Sacred Journeys and Profane Travellers:
# Representation and Spatial Practice
in Varanasi (India)

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Declaration of Authorship

I Cristiana Zara hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely

my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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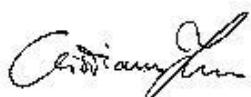
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with tourist representations and practices in India. Orientalist aesthetics have often associated this country with notions of spirituality and mysticism; tourist narratives sustain and reinforce such representations by describing India as a land of ancient rituals and timeless traditions. The visual construction of India's 'spiritual landscapes' has been largely deployed as a powerful tool for subduing the unfamiliar Other within reassuring epistemological categories. However, tourism research has recently become interested in exploring the role of tourist practices in landscape production. Not only do tourists 'gaze upon' landscapes, they also script landscapes through practices and performances. By focusing on the case of Varanasi, the Indian pilgrimage city on the banks of the Ganges, this thesis shows how tourist practices (re)produce and make sense of the city's 'sacredscape'. Special attention is paid to the riverfront, which epitomizes the cultural and spiritual significance ascribed to the city. Both Hindu and tourist narratives depict the riverfront as embodying a special power, a unique meaning, whether this uniqueness is held to be a 'spiritual' or a 'picturesque' one. The thesis analyses the city's riverfront as the place where tourist, ritual, and day-to-day activities are played out and negotiated, and where the aesthetics of landscape is confronted with the materialities and the practices inherent to this place. The research has adopted an ethnographic approach, combining participant observation, interviews and questionnaires, visual methods, and textual analysis of popular tourist literature.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Om ji

GLOSSARY

Ashram: spiritual centre; yoga gymnasium.

Baba: literally 'father'; it is a common and affectionate term for ascetics and holy men in India.

Bakhsheesh: gift, charitable donation, tip.

Banarasi: from Banaras. Inhabitants of Banaras.

Bhajans: devotional songs.

Bhang: a cannabis preparation usually smoked or drunk and associated with the worship of Shiva.

Bhang lassi: cold drink made with a mixture of milk, fruits, spices and cannabis.

Brahmacharin: student of Hindu religious studies.

Chai: Indian tea.

Charas: a popular drug smoked in India.

Chowk: the characteristic bazaar in the maze of the old city.

Dal: popular Indian course consisting basically in a legume soup, with a great variety of regional preparations.

Dhobi-wala: laundryman.

Dhoti: a long loincloth worn by men in India.

Dhrupads: Indian classical music concerts.

Diip dan: the offering of little candles to the Ganges.

Gali: characterstic narrow lanes in the old town.

Ganesh: the elephant-headed Hindu god.

Ganga Aarti: a religious celebration performed on the bank of the Ganges.

Ganga-ji: honorary form for the river Ganges.

Ganga Mam: Mother Ganges.

Ganga puja: the offering of little floating candles to the Ganga river.

Gathers: a term I use to refer to touts, local boys reinventing themselves as unauthorised tourist guides, commission hunters, conmen, boatmen, souvenir sellers and all those people – many of which are kids – that hang around on the *ghats* trying to profit from tourists and pilgrims through any sort of (legal or illegal) activities.

Guru: teacher, spiritual guide.

Ji: a Hindi suffix to denote respect.

Kaliyug: the *kali* age which is the age of strife.

Kathak: North India's classical dance.

Kurta: a traditional item of clothing consisting of a loose knee-length shirt.

Lassi: yogurt drink.

Linga: the phallic form of god Shiva symbolising his creative power and, to a metaphysical level, the wholeness of the universe; this emblem constitutes the focus of Shiva worship (also called *shivalinga*).

Mahant: chief priest of a temple complex.

Maharaja: king.

Maharani: queen.

Mala: traditional flower garland used in various ceremonies.

Mandala: cosmogram.

Mandir: temple.

Mantra: a sacred word, syllable, verse or formula embodying spiritual power.

Masala: mix of spices.

Mithai: milk-based sweets.

Moksha: liberation from the cycle of rebirths.

Murti: sacred image.

Nawab: provincal governor.

Om namah shivaya: the *mantra* dedicated to god Shiva.

Paan: betel leaves. The habit of chewing *paan* is widespread in India; betel is a stimulant substance which has digestive properties and is an excellent mouth freshener. Banaras is renowned for its good quality *paan*.

Panda: Brahmin priest who retains the jurisdiction over the ritual space of the *ghats.*

Puja: worship.

Puranas: Sanskrit traditional sources containing mainly mythological literature; they typically recount stories about the life of Hindu gods, sages, heroes and kings, and the creation and destruction of the universe. The Kashi Khanda is part of the Skanda Purana.

Raga: melodic mode; it is the core notion of Indian classical music. Different *ragas* are meant to convey different moods and human emotions, and are associated with different seasons and times of the day.

Ramayana: the Ramayana is one of the two great Sanskrit epics of India; the Mahabharata is the other one.

Rickshaw-wala: rikshaw driver.

Rishi: seer.

Rudraksha: seeds of the *rudraksha* tree symbolising Hindu god Shiva. The *rudraksha* beads are normally threaded into a necklace used as a rosary.

Sadhu: ascetic, commonly also called *baba.*

Samsara: the cycle of rebirths.

Samskaras: major Hindu rites

Sannyasis: renouncers, ascetics.

Sari: traditional dress worn by Hindu women.

Shakti: energy, power; a term used for the Goddess, either alone or as a spouse of one of the male deities.

Shanti: peace.

Shiva: one of the principal gods of the Hindu pantheon. He is the patron deity of Varanasi

Sitar: the famous stringed instrument used in Indian classical music.

Stupa: Buddhist leap-like constructions containing sacred relics.

Tabla: percussion instrument used particularly in classical and devotional music in North India.

Tandava: cosmic dance.

Thandhai: cold drink made with a mixture of milk, fruits, spices and often cannabis (special thandhai).

Tilak: a forehead mark denoting devotion. It may be made of sandalwood paste, ashes, turmeric, saffron, vermilion, clay.

Tirtha: Sanskrit word commonly used for 'holy place', with particular reference to pilgrimage places.

Yatra: sacred circuits, pilgrimages.

Videshi: foreigner.

Vishvanatha (or *Vishvesvara*): Shiva as "Lord of the Universe" or "Lord of All". Vishvesvara and Vishvanatha are almost synonymous for Shiva as 'Lord of the Universe' or 'Lord of All'.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is about Western tourist representations and practices in India. It draws on fieldwork conducted in the sacred city of Varanasi, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, to explore the representations, practices, and processes of identity formation and cultural negotiation that are brought about in the city by tourism. I have identified Varanasi as a particular symbolic tourist site on which to focus my research, because the representation of India as 'spiritual' is one of the central aspects of Western tourist imaginations, and because Varanasi itself is a city deeply shaped by discourses of religion and spirituality, as I will explain further in a brief introduction to the city.

The PhD research project which has led to the production of this thesis stems from a longstanding interest in India and in Varanasi specifically, that is rooted in my background in Indian studies at undergraduate degree level. My *laurea magistralis* thesis was centred on a study of the ritual and spatial context of the 'holy' city of Varanasi, of which I analysed the places, rituals, and practices of Hindu daily life. Subsequently, my Master's thesis drew on the theoretical perspective of cultural geography to focus on Italian tourist narratives of the journey to India. While my PhD project has developed within the same theoretical framework of cultural geography, it is also informed by my earlier academic background in the study of Indian and Hindu culture, as well as my own personal knowledge and experiences of the city of Varanasi itself.

The first concern of my research is to explore how tourists imagine Varanasi, and how the city is represented in tourist narratives. Representations, and particularly the ways in which tourists imagine the places they visit, and the ways in which these imaginaries

are shaped by dominant narratives, are an important aspect of the study of tourism. The attraction that places exert on travellers is closely related to the way in which places are represented and 'travel' themselves. Tourists know India through a set of tropes and images of which they seek confirmation in place. The inspiration of many Western journeys to India is the perception of India as a 'spiritual' place. As Henderson and Weisgrau (2007: 161) note, 'India's diverse religious spaces have long drawn visitors, pilgrims, devotees, and tourists'. Many Westerners believe India to be 'a repository of religion' (*ibid.*), a country where a purer spirituality can be experienced, a spirituality made up of ancient practices and timeless traditions.

My research concern with representations of tourist sites and with the geographical imaginations of tourists themselves is coupled with an interest in exploring what tourists actually *do*, how they spend time, what activities they engage in, and what geographies they create. In their practices, tourist imaginations and mental representations are negotiated in place. The relationship between representations and practices is dynamic and productive. Representation is not unbounded or de-contextualised, and neither is practice something that happens independently from main discourses and representations. In fact, representation is emplaced, enacted and sustained through practices, activities, routines, materialities; and practices are not only shaped by but also implicated in the construction of representations and discourses. Representations and practices both happen in the body and through the body; they are both connected to each other through places, movements, objects, activities which can hardly be disentangled. Thus, while focusing first on representations and later on practices, a central theme of this research is that tourist representations, practices, bodies and spaces are actually deeply intertwined and cannot be thought of as separate from one another.

Having introduced the central concerns of this thesis, the rest of this introduction will situate my research questions within existing academic literature, identifying the particular contribution that my project aims to make. I will then provide a brief introduction to the site of my research, Varanasi, and outline the structure of the thesis.

This thesis is informed by and intends to contribute to the academic debate within cultural geography on landscape and tourism. In this thesis I have chosen to use theories of landscape with which to explore Western tourism in India, engaging in particular with the recent discussion on the dialectics between representation and practice. What makes landscape a concept particularly suited to this purpose is its peculiar 'duplicity' (Daniels 1989), which I will discuss at some length in my theoretical chapter. The fact of being placed in two epistemological fields at the same time – the material and the representational – makes landscape extremely useful in shedding light on the dialectics between visual construction and concrete experience which is implicit in the tourist process.

Landscape is an inherently Western – and specifically, European – 'way of seeing' (Cosgrove, 1984.) the world. The way of seeing inherent in landscape is ideological because it constructs reality according to a particular perspective. In modern tourism today landscape represents a very powerful means of framing and taming the other.

While my discussion of tourist representations of Varanasi draws on the postcolonial critique of Orientalism, my concern with what tourists actually do in Varanasi was inspired by the 'performative turn' brought about by 'non representational theory' in human geography, which influenced the theoretical debate on landscape. Recent work in geography and tourism acknowledges the importance of practice, shifting the focus from what is represented to what is *done*. In this work the tourist experience is rethought as an embodied and sensual experience, which expands far beyond the visual apprehension and enjoyment of a landscape.

While a flourishing body of literature has been produced as a result of this new turn, it remains largely 'West-centred', both in terms of its theoretical underpinnings and its empirical foci. At the same time, while the postcolonial critique of Orientalsim has inspired a significant body of literature on discursive representations of the Orient, the spatial practices of contemporary tourism in the Orient have remained relatively unexplored. Indeed, the tourist spaces of 'the Orient' have only recently attracted academic interest. In this regard, with the important exception of the work of Edensor (1998a) and, very recently, of Hannam and Diekmann (2011), India still constitutes an open field of enquiry. My thesis aims to start filling this gap in the existing research, by

conducting an empirical study of tourist practices in Varanasi. In order to achieve this aim, I will also investigate tourist representations and narratives of the city, without which those very practices cannot be fully understood.

This thesis also aims to make an original theoretical contribution to the current debate on tourism and landscape by drawing on non-Western theoretical traditions in order to shed light on the particular ways in which tourist representations and practices come together in the chosen context. More specifically, I will use the concepts of *darshan* and *karma* that are central to Hinduism as the context-specific counterparts of, respectively, gaze and practice. Indeed, I will argue that what tourists do in Varanasi cannot fully be understood without engaging with these non-Western notions, which are central to the way in which tourist activities are constructed in the city, and which tourists themselves often actively engage with in their attempts to get closer to an 'authentic' experience of the place.
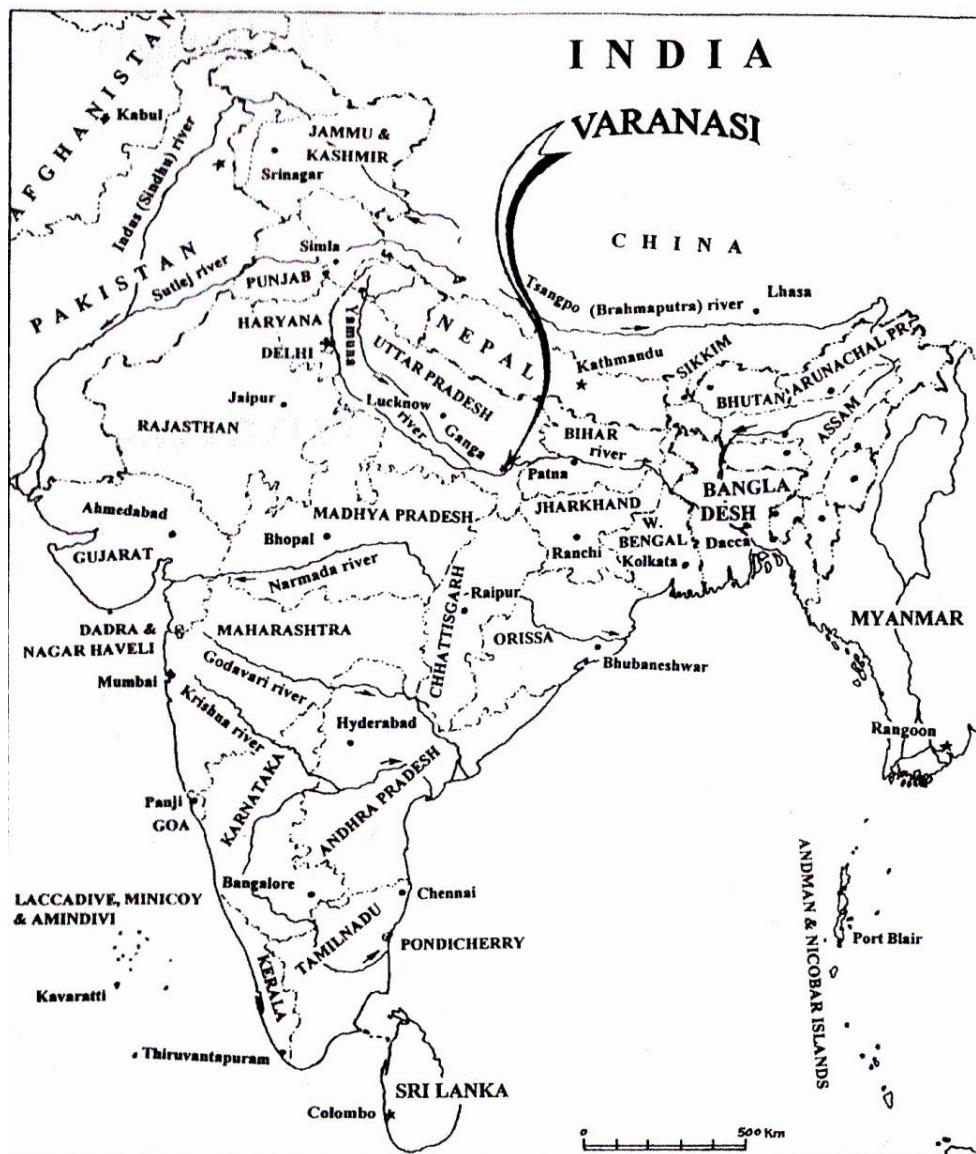
FIGURE 1 - INDIA, VARANASI (SOURCE: SINGH 2009)

Varanasi is commonly considered the sacred city of India *par excellence*, the most sacred especially with regard to Hinduism. The city is known by several names, each one referring to a particular quality and geography of the city: Varanasi is the city stretching between Varuna and Asi, the two tributaries of the Ganges which delimit the city to the north and south; Benares is the anglicised name for Banaras, as the city is normally called among its inhabitants; Kashi is 'the Luminous', the city which is the above of god Shiva and sits at the centre of the cosmos; Mahashmashana is 'the great cremation ground', the city that donates the liberation from the cycle of *samsara.* In popular tourist literature the city is generally addressed with the name of Varanasi, which is how I shall mainly call it throughout the thesis. Varanasi holds a special

cultural and political relevance in the national scenario: it is known as a centre of knowledge and education, probably the most prestigious with regard to traditional learning, and it is one of the great pilgrimage sites of India. It lies on the banks of the 'holy' Ganges and it is famous for its riverfront and the *ghats,* the flights of steps leading down to the river where people perform their holy rituals and day-to-day activities. Hindu tradition posits in the city the power to set all living beings free from the chain of reincarnations, which is why Varanasi is considered the most auspicious place to die. Cremation rituals and ritual ablutions publicly performed on its *ghats* bestow a sacred meaning on the whole city's riverfront. Since ancient times, Varanasi has been home to *gurus,* saints, ascetics, poets, devotees. *Babas* and *sadhus* – that is how holy men are called – are a common sight in the landscape of Varanasi, they are welcomed and worshipped and contribute to enhance the religious aura of the city. Such a 'sacredscape' (Singh 1993; 2009) seems also to be a great attraction to Western travellers, who come in millions every year. In tourist representations Varanasi embodies discourses of otherness in many ways; the city is depicted and promoted as 'mystical', 'timeless', 'exotic'; it is portrayed as reflecting the quintessential holiness of India, and the landscape representing that is particularly the *ghats.* However, Varanasi and the *ghats* are not only the place where sacred rituals are performed. They are also the place where everyday activities are carried out, where people do the laundry, wash their teeth, play cricket, work, or just hang out and drink *chai*. Varanasi is at once a pilgrimage city, a tourist site and an ordinary place, with all the implications that this involves in terms of cultural negotiations, processes of identity, and diverse ways of using, visualising and constructing space.

This makes this city a particularly interesting place for observing how different discourses, representations, cultural practices come together and how tourism is implicated and engages with all that. Moreover, to focus on this particular tourist site allows to fill the gap in the lack of extensive investigation on tourist practices in 'Oriental' landscapes, as well as a lack of attention on 'spiritual landscapes' within mainstream Anglo-European geography. Besides, as already mentioned, Varanasi allows to widen the academic debate on landscape with non-Western theories and concepts referring to visual practices and to practice more broadly.

The thesis develops in five chapters. Chapter 1 provides the theoretical framework that supports my analysis of tourist representations and practices in Varanasi. In this chapter I review relevant academic literature on tourism and landscape as well as significant literature on Varanasi more specifically. Moreover, the chapter provides some insights into the two Hindu concepts of *darshan* and *karma,* which dialogue with ideas of gaze and practice, and which I consider particularly relevant in understanding the landscape of Varanasi. Chapter 2 puts theory into practice by looking at the methodology that informed my research and its entanglements with the context of Varanasi. Chapter 3 opens the empirical part of the thesis by discussing dominant representations and discourses on Varanasi. The chapter focuses in particular on three main narratives: Hindu, tourist and local narratives, the three being all embroiled with each other. Chapter 4 complicates the discussion on representation by exploring how tourists negotiate their imagined landscape with the actual landscape through practice. This chapter looks at what tourists actually *do* in Varanasi and how the tourist landscape is constructed through their practices and bodily interactions. The choice to dedicate separate chapters to investigating tourist representations of Varanasi and their practices in the city must be understood as an analytical device. While acknowledging the risk of crystallising the dynamic thrust that urged tourism and landscape to be rethought as 'more-than-representational' (Lorimer 2005) into a binary logic counterposing representation and the visual to practice and the body, I have decided to dwell on each separately in order to better bring into focus the genealogies of their entanglements. Continuing the exploration of tourist spatial practices, Chapter 5 examines more closely the spaces of Western tourism in Varanasi, arguing the while some of these spaces can be roughly mapped out, these cartographies are unstable and shifting, constituted as much by tourists' improvisational and 'disobedient' movements, as they are by fixed patterns. In the Conclusions chapter I summarise the main themes addressed in the thesis and its contribution to the current academic debate, and point out some open questions for possible future research.

