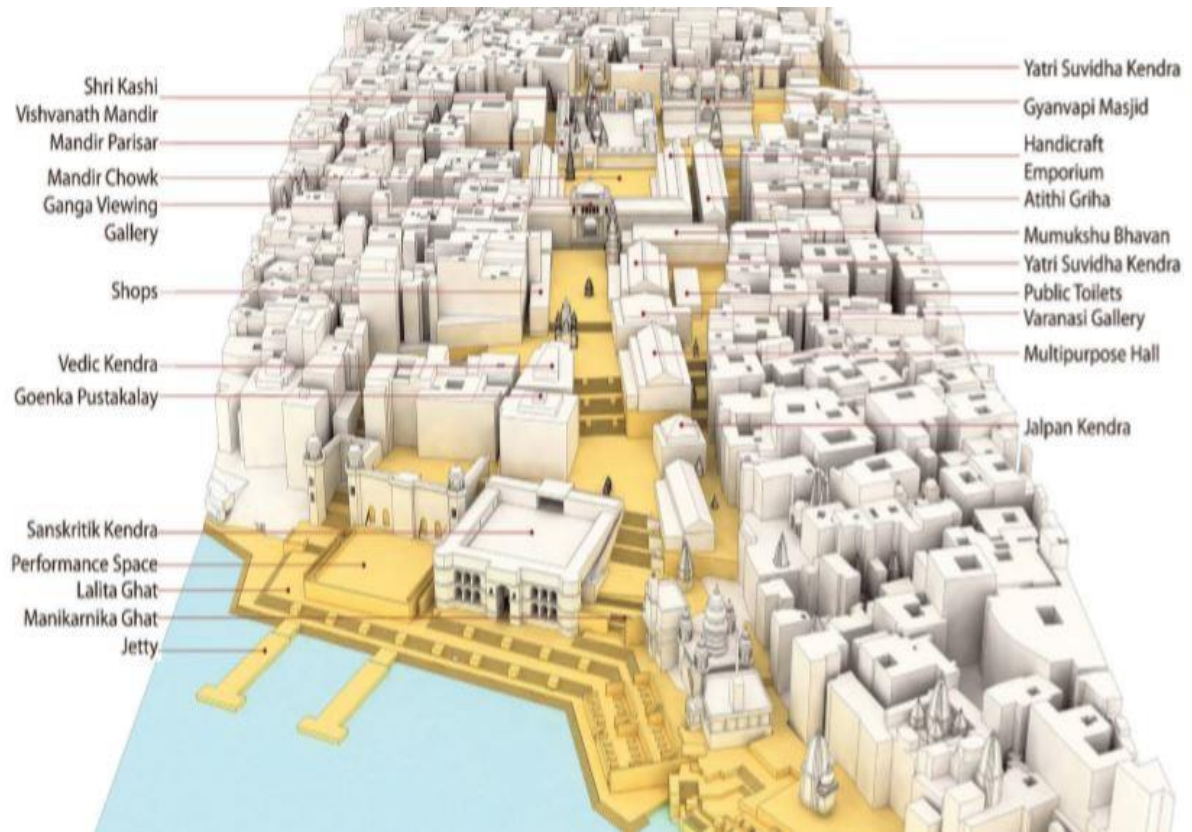


fig. 30, 31,32 Renders showing the before and after of the temple precinct area.



*fig.33 The renders highlight how the ghats will be refurbished to produce a façade of the spectacle of Hindutva.*

### **Cultural and Civic Institutions**

The pilgrim route is surrounded by many cultural and civic institutions which act as *repositories* of Hindu antiquity. The presence of programmatic functions like a museum, vedic kendra<sup>83</sup> and spiritual bookshop act as dissemination devices for the Hindu Tradition, which suppress the shared identitarian space of the temple-mosque precinct. The area also has landscape additions in the form of specifically located trees, which either isolate the mosque or act as visual barriers to purify the cultural landscape, accentuating the singular Hindu narratives. The proposal also suggests the restoration of culturally important buildings and the preservation of civic buildings like the Goenka Library which are named after important Hindu nationalists.

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<sup>83</sup> Translation: center for Hindu learning. Vedic originates from Vedas which are the earliest body of Indian scripture.





