

Beyond the Sacred Fires: Businesses of Cremation and Ganga Aarti in Banaras



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Prelude

As dusk slowly falls over the Ganga, the fires on Banaras's Manikarnika Ghat appear to glow brighter. Over a hundred bodies are cremated each day, and yet there lingers a mystifying stillness on the Ghat. The promise of *moksha* hangs in the air as the smoke from the fires grows denser. Families mourn the loss of their loved ones, wood sellers haul wood up to the huge stacks that sit scattered around the Ghat, and tour guides stand around scouting for their next client. The Dom cremators work to keep the pyres burning as a boatful of tourists passes, clicking away silently. As one party of mourners leaves, another is seen buying Shiva's sacred fire from the Doms, the fire that burns eternally, without which no cremation on the Ghat can take place. Some tourists sit by the tea stall, eyes watery with heavy smoke, and gaze at the fascinating "Burning Ghat". A Dom's break ends as the sounds of "*Ram Nam Satya Hai*" ring in the air. He has another pyre to build. The work is ceaseless. Cremations have been performed here for centuries with the same fire burning night and day.

A little under a kilometer away, another fire burns on Dashashwamedh Ghat, as performers of the Ganga Aarti raise their *deep patras* up to the sky, towards the Gods. An audience of hundreds sits mesmerized, eyes following the performers' graceful movements. There are devotees chanting along with every word of the hymns, and tourists with cameras capturing every move. The *Aarti* is a stimulation of the senses, ranging from the calming smell of incense wafting through the air to the blazing fire of the lamps, and incites a rush of emotions, leaving one with a lingering feeling of warmth and peace. The offices of the organizers stand tall at the back, as arrangements are made for the next step of the performance and plates are passed around to collect donations. As the *Aarti* comes to an end, the crowd disperses as quickly as it arrived, still entranced by the *Aarti*'s sacred fire.

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the work incorporated in this report entitled *“Beyond the Sacred Fires: Businesses of Cremation and Ganga Aarti in Banaras”* submitted by the undersigned Research Team was carried out under my mentorship. Such material as has been obtained from other sources has been duly acknowledged.

Sr. No.	NAME OF STUDENT	DESIGNATION	SIGNATURE
1	Shreya Agarwal	Content Writing	
2	Svankita Arora	Group Leader, Logistics, Creatives	
3	Siddhi Ashar	Audio/Visual Documentation, Creatives	
4	Padmapriya Eunny	Content Writing	
5	Kayannush Gaurd	Logistics, Creatives	
6	Saumya Jain	Accounts, Creatives	
7	Madhurima Khadilkar	Content Writing, Audio/Visual Documentation	
8	Modak KS	Audio/Visual Documentation, Logistics, Accounts	
9	Manojna Lanka	Content Writing, Creatives	
10	Ragini Rao Munjuluri	Content Writing	
11	Deeksha Napa	Audio/Visual Documentation, Creatives	
12	Manish Ruparel	Audio/Visual Documentation, Creatives	
13	Harsh Shah	Accounts and Logistics	
14	Arush Wad	Logistics	

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Sharon Barnhardt and Dr. Pavan Mamidi

Signature:

Date: 12, December 2017

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Abstract

The city of Banaras has been central to the Hindu identity for over 2000 years. It is the Great Cremation Ground, where death is sacred and *moksha* is assured. It is also the holy city of light, of countless temples and *tirthas* on the banks of the holy Ganga. These two inseparable facets of the contemporary identity of Banaras are perhaps best represented in the cremation practice of Manikarnika Ghat and the Ganga Aarti of Dashashwamedh Ghat. Behind these rituals stand two entities that have created the conditions necessary for them to become flourishing practices. These entities- the Dom cremators and the organizers of the Ganga Aarti- have complicated business-like organizational structure that necessitated further investigation. Further, the dynamic between the performers of the rituals and the rituals themselves was an interesting aspect to study. The contrasts between the conclusions drawn from this study are of immense importance. This inquiry was done through semi-structured and unstructured interviews, as well as non-participant observation. The intricate aspects of the functioning of these two rituals as businesses and the relationship between the ritual and its performers are explored, a perspective from which the rituals have not been looked at before.

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CHAPTER 1. Introduction

The fire is one of Hinduism's most sacred symbols- it is central to all religious activity, representative of magnificent power and symbolic of an incorruptible purity. In Banaras, one of the greatest pilgrimage sites in Hinduism today, this fire means even more. It is the defining element of two rituals that have become fundamental to the contemporary identity of the city- the cremation and the Ganga Aarti.

Moksha, or deliverance from the cycle of birth and rebirth, is the seminal pursuit of a devout Hindu. This is assured on the Manikarnika Ghat of Banaras. For several centuries now, people from across the country come to be cremated here, soliciting the services of the Doms, who have been tasked with the job of cremation for generations.

Banaras is also the most holy site on the banks of this religion's greatest river: the Ganga. Less than a kilometer away from Manikarnika is the Dashashwamedh Ghat, the site of the hugely popular Ganga Aarti, a magnificent homage to *Ganga Maa*, that draws over 2000 people each night.

The cremation and the Ganga Aarti rituals are developing to cater to a changing audience. This has allowed the rituals to weave themselves into the popular culture of not just the city, but of Hinduism itself, and has elevated these rituals from their primary intent.

The organizations that are responsible for these two rituals form the backbone of their functioning- their story reveals a unique case for the evolving times in the practice of religion. In both the cremation and the Ganga Aarti, we can clearly see the organizations that back the rituals responding to the changing demands of the market they inspire. This is only possible with an organizational set up, which in developing around the specific requirements of the ritual, has not only found a way to financially sustain those associated with their performance, but has created two complex, yet thriving businesses out of them.

The organizational structures of these rituals may go unnoticed by many, however, we view them as our key to understanding the fascinating case that these two rituals in Banaras present. These organizations and the specific roles of their performers form the focal point of this study.



Figure 1. Burning pyres of Manikarnika in the night



Figure 2. Ganga Aarti on Dashashwamedh Ghat

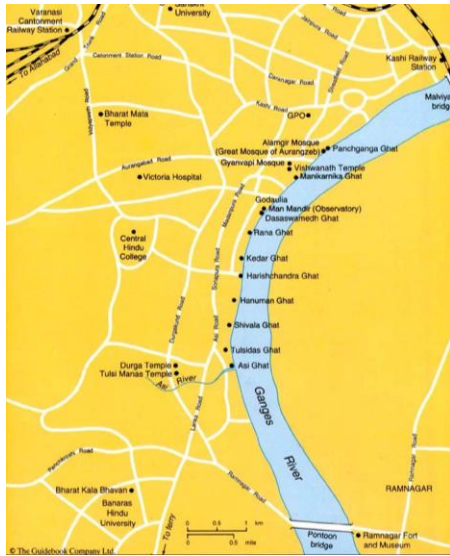
1.1. Geographical Overview

The city of Banaras is situated in southeastern Uttar Pradesh in the north of India. The city is in the Gangetic Plains and has a rather even topography. The space called Varanasi today is actually an assemblage of seven urban spaces that are collectively called the Varanasi Urban Agglomeration. It is also the capital of the Varanasi District and administrative headquarters of the Varanasi division (Singh, 2008).



Map 1: Banaras, India (Varanasi, 2017) Map 2: Banaras Region (Uttar Pradesh Tourism)

Banaras is located on the left bank of the river Ganga. The river is perhaps the most striking natural feature of the city, and has been critical to the city's history, sanctity, and unchanging popularity. This bank takes the shape of a crescent, and the city evolved alongside it in an almost circular manner. In fact, the very etymology of Varanasi comes from its natural borders: River Varuna which still flows to the north of Banaras and Assi, a small stream to the south (Eck, 2013). The River Ganga has been central to Banaras' evolution as a place of Hindu pilgrimage. The natural flow of the river here is unique, as this is the only place along its entire course where it flows from the south to the north. This flow, which is around 7 km in length, is symbolic; it is believed to represent the flow of the souls of people who die in Banaras, as they journey from the south (Yama's land of the dead) to the north (to Shiva in Kailash) (Eck, 2013).



Map 3: Ghats of Banaras
(Uttar Pradesh Tourism)

The river is flanked by 40 to 60 wide stone steps at a time that serve as the transition between the main city and the river. These are the celebrated 84 ghats of Banaras. Although built at different times in Banaras' long history, these ghats now appear as a single continuous stretch. They have been and continue to be the sites of all sorts of daily activity (Singh, 2008). These ghats play a critical role in the sacred geography of Kashi. The city is described to lay stretched out along the Ganga, with the five *tirthas* (pilgrimage sites) symbolic of different body parts: “(sic)Asi is the head; (sic)Dashashvamedha is the chest;

Manikarnika is the navel; (sic)Panchaganga is the thighs; and Adi Keshava is the feet. Here it was, he reminds us, that Vishnu first placed his holy feet in Kashi” (Eck, 1982). The Manikarnika and Dashashwamedh Ghats are almost centrally located between the two ends of the city's riverfront. The distance between the two is just shy of a kilometre and is traversable by boat as well as on foot. Manikarnika Ghat lies at the end of an intricate set of *gallis* or lanes, like all the other smaller ghats. Dashashwamedh Ghat is one of the biggest ghats of Banaras, and one of the few connected to the city via a main road. The avenue up to the Ghat has been overtaken by shops and stalls, making it a difficult passage.

The last 15 years have seen several changes in land use in Banaras, largely due to an exponential increase in population calling for far more space. Imbalanced development, particularly in the old city, has necessitated urban development plans including the Varanasi Development Plan and Master Development Plan. These plans also seek to better preserve the natural heritage of the city which has suffered damage and neglect in the past years (Singh, 2008). These efforts, though largely unsuccessful in ecological conservation, have made urban development more systematic and regulated.

1.2. Historical Overview

Banaras remains one of the few places in the world that has seen undisturbed human settlement for over 3,500 years. The story of this city begins in the 8th Century BCE as an important *janapada*, an ancient Indian province. Kashi was a significant kingdom during the composition of the Hindu Upanishads, the Epics, and Puranas as well as the ancient Buddhist Jatakas. What is most interesting to note about the city is that from the earliest references to Kashi, the first being approximately 2,500 years old, it has been considered most holy; Kashi was always Shiva's chosen place and eventually, Shakti's too. (Eck, 2013). Over the millennia of its existence, the city has been under many rules and seen many changes, but its religious significance has remained largely undisputed. Because of this, it has been an important centre for music, literature, and politics.

Each ghat of the city has its own history and myths. The ghats of our study are some of the oldest ghats of Banaras. Both of them are of significance as *tirthas* (pilgrimage sites). As Eck points out, "...(sic) Dashashwamedh and Manikarnika were skirted by the river of heaven [Ganga] and became infinitely more powerful and lustrous than before" (1983).

Manikarnika Ghat is said to be the ancient spot where Shiva's *mani* (earring) fell to the earth, creating the Manikarnika *Kund*. The Ghat was the first to be built in stone in the year 1302. It was rebuilt by the Maratha Peshwa Bajirao in 1735, and rebuilt again by Indore's Rani Ahilyabai in 1791 (Parry, 1994). The ritual of cremation has been taking place on the Ghat since ancient times, with the Doms being in charge of all cremations as well as the eternal sacred fire on the Ghat, which was believed to have been given to them by Shiva himself.

Dashashwamedh Ghat is said to be the site of Brahma's ten horse sacrifice (which is the origin of the Ghat's name). The religious significance of the Ghat has made it the site of daily aartis to the Ganga for many years, and is the site for the grand Ganga Aarti today. This Aarti was is believed to inspired by the one started at Haridwar.

1.3. Research Question and Aims

After our preliminary research, we narrowed down on the areas that would constitute our study. This study can be described as follows:

“Cremation and Ganga Aarti in Banaras: An inquiry into the business organization of the two rituals and their performance today”

- a. To study the cremation and Ganga Aarti as the primary activities of Manikarnika Ghat and Dashashwamedh Ghat, respectively.
- b. To investigate the nature of the current organization of the rituals.
- c. To compare/contrast the relationship of the performers of the two rituals with the two rituals themselves.

The following will give a brief explanation of the aims:

- a. Of the many activities of the two Ghats, the cremation on Manikarnika Ghat and the Ganga Aarti on Dashashwamedh Ghat are undoubtedly the most significant. Understanding them today warrants knowledge of their history and myths and the many dimensions of their performance.
- b. Behind the performance of these rituals is an organizational setup created to meet the specific needs of the ritual. We thus aim to delve into the structure of these organizations and get a deeper understanding of their day-to-day functioning.
- c. The key performers of the two rituals, the Dom cremators and Brahmin Aarti pundits play a most interesting role in the rituals. We seek to further explore their role in the ritual and the organization.

1.4. Operational Definitions:

- a. Cremation in Banaras: Cremation in Banaras in the context of this study refers to the cremation practice of Manikarnika Ghat alone and not cremation that is known to take place in other parts of the city as well.
- b. Ganga Aarti in Banaras: The practice of performing an Aarti to the Ganga has in the past and today taken place along several ghats and in the city’s many temples. However, the

organized public performance of the Aarti that takes place on Dashashwamedh Ghat is the most popular of its kind and forms a focus of this study.

- c. Business organization: The performance of these two rituals at their current scale involves organization and management akin to a business setup. This dimension is the lens through we study the contemporary performance of these rituals.

1.5. Rationale

Banaras is a place that captivated our team immediately. We were fascinated by its complex past and even more complex present. The narratives of the city all seemed to follow a single thread, centered on the ancient religious and spiritual significance of the city. Today, this significance is best embodied through two rituals, which have become identifiers of the city the world over: cremation and the Ganga Aarti. Preliminary research revealed the existence of complex organizations behind both that facilitated their continued practice. Our findings on the field proved that these organizations were different in many crucial ways. However, both have been able to use the stronghold of faith over people's minds, generated by the city, the river, and their many myths to create a stable business and an experience of the ritual that transcends its intended primary aim.

Banaras is a city where myth and legends live on, visible in every activity, of untraceable antiquity and nearly unquestioned in authority. Yet there is a very real, less glamorous, but just as fascinating flipside to this city's religious activity: the systems that organize, promote and manage it in a time driven by the demands of the market. Through this study, we have sought to capture the contemporary realities of these rituals and the people behind them as they reconcile these ancient rituals with the business organization of today.

The subsequent section will analyze some key pieces of literature that have contributed to this study. Chapter 3 addresses the methodology that was used during field research. Chapter 4, 5, and 6 form Section A and explore the ritual of cremation itself, the organizing structure behind it, and the cremator in terms of his relationship to his job, respectively. Similarly, Section B consists of chapters 7, 8, and 9, which are about the ritual of the Ganga Aarti, the organizing structure behind it, and the Aarti performer in terms of his relationship to his job, respectively. Finally, Chapter 10 is composed of the analysis of our findings on field, while the conclusion contains our final thoughts.

CHAPTER 2. Literature Review

As in every academic undertaking, surveying existing literature relevant to our study was an important step. We referred to several secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and thesis papers. In this section, we have reviewed those academic sources that have been critical in furthering our understanding of our topic. For clarity's sake, we have categorized them based on what aspect of our research they were most useful.

2.1. The City of Banaras

When conducting a study in as complex and multifaceted a place as Banaras, it is essential that one at least attempt to understand it. We wanted to explore both the material and spiritual sides of Banaras before walking right into it.

Diane L. Eck's mammoth work *Banaras: City of Light* (1983) has been an invaluable part of our research. Eck covers the legends, mythology, oral histories, iconography, and geography of Banaras. In doing so, she explains the reason behind the interest it has sustained for nearly 3000 years (Parry, 1994). She discusses Kashi's significance as a site of liberation or *moksha* and its centrality to many Hindu myths. Finally, Eck goes on to briefly describe the various businesses and communities that flourish today owing to the city's immense popularity— from the upper caste priests to the lower caste barbers. Eck's work has been essential in getting insight into the city and the greater spiritual symbolism of the rituals studied.

