VĀRĀNASĪ/BENARES: THE CENTRE OF HINDUISM?

A discussion of the meaning of "place" and space[1]

With 6 figures and 5 photos

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Zusammenfassung: Vārānasī/Benares. Eine Erörterung der Bedeutung von Ort und Raum

Benares markiert den Ort am Ganges, der im goldenen Zeitalter verharrt. Er ist herausgehoben aus dem ihn umgebenden Kontinuum und beinhaltet zugleich das gesamte Universum. Und weil der Ort „von Śiva niemals verlassen ist", verheißt er Erlösung. Zahlreiche Umgehungen und Pilgerreisen umkreisen ein wechselndes Zentrum am Hochufer, unweit des Ganges oder führen in spiralförmiger Bewegung darauf zu. Solche rituellen Reisen verschaffen dem Pilger Verdienst und wer in Benares stirbt, ist am Ziel, er wird niemals wiedergeboren.

Charakteristisch für den Hinduismus ist das Prinzip der Substitution: heilige Orte von Benares werden abgebildet an anderen Orten und in Benares selbst finden sich fast alle anderen heiligen Orte des Subkontinents. Benares strahlt aus und vereinigt zugleich; denn es kann nicht genug sein mit der Anhäufung von heilsspendenden Qualitäten. Auch in Benares selbst sind verschiedene Orte der Stadt wiederum an einem Punkt konzentriert. Dort ersetzt der Akt der Verehrung die Prozession. Und schließlich repräsentiert die Göttin Vārānasidevi den Ort Vārānasī/Benares. Dem eingeweihten *siddha* jedoch, dem Seher, der bereits in diesem Leben von den Fesseln der Existenz befreit ist, ist jedes Ritual fremd: Benares ist in ihm, er vollzieht die Umwandlung des heiligen Ortes in sich selbst.

Introduction

Kāśī, Avimukta or Vārānasī – names for differing spatial entities, names that are also used interchangeably – names that, as Eck (1983, 187f.) observed, "express the various powers and attributes of the city and reveal the dimensions of its sacred authority". Vārānasī and Kāśī seem to have been synonymous

since the first century AD; Vārānasī is also named as the capital of a kingdom named Kāśī. Later, the term Vārānasī referred to the urban settlement, while Kāśī represented the sacred realm *(kṣetra)* encircled by the Great Pilgrimage, *pañcakrośiyātrā.* The name Vārānasī seems to convey the notion that the settlement was situated at the confluence of Gangā and Varanā (Dubey 1993, 331).

During the Muslim rule "Vārānasī" was corrupted into Banāras and was as such kept during the British rule, but spelt as Benares. With an official statement, the ancient name Vārānasī was restored on May 24, 1956.

Questions about the antiquity of Vārānasī often arise, but are not easily answered. Mark Twain wrote in 1898 in his 'Following the Equator: Journey around the World': "Benares is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend". These poetic notions resulted in the belief that Vārānasī is "the oldest urban settlement of the world". Excavations, however, have proven that a simple settlement of mud structures existed on the plateau near the confluence of Gangā and Varanā in the eighth century BC, while the first urban settlement patterns evolved in the 6th to 3rd centuries BC, when Vārānasī or Kāśī constituted one of 16 small tribal royalties. One of these was of the Śākyas, to which Siddharta Gautama (Buddha) belonged. His appearance in Vārānasī and Sarnāth, where he delivered his first sermon, might be dated to around 420 BC. Centuries of ever new invasions followed, with local rulers fostering the Brahmins as religious and legal advisers. As a rising class these Brahmins were very open to incorporate new and alien cults into their own traditions; alien gods were identified with their own deities. Thus a variety of manifestations developed, but no authority to formulate and promulagate dogmas.

After the flourishing Gupta-dynasty (4th to 6th centuries AD), Kāśī probably lost its independence. *Purānic* literature refers to the dominance of the temple of Avimukteśvara in this period; seals from the 6th to 11th century were found with inscriptions that name the territory as Avimukta – the "Never-Forsaken" land. When the *pañcakrośi* pilgrimage evolved during the 12th century, the Lord of the Universe,

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[1] Both contributions – on Vārānasī/Benares (Gutschow) and Water Symbolism (Singh) – were written in a kind of dialogue between the two authors in winter 1993/94. They met each other first in 1978 at a seminar in Bombay and shared the *pañcakrośiyātrā,* the circumambulation of Kāśī, in April 1991. In 1992 they followed the route of Avimukta and Antargrhi, always under the guidance of Kedarnāth Vyās, without whom that "work" would not have been possible.
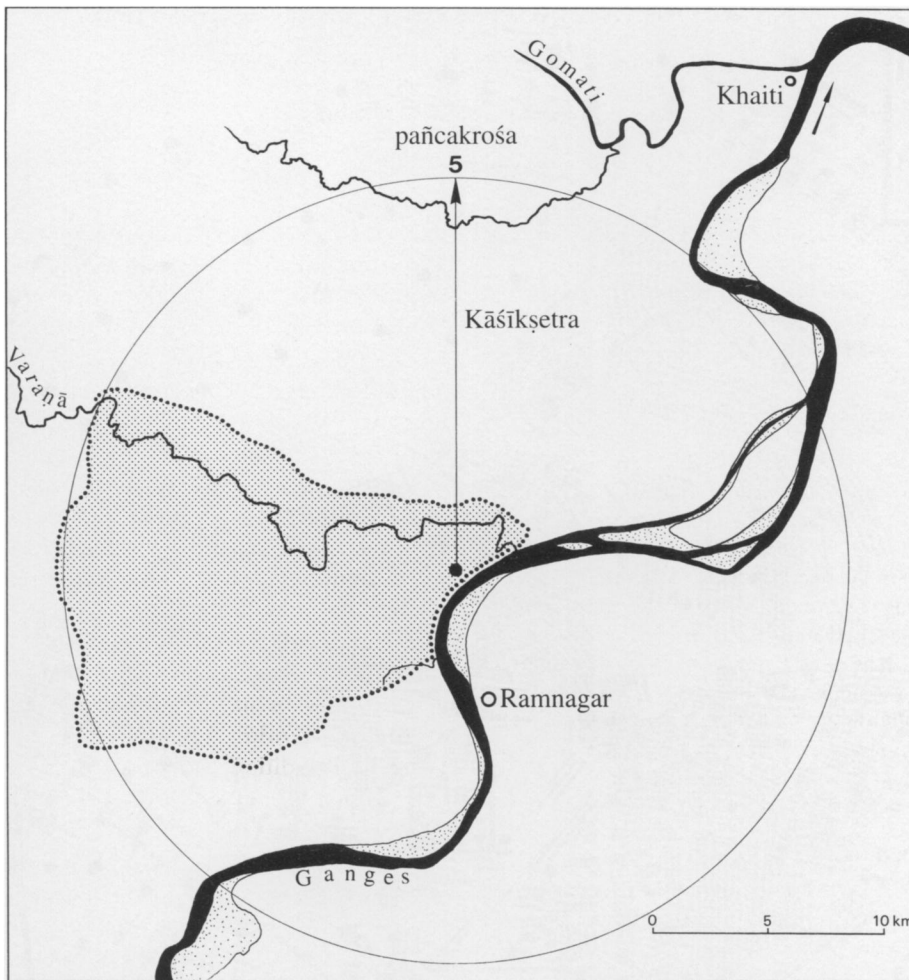
Fig. 1: Benares: The circle with a radius of five *krośa* (= 17,6 km) identifies the ancient "Sacred Field of Kāśī", *Kāśīkṣetra.* For centuries, however, pilgrims have cirumambulated only a fraction of this sacred territory while they follow the sacred journey of the *Pañcakrośiyātrā,* the route of which is indicated on the map by dots. The Ganges no longer crosses *Kāśīkṣetra,* but forms the southeastern edge

Benares: Der Kreis mit einem Radius von fünf *krośa* (= 17,6 km) markiert das alte "Heilige Feld von Kāśī", *Kāśīkṣetra.* Seit Jahrhunderten haben die Pilger jedoch nur einen Teil dieses heiligen Gebietes auf der heiligen Reise der *Pañcakrośiyātrā,* deren Route auf der Karte durch Punkte gekennzeichnet ist, umwandert. Der Ganges durchquert *Kāśīkṣetra* nicht mehr, sondern bildet die südöstliche Grenze

Viśveśvara, replaced the Avimukteśvara as the central focus.