*fig. 34 Sloping roofs with pediment like details and steps wrapped around colonnades mobilising a faux revival of Greek historical monumentalisation.*

All styles mediate practices of power. In his theory of nationalism, Anderson suggests that *'the nation is an imagined community that cannot be sustained by face-to-face contact but rather is marked by the style in which it is imagined.'*<sup>84</sup> With the pediment like sloping roofs, the arched colonnades, the presence of the plaza and the landscape trickling down towards the river, the aesthetics of its material form and planning principles conjure strong memories of the Acropolis, with the temple placed as India's Parthenon. The attribution of power to a formal style is a dangerous practice since it lures architects into the false hope of a stylistic escape from *complicity* and a blindness to new styles of seduction.<sup>85</sup> The employment of the Greek language in the patterns used for the pavements and even the formalization of its

<sup>84</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso books, 1983) p.6.

<sup>85</sup> Kim Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form* (Routledge, 2014) p.69.

architectural representations concretizes and affirms multi-valent aspirations. Appropriation of a global aesthetic of *historic monumentalisation* naturalizes the position of the temple as a monumental construct. This also leads to the appropriation of temple complexes as national representations of grandeur and supremacy, appropriating religious monuments as national identity creation devices. The temple precinct operates as a portal object, connecting a populist aspiration to the image of the nation. The textures and materials proposed for the temple complex also buttress the sacred projection of cultural stabilization. The politics of identity and difference is mediated in an arena of spatial representation and the inertia of buildings can *fix*<sup>86</sup> identity over time. The appropriation of stone for the construction of the complex, generates a narrative of stability. The CEO of the temple trust Mr. Vishal Singh says: '*we are making this to sustain for the next 500 years so no one can erase our history,*' locating a claim to eternity.

The selection process of the design for such a politically sensitive site is a critical parameter to analyze. After winning the competition of the Central Vista Development project in Delhi, which is a project to demolish the Lutyens Delhi and erect a new image of India, HCP was gifted the project by the state without any public participation or even a design competition. The tender for the construction of the project has also been won by the Psp projects construction firm who coincidentally have also done the BJP headquarters. The selection of Bimal Patel as the architect for many projects of national importance, points towards an aspiration for the production of a *national architectural style*. Whenever dignitaries from different parts of the world have visited India, Narendra Modi has brought these bodies with power to either Ahmedabad, Varanasi or Delhi, all of the places where Bimal Patel is an active creator of place, constructing a singular image of India. Spatial configurations like the temple precinct projects play a dominant role in the construction of the national psyche and how theological architectures can be saturated with the political overtones of the right-wing Hindu rhetoric.

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<sup>86</sup> Dovey and Permanasari.

## Megalo-Media: Noopolitics of Representation



fig.35 A forty feet cut-out made by the artists in Varanasi of Modi and Emmanuel Macron during his trip to Varanasi, placed on the Assi Ghat.

*Half of politics is image-making; the other half is the art of making people believe the image.*

*-Hannah Arendt, Crises of Republic, 1972.<sup>87</sup>*

Wrapped in a saffron<sup>88</sup> shawl, with sandalwood paste rubbed all across his forehead, Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone for the inauguration of the Kashi Corridor project on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, 2019 (fig.36). The image of Narendra Modi, next to Yogi Adityanath (A Hindu Brahmin Priest who is also the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh), larger than life cutouts of himself sporadically spread throughout the blank site, with the barricaded Gyanvapi Mosque in the backdrop concretizes the right-wing populist rhetoric within the hegemonic hierarchies of power. While addressing the country via the locals of Varanasi through his speech on the same day, *'Har Har Mahadev... God told me, you talk a lot, now it's time to work. You may call it Bhole Baba's (Lord Shiva) will or blessing, that today, is*

<sup>87</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic: Lying in Politics, Civil Disobedience on Violence, Thoughts on Politics, and Revolution* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1972), CCXIX.

<sup>88</sup> Saffron has very important connotations in the Hindu tradition and it's also the colour of the BJP.

the auspicious day when that dream descends into reality. This kashi Vishwanath dham project, is like a festival for the freedom of Lord Shiva himself, because he was so stifled our lord, strangled by walls from all four sides, I don't know since how many generations he hasn't been able to breathe... [...] I haven't come here. I have been called.'

hindustantimes

# Mesmerising trail of devotion in works

**FROM GHATS TO KV TEMPLE** Completion of the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor will enable pilgrims to catch a glimpse of the KV temple directly from the ghats

Sudhir Kumar  
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**VARANASI:** Thousands of pilgrims from across the world, who come to the Kashi Vishwanath temple every day, are set to have an amazing experience, one of which being a glimpse of the temple directly from Kashi's famous ghats.