Rana P. B. Singh (1994) focuses on the symbolic significance of the city. He defines the 'sacred landscape' of the city in relation to its proximity to the Ganga, supported by the symbolic meaning of water in Hinduism. He describes five major ghats of pilgrimage- Assi, Dashashwamedh, Panchganga, Adi Keshava, and Manikarnika. This improved our understanding of the symbolic importance of the ghats to the rituals they are known for and of the greater religious significance of the city.

2.2. Manikarnika and Dashashwamedh Ghat

Our preliminary research led us to discover that it is near impossible to separate the rituals from the Ghats, and an understanding of the Ghats would further an understanding of the rituals themselves.

Sinha's (2015) brief paper deals solely with the two ghats in question. She begins with an explanation of the physical, architectural landscape of each Ghat, after which she describes their cultural landscapes, studying the effects of the former on the latter. Her perspective displays a multidimensional understanding of the Ghats as living spaces. It helped in understanding importance of the Manikarnika and Dashashwamedh Ghats as the setting of the rituals of our study.

Maurya et al. (2017) discuss briefly the economics of the two Ghats, in terms of the many economic activities that take place there. They clearly place the Ghat economy in the informal sector. A primary focus of their study is to track the effects of the tourism industry on the two mentioned ghats. To study the "occupational structure on the ghats", respondents of the research questionnaire were divided along the Ghats into five groups: boatmen, shopkeepers, priests, Doms, and guides. We wished to learn about the dependence, if any, of other economic activities on the rituals of our study; this paper was extremely useful in this respect.

Very little academic attention has been paid to the ghats of Banaras, especially Dashashwamedh and Manikarnika. Very rarely are the communities on the two ghats addressed. In studying their economics, there are complex cultural, social, and religious factors which must be weighed in on to study the sustainability of the Ghats. There have not been given due credence. It is difficult to study a single aspect of a Ghat in isolation. Especially important is the fact that none of these sources address the possible effects of the newest socio-political and economic developments on these two Ghats.

2.3. Cremation and Banaras

Parry (1994) gives an in-depth study of death in Banaras; from its mythological and symbolic significance to its material reality. All aspects of Hinduism's connection to Banaras are explored as well. Parry describes the businesses of death in the city, particularly those linked with the death rituals practiced on Manikarnika Ghat. He traces the performance of these rituals by the various communities. Sections of the text were most useful to us in the introduction to the nuances of the death rituals conducted, and also alluded to the dynamics of the communities that participate in the diverse activities related to death on Manikarnika Ghat.

Kaushik (1976) attempts to “conceptualize the problem of death as a marginal situation which confronts society.” She goes on to explain the meaning and significance of cremation in Hinduism. Her focus on death rituals performed by both the upper and lower castes brings her to an ethnographic account of Doms in Varanasi for the year 1974-75. She emphasizes the importance of the Doms in the cremation process, and of the sacred fire in their custody. This paper gives us an overview of death rituals in general, as well as a reliable view of the Doms and the significance of their work on the Ghat.

Singh (2008) conducted an ethnographic study of the Dom community in Uttar Pradesh and attempts to draw a structural profile of the Doms based on their antecedents and legends. She examines the origin of the Doms through various ancient texts. Her work also describes the tension between the Doms and the Brahmins. She writes about the history of the oppressed and marginalised lower castes and their treatment in early Brahmin literature, that is, the *Rig Veda* and *Yajur Veda*. Singh also provides the reader with contemporary legends about the Dom origin rather than just the ancient ones, with a section that delves specifically into the myths behind the Doms of Banaras.

2.4. The Ganga Aarti

An *aarti* is an age-old traditional ritual in Hinduism, finding the inception of which would take intensive work in religious studies. However, to gain an understanding of the Ganga Aarti in Banaras, there were a few sources to guide us.

Zara (2014) acted as our introduction to the performance of the Ganga Aarti and was perhaps the most accessible study about it. As someone who has worked extensively on the ritual, she recognizes it as a spectacle and celebration of life. She reminds us of how Orientalist representations of India are reaffirmed in narratives of Varanasi; in the course of our research on these rituals, we saw this in their mystical, exotic, yet reductive description. The paper enabled us to see this ritual as a performance on a public platform and introduced us to the material, the representational, and the transcendental layers of watching the Aarti which collectively construct the individual's experience.

However, this paper does not represent a holistic idea of the ritual. The relationship of the rituals and its performers has been given very little attention. It hardly explores the significance of this ritual to the people on the ghats. It also looks at the ritual through a predominantly western lens, thereby constructing more or less a mainstream representation which solely focuses on the visuals.

Altogether, we noticed very little academic interest in the Ganga Aarti in particular. This furthered our desire to study the Aarti and explore its nuances.

One broad takeaway from the literature reviewed with regard to the two rituals was that the study of the rituals and the performers as absolutes has rendered existing literature insufficient. Second, although the semantics of the various procedures of these rituals have been explored, their sustained importance and meaning in the minds of the people that reside in Banaras has not been pursued. To study the relationship of the performers with the task they do is one of our aims.

2.5. Employment and Occupations

Iyer et al. (2011) through comprehensive data, show the caste differences prevailing in entrepreneurship across India. The paper focuses on that rapid economic growth India has seen in the past decade, along with the emergence of the new discourse in Dalit politics. Both come with their own challenges. Although growth has happened, it has not been equitable. Secondly, the emergence of Dalits in the working sector has sparked the debate about reservations- the challenge is providing the jobs without having the need for reservation. Although the lower castes have had political support through the 20th century, so cannot be said about economic support. It is difficult for members of the SC and ST castes to enter the entrepreneurial working sector. Discrimination, lack of knowledge and financial constraints are thought to be the reasons for this. Firm owners from these communities also find it easier to work with other members of the same community and do not venture outside of their family to look for added labour. Thus, the worker pool tends to limit the scope of the firm and its future enterprises. Financing also seems to be a challenge for firms owned by these groups. Statistically, more than a third of the firms are not registered by the government and consequently belong in the “unorganized” or “informal” sectors of the economy.

The takeaway from the paper was that the SC and ST groups have limited representation in the economic sphere and the reasons for this are lack of knowledge about the market, financial backwardness and discrimination by other sections of the society. This is not only preventing them from expanding their enterprise, but is also preventing them from entering the formal sector of the economy. Caste is the underlying factor here that is at the root cause of the problem.

Jodhka (2010) highlights the effects of the new regime after the 1990s in India, which saw state withdrawal from its involvement in the economy, especially in employment. He mentions how there was an ideological shift in the country, with focus moving from the Nehruvian idea of planned development to growth in private enterprise, thereby displacing the lower castes and classes. This instigated the emergence of an entrepreneurial culture among the underprivileged sections of society, as they had lost the benefits the state had provided them earlier.

This study found that though most Dalits are getting educated and are looking for alternative sources of employment, only a limited number of jobs have been created for them. This instigated the evolution of self-employment amongst the Dalits, especially those in Uttar Pradesh.

The major gap underlined in this paper was the lack of inquiry into the way in which Dalits handle discrimination and prejudice in the urban labour market, and the experiences of those who venture into the business world and attempt to set up their own enterprises are hardly brought to the forefront. Caste has only been researched only through a social lens, and rarely from an economist's perspective. Most academic work done on entrepreneurship has focussed on the operations of a rational individual in a free market economy, and has not addressed caste as a potential area to explore.

2.6. Reshaping of Religion

Carette and King (2004) look at the changing face of religion as set against capitalism in our times. Offering a critique of neoliberal policies, the writers explore the ways in which the concept of spirituality has become the "new cultural addiction". Their discussion of the privatisation and commodification of religion into a packaged and flattened idea of spirituality includes looking at globalisation as one of its key causes. Sections of the book pushed our discussion of the business aspect of religion.

Varanasi has begun to attract innumerable tourists over the last few decades, particularly international ones. This was of interest to us, as we wished to look at the effect, if any, of tourist engagement on both the Ganga Aarti and cremation. Being exposed to international interest, how do they fit into the bigger picture changing religion?

Carette and King (2004) also address the wide changes taking place with religion at the global level, and helped us understand how non-religious entities often profit from it. This source helped in understanding the theoretical reason behind the influx of western interest in Varanasi.

Chidester (2005) talks about the relationship between religion and popular culture. As the author compellingly puts it, he expects the reader to see ‘the religious fakery’ in the book as an occasion for thinking about authenticity. An important point the author raises is the concept of ‘ritualized expenditure’ in non-productive economic activities and how it is a display, or performance of wealth. He also raises the fact that popular culture is preoccupied with death, dying, and the dead, a valuable point to note.

Chidester moves on to a section talking about how popular culture is integrated into religion. He highlights the fact that often, successful religious groups adopt the material culture, visual media, musical styles and other features of popular culture. A key point the author raises is that this integration of religion and popular culture can also lead to religious groups being converted to consumerism, and ‘selling God’, which has even led to the fostering of ‘religio-economic corporations’. He then discusses how recent research on religion has brought up the dynamics of performance; the perspective that ritual is ‘sacred drama’, an interactive process of giving and receiving.

This book was of immense importance as it sheds light on consumerism in religion and its deliberate attempt to reshape itself in the light of popular culture. It highlights how religion is growing and adapting to changes taking place in the world, and even its extension to notions such as ‘religio-economic corporations’, as discussed earlier. As the author says, ‘understanding of religion requires critical and creative reworking in response to new challenges posed by globalization’.

Unfortunately, there seemed to be little work done in the Indian context along similar lines as these studies. Both of these books have been written in the American context, and we must be careful not to blindly trust them in their evaluation of religion when applying it the functioning of religion in India. They were, however, a good stepping off point into looking at the effects of a global culture on religion.

CHAPTER 3. Research Methodology

The nature of our study is qualitative and descriptive. Majority of our information was obtained from primary sources.

3.1. Primary Respondents:

Our primary respondents comprise individuals and organizations directly involved in the rituals.

Table 1. Primary Respondents

Subject	Methods Used	Number
Dom cremators	Micro-conversations Semi-structured interviews	5
Ganga Aarti Performers	Micro-conversations Semi-structured interviews	4
Ganga Aarti Organizers: Ganga Seva Nidhi Gangotri Seva Samiti	Micro-conversations Semi-structured interviews Structured interviews	4

3.2. Secondary Respondents:

Our secondary respondents were those who formed a part of the ecosystem around the rituals, but were not directly involved in their performance. These included those people on the ghats who cater to tourists and consumers of the rituals.

Table 2. Secondary Respondents

Subject	Methods Used	Number
Vendors and service providers (both ghats)	Micro-conversations Semi-structured interviews	19
Tour guides (both ghats)	Micro-conversations Semi-structured interviews	6
Boatmen (both ghats)	Micro-conversations Semi-structured interviews	7

Tourists (both ghats)	Micro-conversations	6
Pandas/Ghatiyas (Dashashwamedh Ghat)	Micro-conversations Semi-structured interviews	9
Devotees (Dashashwamedh Ghat)	Micro-conversations	5
Mourners (Manikarnika Ghat)	Micro-conversations	6

The two Ghats were the setting for most of our research. These were public spaces frequented by many people relevant to our study and our conversations often drew them in. This was most useful in constructing a more holistic understanding of our questions. However, the constant audience we had hindered our ability to pursue more sensitive information, due to which we often had to seek out more privacy. Two of the performers we spoke to chose to remain anonymous due to the sensitive nature of the information they gave us. Thus, their names have been changed in order to uphold their anonymity. Two of the performers we spoke to chose to remain anonymous due to the sensitive nature of the information they gave us. Thus, their names have been changed in order to uphold their anonymity.

3.3. Non-Participant Observation

Non-participant observation was the primary method used to study the execution of the rituals. It was critical in understanding the dynamics of relationships on the Ghats. Integral aspects of our study are the dynamics of the relationship between various parties on the Ghat and the perception by the audience. In both cases, non-participant observation gave us the opportunity to observe first-hand the things people either struggled with or chose not to verbalize. The visceral reactions to the Aarti, the evident tension between the organizations and the performers, and the normalization of watching cremations were all things we observed that were starting points of further inquiry.

3.4. Interviews

The diagram below displays the core themes generally explored in our interviews:

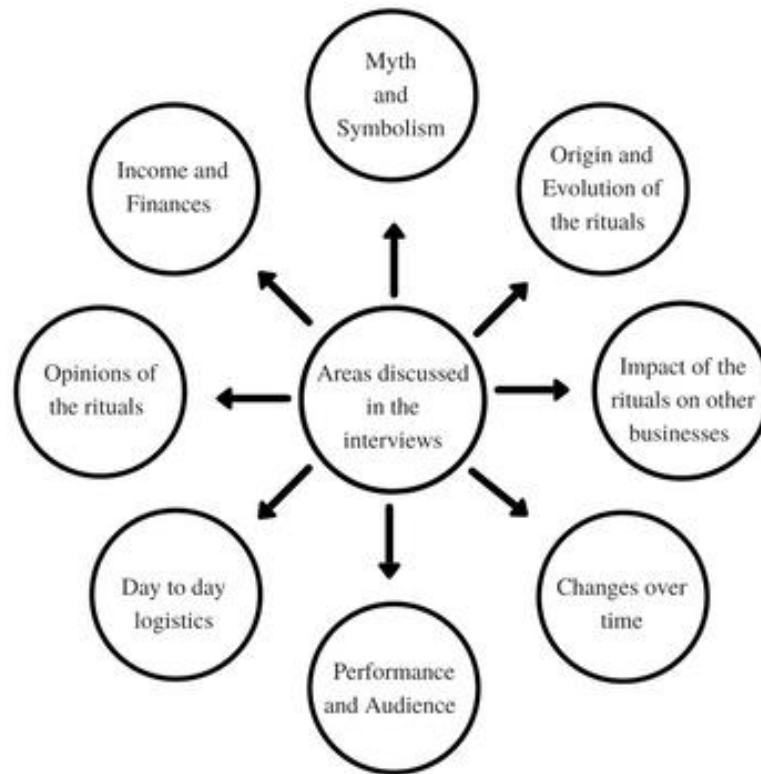


Figure 3: Areas discussed in interviews

3.4.1. Semi-structured interviews

In semi-structured interviews, interviewees respond to a pre-decided set of open-ended questions. Our first interactions with most of our respondents were semi-structured, during which we built a rapport with them. This allowed for more informal interactions thereafter. These interviews ensured our most important questions were answered, but gave us the flexibility to pursue things our respondents deemed important. They were most efficient with the Aarti organizers, Ganga Seva Nidhi and Gangotri Seva Samiti, due to their time constraints.

3.4.2. Unstructured interviews: Micro-conversations

Unstructured interviews were the most widely used method of our field research. Our unstructured interviews took the form of micro-conversations, a form of unscripted interviews

where the interviewer begins by talking about details specific to the subject. Thus, they begin with a “chat-up” line that usually pertains to the subject’s context or the situation that they are in. The tone of the questions is one of respectful curiosity, communicating the interviewers’ earnest intentions. As the conversation progresses, the interviewer embeds questions relevant to the research. In this manner, primary information was obtained in a subtle and informal way, catering to the subject’s sensitivities.

3.4.3 Sampling

The nature of the study undertaken was largely people-centric. Since the performance of the rituals and the economic systems that surround them are the most important elements of our study, the people directly involved in the ritual formed our primary sample. These included both the performers and the organizers.

3.3. Visual Documentation

To support our on-field inquiry, we made use of visual documentation in the form of photography and videography. We recorded as many interviews as we could, which helped us use them later to draw fair inferences. Apart from making notes, this helped us keep track of all the responses and not miss out on finer details. We attempted to capture the Ghats and the people on them to support our observations.