CHAPTER 1

THEORISING TOURISM AND LANDSCAPE IN VARANASI

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the theoretical framework informing my thesis, which draws mainly on tourism studies, the geographical debate about landscape, and Orientalism. Landscape, in particular, constitutes the key concept through which I have chosen to explore tourist narratives and practices in Varanasi, and in this chapter I shall discuss the theoretical foundation which makes landscape suited to this aim. Of course, each of the strands that sustain my research is vast and concerned with its own agendas. However, some common directions emerge and it is to those common themes that the literature reviewed here makes reference. In particular, my theoretical discussion revolves around three axes. The first one is concerned with modern paradoxes: theorisations on tourism as well as landscape have increasingly drawn attention to the epistemological paradoxes which characterise modernity; debates about authenticity in the tourist experience and the tensions implicit in the 'duplicity' of landscape (Daniels 1989) are notable examples. The second one deals with the visual, representation and the line of research opened by academic discussions about the gaze. Feminist critique on the masculine, disembodied gaze (for example Haraway 1991; Rose 1992), Denis Cosgrove's iconographic approach in landscape studies, John Urry's idea of the tourist gaze in tourism research, all inspired a large body of work

centred on vision and the power relations implicit in it. The third axis has to do with practice and performance and points to the 'performance turn' brought about in the social sciences by non-representational theories, where the focus of research shifts from representation to notions of affect, embodiment, corporeality and performance (Lorimer, 2005; Thrift, 1996; 1997; 1999; Wylie 2005). In this respect, I would like to make clear that while 'performance' is a term theoretically appropriated by different disciplines, most notably cultural anthropology (Goffman 1959; MacCannell 1999 [1976]), and theatre studies, my use of the term in the thesis is restricted to the literature informed by cultural geography, especially the contribution of cultural geography to tourism (for example Coleman and Crang 2002; Crouch 1999; Edensor 2000; Haldrup and Larsen 2010).

These conceptual axes unfold through the main parts which structure the chapter; these deal respectively with tourism (Part I), a synthesis of landscape and tourism theories (Part II) and the relevance of those main bodies of work to India in general and Varanasi in particular (Part III).

In the first part of the chapter (sections 1.2 to 1.5) I review some key works which have significantly influenced the way in which we understand tourism. In this respect, it may be worth mentioning that, despite the intrinsic geographical dimension that tourism has, most of the groundbreaking studies which contributed to the academic debate on tourism actually draw on social theory, anthropology in particular (see for example Clifford 1997a; Cohen 2004; Edensor 1998a; Graburn 1983; MacCannell 1999 [1976]); Smith 1977, Urry 2002a [1990]). However, more recently geographers have added to the understanding of cultures of travel by focusing on their spatial dimension and exploring in more detail the cultural geographies of tourism.

The second part of the chapter is devoted to landscape and tourism. In particular, section 1.6 looks at how geographical theories on landscape engage with tourism. The aim of this section is to show how theorisations of landscape allow for a deeper understanding of tourism, and what role landscape has in the tourist experience.

The last part of the chapter deals more specifically with my case study. In section 1.7 I engage with postcolonial theory in order to discuss some dominant tropes employed in

the construction of the tourist landscape of Varanasi, and review key literature regarding tourism and heritage in Varanasi.

In section 1.8 I suggest some alternative ways of looking at gaze and practice as constitutive of landscape, and draw on the Hindu concepts of *darshan* (seeing) and *karma* (action) to provide the theoretical framework of my research with further, trans-cultural, conceptual tools. Such parallels, or 'theoretical encounters', I argue, shall enable a deeper understanding of the specific cultural context where theories of landscape apply. The chapter then closes with some summary remarks.

PART I: SOME 'THREADS' IN TOURISM STUDIES

1.2 TOURISM: A MODERN EXPERIENCE

Tourism is often considered a modern experience *par excellence* (MacCannell 1999 [1976])*.* The tourist as a metaphor for the modern subject is a key idea within tourism studies. Urry (2002a [1990]: 4) notes that:

> To be a tourist is one of the characteristics of the 'modern' experience. Not to 'go away' is like not possessing a car or a nice house. It has become a marker of status in modern societies and is also thought to be necessary for good health.

Oakes stresses that tourism embodies the paradoxical nature of modernity. Oakes' point, to which I shall return later, is that modernity is constituted by a complexity of tensions and paradoxes and that tourism is central to those tensions (see Oakes 1997; 1998; 2005). This theme has been recently developed by Minca and Oakes in *Travels in Paradox* (2006b), where they explore the paradoxes of the tourist experience through a series of case studies discussed by prominent tourism scholars.

However, the groundwork for all reflections about tourism and modernity is Dean MacCannell's *The Tourist* (1976), which provided the theoretical foundation for rethinking the tourist experience as a distinctive product of modernity. MacCannell's theory of 'the tourist' is twofold. On the one hand, he studied 'actual tourists in search of experience' and provided a sociological analysis of this social group; on the other hand, he focused on 'the tourist' as 'one of the best models available for modern-man-in-general' (1999 [1976]: 1). In other words, by exploring the role of the tourist in modern society, MacCannell supplied a structural analysis of modern society as a whole. He argued that one of the fundamental characteristics of modernity is the 'social redefinition of the categories of "truth" and "reality"' (*ibid.*: 91), and maintained that 'the modern disruption of real life and the simultaneous emergence of a fascination for the "real life" of others' constitute one of the great contradictions of modernity. He explained that 'Modern Man' is losing connection with his (sic) own world, made up of his work bench, the town he lives in, his family, his neighbourhood, but at the same time, he is becoming more and more interested in 'the "real life" of others' (*ibid.*). As a result, MacCannell argued, *cultural representations* (*ibid.*: 92, my emphasis) of reality are prevailing on reality itself in modern society, which is no longer functioning upon a clear distinction between *truth* and *nontruth* as it used to be in pre-modern societies (*ibid.*: 91, emphasis in original). Drawing on the Marxian approach, MacCannell brought into focus the relationship between modernity and the production and consumption of the touristic experiences. He argued that tourism is a 'cultural production' which relies largely on signs. Tourists are guided to consume experiences which are represented, prefigured and promised by the tourism industry through its powerful apparatus made up of brochures, guidebooks, advertisements, souvenirs, magazines, postcards and so forth. MacCannell explained how the connection between reality and representation became crucial in modern society and how this resonates in modern tourism. Relying on the work of Erving Goffman (1959), he pointed out that:

> it is no longer sufficient simply to *be* a man in order to be perceived as one. Now it is often necessary to *act out* reality and truth

Here MacCannell addressed one of the great issues of modernity – and a crucial aspect within tourism – namely the notion of *authenticity*. Drawing on Goffman he suggested the idea of *front* and *back regions*, and argued that this spatial division 'is primarily a *social* one, based on the type of social performance that is staged in a place, and on the social roles found there' (*ibid.*, emphasis in original). The front is the place where customers and service persons meet, while the back is where members of the home team withdraw to rest and to prepare between one performance and another. Examples of the first type of space are reception areas, lobbies, parlours, whereas kitchens, washrooms, boiler rooms, MacCannell explains, are typical examples of back regions. Access to each of these regions is differently regulated according to the diverse social functions embodied by people. Goffman distinguished three main groups on the basis of functions: 'those who perform; those performed to; and outsiders who neither perform in the show nor observe it' (Goffman 1959: 144-45, quoted in MacCannell 1999 [1976]: 92). 'Performers' have access to front and back regions; 'audience' can only access front regions, while 'outsiders are excluded from both regions' (*ibid.*).

MacCannell argued that such division allows for mystification of social reality. He says:

> [...] a weakened sense of reality appears with the differentiation of society into front and back. Once this division is established, there can be no return to a state of nature. Authenticity itself moves to inhabit mystification.
>
> (1999 [1976]: 93)

He explained that 'a back region, closed to audiences and outsiders, allows concealment of props and activities that might discredit the performance out front'. Hence – he maintains – 'sustaining a firm sense of social reality requires some *mystification*' (*ibid.*, emphasis in original). Back regions are popularly believed to

contain 'secrets'; they are places where one can find the 'intimate and real' against the 'show' played out on the front stage (*ibid.:* 94). And in contemporary society, MacCannell goes on to argue, intimacy and closeness are given much significance because they are perceived as more 'real'. Being 'one of them' means being allowed to share back regions with 'them'. It is this kind of authenticity that tourists seek. Sightseers are stirred by a desire to see life as it is actually lived, to partake of the real life of the places that they visit, to go beyond 'false fronts' and access 'intimate reality' (*ibid.:* 95). The tourist industry rouses and accomplishes such a desire by promising 'off-the-beaten-path' tours and authentic experiences 'with local people'. Mystification is designed to generate and support a sense of reality. As MacCannell noted, 'tourists commonly take guided tours of social establishments because they provide easy access to areas of the establishment ordinarily closed to outsiders' (*ibid.:* 98). In this way they feel they have access to the 'real lives' of others. But what is actually being shown to tourists is not the 'real' back stage, as it was meant by Goffman, but 'a *staged* back region, a kind of living museum for which we have no analytical terms' (*ibid.:* 99, emphasis added). Here MacCannell expounded his innovative idea of *staged authenticity,* a concept which has deeply informed tourism studies. MacCannell argued that tourists' 'authentic experience' is actually produced through a new form of social space where a 'staged intimacy' is acted out and outsiders are allowed to view details of the inner working of a commercial, industrial, domestic or public institution (*ibid.*). This is the case, for example, of restaurants opening up their kitchens to guests, or of guided tours into factories and banks, or, more recently, of 'homestay' tourism. MacCannell maintained that the structural development of modern society is characterised by the ubiquitous emergence of such touristic space. He explained:

> This space can be called a *stage set,* a *tourist setting* or simply a *set* depending on how purposefully worked up for tourists the display is. The New York Stock Exchange viewed from the balcony set up for sightseers is a tourist setting, since there is no evidence that the show below is *for* the sightseers. The exhibitions of the back regions of the world at Disneyland in

Anaheim, California are constructed only for sightseers, however, and can be called "stage sets".

<div align="right">(1999 [1976]: 100, emphasis in original)</div>

MacCannell argued that the relationship between truth and representation is complex and cannot be simply flattened into the mere counterposition between the original and the replica. What he suggested is that in tourism replicas are presented as more real than the real thing itself:

Settings are often not merely copies or replicas of real-life situations but copies that are presented as disclosing more about the real thing than the real thing itself discloses.

<div align="right">(*ibid.*: 102)</div>

As we shall see later, the debate about authenticity and its intrinsic expression of the paradoxes of modernity is central to tourism studies and has been discussed by several scholars. When MacCannell emerged within the academy in the Seventies, the attitude of intellectuals was to consider tourism superficial and inauthentic. Discussing the relationship between tourists and intellectuals, MacCannell himself pointed out how the touristic experience resulting from the tourist setting was held to be morally inferior to mere experience because based on inauthenticity and as such superficial. The tourist experience – it was believed – is always mystified; it contains lies whilst presenting itself as truthful, it pretends to reveal the reality behind false fronts (see MacCannell 1999 [1976]: 102-103).

As MacCannell noted, 'the idea here is that a false back is more insidious and dangerous than a false front' (*ibid.*: 102). One of the main exponents of this line of criticism of tourists is Daniel Boorstin (1961) through his concept of 'pseudo-event'. Boorstin argued that modern tourists travel within an air-conditioned bubble searching

for experiences which are just 'an artificial product to be consumed in the very places where the real thing is as free as air' (Boorstin 1961: 99). He claimed that tourists are contented with facades, within tourist settings which are designed to *look* authentic but in fact keep the tourist away from the actual contact with the natives, turning real places into 'cultural mirages':

> [tourist attractions] are ways for the traveller to remain out of contact with foreign peoples in the very act of "sightseeing" them. They keep the natives in quarantine while the tourist in air-conditioned comfort views them through a picture window. They are the cultural mirages now found at tourist oases everywhere.
>
> (Boorstin 1961: 99)

Boorstin expressed a commonsense attitude among tourism scholars according to which tourists are considered passive consumers of pseudo-events, whereas travellers embody the active, strenuous search for people, experience and adventure (see *ibid.*: 85). Such a perspective – which especially in the 1960s dominated the academy – was also developed by Turner and Ash in *The Golden Hordes* (1975), which highlights how modernity marked a shift from the romantic 'individual traveller' of the nineteenth, mid-twentieth century, to the 'mass society tourist'. This is characterised by a way of travelling in which tourists are placed at the centre of a strictly regulated world which is meant to protect them from the harsh reality of the place visited. Here travel agents, hotel managers, and couriers function as 'surrogate parents' who take care of the supposedly vulnerable tourist relieving him/her of any responsibility (see Urry 2002a [1990]: 7), an idea that closely recalls Cohen's concept of 'environmental bubble' (Cohen 1972: 166-167). In this perspective, indigenous cultures are necessarily presented in a superficial, oversimplified way so that difference may be tamed within a reassuring frame which Western tourists can easily recognise. As a result, the tourist space came to be characterised by a dull set of hotels and tourist sights lacking any contradiction, a space that becomes:

a small monotonous world that everywhere shows us our own image… the pursuit of the exotic and diverse ends in uniformity.

(Turner and Ash, 1975: 292)

MacCannell was likewise concerned with the inauthenticity and superficiality of modern life, but he criticised the moral distinction between travellers and tourists and argued against what he called the '*they are the tourists, I am not* equation' (1999 [1976]: 107) which characterised intellectuals' approach to tourism. He disagreed with Boorstin's assertion that tourists just seek inauthentic experiences. On the contrary, MacCannell claimed that all tourists embody a pursuit of authenticity, which can be considered as a modern form of human beings' concern with the sacred. Just like pilgrims do, tourists search for authenticity in other places and times away from their ordinary life, which is increasingly losing attachment to intimate and real things. In this sense, MacCannell's study of the tourist provided the analytical tools to understand 'the big picture' of modern society and its inner tensions.

Rather critical of the 'elite' intellectual approach to tourism was also Cohen (1972; 1979; 1988), who criticised the strict categorisation of tourists. Cohen argued that there is actually a variety of tourist types and modes of experience, and identifies four main typologies: 'drifter', 'explorer', 'individual mass tourist', 'organised mass tourist' (Cohen 1979). Cohen maintained that there is an 'experiential' and 'existential' aspect of the tourist experience which does not rely on – and to some extent even rejects – the 'environmental bubble' upon which the conventional tourist offer is organised. Tourist modes of experience occur at varying degrees and after all, as Urry (2002a [1990]: 8) noted, 'the existence of such bubbles does allow many people to visit places which otherwise they would not'. What Cohen argued is that 'pseudo-events' are never entirely 'pseudo'; to some extent they always leave some room for tourists' encounter with the 'strangeness' of the places visited.

1.3 THE TOURIST GAZE

Representation is another crucial aspect of tourism which many scholars have investigated, and which is closely related to the problem of authenticity. The way people imagine places, choose their destinations, travel, sightsee, and remember their journeys is largely shaped by a complex process of representation whereby places, cultures, people are 'constructed' and circulate through images. Postcolonial critique has added to the debate on representation by showing how tourist experiences should be situated within the broader discursive formations which widely influence Western imagination about the 'non-West'. Indeed, the encounter with 'the other', and the diverse ways in which people try to make sense of it, constitute the core of the experience of travel. Tourists construct representations of 'the distant' and 'the elsewhere' that are continually negotiated at various levels. Postcolonial scholars argue that such images are deeply shaped by the colonial legacy of the West, and that they are mostly influenced by what Said (2003 [1978]) calls 'the Orientalist aesthetics' (see also Bate 1992; D'Hauteserre 2004, 2005; Gregory, 1994, 1999; Hutnyk 1996; King 1999). Many scholars argue that such aesthetics of representation essentially relies on the visual, and that tourism is a strongly *visual* practice. The foundational text in this line of thought is John Urry's work *The Tourist Gaze* (2002a [1990]), which stresses the role that the gaze plays in constructing the tourist experience. Urry argues that a fundamental part of tourists' experience consists of 'gazing upon' a range of different landscapes and scenes that we encounter in our journeys and that are out of our ordinary life (*ibid.*: 1). This gaze, he maintains, is 'socially organised and systematised'; there are indeed many 'professional experts who help to construct and develop our gaze as tourists' (*ibid.*). Advertisements, magazines, films, television, travel books constantly produce and reproduce objects and places to be consumed by the tourist gaze. Moreover, gazes are *situated*: they have changed and developed in different societies and in diverse historical periods, they vary across social groups and times. In his book, Urry analyses how the tourist gaze is constructed, who authorises it, how it affects the places which are its objects, how it relates with other social practices. He explains that 'gazes are constructed through difference':

The gaze in any historical period is constructed in relationship to its opposite, to non-tourist forms of social experience and consciousness. What makes a particular tourist gaze depends upon what it is contrasted with; what the forms of non-tourist experience happen to be. The gaze therefore presupposes a system of social activities and signs which locate the particular tourist practices, not in terms of some intrinsic characteristics, but through the contrasts implied with non-tourist social practices, particularly those based within the home and paid work.

(Urry 2002a [1990]: 1-2)

Like MacCannell, Urry considers tourism, sightseeing and travel important social phenomena. Leisure tourism is widely conceived as an opposite to work; holidays take tourists away from their place of residence and employment into places that have been selected because of their contrast with the *familiarity* of the everyday places that tourists inhabit. However, non-familiar sights may have different features and they may be selected for different purposes. In other words, tourist places respond to different types of gazes. Urry analyses a number of diverse aspects of the tourist gaze and highlights that the gaze can take several forms, the two main ones being the *romantic* and the *collective.* This distinction relates to the kinds of organisation that the tourist industry develops to meet these different gazes. The 'romantic gaze' prioritises solitude, privacy and a sort of spiritual relationship with the object of the gaze. Natural landscapes and sceneries of 'untouched beauty' are usually the favourite objects of the romantic gaze, which Urry believes to be an inherently bourgeois attitude. On the contrary, the 'collective gaze' demands the presence of large numbers of people who confer atmosphere and liveliness to a place (see Urry 2002a [1990]: 43). These are places such as seaside resorts or major cities like London, Las Vegas, Hong Kong, which would look strange if they were empty. As Urry notes, 'it is other people that make such places' (*ibid.*). Urry highlights that in both cases representation plays a fundamental role in the way people enjoy a particular tourist experience:

What people 'gaze upon' are ideal representations of the view in question that they internalise from postcards and guidebooks (and TV programmes and the internet).