At the same time, Vārāṇasī suffered from repeated raids by Muslim invaders (1033, 1194, 1206): chronicles refer to the destruction of thousands of temples. Finally, Aurangzeb ordered the destruction of a number of large temples in 1669 (the one of Viśveśvara among others) and their replacement by large mosques. He even ordered the city to be renamed Muhammadabad.

In 1725 a new Hindu kingdom was established in Vārāṇasī under the name of Kāśīrāj. Since that time new palaces have been erected along the riverbank and temples rebuilt. The British East India Company took over in 1794, but the Mahārājas of Vārāṇasī remained to play an important cultural and social role. Mahārājas from all over India subsequently established residences in Vārāṇasī, to such an extent, that by about 1900 almost the entire stretch of the Ganges between Asī and Varaṇā was dotted with
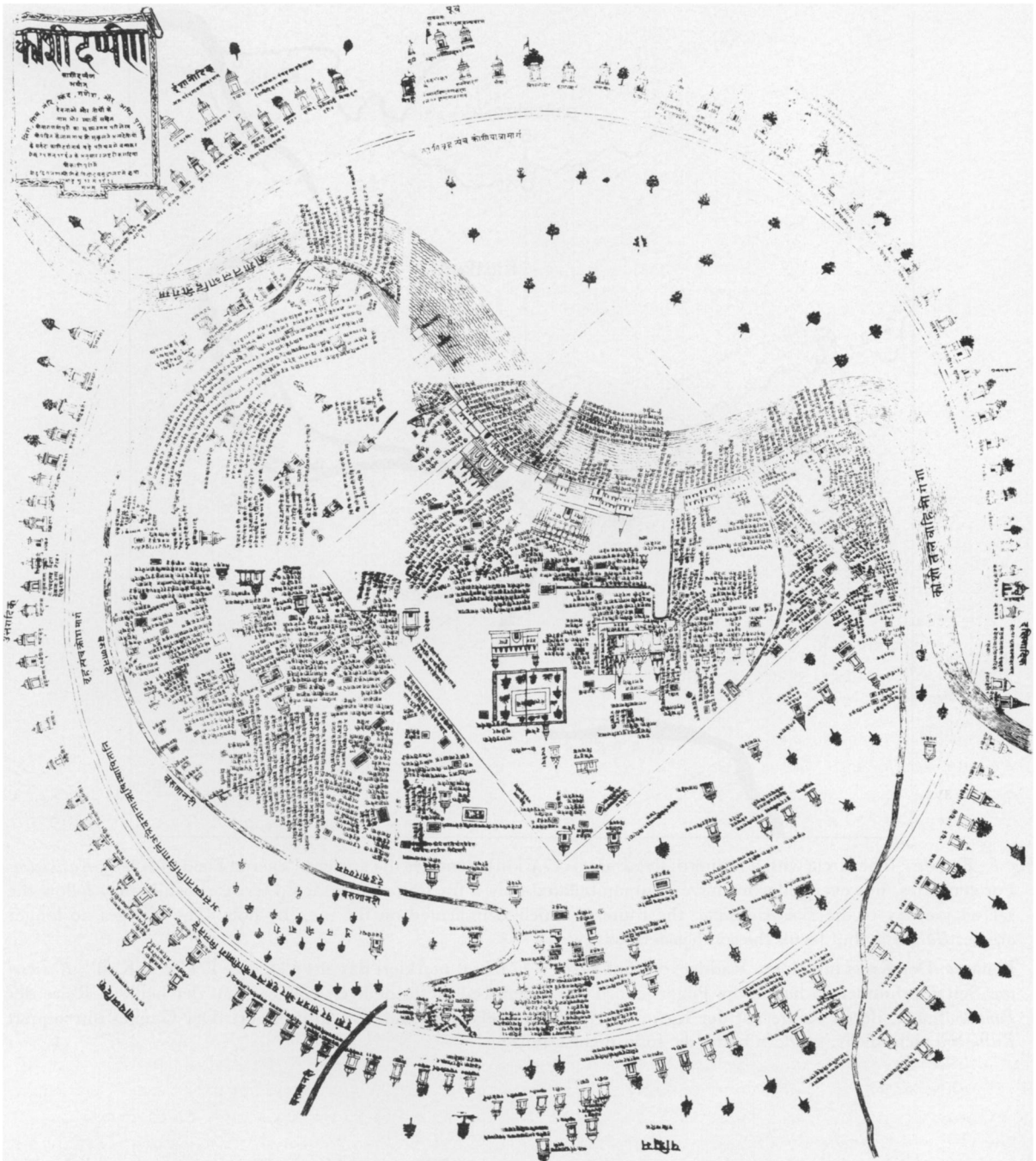
Fig. 2: Benares: Pilgrim's map dated 1875 AD, printed from four moulds on white cotton for Kailash Nāth Sukul. The map is directed east, thus the Ganges appears on top, Varaṇā towards left and Assī towards right. The circle circumscribes *Kāśikṣetra,* the "Sacred Field of Kāśī" with a radius of five *krośa* and an arc of eightyfour *krośa* length (= 269 km). The lettering on the map identifies numerous temples, *maṭhas,* tanks and wells as potential destinations of the sacred journey

Benares: Pilgerkarte von 1875, gedruckt mit vier Vorlagen auf weißem Kattun für Kailash Nāth Sukul. Die Karte ist ostorientiert, daher erscheinen der Ganges oben, Varaṇā links und Assī rechts. Der Kreis umrandet *Kāśikṣetra,* das "Heilige Feld von Kāśī" mit einem Radius von fünf *krośa* und einem Bogen von vierundachtzig *krośa* Länge (= 296 km). Die Legende der Karte weist zahlreiche Tempel, *maṭhas,* Zisternen und Brunnen als potentielle Ziele einer heiligen Reise aus

Photo 1: Benares: *Liṅga* of Maṇikarṇikeśvara, placed two storeys below the courtyard of a *maṭha*, high above the Ganges. With the worship of this *liṅga* the *Pañcakrośiyātrā* and the *Avimuktayātrā* start

Benares: *Liṅga* von Maṇikarṇikeśvara, die zwei Stockwerke unterhalb des Hofes einer *maṭha* hoch über dem Ganges liegt. Mit der Anbetung dieser *liṅga* beginnen *Pañcakrośiyātrā* und *Avimuktrayātrā*

buildings overlooking the sacred river, which became a symbol of cultural unity. Gradually also, the *ghāṭs* were paved and architecturally transformed into stepped stone structures. A few remaining stretches were finally paved as recently as 1992.

Kāśi and the Pañcakrośiyātrā

The *pañcakrośiyātrā*, the circumambulation of Kāśi, delineates the sacred and beneficial "field" *(kṣetra)* of Viśvanātha or Viśveśvara. The centre of this circumference, however, is not represented by this most important shrine of Śiva in his capacity as the Lord of the Universe, but by the *liṅga* of Madhyameśvara, the Lord of the Centre. The name of the pilgrimage comes from the radius of the circuit: five *(pañca) krośa* or 17,6 kilometres (Fig. 1). The distance is measured from the central *liṅga* to the shrine of Dehalivināyaka, which is Gaṇeśa in his capacity as the guardian of the threshold of the western entrance into Kāśi and Vārāṇasi, serving as the protector of the sacred territory.