Number of hours recorded: 29 hours and 25 minutes

Following is the list of interviews that were video recorded:

On Manikarnika Ghat

- Doms, Rishikesh Chaudhary, Prabhu Chaudhary, Panchkoshi Chaudhary
- Dom Manager
- Dom Raja, Jagdish Chaudhary
- Tour Guide, Sanjay Tiwari
- Vendor, Jitendra Kumar
- Boatmen, Rambabu Singh
- Multiple tourists

On Dashashwamedh Ghat

- GSS organizer, Dinesh Dubey
- GSN Organizers
- Vishal Shastri, Panda
- Food Vendor

Dr. Rana PB Singh, Professor

Amitabh Bhattacharya, Journalist

Aayush Rathi, Tour Guide

Following activities were recorded on video:

On Manikarnika Ghat,

- Cremation process
- Cleaning of the Ghat
- Activities and interactions between stakeholders during the day on the Ghat

On Dashashwamedh Ghat,

- Preparation of the Ganga Aarti
- Ganga Aarti
- Winding up of the Ganga Aarti
- Activities and interactions between stakeholders during the day on the Ghat

3.5. Limitations

Some of the limitations we encountered during our study are listed below:

- a. The day-to-day conversations in the city took place in Hindi. Many members of our research team have very little to no fluency in conversational Hindi. This hampered some of our interactions with the people on the ghats. However, we attempted to overcome this by dividing ourselves such that at least one Hindi speaker was a part of every research team.
- b. We started to build a rapport with certain people on the ghats rather early on. This limited our ability to expand our sampling beyond them as it was difficult to get to other individuals from the same subject group.

- c. Unexpectedly, the control exercised by the organizers of the Ganga Aarti over the performers limited our access to them, and forced them to remain anonymous.
- d. Sensitive information regarding finances did not come to us from the organizations, forcing us to rely both on what people lower in the organizational structure told us, and our own inferences from the responses from the organizers.
- e. The nature of our topic necessitated substantial time on the field, which we did not have.

SECTION A: Cremation at Manikarnika Ghat

CHAPTER 4. The Ritual

4.1. History and Myth

Like every part of the city, Banaras' Manikarnika Ghat is ripe with myth and history. Almost every account of the history of the Ghat and ritual we were given was woven in myth. Although the distinction between history and myth was critical for us to draw, the people we spoke to did not distinguish between the two when sharing their understanding of the past. Banaras' reputation as the city of salvation is ancient. Along with *Avimukta*, one of its earliest names is *Mahashamshana*, or the Great Cremation Ground. This name originates from two beliefs: one, that all of Banaras once used to be a cremation ground, and two, that at the end of time (*pralay*) all of creation would burn in Kashi. Over time, the two biggest cremation grounds in the city came about on two of its many ghats, Manikarnika and Harishchandra (Eck, 1982).

Parry (1994) notes that the earliest recorded connection of death in Kashi and liberation or *moksha* is found from eighth century AD inscriptions. However, there is no suggestion in any literature that either Manikarnika or Harishchandra has had a privileged position over the other. While many in the city believe that cremation at Harishchandra Ghat is an older phenomenon, they concede that Manikarnika has become more prominent. Many respondents told us that Manikarnika is the preferred spot of cremation of a devout Hindu.

The actual cremation ground is on the Jalasai ghat, adjacent to Manikarnika. However, over time, the space took on the name of Manikarnika due to the Manikarnika *kund*. The *kund* has various mythical origins. Vishnu is said to have performed many austerities for Shiva at Kashi, during which he created a tank with his *chakra* (discus). While performing these austerities, his sweat then filled up the tank, creating the *kund* (pond). Shiva was so impressed by Vishnu's devotion, that in his delight, the *mani* (jewel) from his earring fell into the *kund*- hence, the name Manikarnika. A variation of the myth goes that it was in fact Parvati's earring that fell to the earth. This myth is but an example of the many ways in which the layer of Vaishnavite myths have become woven with Shaivite one in Banaras.

The etymology of the Ghat reveals another aspect of its past. The guarantee of *moksha* is associated with the presence of Shiva to guide the soul to the next world. He does this by whispering the words of the *Taaraka mantra* in the ear of a person right before he dies. This ear, by virtue of coming in contact with Shiva's mouth, is blessed. Thus, the Ghat is the place where the ear figuratively becomes a jewel or *mani*.

The history of cremation on Manikarnika is tied very closely to the history of the cremators who are called the Doms. We will elaborate on it in the following sections.

4.2. Procedure

It is essential to note that the *antayesti* (last rites) performed in Hindu traditions are a complex process with ancient symbolic meanings attached. There are specific differences in the procedure of cremation of people from different parts of the country as well as caste groups and communities. However, the core beliefs upon which the ritual is constructed remain the same: *karma* (action) and *dharma* (duty). The aim of the cremation is to free the soul from the confines of its body to continue its journey. We have tried to put together the process of cremation generally followed on Manikarnika Ghat from our observations and information from the locals, supported by Jonathan Parry's work on death in Banaras.

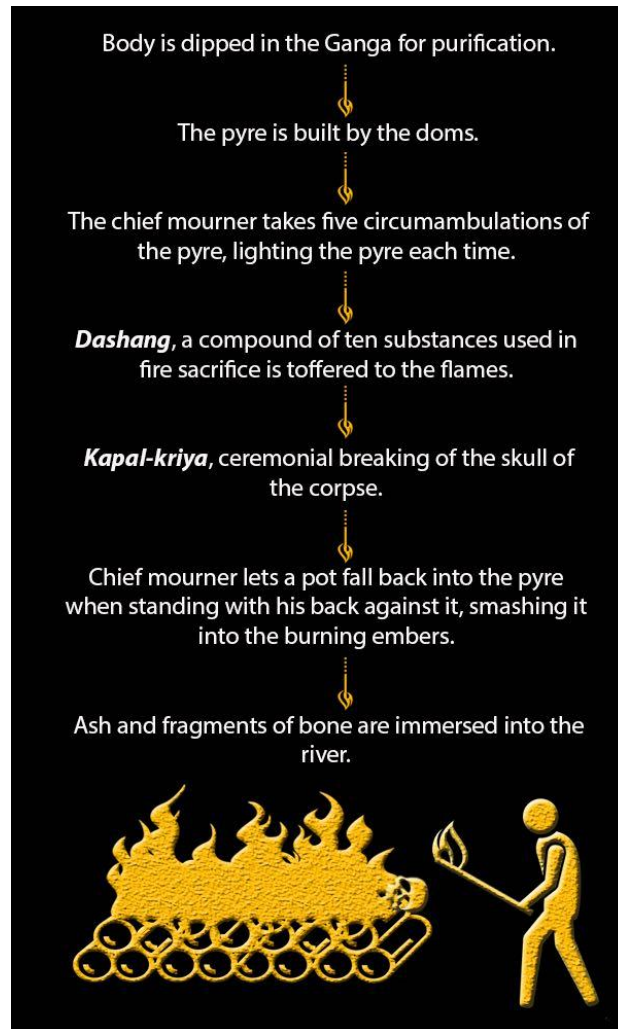


Figure 4. Procedure of Cremation



Figure 5. The Chief Mourner about to light the pyre

The ritual begins with the chanting of “Ram nam Satya hai” (Ram’s name is the truth) by mourners carrying the dead to Manikarnika Ghat. Once the body has arrived, covered in a shroud, it is taken down to the river and dipped halfway into the water as it is considered the ideal position in which to die. This is called the *adh-jal kriya*. Simultaneously, the funeral pyre is built by a Dom cremator with the wood bought by the mourning party.



Figure 6. Adh-Jal Kriya, body being dipped into the Ganga

The chief mourner, usually the eldest son or closest male relative of the deceased, is tonsured by a barber on the Ghat, takes a ceremonial dip in the Ganga, and dresses in clean white clothing. This is to purify himself in preparation for the task he is about to undertake. The body is placed on the pyre, on which fuels like resin and *ghee* (clarified butter) for better burning of the wood are added, and the shroud is removed. The chief mourner proceeds to take five rounds, clockwise, around the pyre, lighting it with a fire-brand at each round.



Figure 7. Barber tonsuring a mourner on the Ghat

After the fire is lit, a mixture of ten substances called the *Dashang* is thrown into the fire. As the cremation continues, the chief mourner must perform the *kapal-kriya*, the cracking open of the skull of the corpse with a bamboo pole. This is believed to allow the soul of the deceased to leave the body.

When the pyre is almost burnt out, the chief mourner must pick up and place an earthen pot filled with water from the Ganga on his shoulder. With his back against the pyre, he lets the pot fall, cracking onto the embers. He then leaves the Ghat without looking back. Some say that this step is symbolic of the breaking of the skull and liberation of the soul, while others say that it is symbolic of breaking a lingering attachment with the dead.

The ash and remaining bones are picked up, usually by the Doms, and immersed in the Ganga. The mourning family goes to the adjacent Scindia Ghat, where everyone bathes in the Ganga to purify themselves after the cremation. They then proceed to their respective homes. Over the following days, rites like the *pind daan*, or offerings of balls of rice, are performed. These are said to please one's ancestors and are a way to ensure the attainment of *moksha* for the deceased.

4.3. Performance

Having discussed the significance of the ritual and the parties involved in the same, it becomes imperative to understand the ground realities of the entire process. After the body is dipped in the Ganga, it is left on the edge of the ghat to dry for about an hour. During this time the mourner must first buy wood for the pyre, the quantity of which depends on the size of the body being cremated. On an average, two hundred and eighty kilograms of wood is required to cremate one body; the mourner pays around ₹1400 per cremation. The local unit of measurement is *mahn*; 1 *mahn* equals 40 kilograms. After the pyre is set by the Doms, the mourner then proceeds to bathe and get his head shaved. Many barbers work on the Ghat for this reason. He then has to take the fire from the Doms. The price of this fire is fixed at ₹500, although the mourner may pay more than the minimum if he wishes to. The fire is usually taken from the embers of the eternal fire housed in the temple above the ghat. Fire may be borrowed from a nearby burning pyre as well. The Doms told us that each pyre takes about 3-4 hours to burn completely, with around 7-10 bodies burnt per hour. After the pyre is burnt out, the Doms have to clean up the place to make it available for more cremations. The Doms are responsible for looking for pieces of jewellery that are left behind on the body and not burnt in the process. Often, ornaments of gold and silver are found, which become the property of the Dom Raja, the unofficial leader of the Dom community.

4.4. Performers

All cremation activities at Manikarnika Ghat and Harishchandra Ghat are conducted by cremators from the Dom community. The Doms belong to a Dalit caste group spread over north India (Singh, 2003). The Doms in Banaras come from the sub-caste called the *Gotakhor* ('divers') and have historically been responsible for work and supervision on the cremation grounds. Due to the belief that their job of handling the dead is an impure one by nature, their caste, effectively tied to their occupation, has been subject to the practice of untouchability. As a part of their job as the funeral attendants, they are also the custodians of the sacred fire of Manikarnika Ghat. The duty of keeping the sacred fire burning is said to have been given to them by Shiva himself, and it lights every pyre in the city. Other accounts say that the original home of the fire was the Harishchandra Ghat, and was transported to Manikarnika later.

When asked about how the job of cremation came to be under their purview, the Doms reverted to myth. Jagdish Chaudhary, the current Dom Raja, recounted this myth: After arriving in Kashi, Parvati wanted to bathe. Shiva suggested that she bathe in the *kund*. While she was bathing, the *mani* of her earring fell. It appeared that someone had stolen it by the time Shiva went looking for it. At that time, the ancestors of the Doms were *pandits*, who came to the *kund* disguised as commoners. One of them had stolen the earring. Shiva cursed the man saying that from then on, he would be responsible for providing fire for cremation to all Hindus who come to Kashi, and that only with this fire would they attain *moksha*.

Another myth often comes up when asked about the origin of the Doms. This one is about the namesake of Harishchandra Ghat, Raja Harishchandra. The myth is that the generous king gave up his kingdom to please sage Visvamitra. The sage then asked for a *dakshina*; with nothing left to give, Harishchandra sold his wife Taramati and son Rohit as slaves, whereas he himself was sold to Kallu Dom, the then Dom Raja, under whom he worked as a cremator. When her son died due to a snakebite, Taramati brought him to the cremation ground where Harishchandra was working as a watchman. However, she did not have the two things one must bring to the cremation ground: *kar* (tax) and *kaffan* (shroud). Even after Harishchandra realised it was his son who was to be cremated, he righteously refused to break the rules of the ground and perform a cremation without the requirements. Taramati was about to offer her saree as the shroud, but before this could happen, Vishvamitra arrived and took both her and Harishchandra up to the heavens, and restored the life of Rohit. For his refusal to go against his *dharma*, Harishchandra attained moksha. Kallu Dom, due to his association with Raja Harishchandra, was granted entry into heaven (Kaushik 1976, Eck 1982, Parry 1994). This connection of Kallu dom and the legendary king Harishchandra is a crucial part of the Dom community's identity.

The Dom Raja, unofficial leader of the Dom community, belongs to a lineage that claims descentance from Kallu Dom, and may be looked at as the 'owner' of the Ghat. Most commonly, all male leaders of the Dom community claim lineage from Kallu Dom.

4.5. Spectacle

“Every city has certain attractions that it boasts of; Delhi has the Red Fort, Qutub Minar; Agra has the Taj Mahal. What does Banaras say? We say come to our city and see our samshan ghat”

-Aayush Rathi, Tour Guide

The Ghat is constructed with a number of steps and balconies above the main cremation area. Over time, these spots have facilitated the viewing of the cremation process by outsiders. We observed boats filled with tourists that pass the ghats every day, slow down in front of Manikarnika. The boatmen then point to the Ghat, explaining to them the significance of the activity. The myths about the Ghat and the cremation are a constant part of their crash-course on Banaras. Even when flipping through travel magazines or blogs about Banaras, one always comes across Manikarnika or the “Burning Ghat” in the top five “things to see” in the city.

Being a tour guide on the Ghat is a business unto itself. They often swarm near the entrances of the Ghat to take advantage of the visitors passing by for their business. We witnessed a number of tours being conducted every hour or so. The tour guides and vendors said that tourists, especially foreigners, are extremely intrigued by this activity. They say this is primarily because of the nature of the activity itself. Funerals are generally a private affair, and cremation grounds are designated to the outskirts of the city. However, this is not the case in Banaras. The Ghat is easily accessible from within the city and from the river, and is open to all. According to many of the guides we spoke to, and the locals around the Ghat, it evolved to be this public as a way of normalising death and to encourage everyone to accept it as a part of life. It is not seen as an invasion of privacy to conduct the cremation in public, and the locals take pride in this fact.



Figure 8. Tourists on Manikarnika Ghat

Interestingly, we saw no barriers to the entry of women onto the Ghat, as is common across cremation grounds in the country. It is believed that women are emotionally incapable of witnessing a ceremony like cremation. However, a woman we spoke to on the Ghat expressed amusement at this. She laughed and said, “Do you see us acting hysterically?” In fact, we came across multiple groups of women who had accompanied mourning parties to the cremation. The presence of women on a cremation ground is a rare phenomenon, and adds to how unconventional Manikarnika is. The fact that women are allowed on the Ghat has also increased the number of tourists in general who come to see Manikarnika in all its unorthodox appeal.

As the number of tourists on the Ghat has been increasing, photography has actively been prohibited. However, this seems to be a norm and not a formal rule. This is to remain sensitive to the grieving individuals. However, after asking the Doms and the mourners, photography may be permissible. As long as one is subtle and sensitive, there are usually no issues.

