

# Visualized Space:

## Exhibition and Colloquium of the Varanasi Research Project

Report >  
South Asia

Pilgrim maps, panoramic scrolls, topographical maps, and picturesque views are among the materials that have been collected and studied by the Varanasi Research Project of the South Asia Institute in Heidelberg. Some of these rare items have been presented for the first time to the public at the exhibition *Banaras – Representations of a Sacred City*. Research findings were exchanged and discussed at an international colloquium with leading experts in the field.

Logo of the Internet  
presentation



Map of Kashi, c. 1970

Courtesy: Axel Michaels

By Martin Gaenzle & Jörg Gengnagel

The history of South Asian cartography has long been understood as being based on Western cartographic traditions. Maps of India were regarded as being produced by foreigners – not by Indians in India. The contributions of Susan Gole (1989) and Joseph E. Schwartzberg (1992) have gradually changed this commonly held view during the last two decades. The Varanasi Research Project 'Visualized Space – Constructions of Locality and Cartographic Representation in Varanasi (India)' concerns itself with aspects of Indian cartography, visualizations of space, and forms of locality and spatial orientation.

The extraordinary position of Banaras among the Indian pilgrimage towns is linked to its special geographical location and its sacred topography. The city is situated on the western bank of the Ganges, which at this point flows to the north. The limits of the city's sacred territory are marked by a circumambulatory procession road (Panchakroshtiyatra) that starts and ends at the central temple complex of the 'Lord of the Universe' (Vishvanatha, a form of Shiva), moves along the riverfront, and then forms a half-circle leading from the confluence of the river Asi in the south to that of the river Varuna in the north. The bathing places or *ghats* face the rising sun. From this western bank of the river the water is easily accessible even during the dry season. The eastern side is flooded during the monsoon, thus making the construction of buildings impossible. The view to the other side of the river is therefore a view from urban space towards wasteland. Favoured by this position the riverfront of Banaras has become a unique landscape in the course of the city's history. The bathing *ghats* are a place for manifold public activities. This is the place for bathing and washing, for exercises, for visiting temples, and for performing processions and rituals. Ascetics meditate in the sun, vendors sell pilgrimage souvenirs, and boatmen look for customers.

These features of the urban landscape have led to a variety

of questions addressed by the research project: How does this sacred topography of Banaras influence the representation of space in pictures, diagrams, and cartographic representations? How do the inhabitants perceive space, be it profane or sacred? How does the corpus of eulogistic Sanskrit literature on Banaras, with its large quantity of 'spatial texts', relate to the daily practice and the actual performance of pilgrimage and the pilgrim's orientation in space? The first results of the research project have been published by Axel Michaels and Jörg Gengnagel. So far the electronic publications of the Varanasi Research Project comprise an extensive Banaras Bibliography, an electronic Index of the Kashikhanda, and an interactive presentation of the religious map *Mirror of Kashi (Kashidarpana)*. This map was printed in Banaras in 1876 for Kailasanatha Sukula. The map's virtual representation with its extensive legends and inscriptions is the outcome of its first complete reading. It is shaped in the form of a mandala and shows the basic features of the city's sacred topography. This 'word picture' consists of more than 1,250 names of temples, gods, goddesses, and places. All these names and places have been indexed, 725 pop-up windows contain additional textual and visual information. This project is affiliated with the Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative (ECAI) of Berkeley.

### A panoramic view

One focus of the exhibition *Banaras – Representations of a Sacred City* was the display of various panoramic views of Banaras – a form of spatial representation, documented for the first time by the publication of a Banaras panorama by Joseph Tieffenthaler (Berlin 1786). The displayed panoramic views of Banaras reach from the original panoramic scroll *Shri Kashipata* (22 x 440cm, c. 1900) painted on paper to a photographic panorama of the whole riverfront with a length of almost 20 metres. This photographic panorama taken in 2001 by Stanislaw Klimek and Niels Gutschow was contrasted with picturesque views of the riverfront produced by various artists during the nineteenth century and with the early works of professional photographers collected by Joachim K. Bautze.

There are two rare pictorial maps painted on paper and cloth dating from the second half of the eighteenth century that represent another aspect of Indian cartography. Kailasanatha Sukula's *Kashidarpana* (1876) and Krishnachandra Sharma's *Kashidarpanapurti* (1877), lithographed in Banaras, both illustrate the tradition of pilgrim maps. The works of these Indian cartographers were shown next to the two earliest topographical maps of Banaras: the map drawn by James Prinsep (1799–1840) in 1822 and the first map commissioned by the colonial administration in 1867.

### Seeing and describing religious urban space

From 22 to 24 May, the Banaras exhibition in Heidelberg was the site for an international colloquium on visualizations of space in the Hindu pilgrimage city of Banaras. This meeting, organized by the Varanasi Research Project, started with an emphasis on 'seeing' as the participants had a chance to get a first hand impression of the different views and visualizations of the city at the exhibition. The first presentations focused on the history of western views of Banaras (in paintings and photographs) and compared the panoramic view with that of pictorial maps, pointing out mutual influences. Clearly, the last two centuries have seen tremendous shifts in the ways of seeing and the forms of representation. The session on sacred topography focused on both the 'classical' textual description of sacred space in Banaras and the spatial practices of ritual actors. Sacred space emerged as something continuously renegotiated by various social actors. The central question concerning cartographic representations was the relationship between 'traditional' Indian map-making and Western technologies of mapping based on measurement. In certain religious maps different principles of mapping occur in combination, representing different kinds of spaces. That mapping is not an innocent practice but is often ruled by important social and political agendas was highlighted by two papers on Bharat Mata (Mother India) being worshipped in the form of a map.

In a welcome contrast to the depictions of sacredness and purity, the issue of contesting and negotiating the representations of urban spaces was taken up. By various contributions on the creation of a literary 'self-image' as well as the gendered character and ethnic appropriation of space it became clear that complex social processes are involved in the creation of place, in distinction to the ideal models of cosmological space.

It became evident in the course of the conference that there is a great variety of perspectives on space in Banaras and that its visualizations and imaginations take on many different forms. But, different as these may be, they are all dependent on social and historical processes, constantly negotiated, frequently changing, and often strongly contested. <

### References

- Gole, Susan, *Indian Maps and Plans: From Earliest Times to the Advent of European Surveys*, New Delhi: Manohar (1989).
- Schwartzberg, Joseph E., 'Cartography in the Traditional Islamic and South Asian Societies', in: J.B. Harley and D. Woodward (eds.), *Cartography in the Traditional Islamic and South Asian Societies*, The History of Cartography (Series) Vol. II, Book 1, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press (1992), pp. 295–579.

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The poster of the exhibition *Banaras – Representations of a Sacred City* shows a detail of the map *Pilgrims in Banaras* (New Delhi, National Museum). Depicted is the southern section with the river Ganges at the bottom, the confluence of the river Asi, the riverfront, and pilgrims moving along procession routes.

### Information >

The Varanasi Research Project is funded by the German Research Council and involves interdisciplinary cooperation in various sub-projects. The research is carried out in cooperation with Rana P.B. Singh (Varanasi) and coordinated by Axel Michaels and H.-G. Bohle.

Websites: [www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/IND/benavr/bbiblio.htm](http://www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/IND/benavr/bbiblio.htm)  
(Varanasi Research Project website, including the extensive Banaras Bibliography)  
[www.banaras.uni-hd.de](http://www.banaras.uni-hd.de)  
(Contains an interactive presentation of the *Mirror of Kashi (Kashidarpana)* religious map)