<div align="right">(ibid.: 78)</div>

Here again the paradox of authenticity emerges. Urry makes the point that much of what is appreciated by the tourist is not directly experienced reality itself but representations of it, mainly through the medium of photography (*ibid.*); to the point that we are able to recognise the authentic thanks to the fact that we have become so acquainted with its reproductions. This has to do with the semiotics of tourism, that is to say with the relationship between seeing and signs, something that has been analysed by Culler (1981: 132), who points out:

The existence of reproductions is what makes something original, or authentic, and by surrounding ourselves with markers and reproductions we represent to ourselves the possibility of authentic experiences in other times and other places.

The gaze is here once again at the centre of academic enquiry about tourism, at least of this strand of tourism studies, which acknowledges the visual as the dominant and constitutive part of the tourist experience.

1.4 THE 'PERFORMATIVE TURN'

A significant challenge to – or we might say a development of – this visual-centred approach comes from the work of the scholars who shifted the focus of their investigations from the gaze to the *practices* of tourism, with a particular attention to the whole sensorium that the experience of travel involves (Baerenholdt et al. 2004;

Barenholdt and Haldrup 2004; Game 1991; Haldrup and Larsen 2010; Desmond 1999a; Lofgren 1999a; Sheller and Urry 2004).

The cornerstone work of this new approach is Tim Edensor's *Tourists at the Taj* (1998a), which explores the tourist practices played out at a symbolic site – the Taj Mahal in India – and the meanings that came to be associated with it. Edensor is interested in uncovering what tourists do and think at symbolic sites, where a range of different – sometimes contesting – narratives and practices converge. By looking at the Taj as a cultural laboratory, he provides a comprehensive study of the way in which tourist space is constructed, regulated and performed. Edensor focuses especially on the performative aspect of tourism. In particular, he analyses four main embodied practices played out at the Taj: walking, gazing, photographing and remembering, which are usually interlinked. Interestingly, Edensor also includes a reflexive analysis of his own performance as a researcher at the Taj, thereby stressing the parallels that can be drawn between tourists and ethnographers (see Crang 2011). Indeed, recalling Crick's (1991) work, Edensor notes that both tourists and ethnographers 'reproduce conventional representations which codify how difference can be understood'. They both 'follow instrumental strategies whereby they may acquire experience and tangible rewards; tourists gain souvenirs and photographs whilst ethnographers […] collect material for publication' (Edensor 1998a: 2). Edensor has also explored narration, as 'a form of performance especially pertinent to tourism' (*ibid.*: 69). He examines the most popular stories about the Taj Mahal, from colonial and national(ist) narratives, to religious discourses, to 'counter-narratives'. Edensor's work is particularly significant from a geographical perspective. Not only does it provide an in-depth analysis of tourist practices, it also shows how such practices are spatialised, how they are emplaced in specific sites and, most importantly, how they produce and re-produce tourist space. He states that 'tourist performances specify the relationship between people and the sites they visit' (*ibid.*: 67) and explains that different types of performances occur in different types of spaces, as well as how different meanings attached to specific sites cause different behaviours to take place. By adopting the metaphor of symbolic sites as 'stages' or 'theatres' where diverse performances are enacted, Edensor emphasises the 'processual' nature of performances and theorises different types of tourist space, distinguishing between 'enclavic' and 'heterogeneous' spaces:

> […] All these performative processes ceaselessly reconstitute the symbolic values of tourist sites and reproduce them as dramaturgical spaces. Clearly there is a relationship between performance and enclavic and heterogeneous tourist spaces. According to my conception, enclavic spaces are carefully staged and designed so that performance is somewhat prescriptive, whereas in heterogeneous spaces, stage boundaries are less clear and a wider range of improvisation is encouraged.

> (1998: 62)

Enclavic spaces are highly regulated and strictly controlled; here tourists are usually cut off from social exchange with local people and 'shielded from potentially offensive sights, sounds and smells' (*ibid.*: 45). This kind of space is characterised by 'the provision of "international" tourist standards' (*ibid.*) and it accommodates mostly package tourism. In contrast, Edensor goes on to explain, heterogeneous spaces allow for sensual experience and free movement; they are places where tourist facilities coexist with local businesses, shops, street vendors, public and private institutions. Here tourists – largely domestic and backpacker – have the chance to mingle with locals and immerse themselves in a vivid and multifarious sensual experience which along with the visual fosters a variegated set of stimuli including tactile sensations, smell, sound and a mix of tastes and aromas. Edensor is particularly interested in exploring the sensory experiences involved in contemporary tourist practices (see Edensor 2006), thus suggesting a new direction in tourism research that has been followed by several scholars. More generally, Edensor calls for a more dynamic conceiving of tourism, which he refers to as a *process* that can hardly be captured within fixed definitions. In his work, he emphasises 'the different and ever-changing processes of tourism', and stresses that 'tourist sites are themselves not static entities'; on the contrary, he says, 'their material shape, symbolic importance and the ways in which they are perceived, represented, and narrated change over time' (Edensor 1998a: 8).

1.5 New developments in tourism research: the contribution of cultural geographers

The idea of tourism as a dynamic process has been further developed by Mike Crang (2004), whose work focuses on tourist practices and cultures, looking at how tourist cultures develop, and how tourism invents, makes and remakes places. He argues that both places and tourists are processual, and that tourism scripts and shapes landscapes as much as pre-shaped destinations 'script' and 'shape' tourists:

> Places are made, done and performed, and through making, doing, and performing them tourists become, well, tourists. […] Tourists do not have pre-given identities; rather, there are identities formed through processes of identification and self-creation.

> (Crang 2004: 82)

Crang reinstates the role of cultural geography in tourism research, showing how much the geographical perspective can say about the shaping of destinations and the cultural processes that tourism brings together. He conceives of tourism research as 'examining tourism not simply as consuming places but also as a dynamic force creating them' (*ibid.:* 74). Accordingly, a significant strand of cultural geographic research turned to look at the complexities, performances, paradoxes, cultural negotiations inherent in contemporary tourism (see, among others, Crang and Franklin 2001; Crouch 1999; Minca and Oakes 2006a; Obrador et al 2009). Other geographers have been adding to the understanding of tourism through a range of contributions which stretch from approaches centred on spatial science (see for example Butler 2004), to studies on tourism and identity (for example Deforges 2000), to work on 'sustainable tourism' (for example Hall and Lew 1998; Hughes 2004), and many other research subjects.

The emergent 'performative approach' to tourism and the importance of 'the sensual' in tourist experience is also central to David Crouch's work (see Crouch 1999; 2001;

2004; 2005; 2009). Crouch welcomes the focus on 'doing' brought about in cultural studies by key scholars such as Edensor, and theorised by 'non-representational' theory, which lays emphasis on the everyday aspects of living, on what individuals *do* in their ordinary life. Crouch suggests that following the direction pointed out by Edensor and the non-representational approach, new research in cultural studies and tourism should aim at making sense of meaning, value, significance and identity engaged in the experience of travel through greater attention to what individuals do, think, and feel.

In line with this renewed interest in the embodied subjectivity of the tourist experience, Soile Veijola and Aeva Jokinen draw attention to the body of the tourist, arguing that we need to study the (tourist) body more systematically (see Jokinen and Veijola 2003; Veijola and Jokinen 1994). Although coming from a different background, Veijola and Jokinen's plea for a more body-centred tourism research has been influential in tourism-oriented work within cultural geography, where a new wave of studies focused on notions of corporeality, performance and affect has emerged (see, among others, Crouch and Lübbren, 2003; Obrador-Pons 2003; 2007; Wylie 2002a; Scarles 2009). Veijola and Jokinen stress 'the *absence of the body* from the corpus of the sociological studies on tourism' (Veijola and Jokinen 1994: 149, emphasis in original), and note that not only the analyses, but also the '*subject* of most of the analyses, the analyst himself has, likewise, lacked a body. Only the pure mind, free from bodily and social subjectivity, is presented as having been at work when analysing field experiences' (*ibid.,* emphasis in original). Instead, Veijola and Jokinen argue that the tourist experience has to be considered not only as 'embodied', but also as *sexed.* Veijola (2006) notes that mobility is commonly considered as an inherently masculine activity, contrasted with the notion of dwelling and belonging traditionally held as feminine. The gendered nature of the modern travelling subject has also been explored by Jessica Jacobs (2006), who focused on the tourist-local encounter in the beach resorts of the Sinai desert, where tourists are mainly European women and locals are often Egyptian men travelling from other regions of Egypt in search of work. Jacobs investigated the tensions and paradoxes that arise 'when European women take on the supposedly masculine subjectivity of travel (and sex tourism)' (Jacobs 2006: 125; see also Jacobs 2010).

The encounter between tourist and the other is central to Oakes' (2005) work, which looks at how the modern subject is reflexively constituted through the *placed* encounter between tourist and other. Oakes shifts the focus from travel to place, arguing that place is the key element in the formation of modern subjectivity:

> The modern subject cannot be limited by a narrow focus on the mobility of traveler or tourist. Rather, modern subjectivity is best conceived in the places of encounter, where traveler and other meet and are forced to negotiate the meaning of the place in which they find themselves.

> (2005: 38-39)

Instead of focusing on travel *per se*, Oakes suggests, we should direct our attention toward places travelled to. In this way, the traditional dichotomy between traveller and tourist – already challenged by MacCannell – loses its power to articulate the modern subject, and the focus shifts on place, which is the actual 'laboratory' for subject formation. The importance of place in tourism has been recently highlighted also by Urry, who stresses that 'the modern subject is a "connoisseur" of places' (Urry 2006: vii). In place, the tourist is no longer a detached, 'universal' travelling subject, but a situated individual who encounters what is 'other' and tries to make sense of it, as much as 'the other' in turn tries to make sense of the tourist:

> In tourism, place becomes a product both of tourist and other – those who are, in fact, living in the spaces of travel occupied by the tourist. They are the objects of the tourist's gaze, and yet are themselves agents in subject formation through their encounter with tourism, an encounter in which the tourist also becomes the other.

> (Oakes 2005: 39)

Place seems to offer a new perspective through which to explore the complexities of the modern experience. Indeed, the underlying preoccupation of Oakes' work is to bring into focus the ambivalence inherent in modernity and its fundamental dualisms. His point is that tensions between progress and loss, reason and emotion, individualism and community, abstraction and embodiment constitute the core of modernity, and express its problematic nature. Oakes is particularly concerned with issues of authenticity, which he considers a paradox and a 'phantom' of modernity (Oakes 2006: 232).

The problem of authenticity as well as the relationship between travel, places and the paradoxes of modernity have also been discussed by Minca, who has devoted much of his work to the postmodern reflection on tourism (see Minca 2001; 2005; Minca and Oakes 2006a; Oakes and Minca 2004). Minca has given particular attention to tourist practices of landscape and the role that landscape has in constructing not only tourist imaginaries, but also tourists' experience and encounter with the other (see Minca 2007b). Tourist narratives about 'the other' have also been explored by Minca, who questioned ideas of 'heritage' and 'cultural identity' in the light of postcolonial critique, highlighting how tourist representations and performances are intertwined with colonial legacies (see Minca 2006).

It will be clear at this point that the field of enquiry of tourism research is wide and multifaceted. In this section and the previous ones, I have highlighted some key themes which have informed tourism studies in the last few decades. The first is the idea of tourism as the epitome of modernity, as a lens through which to analyse tensions and paradoxes of the modern subject. The second is the semiotic approach to tourism, powerfully expressed by the concept of 'the tourist gaze' and its emphasis on tourism as a visual practice, a concept which raises issues related to the notion of representation. And finally, the developing of the visual into a more comprehensive approach, which brings into focus the *performative* aspect of tourism and highlights the 'processual' and dynamic nature inherent in cultures of travel.

PART II: LANDSCAPE AND TOURISM

1.6 THE TOURIST LANDSCAPE

As stated in the introduction of the chapter, the same theoretical strands which underlie tourism research can be traced in geographical discussion on landscape as well, starting from the assumption which sits at the very core of the landscape debate, namely the conceptualising of landscape as a site of paradox and epistemological tensions.

Landscape is one of the most powerful and at the same time complex and ambiguous concepts deployed in geography. Its history and meaning are often contested, and its theoretical definition has been engaging geographers – especially within the Anglophone academy – for the past three decades (see, in particular, Cosgrove 1984; 1985; 1998; 2003; Cosgrove and Daniels 1988; Daniels 1989, 1993; Duncan 1990; Duncan and Duncan 1988; Henderson 1998; Matless 1996; 1998; D. Mitchell 2000; 2001; 2002; 2003a; 2003b; Olwig 1996; 2002; 2003).

The most peculiar characteristic of landscape is that it brings together two distinct epistemological fields: the material and the representational or, in Matless' words, 'the ontological' and 'the ideological' (Matless 2003: 230, drawing on Daniels 1989: 197). Such peculiarity has been explored and theorised by geographers in different ways. Cosgrove notes that:

> Geographically, the idea of landscape is the most significant expression of the historical attempt to bring together visual image and material world.
>
> (Cosgrove 2003: 254)

Daniels (1989) refers to this characteristic in terms of 'duplicity' of landscape, which is at the same time object and perspective, 'solid earth and superficial scenery' (*ibid*.:

197). Daniels argues that it is precisely such a duplicity that gives the landscape its analytical potential, and suggests that:

> we should beware of attempts to define landscape, to resolve its contradictions; rather we should abide in its duplicity.

> (Daniels 1989: 218)

This very duplicity has been described also as a 'paradox' (Guarrasi 2001; Minca 2007b). Minca insists on the tension that underlies the concept of landscape and points out that:

> landscape is perhaps the only geographical metaphor able to refer to both an object and its description; to recall, at once, a tract of land and its image, its representation.

> (Minca 2007b: 1)

This peculiar vagueness of landscape has been crucial to its historical development in modern European academic geography since Humboldt's project. Humboldt's landscape, which lies in between aesthetics and science, subject and object, representation and territory, symbolises 'a "threshold" of Modernity' (Minca 2007a: 183), a 'space of potential and possibility' for the European bourgeoisie, which was in transition from the Romantic imagination to the dominance of scientific knowledge (see Minca 2007a). The original ambiguity of landscape remains within the geographical debate as a kind of thorn in the side, a thorn which several scholars have attempted to make sense of.

A cornerstone in the history of landscape is Denis Cosgrove's (1984) *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape.* Central to Cosgrove's work is the visual experience of landscape, which he defines as 'a way of seeing' (1984:1). He states:

> The way people see their world is a vital clue to the way they understand that world and their relationship with it. Between 1400 and 1900 Europeans changed markedly in the ways that they saw. One indicator of the change in their vision is the idea of landscape.

> (1984: 9)

Cosgrove brings into focus the relationship between power and the visual by examining the various ways in which landscape and Western imagination interact. The dialectics between sight, geographical imagination and power, the ways in which sight is involved in the construction and representation of landscape are the centrepiece of his enquiry. Sight implies a correlation between the viewer and what is seen, and in Cosgrove's idea such a relation is one of dominance and subordination, where the viewer is the privileged actor, since he is in the position of selecting, framing, composing what is seen (see Cosgrove 2003). As he puts it, 'the viewer exercises an imaginative power in turning material space into landscape' (2003: 254).

The question of power and the social and political implications inscribed in landscape have been widely explored by geographers, particularly by scholars drawing on feminist theory (for example Haraway 1991; Nash 1996; Rose 1992; 1993b) and Marxian approaches (for example D. Mitchell 1994; 2000; 2003a; 2003b). The visual theorist W. J. T. Mitchell addresses the question of power by arguing that landscape 'doesn't merely signify or symbolise power relations; it is an instrument of cultural power, perhaps even an agent of power' (W.J.T. Mitchell 1994b: 1). W.J.T. Mitchell emphasises the active role of landscape in the exercise of power and shows how the act of representation is ultimately an act of power, a *process* by which social and subjective identities are formed. He argues that we should not just ask 'what

landscape "is" or "means", but what it *does*, how it works as a cultural practice' (*ibid.*, emphasis in original).

However, criticism about the conceiving of landscape primarily as vision began to be raised. It is actually the foremost proponent of this approach, Denis Cosgrove, who points out some of its limitations:

> [...] critical landscape studies today emphasize the duality and provisional nature of sight: the returned gaze, the capacity of its subjects to manipulate, obscure, subvert or deform visual order.
>
> (Cosgrove 2003: 265)

Cosgrove refers here in particular to 'new spaces of vision' opened by 'advanced optical technologies' which enable images to be made and manipulated in new ways (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, his suggestion of a returning gaze implicit in sight has a wider implication: what is important about this idea is that it extends the agency of the gaze by acknowledging the ability of the 'objects' of the gaze to actively respond, rework and construct their own ways of seeing, becoming themselves, in turn, gazing subjects (see also W.J.T. Mitchell 2005 on the agency of images).

An important turning point in the debate about landscape came from the work of some geographers who began to challenge the supremacy of the visual by claiming the importance of practices in the construction of landscape. A forerunner of this line of thought is J. B. Jackson and his telling metaphor of landscape as a 'theatre' (Jackson 1979). Jackson argues that landscape is not exclusively a visual phenomenon and stresses that it is actually everyday routines that produce and reproduce actual living landscapes. In Jackson's idea vision is practice: the landscape is not so much represented as *performed* (Jackson 1997). Cresswell (2003) further expands such a perspective by focusing on the concept of 'doxic landscapes' (see also Cresswell 1996 on landscape, performance and marginality). He explains that practice and landscape may appear as two contradictory terms as practice is something fluid, mobile, free-

floating, whereas landscape deals with fixity. Nevertheless, Cresswell attempts to draw the two terms together through the idea of 'landscape of practice': his point is that landscapes are 'doxic' in the sense that they are 'practised landscapes', they are 'the product of a particular history' (Cresswell 2003: 277). Such an emphasis on practice follows the wider agenda of non-representational theory (Thrift 1996; 1997; 1999; 2001; Lorimer 2005) where, drawing on the phenomenological approach, special attention is given to notions of performance, practice and corporeality. Accordingly, landscape is rethought as an 'embodied' experience revealing not so much a way of seeing the world as a way of *being in* the world (Ingold 2000; Lorimer 2005; McCormack 2002; Wylie 2002a; 2002b; 2005). Such a perspective is largely informed by the work of thinkers such as of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962 [1942]; 1968 [1961]), Pierre Bourdieu (1977), Michel de Certeau (1984). In the wake of phenomenological theories, landscape and place are often thought together:

> Landscape becomes the close-at-hand, that which is both touching and touched, an affective handling through which self and world merge and entwine. In this ways also notions of *landscape* begin to merge with notions of *place*; landscape and place conjoin intimacy, locality and tactile inhabitation.

> (Wylie 2007: 167, emphasis in original)

Landscape and place are explored together also in some key works such as Adams et al. (2001), Duncan and Ley (1993) and, in tourism, Cartier and Lew (2005), Coleman and Crang (2002).

