



Mapping Sacredness: A Spatial Humanities Perspective to Varanasi's Topography in Dina L. Eck's *Banaras: City of Light*

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Abstract

The proposed topic applies a spatial humanities perspective to investigate the topography of the pilgrimage city of Varanasi. The emergence of the 'spatial turn' in the 1970s introduced a fundamental change in retracing geographical sites through literary representations. Besides, geospatial tools and techniques visually map spatial patterns and discover the complex relationship between space, place, and human culture. In this regard, this inquiry examines the sacredness of the city of Varanasi and its literary and cartographic representation. Varanasi (also known as Kashi, Banaras and Benares) sustains an unparalleled religious significance because of its unique geographical location. This enigmatic environmental condition enables the proliferation of sacredness and religiosity, coalesced with culture and heritage. The interface of the environment and the distinguished geographical setting fosters a conducive ecosystem for the flourishing of many religions, namely Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Jainism. To map and visualise the ubiquitously existing religious and cultural terrain, the paper analyses the use of geographical tools, such as online mapping, personal navigation devices and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to detect the pervasiveness of the religious domain in the city. In this attempt, the inquiry takes extensive references from Diana L. Eck's (1993) autobiographical travelogue to demonstrate the city's myriad layers of ritual, customs, performance and religious ceremonies. The paper also highlights the synchronicity of these geographical tools and the literary text to get a salient spatial description of the perpetuated and entwined religious and cultural ambience in the specific environment.

Keywords: map, sacred, spatial humanities, Varanasi, topography, environment

Introduction

"The Ganges, Shiva, and Kashi: Where this Trinity is watchful, no wonder here is found the grace that leads one on to perfect bliss."

(Kasi Khanda, 35.10)

A radical change in the process of lucid manifestation of untraceable geographical terrains, topographies, local sites and complex patterns of human habitation is made possible after the advent of geospatial tools. Geographic Information System (GIS), online mapping, relief map and personal navigation devices precisely demarcate the boundaries between unknown places by obtaining an intelligible visual representation and information for social importance (Bodenhamer et al., 2010). Henceforth,

the literary representation of space, place, and other geographical locations has encountered significant development in literary criticism and the praxis of theoretical impulses. This theoretical development began after Edward Soja introduced the 'spatial turn' in the literature in the 1970s as a significant shift in academic thinking across various disciplines (Thrift, 2006). This critical schematism renders an attuned correlation to visualise environmental and geographical contours by merging literary vignettes and material objects in space. The multidimensional and contextual use of space enables showcasing its relationship with other objects, in which the existence of space depends on the object's existence (Harvey, 2004). The present inquiry combines these scientific



tools and literary representation of space to gauge space consumption by existing physical objects and abstract practices under the emerging field of study, 'spatial humanities.' This investigation provides a vantage point in the course of examination to perceive tangible and intangible elements of society that modify the inherently complex notion of space after being accommodated in diverse contexts.

Like other interdisciplinary approaches, spatial humanities proposes an intertwined endeavour under the rubric of incorporating the concept of geographical space into the humanities. The blend of these two different fields of study promulgates a common consensus of the notion of space, which distinctively deals with larger areas in scientific research as well as metaphorical conceptions in the humanities. On the one hand, in the humanities, the conceptual framework of space and its relationship with social and cultural entities stipulate spatial patterns related to the human body, race, culture, identity, religion, etc. On the other hand, the scientific idea of space descends from Issac Newton's proposition of space as 'absolute space' in the context of the 'relativity of motion' to G. W. Leibniz's interpretation of space, in which he considers space as 'a system of relations between existing things' (Arthur, 1994, p. 220). In addition, the study of space in the geometrical field fundamentally attributes a set of points encompassing objects' location and measurements by working in a defined structure. Furthermore, the geospatial tools embody a range of technological devices and software that work to map and delineate geographical information pertinent to specific locations, inside and on the surfaces of the earth. These tools are indispensable not only to provide an accurate estimation or mapping of landscapes, cityscape, sacredscape, and other significant sites but also to showcase the spatial relationship between objects, places and people in the given environment.