There will be a grand gate near Lalita Ghat and a cultural centre near the adjacent Jalasen Ghat, said Vishal Singh, chief executive officer, Shri Kashi Vishwanath Special Area Development Board (SKVSADB).

Floating jetties will be set up at these two ghats, the stairs of which will be beautified and equipped with ramps and escalators.

After getting off the boats at ghats, the devotees will climb the stairs, enter the grand gate and walk through the corridor that will have a museum, meditation ground, security point, heritage library, viewers' gallery, a cafe, 'yatri suvidha nivas' and many other facilities, Singh added.

At the ghats, two big TV screens will be installed and there will be arrangement of live screening so that devotees can do 'darshan' of Baba Kashi Vishwanath at the ghats too.

These works, to make a sea change in the landscape of the K V temple area, are being undertaken under the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor project that is slated to come up in five lakh sq feet area.

The Yogi Adityanath government



\* A model of the Kashi Vishwanath corridor.

constituted the SKVSADB in August last year.

Singh further said: "The corridor will also have a temple Chowk, multi-purpose auditorium, 'bhogala' (a kitchen for cooking prasad for Baba) and a salvation home."

As of now, the devotees have to pass through narrow lanes and by-lanes, which stay choked on some suspicious days, especially during Shrawan, Mahashivratri and Rangbhari Ekadashi, Singh said.

But now the congested temple premises will be expanded from 2100 sq ft to

28,000 sq ft. Also, the temple, which till the beginning of 2019 was surrounded by dilapidated buildings, now has a vast open space of 5 lakh sq ft in its east.

Old temples, which are present on the 5 lakh square feet area, will remain on either side of the corridor among the new structures.

A lot of plantation will also be done in the area, Singh said.

The corridor, an ambitious project of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is worth around Rs 1,000 crore. Deadline to complete it is June 2021. So far, Rs 490 crore has already been utilized in buying and demolishing the buildings.

To make space for developing the corridor, Shri Kashi Vishwanath Special Area Development Board has bought a total of 291 buildings, including houses, and demolished them. The area has also been levelled, he said.

Makrana marble will be used in the construction work of the corridor. A three-member team, led by Singh, says, "The best quality of Makrana marble stone will be used in construction of the corridor. We visited the marble quarries in Makrana and collected samples in order to select the top-quality of marble."

The samples were given to experts



\* Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone of the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor in Varanasi on March 8. HI FILE PHOTO

who tested them and identified the best ones among them. Now, we are going to place the order for the Makrana marble for construction of the corridor, said Singh.

According to experts, it has been observed that Makrana marbles are highly durable—of over 500 years. That is why this marble has been finally selected for the corridor.

Singh said: "We are working with the goal of over 500-year durability in mind. Quality and sustainability have to be very high in each and every construction."

During demolition of the houses purchased for the corridor, as many as 41 ancient temples were revealed. These

temples are being preserved and beautified with the help of the Archaeological Survey of India, Singh said, adding that the original look of the temples would be maintained.

Of the total 5 lakh sq ft, around 70 per cent will remain open area and have greenery. There is a proposal to plant saplings of trees of some indigenous varieties. The project will add to the glory of this ancient city.

The chief minister inspected the project several times ever since it was planned one-and-a-half years back.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation of the project on March 8 this year. After laying the foundation, Modi said, "The foundation laying of

Kashi Vishwanath corridor project is a festival of 'mukti' (liberation) of Bhole Baba 'because he was surrounded by walls from all sides. He must be facing problem in breathing for many centuries."

Meanwhile, locals have different views regarding the project. One Mahesh Yadav says, "The project has brought antiquity of the area to an end. Many narrow lanes have disappeared and now there is an open area."

P Kamalakar Pandey says, "I think the project, after its completion, will attract more tourists. Devotees will walk to the temple comfortably through the corridor that will be spacious and have many facilities."

