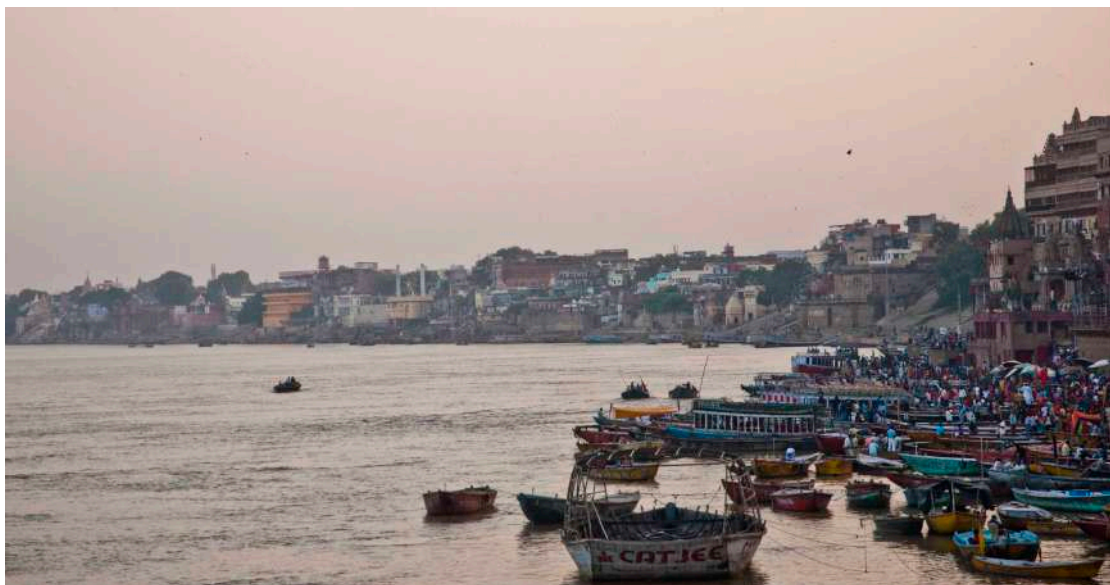


DIP 2018

Mythological narratives and Religious Rituals: the pursuit of Identification

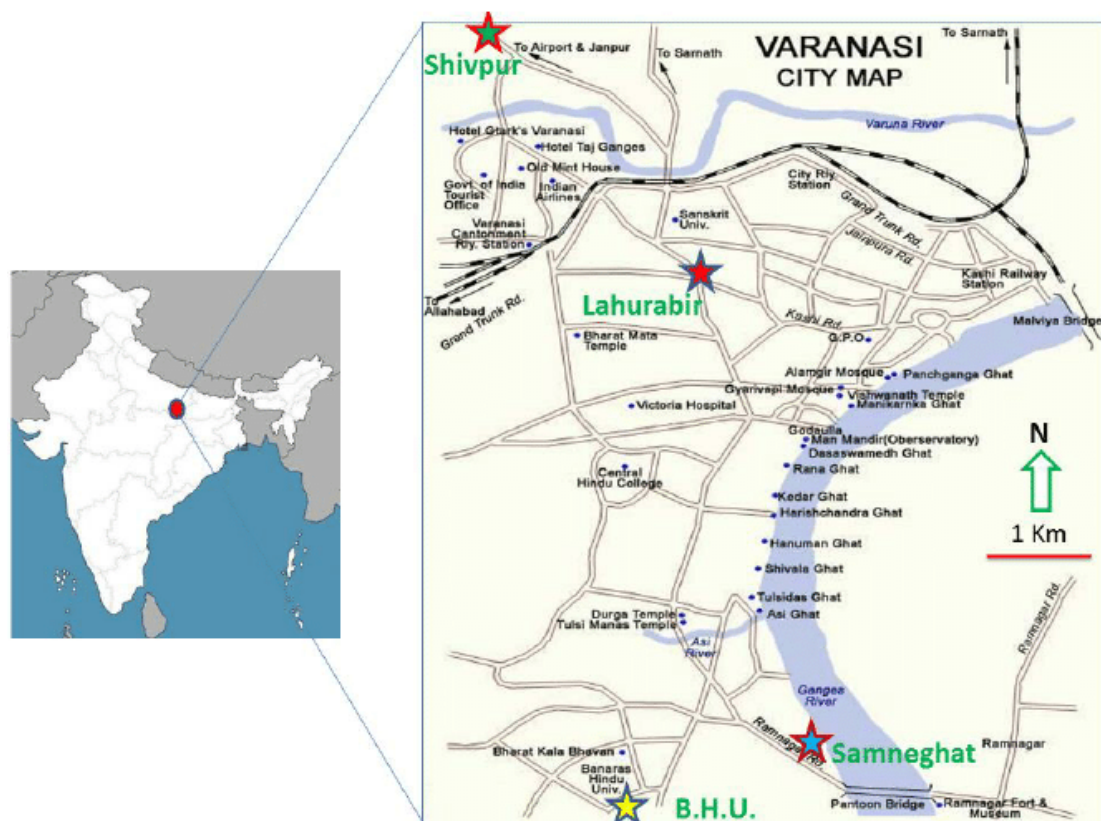


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Chapter 1:

1.1 Introduction

Banara is one of the most great pilgrimage sites in India today. It is also the most holy city on the banks of the Ganga. Banaras plays an important role in the minds of Hindus. Buddha is believed to have founded Buddhism at nearby Sarnath, and it is also a place in which Buddha first time imparts his thoughts to the monks. The city's religious importance continued to grow after the *nirvana* of Buddha. In the 8th century, Adi Shankara, the philosopher and theologian consolidating and developing the doctrine of Advaita Vedanta, established the worship of Shiva as an official denomination in Banaras. Although the Muslims invaded and the ruled India for years afterwards, Banaras continued as an important center of Hindu pilgrimage, mysticism, devotion, and religious rituals which further led to its reputation as a holy city.



(the Map of Varanasi by Abhay Kumar Singh, 2014)

Geographically, Banaras is located in the Indo-Gangetic Plains of North India. This holy city is located between the Ganges confluences with two rivers: the Varuna river and the Assi stream. Banaras is bounded by Varuna and Assi, which gives this holy city its current popular name: Varanasi. The distance between the two confluences is around 4 kilometers, and many Hindus choose it as a sacred journeying route.

The Ghats in Banaras are embankments made in steps of stone slabs along the riverbank where Hindus perform ritual ablutions. The ghats are an essential complement to the Hindu concept of divinity represented in physical and supernatural elements. Banaras has about 84 ghats, most of which are chosen for ablutions by pilgrims and spiritually significant puja ceremony, while some are used as Hindu cremation sites.