Thus, we can say that the activity of cremation on Manikarnika has evolved to become a spectacle, not with the bells and whistles of an event like the Ganga Aarti, but in a way of its own. Just as people go to watch the Ganga Aarti, they do so now for the cremation as well. An

audience exists, which consists of everyone, from tourists to locals who pass through, but it is removed from the ritual itself. The people on the ghat such as the vendors, tour guides, and boatmen have modified their businesses to cater to the people who come to watch the activity.

4.6. Evolution over time

The government has played an integral role in improving the conditions of the Ghat, and in easing the process of cremating a loved one for the family members. We were told that almost 30 years ago, the Nagar Ayog of Banaras, Baba Hardev made the price of the sacred fire standardized. Initially, the Doms exercised complete autonomy over the price of the fire; they heavily charged the people who came to the Ghat to burn a body, and refused to cremate if the price was not met. This warranted some correction because of the Doms' abuse of power and the impact it had on the mourners. Therefore, the price of the sacred fire was standardized by the government, and has been the case since. Apart from this, the current government recently started a boat service to bring the bodies from Raj Ghat to Manikarnika. Raj Ghat is most accessible from the main roads of the city and is also closest to the railway station. Initially, bodies that came from outside the city had to be carried by men physically through the narrow lanes of the city all the way to Manikarnika.

The government started a boat service that connects the two ghats by the water channel. Called *Nishulk Jal Shav Vahini*, there are three motorboats that operate everyday from 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. The bodies are loaded onto the boat, and along with the mourners, each boat covers the distance of 4.5 kilometers in less than ten minutes. On an average, 10 bodies per hour are transported to Manikarnika via this route. In order to make the job of cremating and cleaning up afterwards more efficient, the government is also building metal crates. This will ensure that the body does not burn directly on the Ghat floor and the task of cleaning is easier and faster afterwards.



Figure 9. Nishulk Jal Shav Vahani, bringing bodies to Manikarnika Ghat

There have been several attempts to encourage the use of the electric crematorium on Harishchandra Ghat since it is cost-efficient, less time consuming and definitely less polluting (Chandrai, 2013). However, due to the claims made by Dom cremators that one cannot attain *moksha* without doing it the traditional way, it did not gain popularity. The Dom Raja used his authority to rally the Doms against this idea, because it was perhaps the first time their income was under question. Thus they rallied, and no further attempts to popularize electric cremations have occurred.

Many initiatives have been taken to maintain cleanliness along the ghats. Dustbins have been put up stop littering, and people have been employed who work throughout the day to keep the ghats clean. However, these are not particular to the Manikarnika Ghat, but have been started across the riverfront.

CHAPTER 5. Organization of the Doms

The cremations on Manikarnika Ghat are performed day and night, all through the year. Understandably, it takes painstaking management and huge efforts to meet the requirements of the large number of cremations that take place every day. To facilitate this, every party on the Ghat plays a role: the wood-sellers, boatmen, barbers, and cleaners. However, the greatest responsibility of ensuring that cremations go on without a hitch, as they have for centuries, falls on the Doms. The Dom cremator offers the service of cremating the body and selling the fire. The complex, informal organization of the Doms not only enables them to fulfil this responsibility efficiently, but also financially sustains many of them. The subsequent section studies how various aspects of the informal Dom organization achieves this.

5.1. Internal organization

The Dom Raja is widely considered the leader of the Doms, both within the community and outside it. This is not an official title, but has a long historical significance of its own. Dom Raja (literally meaning “King of the Doms”) is a moniker which, according to the Doms themselves, was first held by Kallu Dom. Although the Dom community as a whole traces its ancestry to Kallu Dom, the title of Dom Raja is given to the oldest male member of the family that traces its lineage *directly* back the mytho-historical figure. The continuation of the bloodline through a male ‘heir’ is essential for the Dom Raja’s family to maintain this leadership. Adoption is not uncommon; young Dom boys have been adopted in the past to ensure that his title is passed on (Singh, 2003). The current Dom Raja of Manikarnika ghat is Jagdish Chaudhary who took on the role after the deaths of his brothers, Ranjit and Sanjit Chaudhary.

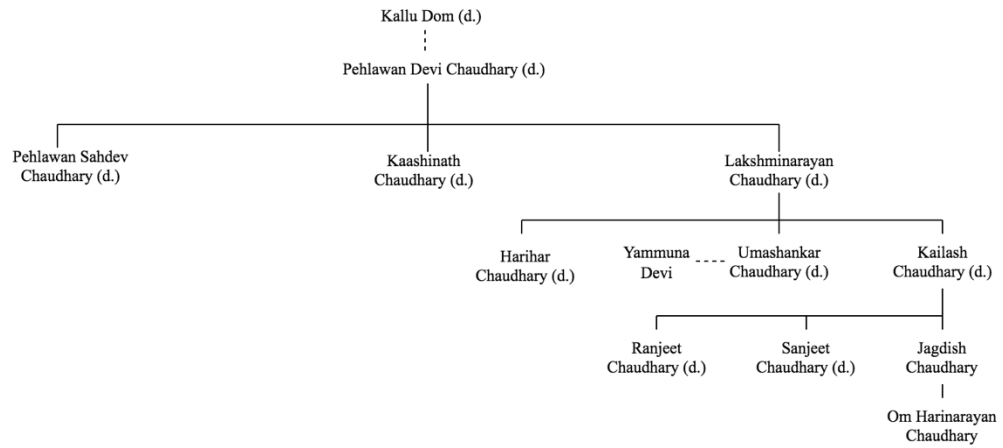


Figure 10. Lineage of the Dom Raja



Figure 11. Jagdish Chaudhary, Dom Raja of Manikarnika Ghat

The second level in this hierarchical structure is occupied by the leaders of sub-groups of Doms. These groups work on the ghat according to the *paari* system, which can be translated as a shift system.

5.1.1. The *Paari* System

The Doms have an intricate and interrelated familial system which has grown immensely over generations. The growth of the community has led to the formation of sub-groups within. Each of these groups has a male head who oversees a number of cremators. Due to the limited space of the ghat and the now large number of cremators, the work of cremation is divided among these leaders and their group of Doms. This is called a *paari* or a shift. Each group has control over cremation on the Ghat for a certain period of time, during which only the cremators from that group work on the ground. In turn, they keep all the income generated during this time. This system, and how long each group has their duty on the Ghat, is internally decided by these leaders, and is not necessarily uniform. From our understanding, the number of days of one *paari* on the Ghat depends on the number of people in that group. The Dom Raja's *paari* is the longest.

Each *paari* also has a *muneem* (bookkeeper) in it. He sits in one of the balconies above the main cremation ground. He is the accountant who looks over the daily proceedings. He especially keeps into account the money he receives from the exchange of the sacred fire. Everyone who comes to that Ghat for cremation has to buy the fire from him. Once their *paari* is over, the Doms take 10-12 days off from their job and from the Ghat. This is when they go home to their families.



Figure 12. *Muneem and two Dom cremators on Manikarnika Ghat*

5.1.2. Control and Oversight

The Dom Raja is the leader of the Doms, whose authority does not extend to the individual level. To many cremators, the Dom Raja is also not an identifiable figure. From our interviews, we gathered that they know the Dom Raja as a figurehead of the Dom community that he is a descendent of Kallu Dom and his forefathers have been the Rajas before him. They know of the *haveli* he resides in with his family, but it is highly unlikely that they have seen the inside of it. Therefore, many cremators on the Ghat may not be oblivious to his identity, but they seem to be unsure of the intricacies of the financial system he sits atop. The authority of the Dom Raja thus seems more titular than operative; the title gives him his palatial residence and a substantive financial benefits, but does not seem to invest in him any unique day-to-day power. No one in the hierarchy of the Dom organization seem to wield a disciplinary authority.



Figure 13. Dom Raja's haveli on Man Mandir Ghat

Due to the way the *paari* system has evolved, the leadership within the Dom cremators is rather decentralised. The *paari* leaders have more control over the day-to-day activities of the cremation activity and the cremators. Although the rules and regulations are not set in stone, the Doms recognize their leader's authority, and consequently, the responsibilities that come with their job. The leaders of the *paari* are not required to be present, watching over their cremators all through. However, the absence does not lead to a violation of the system. They are aware of the clear hierarchical structure within the community and their position in that hierarchy, even if they are not aware of the leaders of each *paari*. In Rishikesh Chaudhary's words, "They are above us, and we are below them. However, we are all related."

The *paari* system seems to be a logical and pragmatic way around the cremation activity for two reasons. Firstly, the large number of Doms in the community get a fair opportunity to work and earn money. Without the system in place, an oversupply of cremators on the small area on the Ghat will be counterproductive in the long run. Secondly, owing to the physically and mentally exhausting nature of the job, one person cannot work on the Ghat for days a year. The *paari* system ensures that every cremator gets a break from this grueling task. From our observations, it is a smoothly functioning system that is abided by all. We came across no evidence of the system being actively disputed or contested.

Fundamentally, authority over the Ghat and the job is not invested in a single person or organization; the job is self-regulatory to quite an extent. The authority belongs to tradition, and the social norms it dictates.

5.3. Norms, Rules and Regulations

The Doms collect and dispose fragments of charred wood, as in addition to performing the task of cremation, they are also expected to clean up thereafter. This is a rather taxing job that warrants the admirable work ethic they possess. One morning, we saw that there was a proper system in place to clean up the Ghat and make space available for pyres to follow. The Doms do it to ease their own workload and make the process of cremation more efficient. There is also a

great network of communication and coordination among the cremators that helps sustain the everyday functioning of the activity.



Figure 14. Doms working on Manikarnika Ghat

The Doms also have internal arrangements to ensure that no body that is brought to the ground is denied a cremation. In rare cases where the family of the deceased cannot afford the price of the wood and the fire, the Doms and others on the Ghat do come together and pool money to ensure the body is cremated.

Social norms dictate activity on the Ghat. These norms, like the task of the Dom and their association with the fire, have been passed on from generation to generation. The *paari* system is one such norm. Like much about this Ghat, it is not questioned or contested. Like in any family-centric establishment, these norms do not allow for the separation of work, leisure and social life.

They come together to be deciders of most aspects of the Doms' life. The very association of the Dom with the fire and cremation does not seem to be questioned by anyone, particularly the Doms themselves. Norms here have a weight we do not usually see anymore. So strong is their hold, that the necessity for an enforcement authority does not exist. This organization and its norms are very much informal, but function more efficiently than most formal institutions.

5. 4. Funding and Payments

The Doms earn their income in two ways: through the payment for cremation and the tax on the provision of the sacred fire. The cremators working on the Ghat do not work according to a conventional salary system. Rather, their income comes from every corpse they cremate. This is the payment made by the mourners for the Doms' services in the ritual. According to Rishikesh Chaudhury, there is no standard price for his services. He told us that people pay him ₹200-250 per cremation, but this number could vary. On the days there are no bodies to cremate, he makes no money. From a number of sources, we were able to confirm that a Dom makes approximately ₹15,000 to 20,000 a month.

As people from different economic backgrounds make use of the cremation services, they are not charged exorbitant amounts and pay as much as they can. On the other hand, there have been cases where people have paid the Doms higher than a thousand rupees, grateful for their help. However, there is no standardization to this and the Doms expressed frustration at not having a set salaried earning.

The *kar* paid for the sacred fire for cremation is the second source of income for the community. No cremation on the Ghat takes place without it, as it is believed that this fire is significant in the attainment of *moksha*. According to Parry, the tax levied on this used to reach high levels, an amount that was unaffordable to many people. However, according to many locals on the Ghat, the price on the fire was standardized at ₹500 over a decade ago. Some mourners do pay over this limit (according to their *shraddha* or faith), or so we were told. According to the Dom Raja, this money goes to the person whose *paari* it is at that time. However, we received contradictory responses about whether all the money for the fire goes to

the Dom Raja. The *muneem* keeps a commission of the *kar* paid for the fire, around ₹15 to 20 per body, just enough to keep him afloat.

There is no denying that there is a rising tourist interest in Manikarnika Ghat. Tour guides and boatmen have found ways to make money out of this. They expressed their frustration that the Doms did nothing to make the Ghat more conducive to tourism, despite possessing the greatest ability to enhance the condition of the Ghats. What we must recognize here is that this rising tourist interest is of no financial benefit to the Dom. Their business is generated by the belief in Manikarnika's sanctity and is centered on the dead. Tourism does not help them and this will perhaps be an impediment to the future tourist prospects of the Ghat.

5. 5. Marketing:

The importance of Manikarnika as a site for the attainment of *moksha* is well established. It is among the most popular of myths relating to the city. The promise this Ghat makes is of a core belief in Hinduism; the antiquity of the myth and the ease of the service have ensured that the Doms do not need to invest in an independent marketing strategy.

One interesting question that came up during our research was whether the electrical crematorium at Harishchandra would lead one to *moksha*. Some said that as long as one is cremated in Banaras, *moksha* is guaranteed. However, the Doms, the Dom Raja, and many of the mourners we spoke to did not believe this was the case. They were in agreement that in order to attain *moksha*, being cremated by a Dom, with the sacred fire of the ghat, and a dip in the Ganga, are key elements. According to Panchkoshi Chaudhary, only lost or unclaimed bodies are taken up the electrical crematorium. While different respondents gave us different combinations of factors to attain *moksha*, Manikarnika Ghat remained a common ingredient. Whether this insistence of Manikarnika as the "ideal" spot for *moksha* is purposeful publicity by the service-providers or not is difficult to verify, but one cannot deny that it does work in the favour of their business. This, and the fact that about seven to ten bodies per hour are cremated on an average, point to a high "demand" for cremations on Manikarnika.

It did not appear that the Doms do much to attract tourist attention. Although, there are signs along the river face directing tourists to the "Burning Ghat of Varanasi", it looks like they were put up by the tourism department. Tour guides and boatmen also take every opportunity to bring people to Manikarnika, explaining the processes with varying accuracy. The

unconventionality of the highly public cremation ground is played up and used by the tour guides as a tool to get more customers.

In considering the idea of Doms marketing the activity, we must be cognizant of their greater context. The cremation business is the source of their livelihood; when more people are cremated on the Ghat, the Dom makes more money. However, in encouraging the business, the Dom is forced to propagate a myth that continues to tie him a gruelling job and social-economic ostracism, and is arguably reason enough not to promote it. This is a complex dynamic, intensified by the paradox between the economic desirability and social stigma of the Dom's task, which a subsequent section shall address.

CHAPTER 6. The Cremators

6.1. Hiring and Eligibility

For as long as cremation has been happening on Manikarnika, the Doms are believed to have been the ones performing it. No prerequisites, other than belonging to the Dom community, are required to become a cremator. Men start working here from as early an age as 15 or 16. Panchkoshi, a 24-year-old cremator, used to watch his father work on the Ghat as a child, and followed him into working there.

Anand Singh, a mourner on Manikarnika, stated that it is the “birthright” of a Dom to work as a cremator. From our interviews, we noted that a Dom will never be denied his right to work on the Ghat, but no one has been stopped from pursuing another stream of work either. No Dom is turned away from the job because there is always a requirement for cremators. We neither observed nor were informed of a case when a cremator was removed from the job.

6.2. Terms of work

“Humare liye din aur raat sab ek hi hai, kyunki raat mein bhi sone nahi milta”, Panchkoshi said, “For us, night and day are the same because even at night we barely get to sleep.” One cannot tell when there will be a need for cremators on the Ghat because bodies come at all times of the day. The working hours of the Doms are continuous; essentially, there are no fixed hours of work for the workers. The Doms are not compelled to stay on the Ghat at all times; due to the strenuous work conditions, they take regular breaks. Rishikesh pointed out that as long as someone is covering for him, he can go into the city for recreation. When the need arises, he is called back to work.

Such a mechanism is only possible in a self-regulating system of work, that cremation on the Ghat pretty much is. The absence of an overbearing authority gives the Doms leeway in deciding when to take a small break.

