

Harvesting the Field:

Institutionalizing the spiritual in the redevelopment of the heart of Varanasi

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Abstract:

A field condition lies between the funeral pyres of Manikarnika ghat (pier) and the central institutional worship grounds of the Vishwanath temple and Gyanvapi mosque, transcending dualistic notions of religious boundary, interweaving both holy places in a “forest of bliss.” Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his architect, Dr. Bimal Patel propose, in its place, a series of angular temples and plazas extending to the Ganga river’s edge, providing an architectural platform for potential mass movements. The new hierarchy risks driving pilgrims to destroy Gyanvapi mosque, cleaving the balancing duality of the site in a lobotomizing implosion of sacred cosmography.

“There are many people concerned this project is destroying the soul of the city; and they haven’t taken the trouble to figure out what size it is. It is the size of one building.”

-Dr. Bimal Patel, HCP, talking at the National Film Archives, Pune, India March 2020 (1)

In the heart of Varanasi, India, between the funeral pyres of Manikarnika *ghat* (pier) and the central institutional worship grounds of the Vishwanath temple and Gyanvapi mosque, a long line of pilgrims snake through one of the most densely used pilgrimage routes in the world. Along this meaningful third of a kilometer, the bounded religious dualism of institutionalized space has, for generations, been separated from the open public gradient of the riverbank *ghat* by a field condition of winding narrow lanes and courtyard houses - until now.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his architect, Dr Bimal Patel, have a new urban platform in mind to harness the heart of this ancient city: a series of large plazas extending the institutional, bounded space of the temple all the way to Ganga river’s edge. Ritual offering on the human scale, each step of the pilgrim along this final kilometer has been turned from supplication for the individual - to supplication for the state.

Field condition

On one end, the open system of Manikarnika *ghat*; on the other end, the religious institutions of Vishwanath temple and Gyanvapi mosque; two moments of climax in Varanasi; two defining elements of the spiritual landscape. Between them, however, is the heart of this final leg in the pilgrimages of Varanasi. Often ignored and easily taken for granted as “ordinary,” lie a stretch of *mohallas* (neighborhoods); a field condition of tiny lanes fragmented by gates to form small courtyards and interpenetrated housing, temple, and shop clusters.

Colorful silk benarasi *sarees* are being unfurled for customers. Priests stand in the middle of the street performing prayers to various holy sculptures. The airy *dhoop* (incense) fuses with the heady aroma of *chai*. Children run back home from school engulfed in melodious classical music that often sweeps into the street.



Narrow streets, houses, and a myriad of shrines typify the field condition of Varanasi, photo by Santosh Kumar Pandey.

The edge conditions of these complex linkages bind differentiated neighborhoods, characterized by dense agglomerations of diverse courtyard housing. Seemingly incremental and organic, these *mohallas* are structured by a civic domestication of life within the singular void of the dwelling. Leisure and festivities anchor the house inward while its gated entrance frames this conviviality for passers-by across its threshold from the street. Often a device to assist cross-ventilation from the courtyard during peak summer temperatures, the open doors are also a symbol of religious hospitality for accessing the multiple shrines that ornate the shared walls of these neighborhoods.



A woman passes from one courtyard to another in a mohalla in Varanasi, photo by Shivang Shekhar Singh.



People pause by a small shrine in a narrow Varanasi lane, photo by Santosh Kumar Pandey.

The orientation of lifestyle around the economy of pilgrimage, tourism, and education creates moments of density among these mid-rise structures where shops operate within and around the interstices between *mohallas*. Such service activities along the inner streets and at the

junction of historical gateways establish a consistent rhythm to the weaving of the persistent courtyard morphology within the neighborhood grid.

This is a “field condition” moving from the one towards “the many: from individuals to collectives, from objects to fields.” (2). The *mohallas* are bounded but loose, fluid, expandable, self-built, and respond to context through a porosity and internal replicable dynamism.

