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Kashi and Cosmos: Spatial manifestation and the five pilgrimage journeys of Banaras

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Historically, Hindu rituals, sacred journeys, festivities, deities and their symmetrical links, have come together to form sacred spatial systems that are still observed by both pilgrims and devotees. These pilgrimage traditions are deeply rooted in local space / place, as well as in the cultural inheritance and mentality of their adherents. This structure is reflected symbolically in the spatial frame of Hinduism in which both complexity and temporal stability meet, mediating between people and the cosmos, i.e., in a mesocosm. In Varanasi (Banaras/Kashi) this spatial frame is clearly expressed in a series of sacred territorial boundaries defined by pilgrimage routes. Varanasi, known as the microcosm of India and one of the most sacred cities of Hinduism, has maintained its cosmic layout which was developed in the deep historical past. The passage from macrocosmos (heaven) into the mesocosmos (earth) and further down into the microcosmos (temple or body) is made spatially visible here, and is regulated by the network of pilgrimage routes. This is what we call pilgrimage *mandala*. In theory, the four inner sacred routes of Kashi meet at the point of *axis mundi*, Jnanavapi, while the outer circle covers the rest and meets in the west at Dehli Vinayaka, the gate to the cosmic territory. The five circuits symbolise the five heavenly gross elements of Hindu cosmogony - sky / ether, earth, air, water and fire - parallel to five parts of the human body, i.e. head, legs, face, blood and heart. In this paper, these five extraordinary pilgrimage routes are described and their present scenarios illustrated.

Key Words: spatial manifestation, archetypal representation, pilgrimage mandala, *Axis Mundi*, spiritual homology, chaurashikroshi, panchakroshi, antargriha

Introduction

The Hindu religion, in contrast to the Western tradition, holds that human order was brought into being at the creation of the world. Therefore, cosmisation of a territory or habitat is always a consecration and represents the paradigmatic work of gods (see Eliade, 1991:32). The pattern of traditional and royal cities in India mostly duplicates a celestial archetype, reflecting cosmo-magical powers. This means that

earthly cities, temples or religious institutions have their duplicates in some transcendental sphere, often identified with the heavens (Gastner, 1954:191).

The manifestation of a transcendental element (called 'hierophany' by Eliade) may be translated into a parallelism between the macrocosmos (cosmos / heaven) and the microcosmos (temple / human body). In between these two polarities one can also observe a mediating spatial-sacred structure represented in the (built) environment; we shall call it the mesocosmos (cf. Singh, 1993b:242). An archetypal city such as Varanasi may be considered as a mesocosmos

mediating between the microcosmos of the individual and the macrocosmos of a culturally conceived greater universe (see Levy, 1990). The inter-linkage between these three archetypal levels is sometimes expressed in the idea of a central axis around which the cosmos turns. This centre serves as a communication link between heaven and earth; it is the *axis mundi* (as per Eliade's terminology).

Historically, Hindu practices of rituals and festivities, sacred journeys, deities and their symmetrical links came to form the sacred spatial system that is observed by pilgrims and devotees. In fact, pilgrimage traditions are deeply rooted in local space / place, as well as in the cultural inheritance and mentality of their adherents. This structure is reflected symbolically in a spatial frame in which complexity and temporal stability meet, mediating between people and cosmos, i.e. in a mesocosm as the 'climax community' of Hinduism (see Levy, 1990:28).

Today, there is a rising tide of pilgrimage tourism in India, which may be related to an increased desire among Hindus to assert their identity. Partly, this is a reaction to the new vigour of Islam and perhaps partly

also to increasing prosperity. It is also the consequence of the sectarian politics of 'Hindutva' or conservative Hindu nationalism - and the rivalry between secular parties, such as the Congress, and 'identity' parties. These are evident in North India, in the (high caste-dominated) Bharatiya Janata Party and the (lower caste-dominated) Bahujan Samaj Party - these influences promote a concept of Hindu cultural nationalism based on Hindu scriptures (Narayan, 2009). This nationalism led to the destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992 (Singh and Haigh, 2015: 784).

The cosmic layout of a 'climax community' may be seen in the elaborate frame that is characteristic of Varanasi; it is clearly expressed in a series of sacred territorial boundaries defined by pilgrimage routes. Within this mapping system, the universe is symbolised by a circle (of course, irregular), connecting a number of shrines and sacred sites. This system of spatial manifestations and sacred journeys may be called a pilgrimage *mandala* (see Singh, 1987:493). In Varanasi, the pilgrimage *mandala* is fully developed; it has been eulogised in the mythological literature, and is maintained through pilgrimage and festivities (cf. Rana, 2014:91-107). The spatial components of a worldview, reflected in a conception of local values and practices such as pilgrimages, symbolises the cosmic representation of the earth.

Bhardwaj (1973), following Stoddard (1966), found a weak correlation between a catchment area-based hierarchy of pilgrimage sites and the caste of the pilgrims, which suggests that visitors to pan-Hindu or supra-regional shrines are more often from higher castes than those visiting regional or local shrines (Bhardwaj, 1973). Undoubtedly, part of the reason for this high caste prevalence is socio-economic, but it is also due to the greater familiarity of higher castes with the Sanskrit texts. This scenario is well represented in

Varanasi (cf. Singh, 2002). Bhardwaj (1973) mentions a counter trend caused by the 'Sanskritisation' of the lower castes. Since India's independence in 1947, an aspect of upward mobility among the lower castes has been their adoption of symbols and religious activities formerly associated with the higher castes. The Sanskrit law books and *Puranas* commend pilgrimage as meritorious for poor people, members of the low castes, and women (cf. Singh and Haigh, 2015:791). However, even today, very low caste Hindus rarely undertake pilgrimages (Morinis, 1984).

The diversities, contrasts and distinctive religious notions of Varanasi have played a major role in attracting religious tourists from India and also tourists from abroad. Varanasi is one of the top individual tourist destinations in India and about seven per cent of all the international tourists coming to India visit the city. Like any other heritage city, Varanasi, too, is the product of a unique set of historical, cultural, religious and functional circumstances, and presents itself to a particular group of people (i.e. devout Hindus, Buddhists and Jains) as a distinct sacred place. Every year, around 5 million Hindus (domestic tourists) visit this holy city and perform rituals and pilgrimages (see Table 1). The multiplicity and distinctiveness of this city has also attracted a huge mass of tourists. Arrivals to Varanasi in recent years show a continuous increase of national tourists / pilgrims and also that of international tourists. In 2015, the city recorded a little over 5.50 million domestic tourists (75% were recorded as religious tourists/ pilgrims) and around three hundred thousand international tourists, respectively recording an increase of 8.8 per cent and 3.8 per cent, over the previous year (Table 1). While the arrival of domestic tourists in recent years in Varanasi shows a continuous increase, and the growth of international visitors varies from year to year, the overall trend for both groups is inclined towards an increase. Improving infrastructure, facilities and

Table 1 Varanasi: Influx of Pilgrims and Tourists (domestic and international), 1990-2015