The idea of a pilgrimage around this mythic territory has survived until today, but it is believed that in the present Kaliyuga, the most deteriorated of the four world eras, the circumference of Kāśikṣetra has shrunk to 25 *krośa*. The *purāṇas*, ancient collections of myths and legends, tell us that in the golden age the circumference measured 84 *krośa*, or 269 kilometres. The pilgrimage map of Kāśi produced by Kailashnāth Sukul in 1875 (Fig. 2) depicts the full circle of the *caurāśikrośiyātrā*, the "84-*krośa*-journey". During the recent movement of Hindu revival a group of ritual specialists from Vārāṇasi tried to trace the ancient route, travelling by car to each of the 98 places mentioned on the circuit. The true circle of the ancient circuit as depicted on the map symbolically represents the entire cosmos. Even the *pañcakrośi* pilgrimage around the much reduced space equals the circumambulation of the cosmos.

Kāśikṣetra is defined as space that differs from the profane continuum around it. The *Kāśi Khaṇḍa* tells us that this *kṣetra* is believed to be suspended in the sky, resting on the three prongs of the trident *(triśūla)* of Śiva. Kāśi is said to be like the sun behind the clouds: you can't see it although it is there. PARRY quotes his informants, saying "the soil *is* gold, the city *is* suspended in space and Śiva *does* wander in it daily" (PARRY 1993, 108). In fact, he is represented

in space: Vārāṇasī is described as a figure with its head at Asī, and its feet at Varaṇā.

Kāsī remains in the state of the golden age, although only the "divine sight" of a *yogi* might realize that. But in as much as the time in which it exists is immune to degeneration, its territory is continuously defined through pilgrimages. These are preferably performed during the inauspicious period of an intercalary month, the *adhik mās,* that occurs every two or three years, but also during those days following full moon in October. The ancient texts do not mention any rules as to how the pilgrimage should be performed, and it was not until the end of the 19th century that resthouses *(dharamśālā)* were built at five places. These are always attached to the profane space to the left of the clockwise path, while places of worship are found on the right side. Strangely enough, during the dry season these resthouses shelter the pilgrims only during daytime. Around midnight they move onwards for about four hours to seek rest again under one of the huge banyan trees along the route or on the banks of a wayside tank. Hords of young men from the wrestling clubs manage to cover the 88 kilometres in less than twenty hours on the day preceding Śiva's Great Night *(mahāśivarātri)* in February. And the hurried pilgrim will choose to go by bicycle, motorbike, car or bus to cover the circuit within a few hours, confining the actual worship to a few prominent places such as Bhīmacaṇḍī and Rāmeśvara.

Certainly, these pilgrims won't have time to stop at all the 108 places that mark the route. This is indeed an auspicious number, that can be understood as the multiplication of the nine planets with the twelve months, or the four cardinal directions with the 27 moonhouses *(nakṣatra).* Even the total of the digits is 9, the most auspicious representation of space, as it encompasses the cardinal and intermediate directions as well as the centre. The space and time of the circumambulation thus aquire cosmic qualities.

The names of the 108 places of worship refer not only to the Great Tradition of the Hindu pantheon, but also to protectors *(gaṇa)* of local traditions. Almost every second place has a *liṅga,* Śiva's symbol, as an object of worship. Ten others are devoted to goddesses such as Devī, Durgā or Gaurī, eleven to Gaṇeśas, and a few to Bhairava and Viṣṇu. Also worshipped are two sacred fields *(bhūmi),* six water tanks and wells *(kuṇḍa, kūpa, sarovara),* two mouths of rivers *(saṅgam)* and three *ghāṭs.* The sequence and sets of these seats of gods or sacred places do not convey an inherent logic. More probably they represent

108 existing sacred places which were then incorporated into an established sequence and numbered accordingly in the *Kāśī Rahasya* text. The numbers of the respective chapter and verse have been fixed to each sanctuary fairly recently to allow pilgrims to identify these places and read the verses in a pamphlet bought at the outset of the journey at Jñānavāpī. There they take the vow *(saṅkalpa)* to complete the pilgrimage following austere rules of conduct, for the pilgrim must avoid lust, anger and envy, go barefoot and eat pure food.

Having taken the vow the pilgrim will first move down the narrow lanes towards the river Gaṅgā and take a purificatory bath at Maṇikarṇikā Ghāṭ, the *ghāṭ* that is considered as the place of original cosmogony. It is here that death and cremation becomes an act of universal regeneration.

From the *ghāṭ* the pilgrim climbs a flight of steps to reach the courtyard of a *maṭh.* There he or she climbs down again to worship Maṇikarṇikeśvara (Photo 1), the first of the 108 shrines, which is located two storeys below the present level of the city. It is as if the pilgrim returns to a fragment of primeval time which has survived the cycle of ages. Here, the notion of the golden age becomes manifest as he descends into the dark underground, down to the original, the "real" soil of the world. Again we might refer to the image of the sun behind the clouds. The present townscape of Vārāṇasī may be considered as an illusion that expresses the inauspicious present age, Kaliyuga. Many layers below the surface the real Kāśī is found, having survived the ravages of time. Legends tell us, that some "old" *liṅgas* in the "womb of the city" have been forgotten or hidden for centuries. These are said to have been recovered only at the end of the 18th century, a period of strong Hindu revival.

The merits attained by a *pañcakrośīyātrā* are familiar to every pilgrim. While those sins committed elsewhere are destroyed in Kāśī, those committed in Kāśī are destroyed on an *antargṛhayātrā* and those of the *antargṛhayātrā* are destroyed on a *pañcakrośīyātrā.*

Likewise, a hierarchy of places reflect the sequence of rebirth. Those who die in one of the six other sacred cities of India are reborn in Kāśī. And dying in Kāśī – within the area enclosed by the *pañcakrośī* pilgrimage route – ensures liberation, *mukti.* At the moment of death Śiva gives them the *tārakā mantra* which destroys the fruits of past actions. Thus death in Kāśī can be understood as an initiation, with Śiva as the preceptor.

It was said earlier that Kāśī is essentially separate from the non-sacred continuity that surrounds it. At

Photo 2: Benares: *Liṅga* of Bhīmaśaṅkara, the sixth of twelve *Jyotirliṅgas,* representing the original one identified at Pune. The *liṅga* was "found" below the level of a house along the outer path around the compound of Viśveśvara. On the back wall are the image of Gaṇeśa/Vināyaka and two ancient sculptural fragments

Benares: *Liṅga* von Bhīmaśaṅkara, der sechsten von zwölf *Jyortirliṅgas,* die das in Pune gefundene Original repräsentieren. Die *liṅga* wurde unter einem Haus auf dem äußeren Pfad um die Anlage von Viśveśvara "gefunden". Auf der Rückwand sind das Bildnis von Gaṇeśa/Vināyaka und zwei alte Skulpturfragmente zu sehen

Photo 3: *Liṅga* of fourtytwo miniature *liṅgas* at Kapildhārā, representing three series of fourteen *liṅgas* that mark the urban space of Vārāṇasī

Liṅga bestehend aus zweiundvierzig winzigen *liṅgas* in Kapildhārā; sie repräsentiert drei Serien von jeweils vierzehn *liṅgas,* die den städtischen Raum von Vārāṇasī kennzeichnen

the same time the notion persists that Kāśī contains the rest of space. For the inhabitants of Kāśī there is no need for a pilgrimage to the other places, for they exist in Kāśī itself. The *liṅga* of Bhīmaśaṅkara (see Photo 2), located in the entrance area of a private house just beyond the Viśveśvara compound, for example, represents the *jyotirliṅga* (lit. the immeasurable *liṅga* in the form of a light stray) the "original" of which is found at Pune.