So how does all this apply to tourism and travel? To what extent can such theorisations of landscape help a deeper understanding of tourism? What is the role of landscape in the tourist experience and how does tourism research attempt to make sense of it? Terkenli (2004) provides an overview of tourism landscape research in the social sciences and critically evaluates the place of landscape in tourism geography. She argues that an important turning point in landscape studies came with the emergence

of critical perspectives that developed first from the structuralist (in the 1970s and 1980s), and later from the postmodern and poststructuralist (in the 1990s) approach which led to a significant rereading of landscape. This basically pivots on the historical and material processes of landscape production, reproduction and consumption. Terkenli explains that while structuralist interpretations of tourism landscapes helped to unveil the dialectical relationships of society-individual and structure-culture built into the landscape, postmodern and poststructuralist approaches definitely shift the focus to the socio-cultural, symbolic nature of landscape. The reflection upon the socio-cultural implications of landscape with the tourist experience found a particularly fertile terrain within the social sciences. We have seen how the Cosgrove tradition brought the dynamics between landscape, sight and social formation onto the geographical agenda. The iconographic approach conceptualises landscape as the act of 'gazing upon' a scene, an idea that John Urry further expands in the perspective of tourism (Urry 2002a [1990]). Although acknowledging the importance of other senses in the construction of 'soundscapes', 'smellscapes' 'tastescapes' and the geographies of touch (Urry 2002a [1990]: 146), Urry claims that the focus on gaze is essential in order to understand 'how within tourism the organising sense within the typical tourist experience is visual' (*ibid.*). The visual potential of landscape in terms of representation is remarkable: landscape has the power of turning fearful and inhospitable places into beauty and desire (Urry 1995); such is the case of the Lake District which, Urry explains, was transformed into the quintessential landscape of Englishness by the Romantic aesthetics (on landscape and Englishness see Matless 1998; Daniels 1993). The same argument has been made by Ring (2000) who shows how the eighteenth-century image of the Alps, depicted as wild and terrifying, has been changed into an iconic representation of 'a unique, visual, cultural, geological and natural phenomenon, indissolubly wed to European history' (Ring 2000: 9). Similarly, Sheller (2002) explains how, by the end of eighteenth century, the tropics started to be romanticised by travellers who began to regard the tropical scenery as a 'painting' (Sheller 2002 quoted in Urry 2002a [1990]: 148).

The reference to the tropics puts forward another important aspect of the relationship between landscape and travel, namely that implicit in the idea of 'imperial landscape' theorised by the postcolonial critique. The expression has been employed by W.J. T.

Mitchell (1994a) who states that 'landscape is a particular historical formation associated with European imperialism' (*ibid.*: 8); as such, he explains, the representation of landscape is to be understood not only in terms of internal ideology aiming to affirm national or class interests, but also as a powerful visual means extended to international relations and intimately linked to discourses of imperialism (*ibid.*: 9; on the connections between travel, landscape and imperialism see also Blunt and McEwan 2002; Driver 2001; Duncan and Gregory 1999). As a matter of fact, landscape is a European invention, born within the context of the Italian Renaissance (see Cosgrove 1985) and hence expressing an inherently European character and attitude. This particular way of seeing, perceiving and framing the world has been employed by European colonial power as a means of appropriation of non-European scenes. By reframing unfamiliar sights within landscape aesthetics adhering to the classical canons of order and proportion, travellers and colonisers were able to understand, characterise and evaluate non-European landscapes (see Wylie 2007: 124). They were able to make the other knowable by projecting – and imposing – their own epistemological and aesthetic values incorporated in specific genres of landscape representation such as the picturesque, the idyllic, the sublime (*ibid.;* see also Duncan 1999). It is indeed in this particular historical period, the eighteenth century, Urry notes, that we witness a 'growth of "scenic tourism" in Britain and then across Europe' (Urry 2002a [1990]: 147), a practice that can be seen as the early days of modern sightseeing, of tourists' vocation of 'collecting sceneries' (Löfgren 2000: 19). In his 'history of vacationing', Löfgren explains:

> The eighteenth-century pioneers of modern tourism developed the kind of virtual reality called the picturesque: a certain way of selecting, framing, and representing views. It taught tourists not only where to look but also how to sense the landscape, experience it, and it is still part of our travel kit although the term has lost its more precise eighteenth-century meaning.
>
> (*Ibid.*)

Landscape worked – and still works today – as a device for subduing strangeness, and the way it did so was by silencing indigenous voices and removing disturbing sights from the scene. Thus, landscape is not simply an artistic fact, but it is also – and most of all – an ideological tool, a means of power through which non-European spaces were made understandable for emerging European elites and metropolitan publics. Landscape became the visual vehicle for affirming a Western worldview. This inherited from the Enlightenment the approach of framing reality through dichotomies, whereby 'the Orient', for example, came to be associated with the irrational/non-rational, with mysticism, with the sacred, with the female, whereas 'the West' embodies the rational, science, the secular, the male (see King 1999; Said 2003 [1978]). Landscape served this epistemology and helped to visually construct 'the Orient' as a land of magic and mystery, a land where ancient traditions and pure spirituality can be experienced, but also 'as an object of sensuous and voluptuous pleasure' (Parry 1993: 299), as well as a space of disorder and chaos.

The visual order granted by landscape and the colonial legacy embedded in it are still alive today within tourism. The set of images, signs, stereotypes which the tourist industry makes use of in order to accomplish – and reinforce – tourists' dreams and myths about 'the Orient' is massively displayed in booklets, brochures, guidebooks. Landscapes are intentionally manipulated through sophisticated marketing strategies which help tourists reframe the unknown – and potentially frightening – 'other' within familiar aesthetic coordinates. Tourist landscape works as a device that places tourists in a strange position: they are *within* the scene (they engage with reality through the gaze) but at the same time they are granted the right distance, the proper perspective which allows them 'to grasp the whole'. Here again landscape acts not simply as an aesthetic experience but as an epistemological tool which enables tourists 'to grasp real things as a picture' (T. Mitchell 1988: 22).

In doing so, tourist landscape strategies re-enact colonial imaginaries and fantasies. Among them, narratives about 'loss' form the most widespread trope through which the non-West is represented: living in a world 'corrupted' by modernity, the Western tourist seeks in the non-West authentic traditions, moral values, unspoiled nature and all those things that modern societies have supposedly lost (see Edensor 1998a: 26;

Minca 2011; Rosaldo 1993). And it is to an iconic representation of the 'non-West' that Tim Edensor draws attention in his seminal work *Tourists at the Taj* (1998a) which, as we have seen, turned the focus of tourism and landscape research to the spatial practices and the embodied dimension involved in the tourist experience. An urge towards non-representational approaches to landscape in tourism also comes from the work of Crouch (2004; 2005; 2009), who intervenes in the debate on tourism and representation suggesting that we should think of landscape as the poetics and the expression of our encounter with the world (Crouch 2009). It is perhaps in this 'poetic encounter' with the world, where representation and embodied experience come together, that the constitutive paradoxes of the tourist landscape highlighted by Minca (2007b) emerge. Indeed, in Minca's view, the adoption of the landscape metaphor within contemporary tourist rhetoric and practice reflects landscape's very original ambiguity. The landscape that Minca analyses is that of Jamaa el Fna square in Marrakech, which is considered a symbolic icon of Morocco, and is in fact a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The square is visited every day by thousand of tourists attracted by its 'magic' aura (*ibid.*: 441). The crowd of local artisans, merchants, musicians, storytellers, snake charmers, magicians that animate the square, and the picturesque terraced French-style cafés which encircle the square bestow on the place a special atmosphere where time seems to have stopped and the 'real Morocco', with its 'culture and traditions' offers itself before the eyes – and the cameras – of tourists (*ibid.*: 441). While this representation is typically provided by tour operators, tourists themselves contribute to construct and sustain this landscape through their practices, the first of which is photographing. In the attempt to take 'the perfect shot' capturing the 'true essence' of Moroccan culture, the tourists-photographers climb on the roof-top terrace of the French-style cafés from which they can dominate the scene. They seem to be quite aware, Minca notes, 'of the way in which a landscape is to be constructed' (*ibid.*: 442): by placing themselves in a dominant position, which allows them the right perspective, they act out the idea of landscape as a way of seeing. It is through those very practices of landscape reproduction that tourists actualise the paradox:

On the one hand, the tourists have to consciously position themselves atop a building in order to 'enjoy' the landscape and to frame it in appropriate fashion, in a clear effort at the 'manufacture' of a cultural product. On the other hand, however, with this gesture and with their photographs, they implicitly treat the landscape as an object, an object that can materially be found *in* Marrakech and captured/reproduced in an infinity of ways. The question then is: in which epistemological field are these tourists placing themselves by locating, creating and re-creating the landscape with their performances?

(*Ibid.*: 443, emphasis in original)

Moreover, in 'landscaping' Jamaa el Fna not only do tourists enact a paradox, they also re-enact a colonial discourse which since the time of the French Protectorate (1912-56) has been framing Morocco 'as an aesthetic object of conservation, as an Other space to be encountered, set up for tourist consumption' (*ibid.*: 441). In a way, Minca argues, Jamaa el Fna square is an invention of the French Protectorate, which 'created' Jamaa el Fna as a tourist destination in order to accomplish its colonial policies.

However, it is not all about landscape and the representation of the non-West. Landscape in tourism is used in a myriad of contexts. It is Minca again who draws attention to the dialectics between 'the fake' and 'the authentic' implicit in the idea of landscape. He does so by examining the landscape of the Italian city of Bellagio and its reproduction in Las Vegas (Minca 2005). The interesting question which underlies Minca's work is whether through landscape we can create places, that is to say whether imaginary can be materialised through landscape and become itself a real place. Subsequently, the key question is: does landscape reproduce reality or does it actually reproduce the *idea* of reality? Bellagio is a city in Northern Italy, one of the quaint tourist destinations on Lake Como. But Bellagio is also an expensive hotel along the Strip in Las Vegas which reproduces the picturesque landscape of the actual Bellagio. While this city means very little to most Italians, Minca explains, it is considered a tourist icon by many Anglo-Americans, who see in Bellagio the symbol of

the typical nineteenth-century Northern Italian lifestyle. It is on this iconic representation of the place-Bellagio that the hotel-Bellagio built, becoming in turn an icon, a must-see place in the wider landscape of Las Vegas, a sort of landscape in the landscape. But it is actually through the very reproduction of the idyllic Bellagio that 'the fake' turns into real, and landscape becomes place:

> the Bellagio is not merely another new hotel with a theme along the Strip – it presents itself, rather, as a veritable landscape, a promise of an urban experience, a monument to gentrification, as a phantasmagorical materialization of an imaginary which, by recalling other, far away times and places, has become a veritable place itself.

> (Minca 2005: 107)

It is worth noting that Minca's study of Bellagio is part of a wider project – *Seductions of Place* (Cartier and Lew 2005) – aimed at providing the geographical debate with new insightful reflections about dynamics of place and landscape, highlighting in particular the relationship between 'tourist*ed* landscapes' and 'seductions of place'. It seems to me that this is particularly important in our discussion of tourism and landscape since it offers some innovative perspectives. First of all, it introduces a third element in the dyad tourism-landscape: that is place. As exemplified by Minca (2005; 2007b), but also by Oakes (2005), whether we refer to the encounter with the other or to the material reproduction of landscape, travelling subjects as well as travelling landscapes always deal with places, at some point. Place is a key actor in the way the travelling subject negotiates meaning: people encounter people in place, mental representations and ideal landscapes are confronted with place, even landscapes are materialised and turn themselves into 'veritable' places. Hence, a discussion aiming to understand the implications of landscape in tourism simply cannot leave place aside.

Secondly, and consequently, landscape and place are presented as *dynamic concepts*, which means that we should think of landscape – as well as of place – as *processes,* as

concepts not so much contrasting as able to speak to each other, thereby becoming useful theoretical tools in the understanding of the complexities of the tourist experience. As Cartier states in the introduction of the book:

> Landscape is also place, landscapes make up places, and places may include diverse landscapes. We focus on touristed places because the mobile subject tends to seek particular scenes of leisure/tourism activity, while emphasis on place reflects geographical imaginaries, how people think about destinations, and from multiple points of perspective and distance.
>
> (Cartier 2005: 4)

The idea of 'tourist*ed* landscape' then is about landscape as toured and lived, with all the complexities that this implies. In touristed landscapes different dialectics interact: there are locals and tourists, travellers and sojourners, there are residents becoming visitors and sojourners becoming residents, there are 'travellers denying being tourists: resident part-time tourists, tourists working hard to fit in as if locals' (*ibid.*: 3). This kind of landscape reflects histories of mobility, of different, sometimes conflicted identities, of multiple scale relations, from local to global and vice versa. Touristed landscape further – and productively – complicates understandings of landscape as explored by cultural geographers by highlighting multiple and shifting perspectives in the context of the leisure economy. As a result, the deployment of landscape in tourism research brings to light the fertile 'messiness' of tourism where the merging of visual and sensual experiences, of representational and non-representational elements requires a flexible if 'ambiguous' conceptual tool able to capture that very messiness. The dynamics between gaze and performance, landscape and place have also been explored by Coleman and Crang (2002), who expand sight-centred notions of the gaze to include the embodied engagements and performances of tourists in and with place, and bring into the scope of tourism research the productive tensions between representation and practice. Crang, in particular, challenges traditional ways of thinking of the tourist gaze as a primarily visual phenomenon by looking at the

performative dimension of the visual (Crang 1997). He analyses one of the most distinctive – and distinctively visual – activities of tourism, photography, in a new stance: instead of dwelling on representation he examines picturing as a *practice* thereby urging the academic debate on landscape and visual theory to explore not only representations but also the embodied practices through which representations are created. Following this line of investigation, recent research within tourism has shifted the focus of analysis from ways of seeing to *practices of seeing* (Crang 1997: 360, emphasis in original), highlighting the importance of looking at tourism as a multisensual experience (Crang 1999; Crouch 2005; Edensor 2001; Scarles 2009).

However, while academic literature on tourism and landscape is flourishing and is informed by a productive variety of perspectives, some absences can be identified.

In terms of empirical research, we need to learn more about the practices of tourists, their corporeal engagements with the landscape, the ways in which practices resonate with, and change in relation to, class, gender, ethnicity, age, time, physical conditions, etc. Indeed, bodies, practices, landscapes change in relation to one another, and the more we know about the situated places, times and ways in which they constitute each other, the more deeply we are able to look into the complexities of tourism.

Moreover, the field of research on tourist practices is particularly open with regard to 'Oriental landscapes': academic research has tended to focus more on the ways in which the Orient is represented (for example Gregory 1999; Hutnyk 1996;) overlooking the ways in which it is practised, particularly by contemporary tourism (notable exceptions include Edensor 1998a; Haldrup and Larsen 2010; Tuckler 2003; Jacobs 2010).

In terms of theory, while the landscape theorised by cultural geographers and deployed in tourism draws on rich and varied traditions ranging from humanistic, to iconographic to non-representational approaches, those theories are very much Western and Euro-centred. The conceptual tools adopted in theorising the tourist landscape are most predominantly those produced within the Western academic context and little or no attention is paid to other academic (and non-academic) traditions. The fact that landscape is an exquisitely European invention and thereby

needs to be framed within that academic tradition may explain such a Eurocentric theoretical attitude. Nonetheless, particularly when we deal with the tourist landscape, we need to engage with different visual traditions and ways of seeing, and ask for example how gaze and practice have been differently theorised outside the Western academic realm, or what Western theories have failed to acknowledge in their making sense of landscape. As such a theoretical readjustment was part of the process of my research, I shall delve into this discussion later in the chapter.

PART III: LANDSCAPE AND TOURISM IN VARANASI

1.7 FRAMING THE OTHER: THE TOURIST LANDSCAPE OF VARANASI

The Orientalist critique has provided the theoretical foundation for rethinking the way we understand and construct 'the Orient'. In his groundbreaking work, *Orientalism* (1978), Said states that the Orient is a European and American construction, and analyses Orientalism 'as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (Said 2003 [1978]: 3). He goes on to say:

> […] "Orient and "Occident" are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other.

> (Said 2003 [1978]: 5)

In this sense, Said defines Orientalism as a discursive formation and addresses questions of representation and otherness, showing how the Orientalist discourse constructs the (Oriental) 'other' through representations which are made seem

'natural' descriptions of the Orient (*ibid*.: 21). Critical analysis of processes and politics of 'othering' which underlie Western knowledge has been further developed by postcolonial theorists (for example Bhabha 1994a; Spivak 1988a; 1988b; 1990; Gregory 1995; 1999; 2004; to name but a few). Among those representations, there are some common tropes which came to be associated with India and are particularly relevant to Varanasi. These tropes are reworked and implemented in contemporary tourism, and deployed in the ideological construction of the landscape of Varanasi. In this section I discuss literature concerning landscape and tourism in Varanasi and, drawing on postcolonial theory, bring into focus dominant discourses and representations which frame this symbolic tourist site. In particular, in the first part of the section I review key academic literature deconstructing master representations of India/Varanasi which we shall see at work in tourist narratives of the city (Chapter 3) and in shaping tourist practices in Varanasi (Chapter 4). I dwell upon four of them in particular: the discourse of spirituality, the construction of Varanasi as the centre of traditional knowledge, the idea of India as a country of destitution, sickness, decadence and, finally, narratives of heritage and history mobilised to convey the idea of India as a repository of ancient traditions and splendours. In the second part, I review academic tourist literature on Varanasi more specifically, looking in particular at how landscape and practice have been theorised within that literature.

One of the most common tropes with which India is associated is religion. With its ascetics, its ancient ritualism, and its yogic tradition India is often referred to as the quintessence of spirituality. Varanasi, often defined as the religious capital of India by tourist narratives, embodies such a trope in an exemplary manner. The categories of religion and mysticism and their deployment in Western discourses about India have been thoroughly analysed by Richard King (1999), who draws on postcolonial theory and comparative study of religion in order to retrace the history of ideas which have come to shape Western modern understanding of India as the epitome of 'the mystic East'. In doing so, King calls into question essentialist Western presuppositions regarding the nature of Indian culture and argues for 'an awareness of the mutual imbrication of religion, culture and power' (*ibid*.: 1 and 207). King returns to Ashis Nandy's suggestion that the 'discovery' of the Orient responded to the need 'to expel the other Orient which had once been a part of the medieval European consciousness

as an archetype and a potentiality' (Nandy 1983: 71-2, quoted in King 1999: 3), and makes the point that 'the ascendancy of secular rationality as an ideal within Western intellectual thought' brought with it 'a concomitant marginalization of "the mystical" and the projection of qualities associated with this concept onto a colonized and essentialized India' (King 1999: 4). He then highlights some of the conceptual devices through which such an operation has been made possible. One of these is the creation of what he calls 'the modern myth of "Hinduism"' (*ibid*.: 96-117), which consisted of constructing Hinduism as a single, homogeneous world religion, irrespective of the remarkable cultural diversity of Indian spiritual traditions. Such a discursive formation is reflected in prevalent tourist (and not only tourist) representations of Varanasi: despite being often described as a multi-religious city accommodating faiths as diverse as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Jainism, Varanasi is primarily represented as the capital of Hinduism (see my discussion in Chapter 3). 'The notion of "Hinduism" – King argues – is itself a Western-inspired abstraction, which until the nineteenth century bore little or no resemblance to the diversity of Indian religious belief and practice' (King 1999: 98). Not only was Hinduism used as a uniform representation of India, it was also loaded with particular connotations, notably that of mysticism. King explains that the intellectual manoeuvre which brought the idea of 'mystic Hinduism' to the fore was the identification of Hindu culture and religiosity with the monistic philosophical principles of the Vedanta, particularly the non-dualistic doctrine of the Advaita Vedanta, which asserts the essential unity of all things, and became 'the key Hindu example of the perennialist thesis that all religions, at a fundamental level, express the same basic truth' (*ibid*.: 120). The Vedantic philosophy and texts, therefore, came to signify the mystical nature of the Hindu religion and became representative of Hindu culture as a whole. However, King also argues that while essentialist representations of Hindu religiosity served the Western Orientalist project, the crucial role that indigenous Brahmanical ideology and (Bengali in particular) bourgeois intelligentsia played in it cannot be disregarded. Claims of Hindu identity by Indian independence movements, for example, were often made on the basis of similar Orientalist assumptions, reworked and developed on different agendas by reformists like Vivekananda, Tagore, Aurobindo.