Year	Domestic (mostly pilgrims)		International		TOTAL	
	Total	Growth, annual, %	Total	Growth, annual, %	Total	Growth, annual, %
1990	905,924	3.8	45,971	4.2	951,895	4.1
1995	1,972,540	10.7	113,529	11.4	2,086,069	9.8
2000	2,212,345	7.3	121,141	15.3	2,333,486	12.1
2005	3,049,980	8.6	143,993	1.9	3,193,982	8.2
2010	4,139,785	6.2	219,088	16.0	4,358,879	6.6
2015	5,660,155	8.8	298,795	3.8	5,958,950	8.5

Sources: UP Tourism and Dept. of Tourism, Varanasi; collated by authors

amenities, better transport accessibility and related aspects are supporting the increasing number of Hindus performing pilgrimages. After the destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992, a new wave of consciousness to maintain Hindu identity and the promotion of pilgrimage and religious processions became commonplace. This also resulted in promoting Hindu pilgrimages, with a constant growth rate of around eight per cent annually. It is also to be noted that participation of the middle class and 'backward' communities has increased in recent years.

The motivations for pilgrimage are complex. Schmidt (2009) classifies them into several types: devotional, healing, obligatory or socially required, ritual cycle - whether related to the calendar of stages of human life or 'wandering'. Bhardwaj suggests that pilgrimages to the highest level shrines are made more for spiritual gains while pilgrimage to lower level shrines tend to seek more material goals (Bhardwaj, 1973). Respecting this, Singh and Haigh (2015: 785) propose a typology of five classes arrayed as a spectrum:

- (1) **Tourists** – those who are there for sightseeing, to take a picture, buy a souvenir, eat local food, and have no major spiritual or emotional engagement with the sacred messages of the site; in fact, they are less in number.
- (2) **Pilgrims prompted by duty** – people who travel to sacred sites not necessarily due to belief but out of respect towards their social *dharma*. It is something they must do and be seen to be doing by their community, and also to follow a tradition. Their pilgrimage is not essentially spiritual, but it is expected of them; it is a display of social conformity.
- (3) **Pilgrims prompted by need** - spiritual supplicants - people who undertake pilgrimage to gain some result in the material world or for thanksgiving after

the fulfillment of their wishes and vows (*manautis*).

- (4) **Pilgrims of hope** – spiritual tourists who seek mystical uplift from their association with the Supreme; they have spiritual goals and seek things that are mainly outside the mundane world, but they are part-timers. Such journeys are usually organised by some monastic group or religious trust. They access the liminal mainly to leaven otherwise worldly lives.
- (5) **Pilgrims of union** – true spiritual seekers who believe all experience is part of a spiritual journey. They follow *moksha dharma*, a path that seeks escape from the material world and the Hindu cycle of rebirth.

Of course, there is no tight compartment for any of these groups. Covering all these types, Panchakroshi Yatra is the most popular pilgrimage in terms of high frequency, grand celebration, and intensity of involvement.

Varanasi's Cosmic Layout

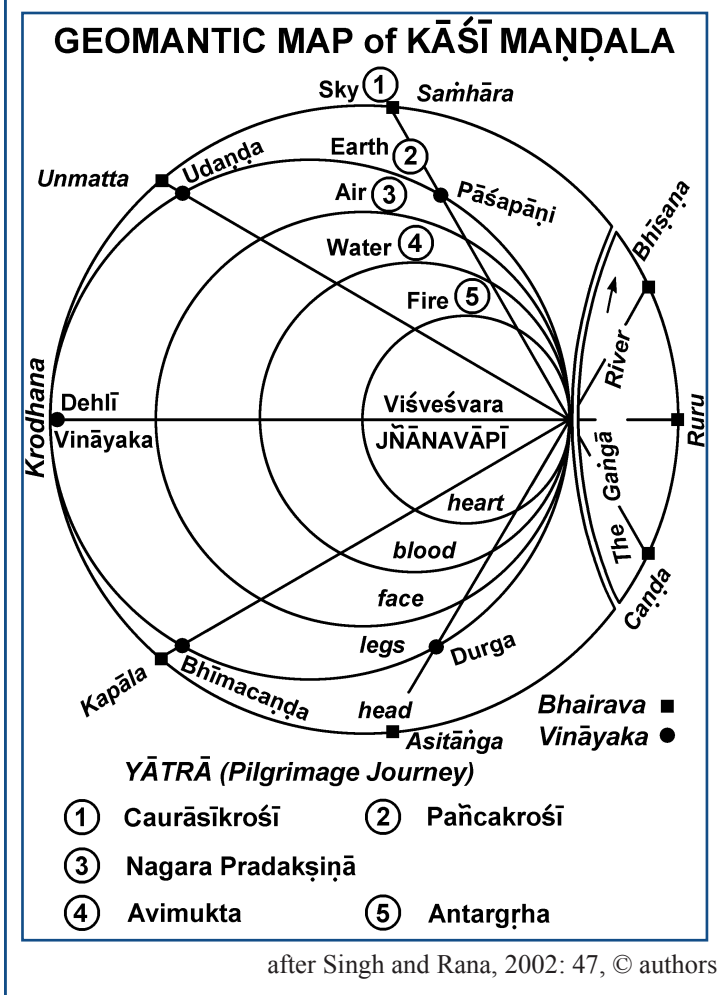
Varanasi is one of the celestial-archetypal cities where the material environment expresses parallelism between the macro-, meso-, and microcosmos, regrouping them to form a sacred spatial system. Varanasi contains five sacred territories, symbolising wholeness: Five is Shiva's number. Shiva, one of the trinity of Hindu pantheon, is the controller of time and the destroyer and re-creator of the universe. Shiva is Varanasi's patron deity. The city of Kashi represents Shiva's body, whose different parts are represented by 18 *lingams*, and together they are further represented in one *lingam* called Krittivasheshvara (Singh, 2004:217). The cosmic interrelationship between the five layers of sacred territories and the three levels of the cosmos is shown in Table 2 (see also Figures 1 and 2).

Table 2 Five Layers of Sacred Territories in Varanasi

Layer	Macrocosm	Mesocosm: Sacred route	Microcosm: part of body	Transcendental power	Sheath (Chakra)	No. of shrines on the route
1	Sky	Chaurashikroshi	Head	Consciousness	Food	144
2	Earth	Panchakroshi	Legs	Action	Mind	108
3	Air	Nagar Pradakshina	Face	Cognition	Breath	72
4	Water	Avimukta	Blood	Wisdom	Intellect	72
5	Fire	Antargriha	Heart	Bliss	Bliss	72

Source: modified after Singh and Rana, 2002: 46

Figure 1 Geomantic Map of Kashi Mandala



That is how ‘that cosmos in its entirety can become a hierophany’ (Eliade, 1959:12). The revelation of a hierophany is initiated at a fixed centre, the temple of Vishveshvara (Shiva as Lord (*ishvara*) of the world (*vishva*), the patron deity of the city, and it ends there. This system is maintained by the initiation and completion of rites performed there. The idea is expressed in the *Rig Veda* (RgV, 10.149) that the ‘universe is conceived as spreading from the central point’. The Vishveshvara temple, conceptualised as the pivot of the cosmos, is outside mundane space and time, though it is a visible site on the earth as well. The arrangement of Vinayaka shrines (total 56) also shows another face of the cosmic layout of the city.