Again on a different scale, certain levels of Kāśī are represented in a nutshell, ready to be worshipped in a single act. The act of pilgrimage is thus reduced to an act of worship without the necessity of movement. The *Kāśī Khaṇḍa* text has identified three clusters of 14 *liṅgas* each which are meant to be worshipped on new moon days along a *bayālīśaliṅgiyātrā* (lit. "journey to the 42 *liṅgas*"). To avoid the burden of such processions, 42 miniature *liṅgas* are placed in one large *liṅga* (see Photo 3). One level of the sacred infrastructure is thus isolated from the rest and expressed in a single symbol, that in a way represents

Kāśī. Many such examples of isolation of certain aspects of space are known. There is even a temple in Vārāṇasī known under the name of Pañcakrośī Mandir, but with representations of many more than just those 108 places that punctuate the route of that *yātrā.* The frame of the temple entrance, the side and rear walls bear altogether 272 niches with representations of sacred places of Vārāṇasī and Kāśī. Starting with Hanumān, Viśālākṣīdevī, Saptā-varṇa Vināyaka, Maṇikarṇikeśvara and Daṇḍapāṇi on the left doorjamb, an imaginary route leads around the temple, covering even the deity dedicated to the pilgrimage, Pañcakrośīdevī.

As the initiated might perform the *yātrā* within his own body, the Pañcakrośī Mandir serves as a tool: 272 gods and goddesses, *ghāṭs,* ponds and wells are visualized, worshipped and circumambulated in a single act of motion. The walls of the temple are transformed into a vast sacred scene.

Vārāṇasī, as any other sacred place in India is rich in such replications. For example, a goddess by
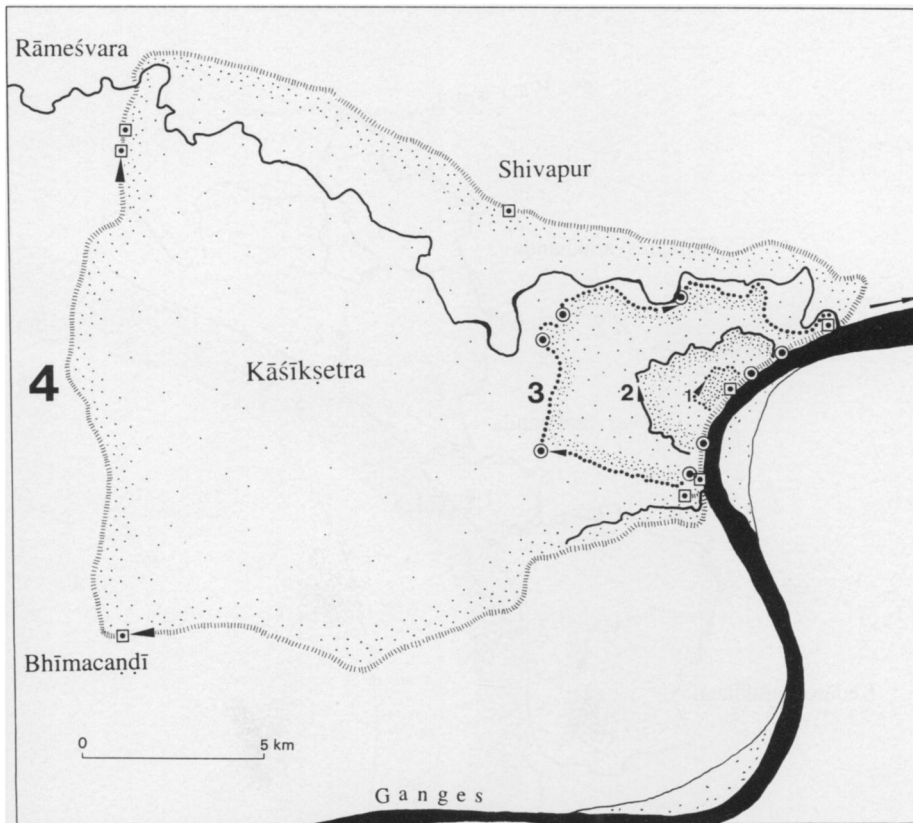
Fig. 3: Benares: Identification of four circumambulatory routes *(pradakṣiṇā)* or sacred journeys *(yātrā)*, encircling an ever increasing territory. 1 *Antargṛhayātrā*, 2 *Avimuktayātrā*, 3 *Nagarapradakṣiṇā*, the route of which is divided by eight protective temples dedicated to the guardian Gaṇeśa/Vināyaka as indicated by circles on the map, 4 *Pañcakrośiyātrā*, the route of which is again divided by eight protective temples of the guardian Gaṇeśa/Vināyaka, as indicated by squares on the map

Benares: Darstellung von vier Umwandlungsrouten *(pradakṣiṇā)* oder heiligen Reisen *(yātrā)*, die ein immer größeres Gebiet umfassen. 1 *Antargṛhayātrā;* 2 *Avimuktayātrā;* 3 *Nagarapradakṣiṇā*, die Route, die durch acht schützende, dem Hüter Gaṇeśa/Vināyaka geweihte Tempel unterteilt wird, ist auf der Karte durch Kreise gekennzeichnet; 4 *Pañcakrośiyātrā*, die Route, die wiederum durch acht schützende Tempel des Hüters Gaṇeśa/Vināyaka unterteilt wird, ist auf der Karte durch Quadrate gekennzeichnet

the name of Vārāṇasīdevī represents the city of Vārāṇasī within the compound of Trilocaneśvara, and a goddess at Lalitā Ghāṭ by the name of Kāśīdevī represents Kāśī.

Avimukta – the "realm that is never forsaken by Śiva"

Moving from the *pañcakrośiyātrā*, the most inclusive pilgrimage route, towards the centre and the Ganges, a second route is marked by the *nagarapradakṣiṇā* (No. 3 on Figure 3). It introduces the term *pradakṣiṇā*, literally, the "circumambulatory route" around the city *(nagara)* of Vārāṇasī, that urban entity that spreads between two tributaries of the Ganges,

Varaṇā in the North and Asī in the South. Several days of the year, especially the day of the full-moon in the month of Mārgaśira (in December), are considered auspicious for this pilgrimage, which concludes with a ritual at Jñānavāpī, the sacred well beside the temple of Viśveśvara.