With regard to the relationship between the colonial cultural enterprise and local elites retaining authority over the production of knowledge, Dodson (2010a) provides a rich and detailed study of the intellectual history of Northern India between 1770 and 1880, and its entanglements with British Orientalism. By focusing on Banaras in particular, Dodson analyses the 'double' (*ibid.*: 1) practices of Orientalism, showing how the intellectual expertise of the Sanskrit *pandits,* who were privileged interlocutors of the colonial state, has provided the cultural foundation upon which European authority was grounded. Such an intellectual and ideological process operated through a concrete network of institutions, which functioned as strategic cultural outposts for the diffusion of Orientalist knowledge, whose 'discursive, institutional and social constructs' (*ibid.*) have been subsequently adapted and employed by Indian Sanskrit scholars 'in the production of newly inflected Hindu identities' (*ibid*.). One of those institutions is the Benares Sanskrit College (today part of the Sampurnananda Sanskrit University), upon which Dodson's study is centred. The Benares College was established in 1791 by the East India Company committed to improving education of Indian people, a goal that is well suited to the civilising mission underpinning the colonial project. The position itself of the college is revealing as to its objectives: not only was it built in Benares, a renowned centre for Sanskrit learning, a city which is traditionally regarded as the source of all knowledge and constitutes therefore an authority in its own right, it was also located in an area of the city, in between the *ghats* in the East and the Cantonment in the West, which suggests a meaningful parallel, as Dodson points out:

> In a fundamental way, the very location of the new college building in the city – between the *ghats* and the cantonment – reflected this new programme: Benares College was to act as a sort of 'common ground' for the comparison of the knowledges of East and West, which, it was hoped, would serve to demonstrate to Indians the ultimate truth of Western thought, thereby ushering in an age where 'a higher philosophy and a purer faith will pervade this land'.

> (Dodson 2010a: xi)

As I shall show in Chapter 3, the construction of Varanasi as a centre of knowledge and education, with particular regard to traditional learning, is one of the images most mobilised in the promotion of the city by both tourist and Hindu narratives.

Equally concerned with the colonial production of knowledge, but focused more on representations of Indian landscape is David Arnold (2005a), who examines the ways in which nature was represented through science, particularly botany, widely practised in early nineteenth century British India. Arnold explains that as a colonial science, 'botany was influentially involved in the scenic depiction as well as the scientific investigation and material exploitation of the country' (*ibid.*: 147). The key argument of the book deals with issues of landscape, representation and travel practices and is therefore particularly relevant to my study. Drawing on the idea of the gaze (see Foucault 1970; 1976; 1979; Pratt 1992), Arnold lays stress on the mobile nature of the knowing gaze – whether that of the naturalist, the missionary, the explorer, or the administrator – and shows how travel constituted the chief mode of observing, representing and ultimately 'knowing' (Carter 1987: 69) India. Furthermore, expanding on the idea of India as the Oriental other, Arnold suggests that another way in which India was understood was through the association with 'the Tropics'. He notes:

> The idea of India's "tropicality" was one externally imposed but increasingly resonant means of trying to define, compare, and contextualize India, to render it more accessible to the European imagination and ultimately to its colonizing processes.
>
> (Arnold 2005a: 110)

On the one hand tropical India was idealised as luxuriant, warm, fertile, a paradise on earth; on the other, it was represented as pestilential, deadly, infectious, corrupted, 'a land of death' (Arnold: 2005b). The association with death is particularly relevant to Varanasi in two respects. The first is that Varanasi is renowned as the city of the last

rites: Hindus come to die here in the hope of attaining liberation from the chain of reincarnations. Because these rituals are performed in public on the banks of the Ganges, they have become an attraction to tourists. This makes Varanasi 'a playplace of death' (Urry 2004: 209-211) that is, a place where death and suffering are 'turned into public play [...] with tourists as increasingly significant witnesses to that suffering' (*ibid.*: 210; see also Lennon and Foley 2000 on 'dark tourism'). As we shall see, the tourist gaze in Varanasi is constructed so as to include the sight of death rites, which are in fact one of the highlights of sightseeing in the city. Secondly, Varanasi is often represented as a landscape of death and disease (see section 3.8 in Chapter 3), a city framed by the image of cripples, the poor, the dirt, the architectural decadence of the sumptuous palaces crumbling along the river, a backward and unhealthy place where infection and illness are always lurking. In this respect, Varanasi epitomises colonial depictions of India as a 'deathscape' (Arnold 2005b: 42) which, Arnold argues, helped reinforce European scientific authority over India substantiating its mission to bring progress, sanitation, medical improvement in the 'deadly' subcontinent.

The politics of representation are also at the centre of John Hutnyk's (1996) work on Calcutta, which turns to contemporary tourism to explore discourses and narratives surrounding the city. By deconstructing the stories, images, gossip, or as the title suggests, 'the rumour' of Calcutta produced and circulated by Western travellers, Hutnyk offers an acute critique of the unequal power relations re-produced through travel, with special regard to budget tourism and charity work, responsible, according to the author, for reinforcing stereotypes associating Calcutta with decay and poverty. Similarly, other critical studies have focused on the deployment of Orientalist representations in tourism discourse (Mills 1991; Bhattacharyya 1997; Mohanty 2003). Deborah Bhattacharyya (1997), in particular, provides an insightful analysis of tourist narratives on India with her deconstruction of the Lonely Planet guidebook.

Practices and representations in contemporary tourism in India are addressed by Henderson and Weisgrau (2007), who explore tourism, heritage and 'the seduction of history' in Rajasthan, looking at the complexities of tourism in this particular area from different perspectives, from sociology to geography and history. The contributors of the volume investigate 'the potency and uses of the concept of "heritage" – with its

presumed imprimatur of historicity – as a marketable commodity in the tourism industry' (*ibid.*: xxvii). The idea of heritage and history as products for tourist consumption provides a useful framework with which to understand representations and practices in Varanasi: as I shall discuss later in the thesis, the city is portrayed as timeless and its 'living heritage', made up of ancient ritualism and wisdom, is the pivotal point of tourist marketing strategies. Drawn by the image of Varanasi as the embodiment of the heritage tradition of India, tourists come to Varanasi to do yoga, learn classical music, and to witness ancient ceremonies and rites. Moreover, a whole part of the book is devoted to spiritual spaces, bringing into focus the dynamics between tourism, religion, identity and place, with special consideration for the ways in which different social groups, agendas and discourses converge and interact in religious settings.

However, while academic tourist literature on India has extensively investigated Western and Orientalist representations and discourses, the practices of tourism are largely overlooked. The same is true for the theoretical production regarding Varanasi more specifically. Following the mainstream configuring of Varanasi as a spiritual site, tourism here is mainly studied as religious tourism. Varanasi is, above all, a pilgrimage city. A conspicuous part of the literature regarding the city indeed draws on pilgrimage studies and is mainly concerned with the sacred geographies and geometries of the city, and with the practices of pilgrimage and religious tourism. The landscape of Varanasi is primarily studied as a spiritual landscape, and the practices of mobility predominantly explored by scholars are the practices of pilgrimage and religious travel. The social, ritual and spatial construction of *tirthas*, Hindu sacred places of pilgrimage, have long been the focus of a wide range of scholarly research, from geographical (i.e. Bhardwaj 2003; Gutschow 1994; Singh 1993; 1997; 2002; 2009c; Singh and Singh 1987; Sopher 1987; 1997; Stoddard 1968; Stoddard and Morinis 1997), to anthropological (i.e. Kumar 1989; McKim Malville and Saraswati 2009; Parry 1994; Saraswati 1975; Vidyarthi et al. 1979), to religious studies where they form a large body of work. A characteristic of the theoretical production on Varanasi is that it is composed by a sort of 'hybrid literature' made up of academic and popular literature both of which widely referenced as authoritative sources of knowledge. It is often the case, for example, that established academics who have worked extensively on this city and who have

also published their studies outside the academic realm, have come to be referred to as the 'experts' on Varanasi and are frequently mentioned in popular tourist literature as well. Such is the case of authors like Diana Eck, Rana P.B. Singh, Jonathan Parry whose work I shall refer to.

Among the 'experts' on Varanasi is indeed Diana Eck, whose seminal work, *Banaras: City of Light* (1983), provides an eloquent account of the city's sacred structure and meaning, which she studied as 'text and context', that is, drawing on relevant Sanskrit literature and the city itself as her two main sources. Eck defines Varanasi as 'a living text of Hinduism' (Eck 1983: 9), where 'the layering of the Hindu tradition' is displayed 'like a palimpsest', making the city look like 'an old parchment that has been written upon and imperfectly erased again and again, leaving the old layers partially visible' (*ibid.*). On the one hand, Eck's looking at landscape as a palimpsest may be well included in the established 'idiographic' tradition of landscape (Crang 1998). On the other hand, the suggestion of a textual reading of the city recalls Duncan's metaphor of landscape as a text (Duncan 1990), a text, Eck argues, that can be interpreted differently depending on whether it is 'read' by Hindu or Western eyes. Indeed, 'precisely because Banaras has become a symbol of traditional Hindu India – Eck points out – Western visitors have often found this city the most strikingly "foreign" of India's cities' (Eck 1983: 9). She goes on to reference the writings of prominent early visitors from the West, like Ralph Fitch, Jean Baptiste Tavernier, Bishop Reginald Heber, Emma Roberts, Mark Twain and others who have produced notable accounts and sketches of Banaras. However, in describing the city Eck admittedly assumes the Hindu stance, offering suggestive insights into the cultural and religious symbolism of the landscape of Varanasi.

The cultural and sacred geographies of the city have also been extensively explored by Rana P. B. Singh, a Banarasi cultural geographer who has consistently written about Varanasi. Singh is particularly concerned with the spiritual meaning and ritual practices of landscape (Singh 1993; 1997; 2002), which he believes to be a fundamental part of the cultural heritage not only of this city but of India as a whole (Singh 2009a; 2009b). In fact, Singh has been actively committed to enlisting Varanasi's 'heritagescapes'

(Singh 2009a; 2010), especially the riverfront *ghats*, in the UNESCO World Heritage List, an objective yet to be achieved.

The visual construction of the sacred landscape of Varanasi is the core of Niels Gutschow's (2006) investigation of the city, a visually powerful study of the city's religious topographies as they unfold through picture maps, 'built maps' (temples and sacred compounds embodying the sacred geographies of the city), panoramas and conventional topographical maps. Elsewhere (Gutschow 2008), the author focuses specifically on the visual display of Varanasi in the form of panorama, and traces the history of the production of panoramic views of Banaras as they developed from the eighteenth century onwards. The symbolism of sight and the centrality of image to Hinduism are addressed also by Eck (1998), who makes frequent reference to the landscape of Varanasi throughout her work, suggesting that the city is to be metaphorically understood as the embodiment of a divine image which pilgrims come to worship, an idea to which I shall return in the next section. The symbolic representation of Varanasi in the form of a cosmogram, or *mandala,* is central to the work of Rana P.B. Singh (see Singh 1993; 2002; 2009c), who has also explored literary images of Varanasi produced by Indian writers in different historical periods, from Kabir's medieval Kashi to Pankaj Mishra's contemporary depiction of the city in his novel *The Romantics* (1999) (Singh 2004). Equally centred on literary representation of Banaras is Golding and Singh's (1997) fine translation of the work of Hindi novelist Shiv Prasad Mishra 'Rudra', *Bahti Ganga* (The Flowing Ganges), a collection of tales set in the city.

Renowned visual accounts of Benares are Richard Lannoy's (1999) photographic study of the city, and James Prinsep's (1831, 1833) nineteenth century illustrations, mainly drawings and lithographs of the city's riverfront, reproduced in a recently re-edited volume (Kejariwal 2009). A key work dealing with practices of representation of Varanasi is Gaenszle and Gengnagel's (2008) *Visualizing Space in Banaras,* an insightful exploration of 'the multiple ways this urban site is visualized, imagined and culturally represented by different actors and groups' (*ibid.*: 7), with a specific focus on the visual media. The book brings together scholars from different disciplines who discuss how

the urban space is symbolically constructed through sacred topography, maps, images, and social practice and everyday life, each one forming a specific section of the book.

While there exists a broad literature on the religious aesthetics of Varanasi's landscape, a large body of work has been produced on religious practice as well. One of the most cited works on the ritual construction of the city is Jonathan Parry's *Death in Banaras* (1994), which presents a systematic study of death rituals as the fulcrum around which not only the religious life but also the socio-economic structuring of the city revolve (on the same topic see Justice 1997; on religious practices in Banaras see Hertel and Humes 1998).

In terms of travel practices, as I mentioned, most of the literature on Varanasi is devoted to pilgrimage and religious tourism: journeys are primarily addressed in terms of *yatras,* that is sacred journeys or pilgrimages (Eck 1983; Gutschow 2009; Singh 1993; 2002) which weave together geomancy and religious performance. There are also attempts to explore tourism and travel in broader terms, focusing for example on issues of heritage and sustainability (Singh and Rana 2001; Rana and Singh 2000), and on early Western travel writing, however, in general, little attention has been paid to contemporary Western tourism, whose complexities and cultural implications seem to have been better explored in works of fiction (Mishra 1999; Dyer 2009; Payne 2001) than by academic research. When tourism in its own right is studied, it is mainly in relation to its disruptive (Huberman 2005) and 'consuming' potential (Huberman 2006). Recent attempts to subvert this tendency are Rana and Singh's (2010) analysis of 'perceptions and images of tourists and pilgrims in Banaras', Korpela's (2009) investigation into the community of long-term visitors in Varanasi, and Doron's (2005) focus on the dimension of the encounter with the other as it is experienced by tourists, pilgrims and boatmen in the city.

1.8 THEORETICAL ENCOUNTERS: GAZE AND *DARSHAN*, PRACTICE AND *KARMA*

Gaze and practice are two key ideas in my thesis. In this chapter I have outlined how the visual and the performative have inspired debate about landscape and tourism in

the social sciences in the past three decades. But how does Varanasi engage with such a debate?

The cultural context of Varanasi bears peculiar characteristics that further expand the complexity and the productive ambiguity of the concept of landscape. These characteristics are basically to do with the spiritual essence that the city is believed to enfold and the metaphysical quality that is deemed to constitute its landscape. That urges us to acknowledge a transcendental element to the epistemology of landscape which further complicates its intriguing ambiguities. As a result, further distinctive narratives, practices, and negotiations come into play in the landscape of Varanasi. This forms the core of my research and shall be the subject of the chapters to follow; however, I would like to suggest here other perspectives which we should consider in looking at concepts of gaze, practice and landscape in Varanasi.

As it appears from my literature review, the theoretical framework of my thesis draws upon Western – Anglophone in particular – academic debate. However, the ways in which sight is constructed (and deconstructed), or the conceptual apparatus that we employ in order to make sense of practice and performance are culture-specific: different words, metaphors, concepts may be used in different contexts to articulate those very ideas. Therefore, while notions of 'gaze' and 'practiced landscape' constitute key tools in researching and theorising landscape in general, we also need to be equipped with the 'proper words' in order to be able to understand *that* particular landscape and its inherent practices. In this section, I suggest that two such words are *darshan,* which connotes ideas of gaze, and *karma,* which refers to practice and action. Those two concepts are key to understanding Hindu practices of vision and the everyday rituals that constitute what tourists and pilgrims alike recognise as the spiritual landscape of Varanasi. One may argue that while *darshan* and *karma* can help frame Hindu ways of seeing and related spatial practices, they are of little relevance to Western, non-Hindu tourists. Yet, my research has shown that different traditions of vision and cultural practices conflate in the discourses, narratives and encounters on the *ghats,* so my aim is to provide a key 'conceptual lexicon' to better understand the hybrid language of the tourist encounter in Varanasi.