The five sacred territories (from top to bottom) sequentially become smaller in territorial area, but higher in manifestive power, reaching to the highest at the inner sanctum (*Antargriha*). This idea runs parallel to that of a shrinking world, but expanding universe (see Figure 2). The dialectics behind this are based on the notion of creation and existence arising from opposite forces. It also shows parallels with Shiva’s dance, symbolising cosmic cycles of creation and destruction, and also the daily rhythm of birth and

The five sacred routes delimit their territory and reflect the various myths; however, the pilgrimage always starts and ends at the Vishveshvara temple - the pillar at the centre of the world or *axis mundi*. The five sacred routes / zones are also associated with the symbols of the divine body, transcendental power and sheaths. These are analogous with the five broad elements of organism, according to Hindu mythology. This spiritual perception of the sacred territories shows the interlinking relationship between human beings and the cosmos, occurring in a strong state of connection to the sacred where ‘one sees one’s soul’ (Singh, 1991:9). Like the human body, the territory of Kashi (the total sacred territory of Varanasi) is the *Brahman* who illuminates the world and dwells inside the citadel of five sheaths, the world within. In this way, the pilgrimage transforms the macrocosmic journey into a microcosmos. It also reflects the fact that

man tried to integrate multifaceted nature in terms of the intuitively known unity of his own body. The perception of an analogy between human anatomy and the physiognomy of the earth is widespread (Tuan, 1977:89).

Figure 2 Kashi Mandala (spatial frame)



death as the basis of all existence (see Capra, 1991:242; Singh, 1992: 142).

Before describing the cosmogonic frame, let us see the background of each of the five sacred territories of Varanasi and share a brief outline of the Vinayaka shrines.

Chaurashikroshi (84 - Krosha^[1] sacred territory)

The outermost pilgrimage route forms a complete circular shape, but nowadays it is rarely followed. The temple of Madhyameshvara serves as the centre and the shrine of Dehli Vinayaka (the entrance gate) is the radial point; the radius covers a distance of five *krosha* (11 miles / 17.6 km) and thus, the circumference measures 168 miles (296 km). Symbolically, it represents the outer limit of the universe within which lie four other sacred territories (Rana, 2014:93). Thus, circumambulation of this territorial route symbolises the sacred journey to the cosmos (Singh, 1987:503). A number of deities associated with space (direction) and time (yearly cycle) emerge to form the greater pilgrimage *mandala* of Varanasi, known as the Kashi Mandala (Figure 3).

In each of the eight directions, 12 ‘power goddesses’ (Shakti) represent the ‘power’ of 12 months; they are further supervised by the ‘leading energy goddess’, Durga, and her male partner Bhairava, who looks after the rhythm of ‘time’ and ‘death’, and is assisted by a directional guardian or Dikpala and three auxiliaries or Ishta Devas. Their total number is 144, i.e. 96 Shaktis, eight Durgas, eight Bhairavas, eight Dikpals and 24 Ishta Devas (for a full list see Singh, 1993a:40-41).

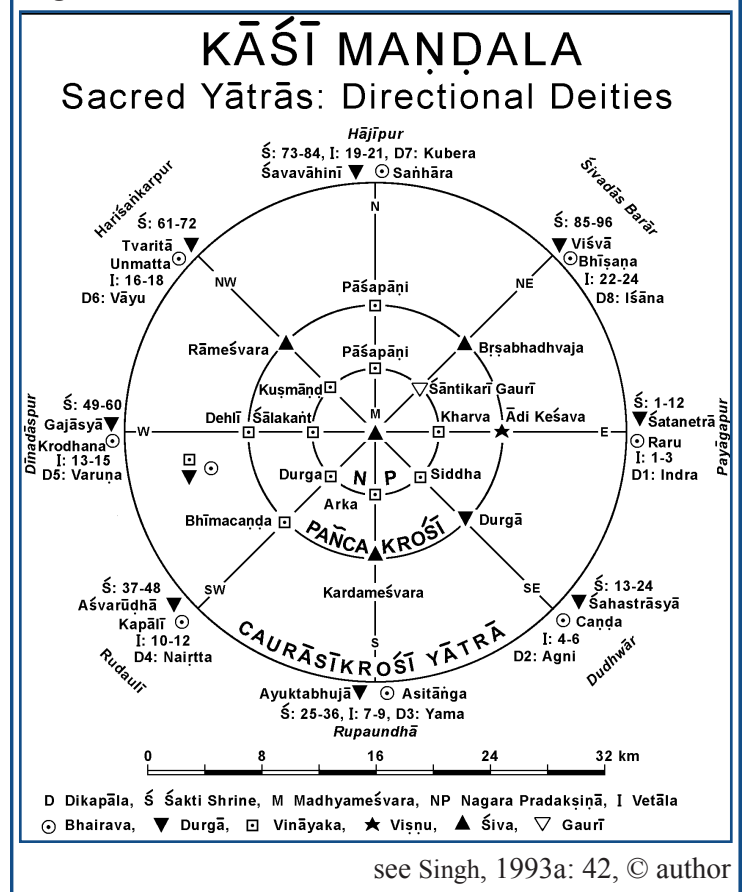
The Chaurashikrosha Yatra route is divided into eight directions (*astha-dika*), and protected by the directional deities. Each of these directions is regulated and controlled by goddesses of the cycle of time (i.e. 12 zodiacs / 12 months), called Shaktis, thus their number reaches 96 (i.e. 12 x 8). The myth says that 96 Shaktis helped the Goddess Durga in killing the demon’s army. At the end of the war Durga had cited their names (KKh, 72. 3-13). The act of these Shaktis in each direction is supervised by Kshetra Devi (territorial goddess), a form of Goddess Durga, and further assisted by a form of Bhairava, a directional deity or Dikpala and three Vetals or demi-divinity assistants. This way the sacrality of time (12 months) and

temporality of space (eight directions) merge at a cosmic state controlled and maintained by Shaktis (cf. Figure 3). At the centre is Saubhagya Gauri, who supervises the articulation and ordering (KKh, 72.91).

The number 144 (12 x 12) refers to a cosmogony where the macrocosmos (12 zodiacs) meets the microcosmos (12 months). Thus, the earthly journey puts one in touch with the cosmological dimension. In Hinduism, the number 144 has other connotations too: it refers to the product of 9 planets x 4 directions x 4 parts of the day, and to the product of 9 planets x 2 layers - heaven and earth (image and reflection) - x 8 directions. Further parallels with a cosmogony may also be derived.