The third route (No. 2 on Figures 3, 4 and 6) is marked by the *avimuktayātrā*, the pilgrimage that encircles Avimukta, the territory that is "Never-Forsaken" by Lord Śiva. Early sources such as the 9th century text of the *Skanda Purāṇa* already mentioned that the *kṣetra* or sacred territory of Avimukta "is superior to all other places, including Prayāga, because it bestows most easily release *(mokṣa)*" (BAKKER 1993, 25). At about the same period, the *Liṅga*
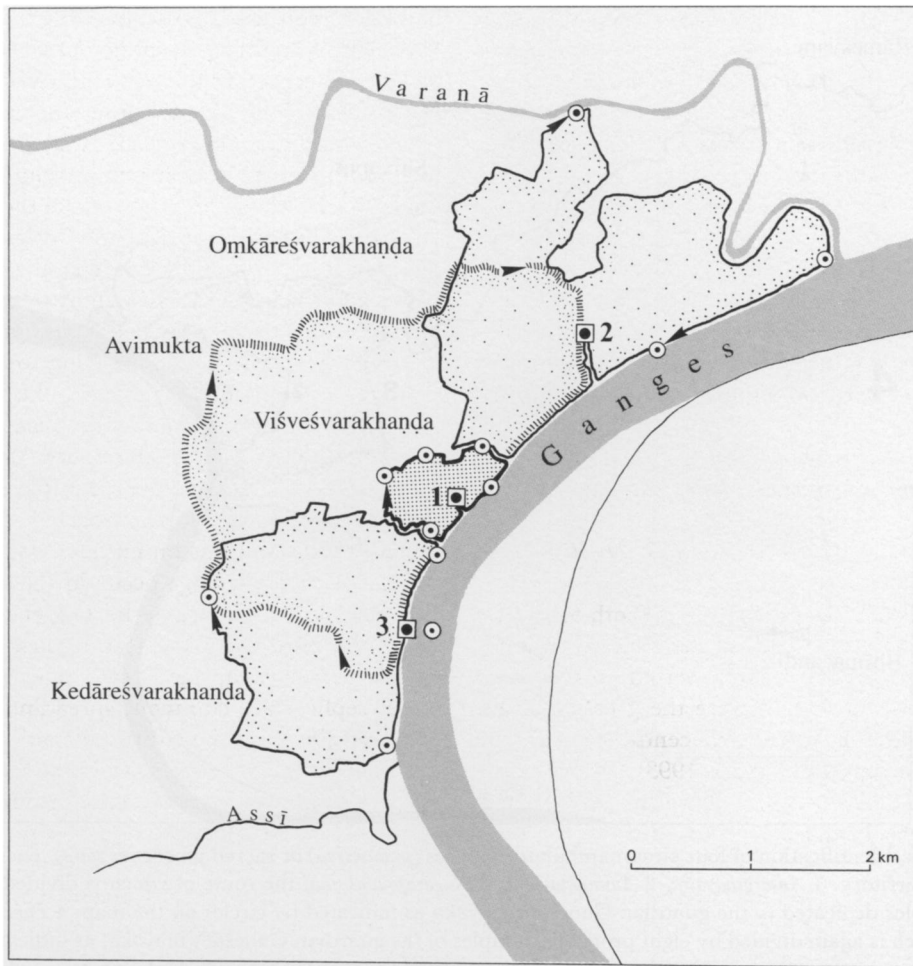
Fig. 4: Benares: Delimitation of three different territories, located along the Ganges and extending around central
sanctuaries. 1 Viśveśvara, 2 Oṃkāreśvara, 3 Kedāreśvara. Each processional route around these territories, called
Viśveśvarakhaṇḍa, Oṃkāreśvarakhaṇḍa and *Kedāreśvarakhaṇḍa* respectively is marked by sacred shrines that are attached
to the Four Directions of the cosmos. Another processional route defines Avimukta, the "realm that is never left by
Śiva", binding the three central sanctuaries together

Benares: Abgrenzung von drei verschiedenen Territorien um die zentralen Heiligtümer entlang des Ganges. 1 Viś-
veśvara, 2 Oṃkāreśvara, 3 Kedāreśvara. Jede Prozessionsroute um diese Gebiete – genannt *Viśveśvarakhaṇḍa, Oṃkā-
reśvarakhaṇḍa* bzw. *Kedāreśvarakhaṇḍa* – ist durch heilige Schreine markiert, die den vier Himmelsrichtungen zugeordnet
sind. Eine andere Prozessionsroute ist Avimukta gewidmet, dem "Reich, das Śiva niemals verläßt"; sie verbindet
die drei zentralen Heiligtümer miteinander

Purāṇa mentions that other *tīrthas* (sacred places) of
North India even come to Avimukta on pilgrimage:
they join the Gaṅgā on her way to Vārāṇasī and
assemble at Avimukteśvara. Most eloquently, the
Kūrma Purāṇa, another text of the eighth or ninth cen-
turies (ECK 1993, 13), eulogizes the qualities of
Avimukta – the territory where sins perish instantly.

*The city of Vārāṇasī is the most sacred region of mine,
and is veritably the rescuer of all beings from the ocean of
mundane existence.*

*Noble-souled devotees of mine attached to my vows, O god-
dess, dwell at that place, with steadfast determination.*

*This Avimukta (undeserted) region of mine is the highest of
all holy spots, the best among all places, and the most
excellent knowledge of all kinds of knowledges.*

*The holy spots of pilgrimage and shrines that are situated
elsewhere, in heaven, earth or in cremation grounds are all to
be found here.*

*My city does not rest on earth but hangs in the ether; only
the liberated souls can perceive it as such by their mind and
not the unliberated ones.*

This city is reputed as a crematorium, and spoken of as 'avimukta', never deserted by me, O lovely one. I destroy the world by assuming the form of death at this place.

Of all hidden places, O goddess, this one is dearest to me, resorting to which, my devotees virtually enter into myself.

All deeds like charity, repeating of names, sacrificial offerings, deeds, penance, meditation, studies done in this place become imperishable.

Sins accumulated by one through thousands of births instantly perish when he enter the Avimukta city of Vārānasī.

Those who dwell in this holy city and constantly remember Kāla (death), are purged of all their sins of this world and other world.

Śiva, embodied as Kāla, destroys all the sins of those who commit them (through ignorance) after taking up an abode in this city.

(29. 21–30, 73–74)

Certainly, Vārānasī or Avimukta (both terms are used for Śiva's territory) is "the most sacred region", because when dealing with a certain place, such literature praises it as if it were the greatest of all: "What is praised occupies full centre-stage for its moment of recognition" (Eck 1993, 3). Not only "Śiva destroys all sins", but the place itself, Vārānasī, "is veritably the rescuer of all beings". In a cryptic way the territory is called the "most excellent knowledge". It is not the place itself which represents this knowledge. It is rather the knowledge about the quality of the place, handed down by the *purānic* literature, that becomes a tool towards salvation. This knowledge has to be protected from the ignorant, presumably the enemies of the *veda*. Therefore, it is also called "hidden" – accessible only to those who share the knowledge about its existence and qualities.

Today, the pilgrimage encircling and thus defining the territory of Avimukta is rarely performed. We had to resort to the guidance of Kedarnāth Vyās, who finds his way without any sign of uncertainty to those 72 gods, goddesses and sacred water sites that have to be visited in a fixed sequence.

The pilgrimage starts with a vow at the Avimukteśvara, a *linga* that represents Śiva as the master of the territory that is never forsaken by him. It is one of those inconspicuous phallic symbols of Śiva that seem to have been scattered over the entire urban environment – they are found virtually everywhere (Photo 4)! All the more it seems surprising, that most of these symbols are not anonymous, but identifiable: Kedarnāth Vyās indeed knows almost every *linga* by its specific name. In fact, the *linga* of Avimukteśvara

had been replicated, most probably in course of the 19th century to revive the notion of the ancient centre it represented before the rise of the Viśveśvara, Śiva in the form of the "Lord of the Universe", after the twelfth century. The replica is housed in a small niche north of the Aurangzeb mosque which dominates the heart of the city – since the last riots in 1993 heavily fenced in. But the "original" place of the *linga* is still remembered. There is a spot on top of the mosque's plinth with signs of soot, traces of light offerings to the primeval Avimukteśvara which is said to have had its temple there until its demolition was ordered by Aurangzeb, the 17th century Moghul. This kind of memory of "place" is probably unique and characterises the South Asian notion of space. In a way, a *linga* represents "place" and therefore may not easily be translocated. The inherent quality of that place is immutable, cannot be transferred. Should a change occur in the environment, whether by force or not, the tendency prevails to direct the required ritual to the place of origin, as that is perceived as the "real" one. On the other hand, replicas are common, spreading the qualities of sacred sites over the entire subcontinent.

The pilgrimage of the *avimuktayātrā* starts – as the *pañcakrośīyātrā* does at the underground sanctuary of the Manikarnikeśvara and the guardian to be worshipped at the outset of the sacred journey, Siddharināyaka. The first 18 places are located along the Ganges, upstream to the centre of the southern realm of Vārānasī, Kedareśvara (No. 17) and its respective guardian (No. 18). From there the route leads away from the river and follows roughly a radius of 2000 metres around the centre represented by the *linga* of Avimukteśvara. The route reaches the Ganges again at the temple of Hiranyagarbheśvara (No. 35) and leads down to Maheśvara (No. 52) at Manikarnikā Ghāt, the cremation ground. Again 18 places mark this stretch of the river, mostly high above the banks and in most cases identical with those visited in the course of the other pilgrimages. With the *linga* of Gangeśvara (No. 59) the central compound around the mosque is reached, which is first circumambulated (No. 59–67 = Viśveśvara). After having worshipped Viśveśvara, the pilgrim returns again to the outer circuit (Nos. 68–71). Only after having worshipped five guardians (Ganeśa in the form of Vināyaka, collectively numbered as 71) does he finally reach Avimukteśvara.