Each ghat of Banaras has its own history and myths. The ghats of our study are some of the most significant ghats of Banaras. Our program will mainly focus on two Ghats in this holy city: Manikarnika Ghat, where Hindus cremate the corpses, and Dashashwamedh Ghat, where Hindus hold puja ceremony. It is worth noting that many ghats are associated with Hindu legends and myths. Also, the wide-ranging stretches of ghats in Banaras increase the riverfront with a plenty of temples, shrines, and palaces built tier on tier above the water's edge, which symbolizes the city's rich history and cultural heritage.

I view the religious ritual (Ganga Aarti) and the mythological narrative as key to understand the identification embraced by the Aarti Brahmin priests and the untouchable cremators. These two groups of people and the specific roles of their performance form the focal point of our study.

Manikarnika ghat is the ancient place where Shiva's earring fell to the earth, creating the Manikarnika tank. The Manikarnika Ghat is the primary site for Hindu cremation. There are raised platform which are used for religious rituals adjacent to this ghat. According to Parry, the Manikarnika ghat was built in stone in 1302. It was rebuilt by the Maratha Peshwabajirao in 1735, and rebuilt again by Indore's Rani Ahilyabai in 1791 (1994). The Ghat has been holding the ritual of cremation since ancient time. The Doms (the untouchable) are in charge of all cremations and the everlasting sacred fire on the Ghat. The Doms believe that Shiva gave them this holy mission.