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CIN: L74990DL1960G000335  
Office of Chief General Manager (CGM), NBCC (India), Laxmi Road, New Delhi (India)  
**NOTICE INVITING TENDER**  
NBCC (India) Ltd. invites open tender from eligible applicants who fulfil qualification criteria as stipulated in the NIT for "Construction of Office cum Training Center on the plot of land at Community Center, Saket, New Delhi on Design, Engineering, Procurement and Construction (EPC) basis." Estimated Project Cost: Rs. 78.54 Crore. Last date of submission of Bid: 22.10.2019. Complete details are available in the NIT. NIT will be available on websites: www.tenders.nbcc.com and www.eproc.gov.in. Complete information to the publication, if any, would appear only on the said websites and not here published. Chief General Manager (CGM)

**NLC India Limited**  
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fig. 36 A newspaper clipping from the Hindustan times positioning Narendra Modi in front of the Gyanvapi Masjid, 8<sup>th</sup> march, 2019.

Deleuze, in his essay 'post-script on control societies'<sup>89</sup> argues that the *dispositifs*<sup>90</sup> of power and control that once operated primarily on the body now operate on the mind through technologies of communication. The urban bodies now live in image saturated environments, surrounded by swarms of billboards, advertisements and symbolic image cultures which play a critical role in the construction of selective perceptions and identities. This power to produce images of social reality has been taken advantage of for constructing the *social imaginaries*<sup>91</sup> of nations. The chapter surfaces this syntactical shift in operative power from Bio to Noo-politics. A network based geo-politics, noo-politics commands and reorganizes the other power relations because it operates at the most deterritorialized level.<sup>92</sup> The noo-

<sup>89</sup> Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October*, 59 (1992), 3–7.

<sup>90</sup> Deleuze.

<sup>91</sup> Charles Taylor, 'Modern Social Imaginaries', *Public Culture*, 14.1 (2002), 91–124.

<sup>92</sup> Maurizio Lazzarato, 'The Concepts of Life and the Living in the Societies of Control', *Deleuze and the Social*, 2006, 171–90.

politics<sup>93</sup> and soft power is critically operative on mental disposition, with the power exerted over the life of the mind, including perception, attention and memory. The action at a distance of one mind on another, through the mental power to affect and become affected, which is mediated and enriched by technology.<sup>94</sup> Networks of information and communication generate new logics of representation that are more topological than analogical. When bodies as individuals wield power, that power in turn wields people. When communication is controlled by these bodies positioned in power, they can control the belief systems and narratives which in turn control people.



*fig.37 Narendra Modi with Japanese PM Shinzo Abe performing the Ganga aarti in Varanasi.*

The Kashi-corridor temple precinct is not just a physical construct. It is also a semiotic event shaped by material and immaterial processes found in our current communication and information age. Calling the Kashi-Vishwanath project a message from God himself is an act of exercising *theocratic power* whilst masking the identitarian agendas. Modi as a patriarchal figure has transgressed the bodily dimensions and has concretized himself as a symbolic construct. Both the technological and the organizational approach to nation branding deal with symbolic power, that is, the power to produce and communicate selective accounts of

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<sup>93</sup> Andreas Angelidakis, *Cognitive Architecture: From Bio-Politics to Noo-Politics; Architecture & Mind in the Age of Communication and Information* (010 Publishers, 2010), vi.

<sup>94</sup> Gabriel Tarde, *Gabriel Tarde on Communication and Social Influence: Selected Papers* (university of chicago press, 2010).

social reality.<sup>95</sup> Since Modi has assumed governmental power, Varanasi has been activated as site to produce images of mass dissemination for the assertion of Hindu identity. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of July 2018, Modi released a booklet called *'Meri Kashi'* (fig.38) which documents the infrastructure developments and the *positive* changes in the lives of Kashi and its common man, which was distributed throughout the city for free. In all his speeches for Varanasi, Modi appropriates the usage of only *Kashi*, the most archaic name of the city, with aspirations to resurrect layers of Hindu Antiquity through this naming, diminishing the Mughal histories. The Book cover itself has a large image of Modi with the Caption *'Meri Kashi'* which translates to *'My kashi'* plotting ownership on its territories. These objects which highlight the work done by the government also act as propaganda devices providing positive reinforcement to the image of the bodies in power and can reach the micro scales by transgressing the boundaries of the Mind and the Home.