Four times an imaginary centre that had been superceded by the mosque is circumambulated in a unique sequence: The pilgrim is led near to the final destination, passes by it, encircles it again and
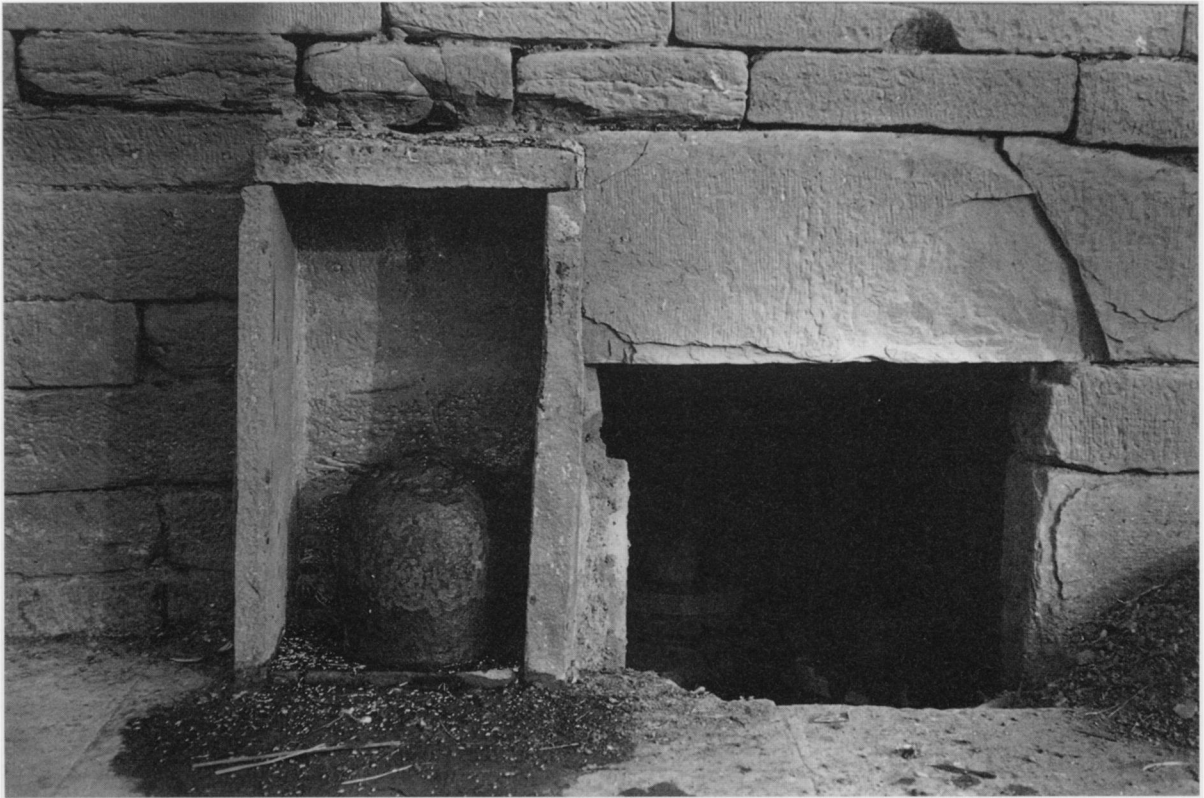
Photo 4: Benares: Besides hundreds of *lingas* that are clearly identifiable and even named in ancient texts there are thousands of votive *lingas* placed along the Ganges, in and besides temples, once installed by pilgrims in fulfillment of a vow. – Two examples near Pañcagaṅgāghāṭ are framed and covered in a simple fashion, a first step towards the creation of space that eventually develops architectural traits

Benares: Neben hunderten von *lingas,* die eindeutig zu identifizieren und sogar in alten Texten genannt sind, gibt es tausende von Votiv*lingas* entlang des Ganges, die einst von Pilgern in und neben Tempeln als Erfüllung eines Gelübdes aufgestellt worden sind. – Zwei Beispiele in der Nähe von Pañcagaṅgāghāṭ sind in einfacher Manier gerahmt und überdacht worden, ein erster Schritt in Richtung einer Raumgestaltung, die schließlich architektonische Züge annimmt

reaches it only after paying respect to a fivefold threshold represented by the Vināyakas. The complexity of the gradual approach seems to mirror an adaptation to the changes in the sacred topography. Viśveśvara (No. 67), at present considered the centre of Vārāṇasī, in course of the route appears to be just one of the many forms of Siva, followed by Annapūrṇā, his female counterpart (No. 68).

As in all other cases, the number of places that mark the route, seventy-two, and the fact that half of these are located along the Ganges, is open to various speculations. Nine times eight is as an auspicious number as 108: it stresses the spatial impact and at the same time incorporates the centre.

On a different level of speculation one would have to argue about the meaning of three mounds (No. 21, 26, 32) that seem to mark the boundary of the territory of Avimukta. Topographically very prominent, these mounds, located almost exactly along the above mentioned circuit of *avimuktayātrā,* seem to have been used since the earliest times for the establishment of sanctuaries. It is as if these mounds could be interpreted as the three spokes of Śiva's trident *(triśula).* As was said in the *Kūrma Purāṇa:* The city "hangs in the ether" – it balances above earth on the trident.

Antargṛhayātrā – the pilgrimage around the heart of the city

The innermost pilgrimage (No. 1 of Figures 3, 4, 5), literally "the route inside the house", encircles the very core of Vārāṇasī, the centre of which is represented by the holiest of the holies, Viśveśvara or Viśvanāth, that form of Śiva that has spiritually
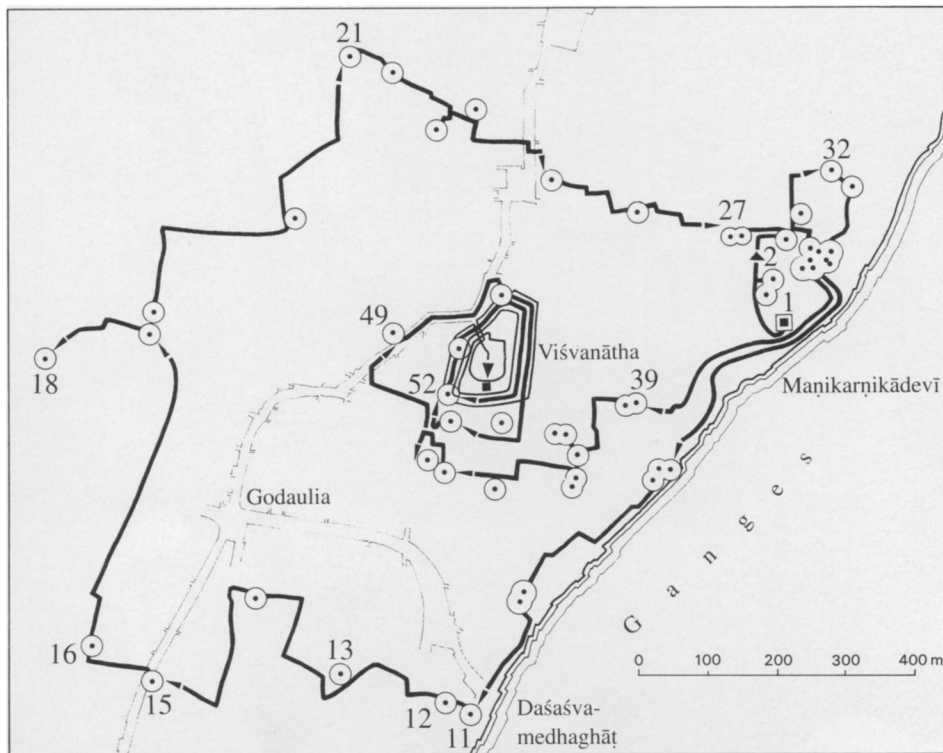
Fig. 5: Benares: Processional route around the inner realm of the "Master of the Universe" (Viśveśvara), called *Antargṛhayātrā* or *Viśveśvarakhandayātrā*. A sevenfold circumambulation leads towards the centre in a spiral-like movement. Altogether 76 temples and shrines dotted along the route attract the pilgrim's attention before he finally reaches Viśveśvara