The Chaurashikroshi Yatra was more a symbolic reference to the cosmic circuit of Kashi, and rarely a part of pilgrimage in the recent past. Thanks to Svami Shivananda Sarasvati (1929-2014), a monk of Dandi tradition (disciple of Svami Karpatri-Ji), who dedicated his entire life to the revival of pilgrimage routes of Varanasi and their related rituals and festive traditions, most of the pilgrimage circuits of Varanasi, including Chaurashikroshi Yatra, have been re-activated. With

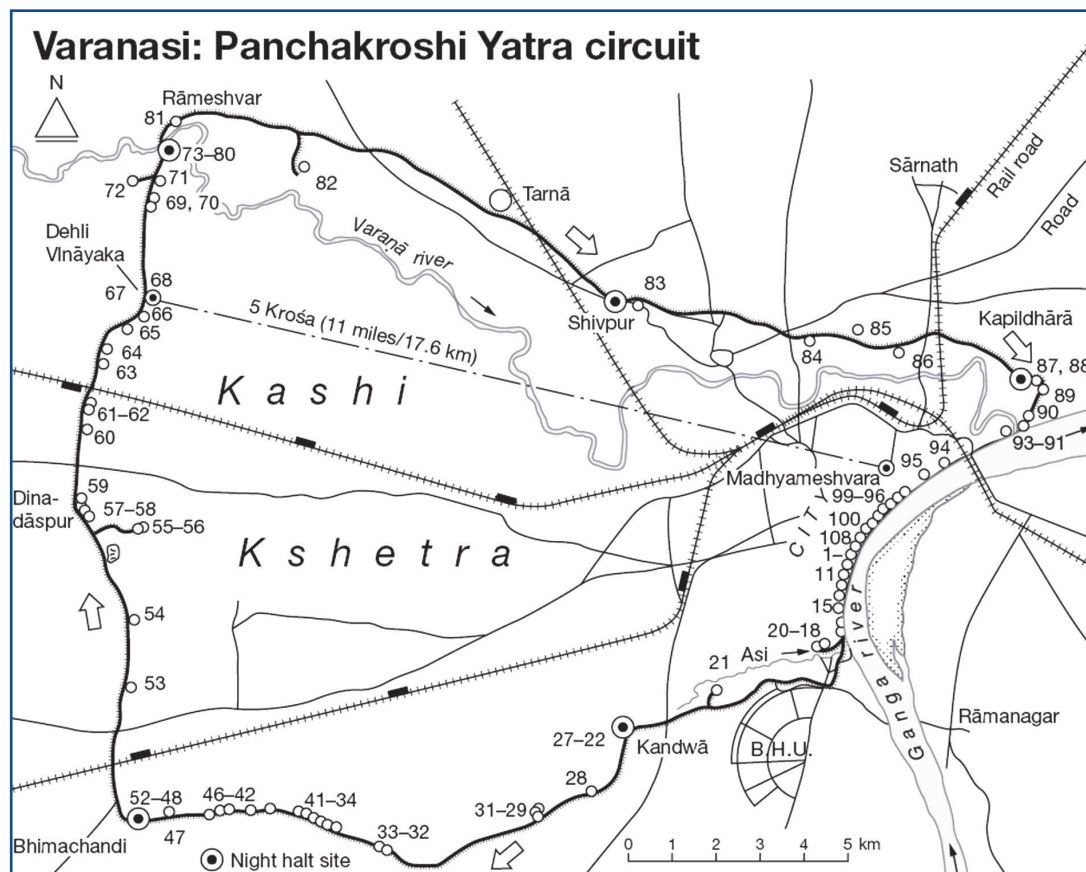
Figure 3 Kashi Mandala: Yatras and Directional Deities



1) A *krosha* refers to a distance of roughly 2.2 miles or 3.52 km.

see Singh, 1993a: 42, © author

Figure 4 Panchakroshi Yatra



after Singh and Rana, 2002: 163, © authors

his patronage and guidance, a trust was founded, named *Kashi Pradakshina Darshan Yatra Samiti* [Kashi's Circumambulatory Journey and Pilgrimage Committee]. The trust was registered in 2001. It is run by one of his disciples, Uma Shankar, who issues advertisements during holidays and festivals to encourage people to undertake pilgrimage and join the journey on a self-help and cooperation basis. He fixes the time, date (mostly Sundays and festival days), and the site of gathering and initiation, followed by 'taking vows' (*sankalpa lena*) and based on standard routes and shrines described in Sanskrit literature, he leads the group, and finally, gets the 'initiation released' (*sankalpa chhudana*) at the prescribed site, mostly at the Vishvanatha temple. During 2001-2015, the Chaurashikroshi Yatra was performed 10 times, and each period consisted of four consecutive Sundays. On an average a pilgrim group consisted of 24-26 persons, recording 50 per cent each males and females. About three to four big vehicles were arranged that stopped at all the major sacred sites described, and in four Sundays the entire route was completed. Each individual carried her / his ritual items, fruits and material to be offered at the shrines. Thus, the dying tradition has now got a new lease of life.

Panchakroshi (25-Krosha sacred territory)

The route delimiting this territory (see Figures 2 and 4) covers a distance of 55.2 miles or 88.5 km (25 *krosha*). It is divided into five parts, identified with five spots where pilgrims stay overnight in rest houses or inns (numbering 44 in total). This itinerary has now replaced the earlier one and it is the most popular. The myth referred to in this route is dated ca. 12th century CE and it is found again in a more developed form in later myths (ca. 16th century CE). An abundance of myths concerning this journey are also found in literature (see Singh, 2002).

A total of 108 sacred sites and shrines are found along this route. The number 108 has a cosmogonic scope related to the constellations (lunar mansions) and the rhythm of human cognition. It defines cardinality, centrality and circulation. Further, it refers to a product of 12 (the yearly cycle of months in a year) x 9 (the cosmic space denoting nine planets in Hindu mythology). Other cosmogonic parallels are: a product of 27 constellations, and four parts of the day, of four directions; a product of 36 crores (360 million) divine beings, and three mythical realms; and also the product

of the powers of the three basic integers, i.e. $1^1 \times 2^2 \times 3^3$ (see Singh, 1993a:60-61).

In an earlier study, Singh (2002) explored the cultural geography of Varanasi's *Panchakroshi Yatra* of *Ashvina Malamasa* (18 September - 16 October, 2001; cf. Figure 4). Surveying a sample of 432 from 52,310 pilgrims, Singh (2009) found that most travelled as small, typically family, groups (three to six persons) (*sim*, Gujarat: Sopher, 1968). In Varanasi, the majority of the participants (66 per cent) were female and most came from the local area. However, there were also cohorts from Bengal and from the diaspora (Singh, 2009). Over half of the pilgrim-tourists were middle-aged (40-60 years) and 20 per cent came from the lower classes, including the peasantry and menial servants. Their educational status was low with 57 per cent of the local pilgrims claiming to have an education between primary school and graduation (Grades 5-10), compared to 70 per cent of the pilgrim-tourists from further afield. People of Brahmin caste were the majority because undertaking such rituals helps reinforce their professional image and religious status. Together, the Brahmin and merchant castes shared a little over half of the total number (Singh, 2009). Similar results were found in a survey of 500 pilgrims to the Shaivite shrines of Jageshwar in Kumaon, Uttarakhand (Agrawal, 2010), which, too, was dominated by Brahmin participation and married people. Agrawal (2010) found that rural respondents and those from lower income groups were more inclined toward God than wealthy and urban people.