Resembling the schools of the ancients, *gurus* (teachers) disperse themselves in different *mohallas*, from courtyard houses to suburban gardens of rich merchants. 330 million gods and goddesses – including Shiva, Shakti, Brahma, and Vishnu – are domesticated within *mohalla* walls, courtyards, and gateways (3). This meta-realm, discovered seemingly accidentally as an individual wanders down a lane or through a gateway, increasingly reveals spiritual elements that often crop up further in odd places and in greater numbers despite active suppression of Hindu culture over the centuries.

The multiplicity of shrines throughout this dispersed urban fabric of *mohallas* was created, as often as not, in periods when the city was under Mughal rule (4). A resilient structure of spiritual life based on individual journey was fostered across this organic pattern in reaction to attempts at contrary centralization. Hindus retired from arbitrary assaults of the cacophonous and disarrayed world of conquered Varanasi, cloistering themselves to develop spiritual manuals, temple rituals, and cremation rites.

The redevelopment project claims to be liberating various shrines by demolishing the *mohalla* field condition; but one must wonder if that is similar to liberating a snail from its shell? Besides this legacy of destruction, Varanasi’s sacred geography today clutches Shiva’s greatest gift: liberation. Upon death or in life, no amount of wealth can buy a ticket to heaven. Priests, *gurus* and pilgrimage guides encourage thousands of pilgrims to follow the *yantras* (wayfinding devices) by materializing the *tantras* (spiritual fabric) of the city through the scale of individual embodiment (5). This ancient wisdom stands threatened under the rubble that was once the abode of religious workers.



A small temple is revealed as the surrounding caretakers' homes are demolished, photo by Aditi Vatsa.



The 2019 Varanasi condition with mohalla neighborhoods and superimposed development area in red. Image by authors.

The two neighborhoods that now lie destroyed and displaced by the project are Lahori Tola and Saraswati Phatak. The mostly sixth generation descendants from Lahore in Lahori Tola face a double displacement, having first fled the partition between India and Pakistan due to sectarian polarization in Lahore. Now they face displacement in Varanasi as well (6).

While the particular Dom caste supervises the cremation grounds (7) and the renounced Aghori sadhus, practice their own rights to retreat amid the heterotopic *ghats*; the

government's novel urbanity of plazas, guest houses, gallery spaces, shops and escalators is enforcing a rite of exclusion and displacement (8). The multi-scalar chaos that would normally ensue within the streets, along the *ghats*, and around the inner sanctum of the temples as a result of religious movement and diurnal retreat; has been appropriated as an institutional space within the Vishwanath Dham Redevelopment project, adjusting the soul of this ancient city.



The HCP Varanasi proposal extends the institutional temple condition all the way to the river's edge and entirely circles the mosque. Image by authors.

At the outset, the project aims to “decongest and beautify the area, remove encroachments and provide easy access to the temple for pilgrims” (9). To put the heart of the “world's microcosm”(10) under the knife is symbolic of a new Varanasi under the Hindutva government (11). Implicitly, the architecture fulfils the role of environmental censor, specifically to establish a permanency of generic sacrosanctity though an angular architecture of consumption.



A new sense of scale is created as neighborhoods are demolished, photo by Sunday Guardian Live.

The maze of streets, once the armory of integrity against the inroads of commercialism, have been pulled down to make way for an architecture of bigness. By revealing the hidden shrines, the 330 million gods are turned into a museum gallery show viewable by escalator. This is an urbanism of its own - the empty promises of which propose spaces where anything is possible - and imply that civic complexity was non-existent in the destroyed *mohallas*.

However, even the historical attempts at modifying the sacred geography of the city in the Mughal and British eras could not disrupt the traditions of an intellectual life from the times of hermitage in the Forest of Bliss (12).



A Sadhu ascetic sits amid the rubble of a destroyed mohalla, photo by Priyadarshini Sen.

Forest of Bliss

It is said that at the intersection of the streams Varuna, Asi, and river Ganga, spreads Anandavana, the “forest of bliss” (13). Bliss: that which is a unification and equanimity of mind and body in a centeredness that transcends comparison and hierarchy; is a spiritual condition, although one that is materially manifest in the organic field condition of the *mohallas*.