(Manikarnika Ghat)

The Dashashwamedh Ghat is the main and the most important ghat of Banaras located on the middle of the city's riverfront, close to the Kashi Vishwanath Temple. According to the myth, Brahma created this ghat to welcome Shiva and sacrificed ten horses during the Ashawamedha yajna—a horse sacrifice ritual followed by the Shrauta tradition of Vedic religion, it was used by ancient Indian Kings to prove their imperial sovereignty. There is a group of Brahmin priests performing “Agni Puja” (worship of Fire) every evening at Dashashwamedh Ghat as a dedication to Shiva, Ganga, Surya (Sun), Agni (Fire), and the entire universe.



1.2 Research Question and Aims:

At the field, we will focus on the cremation at the Manikarnika Ghat and Ganga Aarti at the Dashashwamedh, how do the rituals (cremation and Ganga Aarti) form and develop/strengthen the identification of the Dom and the Brahmin priests? What roles do these rituals play in the performer's identification? **I will argue that the religious rituals (Ganga Aarti) and the mythological narrative by the Dom community can strengthen the identification embraced by the Aarti Brahmin priests and the untouchable cremators.**

I will investigate these points as follows to support my argument.

A: the myths behind the rituals.

B: the relationship of the performers with the tasks they do.

C: The others' attitude and opinion of the Dom cremators and Brahmin Priest.

1.3. Rationale:

Banaras is always related to religious myths and ritual. Innumerable foreign tourists from all over the world come here to seek spirituality and self-salvation. They are captivated by Banaras' religious atmosphere and magical phenomena. I think that the significance of Banaras is best embodied by two rituals, i.e., the cremation and Ganga Aarti. However, I am more interested in the performers behind these rituals, and I am curious about their identification, and how is the identification linked to the ritual performances. Banaras is a city interwoven by myths and legends, which is visible in ritual activity and is rooted in the minds of the local. So, I would like to explore the relationship between the ritual activities and its influence on the people or otherwise.

1.4 Research Method

I would like to use non-participant observation as the primary method to study the performance of the rituals on the field, because I was warned that I should not appear on the cremation site because I am a non-Hindu, I may trigger off the anger and dissatisfaction from the family of the deceased in such sensitive place. So, non-participant observation is the only way giving me the opportunity to observe first-hand the rituals, such as the instinctive reactions to the Ganga Aarti, the detail of the Ganga Aarti, the mental and spiritual condition the cremators uphold at the ghat, etc..

1.5 Limitations:

On the field, I encountered some limitations which might impede my study and further understanding. These limitations including:

A: the conversation and the interview with the local were hold in Hindi, however, I have totally no idea about this language. This obstructs my interaction with the local people. I tried to overcome such obstruction by asking for translation. Also, I tried to get more information from my group members during the lunch and the diner. Meanwhile, I realized that the secondary literature review should become my focal area.

B: We tried to establish a rapport with the cremators and Brahmin priests once we arrived at the city. However, it is very difficult to establish a friendship with the Brahmin priests, we must have a chat with them, but they are indifferent about our questions. It seems that they want to get rid of us as soon as possible. Eventually, we hardly talked with them.

C: Manikarnika Ghat is a very sensitive place. Foreigners should better avoid getting close to the cremation site. So I could only stand away the core area and observe silently.

Chapter 2. Insights and Reflection

2.1 the Cremation on Manikarnika Ghat

Manikarnika Ghat is full of myths and history. Undoubtedly, the Hindus living

and working on this ghat doubtlessly believe these myths, i.e., telling the history means telling the myths. The Mythological narrative plays an important role in their understanding of the past and the form of their identification. The history of cremation on Manikarnika is tied closely to the history of the cremators who are called the Doms. Cremation is essential to the Hindus, the aim of the cremation is to free the soul from *karma* and *dharma* and then reach *moksha*.