1.8.1 GAZE AND *DARSHAN*

In the Hindu tradition, sight bears a crucial meaning. Its symbolism is deeply intertwined with the Hindu mythical imagery. From the allegory of Shiva's third eye – which represents 'the knowledge eye', the one that the god uses to endlessly create and destroy the world – to the legendary *rishis* – the mythical 'seers' who revealed the transcendental truth enclosed in the sacred texts – the sense of sight represents, in the Hindu imaginary heritage, a symbolic vehicle of transcendental knowledge. The profound and manifold meanings involved in the act of seeing (see Babb 1981) are perhaps best expressed by the idea of *darshan,* a Sanskrit word that means 'seeing' (for a discussion of *darshan* and visual culture in India see Eck 1998; see also Gonda 1969 for a detailed study of the gaze in the Veda texts)*. Darshan* is a sophisticated concept which refers to the visual connection with the divine, and it metaphorically embodies the principle of cosmological order: as a popular myth in the Puranas goes, when Shiva's eyes are closed, the entire universe falls into darkness (the story is told in the Shiva Purana). Indeed, in Hindu iconography, gods are always represented with their eyes wide open to signify that the all-seeing gods are essential to the maintenance of the cosmic order. Sight, therefore, is deeply implicated with the metaphysical dimension. The contact between the divine and the human occurs through the gaze, which is hence understood as an act of worship: Hindu devotees go to the temple to have the vision of the god, and by establishing a visual connection with the god they reconnect with the sacred, ritually restoring the original unity of the material and immaterial realms. *Darshan*, therefore, brings together the viewing subject and the object of vision, it refers to both the act of gazing and the image. Interestingly, not only does one go to the temple to see the god, but also *to be seen* by him/her:

> The central act of Hindu worship, from the point of view of the lay person, is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one's own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity.
>
> (Eck 1998: 3; see also Ramaswamy 2006: 168)

The reciprocity involved in *darshan* challenges the idea that there is a dominating viewer gazing upon an inert, passive object; instead, images are given agency (see W.J.T. Mitchell 2005; Gell 1998; on the lives of Indian images see Davis 1997), and emphasis is laid upon the contact – sensory as well as spiritual – activated through eyes. As Eck (1998: 9) highlights, 'in the Indian context, seeing is a kind of touching', a suggestion that we also find in Kramrisch (1976: 136) and Gonda (1969: 19). This idea of an almost tactile gaze opens up new possibilities for rethinking the visual as a deeply sensual phenomenon. The embodied dimension of sight is further made explicit by the intrinsic association of *darshan* with practice, particularly with ritual practice. When Hindus go to a temple for worship, they do not say they go to pray or to worship, rather, the expression that they commonly use is 'I go for *darshan*'. Likewise, when pilgrims go to Varanasi, they go for the Ganga *darshan*, the vision of the sacred Ganges, or for the *darshan* of Vishvanatha, that is Shiva as the 'Lord of All' worshipped in the homonymous temple in the city. The landscape of Varanasi is itself regarded as a 'divine image', whose *darshan* pilgrims come for. As a visual practice, *darshan* extends from sacred images, to holy persons, to places. Vision, therefore, demands a physical act, whether it implies going to a temple, paying a visit to a *guru*, or embarking on a sacred journey. While the spiritual experience accomplished through *darshan* is central to pilgrimage and religious rituals, the same conceptual framework is employed also to describe the more lay activities of tourism: 'to have the *darshan* of a place' often stands as a cultural translation for 'sightseeing', and the ways in which sight is both constructed by the local tourism industry, and performed by tourists reflect many of the ideas implied in the notion and practice of *darshan*, as I shall illustrate later on in my empirical chapters. However, what I would like to highlight here is the usefulness of the idea of *darshan* as a further theoretical tool to enhance understanding of landscape. Eck points out that the notion of *darshan* should direct our attention to the fact that 'India is a visual and visionary culture, one in which the eyes have a prominent role in the apprehension of the sacred' (1998: 10); she also maintains that seeing, in Hindu terms, is a way of knowing. While this idea is not at all new to Western theorisations of the gaze, what the *darshan* brings to the academic debate is the kind of knowledge that is achieved through the gaze. For Hindus, the supreme

knowledge consists of the realisation of the world's essential unity, and such a realisation is metaphorically attained through vision. Far from being a means for separation between two epistemological realms, sight represents here, at least at a symbolical level, a unifying element, one that weaves the material and the transcendental together through the aesthetics of the gaze, which is understood as a visual, embodied and ritual act altogether. Gazing upon the landscape of Varanasi is therefore considered as a spiritually laden activity which, while providing aesthetic enjoyment, involves sensual engagement and realises spiritual benefit. As we shall see, not only are tourists made aware in many ways of the sacred implications of viewing, they also re-signify the spiritual sight in their own terms: *darshan*, as we shall also see, often becomes a matter of negotiation in the tourist encounter on the *ghats*.

1.8.2 PRACTICE AND *KARMA*

We have seen how practice has become central to the geographical debate on landscape. The gaze, it is argued, is not the only epistemological tool to be adopted in defining landscape, which is instead constructed through bodily interactions and the repetition of everyday practices (Cresswell 2003; Seamon 1979b; 1980; Wylie 2005; 2006).

Again, in the Hindu context, the notion of 'landscape of practice' acquires a particular meaning. The Hindu tradition acknowledges a deep significance to practice, which is connected to the fundamental concept of *karman* (or *karma*[1]), 'action', 'activities'. *Karma* is the cardinal theory that sustains Hindu beliefs about reincarnation. In Hindu tradition rebirth is directly connected to previous-life deeds, therefore great attention is paid to them. Action – and hence practice – bears a liminal connotation since it is responsible for the posthumous psychical condition of human beings; it links the physical and the psychical domain, this world and the next. In this sense, every practice is conceived as a ritual, from daily routines such as bathing and personal hygiene, to

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[1] Karma is the nominative Sanskrit form of karman.

great ceremonials such as weddings and cremation rites (a socio-religious study of *samskaras,* major Hindu rites, is provided in Pandey 1969).

The doctrine of *karma* is complex; it basically pivots on the law of cause and effect, where every deed is believed to bear a 'fruit' (*karmaphala*) which can be positive or negative and will be enjoyed or suffered in this or the next life, as much as what we experience in our present life is the result of the *karma* that we have accumulated with our previous life actions. While this may appear as an oversimplified explanation, and bearing in mind that it is not my aim here to delve into an extensive discussion of the theory of *karma*, what I would like to highlight is the fundamental idea that every action has a consequence; these consequences determine human beings' conditions and the functioning of the whole cosmos. Indeed, the natural laws of causation which lie beneath the principle of *karma* are believed to rule not only human life but also the whole universe: the cosmos would not exist without causality. In a way, then, action is the necessary condition for the existence of the world, it 'creates' and maintains it. That is particularly the case in ritual actions; Vedic sacrifices, for example, were specifically performed as acts of restoration of the cosmic order. For this very reason the spatio-temporalities of deeds are taken into great consideration: in order to activate positive effects, ritual activities require auspicious times and places, so for example bathing in the Ganges in Varanasi in the early morning lends a mundane practice the special power of securing spiritual merits, allowing the performer to accrue 'good *karma*'. Likewise, performing cremation rites in Varanasi has a special relevance in that it grants release from the *samsara*, which does not happen in other cities. Practices acquire a special meaning in the landscape of Varanasi, which is in turn constructed through those very practices. What is peculiar to Varanasi, though, is that its landscape is not simply the product of everyday practices but the product of practices charged with spiritual and religious meaning, which are sedimented through a − ritual − repetition. At the same time, those practices ensure that the Varanasi landscape is 'recognised' by devotees, pilgrims, and by tourists, who visit the city 'to see the amazing Hindu ceremonies on the Ganges'[2]. Landscape and practice, therefore, are to be thought of as mutually constitutive. In the tourist encounter,

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[2] Australian tourist, 39, female; excerpt from questionnaires.

karma itself becomes a discursive practice: tourists are taken to the *ghat* boat tour at sunrise, as this is considered 'the best moment' to carry out this activity; they are plied with requests to buy candles to be offered to 'Ganga-ji' for 'good *karma*'; they are involved as spectators in the Ganga Aarti, a celebration – together aesthetic and ritual – of the 'sacred' riverscape. If for the *darshan* we noted how the gaze is intimately tied to ritual action, so we can see how rituals are never divorced from aesthetic values. As Vidyarhti et al (1979: 148) point out, 'certain types of sacred performances are consciously conducted with earthly considerations'; holy rituals, they explain, fulfil individuals' ultimate wish of enjoying beauty; that is accomplished through the choice of place, time and season, and all that makes rituals pleasurable and absorbing. They go on to say:

> In Kashi, a ritual bath in the Ganges is not only a matter of gaining religious merits but also an occasion of going through an exiting experience in life. (…) All ritual performances are made with a perfect sense of aesthetics held with deep devotion. Indeed, no ritual of whatsoever merit can persist for a long time without lending a sensual pleasure to the performer.
>
> (*Ibid.*: 148-149)

In this section I have shown how concepts of *darshan* and *karma* may help to think of landscape as dialectically constructed through representation *and* practice. In the Hindu perspective, landscape is the spatial metaphor that brings together material and spiritual world. This is spatialised through everyday rituals, whose performance bears a deep aesthetic significance. That is how the Varanasi landscape is performed and, at the same time, how it offers itself to the sight. The *ghat* landscape is the place where the unity of the earthy and transcendental world is symbolically realised through the ritual practice and the full aesthetic enjoyment of it. The spiritual attitude to landscape which is embedded in Hindu traditional discourses affects tourism in many ways. Indeed, in the empirical part of my thesis I shall show how notions of *darshan* and *karma* are mobilised in shaping tourist representations and practices in Varanasi and

how, in turn, landscapes of *karma* and *darshan* in Varanasi are enriched with new perspectives and interpretations by the practices of tourism. My aim here has been to provide a basic theoretical understanding of these two concepts in order to move on to explore their imbrication with tourism in Varanasi in the next chapters.

1.9 CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I have reviewed the key literature framing my thesis, and highlighted some major threads within tourism and landscape studies which have inspired my work: the notion of the gaze, the idea of 'practiced landscapes', and the 'paradoxes 'of contemporary tourism. Theory informing the tourist landscape is wide-ranging and empirical research in this field is flourishing, with increasing attention being paid to the practices of contemporary tourism in 'the Orient' (Haldrup and Larsen 2010; Jacobs 2010). Nonetheless, India still constitutes an open field of enquiry in this respect, a new direction that has been pointed out by important works such as those of Edensor (1998a) and Henderson and Weisgrau (2007). Moreover, when it comes to sacred sites such as Varanasi, scholarly interest tends to focus more on religious geographies and practices, overlooking the connections between religious and lay tourism. As a matter of fact, Western tourist practices in Varanasi have largely been left unexplored by existing literature. My thesis aims to fill this gap. From a theoretical point of view, my thesis aims to enrich the current theoretical discussion on tourist landscape by including non-Western theoretical traditions, which have hitherto been somewhat ignored. In particular, I have suggested alternative ways of looking at the two underlying concepts of my research, gaze and practice, whose contextual meaning could be better grasped and rendered by the culture-specific notions of *darshan* and *karma.* These two notions point to a transcendental aspect of landscape which, with some notable exceptions (Cosgrove 1984: 57; Tuan 1974; 1996) has been largely disregarded by Western geographers. The central claim of this chapter is that the discourses, narratives and practices of tourism in Varanasi can be better understood by adopting the framework of landscape, which mobilises ideas of gaze/*darshan* and practice/*karma*. One may ask what it is about landscape that makes it theoretically

suitable for the specific context of Varanasi. After all, as we have seen, landscape is a rather unstable idea, one in which the epistemological premises are ambiguous, swinging as they are between representation and hard reality, subjectivity and objectivity. Following Minca's (2007a: 183) suggestion, we should perhaps think of landscape as a 'threshold', rather than as a solid conceptual armour. And yet, it is precisely its peculiar duplicity that makes landscape a particularly useful concept in our investigation of Varanasi's tourist geographies. The fact of being placed in the material and the representational fields at the same time makes landscape a key theoretical device in shedding light on the dialectics between visual construction and concrete experience which is implicit in the tourist process. In this way, we can look at the city's sacredscape as an arena where representation merges with the embodied 'performances' (Edensor 2000) of travellers, where the aesthetics of landscape is confronted with the sensuous dimension (smells, sounds, tastes..), the materialities (the dead bodies on the cremation grounds?) and the practices inherent to this place. Landscape, indeed, speaks of both what people see, and what people do, of both representations and practices, of the visual and the material, of expectations, fears, desires and actual experiences; it speaks, in other words, of the tourist's 'total experience', and that is what makes it a helpful epistemological tool to bring with us in our theoretical 'travel survival kit' – to borrow the expression from the Lonely Planet *India* – to Varanasi.

CHAPTER 2

THEORY IN PRACTICE: METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS IN CONTEXT

2.1 FROM LONDON TO VARANASI

I left London with my suitcase filled with the 'proper' theoretical and methodological tools and a well-designed research schedule, heading to Varanasi. It was clear from the beginning, from my very first days in Varanasi, that my supposedly proper 'academic equipment', which I had had the chance to discuss at length in supervision meetings as well as in various academic symposia, was likely to be challenged in many ways by the actuality of my research context. Again, this was something that a thorough academic training had made me prepared to deal with. Literature reviews of critical anthropology and ethnography, as well as workshop discussions about the most common issues arising from research practices, had made me sufficiently aware of questions of positionality and reflexivity, of ethics, of 'the messiness' of the field involved in ethnographic research. Nonetheless, theoretical discussion on ethnography materialised into context-specific issues that while questioning my research aims and methods in many and sometimes puzzling ways, also opened up new perspectives and solutions to my work.

In this chapter, I will provide an account of the main methodological issues that I encountered in my research, explaining how I went about working out solutions, why I made certain choices in the first place, and in what ways some of those issues

enhanced my doctoral work, allowing me to understand the actual context of my research more deeply, precisely while I was struggling to cope with it. If on the one hand the dilemmas and problems posed by the context caused my research pace to slow down, and confronted me with frustrations and the need to readjust my agenda *in itinere*, on the other hand they constituted an important source of reflections which ultimately helped me to answer my main research questions. While discussing the research methodology and unfolding the characteristics of Varanasi in terms of research environment, this chapter also aims to offer a broader picture of the city and its physical, social and cultural milieu, so complementing the background information already given in the Introduction Chapter.

I spent an overall period of five months in Varanasi, in 2009 and 2010, in order to carry out my fieldwork. This involved two trips: the first one, in which I completed the bulk of my on-site research, stretched from the beginning of February to mid May 2009; the second one, aimed at tackling outstanding issues, extended from the beginning of December 2009 to mid January 2010. The choice of when to go and how long to stay was based on several factors, the first of which was seasonality: I made sure that most of my fieldwork fell in the high tourist season, which in Northern India stretches approximately from October to March. Seasonality was also important in terms of climate conditions: I avoided undertaking fieldwork during both the monsoon and the hot season, although part of my first fieldtrip extended into the beginning of Indian summer, which was helpful to my research insofar as it granted me a different perspective on Varanasi. In fact, despite causing some difficulties which I will explain later, experiencing the city in what could be called its 'non-tourist mode' gave me a sense of how the geographies of the city change dramatically in relation to variations in climate and tourist presence. Climate is in fact very influential in tourism trends: the winter season is normally recommended as the best time to visit India because of the favourable weather conditions, so tourism tends to be concentrated in this season. However, small but significant variations may occur. Alongside climate, tourist flows in India, and in Varanasi more specifically, follow several other factors bound to specific socio-cultural and religious aspects. For example, while August is rarely suggested as the best time to travel to Varanasi due to the monsoon-affected environment conditions, this month is considered as a peak season for Italian tourists, who

traditionally take their long holiday in August. Conversely, while the Christmas period falls within the 'best time to go', recommended by many travel websites and guidebooks, Western tourists attached to Christian traditions may be more willing to spend Christmas at home with their family and only choose to travel in the weeks afterwards. Indeed, during my last fieldtrip I observed a decrease of incoming tourists in the weeks immediately before and after Christmas. Similarly, Buddhist tourists, drawn to Varanasi by the symbolic significance of the nearby Buddhist site of Sarnath, flock to Varanasi and Sarnath during major Buddhist festivities, which do not necessarily coincide with the conventional tourist season. The Buddha Purnima, for example, the holiest day in the Buddhist calendar in which the birthday of Buddha and his first sermon at Sarnath are celebrated, occurs during the full moon (*purnima*) of the month of Vaishaka, corresponding to mid April-mid May, which is considered low tourist season. At the time I was in Varanasi in 2009, the Buddha Purnima fell on the 9th of May, and whilst there were in fact almost no Western package tourists around, the hotel managers whom I spoke to during that period seemed to be quite busy with parties of South East Asian tourists. This information about general and local tourist trends and related explanations was given to me by my informants employed in the tourist sector in Varanasi.

Having decided when to go, the next major choice regarded where to stay. While many students, researchers and long-term visitors in Varanasi tend either to rent a house or to stay in student halls of residence – like the popular Amar Bhavan and Ganga Mahal in Assi Ghat, or the Kautilya Society in Munshi Ghat, run by non-profit organizations promoting cultural exchange – I opted to stay in a tourist guesthouse for the whole duration of my fieldwork. As tourists were at the centre of my enquiry, I made sure I was with them most of the time, and indeed staying in a hotel meant that I could easily make contact with tourists, observe their routines, chat and share experiences with them on a daily basis. Which hotel to choose was another key question: tourist structures are situated basically in two areas of Varanasi: the *ghats* and the Cantonment. The latter hosts almost exclusively high-ranked and luxury hotels, while the *ghats* are mostly home to budget hotels, guest houses, lodges, inns, although some top-class heritage hotels are also there. I chose to stay in a guesthouse in Assi Ghat, and if on the one hand this made it more difficult for me to make contact with

package tourists, mostly based in the Cantonment, on the other hand it bore several advantages which I shall explain later in the chapter.

However, while the two mentioned fieldtrips constitute the core of my empirical investigation, it is important to make it clear that I was not coming to the PhD research with no experience of the city. Quite the contrary, my doctoral work built on substantial knowledge of the ritual-spatial context of the city, previously achieved through my undergraduate studies. As I mentioned in the Introduction, I had carried out extensive fieldwork in Varanasi for the preparation of my *laurea magistralis* thesis, which allowed me to gain familiarity with the city's physical environment and its socio-cultural characteristics in advance, and to establish academic and personal networks which turned out to be very helpful for my PhD as well.

The protagonist of this chapter is 'the field': the fruitful entanglements of methodology with the spatio-temporalities, the ethics, the materialities, the practicalities, the social and cultural specificities of the field in which the research took place. Stated otherwise, the 'how' and 'where' of my research are dealt with here. In particular, in the next section I will address the problem of how to investigate tourist practices, and review, in the following sections (from 2.4 to 2.8), the methods that I adopted in my research; these will be preceded by some considerations on the spatio-temporalities of fieldwork itself (section 2.3). Sections 2.9 and 2.10 delve into some specific issues which have arisen in relation to language and translation (section 2.9) and the ethics of the field (section 2.10). Questions of positionality and reflexivity are explored in section 2.11 which looks at the concreteness(es) of being in the field and the embodied, social and cultural dimensions involved in it. Finally, section 2.12 deals with the analysis of collected data and explains how I went about processing and making sense of the information elicited in my research.

2.2 HOW TO INVESTIGATE TOURIST PRACTICES? METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES

As stated in the Introduction of my thesis, one of the main objectives of my investigation was to find out how tourists *practise* the landscape of Varanasi, looking in

particular at the practices of Western tourists. In Chapter 1 I have provided the theoretical justification for my choice of adopting landscape as a conceptual lens for my analysis, showing how research on performative aspects of landscape and tourism constitutes an emerging field of enquiry within the social sciences. Yet, if on the one hand researching tourist practices responds to emerging theoretical demands, in practical terms it means having to deal with tricky methodological issues: where and how can we observe what people do? What does observing tourists' practices entail? Which is – if there is any at all – the 'right distance' at which one should position oneself in order to be able to 'properly observe' tourist practices? These are some of the practical questions which I grappled with most in my research. I shall address these questions in this section.

One of the major problems in researching tourists is related to the very nature of tourists as travelling subjects and the ephemerality of the tourist experience (see Minca and Oakes 2011 forthcoming). Indeed, Graburn (2002) questions the efficacy of any ethnography that has tourists as the focus of enquiry. He asks 'how is it possible to know about today's mobile subjects' (*ibid*: 19) and delineates a whole set of problems arising from doing ethnography with tourists. Tourism is made up of transient events like tours, visits, sightseeing, and it occurs largely in places of transit like hotels, stations, airports and on means of transportation. This intrinsically mobile nature of tourism and leisure makes participants fleeting and hard to grasp, both practically and intellectually. Practically, because it may be very difficult to get hold of tourists: package tourists, in particular, are sealed into buses, five-star hotels and bound to controlled routines which leave little room for any unplanned interaction; an issue to which I shall return later in this chapter. Tourists are hard to grasp intellectually, Graburn maintains, because as participants in a ritual, they are in a 'special state of mind' which 'may include intense concentration, meditation, distraction, seriousness or altered state of consciousness' (*ibid*: 20), and this condition is likely to affect their willingness to spend time in interviews and questionnaires, or to be observed and photographed for research purposes. However, one may argue that not all tourists are necessarily in this position, and indeed in my research I encountered many tourists who were actually happy to be interviewed or asked about their journey, as that seemed to be giving them the opportunity to share emotionally intense experiences

with someone attentively interested in hearing them. Nonetheless, some of Graburn's concerns seem to find substantiation in the particular context of Varanasi. Graburn claims that because of their supposedly altered state of consciousness tourists may be 'unable to state their true feelings' (*ibid*) and as a consequence, the ethnographer is often left with confusing, ambiguous and misleading responses, which may be very difficult to make sense of. In Varanasi, this is further complicated by the widespread (particularly among backpackers) and somewhat socially accepted use of drugs, and by the spiritual rapture that the city easily leads to, so that travellers are often dragged into very particular, sometimes altered states of consciousness which makes interpreting data collected through interviews rather challenging.