“The forest of bliss” refers to this place in the idyllic times of the city’s mythical beginnings: “It was not the urban Varanasi [of institutional citadel] that sat on the Rajghat Plateau, but the forest paradise that spread out to the south. Its groves, streams, and pools provided a beautiful setting for temples and ashrams. Here teachers could gather their students, *yogis* could practice their *yoga*, and ascetics and hermits could find a place for their disciplines” (14).

The areas around the site were dense forests; now they are an organic condition of tiny lanes and low-level houses. According to Hindu philosophical traditions, *Brahman* (The Supreme Being) is in parts - *sat* (being), *chit* (consciousness), and *ananda* (bliss) (15). The bliss of the knowledge of *Brahman* is likened to the unitive bliss of lovers in close embrace as the duality of two has become transcended by the union of one. The word *ananda* carries the weight of its association with *Brahman* when it is used to describe the essential nature of Kashi, the “Forest of the Bliss of *Brahman*” (16) The forest of bliss is a field condition, one that does not differentiate, but extends endlessly in a gradient of constantly expanding understanding and consciousness in being.

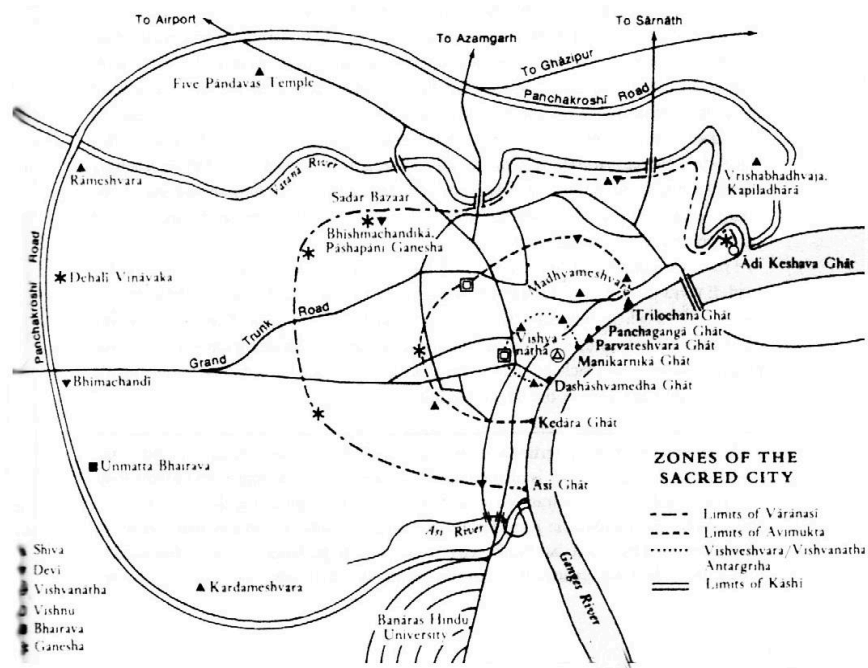
If we consider the nonduality presented by this field condition, the outside and the inside also become interpenetrated. The boundary of the macrocosm of city/ forest and personal body is blurred in ultimate *samadhi* (contemplation). In earthly body, the process may be approached by *dhyana* (meditation); in Pali, *jhana* (17). In Arabic, *Jannah* refers to paradise. There are 8 doors of *Jannah* in Islam (18) and, perhaps coincidentally, 8 levels of *jhana* in Buddhism. These teachings; the 8 *jhanas* or “Eightfold Path,” were delivered by Siddhartha Gautama at the intersection of the Varuna and the Ganga rivers on the outskirts of Varanasi (19).

The organic condition of the *mohallas*, in all their ordinariness, allude to the forest of bliss which, by definition, transcends dualistic notions of religious boundary, and weaves together all holy places of every stripe. While we are at risk of romanticizing what some have called a “slum” condition, we must go further to suggest that the very conditions which seem antithetical to “paradise” are the exact location of paradise at the moment of transcendence into a non-dual worldview.