A similar line of survey and orientation study was completed in the following year of the intercalary Hindu month of Bhadrapada '*Malamasa*' (18 August - 16 September, 2012), which recorded pilgrimage numbers totalling 69,156 devout Hindus (pilgrims and pilgrim-tourists). For a detailed socio-cultural and perceptual understanding, 497 respondents (239 pilgrims on foot and 258 pilgrim-tourists) were surveyed through questionnaires and participatory observations and their socio-economic, cultural and religious characteristics recorded and analysed. The conclusions of the earlier studies of the Panchakroshi Yatra were further validated by the studies that followed (Singh, 1998, 2002, 2009 and 2012). A similar tendency was observed in the Panchakroshi Yatra of 17 June - 16 July, 2015, which recorded 68,802 pilgrims, in which 45.8 per cent were recorded as pilgrims on foot (Table 3). It is noteworthy that in spite of better transport facilities, people prefer to walk, their luggage and material for rituals and daily uses being carried in an accompanying vehicle.

At the eight sacred spots and temples there is a tradition of special oblations and rituals. The priests direct and help pilgrims follow the rules, though many times in abbreviated form. The eight sites and prescribed ritual items, in addition to the commonly used items, are given below (Singh, 2002: 34):

- (1) Kardameshvara (no. 23): offering a mixture of seven grains, including un-husked rice.
- (2) Bhimachandi (no. 49): coconut, vermilion in a wooden pot, sari and skirt.

Table 3 Panchakroshi Yatra (P-Y), Varanasi: Frequency of Pilgrims, 1985-2015

Se	P-Y Period, Year	Hindu Month, Suni-Lunar	a. Pilgrims On Foot		b. Pilgrim-Tourists		TOTAL	% increase
			Total	%	Total	%		
1.	18 July – 16 Aug. 1985	<i>Shravana</i>	26,504	60.4	17,368	39.6	43,872	4.62
2.	15 April – 14 May 1991	<i>Vaishakha</i>	23,902	56.4	22,048	43.6	45,950	4.74
3.	17 June – 15 July 1996	<i>Ashadha</i>	24,134	50.1	24,064	49.9	48,200	4.90
4.	18 Sept. – 16 Oct. 2001	<i>Ashvina</i>	25,276	48.0	27,934	52.4	53,310	10.60
5.	17 May – 15 June 2007	<i>Jyestha</i>	28,531	47.3	31,771	52.7	60,302	13.12
6.	18 Aug. – 16 Sept. 2012	<i>Bhadrapada</i>	30,498	46.1	35,658	53.9	66,156	9.70
7.	17 June – 16 July 2015	<i>Ashadha</i>	31,512	45.8	37,290	54.2	68,802	4.00

Source: based on personal surveys and by being part of the group; numbers are approximate

Notes: a, Pilgrims on foot follow strict rules and walk;

b, Pilgrim-tourists use vehicles and loosely follow the textual tradition.

- (3) Ekapadagana (no. 53): white sesame and sweet-ball (*laddu*).
- (4) Langotiya Hanuman (near Sindhurodhasa Tirtha, no. 59): a piece of red cloth and *laddu*.
- (5) Dehali Vinayaka: vermilion, clarified butter (*ghee*), sacred thread, sacred grass, *laddu*, and fresh sugarcane.
- (6) Rameshvara (no. 74): white sesame, fresh rice, *datura* flower (*Datura datura indica*) and its fruit.
- (7) Kapiladhara (no. 87): performing ancestral rites, offering holy water to ancestors, and donating money and clothes to Brahmins.
- (8) Kharva Vinayaka (no. 93): offering barley (*java*); tossing pieces of barley continues till Saptavarana Vinayaka. More commonly, pilgrims start this ritual at the shrine of Java Vinayaka, located across the Varana river, and while returning visit Adi Keshava and Kharva Vinayaka temples.

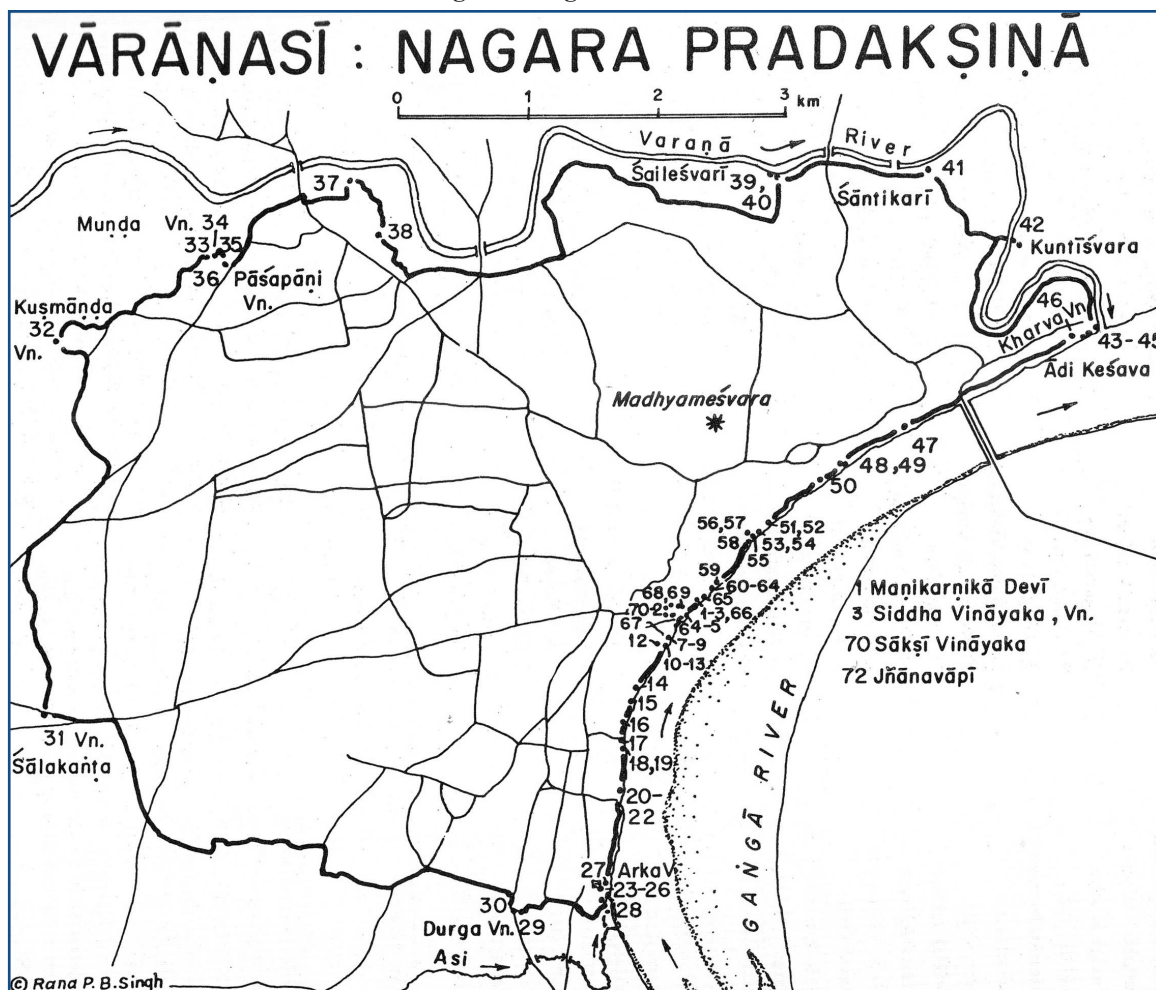
Many pilgrims strongly feel that the Panchakroshi Yatra (PY) provides relief from all types of sins. According to Kedar Nath Vyas, a priest, by the performance of PY, pilgrims get relief from grave sins even such as killing a Brahmin or a cow. Moreover, only after PY a person is expedient for doing Avimukta and Antargiha Yatras. It is believed that with the completion of the latter two, a person can get a special place in Shiva's realm, and ultimately become a part of Him.