Considering the coexistence of geospatial tools and literary representations of space, the specific inquiry extensively uses both modes to portray and map the sacredness of the pilgrimage city. They visualise the spatial patterns by discovering the complex relationship between space, place, and human culture. The inquiry also examines the sacredness of Varanasi and its literary and cartographic representation, in which the unparalleled

religious significance is picturised. The interface of this enigmatic environmental condition fosters a conducive ecosystem for the flourishing of many religions, namely Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Jainism. The geographical tools and Diana L. Eck's (1993) autobiographical travelogue demonstrate the city's myriad layers of ritual, customs, performances and religious ceremonies. The synchronicity of these geographical tools and the literary text highlights the salient spatial description of the city. The city has continued to uphold and entwine religious and cultural ambience in its specific environment since time immemorial. The following section provides a theoretical interpretation of spatial humanities by means of spatial technologies.

Geospatial Tools and Spatial Humanities: A Theoretical Understanding

With the increasing body of knowledge, the comprehensive manifestation and visualisation of subtle and complex layers of phenomena requires a clear-cut definition and exhibition at the time of analysis. The Earth is full of mysterious artefacts and requires anthropological, historical, geographical, scientific, literary and other disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to unravel those enigmatic instances. In this context, the spatial humanities perspective touches upon one of the important issues that usually remains a dilemma between the thorough discussion and investigation of two far-reaching disciplines: science and the humanities. With the time being, the joint venture of several disciplinary approaches enables achieving a more comprehensive understanding of social, cultural, political, religious and other mundane problems. Scientific solutions to problems and human-oriented problem-solving methods are essential to providing a holistic experience of human life. Deriving the prompts from the combined investigation, this particular inquiry conceptualises spatial humanities at the critical level by engaging the technology and applying it to the subject matters of the humanities. This development uses geospatial tools within human-centred spatial dimensions to reckon human culture, religion, history, and experience, using Geographic Information Systems and other spatial technologies.



Spatial humanities is obligated to the discipline of 'geography,' which bridges the gap between the humanities and science and technology. On the one hand, geographers, with the help of scientists, are engaged in developing scientific tools and software to provide a clear picture of geographical terrains and the surrounding environments. On the other hand, many geographers and urban theorists, like Bertrand Westphal, David Harvey, Edward W. Soja, Derek Gregory and Nigel Thrift, have opted for literary criticism and theoretical approaches, especially the postmodern condition, to reassert space, place and other geographical locations. They use literary representations of various authors, poets and essayists to concretise the description of physical sites. Their projection emerges to discuss the importance of space and place that play a vital role in human inhabitation and social and cultural development after the decline in the superiority of time over space in literary discussions (Tally, 2014). They advocate reconsidering space and spatial relationships that are far from mere geographical interpretation. In spatial humanities, geographers revitalise and redefine the geographic concept of space (Bodenhamer et al., 2010). At this juncture, most literary works require geographical inquiry to carefully examine the characters' place, city, environment, urban settlement, and spatial experience across literary genres. Geographers use powerful tools to integrate and visualise locations for precise information. These tools can "discover relationships that make a complex world more immediately understandable by visually detecting spatial patterns that remain hidden in texts and tables" (vii).

Geospatial tools encompass the advanced technologies, such as software, GIS, GPS, Remote sensing tools, cartographic tools, 3D and 4D visualisation and other technologies, to provide an exact visual map of a given place, space, culture, and urban planning. Correspondingly, these technical devices compile existing social order, culture, behaviour, religion and everyday practice. They provide a technological platform to geographers, who are curious to mark up space and spatial differences by fetching a rigorous mathematical measurement. The spatial heterogeneity is essential for stern computation, for which the geographers apply

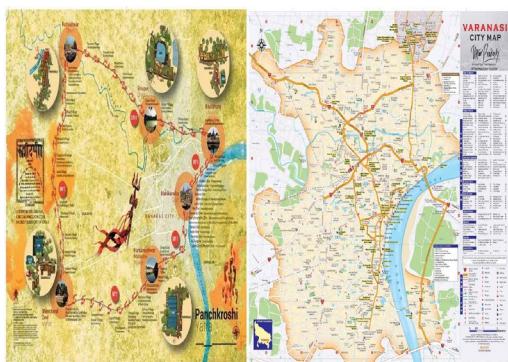
"cognitive science, computer science, physics, non-Euclidean geometry, neural computing, and fractal geometry to extend their understanding of space" (2). GIS amalgamates a bundle of geographical tools that impressively gather and integrate data from different sources to visualise a particular phenomenon. This ability of GIS attracts scholars from several disciplines, especially from the humanities. They considerably use this technology to dig out more authentic information about places, artefacts, human evolution, culture, and urbanisation found in historical places. Geographic Information Science can provide explicit qualitative and quantitative information per the demands of disciplines.