The blissful forest condition at the river’s edge, and this crowded city at the river’s edge, are unified - as long as the psychosocial qualities of consciousness remain transcendent in both cases: resiliency is encoded into personal perception. The individual and the context are

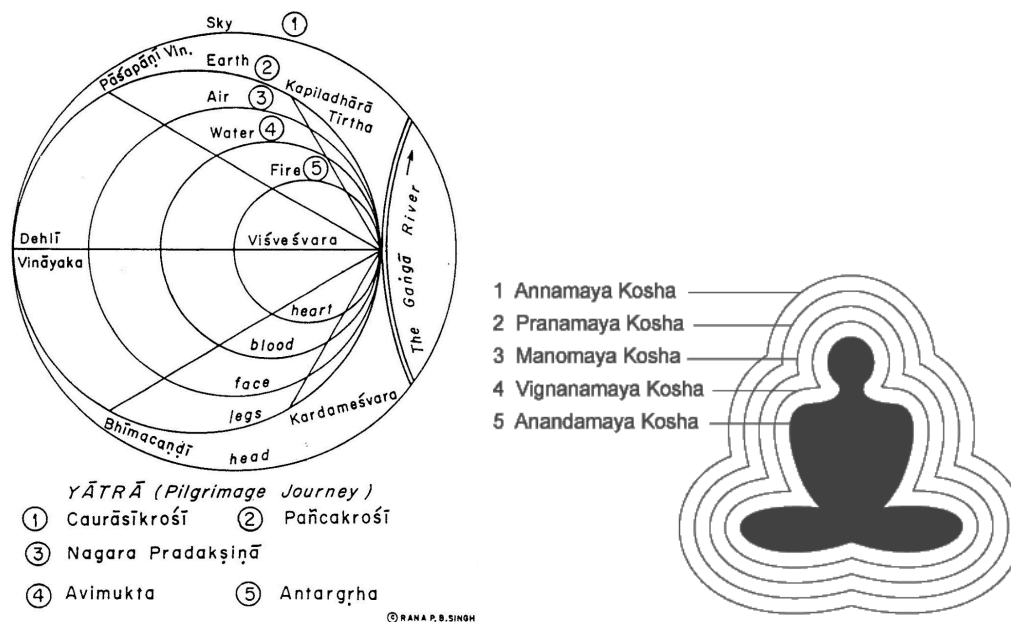
together a pulsating node, a rhythm of intersubjective encounter and differentiated perspective.

The fabric of Varanasi is at once a way of discussing the experience of the pilgrim on a sacred journey in the city as well as discussing how self built, user created architecture is made possible by social technology: *tantra* (network), *yantra* (device), and *mantra* (meme). Perspective among actors in an “end to end” network constantly, instantaneously, reframe the feedback loop of the data system (20), creating resonance and resiliency (21) - providing the lively character of a “user generated content” system (22).



Five pilgrimage routes (yantras): Kashi, Varanasi, Avimukta, Antargriha, and Manikarnika.; Image by Diana L. Eck.

In the field condition of Varanasi, "one sees one's soul" (23) illuminating the world, by dwelling inside the "citadel of the five sheaths." This is a reference to the five *koshas* (sheaths) that simultaneously make up the singular body of an individual, a stalk of grass, and the sacred rings of the city (24).



At left, the city depicted as diagram with its intersecting 5 kosha rings, by Rana P.B. Singh; and at right, the human body depicted as diagram of the 5 koshas, image by Mahendra Joshi.

The Jaabala Upanishad describes the rivers of Varanasi not as geographical rivers, but interior rivers; the mystical veins of the body’s subtle physiology: “It is called Varana because it obstructs all sins of the senses. It is called Nasi because it destroys all sins of the senses... It is the place where the nose and the eyebrows meet. That is the meeting place of heaven and the world beyond.’ This is the highest of the *chakras*, the ‘circles’ of power in the yogic anatomy. It is the place of the eye of wisdom” (25)

From this multiscale perspective the ancient temple is simultaneously the universe and the body of the pilgrim. The Vishveshvara (Lord of the Universe) temple, associated as a spiritual reflection of the Kashi Vishwanath temple, is conceptualized as the pivot of the cosmos. It is outside mundane space and time (26). One interpretation is that this temple is here and now - you are in the center always. Each step on your pilgrimage is already the destination. The famed poet Kabir, from Varanasi, describes,