Nagar Pradakshina (City circuit territory)

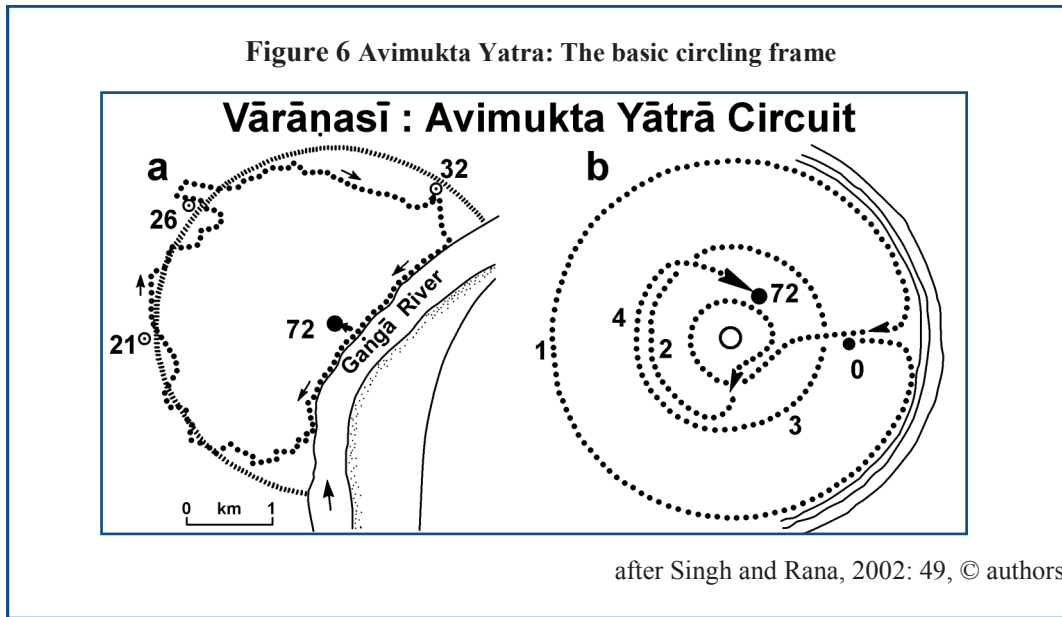
This, an abstract form of the sacred territory, has been vividly described in mythology. It denotes the outer boundary of the city (Figure 5) and covers a distance of 25 km (15.5 miles). 72 sacred shrines and sites dot this route.

The cosmogonic homology of the number 72 may be interpreted in several ways: a product of 12 months, two hemispheric routes of the sun (northern and

Figure 5 Nagar Pradakshina



see Singh, 1993a: 45, © author



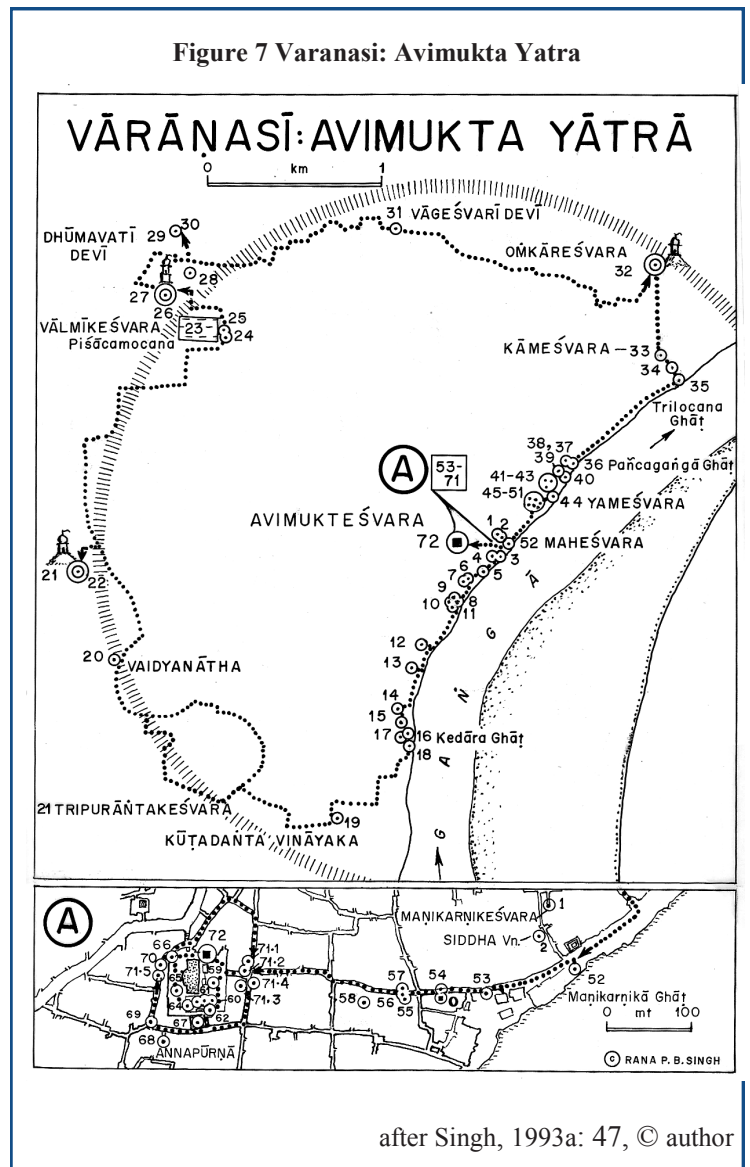
southern), and three mythical realms (heaven, earth and atmosphere/sky); 12 zodiacs and six seasons; nine planets and eight directions, etc. Pilgrims believe that the journey to this territory means atoning for all types of sins and it allows them to be purified with a view to receiving divine bliss. This journey can be completed in two days.