Amid the authentic qualitative and quantitative process of obtaining information, GIS explicitly uses technological tools to picture or draw cartographies of particular social phenomena. Online mapping and personal navigation adequately use the devices to draw maps related to any event, incident or calamity. Likewise, these tools can help draw maps of religious places and patterns that are followed to perform religious processions. This particular integration is employed to showcase the pilgrimage city of Varanasi and the extension of religious performances and ceremonies to different locations across the city.

Religiosity, Spirituality and Sacredness of Varanasi

As I have already discussed, the spatial humanities' conceptual foundation intertwines two fields to ease spatial and topographical inquiries. The duo evidently provides precise visual information about geographical sites, physical and non-physical components, and their relationship. Corresponding to this methodological context, the task of locating religion, sacred space, topography and imaging important sites related to religious practices can easily be traced and analysed. This particular section underlines the stretches of religious sites across the pilgrimage city of Varanasi. In the process of acknowledging the unparalleled topography, sacredness, spirituality and everlasting heritage, it is inevitable to understand the symbiotic interconnectedness between nature and religion. The professor of religion, G. Van Der Leeuw

(1938), argues that the origin of religion is somehow contingent on the natural events, which primitives assume to be done by some supernatural powers, such as gods, spirits and demons. This assertion preoccupies the bonding between natural elements and the unintelligible evolution of religion. The correlation between environment and religion contributes to the flourishing of a heritage of religions, rituals, customs, practices, performances and processions.



(Source: The Indian Express & Varanasi Nagar Nigam, 24 July 2019)

In this regard, the diversity of India embraces a spectrum of dissimilarities in the practice and performance of religions, cultures, rituals, and processions. These differences can be witnessed at the micro and macro levels across the country, resulting in an uncommon style and form of revering deities and their allies. Varanasi is a distinct and impressively unique historical place for people of many religions. The city seemingly disseminates a peculiar cosmological image to its visitors by coinciding Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism and Christianity on its sacred soil. Geographically, the city is located "on the western bank of the holy Ganga, which flows in a curve to the north and north-east at this point, the elevated riverfront where bathers face the rising morning sun above an empty landscape-these and similar geographical peculiarities contribute to the special character of the town" (Gaenszle & Gengnagel, 2018, p. 7). The city's topography includes many religious sites, sacred places, spirituality and several religious processions in a circumambulatory form. The following picture

shows the routes and religious places, and the sites which come under the circumambulation:

The sacred topography of the city mainly focuses on the textual description of the classical texts and the spatial practices that people of the city and outsiders perform. Kasikhanda, one of the holiest scriptures, eulogises the sacred city. It states there is no place beyond Kashi; it is the ultimate place created as 'His abode' by the omnipresent lord, Shiva. Furthermore, it states that the city was incepted "when there neither the sphere of the earth nor the creation of water" (Tripathi, 1998, p. 26). The investigation of the city's religion, space, topography and culture by many Indian and Western scholars leaves them in an enigmatic situation due to its cosmological connection with eternity. Jonathan Parry calls the city the 'microcosm of the universe' due to its linkage with the cosmic origins that keep the city outside of the notion of time and space, called indestructible (avinasi). Mythologically, the city is not restricted to a single geographical location; instead, it can also be found in the north and south, namely Utharkashi in Hamalaya and Daksinakashi in the southern part of India (Gaenszle & Gengnagel, 2018).

This scriptural and historical description of the city is interlinked with the everyday practices that are performed by pandits and pilgrims. The spatial pattern encompasses many religious practices like Kawar Yatra, Panchkroshi Yatra, Chaurasikosh Yatra, Ganga Arti and other significant processions. These processions or religious ceremonies show a localised landscape of Banaras, which results in creating a religious topography for the sacred city. Diana L. Eck's (1993) description of the city is vividly enriched by intrinsic mythological and topographical sensitivity, which she perceives as a part of a complex spatial pattern of imagined landscape. The following section extensively discusses how Eck's autobiographical travelogue manifests the entire city as a pilgrimage site and its topography as sacred.