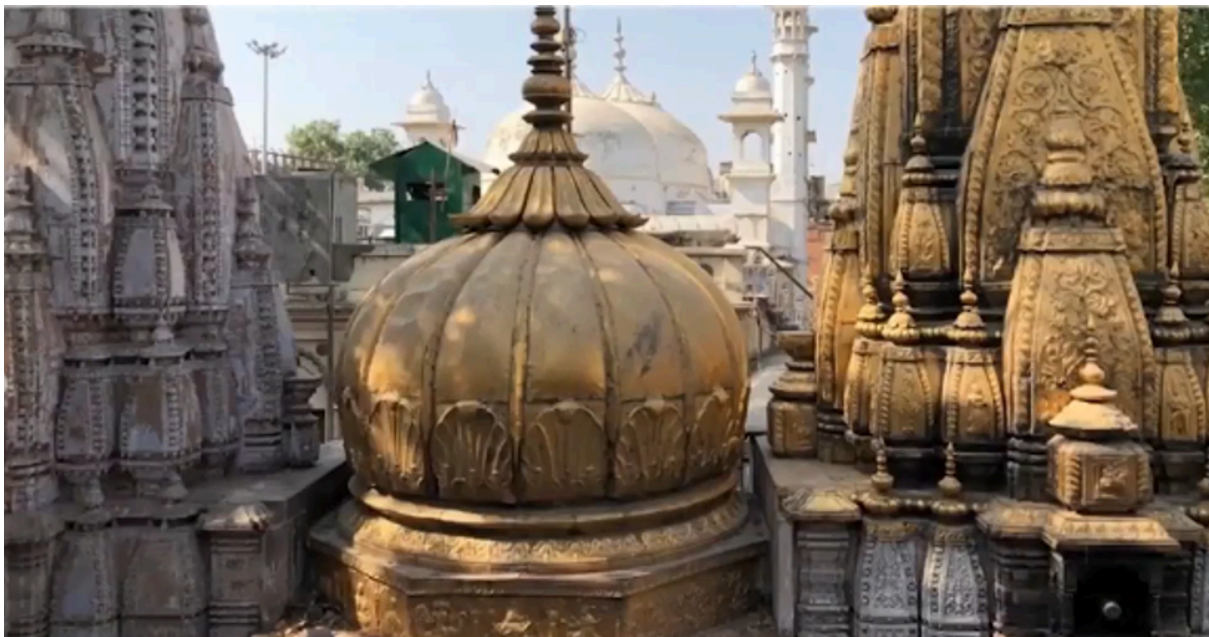
*“WITHIN this earthen vessel are bowers and groves, and within it is the Creator:
 Within this vessel are the seven oceans and the unnumbered stars.
 The touchstone and the jewel-appraiser are within;
 And within this vessel the Eternal soundeth, and the spring wells up.
 Kabir says: ‘Listen to me, my Friend! My beloved Lord is within.”*

Kabir, Translated by Rabindranath Tagore (Tagore n.d.)(27)

As the microcosm of the body is unified with the macrocosm of the city, India, the world, and the universe, we naturally become “lost” in the winding lanes in which we find ourselves, a condition that stands drastically altered in the new proposal. What was once a manifold of individual journeys as many stalks of golden grass in a vast field, is set to be harvested with the cutting edge of religious duality.

Boundaries

As we leave the field condition of the “forest of bliss,” physical places take on more particular institutional qualities of “center.” They are configured in the ground; not through the esoteric perspectives of the viewer, but through walls and boundaries created with two sides - here and there, this one and that one - in dynamic opposition. The *tirtha* (holy place/pilgrimage) complex of Vishwanath temple and Gyanvapi mosque in this way co-creates its institutional relevance in opaque opposition.



Vishwanath Temple and Gyanvapi mosque in dual unity, photo by HCP.