Though many of them live in chawls (small settlements) far from Manikarnika, they choose to

live on the Ghat itself for the time of their paari, sleeping there between breaks. When they get some time off after their paari, they go home. This holiday lasts from 5 to 15 days, after which they have to be back on the Ghat.

As mentioned above, we gathered that the Dom cremators do not particularly have a say in major changes that might affect them. They follow the decisions of those higher up in the hierarchy. Whether these changes take place with total transparency between the two levels is unclear, but there is a palpable gap between the Dom Raja and the cremators themselves.

6.3. Perception of Self and By Others

The Dom Raja, when explaining how the Doms were put in charge of the duty of cremation, referred to it as a curse placed by Shiva on his ancestors. When asked if he still saw it as a curse, he said that it is perhaps Shankar's boon, because it is with their help that everyone can attain moksha. Our findings on the field revealed that there continues to be this dual perception of the relationship with their job: a perception of it being both a boon and curse.

The Doms hold a strong belief that it is their duty, their karm, to perform the job of a cremator. They take pride in their work, especially when mourners thank them for helping their loved ones pass on and find moksha. For them, this is the purest work, even if others do not see it the same way. This pride exists in the face of, and is perhaps instrumental in coping with, the physically and mentally challenging nature of the task they perform. Some of the Doms we spoke to saw their role in the attainment of cremation as a limited one: they simply set the pyre and provide the fire- the rest is up to Shiva. Others were not so modest; the Dom Raja referred to himself as the 'owner' of Manikarnika, a sentiment echoed by other stakeholders on the Ghat.



Figure 15. Dom cremator Rishikesh Chaudhary tending to the pyre

There is however another side to this story. Although they are proud of being born in Kashi and are happy being its residents, on a number of occasions they expressed immense frustration at being born into this occupation. Prabhu Chaudhary mentioned incessantly the unfairness of their job. “If God had made us differently, we would have worked somewhere else and led different lives. But there is nothing we can do as our livelihoods depend on this”, he said. Prabhu, and many others, often indulge in substance abuse to cope with the mental and physical exertions of their work.

The Doms make clear the extent to which they work with death; they insist that they never “touch” only handle the dead (Singh, 2016). This was apparent from their consistent use of bamboo poles. This shows that in spite of their work, they too view the dead as “impure” and continue to separate themselves from the corpse.

To better our understanding of the Dom community, it was essential to see how our other respondents viewed them. Our preliminary research pointed to a strong presence of the caste system and discrimination based on it. Historically, the Doms have been seen as an “untouchable” caste due to their dealings with dead bodies- it is seen as an impure task (Parry, 1994). Our aim was to start a conversation about the same and explore whether or not they continue to be at the receiving end of it. When asked about watching the Ganga Aarti on Dashashwamedh, Hrishikesh said, “We haven’t done so [been to the Aarti] because there are some people there who consider us untouchable because of caste. This is the reality. Here on Manikarnika, we are considered the purest of the lot. But there, they don’t see us as pure.”

As all the ghats are public spaces, there are no legal restrictions on the Doms from going to Dashashwamedh, but there are some who do object to their presence. The muneem too expressed anger at the treatment of the Doms simply because of their caste, their occupation. He said discrimination has always been there and will continue to exist.

On the other hand, the responses of Pandits on Dashashwamedh Ghat gave us rather contradictory opinions. Regarding the Doms visiting the Ghat and watching the Aarti, they said that they are more than welcome to do so. In response to this, the muneem was not in agreement. It is important to note that the pandits might not have wanted to come across as casteist, which might have affected their responses. The organizers from the Gangotri Seva Samiti were insistent that whether it may be a Dom or anybody else, they would not be turned away from the Aarti. Interestingly, the Dom Raja mentioned that there have been instances when he and his family have been invited to Dashashwamedh for the Aarti on special occasions. This disparity in the treatment of the Dom Raja and the other Doms can be attributed to multiple reasons. One of them could be the fact that the two come from different social positions. The Doms cremators are the lowest in the hierarchy, and do not enjoy any power or authority. They face the bitter end of discrimination, while the Dom Raja, whose title gives him authority and control over the Ghat, is treated with respect.

Other parties on the Ghat such as the boatmen and the tour guides also have different dynamics with the Doms. A boatman expressed frustration at the uncleanliness of the Ghat. He was adamant that keeping the ground clean was a part of the Doms' duty, and that they were failing to perform it correctly. He said, "Their work is considered so pure, but they do not look after all the dirtiness they are creating because of it." There is also animosity between the tour guides and the Doms. The Doms believe that the guides simply exploit unknowing tourists and spew inaccurate facts at them for money. On the other hand, the tour guides resent the Doms for their high economic and financial stability, despite the job they do. There is a clear understanding of space division on the Ghat between the two; one does not go to the other's side without reason.

In another instance, one of our photographers was stopped by a pandit on the Ghat, clearly wanting a payment to let him go. Panchkoshi Chaudhary told us that the man had no important role on the Ghat and just waited around to stop people from photographing, and demanding a payment to let the incident go. He said that the pandit was only able to get away with this as he was well-connected and had a powerful network in the city.

These relationships are evident of the tension exists among the various social groups on the Ghat. We were also informed of the woodsellers' strained relationship with the Doms. This is understandable given the fact that they are all dependent in different, but deeply interconnected ways, on the same ritual. The task of one necessarily impacts the others and with the intense demands on the Ghat, frustrations are bound to run high.

Rishikesh, Panchkoshi, and Prabhu Chaudhary all told us that they considered themselves lucky to be born in Kashi, to be a resident of the sacred land. Later, they expressed frustration towards being born into this occupation. This reconciliation of loyalty to Kashi in spite of their role in its grand scheme is interesting to note.

Economic desirability

Karm is something that seems to drive the Doms' job. On multiple occasions, we have been told that it is both a boon and a curse that they are doing this job on the Ghat. A curse because of the unfavourable work conditions and the discrimination that comes with it, a boon because they believe it is Shiva's blessing over them.

Economically, the Doms are relatively better off when compared to other service providers on the ghats. The Doms earn anywhere between ₹15,000 to 20,000 a month from their work, which is higher than how much any other party on the Ghat makes. The tour guides we spoke to on Manikarnika told us, almost resentfully, that the Doms are the ones who benefit the most on the Ghat from the job of cremation. A sweeper also told us that he would not mind doing the job of cremation if it paid him as much.

The Doms are aware that there are jobs that will provide better working conditions and dissociate them from this task that is considered "impure" in Hinduism. However, no other job will give them the financial stability that working on the Ghat does. Panchkoshi mentioned that he used to work in an industrial set up a few years ago, but did not earn enough to make savings. Thus, he ventured back to Manikarnika to work as a cremator.

From the way the workforce is organised to how the income is split, and the fact that all members of this organization come from the same interrelated community, all of these factors add up to making the business of cremation on Manikarnika Ghat one based on a family-centric system.



Figure 16. Dom cremator Panchkoshi Chaudhary

SECTION B: Ganga Aarti on Dashashwamedh Ghat

CHAPTER 7. The Ritual

7.1. History and Myth

The Ganga Aarti is a *puja* or prayer to what is considered the holiest river in Hinduism. The religious prominence of this river is rooted in its many legends. These legends live on in Banaras and are the bedrock of most religious activity in the city.

From her origin in Gangotri, the goddess Ganga, who is believed to be embodied in the river, is considered sacred. There are many myths that establish Ganga's divinity, from her conception as the liquid embodiment of Shakti to her seat in Shiva's locks. Ganga is the subject of both symbolic and specific faith to Hindus. The belief that the Kaveri is the Ganga of the south and the Godavari is the Ganga of Central India are indicative of her spiritual identity that transcends the physicality of the river. Of all the holy sites along the course of the Ganga, none are as sacred as Banaras. The city has long worshipped the river through prayers and *aartis* in temples and on her banks. Dashashwamedh Ghat is arguably the most popular site for this. One of the five *tirthas*, this Ghat draws large crowds of bathers every morning. *Pandas* or *Ghatiyas* line the Ghat to perform various ritual services (Eck 1983).

The people of Banaras may have been worshipping Ganga since time immemorial but the grand Aarti that is now performed on Dashashwamedh Ghat is a fairly recent phenomenon, no more than thirty years old. In this short span of time, it has grown considerably in scale and popularity, due to the efforts of the two organizations that started and run the Aarti. The following section of the chapter will dwell deeper into the history of the Ganga Aarti on Dashashwamedh.

The two organizations that carry out the Ganga Aarti are Gangotri Seva Samiti and Ganga Seva Nidhi. Though a Ganga aarti can be conducted by anyone, anywhere along the river, these two organizations are the drivers for the popular Ganga Aarti we see today, and were indispensable to the process of creating a communal atmosphere around the Aarti. The Aarti is

performed at the same time every evening; the two organizations perform the Aarti on two separate sections of the Ghat.

The Gangotri Seva Samiti started when Shri Kishore Raman Dubey, also known as Babu Maharaj was inspired by the aarti conducted at Haridwar. He wanted to conduct a similar prayer to the Ganga in Banaras as well. Although they had no funding, he was committed to performing an aarti in a similar manner. Thus, the first Ganga Aarti on Dashashwamedh Ghat was performed in 1992. Initially, it was Babu Maharaj who performed the Aarti. However, after an unfortunate accident, he was no longer able to do so. Instead, five Brahmins were hired to take his place. Since then, it has always been five Brahmins performing the Aarti on the Gangotri Seva Samiti side of the Ghat.

Dinesh Dubey, the son of Babu Maharaj, discussed other motivations for the birth of the Ganga Aarti in an interview with us. One of the main reasons was the cleanliness of the river and the ghats. He staunchly believed that a large part of the river's cleanliness today is due to the performance of the Ganga Aarti, which deified the river and elevated its piety in the eyes of the people. Traditionally, the worship of the river happens at dawn and at dusk everyday. Visitors who came to Banaras often stayed only for the morning Aarti, visited the ghats during the day, and left in the evening for Lucknow. Due to the lack of anything to do in the evenings, the local saying "*Subah Banaras, shaam mein Awadh*" evolved (visit Banaras in the morning and Lucknow in the evening). The organizers saw a window of opportunity here and thus, decided to start something momentous to keep the crowds in Banaras in the evenings as well.

The second organization is the Ganga Seva Nidhi which was set up by Munnan Maharaj. There is some ambiguity over which organization came first. However, most people hold that the Gangotri Seva Samiti was established earlier. The founders of both the organizations initially intended to begin the practice of the Aarti together. However, Munnan Maharaj believed that funding was necessary before beginning and wished to wait. Babu Maharaj disagreed and started the Aarti without financial backing on one half of the Dashashwamedh Ghat. A short while later, the Aarti began on the other half of the Ghat through the Ganga Seva Nidhi. This division of the Ghat between the two Aartis continues today.

7.2. Procedure



Figure 17. Procedure of the Ganga Aarti

Amitabh Bhattacharya, a journalist and scholar, familiarized us with the procedure of the Ganga Aarti. Originally, the aarti to the Ganga was a Vedic practice of worshipping the elements. The main purpose of the Aarti is to reaffirm to God that whatever he has created has not been destroyed. The procedure makes use of various items to symbolize the elements, like water, fire, and earth. The *puja* or prayer is a way to pay homage to the almighty. In a traditional aarti, the god is invited, given a seat, bathed, and clothed. A pleasant atmosphere is created by

the lighting of incense and lamps and the offering of ceremonial food. The god is entertained by song, dance, and percussion.



Figure 18. Ganga Seva Nidhi performers performing with the Agarbatti

From three in the morning, one sees people coming to the Ghat to pray to the Ganga. They pour milk into the river and light a candle, releasing it into the water as an offering. According to Bhattacharya, the colossal Ganga Aarti performed in the evening has risen to prominence due to the the ‘*Sarvajhanik*’ or inclusive mindset of Banaras, which brings people together and creates a communal atmosphere. It is said to have a different meaning than that of the morning prayer, as it focuses on collective rather than individualistic prayer.

The Ganga Aarti consists of seven steps and is preceded by a *puja* (prayer) to the river. These individual steps are defined by the instrument used in their performance. Each of these steps is imbued with symbolic meaning and is performed in all four cardinal directions. Ram¹, an Aarti performer from the Ganga Seva Nidhi walked us through each of the steps, which are performed by seven Brahmin men in perfect coordination. Before the Aarti, about five to ten *keerthans* (song) are performed, the main being the *Guru Mantra*. Firstly, *agarbatti* (incense) is used as an offering to the gods. This is followed by the use of a *loutan*, a flat-based brass vessel that holds coal and incense pellets which are lit to spread fragrant smoke in all directions. This is

¹ Name changed for the purpose of confidentiality.

supposed to please the gods' sense of smell. After the *lautan* comes the use of the visually stunning *deep patra*, a 6 kilogram heavy conical metallic oil lamp that has 51 diyas on it, each with its individual flame. Following this is the *tandav*, in which a snake-hooded oil lamp, equally heavy and visually stimulating, is rotated in a sequence. After the excitement of the fire, the gods are slowly lulled into sleep. Before this, a *rumal* or piece of cloth is used to hold flowers that provide a fragrant smell. The *rumal* itself is symbolic of *vastra* or cloth, which is an offering of clothing to the god. Then comes the *mor pankh*, a fan made of peacock feathers, as the hymns of the Aarti slow down. The final step in the ritual is the use of a *chaamar*, a fan made of yak's tail. The yak's tail hair is extremely light and stays suspended in the air for a brief moment. This supposed to have a hypnotic effect on the gods, finally putting them to sleep. The beginning and the end of the Aarti is marked by the blowing of a conch shell, which is believed to be both a call to the gods and a way of driving away darkness.



Figure 19. Ganga Seva Nidhi employee prepares for the Ganga Aarti



Figure 20. Gangotri Seva Samiti employee combing a Chaamar for the Aarti

The ritual of the Ganga Aarti is thus, an elaborate recreation of the age-old prayer and sacrifice to the Ganga. While each step of the Aarti's procedure has a symbolic meaning, its performance itself is so intricate that it elevates the simple ritual.

7.3. Performance

The Ganga Aarti starts at exactly 6:30 in the evening every day and lasts for about an hour. The excitement for the Aarti builds quite early as the platform and equipment for the grand performance are set up, from cleaning the Ghat to lighting the *deep patra* for the performers. The generally calm ambience of the Ghat is replaced with a buzzing sense of anticipation. Vendors sell flowers and *diyas* just before the Aarti starts, for devotees to let into the Ganga. The boatmen position their boats astutely, aiming to ensure the best view for their customers from the river. Upbeat devotional music (*bhajans*) are also played right before the Aarti, setting the mood for the enthusiastic display that is to proceed.

The Aarti itself is performed smoothly, with grand gestures to Ganga performed in a sequence and repeated in all four directions. The Ganga Seva Nidhi's Aarti begins with the

organizers requesting the audience to stand up and pledge to keep the Ganga clean. The performers then start the process with a small *puja* on the bank of the river, followed by the lighting *diyas* in front of three photo frames, one of which is of the founder of the organization. They then stand together and sing a *bhajan* as an ode to the river. As the Aarti goes on, there is another pandit from the organization who goes around with a big plate collecting donations from the audience. While the beginning of the Aarti is marked with a pledge, its end is marked by a chant played over the speakers, echoed loudly through the crowd. The chant repeats “Ganga Mata ki Jai”, “Sheetla Mata ki Jai”, “Har Har Mahadev”, among others. Interestingly, one of the newest chants is “Bharat Mata ki Jai”, which was enthusiastically repeated by the crowds.

The Aarti comes to a close as the performers distribute *prasaad* to all those present. Some devotees even touch the performers’ feet as a mark of respect. The rush of the Aarti shuts down as the crowds disperse. It is undeniable that the Aarti demands attention in the way it is performed. Much of this is due to the performers themselves, who will be discussed in the following section.