Sacred Space and Varanasi's Topography in Banaras: City of Light

In the previous sections, the deliberation on spatial humanities, religiosity, and the sacredness of the city of Varanasi provides a precise outline of how the approach to spatial humanities can accommodate the



analysis of the sacred city. The collective endeavour of geospatial tools and literary works discloses several incomprehensible spatial patterns and a complex layer of Varanasi's topography. People from across the world visit the city in search of synchronicity of religions, sacredness, spirituality, environment and topography. The visitors acknowledge not only the literary representation of this unique cosmos, but also use geospatial tools to map or perceive the lengthened patterns of religious ceremonies and processions illustrated by cartographers. This particular section focuses on Eck's *Banaras: City of Light* as the primary source for both literary representation and fact-based description of Varanasi's sacredness and topography. Eck's interpretation of the city embodies a systematic chronological discussion, which is immensely influenced by various standpoints over time. The unparalleled synchronicity of religion, spirituality, sacredness, culture, environment and other aspects yields a distinct cosmology on the bank of the river, Ganges (Ganga).

She exhibits spiritual instances of the city beginning from the riverfront that evidently traces the ancientness of the city through the manifestation of seventy bathing ghats along the river. Her exposition compares the city with the world's oldest cities like Jerusalem, Athens and Peking. Topographically, the city spreads across the river, but significant religious and spiritual development can be observed on the left side of the holy river. The epicentre of the major religious activities is typically assumed to be found in the middle of the city, surrounded by the three rivers: Ganga, Varuna and Assi. The great temples, such as Vishwanath, Durga, Kaal Bhairav, Annapurna, etc., are in the middle of the city. Some major ghats, like Manikarnika, Harishchandra, Assi, Tulsi, and Dashashwamedha, are located on the bank of the river Ganges, between Varuna and Assi. Her depiction of these sacred spaces and places through the city's topographical elucidation creates a sacred landscape in the urban space of Varanasi. This exposition seeks to see the picture of the city through the separate eyes of Hindus as well as of Westerners.

Moreover, the ancientness and historicity of the city can also be acknowledged by its 2500-year-old geographical setting that attracted lord Buddha,

Mahavira, Shankara and other sages worldwide. Because the city is not only a Hindu place, but other religions have also come to this place. The evidence of lord Buddha's arrival in this land can be discovered at Sarnath, where he delivered his first sermon. In Jainism, four spiritual teachers (Tirthankaras) were born across Uttar Pradesh. Out of four, Parshvanatha, the twenty-third tirthankara, was born at Bhelupur in Banaras in 872 BCE. After the advent of Islam in India in 1206, the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate dominated the entire Gangetic valley that came under Muslim rulers. The tendency of the monolithic Muslim monarchs was steadily narrowing, affecting many sites of worship for Hindus and other religions. Consequently, there was a substantial change across the country regarding sacred sites and their topographies. Kashi tried to recapture its lost glory after Muhammad Ghori ordered the destruction of temples and major heritage-like sites of the city. However, Mughal Emperor Akbar sponsored the reconstruction of many Hindu temples. Besides, his allies, the Rajputs from Rajasthan, participated actively in building ghats along the Ganga.

These many historical fluctuations have not merely transformed the topographical terrain of the city in terms of religion and sacred space, but also introduced many social, cultural, behavioural, religious and ritualistic changes over time. Several religious sites, which were destroyed or buried under the earth, were excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India to unravel the historical evidence regarding the sacred space and its potential impact on the existing landscape. At present, the city shares a large area of temples, sacred sites, religious ceremonies, rituals and practices related to Hinduism. People from other corners of the world use geospatial tools, online maps, personal navigation systems, and literary representations to visualise the city of Varanasi, a pilgrimage city.

Conclusion

The inquiry has emphasised the extensive use of the spatial humanities perspective to unveil Varanasi's geographical terrain and sacred topography. Throughout the discussion, the paper has employed geographical tools and literary representations to



illustrate the complex layers of religion, culture, heritage and several old traditions of Varanasi. The coexistence of enigmatic environmental ambience and flourishing everlasting religiosity, culture, ritual, performance and other practices requires painstaking attempts by scholars from all disciplines.

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