Avimukta (‘Never forsaken’ territory)

The myth says that Lord Shiva does not leave this territory even in times of dissolution and that is why it is called *avimukta* (‘never forsaken’). Mythology mentions that this sacred area preserves the infinite power of Shiva, initiated with his three forms - truth (*sat*), pleasant / consciousness (*chit*) and bliss (*anand*). Seventy-two shrines and sites are spread along this route. The route moves four times in a spiral form (Figures 6 and 7). In mythology this journey has been described as one of the most important ones, but with time it had lost its popularity (Singh, 1993a:48). Thanks to the initiatives of Svami Shivanand Sarasvati it was revived during the late 1990s and is today regularly performed under the direction of *Kashi Pradakshina Darshan Yatra Samiti*.

Antargriha (Inner sanctum territory)

The route (Figures 8 and 9) of this journey moves seven times around the Vishveshvara temple. It includes 72 temples and sites, out of which 56 are dedicated to Shiva. This symbolises cosmic integrity, i.e. seven *chakras* (spinal energy zones or plexuses) and eight cardinal directions. This is how Shiva protects his territory (see Singh, 1993a). The seven-



round spiral symbolises the understanding of reality, both physical and transcendental, and reminds pilgrims that the centre of the patron deity Shiva is everywhere but the circumference is nowhere. In terms of hermeneutic philosophy, this may be seen as the essence of the archetypal - 'the circle never closes'. It is also a symbol of the mystical struggle:

which ascends eternally, every widening, enfolding and unfolding the triune struggle . . . of earth, man and gods (Katzantzakis 1969, quoted by Brennehan and Yarian 1982: 50).

After taking a holy dip in the Ganga at the Manikarnika Ghat, pilgrims visit the central spot, Vishveshvara, and then proceed to the inner sanctum, following the spiral route. This way they receive the highest religious merit, resulting in peace and relief from transmigration. In the context of alchemy, these seven spiral *chakras* (routes):

'make us a vital part of the energy vortex behind all life here, and they are the conduits to make this world whatever we need it to be for ourselves (Margold, 1991: 47).

There are many legends and *Puranic* descriptions about the origin of worship of Shiva in an anthropomorphic and ithyphallic form (*lingam*), usually as the stylised *lingam* (see Morinis, 1984:27-30). The *lingam* consists of three parts (basement, middle and top), integrating evolution, existence and involution, i.e. *shristhi*, *shtiti*, and *samhara*, respectively (Pillai, 1959: 19-20). Number three is also significant in the context of Shiva's *trishula* - the three-pronged spear or trident. This is symbolised in the landscape of Varanasi with three sacred segments, each having an *antargriha* (inner circuit) route, delineated with circumambulatory paths and linked with many temples along the path, and their associated patron deity, a form of Shiva: Vishveshvara in the centre, Omkareshvara in the north, and Kedāreshvara in the south (Figure 10). It is believed that Kashi rests on the *trishula* (Singh, 2009:175). These three inner circuits have an overlapping circuit, i.e. Avimukta (see Singh, 1987:508-509).

Cosmic Layout and Vinayaka Ganesha Shrines

The form of Ganesha (elephant-headed God who is Shiva's son), as protector from all obstacles at eight cardinal directions in all the seven layers of the realm between earth and heaven (symbolically representing seven layers of the atmosphere), is known as Vinayaka. His number is 56 (i.e. 7 layers x 8 directions). The number and location of the 56 Vinayakas can be represented in a spatio-cosmological model showing eight directions, seven layers, three realms / segments and the associated routes of pilgrimage (Figure 11). This symbolises the concept of universe within universe. The pilgrimage is performed on the fourth day of the dark-fortnight (waning of the moon) of each month, and if Tuesday falls on that day it is considered very auspicious, granting desired results (Singh, 1987: 519).

Number 56 refers to the guardian. Courtwright (1985: 27) has explained this:

The city is laid out as a model of the cosmos, in seven concentric circles. Each circle has a shrine of Ganesha (Vinayaka) at the four directions and the four intermediate points, just as on the cosmic level, the diggajas (elephant guardians) stand watch over the region of the sky

As per textual reference and tradition

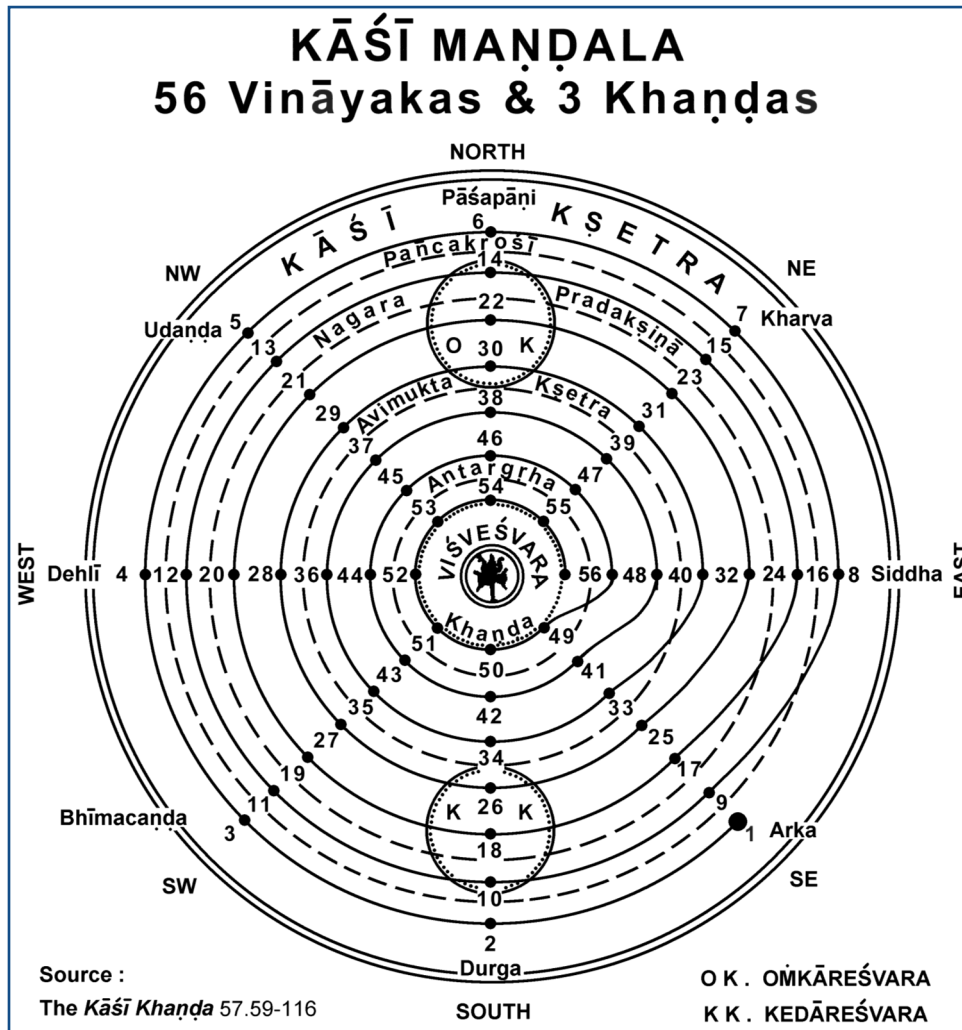
the pilgrim must pass through one chain of these threshold guardians after another as he approaches the centre of the city (Eck, 1978:179).