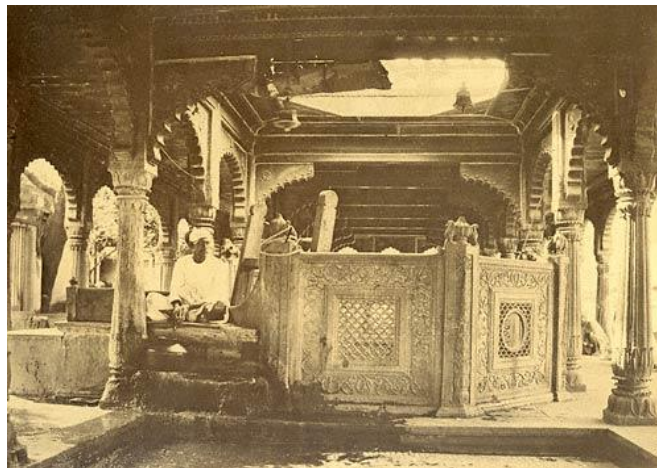
Opposition in dynamic interplay and constant self-correcting feedback is described in data systems theory as a “generative adversarial network;” a form of systems intelligence that manages and internally regulates by way of a stream of data (28). Likewise, Shiva and Shakti, paired in cosmic union, perform a timeless dance of creation and destruction, birth, and death, as the basis of all existence (29).

In “deep learning,” the system ecology and data streams are so vast that it is impossible to ascertain exactly what algorithms are creating system outcomes (30). No single, knowable, controlled set of arbitrations are leading to outcomes. Hence, the complex is referred to as a

“black box” (31). Likewise, a human brain is a kind of black box (32). If we cut open a person’s brain, we cannot read their secrets. Likewise, the divine and the universe as a whole may be called a black box, impossible to fully grasp. In Hindu symbolism, the *lingam-yoni* sacred object(s) also represent a black box (33).

The two religious centers - Vishwanath temple and Gyanvapi mosque - each act as a black box, as their central alter sites are inaccessible and inscrutable sources of gravity in the larger system. At times, the chipped white of the mosque dome can be seen peeking behind the golden spires of the Vishwanath temple, evoking transparency as a spatial quality in duality (34). A resolution is reached by interpenetrating this space over the Gyanvapi “well of wisdom” (35).

It is said that within this well is hidden the *lingam* of Shiva from the original, perhaps even timeless temple (36). This layering of *lingam* with the well-like *yoni* of Shakti is characteristic of the complex. Less than a hundred meters away, at the center of Vishwanath temple, is another black *lingam-yoni* in a golden alter frame onto which the temple priests pour offerings.



The interior of Gyanvapi mosque, photo by John Sache.

At Vishwanath temple Shiva is worshipped at five principal *aartis* (prayers) during the day with chanting, clanging of bells, and jostling of crowds, from early in the morning until late at night (37). The *salat*, Muslim call to prayer, likewise resonates five times a day from Gyanvapi mosque. Like the duality of Shiva and Shakti in *lingam-yoni*, the duality of Muslim mosque and Hindu temple stand side by side. Hindu pilgrims circle Muslim mosque in supplication, co-creating the sacred.



PM Modi makes a ritual offering at Vishwanath temple to initiate the redevelopment project, photos by News Chrome.

The two are superimposed in one generative adversarial network. They become a system of dynamic feedback, a larger self-regulating neural net. The old field condition of now destroyed *mohallas* tempered the duality into a fluctuating state of continuous activity, ambiguous enough to make pilgrimage an individual journey of diverse intercultural worship.

Varanasi, a palimpsest of Hindu and Muslim influences, is undergoing a fundamental transformation through the magnification of the monumentality of its respective parts, setting up a defining edge - preparing implements for a harvest of spirituality. Perhaps an institutionalized spin on the ancient belief that “everyday one should see Vishveshvara and bathe in Manikarnika” (38), is made by shifting the disjunction of formerly opaque interiority of worship into objects of worship at the center of an architecture celebrating civic pomposity. From “an accumulation of voids in a largely unmanipulated solid, to the accumulation of solids in a largely unmanipulated void” (39), the field condition of *mohalla* conglomeration now holds linear blocks perpendicular to Manikarnika *ghat*.