With all this in mind, in this section and the following I will explain how I went about designing the methodological framework which supports my research, and show how it tackles the questions highlighted above.

Having decided to focus on Western tourists and to explore what they actually do in the landscape of Varanasi, the first step was to outline a spectrum of the typologies of Westerners present in the city and the people and the institutions involved with them. Although my research is not concerned with a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenologies of tourism in Varanasi, a general understanding of its geographies in terms of tourist presence was necessary. My research focused in particular on package tourists, independent travellers, and local institutions and local residents dealing with tourism.

The main concern at this point was how to approach tourists and which methods would best serve my purpose of eliciting information about their practices and experiences in Varanasi. It seemed to me that spending extensive time on site as a traveller among other travellers would allow me to learn more about tourist life in Varanasi by actually being part of it. What is more, it would help my understanding of the landscape of Varanasi through my own interactive and embodied engagement with it. Since my research centred on the practices of landscape, I thought that a research methodology involving the active participation of the researcher in that landscape would be particularly helpful. Ethnography, as a 'uniquely useful method for uncovering the *processes* and *meanings* that undergird sociospatial life' (Herbert 2000:

550 emphasis in original), looked like the most suitable choice. As Goffman (1961: ix-x) maintains in his renowned study of the social situation of mental patients in asylums, 'any group of persons […] develops a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable, and normal once you get close to it, and a good way to learn about any of these worlds is to submit oneself in the company of the members to the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject'. To 'get close' to tourists and share everyday contingencies and routines seemed to me as the best way to uncover the processes through which representation and practice are negotiated in place and become part of the construction of the landscape of Varanasi. If my main research objective was to find out what tourists actually do in Varanasi, then ethnographic observation would – and indeed did – elicit a great deal of information in this respect. Precisely because ethnography 'examines what people *do* as well as what they say' (Herbert 2000: 552), it was particularly helpful to employ interviews, for they enabled 'to contrast deeds and words' (*ibid*.) and highlight some discrepancies between what tourists said about their activities and what I actually observed, thus providing the research with further valuable insights (on this topic see also Eyles 1988a; Liebow 1967). Indeed, as is often the case in fieldwork research, instead of adopting a single specific technique I opted for a combination of methods. Ethnography is certainly the methodology that informed my research, but how do we *do* ethnography? I made use of different techniques such as semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, participant observation (meant here as a more specific segment of ethnography) and visual methods. Combining different techniques turned out to be paramount in my fieldwork because it allowed me to obtain data which would not have been possible to attain through other techniques which I had planned initially, such as with package tourists, as I shall explain later. In fact, although I had designed a clear research plan in advance, once in the field I had to revise some of the methods I intended to adopt. The main problems I faced and the solutions I worked out are discussed in the next sections, which provide a review of the major methodological choices that shaped my research. Broadly speaking then, the qualitative approach forms the basis of my research; however, this is complemented by second-source quantitative data consisting largely of figures of tourist arrivals at both local and national level.

In practical terms, my work on the field was organised in three phases. The first phase was largely devoted to 'entering the field', that is, gaining acquaintance with the surroundings in terms of both physical and socio-cultural environment, building trustful relationships with people, networking and making contacts with scholars and key actors of the city's cultural panorama, particularly those related to tourism. While, as I said, this process was facilitated by my previous knowledge of the city, it still took a significant amount of time. I also spent part of my first period in Varanasi trying to identify the typologies of foreign travellers present in the city, the local social actors most involved in tourism, and relevant contacts, gatekeepers and potential interviewees. In the second phase I carried out the core part of my research activities, which included conducting participant observation of package tours and independent travellers' routines, keeping a field diary, designing, distributing and collecting questionnaires, interviewing, and carrying out documentary research. A substantial part of my work in the field also involved photographing and audio-video recording. The third phase was basically a follow-up, and involved a second fieldtrip to Varanasi aimed at attaining some specific data which I was not able to attain previously. This mainly regarded package tourists, from whom I needed to collect more questionnaires, as well as detailed statistics of their arrivals in Varanasi. In the following sections I will review in more detail the methods that I adopted in my fieldwork, starting from some preliminary reflections on fieldwork itself and the actual context in which it took place.

2.3 THE TIME-SPACE CONTEXT OF RESEARCH: DOING FIELDWORK IN VARANASI

Ethnographic literature has long been discussing issues arising from doing fieldwork, especially in developing countries. The culture shock, the settling-in phase, the problem of language, the relationship of the researcher with informants, assistants and the local community, the gender issue, and several other matters that are likely to challenge a fieldworker have been closely examined by social scientists adopting a qualitative approach (examples within human geography are Cloke et al. 2004; Crang and Cook 2007; Cook and Crang 1995; Desai and Potter 2006; Flowerdew and Martin 1997; Howard 1997; Robson and Willis 1997; Rose 1993a; 1993b). Nonetheless, the

ethics, politics and practicalities of fieldwork are realised differently in different contexts, giving each research its own nuance and its own methodological specificity. That is what happened with my work in the field, where I was confronted with common methodological concerns articulated into very context-specific issues, most of which related to the spatialities and the temporalities of the site of my research. Dealing with a different spatio-temporal context is in fact one of the most challenging things about doing research in a foreign country. As a European woman used to working and travelling within the familiar boundaries of Europe, I had to relocate myself, my research schedule, my expectations, my physical and emotional self into a completely different time-space context. The temporalities and mobilities of my research were affected by that: the average time it would take to do even the simplest things, the way in which I was (or was not) able to move around, the shifting accessibility of the city's spaces at different times of the day and in different seasons, these are all factors that I had to cope with during my fieldwork. As my main focus was on the *ghats,* I was based in that area; however, accessibility to the *ghats* was not always to be taken for granted: compounded by a lack of proper lighting and maintenance they are dangerous place as the sun sets, particularly for women alone, so it is sensible not to be around at that time. Likewise, the riverbank is not an advisable area to be in during the monsoon time.

Settling in and starting to work efficiently took longer than I expected. That was due to a combination of cultural, structural and environmental reasons. First of all, I had to readjust my schedule to a completely different pace, as having things done in what I considered to be a 'reasonable' time proved to be quite a difficult task, and that applied to both research-related and mundane things. While I found this rather frustrating, such a frustration was revealing as to the expectations that I was unconsciously imposing on the field: who has the right to define what a 'reasonable' time is? Harvey (1996a) reminds us that time and space are 'social constructs' and that 'different societies produce qualitatively different conceptions of time and space' (1996a: 210); indeed, negotiating between different cultures and practices of time and space was one of the first things I had to learn to do in the field. Harvey also makes the point that because time and space are constructed through social and cultural processes they are not to be thought of as absolute and immaterial, instead, they are

embedded in the materiality of the world (1996a: 211). In fact, the cultural causes that affected the pace of my fieldwork had a very concrete material side too, principally connected to the weakness of the city's infrastructures: frequent power breakdowns, slow and congested road connections, defective technologies and limited water supply made work conditions rather uncomfortable. My fieldwork activities entailed commuting on a frequent basis between two distinct areas of the city: the riverside, in the Eastern part, where the *ghats* are, and the Cantonment, in the Western part, where big hotels and tour operators are mainly located. Because of the bad traffic conditions which characterise the busy streets of Varanasi this activity would be considerably time-consuming and unsafe. The sort of spatial order that I was used to in Europe did not apply there in the same way: being in traffic jams alongside stray dogs, cows, monkeys, cripples, beggars, shouting vendors, rickshaws with drivers constantly beeping their horns, cars, bikes, hazardous drivers, precariously loaded vehicles, shrouded dead bodies carried in litters to funerals is a rather disorientating experience (see Edensor 1998b); while this experience may be exotic or shocking to many tourists (as I gathered from their own accounts), it is certainly inconvenient when it comes to having to stick to a work plan. Undoubtedly the fact that I was not new to this context reduced the shock, but still it was something that had an impact on my research routine.

The environment played an important part in my fieldwork: while the change in climate and food expectedly brought about some physical indisposition at the beginning, the poor hygiene conditions which the city is unhappily famous for caused health problems throughout the fieldwork and afterwards, affecting my ability to work, my attitude towards the research, my way of perceiving, observing and discerning things. Reflections on the embodied aspects of research shall be discussed in more details in section 2.11.4 and later in the thesis.

Seasonality, as I stated in the introduction of this chapter, was also important: as the focus of my research was on the *ghats* of Varanasi it would have made little sense to plan a fieldwork during the monsoon season, when the *ghats* literally disappear under the flooding of the Ganges. It could be worth asking, for example, whether and how my research outcomes would have been different if I had conducted my fieldwork

mainly in monsoon time. Likewise, the hot season is likely to affect the research environment in significant ways; in this time of the year the riverbank turns into a rather inhospitable place: the fierce sun makes the stone steps and platforms of the *ghats* burn, leaving them largely deserted for most of the day, especially during the hottest hours. In this season most of the activities move to cooler parts of the day, from sunset to dawn, throughout the night. This obviously does not suit tourists, who avoid the city during this period; the heat increases environmental hazards, worsens service provision, reduces people's mobility and may turn a journey to Varanasi into a very unpleasant experience. Working too becomes very difficult as electricity failures, impoverished hygiene conditions and disruptions in general increase significantly. Nonetheless, in that time it was easier for me to contact and interview hotel managers and tourism workers in general, as they had much more spare time compared to during the peak tourist season.

Furthermore, cultural and political elements merged with climate in shaping the space-time context of my research. Because of its symbolic importance in the religious and cultural panorama, Varanasi is always at the centre of some religious celebration or festival, to the point that, as a popular saying goes, in Banaras there are more festivals running than days of the year (see Singh R.P.B. 1993: 215). Indeed, according to the *Panchanga,* the Hindu lunar almanac, each day and season of the year is recommended for a specific type of worship leading to the achievement of specific spiritual merits. It is believed that any deed made in Kashi (Varanasi) has a special metaphysical resonance, from everyday rituals and prayers to sophisticated Vedic rites, everything is amplified by the special power attributed to this *tirtha*, sacred place (see Kashi Khanda).

Alongside Hindu festivities, Sikh, Muslim, Buddhists, Christian and Jain festivals are also celebrated, so that there is a festival going on nearly every day. That causes significant inconvenience to those who need to get on with their work, as many offices, roads, public places are closed and the overwhelming fervour with which these events are celebrated, day and night, makes it difficult to carry on with one's own regular activities during those days; however, it also gives the sense of the cultural and

spiritual vitality of the city, and attracts plenty of tourists and pilgrims, which my research highly benefited from, despite the disruptions.

The cultural and religious symbolism of Varanasi within the broader national discourse is a key feature of the city, and as any spiritual activity resonates here more vigorously, so do political claims. Indeed, political battles are fought here very ardently; claims of national identity are often made on the basis of religious belonging and the city sadly has records of several bomb attacks made on the basis of religious fundamentalisms. In March 2006 blasts at the Sankat Mochan Hanuman temple, a vibrant Hindu religious-cultural centre very popular in the local community, and at the Varanasi Cantonment Railway Station killed several people. The last of these series of terrorist attacks occurred near Dashashvameha, the main of Varanasi's *ghats,* in December 2010. At the time I was carrying out my fieldwork in Varanasi in 2009, general elections were held, which caused major disruptions to the normal routine of the city and made terrorist alert levels rise considerably. Risks connected with terrorist threats entered significantly in my research. The terrorist attacks in Mumbai in November 2008 significantly affected my research in that it resulted in a drop-off of tourism in India and Varanasi during the following months. Some of the problems that I experienced in getting in touch with package tourists (which I will explain later), had to do with the consequences of the Mumbai attacks. Broadly speaking, general elections, frequent religious festivities, extreme weather conditions and the terrorist threat made part of my fieldwork particularly challenging. Yet, at the same time, those very difficulties gave me the sense of the rich 'texture' of this place, making me more aware of its multi-scale entanglements with socio-political events and cultural practices, and its embeddedness in the physical and material conditions that characterise it.

2.4 PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

The main element on which ethnography depends is observation (see Kees van Donge 2006; Herbert 2000). This is not meant as a mere observing a scene from a supposedly detached position – as was the case in the descriptive geography of the past or for some old-style ethnographers (for example Malinowski 1967); instead, it is a form of

observation 'from within', one which presupposes an engagement of the researcher with the social scene s/he is to analyse. In participant observation 'ethnographers gather data by their active participation in the social world' (May 2001: 154) gaining insights that would be difficult to obtain through other techniques. As May (*ibid.*) notes, 'in "doing" ethnography, engagement is used to an advantage', so for example my active presence in the field allowed me to share with tourists a variety of everyday situations and contingencies which tourists frequently experience in Varanasi, thereby enhancing my empathy with them, the empathic understanding of a particular social scene being one of the strengths of the ethnographic method (see May 2001: 150; Kees van Donge 2006: 186).

More generally, living among people *in place* and immersing myself in 'the daily flow of social life' (Kees van Donge 2006: 186) bore several advantages: firstly, to better understand social and cultural processes in the context where they unfold; secondly, to gain data from my own reflexive experience in the field; thirdly, to capitalise on being part of a range of informal situations which can easily lead to contacts and information. However, while participant observation is often used as a synonym for ethnography, here I will employ the term to refer to two specific segments of my ethnographic work: one involved my full immersion as a 'complete participant' (Gold 1969, quoted in May 2001: 155) in the life and routines of travellers in Varanasi; the other one saw me as a 'participant observer' in some package city tours which I was able to join.

I will start from this second *tranche* of my research, which was troublesome and revealing at the same time. My aim was to join package tourists visiting Varanasi in order to closely observe what goes on during those tours: which parts of the city tourists are taken to, how they move around, what they do while sightseeing, what comments are made, what stories are told. That turned out to be quite a difficult task to achieve. The main obstacle was related to issues of security: the tour operators that I contacted could not officially include me in the group due to insurance-related restrictions: I would have had to buy the whole package in order to be able to travel with the group. But that would have meant joining the whole trip, whereas I was interested only in the Varanasi part. To make things even more difficult, the November

2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks caused many scheduled journeys to be cancelled at the last moment, further reducing my chances to join package tourist groups in Varanasi. However, following some tour operators' unofficial suggestions, I made contact with local guides, who introduced me to the tour leaders, who eventually allowed me to join groups and to take part in the city sightseeing. In this way, I was able to share the activities of three organised groups – one Greek, one Italian and one American – either for the whole duration of their stay in Varanasi, or in key moments of their city tour, like the unfailing early-morning boat trip along the *ghats* or the evening Ganga Aarti*,* a religious celebration performed on the bank of the Ganges, which has recently become very popular among tourists.

Gaining access to package tourists also proved to be very difficult in relation to conducting interviews and questionnaires. In many ways, package and luxury tourists are very much 'protected' and inaccessible compared to independent travellers and lower budget tourists; they also have their own specific geographies and practices, as I shall illustrate in the empirical chapters of this thesis. On the other hand, I did have easier access to the less regulated life of independent travellers in Varanasi. I lived in a guest-house, hung out with travellers, became a regular in traveller haunts, did 'touristy' things –whether mainstream touristy or 'alternative' ones – attended concerts, roof parties, day trips, did shopping, bought souvenirs, drank plenty of *chai* with fellow travellers, friends, locals. In the months spent in Varanasi I became part of the local community of travellers, making friends (some of whom I am still in touch with), sharing stories, participating in routines, activities and the everyday life of foreign tourists in the city. As a result, not only was I able to observe tourist practices 'from within' and to gain deeper insights into tourist cultures in Varanasi, I also benefited from my position as a participant observer in terms of networking: some fellow tourists became very interested in my research (after all it was their own experiences that I was keen on) and either came to talk to me spontaneously about anecdotes, feelings, things that occurred in their stay, or provided me with useful suggestions, tips and contacts for interviews.

In terms of my ethnographic work more generally, three activities were particularly key: strolling on the *ghats*, regularly attending the evening Ganga Aarti at

Dashashvamedha Ghat (the main *ghat*), and keeping a field diary. Those were very fruitful activities which allowed me to record observations, make useful notes, elicit and compare information, and provided occasions for interviews and the distribution of questionnaires. Again, the flexibility accomplished through the ethnographic approach was paramount. With regard to tourist questionnaires, for example, as I shall explain later, I would collect the filled-in forms from the local official guides, whom I would meet daily at the evening ceremony on the main *ghat* – a sort of meeting point for all tourists and guides. That was a key moment in which I had the chance to engage in informal chats through which I could gather more information and make further contacts. The chats that I used to have with the guides on the *ghats* gave me the opportunity to look at tourists' behaviours and practices from yet another standpoint, precisely that of local guides. Through the stories, the jokes, the anecdotes, sometimes the discussions that the guides would share with me about their experiences with tourists, I could get valuable insights into the geographies, practices and politics of tourism in Varanasi, particularly organised tourism. These jovial conversations represented an important source of information for me. In terms of research practices, this is also a telling example of what I consider to be the usefulness of 'doing research at the *chai* stall', meaning the goldmine of knowledge that informal hangouts often are.

2.5 VISUAL METHODS (AND BEYOND)

Visual methods formed an important part of my research. Drawing mainly on photography and video-ethnography as methods for social research (see Harper 2000; Knowles and Sweetman 2004; Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001; McEwan 2006; Prosser 1998; Robinson and Picard 2009; Pink 2001; Rose 2001) I collected three types of material. The first is photographs and video footage produced by myself, where the focus was on 'practices' – of tourists, pilgrims, and ordinary people – but also on the socio-spatial structure of the city. The second type is advertising material such as leaflets, postcards, promotional CD-ROMs, booklets, brochures, but also non-tourist productions displayed publicly such as notices, flyers, posters, paintings. Here the focus was very

much on representation and the ways in which the city is marketed, promoted, visually narrated and constructed by different gazes, mainly by the organised gaze of the tourist industry, but also by more 'spontaneous' gazes such as those of local artists, students, informal groups, cultural associations in which long-term and habitual Western visitors, scholars, connoisseurs of Indian cultures are often involved. Finally, the third type of data collected is visual material produced by tourists, largely photos, drawings, footage, which they agreed to share with me.