(the Pyre is put in piles at Manikarnika Ghat)

2.2 Procedure

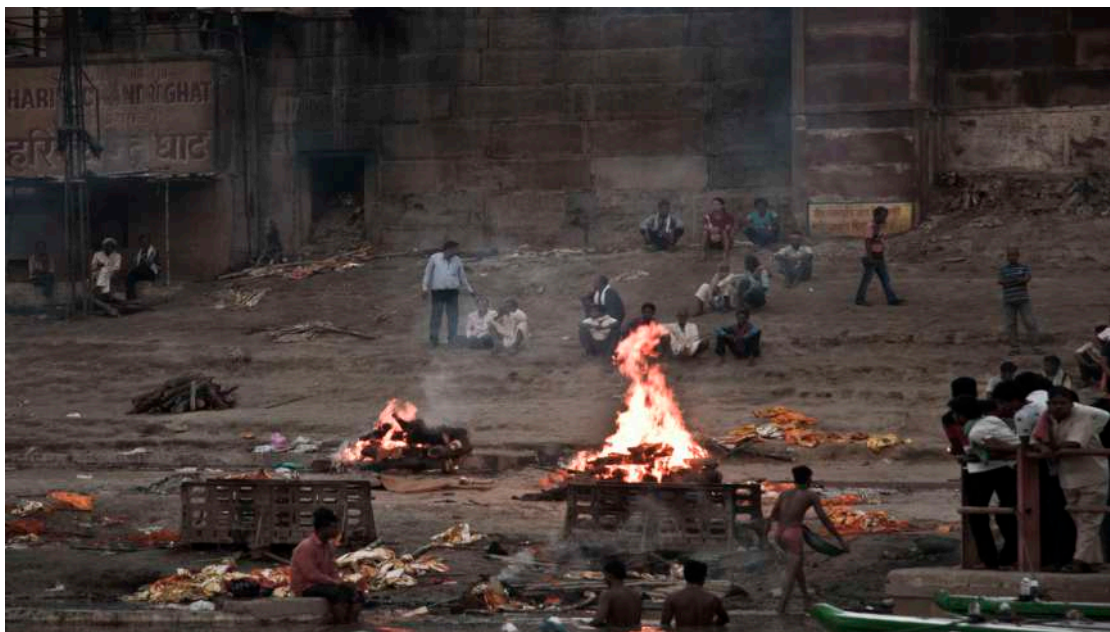
The ritual begins with the chanting of “Ram Nam Satya hai” (Ram’s name is the truth) by mourners carrying the dead to the cremation ghat. Once the corpse covered with a gold shroud has arrived, the corpse is taken down to the Ganga and is dipped for purification. Then the chief mourner, with a tonsured head, takes a dip in the Ganga for purification. The corpse is placed on the pyre which is prepared by the Dom in advance. Fuels like resin and *ghee* would be added for the better burning of the wood. The chief mourner then undertakes a ritual task that he takes five circumambulations of the pyre and lights the pyre each time.



(A Dom is transporting the pyre)

Once the fire is lit, a mixture of ten substances called the Dashang is thrown into the fire. The chief mourner must crack the skull and bone of the corpse open by using a bamboo pole. Which is believed to liberate the soul of the deceased from the body/dharma/karma (Mcbride, 2014).

When the pyre is almost burnt out, the chief mourner should take an earthen pot filled with water from the Ganga on his shoulder. He then throws the pot down to the pyre with his back against the pyre. This step symbolizes the breaking of a lingering attachment with the dead. Lastly, the Dom picks up the ash and remaining bones and immersed them into the Ganga. (Mcbride, 2014).