7.4. Performers

The performers of the Aarti are hired employees of the organizations. Learning how to perform the Aarti is a time consuming process. Hence, rigorous training goes into making these performers look as comfortable and professional as possible. As a trial run, a novice performer begins by performing the morning Aarti on the Ghat. This Aarti is performed by just one person, using only the *tandav*. It has a considerably smaller audience, so it gives them the opportunity to practice. Once they perfect that, they become part of the grand evening Ganga Aarti. Though the morning Aarti allows some room for mistakes, doing the same during the evening Aarti can lead to terminations.

The performers of the Aarti are usually young Brahmin men in their late 20s or early 30s. Most of the performers we interacted with were university students or graduates studying Sanskrit, pandit studies, or other subjects. These performers come from various parts of the country and sometimes from Nepal. The Ganga Seva Nidhi arranges accommodation for its performers. The performers work with the organization every evening for the duration of their

employment. There are also a few performers who only work for a few months of the year. For example, an Aarti performer from Shimla worked under the organization for about two and a half months each year, usually around the festival of *Dev Deepavali*. There are a number of young Brahmin pandits who are looking to be a part of the Ganga Aarti, thus, making it easy for the organization to find replacements.

Though these performers of the Aarti are deeply revered by many who come to watch, most of them maintain that they see themselves as normal students who have had the good grace of being able to perform the Aarti.

7.5. Evolution over time

The Ganga Aarti that has been taking place for nearly 25 years, has indisputably evolved over time. Though the procedure itself has remained the same, its setting and surroundings are transient. The main initiative in recent times has been the cleaning of the Ghat, especially before the Aarti. The organizations in charge of the Aarti conveyed that the cleaning of the Ghat has mainly been due to the emergence of the Aarti.

The most common and dominating views that we gathered from the people on the ghats were in favour of the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, who helped develop the ghats, which helped to ease the performance of the ritual. The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, a cleanliness drive by him seemed to have greatly impacted the ghats, especially Dashashwamedh. Though the organizations themselves play a major role in maintaining the ghats, the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan has successfully made maintenance plain sailing. Under this scheme, several seats and platforms have been installed for people to sit on; the walls have also been freshly painted and umbrellas have been erected to provide shade for the *pandas* and *ghatiyas*.

7.6. Spectacle

The Ganga Aarti has come a long way from when it first started, to the performance it is today. There has been a definite attempt to create a certain atmosphere and to garner more attention; as said by Amitabh Bhattacharya, a journalist we interviewed who is associated with Ganga Seva Nidhi, there has been an attempt to ‘give the Ganga Aarti a new look’. What strikes

one immediately about the Aarti, adding to the notion of its grandeur, are the elaborate costumes worn by the performers and the impressive equipment they use. There is an undeniable sense of opulence surrounding the performance, something that surpasses a simple prayer to a god.

The seating itself was proof that the Ganga Aarti can be compared to a production, with the frontmost seats reserved for VIPs. What determines this status is still uncertain; it seems that foreigners mainly get this treatment and usually opt to sit on the balcony seats provided by the Ganga Seva Nidhi, a privilege reserved only for the elite. The Aarti itself is an eye-catching performance, one that people watch not just from the Ghat, but also from boats on the river itself, ranging from small to large two-tiered ones meant for tourists. There are loud speakers situated in various places on the Ghat, amplifying the acoustics of the entire area. On seeing the Aarti, it becomes clear that the ritual has become more than just that; it has evolved into a show and has attracted a crowd. CDs of the entire Ganga Aarti are even sold during the Aarti, for people who want to relive the exhilarating experience. The audience themselves give us an idea of the attention the Aarti has gained. They range from deeply dedicated devotees, eagerly singing along with the *bhajans* and chants and immersing themselves in the experience, even falling at the feet of the performers after the Aarti is over, to tourists coming to see what the Aarti is about and watching it for themselves.

All of this shapes our ability to look at the ritual through a new lens; it provides ample evidence to refer to the ritual as a spectacle of sorts. This also encouraged Narendra Modi to bring honourable guests like the Prime Minister of Japan, Mr. Shinzo Abe to Dashashwamedh to watch the Ganga Aarti. This led to the event gaining extreme popularity and becoming one of the most highly reputed religious activities in India. It even saw celebrities such as businessman, Anil Ambani and actor, Kangana Ranaut paying visits to the Ghat to witness it in its vibrant and euphoric form. The campaign for “Incredible India” also showcased the Ganga Aarti in one of its revered advertisements. The Ganga Aarti has thus managed to make a name for itself, attracting people from various parts of the world, either to pray to the river or to experience this elaborate performance for themselves.

CHAPTER 8. Organization of the Ganga Aarti

The Ganga Aarti is organized by two establishments, Gangotri Seva Samiti and Ganga Seva Nidhi. Both of these organizations started off rather small, but quickly grew into establishments efficiently governing the performance of the Aarti. In this process, they passed on from the founders to their heirs, growing in size, resources and popularity. These organizations, although engaged in religious activity, are providers of a service: the hour-long performance of the Aarti every evening.

The organizers of the Aarti were inspired by a similar ritual in Haridwar. Despite not possessing all resources necessary to recreate the Aarti, they made the decision to begin the public performance of the same. While there existed faith in the river, there had never been an Aarti of this nature before. The two organizers, in under a decade, managed to turn the performance of these rituals on the Ghat into a performance that draws a daily audience of over 2000 people, hiring performers on clearly defined contracts, marketing itself and ultimately meeting the ever-rising demand for the Aarti. The subsequent section studies how various aspects of the Ganga Seva Nidhi and Gangotri Seva Samiti achieve this.

8.1. Internal Organization

The founder of the Ganga Seva Nidhi passed away in 2005. His son is still very much a part of the organization, but the functional head of the organization is an outsider. Mr. Hanuman, the head organizer in charge, is not related in any way to the family but started working for the founder at a very young age and has been affiliated with the organization since. Both organizations have several other employees who handle day-to-day affairs. Those we spoke to were not part of the family but have been working for the Aarti for a long time.

From our interaction with the two organizations, it seems that power still lies with the family of the founders, but has been decentralized. Though the family of the founder still has the ability to make the big decisions, the actual logistics of the functioning of the internal organization, as well as the actual conduction of the Aarti is done by outsiders who work for the organization but are not related to the founder. All workers of the GSN were deferential to the founder's son, but there seemed no doubt that the real head was Mr. Hanuman.



Figure 21. Head organizers from the Ganga Seva Nidhi

The organizations have a fixed managerial hierarchy, with limited people having the ability to exercise control and enforce regulation. Both organizations, though rivalrous, function similarly in these regards. Our primary points of contact on the Ghat had been the two organizers who we hoped would introduce us to the performers themselves. However, reaching out to the performers proved one of the greatest challenges of our field work, thanks largely to the control these organizations exercised over them. The Gangotri Seva Samiti finally did grant us an interview with a performer under the watchful eye of the organizer, Dinesh Dubey. It was evident from the performer's answers that he was terrified of talking about certain sensitive issues such as a potential ticketing system for the Aarti.



Figure 22. Dinesh Dubey, son of Gangotri Seva Samiti founder

The Aarti performers are employed by the two organizations, to whom they are answerable. There is a clear hiring process involved and the authority the upper echelons of the organization have allows them to monitor and discipline them. Within the ranks of the Aarti performers, some who have been engaged in the role for a longer period have a deeper, more personal relationship with the organizers, while many, usually the younger performers, seem to have no working relationship with them at all.

8.1.1. Control and Oversight

The organizations seem to have an overall controlling nature. They are authoritative bodies with clearly divided roles and responsibilities, which creates a chain of authority. A critical function of all those within the managerial hierarchy of the two organizations is to exercise oversight over the conduct of the performers for the hour of the Aarti. The organizers of the Aarti watch the performers like hawks during the performance.

The performer Pankaj² told us that the organizers constantly keep an eye on them while they are on the Ghat. He was petrified by the prospect of his employers finding out that he had

² Name changed for the purpose of confidentiality.

consented to speak to us. Ram was much more forthcoming with regards to this. If any of the seven made a single mistake in their performance, they had to face serious repercussions. Their jobs were always on the line.

It is essential to note here the greater significance of the Brahmin in the performance of Hindu rituals. The Brahmin performs the ritual and is thus the key to its success. This ability has been the basis of their uncontested supremacy in the Hindu order, giving them enormous power. So rigid a monitoring system, such tightly controlled finances and so disproportionate a distribution of power are only possible in organizational setups as structured and defined as the Nidhi and Samiti. The violation of so basic a norm with regards to the role a Brahmin plays in a ritual also clearly indicates that to the organizers, the priority is the business.

8.2. Norms, Rules and Regulations

Like any other organization, the Seva Samiti and Seva Nidhi also have numerous rules and regulations that are expected to be followed by all the employees. Most rules within the organization pertain to the performer. A woman cannot perform the Aarti. Strict regulations are imposed on physical appearance. They're expected to be clean shaven and well-groomed. Every aspect of their time on the Ghat is closely monitored; a performer we approached for no more than a few seconds was reprimanded the next day by the organizers. Any association with the tourists, particularly women, results in serious action. Thus, we were hardly surprised to hear from Ram that a performer seen one day with a foreign tourist was fired the very next day. Performers were fired frequently, usually for flaws in performance but often for disciplinary indiscretions.

The preparation and set-up before an Aarti and the clean-up after happen most efficiently. The well-oiled system in place does not change. Clear roles are designated: one person picks up the various instruments of the Aarti, while another rushes to collect the donations made in a plastic sack that is dutifully handed over to the organizers.

Some norms exist between the organizers and the parties on the Ghats. *Pandas* are expected to vacate the platforms where the Aarti is conducted at least an hour prior. We were told that this was never a problem, as the organization's ownership of the space for the duration

of the Aarti had never been contested. There also seemed to be an understanding between the organizers of the Aarti and the people who provided various services for or during it, the boatmen in particular.

The rules that apply within the organization are very much formal. They are not negotiable, and their violation has clear repercussions. Once again, the fact that the performers form the focus of such extensive regulation reveals the way the organizers view the Aarti. In their own words, the Aarti is a display of *shraddha*. Therefore, the only criteria (aside from the barriers of caste and gender that were not open to discussion) to become a performer should be one's faith. The frequent firings happened because the performers did not perform with the flair of movement expected of them, telling us what the organizers value the most in the performance.

8.3. Funding

"Havan karega toh ghar chalega"

-Amitabh Bhattacharya, Journalist

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Funding is an integral part of the workings of any kind of activity, especially that of an event of the scale of Ganga Aarti. The Aarti is supposed to be performed out of devotion to god, and not for any monetary benefits. The interviews with the actual managers of the organizations revealed very little about their finances, as the organizers were hesitant to disclose any information on financial matters. "Ganga Maa ki kripa se chal raha hai, Aarti", they would say, "It runs with the blessings of Mother Ganga." The further we probed, the more guarded were the responses about finances. Amitabh Bhattacharya, however, revealed some of the more candid details regarding the specifics of the money earned and spent in performing the Aarti every day. He denied the possibility that the donations received every day were more than ₹300 to 400, a meagre amount compared to the approximately ₹4000 cost of performing the Aarti everyday. He even mentioned that there is often upto a 25 percent shortfall a month, due to inadequate funds. The organizations claimed to never ask for donations, merely accepting what people donate "out of the goodness of their hearts".



Figure 23. Collection of donation from the audience during the Aarti

However, during the Aarti, we observed a pandit of the organization walking around with a donation plate, encouraging the audience to donate. The amounts each plate collected were substantive, easily more than ₹400. *Pandas* also told us that the Ganga *puja* performed before the Aarti could be done in the name of a devotee in exchange for a sizeable donation. This devotee would not only stand on the closest platform to the river and participate in the *puja* done by the performers, but would also be seated at the very front of the audience, enjoying a stunning view. Further, the highly sought after seating atop the organization's office, which gave those seated there an aerial view of the Aarti, was controlled by tickets. These tickets had variable costs and were always occupied by foreign tourists. This practice in particular upset many *pandas*.

An interesting detail that we discovered during the interview with Amitabh Bhattacharya was the extremely significant role *Dev Deepavali* plays every year in raking in huge amounts of money to sufficiently fill the treasury of the organizations. During this festival, numerous celebrities visit Banaras, specifically to watch the Ganga Aarti. Around this time, these VIPs make very generous donations to these organizations, more than enough to sustain them for the coming year. They also donate in kind, providing cans of *ghee* and other essentials for the Aarti.

Dinesh Dubey also acquainted us with the names of colossal industrialists who frequent the Aarti, and on whose liberal donations the Ganga Aarti is perpetuated. JSW Jindal and the Piramal Group, apparently agreed to renovate the Dashashwamedh Ghat at their own expense. This might have saved the organizations from draining their own treasuries to repair or remodel certain facilities on the ghats like pavements and public platforms.

At first glance, it appears that the Aarti is financed by no more than donation plates passed around during the performance. Further research revealed a far more complex financial backing for the ritual. Such a system necessitates a structured system of management that these organizations provide.

8.4. Marketing

The Ganga Aarti managed to make a name for itself as it grew throughout the years, and there seems to be a sustained effort to garner more attention.

A key way the organizations market themselves, whether this is intentional or not, is a constant recounting, re-emphasizing and propagation of the centrality of the river to Kashi's existence, and the blessings bestowed by this holy river. As said by Mr. Hanuman, in the city that has "*Ganga Maa ki kripa*", no matter how poor someone is, they will never go hungry. The Aarti performers market themselves in the framework of the benevolence of Ganga.

A main idea that the Ganga Aarti is rooted in is community involvement. The Aarti involves people of all walks of life sitting together in the open space of the Ghat and participating in a ritual that promotes a communal atmosphere. The organizers take great pride in the faith they are creatively and effectively contributing to by encouraging awareness about keeping *Ganga Maa* clean. Undeniably, the Aarti has played a major role in having a social impact on the Ghat, including cleaning of the Ghat and Ganga itself. This social narrative has turned into one of the ways in which the Aarti has been popularized. Amitabh Bhattacharya even referred to the Aarti as a "social awareness program", talking about it as an initiative to encourage a communal sense of responsibility in cleaning the Ganga.

The idea of strengthening community bonds is believed by the organizers to be essential to nation building. The Aarti is no doubt as much a patriotic event to the organizers as it is an

ode to the river. This fact is confirmed by the loud chant of “*Bharat Mata ki jai*” that echoes through the Ghat after the Aarti. Whether it arose as support for Indian soldiers during Kargil, or the pride in Modi’s association with the Aarti, the organization’s commitment to using the Aarti to strengthen patriotic sentiments cannot be denied.

Despite vehement denial of investing in devices to popularize the Aarti, the organizations promote the sale of CDs of the Aarti, during and after the performance.

Word of mouth advertising also worked in favour of the Aarti. The tour guides on the ghats seemed to be advocates of the Aarti as they often told the tourists about its grandiose and beauty. Although some locals do not think too highly of the Aarti and dismiss it as “just a business”, the tourists flock in hundreds every evening to witness the immaculate Aarti. This further proves that there is never a lack of audience for the Ganga Aarti.

The two organizations of the Ganga Aarti thrive as businesses due to the rivalry between them. They compete for the same audience, and sell an almost identical service. Due to this, both engage in subtle marketing strategies where each claims that it is better, older and more sincere than the other, and hopes to one up the other whenever the opportunity surfaces. There are undertones of severe competition between the two organizations; this in itself points to the necessity for a structured organizational setup in order to compete and ensure a secured audience.

CHAPTER 9. The Aarti Performer

It became clear to us that the profession of the Aarti performers was unlike any other we've seen. The Ganga Aarti is a unique fusion of the gravity associated with a ritual carried out for the gods, and the undeniable grandeur of the spectacle that it has become; an amalgamation of precision and free flowing movements, of discipline and art, and most importantly, of ritual and performance. It is solely up to the performers to execute the Aarti with the grace and sincerity it warrants.