*fig.38 The book launch of the 'Meri Kashi' booklet in Varanasi.*

The Modi government has even employed the medium of cinema and motion pictures for propaganda of the temple precinct. A documentary was produced by Mr. Rana from BBC

<sup>95</sup> Göran Bolin and Galina Miazhevich, 'The Soft Power of Commercialised Nationalist Symbols: Using Media Analysis to Understand Nation Branding Campaigns', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 21.5 (2018), 527–42.

London, highlighting Gandhi's stand on the project. At the inauguration ceremony of Banaras Hindu University, Mahatma Gandhi addressed the people of Varanasi saying, 'when I visited the Kashi Vishwanath temple last evening, I had a thought, if a person who is new to Varanasi visits the temple, what will they think of us Hindus? They would definitely condemn us. I speak feelingly as a Hindu.... If even our temples are not models of roominess and cleanliness, what can our self-government be?' The revival of the testimony of Gandhi spoken in a colonial context points to a selective revival of historical narratives as Gandhi has been demonized many a times in the BJP narratives calling him a patron of Islam. Offering validity to the construction of the temple precinct through the resurrection of texts molded into motion pictures speak strongly to the dissemination methodologies of *soft power* appropriated by the Modi regime.



fig.39 The scroll advertisements of Shinzo Abe with his quotes on positive reaffirmation of the Image of India, producing projected images onto the bodies.

Mobilizing Varanasi as a site of confluence between global bodies of power, propel Varanasi as a Glocal<sup>96</sup> spatial construct. From Billboards of the Japanese President Shinzo Abe hovering over the main streets of Varanasi, to 40 feet cutouts of Modi with the French Prime minister Emmanuel Macron asserting monumental presence on the ghats of Varanasi, the bodies in power are producing Artefacts which activate Varanasi as a global political construct. The transgression of these artifacts into the public domain mobilizes the creation of a *citizen spectator* through the institution of spectatorial rights. The orchestration of events of global importance like the *Kashi-Kyoto pact*<sup>97</sup> and the construction of monumental architectures like the Kashi-corridor complex in the spatial domain of Varanasi also propels the dissemination of media-bites, news-clips and hashtags, which position Varanasi as the

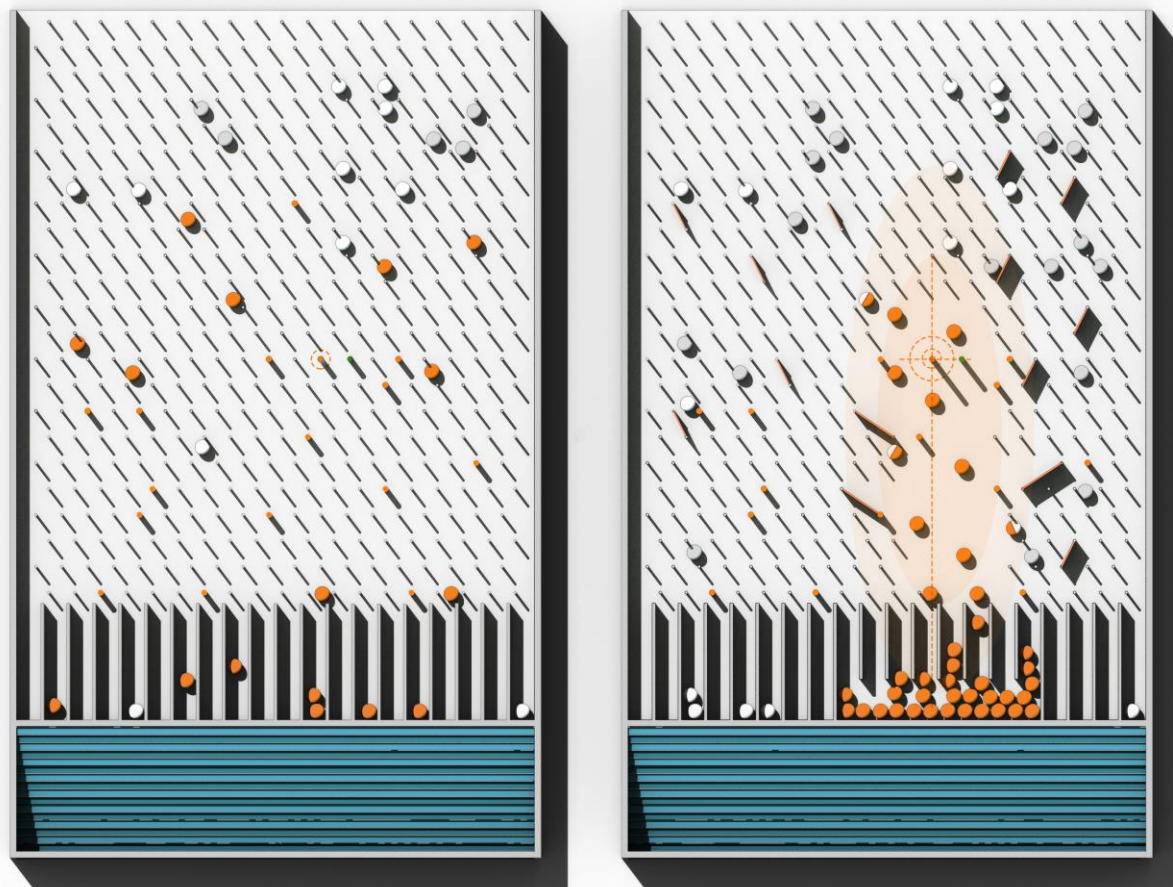
<sup>96</sup>Glocal: Globally accessible local. Jain.