The 2019 existing plan of temple and mosque shows the prevalence of the surrounding organic field condition and inter-cultural nature of existing yantra pilgrimage routes. Image by authors.



HCP's proposal imposes strict linearity and dwarfs the mosque. Image by authors.

This rigorous linearity of the new platform reinforces a sense of disconnect of the moving body from the larger collective, a once personal psychosocial journey into a shared mass experience. What was once a manifold personal supplication has become a mass supplication.

The new, sequestered hierarchy of the urban plazas risks driving pilgrims into a destructive frenzy to open the black box of the Gyanvapi “well of wisdom” to “liberate” *linga* from *yoni* - a lobotomizing implosion of sacred cosmography. No longer a theatre to catalyze inclusive participation, the corridor between the temple complex and Manikarnika *ghat* faces a future

as a mere organizational tool where the remnants of the past face the imposed linear architecture of the new in an uneasy standoff (40).

Harvest

The multiscalar journey of the pilgrim: across city, temple, and river, climaxes with stacks of wood and funeral pyres- Manikarnika. a familiar chant of a funeral procession can be heard: “*Rama nama satya hai!* God’s name is truth!’ Here the harvest of the field condition is made, materially encapsulated in the burning of the dead, on their final physical journey into the immaterial. As a locus for an open system of information and data, this location is a unique site of vertical integration by juxtaposition of river and sky, personal and cosmic.

Called *amrita*, “the nectar of immortality,” the Ganga waters assure liberation to those cremated on its sacred *ghats*. Like the many pearls making up a luminous necklace, Manikarnika burns the brightest of all the eighty-eight *ghats*. Because of its sanctity as the most sacred bathing *tirtha*, it is celebrated as the ideal place for the dead to journey into the immaterial (41).



View of Manikarnika ghat from the edge of the city, photo by Michal Huniewicz.

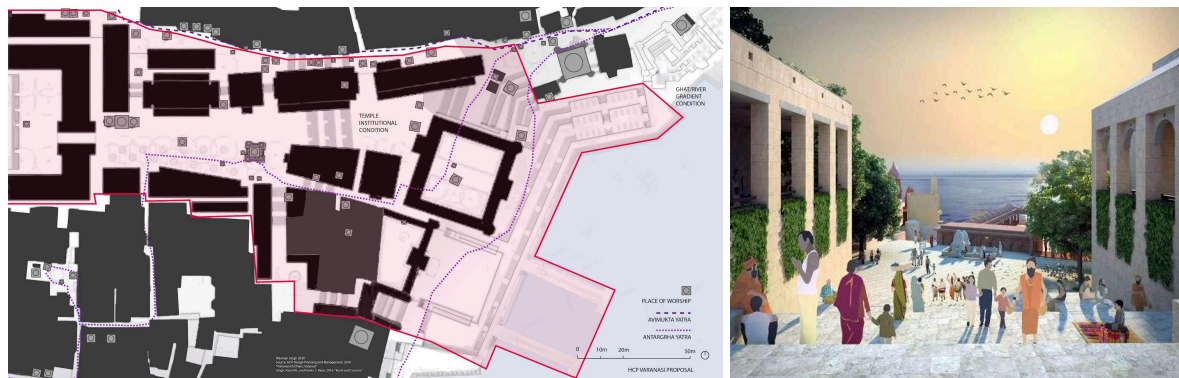
Amid the billowing smoke from the burning bodies, *sadhus* (holy men) with long dreadlocks can be seen praying as others heckle the price of cremation. Widows do penitence. Tourists

and pilgrims alike make alms, buying photo-ops with donations. As mother Ganga embraces all, its waters are liquid Shakti, the feminine energy of Shiva. Her creative powers are so vast that Varanasi has continued to be an active monastic and Vedic center - from the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama's Buddhism, to Mahavira's Jainism, to the "orthodox" Hindu Upanishads (42).