Much of the information we gathered comes from Ram, a student who has been performing the Ganga Seva Nidhi Aarti for the last three years. He told us not just about the job of an Aarti performer, but also shed light on the organization's internal workings.

9.1. Hiring, Eligibility and Firing Process

There is a clear hiring procedure followed to select those performing the Aarti. A performer under Ganga Seva Nidhi, in an in depth interview, familiarized us with how the organization hires their performers. They consider physical appearance, stature, then personality and intelligence. The performers are preferred to be younger, and they must be Brahmins.

The Aarti performers are usually students from reputed Sanskrit universities in the city, and take up the responsibility of performing the Aarti during the course of their university degree. The organization pays for the stay and the food of the performers. According to the Ganga Seva Nidhi, if an Aarti performer is planning on leaving, they bring pandits and begin training them in the performance procedure around 3-4 months prior to them leaving; the Aarti is said to be very time consuming to master.

Like their hiring process, the organizations' action with regards to firing their employees if the case arises is equally strict. As discussed, there are many rules the performers must adhere to, and any deviation from these rules results in immediate action. One of the instances that was recalled to us was one in which a performer was seen by one of the organizers in the city, at a bar, with a girl. Seeing this as inappropriate behaviour for an Aarti performer, he was immediately terminated from the job.

9.2. Terms of Work

The Aarti performers have fixed working hours, including the time they spend performing the Aarti, and the time they spend on training for it. They commit around 2.5 hours per day to this occupation. The minute the performers change out of their costumes, they are free to leave. This is indicative of a contractual agreement between the organizers and the performers; it is evidence of the organizers seeing the performer as only having an instrumental value to the ritual.

We were under the assumption that the job of the performer must be a well paying one, being so prestigious and socially desirable. However, we found that was not the case. Our anonymous performer, who threw light on the internal workings of the Ganga Seva Nidhi, told us that they make only about ₹3000 a month. “3000 se zyada ki toh main cigarette peeta hoon”, he said, implying that he smokes more than ₹3000 worth of cigarettes in a month. On the other hand, Dinesh Dubey of the Gangotri Seva Samiti claimed that his performers make ₹10,000 a month, clarifying that this includes all of the other jobs that they work, if any. He was ambiguous about the salary they receive from the Samiti.

Some of the performers come from far off places to Banaras to perform the Aarti and are financially dependent on it. Oftentimes, we got the impression that the organizers took advantage of this fact and were not providing them with enough compensation for the effort they put in.

9.3. Perception of Self and Perception by Others

The *pandas* on Dashashwamedh saw the performers in a different light; this differed from the audience. They did not appreciate the Aarti being performed by students with little to no prior experience of carrying out the *puja*. The Aarti is highly revered by them, and they believed it should be performed by people who actually possess a deep understanding of the *puja* and its meaning.

Social Desirability

Despite their meagre earnings from this occupation, there is no denying that for about one hour everyday, the performers are elevated to an ethereal status; they enjoy an unparalleled social prestige. They become the focal point of the evening, and are able to hold the attention of around 2000 people effectively throughout. The job is highly revered, with many devotees even touching the performers' feet at the end of the Aarti to convey their utmost respect. The performers themselves take pride in their occupation and association with *Ganga Maa*.

The *pandas* of the Ghat, however, were of the opinion that the performers were solely participating in it for financial reasons and not so much out of their devotion to the gods or the river. Nevertheless, they cannot deny the appeal of becoming performers of the Aarti, as this job comes with undisputable social standing.

This raises the compelling interplay between social and economic desirability of this occupation. There will never be a scarcity of Brahmins lining up for the job of being a Ganga Aarti performer, for many reasons; the ability to show their respect to *Ganga Maa*, combined with the veneration and social status it guarantees fuels the desire to be a Ganga Aarti performer. However, the economic appeal of this occupation ranks very low; the performers make around ₹3000 a month. This is a fascinating dynamic between the evident social allure, but possible economic aversion.

Though at first glance, the Gangotri Seva Samiti and Ganga Seva Nidhi do not emerge as businesses, our research and conversations with those associated with the organizations has led us to believe that the organizational structure is quite evidently that of a business.



Figure 24. Ganga Seva Nidhi performer with the Deep Patra

CHAPTER 10. Analysis

10.1. Reflection on the performer

The task of performing a ritual in Hinduism is the Brahmin's. He is considered the 'purest' in a spiritual sense and has long enjoyed far greater prestige than any other group in Hindu society. Brahmins have also had the ability to make money; there are no standardised prices associated with performing rituals, and *dakshina* can be of any denomination. If the Brahmin lies at one end of the Hindu social spectrum, those associated with tasks such as cremation lie at the other. They have, for centuries, seen ostracism on the grounds of the "impurity" of their work. Communities associated with such tasks have usually been economically backward, with little to no say in the money they receive for their services.

Our pre-field research revealed that caste issues are still very much a contemporary reality in Banaras. The fact that rituals form the centre of our study necessarily means that those associated with the same will come from a particular caste. The Ganga Aarti is performed by priests who are all Brahmins, while the cremation is performed by Doms, a Scheduled Caste community historically treated as untouchables. In India, caste is not merely an indicator of social standing but of socio-economic standing. Lower castes in this country have historically had less access to resources and opportunity, due to which they have long stood at the more disadvantaged end of Indian society (Vaid, 2012). Thus, a key prefield hypothesis of our study was that the higher caste group, the Brahmins, would consistently also be the more economically advantaged social group. This was not the case, and our findings on field revealed that class was as much a social issue on the ghats as caste.

The Dom cremators make an average of ₹18,000 to 20,000 a month- a number that almost doubles in the summer months, when the oppressive heat claims more lives than any other time of the year. The Aarti performer makes ₹3,000 a month for every month of the year. These figures alone forced us to question our previously conceived notions about the relationship between caste and class. As we explored the organizations behind the performers and cremators and, more importantly, the relationship they have with those who pay them, this paradox became clearer. There is no denying that the Brahmin performers enjoyed greater prestige. However, they are employees of an organization, also run by Brahmins, who made decisions that they had

little to no say in. The Dom cremators-, who are arguably of the lowest caste group on the ghats, are believed to be the most financially comfortable. Their work is frowned upon, but they earn more than anyone else; cremators we spoke to said that they would definitely prefer a better job but knew of none that would give them the chance to earn as much as being a cremator did. Here, we saw the dynamic between a task of greater social desirability and far lower financial appeal and a task of greater comparative economic desirability but very low social standing. Many throng to the two organizations to perform the Aarti, while nobody signs up to be a cremator.

While the Aarti performers struggle to make ends meet on the amount they receive, it is obvious that the organizers fare far better. GSS's main organizer revealed that he has several homes in Banaras and the financial backing of massive organizations has proven this. Meanwhile, the Dom Raja lives in a palatial *haveli* on Man Mandir Ghat. He is the chief financial benefactor of the cremation business but does not control it. The caste and class relation is also proven in the treatment of the people. Within the Dom community, experiences with caste-based discrimination varied greatly depending on the class of the person we spoke to. The individual Dom performers had seen discrimination on the ghats, while the Dom Raja had seen nothing of the sort, stating that he would be welcome everywhere. Here, not only do we see a system of class within a caste, but of the class status of the Dom Raja trumping his caste.

The intuitive association that is often made between the higher caste and a higher economic status, and a consistency in the treatment of various caste groups is rather simplistic in the context of our study. It warrants greater explanation in a time when equations of power are changing. The relationship between caste and class has long been debated. Money, whoever it is that possesses the ability to make it and hold it, seems to command an authority of its own that must be explored to better understand how the dynamics of society work.

10.2. The Myth, the Spectacle and Commercializing Religion

At the core of the ability to make the businesses of the cremation and the Aarti work, was the prior existence of a deep-rooted faith. While this study focuses on the businesses that evolve out of the ritual, it is crucial to recognize that the only reason that there is scope for the existence

of these businesses is a belief in the greater religious value of the rituals and the need to perform them- a belief that stems from the myths around them. These two businesses are not unique in this utilization of a myth. Ultimately, it boils down to a question of demand and supply.

The myths that surround the city of Kashi and the river itself, firmly establish a religious sanctity far greater than anything else in Hinduism today. Their significance is so great that it has transcended their physical limits; there is a Ganga of the south and a Ganga of the east, and Kashi is believed to be able to exist anywhere touched by Shiva's light. A devout Hindu has ample reason to visit Kashi. This serves as the basis for the generation of demand for both the activities. Cremation is a service that has a natural demand anywhere, but cremation on Manikarnika Ghat is only as significant as it is because there are myths that promise one *moksha*. The only reason any ritual to the Ganga sees an audience is because it is not a mere river, but a goddess.

The two organizations that this paper has studied form the suppliers of a service that meets these demands. The Doms, along with the woodsellers, ensure the creation of a smooth system to carry out cremations on the Ghat at any point in the day. The Aarti performers achieve this with the performance of the widely-popular *Aarti* that operates as an invocation and homage to the river, organized and managed by the GSS and GSN. Herein lie a few critical differences between the two.

The organizers of the Aarti took an age-old belief in the sanctity of the river, and inspired by a similar performance elsewhere, created a practice that had no prior explicit demand. The move to start the Aarti and, more importantly, the manner in which it developed in the years thereafter, focusing its attention on building the impact of a singular event as opposed to expanding its scale to the city's many great ghats, show an entrepreneurial spirit of seeing enormous abstract demand that they channelized into a concrete, daily one hour tribute. These performers are not dressed like other pandits of the Ghat, and the stage of the performance is unlike the way the Ghat is at other times of day. The investment in these aspects, from the lighting effects to overhead decorations, organized *bhajans* before and after the performance, resplendent and coordinated outfits of performers, all of whom are unconventionally good-

looking and the theatricality of the entire arrangement, all create a performance intended for more than just the mere performance of ritual. It is very much a stage, where the performers are actors and the enthralled audience, devotees and tourists together, are free to see this as anywhere between (or as both) a practice of utmost devotion and sincerity to the greatest river in Hinduism and perfectly orchestrated and immersive performance that stimulates each sense. Whatever one's view, there is no denying that the Ganga Aarti has turned one of Hinduism's simplest rituals into one of the most magnificent spectacles, generating massive business today.

The cremation on Manikarnika Ghat and the myths that surround it are impossible to separate, and it would be futile to try and understand which came first. Suffice to say, this cremation ground would not see an average of 120 bodies a day if a cremation here was the same as anywhere else. The promise of this ghat is one that many spend their whole lives in pursuit of: deliverance from the cycle of birth and rebirth. Those who choose, or whose families choose a cremation here implicitly consent to one unlike anywhere else. The volume of demand for the cremation service necessitates certain changes in the ritual to speed up each step. Perhaps the most unconventional aspect of this space to which they lend their consent is the presence of an audience- by-standers, unconnected to the deceased sipping chai on a bench 10 metres away from a deeply private moment for any person. Yet, we saw no resistance to this, nor grief or anger at the general nonchalance of death on Manikarnika. This is perhaps because dying on the Ghat is not a personal event but a public affair that, not unlike the Aarti, draws in people who are enthralled by it. The mere experience of standing on the Ghat, hearing the sound of the crackling fire and seeing pyres at different stages of the cremation process, inhaling the fumes of wood burning in the open air and the oppressive heat that gets worse the closer one is to the pyre, all immerse one's senses. It was clear from our time on the Ghat that the presence of this audience was not only allowed, but encouraged. There was no independent investment in the creation of such conditions, and that in itself is the appeal of this spectacle. The degree of tourist interest this Ghat generated, amongst Indians and foreigners alike surprised us, and many in the city are waking up to an extraordinary and highly unconventional potential for tourism here. We saw the beginning of the effort to promote this. Whether other myths were told to us or not, we heard the story of Manikarnika wherever we went, followed always with the reassurance that we could go and watch. Women, typically not allowed to view cremations, were encouraged to sit by the

Ghat. Not only did people take pride in the fact that nobody was excluded from the cremation ground, but were also proud of its presence in the very heart of the city. Its ability to simultaneously humble and inspire awe, and normalize the inevitable, makes Banaras a 'model' for other cities. Boatmen and tour guides alike did not let a tourist in the city leave without a quick halt at the Burning Ghat.

Whether or not there exists an audience on both the Ghats to watch the rituals, they will be performed because of the deep faith associated with them. However, capitalising on the ancient myths has allowed sustained demand for the services of the providers of the ritual. The myths perhaps do not stem from the need to have this demand, and it is impossible and futile to attempt to understand whether they are told everyday because of a dependency on them or a faith in them or even, if these two are independent of each other (Chidester, 2005).

The organizations behind the two rituals and the city of Banaras are, by no means, unique in this. The world we live in is changing. The market forces drive most decision making in the need to meet the ever-rising demands of globalization. Religion is not spared. While there has perhaps never been a time when the combination of socio-economic demands and politics has been entirely independent from religion (the history of Banaras itself is evidence of this), our times are different simply because of the intensity of competition and the very real danger of dying out if unable to compete. The organized businesses behind the two rituals are a part of a greater story of religion itself changing, redefining itself, its practices and beliefs to adjust to a globalised world. Whether it is the mega-churches of America or the direct-to-doorstep customised blessings of tele-babas, religion has created a flourishing market of its own. It is because of this that the person who wields the power is no longer the chief performer of the ritual but the man who runs the organization of which he is a part, and the scale and intensity of organization we see on both Ghats is needed. Our time with both rituals showed us how, in meeting the framework of the market forces for religion, they have found a way to not merely survive, but flourish.

CHAPTER 11. Conclusion

The rituals of cremation and the Ganga Aarti in Banaras are, at first glance, stunning manifestations of two different sides of Hinduism, kept alive and thriving in one of its most important cities. Our study has led us to believe that this is, in fact, true, and is the face of a complex organisational system that is the reason they continue to thrive.

The cremation on Manikarnika Ghat is by no means a new ritual. It has been performed here for centuries. The community closest associated with it, the Doms, have themselves traced a legacy several generations old. The Doms are responsible for the task of cremation from the time the body is brought to the Ghat to retrieval of the last ashes. They are custodians of the sacred fire of Shiva that has always been the only source of embers to light the Ghat's many pyres.

The age-old association of the Doms with the cremation rituals has led to the formation of an internal organisation system that has allowed them to efficiently meet the enormous demands of their task. The system, headed by the Dom Raja and comprised of several self-regulating *paaris* collectively create a large, informal family-centric organisation still governed by strong beliefs in *karma* and the community's ancient legacy's as Shiva's cremators.

Today, this informal organisation has granted the Dom performer a stable source of income far higher not just than other things they can do, but than what most others who work on the Ghat make. Off the ghat, they are still face social ostracism on the basis of their caste. However, it seems clear that the dynamics of power on the Ghat are changing.

The Ganga Aarti of Dashashwamedh Ghat, that on average draws a crowd of 2000 people everyday is arguably the most identifiable aspect of the city today. This grand performance is an hour long tribute to the river that forms the lifeline of the city. The Aarti thus combines the religious preeminence of the city of Banaras with a strong sense of faith the river generates across followers of Hinduism to create a spectacle of a scale that only grows each year.

The introduction, conception, organisation and management of this ritual is done by the Ganga Seva Nidhi and Gangotri Seva Samiti. These organisations, in starting the Aarti on the Ghat approximately 30 years ago, displayed a streak of entrepreneurial thought that has resulted in a business that not only carries enormous social prestige, but also seems to earn them considerable economic advantage.