<sup>97</sup> For more information, visit: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyoto-Varanasi\\_Partner\\_City\\_Agreement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyoto-Varanasi_Partner_City_Agreement)

image metonymic to the image of the country. Images of Shinzo Abe performing the Ganga Aarti, Emmanuel Macron walking hand in hand with Narendra Modi through the streets of Varanasi and on the Ghats produce images of spaces infused with power along with the dissemination of cultural domination and alliance.

Appropriation of Aural, visual and textual modes of dissemination at local, national and global scales appendage the ideological cause of selective nation branding and identity formation. The systematic analysis of these forms of latent content aid in surfacing the embedded ideologies within. Through systematic analysis of images and metaphors, it is possible to reveal the deep structure of an ideology, felicitating the production of a *theatre state*, and its governance through ritual and spectacle. The analysis of the political currency of images surfaces the deeply enmeshed circuitry between the symbolic and the material in India's post-reform mediascape.

### Conclusion:



*fig.40 The illustration reflects upon the before and after condition of the construction of the Kashi-corridor temple precinct project. The built fabric of Varanasi before was like a maze where bodies could lose orientation and reappear at the river banks. With the erasure of the built environment along with such an important sacred politic insert, the site produces politicized bodies (saffron is the colour of BJP) being oriented into the site using various forms of power, concretizing a selective Image of Kashi.*



*We must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology.*

*-Edward Soja, postmodern geographies.<sup>98</sup>*

Striking two birds with one stone, Modi has mobilized ~~Varanasi~~ *Kashi* into the realm of the *unsacred* by establishing himself as a critical agent of power in the context of the state and buttressing his theological and identitarian position through myriad forms of ‘*complicitous silences*’<sup>99</sup> appropriated through the built environment. The bodies in power have produced a symbolic order of an imaginary nation suppressing real practices of poverty and disorder. The invention of unified symbols and images of projected self-identities mask internal divisions to construct a simulation of unified origins. The commissioning of status building projects for the populous patrons to magnify a specific regime of scaling, Varanasi has become a reigning symbol of a muscular, resurgent *neo-Hinduism* with Modi at its helm.

Non-political bodies are activated through the reconstruction of sites which stay activated in the political realm. Everyday life in architectural and urban space is a product of history which produces more history. The project propelled by the bodies in power of the *reclamation* of sacred symbols for a return to the glorious histories of *uncorrupted culture*, as Bhabha elucidates, is an act in futility. Culture manifests as a melting pot of several disparate elements which are regularly being added and are transforming our cultural identities producing hybrid artifacts like the Kashi-Vishwanath-Gyanvapi Temple Mosque precinct. Placing the Islamic *diaspora* as the primary *other*<sup>100</sup> the government has categorically appropriated them as the *scapegoat*<sup>101</sup> masking internal socio-structural hierarchies and producing sites for staging antagonism that keep monuments and politics in the stare of activation. Apart from the ideologies which dismantle established secularistic structures, this form of radical Hinduism also brings to surface the existing hierarchical structures within the Hindu Body politic. This unitary narrative of Hinduism leads to the further subversion of the communities which find themselves devoid of agency through the politics of exclusion. These narratives also tend to mask the processes of operative labor which function hidden below the façade of the cosmic narratives. The mobilization of projects of theological importance stabilize spatial order and identity<sup>102</sup>, and inevitably carry authority as symbolic capital and buttress the reproduction of difference.