2.3 The Myths Related to The Dom

How did the job of cremation come to be under Dom's purview? Why they are treated as the untouchable? Jagdish Chaudhary, the current Dom Raja, narrates this myth: after arriving in Kashi, Parvati wanted to bathe. Shiva suggested that she should bathe in the Kund. While she was bathing, 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. Therefore Shiva cursed the thief and punished the Dom for offering fire for cremation to all Hindus at this place. To gain forgiveness, they agreed to become the keepers of the flame. Only the fire offered in here could give Hindus *moksha*. (Shankar)

Another myth is more about the origin of the Doms. The myth is that the generous king Harishchandra gave up his kingdom to please sage Visvamitra. The sage then asked for a donation; Harishchandra sold his wife Taramati and son Rohit as slaves, whereas he himself was sold to Kallu Dom, under whom he worked as a cremator. When her son died due to 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: tax and shroud. Even after Harishchandra realized that 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 (DIP, 2017, P.29). This connection with Kallu Dom and the legendary king Harishchandra is a crucial part of the Dom community's identity.

When the Doms explain how they were put in charge of the duty of cremation, they prefer viewing their job from a perspective of myths. Our findings on the field revealed that the Doms take pride in doing the cremation, because the Hindus attain *moksha* through their services. For example, Rishikesh Chaudhary, one of the cremators, said that: they are the purest people at the Manikarnika Ghat since their community is appointed by the God Shiva, they are the only people allowed to keep the sacred fire which would offer *moksha* to Hindus. Clearly, the Doms uphold a potent belief that doing cremation at this Ghat is their *karma* assigned by the God Shiva, they believe it is Shiva's blessing over them. They are totally intrigued by their own myths and history, and their identification is absolutely strengthened by such myths.



(the Doms)

2.4 The Procedure of Ganga Aarti on Dashashwamedh Ghat

The Ganga Aarti consists of seven steps. Each step is defined by the instrument used in the performance. Each of these steps is imbued with symbolic meaning and is performed in all four cardinal directions. Before the Aarti officially starts, the organization of the performances would play religious music by using loudspeaker to heighten the religious atmosphere. Firstly, incense is used as an offering to the gods, which is for getting the gods' attention. Then the Brahmin priests use a flat-based brass vessel loading coal and incense pellets to spread fragrant smoke in the air. This means pleasing the gods' sense of smell. Then the priests hold the deep patra, a 6 kilogram heavy conical metallic oil lamp which has 51 small cup-shaped oil lamp on it, they rotate the deep patra and create a fascinating visual display of fire. This is followed by the use of a snake-hooded oil lamp, it is rotated in four cardinal directions. Then a piece of cloth is used to hold flowers which evoke a fragrant smell. This step represents the offering of clothes to the gods. This is followed by a fan made of peacock feathers which is for calming down the senses and the feverish atmosphere evoked by the previous steps. Lastly, a fan made of yak's tail is rotated in four directions to exert a hypnotic effect on the gods, finally lead them to sleep. Also, the priests blow the conch shell at the beginning and the end of the performance, it is usually taken as an auspicious omen because the sound is similar with the holy sound: *OM*.



(the priests blow the conch shell)

Chapter 3. The Pursuit of Identification

Now, let us specify the relationship between the identification and the mythological narrative or religious rituals upheld by their performers. Particularly, every collective identity seems to have the following sort of structure. Firstly, “it requires the availability of terms in public discourse that are used to pick out the bearers of the identity by way of criteria of ascription, so that some people are recognized as members of the group” (Appiah, 2005, P.67), such as the Dom, the Brahmin priests, etc.. The availability of these terms in public discourse requires both that it be reciprocally understood among most members of the society that the labels exist and that there be some extent of agreement on how to identify those to whom they should be applied. In the case of Ganga Aarti, the relationship of the rituals and its performers has been given very little attention. It hardly explores the significance of these rituals to the performers. The splendid outfits worn by the Brahmin and the performance itself is the biggest label recognizable to the Hindus. Once this set of labels are decided, they regulate how these Brahmins behave and how they may be detected. These labels/signs rooted in their conformity to norms about how they should behave. We can say that there is a *social conception*—created from these labels—of the Brahmin priests. So, unlike the traditional idea that the normative content of an identity should be determined essentially by its bearers. However,

some people would have the content of their identities determined in some extent by others. For example, one night at the field I saw such scene: a Hindu knelt down as the Brahmin performers pass by him. Also, when the Ganga Aarti is going on, the audiences like using smartphone to record this procedure. The reaction of the others absolutely enhanced their identification, and the reaction incessantly remind the Brahmins of their reputation.