Figure 10 Varanasi: Three Khandas and Avimukta



after Singh, 1993a: 156, © author

Figure 11 Kashi Mandala: 56 Vinayakas and 3 Khandas



after Singh and Rana, 2002: 52, © authors

Cosmogonic Integrity

The number of sacred sites and shrines along the five routes of pilgrimage symbolises cosmogonic integrity. This can be explained by symbolic cosmic numbers and their products (Table 4). The spiritual homology of the five sacred territories shows the interlinking relationship between human beings and the cosmos, occurring in a strong state of connection to the sacred, where 'one sees one's own soul'.

As discussed earlier, the number 144 (12 x 12) refers to a cosmogony where the macrocosmos (12 zodiacs) meets the microcosmos (12 months). Thus, the earthly journey puts one in touch with the cosmological dimension. The total number of all the shrines comes to 468 which in itself forms a parallel to the product of 9 planets x 13 months (including an intercalary month) x 4 directions, or mythical parts of a day. It is also a product of 12 zodiacs x 13 months x 3 mythic realms.

The symbolic forms and

numbers characterising the shrines and sacred routes have emerged to form an established order through the binding of faith and the belief system. In fact, the belief system serves as a vital link between the place of pilgrimage and its extensive geographical and religious hinterland (Morinis, 1984: 242).

The manifestation of an ethereal life force possessing a spiritual quality implies understanding a higher truth with respect to the quest for a human link and place in the terrestrial space (see Swan, 1991:2). Sacred sites are places where the divine manifests. At the level of popular belief, one can visualise and experience them, and also get a revelation from them.

Table 4 Kashi: Pilgrimage, Sacred Sites & Shrines vs. Cosmogonic Integrity

Sacred segment/ route of Pilgrimage	1. Macro-cosmos: Planet	2. Meso-cosmos: Direction	3. Micro-cosmos: 3 mythic realms / 2 parts of a day	Shrines on the route = 1x 2x 3
1. Chaurashikroshi	9	8	2	144
2. Panchakroshi	9	4	3	108
3. Nagar Pradakshina	9	4	2	72
4. Avimukta	9	4	2	72
5. Antargriha	9	4	2	72
TOTAL	9	4	13 (months)	468

Source: Singh and Rana 2002: 50

Pilgrimage and Religious Experience

Similar to stages of the pilgrimage cycle as propounded by Turner (1986), religious experience, too, can be theoretically arranged into four stages based on Grof's (1976) work on drugs and consciousness. Preston (1984:14-15) has critically examined his ideas and supported his views with respect to its wider applicability, including the Indian context. These stages are suitably applicable in the case of the religious experiences of pilgrims who perform the Panchakroshi Yatra:

Abstract and Aesthetic experience: This refers to the initial unfolding of altered consciousness which the individual experiences directly through the senses, looking at objects like the area, route, geometrical design, architectural pattern. This is the most common experience that pilgrims have.

Psychodynamic experience: This denotes characteristics related to pain and stress, and the inconveniences faced during the journey. The experience is based on individual personality, nature of belief, and level of tolerance and motive.

Peri-natal experience: This is the feeling of calm and cosmic unity when the pilgrim enters a state of undisturbed intrauterine life. For most pilgrims this is the supreme experience. This type of intimate experience is difficult but not impossible to feel and express, 'they may be personal and deeply felt, but they are not necessarily solipsistic or eccentric' (Tuan, 1977: 147).

Transpersonal experience: This experience involves the enhancement of ordinary senses and an expansion of consciousness to an extra-planetary consciousness, and is generally not realised by lay people. A stage of this experience was realised by the great thinker of the 6th century, Shankara, on

the banks of Ganga in Varanasi; Raja Rao (1989:123) narrates it thus:

The cessation of all mental activities is the supreme peace that is the holiest of all holy places of pilgrimage, the Manikarnika (in me); the ever-flowing stream of knowledge is the pure primeval Ganga (in me); (thus) I am the Kashi, of the form of pure consciousness of self'.

Pilgrims' religious experiences may also be explained in terms of the psychological response between people and the natural environment (where wilderness still dominates). Pilgrims' experiences lead to a sense of awe and wonder, and at the same time relatedness (cf. Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989:194-195). They believe that there exists an unseen order where a supreme controller, the gods, harmoniously looking after us also perform pilgrimage in the unseen world of heaven; this is referred to by William James (1902) as 'the life of religion'. This way the gods, especially Shiva and his consort Parvati, help pilgrims get relief from all their troubles, sorrows and sufferings, and ultimately attain peace and bliss.

In performing the sacred journey and visiting shrines, pilgrims proceed inwards for multiplicity to unity, just as in contemplation, and when they return to their home the process becomes reverse, thus developing a cyclic form between worldly activities and spiritual feeling, comparable to a pilgrimage *mandala*. This can be interpreted as a miraculous happening. This sort of profound sense of relatedness with cosmic nature is to be understood only in the context of faith. Pilgrims perform this sacred journey with a deep involvement of faith. They approach certain shrines and divinities for specific needs and merits, others for different purposes, but above all, everywhere religious performance works as an 'instrumentality of ritual' (Diehl, 1956).

Conclusion

In this paper we have explored the spatial framework of pilgrimage for Hindus in the sacred city of Varanasi (Banaras) or Kashi. Varanasi presents us with a unique model of cosmogonic integrity, for the holy city bestows salvation to all - human or non-human (Rana, 2014:95). As Swan (1990:35) says:

by condensing the cosmos into a small sphere, its laws can be observed and experienced more clearly, and human lives can be placed more accurately - in accord with them.

The series of five pilgrimage routes and territories explored in this paper do not form a hierarchically structured network - each higher level contains the lower, but not vice-versa. Rather than hierarchy, the whole is present in each part, or layer, and in each level of existence. At every step there appears a living reality that is total, unbroken and individual (Singh, 2000). But this does not mean that the degrees represent 'higher' or 'lower'. Following the terminology of CS Lewis (1947; 1960), this can be formulated theoretically as follows: the 'higherarchy' is above and the 'lowerarchy' is below, but we need both to reveal the whole more completely. The sun is perceived as father ('higherarchy') and the earth as mother ('lowerarchy'), thus there is no hierarchy, and these are the two ends needed to understand the ultimate reality of wholeness that is Varanasi. After all, every system or symbolic structure has its own kind of power over the individual, and has its own way of linking human consciousness.

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