Benares: Prozessionsroute um das innere Reich des "Herrn des Universums" (Viśveśvara), genannt *Antargṛhayātrā* oder *Viśveśvarakhandayātrā*. Eine siebenfache Umwanderung führt in spiralförmiger Weise in das Zentrum. Insgesamt 76 Tempel und Schreine entlang der Route ziehen die Aufmerksamkeit des Pilgers auf sich, bevor er am Ende Viśveśvara erreicht

dominated the city since the twelfth century. However, similar to the circuit of the centre, two more pilgrimages lead around the southern (No. 3 on Figure 4) and the northern (No. 2 on Figure 4) quarters of Vārāṇasī, with the temples of Kedāreśvara and Oṃkareśvara respectively as centres. Such a threefoldness of processional routes again seems to support the notion of the complexity of Vārāṇasī's spatial organisation.

As no place can be identified as the ultimate and only centre, no territory is the only "innermost" one. It is up to the individual and his or her perception of spiritual relationships, as to what is recognised and through ritual treated as the centre. Although there are three parallel or even competing notions about the "innermost" territory, the *avimuktayātrā* seems to bind these three together, leading from the topographical centre towards Kedāreśvara and returning from Oṃkareśvara to that centre (Fig. 4). While the

Kedāreśvara Khaṇḍa pilgrimage is still performed, the pilgrimage of the Oṃkareśvara Khaṇḍa has survived only through literary sources. SINGH (1987, 500 a. 1993, 58) has traced the route according to the description provided by the *Kāśī Khaṇḍa,* the text of 11 624 verses that had been in the process of formulation during the revivalist Hindu empire of the Gāhaḍavāla dynasty in the twelfth century (ECK 1993, 10). By the 17th century so many of the 108 places along the route had been destroyed or even hidden away from the Muslim invaders, that the pilgrimage ceased to be performed. It was only during the recent movement of Hindu revival, that a group of priests managed to trace the ancient route to restore the long forgotten fabric.

The *antargṛhayātrā* remains as the most common of the three *khaṇḍayātrās,* also considered to be a precondition for the *yātrā* encircling Kāśī. The pilgrimage is easily completed within a day, preferably

Photo 5: Benares: The temple of Īśāneśvara (No. 49 of the *Antargṛhayātrā*) is transformed into a dwelling. The four pillars of the originally open hall, a few smaller *liṅgas,* Śiva's mount Nandi, the bull, and a few ancient architectural fragments are integrated into a kitchen and living room

Benares: Der Tempel von Īśāneśvara (Nr. 49 der *Antargṛhayātrā*) ist in ein Wohnhaus umgewandelt worden. Die vier Säulen der ursprünglich offenen Halle, ein paar kleinere *liṅgas,* Śivas Tragtier Nandi, der Stier und ein paar uralte architektonische Fragmente sind in eine Küche und ein Wohnzimmer integriert worden

on the day preceding full-moon in February, October or November, most auspiciously however on the occasion of Śiva's dark night, *śivarātri* in February.

After preparatory rites at the tempel of Viśveśvara which is also the final destination, the pilgrimage starts with the worship of the goddess Maṇikarṇikā-devī. Before moving upstream the bank of the river, the pilgrim first turns North through the narrow lanes around the busy temple of Śaṅkaṭādevī, high above the Bhonsalā Ghāṭ. On his way, the pilgrim also turns towards the Ganges to offer *akṣata,* raw rice, to the waters in remembrance of Śiva in the form of Jarāsaṅdheśvara (No. 8), the *liṅga* of which no more longer exists as it sank into the river during one of the yearly inundations. In this case, not even a replica ensures a material continuity. It is just the place that is remembered.

The *liṅga* of Śulaṭaṅkeśvara (No. 11) guards the southernmost "corner" of the inner territory along the Ganges, from where the circuit leads around the centre for a distance of 300 to 400 metres. Some sanctuaries are located in new buildings, integrated into private residences (No. 15), and in one case, a complete temple is virtually transformed into a residence (No. 49, Īśāneśvara, Photo 5), the *liṅga* rising in the middle of the "living room". Only 15 of the total of 77 shrines along the route are identifiable as temples, complete with vestibule and *śikhara* tower above the sanctum. Eight of the 56 *liṅgas* along the route are "hidden" away below the present level of the city. One of these (No. 27, Pitāmaheśvara) can only be imagined below the road, as the staircase down is accessible only on the occasion of *śivarātri.* Having finally completed the outer circuit, the pilgrim embarks upon six more circumambulations, following a spiral-like movement towards the final destination, the Lord of the Universe.

More than any other type of movement, the spiral conveys the idea of a gradual approach. While the circumambulation represents a more clearly arranged

task, perhaps even controllable, the spiral stands for a complex process which is less apparent. In the case of the *antargṛhayātrā*, this process certainly reflects "the yogic idea that in order to attain union with the god, the adept's life-force must cross through seven centres or circles ranged along his spine", as PARRY (1993, 106) wrote. Again, Kāśī's identification with the human body is obvious: the pilgrim's action completes a "journey" through the spinal circles or *cakras*, putting him in direct contact with the transcendental world. The notion of seven circles also appears on an all-encompassing level: seven concentric rings, each described by a set of shrines dedicated to Gaṇeśa, the Lord of the Thresholds, encircle the same centre as the *antargṛhayātrā* refers (ECK 1983, 187/188; SUKUL 1974, 100 f.; SINGH 1993, 51 dealt with some more of the many symbolic associations of the number seven). The Vināyakayātrā, a pilgrimage that covers these 56 shrines of Gaṇeśa, then, represents another spiral-like movement towards the centre, starting with the *pañcakrośīyātrā* which is defined by the outermost set of eight shrines (Fig. 3). The spiritual fortification of the sacred centre by these sets of guardians seems to refer again to the notion of the "most excellent knowledge" that has to be preserved and the fact that Vārāṇasī is "hidden": certainly, the place has to be protected and Gaṇeśa acts as the ideal protector.

Conclusion – The idea of the centre

Is Vārāṇasī/Kāśī really "the" holy centre of India, or would it not be better to call it "one" holy centre of a religion that has basically no centre? Is Kāśī not "one" *tīrtha* out of many which have long been the goal of pilgrims?

PARRY (1993, 109) argues, "the idea that India, Kashi and Manikarnikā are all 'navels' at the centre of space is paralleled by a comparable image applied to Palestine, Jerusalem and the Temple." Of course it is, in the literature of high praise, but there are other *tīrthas* which claim equal merit, and in Kāśī itself there are competing notions about which place should be considered as the real "navel".

Let us first discuss the uniqueness of Kāśī, Vārāṇasī and its present centre, the temple of Viśveśvara. The first replica of Viśveśvara was already established within the temple precincts of Pattadakal in the 9th century under the name of Kāśīviśvanātha. Another temple was built in 1627 on the central square of the city of Patan in Nepal. Its founder, king Siddhinarasiṃha Malla even abdicated in 1652 in order to undertake a pilgrimage to be able to

worship the "real" Viśveśvara in Vārāṇasī. And after the temple had been destroyed by the zealous Aurangzeb in 1669, a minister of Siddhinarasiṃha's son built another Viśveśvara on the same square in 1678 to serve as a valid substitute. During the 19th century, Nepal's prime ministers even ventured to create a replica of Vārāṇasī, obviously in a surge of justification of their disputed power. They lined the riverbanks with temples and *ghāṭs* and interpreted the landscape to mirror the Ganges with its two tributaries.