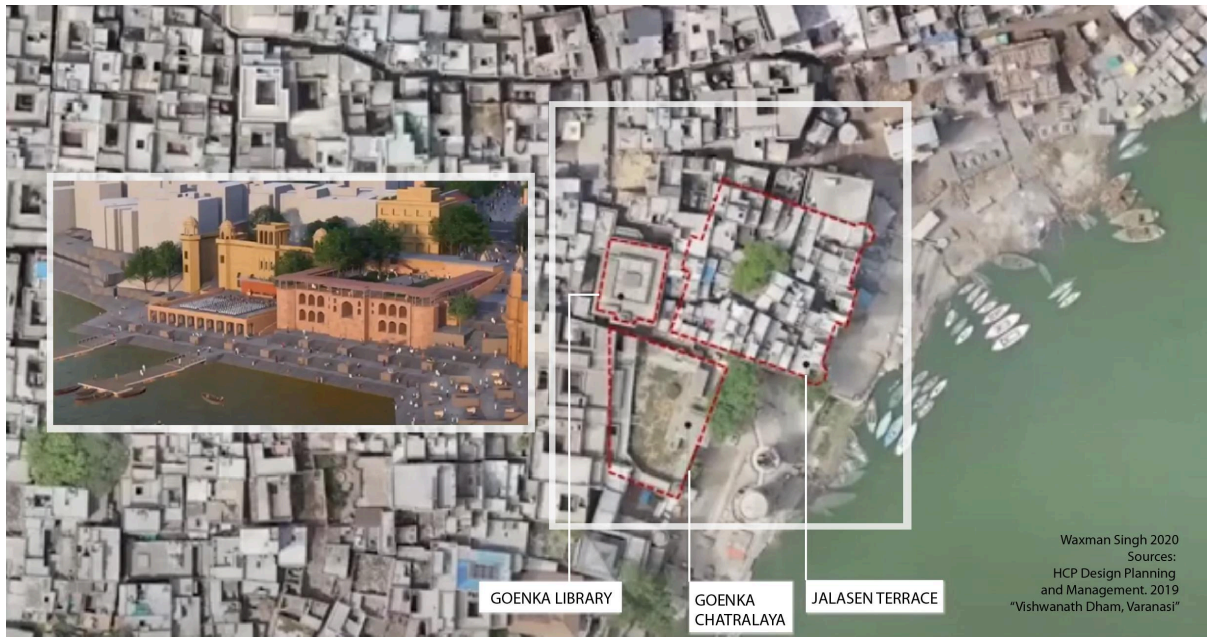


2019 existing condition of streets, places of worship, and yantra pilgrimage routes. Image by authors.

Here the new proposal operationalizes the *ghats* as platform of “user generated content” under the single Hindutva government. The organic collection of self-built housing atop an old fortified construction along the *ghat* has been regularized as a large and raised stage, a parade ground for programmable performance. The information specialists who attempt to create and manage a systems architecture here will do it with a secure “cloud data system”(43). The physical platform will become a digital platform; a way to broadcast the desires of a Hindu authority for a million retweets.



The HCP proposal creates a long set of large plazas, escalators, shops, and galleries reaching towards the river's edge. At left, image by authors. At right, image by HCP.



Housing will be removed from an old fortification to create a staging area complex. Image by authors with HCP drawings.

Luckily, amid the funeral pyres of Manikarnika, the cloud retains an old meaning as well. The dead, dipped in Ganga and bound in red or white cloth, await their final rites. Here is not simply a collection of data organized by one structure or organization, one religion; here are the burning bodies of people who have made their final offering to truth. This cloud swirls above and beyond any single earthly authority and hierarchy. It interpenetrates between worshippers and tourists; the authentic and the fake; creating a much more open data system than any single dogma.

Information systems - *tantra* (network), *yantra* (device), *mantra* (meme) - allow for a single voice to travel to millions around the world and a single path to be accessed by whole populations. It also allows for a riot or a mob to materialize and destroy that which may be its most valuable balancing element - provided the physical form of architecture allows it.

Architects and pilgrims alike must ask how we embody our information. We must consider what paths to take, and at what scale. Together, in our human bodies, and in our vast interconnected formal and informal 21st century cities, we make a field in all its complexity. What will be the harvest?

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