This study of the polyvalent forms of power aids in the construction of total assemblages of several processes operating in various registers converging at this very moment in time. The built environment provides physical evidence to how the governmental power is translated into embodied experience, where competing identities assert themselves in the visual order of

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<sup>98</sup> Edward W Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (Verso, 1989).

<sup>99</sup> Kim Dovey, ‘The Silent Complicity of Architecture’, in *Habitus: A Sense of Place* (Routledge, 2017), pp. 299–312.

<sup>100</sup> Jain p.145.

<sup>101</sup> Jain.

<sup>102</sup> Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form*.

global neo-liberal consensus. These image cultures speak to a politics of recognition, exclusion and assertion, in an avowedly plural and religiously inflected *post-colonial polity*. The semblance of such pluralistic epistemologies and pervasive heterogeneity of power construct a more holistic image of the polarity of these theologically charged architectures. This plurality transgresses intelligible and embodied boundaries of self through mental, symbolic, physical and notional systems of image practices. Inimical to the ideas of nationalism, these forces appendage identitarian ideas of people that are mapped onto territories at various scales. Peeling the layers of religion, caste, place and representation, one can surface the existential hybridity that is masked under the unilateral narratives of the site as Hindu sacrilege which supplements the ideological aspirations of the bodies in power towards the construction of selective identities.

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## *Illustrations*

fig.a <https://www.news18.com/photogallery/india/pm-modi-lays-foundation-stone-of-kashi-vishwanath-temple-corridor-2060487.html>

fig.1 Diana L Eck, *Banaras, City of Light* (Penguin Press, 1983) p.37.

fig.2 Press trust of India. Accessed 12 july,2020

<https://www.bloomberquint.com/elections/pm-holds-mega-roadshow-in-varanasi-performs-ganga-aarti-3>

fig.3 Accessed 12 july,2020 <https://www.freepressjournal.in/world/diyas-and-delight-us-celebrates-ram-mandir-bhumi-pujan>

fig.4 By Samuel Bourne [1][2] (1834–1912) -

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fig.5 25 april, 2019. <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/lok-sabha-2019/story/narendra-modi-varanasi-1510815-2019-04-26>

fig.6. 13 july, 2018 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/varanasi/on-13th-visit-to-kashi-pm-modi-to-launch-12-new-projects/articleshow/64970506.cms>

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fig.8 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hHSlai0oe8&t=1051s>

fig.9 1905, madho Prasad .British library <https://www.oldindianphotos.in/2015/05/benares-varanasi-ghats-ganges-river-1905.html>

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fig.13 [https://medium.com/@Legal\\_Kant/when-christian-ex-cop-calls-india-saffron-pakistan-he-is-dancing-to-the-tunes-of-vatican-bank-c91396422fde](https://medium.com/@Legal_Kant/when-christian-ex-cop-calls-india-saffron-pakistan-he-is-dancing-to-the-tunes-of-vatican-bank-c91396422fde)

fig.14 Madhuri Desai, *Banaras Reconstructed: Architecture and Sacred Space in a Hindu Holy City* (University of Washington Press, 2017) pg.83.

fig. 15 <https://www.fortuneindia.com/ideas/highway-to-heaven/103518>

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fig.17 <https://www.ndtv.com/photos/news/in-pics-sea-of-saffron-greets-pm-modi-during-varanasi-roadshow-97401>

fig.18 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hHSlal0oe8&t=1051s>

fig.19 <https://www.fortuneindia.com/ideas/highway-to-heaven/103518>

fig.20 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSGEH6di2cQ>

fig.21 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hHSlal0oe8&t=1051s>

Fig.22 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSGEH6di2cQ>

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fig.26. Narendra Bisht. <https://www.fortuneindia.com/ideas/highway-to-heaven/103518>

fig.27 Illustration done by the author.

fig.28-34 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hHSlal0oe8&t=1051s>

fig.35 <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/emmanuel-macron-in-varanasi-live-french-president-pm-narendra-modi-visit-varanasi-mirzapur-today-1822613>

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fig.39 Rajesh Bhatt <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/modi-japanese-pm-to-visit-varanasi-today/article7978341.ece>

fig. 40 illustration by the author.