A second element of a social identity is “the internalization of those labels as parts of the individual identities of at least some of those who bear the label” (Appiah, 2005, P.68). For example, if the label is “Brahmin priest”, we can call this *identification as a Brahmin priest*. Identification as a Brahmin priest means thinking of yourself as a Brahmin priest in ways that make a difference: perhaps thinking of yourself as a Brahmin priest shapes your feelings (so that you respond with pride as a Brahmin priest when you are treated exclusively). Perhaps it shapes your actions, so that you sometimes do something as a Brahmin priest (restraining your public conduct by the thought that misbehavior will reflect badly on *the social concept* of Brahmin priests). For instance, on the field, it is very difficult to establish a friendship with the Brahmin priest, we must have a chat with them, but they are indifferent about our questions. Why? They are treated as holy people—they should not deign to accept the interview held by a group of unknown students. On the contrary, we established a great rapport with the Doms, which allowed us to talk and learn their lives and jobs at a deeper level thereafter.

The third element of identity, also the one most easily being overlooked, is that identification has a potent narrative dimension. “By way of my identity I fit my life story into certain patterns, and I also fit that story into larger stories; for example, of a people, a religious tradition, or a race. Nor is this narrative element simply a feature of Western modernity. Around the world, it matters to people that they can tell a story of their lives that meshes with larger narratives” (Appiah, 2005 P.68). As I have mentioned before, the mythological narratives constitute one of the elements of the Doms’ identity. For example, Rishikesh Chaudhary, one of the cremators on the ghat, faithfully emphasizes that the Doms are the purest people at the Manikarnika Ghat since this holy ritual is appointed by the God Shiva, they are the only people allowed to keep the sacred fire. Obviously, the Doms uphold a strong belief that doing cremation at this Ghat is their *karma* assigned by the God Shiva, they believe that it is Shiva’s blessing over them. They take pride in the myths related to their community, and their identification is absolutely strengthened by such myths. Such collective identification can confer significance upon very individual achievements. This can be proved by their painstaking works.

The final element of a social identity is the existence of patterns of behavior toward a person. To treat someone as a Dom is to do something to him in part because he is a Dom. As Appiah noticed, “in the current landscape of identity, the treatment-as that is often in focus is invidious discrimination” (2005 P.68). Our team found an obvious cleavage between how the Doms view themselves and how the others within this ecosystem view the Doms. According to our interviewees, the Doms are untouchable because of their dealing with the dead bodies. Prabbu told us that some people would point the fingers at the Doms if they pass by. Such cleavage may cause the Doms severe psychological issues, which is worthy further investigating.

4. Conclusion

The Ganga Aarti and the ritual of cremation help Banaras achieve its holy renown. The association of the Doms with the myths has led to the formation of identification with the Dom community. Their identity is reaffirmed by the mythological narratives. They believe that the Doms are appointed by Shiva to be the custodians of the sacred fire. They take pride in such jobs even though they are looked down by others. This sense of honor created by the myths is the prerequisite that several generations painstakingly work on this site. The Ganga Aarti is the most recognizable activity of the city today. This one-hour long ritual appeals to thousands of Hindus everyday. Meanwhile, this ritual as a label and the reaction of the audiences to this ritual are undoubtedly conducive to the pursuit of identification with the Brahmin priests. Thus the study in Banaras has led us to believe that the religious rituals (Ganga Aarti) and the mythological narrative can strengthen the identification embraced by the Aarti Brahmin priests and the untouchable cremators.

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