Such an intervention may well be placed near to Parry's comparison with Jerusalem, as European medieval towns were seen as replicas of Jerusalem. The way of the Cross and the place of Golgotha were quite easily transferred to share the event of Christ's suffering everywhere.

While Kāśī and the Viśveśvara were widely replicated to share their sacred qualities, in Vārāṇasī itself the primeval Viśveśvara has various manifestations. The first temple might have been destroyed in 1194, but in the 19th century it was reconstructed and named as Ādiviśveśvara, the "primeval" one. In 1585 another temple was built some 100 metres southeast of the first one. Destroyed in 1669, only part of its sanctum survived as the rear wall of the mosque which replaced the temple. These ruins, however, continued to be worshipped, even after a new temple was built in 1777 nearby. The story is even more complex: temples form only the shells, it is the *liṅga* which carries the notion of Śiva's presence. It is said, that in 1669 the *liṅga* of Viśveśvara fled the polluting destruction, seeking refuge in the Well beside the temple, which later came to be known as the well of wisdom (Jñānavāpī). The attending priest maintains that in the 19th century pilgrims used to make their vow "above" the well with the primeval Viśveśvara as witness. Today this vow is done at the priest's throne beside the well, while a betelnut represents the *liṅga*.

There are many more competing legends. For example, there is one *liṅga* kept in a private house near Lolārka which is said to have been rescued by its inhabitants in 1669.

A new Viśveśvara was established at Mīr Ghāṭ in 1958 because conservative Brahmins argued that the untouchables, having gained access to the temple according to the provisions of the Indian constitution, polluted the *liṅga*. And in 1962 the largest temple of Viśveśvara was completed on the campus of the Banaras Hindu University.

While substitutes of the Viśveśvara spread all over the sub-continent, other *tīrthas* were replicated in
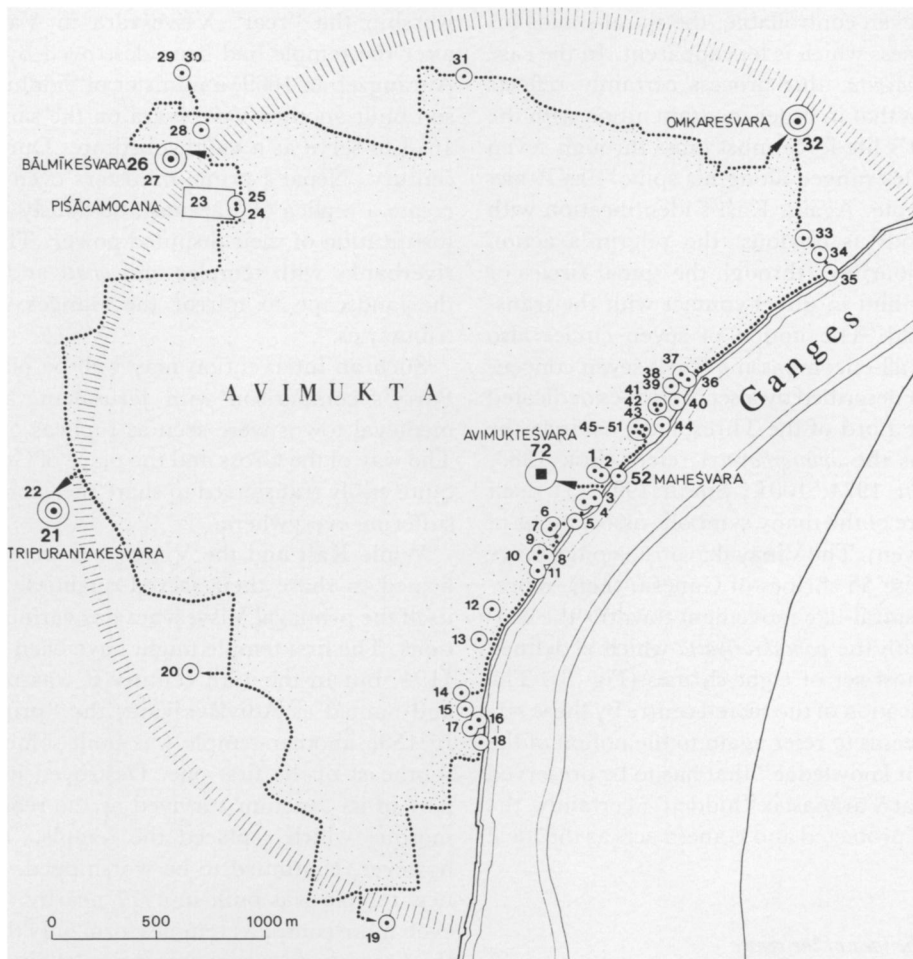
Fig. 6: Benares: Processional route defining the territory of Avimukta, the "realm that is never left by Śiva". The route is dotted by 71 temples and shrines before it ends at the tiny temple of Avimukteśvara. Three hills along the line of a suggested circle (No. 21, 26, 32) serve as topographical landmarks guarding the ancient territory

Benares: Prozessionsroute um das Gebiet von Avimukta, "dem Reich, das Śiva niemals verläßt". Entlang der Route liegen 71 Tempel und Schreine, bevor sie an dem winzigen Tempel von Avimukteśvara endet. Drei Hügel entlang eines gedachten Kreises (Nr. 21, 26, 32) dienen als topographische Grenzpunkte, die das uralte Territorium behüten

Vārāṇasī itself. In such a world of interchangeability it seems difficult to determine a "real" and undisputed centre. Even the centrality of the cremation ground at Maṇikarṇikā, where the world was first created, is disputed: the tank *(kuṇḍa)* at Kedāra Ghāṭ is thus called Ādimaṇikarṇikākuṇḍa, the "primeval" one. PARRY (1993, 106) quoting his informants, says that "it is widely held that those who die in Kedār Khaṇḍa are granted a more immediate and unconditioned 'liberation' than those whose death occurs elsewhere".

Among Hindus a "dispute" does not create a dogmatic confrontation, as every region or community follows a different perception. There is certainly a quest for the "real" and "primeval" centre, but the search for it has a varied outcome.

Strictly speaking, a *maṇḍala* is "a circle separating a particular area from its surrounding". The enclosed area is protected from malevolent forces. Especially this is true for the spatial entities Kāśī, Avimukta or Antargṛhi. The *yātrās* described earlier mark the boundaries of sacred space on different levels, the sanctity increasing step by step. As diagrams, *maṇḍalas* are used as a "support of a concrete ritual or an act of spiritual concentration" (ELIADE 1952, 54). The adept penetrates the *maṇḍala* by yogic techni-

ques. In the same way the pilgrim passes through the protective circles defined by the Guardians of the Thresholds on his sacred journey towards the inner sanctum of the sacred field *(kṣetra).*

It was said earlier that Kāśī is apart from the rest of the world, apart in terms of space and time. At the same time Kāśī encompasses the rest of space. While the pilgrim moves along the defined route, he or she (most of them are women!) not only moves along the outer circle of the *mandala:* the pilgrimage also attains the quality of a circumambulation of the entire cosmos! While the first notion is based on an oppositon of inside – outside, the second surpasses this division. The *mandala* then represents the cosmos – Kāśī *is* the cosmos.

The sacred journey does not imply a centredness, as it is all-encompassing, addressing the entire space. Whether Madhyameśvara, Avimukteśvara or Viśveśvara, the journey has still a cosmic quality. As a cosmos, however, Kāśī reveals a hierarchy of space that refers again to the circles the adept penetrates, pointing again to the centredness: it is the space of Antargṛhi that warrants complete union with God 'as water with water.'

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