The business-like nature of the Aarti is perhaps best elucidated in the relationship between the organisers and the performers. Unlike most Hindu rituals, this arrangement reduces the performer of the Aarti ritual to no more than an employee. He makes much less doing this job than many others in lines of work far lower in social status than performing the Aarti. His role, the expectations of him and the little to no say he has in the Aarti are far more along the lines of the demands made of a contracted employee in a large company and less along the lines of the embodiment of shraddha the Aarti is believed to be.

The cremation and the Ganga Aarti, as they are performed today in Banaras are representative of a changing time. The rituals, though rooted in a deep sense of religious faith, are both operating within their own framework of market forces. The strength of market forces has also revealed how social relations on the Ghat itself are changing. Our conventional understanding of caste and its relation to caste was challenged, and our findings revealed that not only is caste status an insufficient indicator of class status, but also that class is increasingly serving for a higher social prestige. Both have recognized a demand for a particular service and have, intentionally or not, modeled their work to best meet this demand. The organizers of the Aarti and the cremation are thus, the suppliers of

a service- a position that makes them redefine, restructure and innovate in their respective organisations as they need arises. Religion and religious activity across the world is similarly reshaping itself to fit into a globalized, consumer-driven world. The traditional authorities are weakening, and the market now governs the sacred space.

The sacred fire of Banaras is the emblem of two fascinating rituals that are central to this ancient city's contemporary identity, and the complex organisational framework that lies beyond them facilitates this. Our study has left us convinced that under them, these rituals will continue to thrive and if not, will innovate to ensure that they do.

“It is like smoking a cigarette; the first few times will be of bad taste, but soon you will be addicted. Banaras is this pious addiction. Once you come here, you would want to visit again and again.”

Amitabh Bhattacharya, Journalist

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Appendix

Overview of Data Collected from On-Field Research

Respondent	Theme of Questioning	Nature of Responses	Context/Bias of response
Dashashwamedh Ghat			
Aarti Performers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization and organizers • Myth and symbolism • Evolution over time and tourist interest • Performance and audience • Day to day interactions and logistics • Payments and finances • Opinion of Manikarnika Ghat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pankaj: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Spirituality of the river and devotion to the performance - Nature and extent of control of the organizers over the performers - General background of the performers • Ram: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Internal working of the organizations - Financial standing of the performers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pankaj: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financially dependent on the performance of the Aarti Firm belief in the religious sanctity of Ganga Seva Nidhi's Aarti Weary of violating instructions of the organizers • Ram: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highly opposed to commercialization of the ritual Tense relationship with organizers
Organizers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization and organizers • Myth and symbolism • Evolution over time and tourist interest • Performance and audience • Day to day interactions and logistics • Payments and finances • Opinion of Manikarnika Ghat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History of the organizations • History of the Aarti • Finances of the organizations • Nature of internal organization • Logistics and challenges • Symbolism of the ritual • Role of performers • Background of performers • Eligibility and selection • Government intervention in the Aarti 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deeply devoted to the cause • Highly guarded about their performers • Weary of outside interest in the organization structure

<i>Pandas</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opinion of the Aarti • Opinion of the Organization and performers • Changes over time and tourist interest • Day to day interactions and logistics • Impact of Aarti on their work • Opinion of Manikarnika Ghat and the Doms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History of the organizations • Nature and evolution of the Aarti • Impact of Aarti on the worship of Ganga in temples • Interest of locals in the Aarti • Impact of Aarti on tourism • Relationship between organizers and others on the Ghat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better business opportunities on the Ghat due to popularity of the Aarti
Boatmen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opinion of the Aarti • Opinion of the organization and performers • Changes over time and tourist interest • Day to day interactions and logistics • Impact of Aarti on their work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business nature of the Aarti • Rise in tourism due to the Aarti 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invested in not upsetting the parties of the Ghat • Dependent on the people of the Ghat for livelihood
Flower vendors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opinion of the Aarti • Opinion of the organization and performers • Changes over time and tourist interest • Day to day interactions and logistics • Impact of Aarti on their business 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business nature of the Aarti • Rise in tourism due to the Aarti 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invested in not upsetting the parties of the Ghat • Dependent on the people of the Ghat for livelihood

Food Vendors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opinion of the Aarti • Opinion of the organization and performers • Changes over time and tourist interest • Day to day interactions and logistics • Impact of Aarti on their business 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business nature of the Aarti • Rise in tourism due to the Aarti 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invested in not upsetting the parties of the Ghat • Dependent on the people of the Ghat for livelihood
Devotees and Tourists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opinion of the Aarti • Myth and symbolism • Opinion of the Manikarnika Ghat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Devotees <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognize the business aspect of the Aarti - Rise of tourism because of the Aarti - Religious sanctity of the ritual • Tourists <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Spectacle nature of the Aarti - Commented on the unconventionality of cremation on Manikarnika 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Devotees <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are not directly impacted by the popularity of the Aarti - Prefer to do the Aarti in their own space and time • Tourists <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unaware of the history of the Aarti and its organization
Cleaners and sweepers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opinion of the Aarti • Changes over time • Payments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evolution of the Aarti over time • Impact of increased tourism on the cleanliness of the Ghat • Impact of government intervention on their salaries and working conditions 	
Manikarnika Ghat			
Dom Raja	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Origin and evolution • Myth and symbolism • Evolution over time and tourist interest • Performance and audience • Day to day interactions and logistics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History and myths of Manikarnika • Lineage and descendants from Kallu Dom • Importance of the sacred fire in the attainment of <i>moksha</i> • Logistics of the process of cremation • Payment and finances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Figurehead of the business organization of the Dom cremators • Out of touch with the daily activities of Manikarnika • Direct benefactor of the present economic arrangement • Holds high socio-economic position in the

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Payments and Finances • Opinion of the Ganga Aarti 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role in day to day activity of the Ghat • Electric cremation on Harishchandra • Electrical cremation as the future of cremation • Discrimination based on caste 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • society and thus treated differently than Dom cremators
Dom Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Origin and evolution • Myth and symbolism • Evolution over time and tourist interest • Performance and audience • Day to Day interactions and logistics • Payments and finances • Opinion of the Ganga Aarti 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History and myths of Manikarnika • Lineage and descendants from Kallu Dom • Importance of the sacred fire in the attainment of moksha • Logistics of the process of cremation • Payment and finances of the ritual • Role in day to day activity of the Ghat • Logistics of the Paari system • Electric cremation on Harishchandra • Electrical cremation as the future of cremation • Discrimination based on caste 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of the benefactors of the of the economic arrangement

<p>Doms</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Origin and Evolution • Myth and symbolism • Evolution over time and tourist interest • Performance and audience • Day to day interactions and logistics • Payments and finances • Opinion of the Ganga Aarti 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History and myths of Manikarnika • Lineage and descendants from Kallu Dom • Importance of the sacred fire in the attainment of moksha • Logistics of the process of cremation • Role in day to day activity of the Ghat • Electric cremation on Harishchandra • Electrical cremation as the future of cremation • Discrimination based on caste • Spectacle nature of the ritual • Income from the job • Ganga Aarti on Dashashwamedh 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financially dependent on the ritual • Resentment towards other social groups on the Ghat
<p>Wood Sellers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evolution over time and tourist interest • Day to day interactions and logistics • Payments and finances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quantities of wood used in a day • Nature of job • Logistics of the cremation process • Relationship with the cremators and other parties on the Ghat • Finance and income • Increased tourist interest in Manikarnika 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financially dependent on the ritual • Tension between the them and other social groups on the Ghat
<p>Food Vendors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evolution over time and tourist interest • Day to Day interactions and logistics • Payments and finances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procedure of the ritual • Nature of their business • Impact of tourism on their business • Spectacle nature of the ritual • Relationship with other social groups on the Ghat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financially dependent on workers of the Ghat, tourists, and others

Boatmen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evolution over time and tourist interest • Day to day interactions and logistics • Payments and finances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procedure of the ritual • Nature of their business • Impact of tourism on their business • Spectacle nature of the ritual • Relationship with other social groups on the Ghat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financially dependent on the ritual • Benefit from increased tourism
Mourners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Origin and evolution • Myth and symbolism • Evolution over time and tourist interest • Performance and Audience • Day to day interactions and logistics • Payments and finances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Logistics of the ritual • Significance of the sacred fire • Significance of Manikarnika and Banaras in cremation practices • Increasing tourist interest in the Ghat • Impact of the presence of an audience on state of mind 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mourners on the Ghat have suffered a deep personal loss which will affect their mind frame
Tourists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significance of the ritual • Interest in the ritual and its performance • Opinion of the public nature of the cremation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased interest in the ritual over time • Unconventionality of the ritual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited knowledge about the significance of cremation on Manikarnika
Tour Guides	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Origin and evolution • Myth and symbolism • Evolution over time and tourist interest • Performance and audience • Day to day interactions and logistics • Payments and finances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History and myths of Manikarnika and the ritual • Significance of the sacred fire • Impact of increased tourism on their business • Nature of relationships with other parties of the Ghat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financially dependent on the ritual • Extreme tension between the them and other social groups on the Ghat

Overview of Data Collected from Academicians

Name of Academician	Qualification	Themes Discussed	Nature of Response	Context
Dr. Rana P.B. Singh	Faculty of Geography, Banaras Hindu University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Myth and Symbolism •City of Banaras 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •History and myth of ghats •History and sacred geography of Banaras •History and sacred geography of Ganga 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Primary area of study is the city of Banaras •Not as intimately familiar with the rituals and the internal workings of the organizations •Knowledge of sacred geography helped connect the physical space of the ghats and the river to greater associated myths
Amitabh Bhattacharya	Veteran journalist, Northern Indian Patrika	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Organization and Organizers •Myth and Symbolism •Performance and Audience •Payments and Finances •Opinion of the Aarti •Opinion of the Manikarnika Ghat •Evolution of the Aarti 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Procedure of the Aarti •History and myth of Banaras •Changes over time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Recommended by the Ganga Seva Nidhi •Long personal relationship with the Aarti •Played an instrumental role in the Aarti's conceptualisation

Dr. Neelima Shukla-Bhatt	Faculty of South Asian Studies, Wellesley College	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Changing face of religion •Approaching the Aarti as a spectacle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Reshaping of religion •Religion and media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Extensively worked on similar studies
Dr. P.K. Sharma	Faculty of Soil Fertility, Banaras Hindu University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •City of Banaras •Opinion on commercialisation of the Aarti 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •General view of the city •Believes in the growing commercialisation of the Aarti to meet modern needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Outsider's perspective of the Aarti •Resident of Banaras for most of his life

Overview of Data Collected Through Non-Participant Observations:

Who we observed	Time of the Day	Broad findings
Dashashwamedh Ghat		
Tourists	All times of the day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Spectacle nature of the Ganga Aarti on Dashashwamedh
Devotees	Early in the morning, during the Ganga Aarti	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faith in the river Ganga
Pandas	All times before the Ganga Aarti	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Their role on Dashashwamedh Ghat •Contractual relationship with the organizers
Boatmen	All times of the day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Businesses flourishing due to rise in tourist interest •Dynamics of social relationships on the ghats
Vendors	All times of the day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Businesses flourishing due to rise in tourist interest •Dynamics of social relationships on the ghats
Flower and <i>Diya</i> sellers	During and after Ganga Aarti (morning and evening)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Businesses flourishing due to rise in tourist interest in the Aarti •Dynamics of social relationships on the ghats

Performers	During the Aarti and after	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procedure of the Aarti • Dynamic with audience before, during, and after the Aarti • Relationship with the organizers and with each other
Organizers	Before, during and after the aarti	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Control and oversight over the ritual and the performers
Manikarnika Ghat		
Tourist	All times of the Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spectacle nature of cremation on Manikarnika Ghat • Reactions to the activities of the Ghat
Mourners	During the cremation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procedure of the ritual • Reaction the audience presence
Vendors	All times of the day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Businesses flourishing due to rise in tourist interest • Dynamics of social relationships on the ghats • Marketing of the ritual
Doms	All times of the day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procedure of cremation • Interaction with tourists • Dynamics of interaction with other on the Ghat • Activities while not engaged in cremation task
Boatmen	All times of the day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Businesses flourishing due to rise in tourist interest • Dynamics of social relationships on the ghats
Woodsellers	All times of the day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nature of the business of wood selling

Glossary

<i>Aarti</i>	Act of offering light in the form of fire to the Gods
<i>Avimukta</i>	“Not Liberated”, another name of Banaras
<i>Adh Jal Kriya</i>	“The rite of half-water”, the ideal position in which to die
<i>Agarbatti</i>	A thin stick that has a fragrant smell upon being lit, generally used during prayer
<i>Arth</i>	“Wealth, power, purpose”, the pursuit of wealth and power
<i>Chaamar</i>	Fan made of yak’s tail
<i>Chakra</i>	Lord Vishnu’s discus
<i>Chawls</i>	Type of residential building, usually occupied by relatively poor families
<i>Dakshina</i>	Fee paid to Brahmins for their ritual service
<i>Dashang</i>	A compound of ten substances used in fire sacrifice is offered to the flames
<i>Deep Patra</i>	Carrier of the Aarti flame
<i>Dev Deepavali</i>	Festival of <i>Kartika Poornima</i> celebrated in Varanasi
<i>Dharma</i>	Duty, law, righteousness; religious duties, especially rites; in more modern usage, religious tradition
<i>Galli</i>	Narrow street
<i>Ganga Puja</i>	An invocation to the Ganga that precedes the Aarti, involves all seven performers making ceremonial offerings to the river in the name of a devotee
<i>Gotakhor</i>	Sub-caste of the Dom community
<i>Ghat</i>	The landing places or banks along a river or coast
<i>Ghatiya</i>	A synonym for Panda (see below)
<i>Ghee</i>	Clarified butter made from the milk of a buffalo or cow
<i>Haveli</i>	Mansion
<i>Janapada</i>	Realms that existed in the Vedic period in the Indian subcontinent

<i>Kaffan</i>	Shroud used to wrap the deceased
<i>Kapal Kriya</i>	Ceremonial breaking of the skull of the corpse
<i>Kar</i>	Revenue
<i>Karma</i>	An act, and its results, which will manifest in time
<i>Kashi</i>	The shining city, the luminous, the City of Light
<i>Keerthan</i>	Song
<i>Kund</i>	A sacred pool for bathing, may be clay-banked or have steps for easier access
<i>Lautan</i>	Brass vessel with a mesh that holds coal and incense pellets, used to spread fragrant smoke
<i>Mahashamshana</i>	The Great Cremation Ground
<i>Mahn</i>	Unit used to measure wood
<i>Mani</i>	Jewel
<i>Moksha</i>	Liberation, freedom from attachment to the round of birth and death
<i>Mor Pankh</i>	Auspicious fan of peacock feathers
<i>Muneem</i>	Bookkeeper of purchases of the fire on Manikarnika
<i>Nishulk Jal Shav Vahini</i>	“Corpse carrier boat”, transports bodies to the cremation ghats of Manikarnika and Harishchandra
<i>Paari</i>	Shift; each <i>paari</i> carries out cremation for a certain period of time
<i>Panda</i>	A pandit on the Ghat
<i>Pind Daan</i>	The offering of balls of rice and other grains used ritually in rites for the dead, to nourish the deceased
<i>Pralay</i>	A day of <i>Brahmā</i> , the universal dissolution after one of the vast aeons of time called a <i>kalpa</i>
<i>Ram Naam Satya Hai</i>	“The name of Ram is the Truth”, chanted while carrying bodies to the cremation ground
<i>Rumal</i>	Handkerchief; symbolic of the offering of <i>vastra</i> or clothing

<i>Shraddha</i>	Sincere devotion
<i>Tandav</i>	Snake-hooded lamp with a single flame
<i>Taaraka Mantra</i>	The mantra of the “crossing”, which Shiva is said to utter to the dying in Kashi
<i>Tirtha</i>	Ford, crossing place; a place of pilgrimage