Photography looked like a particularly appropriate method for research aiming to investigate the dynamics between representation and practice in a symbolic tourist landscape. Intrinsically visual in its nature, it seemed to me that this research methodology was well suited to the study of an intrinsically visual concept, landscape. As Rose (2001: 256) stresses, visual methods 'are especially effective when they engage with something that is itself visual'. Moreover, as a practice in itself, photography is particularly close to tourism, tourists being widely associated with the act of photographing, and photographs being one of the most recognised artefacts of the material cultures of tourism. The way in which I used images – either still or moving – as a visual research tool is twofold. On the one hand, I used photos as sources of evidence: pictures convey 'real, flesh and blood life' (Howard Becker 2002: 11, quoted in Rose 2001: 238) and thereby work effectively in describing the 'material reality' of the research context (Collier 1967: 5), as they capture particularly well the 'texture' and 'feel' of place (Rose 2001: 247). At the same time, as Cook and Crang (1995: 69, quoted in McEwan 2006: 232) note, 'photographs can often provide more insights into the social milieu of actors than into the "reality" they supposedly capture, and as a means for studying the culture of groups they can also provide not only a useful research avenue but they may already be part of the very culture you seek to study'. Not only then do pictures provide evidence of the material landscape of Varanasi, they also – perhaps predominantly – delve into different 'ways of seeing' that particular landscape, unveiling different interpretations, agendas, positionalities deployed through the means of visual representation, from those of tourists, tour operators, local people, to my own as a researcher. Photos, indeed, 'do analytical work' (Rose 2001: 256), they do not merely and neutrally document reality, and such is the way they are intended and used within this research framework. In fact, even

when deployed as documentary evidence, they are subordinated to the researcher's interpretation thereby taking a *supporting* function (Rose 2001). As is often the case in social research, those interpretations are triangulated with other sources of evidence, particularly ethnographic data and interviews/questionnaires, as I shall illustrate in the relevant sections. In order to use the photo-documentation technique successfully, I made sure that photos were clearly connected to my research questions by using 'shooting scripts' (Suchar 1997, quoted in Rose 2001: 243), a set of sub-questions and themes generated by the overall one, which were aimed at guiding my picture-taking and collection of visual information. The main themes addressed were representation, practices, and the socio-spatial structure of the city, as I already explained at the outset of this section. This technique also made the coding and analysis process easier. Alongside research-centred subjects, I also used photography in a more intuitive and affective way, taking pictures out of purely aesthetic pleasure, emotional engagement, or as a practice of social interaction (for example in social events like weddings, meetings, parties, leisure moments).

However, while the visual data provides a great deal of information about the city and its representations, practices and spatial structure, it fails to account for another fundamental element in the sensual experience of the city, the sense of hearing. The importance of looking at the 'soundscape' (Garrioch 2003; Smith 1994) of the city is twofold: firstly, it gives landscape 'voices' and 'ears' and not only 'eyes', complementing the traditionally oculocentric approach to landscape (Cosgrove 2008; Driver 2003) with another important sensory element, that of sound; secondly, the soundscape of Varanasi speaks of one of the most prominent characteristics of the city's cultural heritage, that is to do with its special connection to music. Varanasi is in fact a renowned centre of excellence for Indian classical music, which many travellers come here to study. I shall address this topic at length in Chapter 4, showing how the soundscape of the city provides an insight into the practices of landscape.

Hence, by means of a pocket digital recorder that I carried with me most of the time, I collected sounds, noises and voices of the city, occasional conversations occurring on the *ghats*, concerts and improvised music performances. I also collected music listened to and played by tourists: there is in fact a rather intense activity of downloading,

recording, uploading, exchanging, buying music, among travellers. Some of this makeshift music production is easily found on YouTube (see YouTube 2007; 2011), other music has been kindly shared with me by travellers whom I met during my fieldwork, while commercial CDs and DVDs are widely available in markets and shops throughout the city.

2.6 QUESTIONNAIRES

While I had accomplished my goal of joining some tourist groups visiting the city, the question of how to gain access to package tourists on a larger scale was still there; put simply: how could I talk to as many package tourists as possible in order to unveil their views, routines, and practices in Varanasi? I had been able to have informal and quick exchanges with them at some strategic sites and events where tourists inescapably gather or pass by – for example at the main *ghat* during the Ganga Aarti – but I never had the chance to conduct proper interviews. This was partly compensated by the fact that, as I explained, I could gather information about tourists' activities, schedules, itineraries, interests, queries etc. through both my ethnographic observation and the tour operators that I had the chance to interview at length. However, I felt that collecting package tourists' own views and perceptions about Varanasi – or at least what they say about their own views and perceptions – was an important segment of my study. Indeed, much of the literature about tourist landscape which informs the theoretical framework of my research makes significant reference to organised tourism (see for example Edensor 1998a; Urry 2002a [1990]). Questionnaires were designed particularly to reach this group of tourists. The questionnaire option came out as an attempt to respond to the difficulties of making contact with organised tourists; it is a methodological solution that I worked out in the field, having planned to interview package tourists and being confronted, instead, with the fact of not being able to speak to them at all. Tourists in a package are tied to very strict times and highly regulated spaces, so it seemed to me that the questionnaire method was more appropriate in this circumstance. The questionnaire was designed in a way that would allow tourists to fill it out very quickly and still allow crucial points to be covered. The

format that I adopted is the semi-structured one, meant for self-completion, with a prevalence of structured questions. This type of questionnaire is considered cheaper, less biased and more far-reaching than face-to-face interviews (May 2001: 98); it is quick to complete and it suits particularly those situations which involve the collection of information, for example, from passers-by in the streets, at hotel reception desks or at popular tourist attractions (Simon 2006: 166). The semi-structured format allowed me to gather both basic and unambiguous information, and more articulated views and comments, all in a one-sheet form which took less than five minutes to complete. The first part of the questionnaire asked basic questions regarding both personal background information (age, gender, nationality, occupation) and general information about the journey (dates and length of stay, itinerary, accommodation in Varanasi); the second part was designed with my main research questions in mind, and was meant to elicit data as to the representations, practices and geographies of tourists in Varanasi.[3] In accordance with standard ethics requirements, the questionnaires were anonymous and inclusive of a brief note introducing the researcher (including contact details) and the purpose and intended uses of the research.

As for the sampling strategy, I tried to achieve a representative sample (on this see De Vaus 2002; Bulmer and Warwick 1993; Simon 2006) centring the administration of questionnaires on three strategic sites: the local Government of India tourist office, the main *ghat*, and major tourist hotels. Apart from the Government of India tourist office, where the valuable collaboration of the officer contributed to increase response rates, the first distribution did not achieve the results that I had expected. The collection turned out to be problematic especially in luxury hotels, where package tourists mostly stay. This was due to strict administrative rules (some of which have been made stricter after the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack), and to the fact that, as I mentioned, package tourists normally have to stick to tight schedules, which leave them very little time, to complete even short questionnaires. The mediation of some institutional actors turned out to be essential.

I identified local guides as potential key players in the administration of the questionnaires, and established a network of authorised local guides who agreed to

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[3] See Appendix 1.

distribute my questionnaires to the tourists that they were hired to take around. I would meet the guides daily at the evening ceremony on the main *ghat* – a sort of meeting point for all tourists and guides – in order to collect the filled-in questionnaires. It took some time for this strategy to start working effectively. It was actually quite frustrating at the beginning: while all of the guides whom I got in touch with had happily agreed to help me out with the questionnaires, I soon realised that only very few of them were actually doing it. In fact, the response rates were embarrassingly low for weeks. However, towards the end of my stay the established network began to work. Meeting the guides daily and spending some time together allowed me to gain their trust and to build up a relationship which ultimately resulted in them being more committed to the task.

As for hotels, I made contact with managers and front-desk personnel of the hotels most frequented by package tourists, asking them to give the questionnaires to the tour leaders, who in turn could distribute them to their groups. As I expected, most of them refused. However, some accepted and their contribution was very helpful. In particular, I had a very good response from the front-desk manager of a popular five-star hotel, who helped me to collect questionnaires from tourist customers and gave me useful, off-the-record information about figures and trends of tourist arrivals in Varanasi. Again, this was only possible after several meetings, since at the beginning he too had refused to collaborate under the excuse of 'the policy does not allow it' used by most of the hotel staff I met. Tellingly enough, when he later offered to help me with the questionnaires and I asked 'What about the hotel policy?' he sardonically replied: 'Well, WE make the policy!'. This, I believe, can be considered as an example of the difficulty of working in a research environment where the threshold between legality and illegality, ethical and unethical is utterly ambiguous, and where much of the data you are likely to collect depends to a large extent on the kind of relationship you establish with people. This poses a set of ethical issues – which I discuss elsewhere in this chapter – and in terms of the overall economy of the research it was also extremely time-consuming as it demanded the expenditure of considerable time and energy in social networking, much more in fact than I had initially expected. Ultimately, I was able to collect 135 completed questionnaires overall (details provided in Appendixes 1, 2, 3), capturing a sample which can be considered representative in

so far as it includes diverse categories of the population concerned in terms of age, nationality, gender, occupation (see Simon 2006: 169). Combined with other data collected through different methods, questionnaires provided an important source of information with regard to the segment of my research concerned with package tourists.

2.7 INTERVIEWS

While the interview method did not succeed with package tourists for the reasons that I described in the questionnaire section, it did work well with other categories of respondents, namely independent travellers, tour operators, and local people involved with tourism. My ethnographic immersion in the local social life made it easier to make contact with these strata of my targeted population as it allowed the proper time and conditions to establish that interpersonal relation with respondents which is fundamental for the interviewing process to succeed (Willis 2006; on interviewing see also May 2001; Fontana and Frey 2000; Valentine 1997). The networks that I was able to create in this way were particularly helpful in recruiting interviewees: I employed the snowballing technique, using different contacts in order to maximise the diversity of the respondents. Certainly crucial to the success of the interview method was the fact that both independent travellers and local people (including officers, scholars, and those individuals with institutional functions) were not as tightly bound to time constraints as package tourists, so that there was room for more extensive and in-depth exchanges. Overall, I conducted 64 interviews between February 2009 and January 2010. These involved the following categories of respondents:

- Independent travellers (19 persons from Europe, Canada, South America, Australia)

- Tour Operators (7 interviews with tour leaders, branch heads, travel agents of both local and foreign tour operators).

- Local people dealing with tourism (this included both common people like shopkeepers, laundry men, tour guides, yoga teachers, Ganga Aarti priests and patrons, Ganges bathers etc., and institutional representatives and scholars).

- Other 'Westerners' (one Dutch missionary and a British man who had settled down in Varanasi, both living there for many years; interestingly, I was encouraged by my informants to interview them as 'significant Westerners' for my research).

The format that I adopted for all the interviews was the semi-structured one, which in some cases led to a more unstructured type of conversation, particularly with independent travellers, who were sometimes willing to continue the dialogue started with the interview afterwards, engaging other friends in the discussion or returning on the subject at later times when meeting occasionally in common traveller hangouts. Precisely because independent travellers would normally spend more time in Varanasi than package tourists, and were more 'free' to hang around, there was often the chance to bump into them again, have a chat, resume and expand the conversation we had had in the interview; with a few of them, that even led to establishing an enduring friendship. Interviews functioned in fact as a sort of ice-breaker, with travellers feeling increasingly involved in the topic and more comfortable in sharing their views with me; it is not accidental, perhaps, that juicy things would more often than not come up after I had switched off the recorder! It is also significant that after the interview some of the travellers explicitly expressed their contentment for having had the opportunity to 'reflect upon', 'put some order into' 'share with someone' (these are some of the terms they used) their feelings and experiences as visitors in Varanasi.

The interviews lasted between twenty minutes and one hour, except for those with the Ganges bathers (mostly pilgrims), which were considerably shorter because the setting (I interviewed them on site during their ablutions) did not allow for more extensive talk; these interviews were meant to find out what the feelings of the bathers were about being gazed at and photographed by tourists while taking the ritual bath. Reflecting critically upon those interviews, I later realised that while I was interested in unveiling the bathers' reactions to the tourist's voyeuristic gaze, I should

have acknowledged that of the researcher, too, and perhaps asked the bathers what it felt like to be gazed, photographed *and interviewed*.

Many of the interviews were audio-recorded, but the transcription turned out to be rather problematic due to the (often unavoidable) bad acoustic conditions in which they were conducted: temple bells, loud wedding processions, noisy fans or generators, horns and traffic noise, chanted hymns and music from loudly speakers would break through even quiet hotel rooms or private backyards.

As with the questionnaires, interviews were conducted in compliance with standard ethics requirements, with the interviewees being fully informed about the research and asked for a written consent before the interview.

2.8 DOCUMENTARY RESEARCH

In the previous sections I have discussed how I have constructed my (largely) primary source data through different methods. In this section I shift the focus to the data that has been constructed by others and that I use to substantiate my thesis.

My documentary research deals basically with two types of information: one is literature reviews which provide the background to my work; this was achieved through bibliographic research and thorough reading of literature on my case study area, my research themes, and my methodology and theoretical approach (as suggested by Meth and Williams 2006). The second one – which I address in this section – involved the collection and analysis of documents about Varanasi which I will use as source material for my empirical chapters, particularly the one on representation. Some of this material has been examined in the section on visual methods.

Drawing on Cloke et al.'s (2004) discussion on the construction of geographical data, a further distinction can be made as to the sources of my research material. Starting from the basic distinction between primary and secondary source data and referring to the latter, Cloke et al. distinguish three types of sources: official, non-official and

imaginative ones. Official sources provide factual information produced by the state in its various forms (public authorities, institutions, government agencies); non-official sources also provide factual information but it is produced by private individuals, agencies, organisations, firms or social groups; finally, imaginative sources provide information 'which are overtly products of human imagination and whose primary purpose is not to make factual statements about the world but, instead, to entertain, provoke, inspire or move the reader, listener or viewer; in short, to engage the emotions and, indeed, the imagination' (Cloke et al 2004: 93); in other words, they are artistic creations in the broadest sense, and include literature and travel writing, music and the performing arts, painting and the visual arts, photography, cinema and television, architecture, objects and material culture, and electronic media. Focusing on tourism and heritage as the overarching research theme, with a special eye to how the city narrates itself to onlookers (not necessarily always tourists), I collected data from all the three types of sources; in particular, this included official statistics and reports (mainly of foreign arrivals on both local and national scale), local and national press both in English and in Hindi, published and unpublished academic work, commercial publications, paintings and drawings, photographs, fiction, music, audiovisual and multimedia material, maps, souvenirs, handicrafts.

One particular annotation has to be made with regard to a specific set of data. This concerns the number of package tourists present in Varanasi every year. Although my research is mainly based on qualitative methods, I thought that eliciting quantitative data comparing the presence of independent travellers and package tourists in Varanasi could have been useful in order to find out which of the two types of visitors is quantitatively the most significant in the city. Since different types of tourism entail different tourist practices and geographies (see for example Edensor 1998a; 2000 on 'heterogeneous' and 'enclavic' tourist spaces), gathering such data would have added to my qualitative study of those very geographies.

Having been told by institutional sources that there are no official records dealing specifically with either package or independent tourists, I turned to non-official sources, in this case hotels. The idea was to try to obtain statistics of foreign arrivals directly from hotel managers, particularly those of the most popular hotels in the

Cantonment; presumably, this would provide indication as to the number of package tourists visiting Varanasi, given that package tourists typically stay in five-star hotels, especially in big international chains like Ramada, Radisson, Taj Hotel.

Unfortunately, after several attempts (including a second fieldtrip), I failed to obtain this information: none of the contacted hotels agreed to provide their own official records. What I did obtain, though, was helpful informal information about trends and numbers of tourist arrivals in the main five-star and budget hotels in Varanasi, plus some paper reports reluctantly provided by the U.P. Tourist Bungalow. However, these reports only refer to January to July 2009 and are apparently not entirely reliable, according to my informant within the hospitality sector.

Useful but not essential to my research, the lack of official quantitative data regarding the presence of package and independent tourists in Varanasi did not affect the core argument of my thesis, which is substantially constructed through qualitative research.

2.9 ISSUES OF LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION

Omnis traductor traditor

(Every translator is a traitor)

I am writing my thesis in a foreign language. English, indeed, is not my mother tongue; I express myself better in Italian. This is the first basic fact about language which I would like to put forward, as it brings with it a constant trading and 'travelling', sometimes rewarding, sometimes frustrating, between two different languages, two different cultural contexts, two different ways of understanding and 'phrasing' the world. It implies, at almost every word, a choice, a compromise, an ambivalent wavering between betrayal and loyalty, a movement of departure and approach, but also detours, stases, hesitations, returns, wanderings. Just like in a journey. Translating is in fact an ambivalent term, which points to an ambivalent act, one which implies questions of power and the right to represent 'the other' (Madge 1993; Spivak 1990).

As Bujra (2006: 172) points out 'translation is more than a technical exercise; it is also a social relationship involving power, status and the imperfect mediation of cultures'. Scholars across the social sciences and humanities have long been debating issues of language and translation; from Derrida' s 'impossibility' of a 'perfect' translation (Derrida 1996/1998: 56-57), to critical discussion on the politics and geographies of language within academia (Bernd 2005; Bialasiewicz 2003; Desbiens 2002; Desbiens and Ruddick 2006; Minca 2000; Samers and Sidaway 2000), to practical advice about learning a language or employing interpreters in fieldwork (Bujra 2006; Devereux 1992), the language question has been addressed from multiple perspectives. One should also not forget that translation as a strategic device to appropriate and represent the other has been central to the colonial project. Such was the case in British India, where the translation of 'ancient' Sanskrit texts into English, the codification of Indian languages into grammars and dictionaries meant for European readers, the rendering of European texts into local Indian languages by orientalist scholars like William Jones, Charles Wilkins, H.T. Colebrooke, and William Carey operated 'to construct European authority' (Dodson 2010b: 119; see also Bassnett and Trivedi 1999; Cheyfitz 1991; Cohn 1996; Teltscher 1995, Venuti 1993).

The issue of language has arisen in many ways throughout my doctoral work, particularly at three main stages of my research: fieldwork, data analysis and writing. For the sake of clarity, in this section I shall address the language question as divided into two sub-sections, one being 'language in the field', the other being 'back home'.

2.9.1 LANGUAGE IN THE FIELD

English is not the only foreign language which I have been dealing with in my work. Hindi, as the official language of my research site, is the other major one.

Learning the local language is often advised in fieldwork: it adds to the researcher's understanding of the context by allowing her/him to appreciate social conversations with local people, to read signs, adverts, local newspapers, to better comprehend what is going on around him/her. Moreover, as Devereux (1992: 44) suggests, 'the ability to conduct interviews on your own adds texture and depth to the data you collect'.

However, criticism has also been highlighted with regard to the 'prescription' of learning the language (see Clifford 1997a: 22). Clifford (*ibid*.) points out 'the fallacy' of the equation '"culture (singular) equals language (singular)"' (parentheses and quotes in the original) and argues that:

> language is a diverging, contesting, dialoguing set of discourses that no "native" – let alone visitor – can ever control. An ethnographer thus works in or learns some *part* of "the language". And this does not even broach the question of multilingual/intercultural situations.
>
> (*Ibid*., emphasis and quotes in original)

There is also a pragmatic side that needs to be considered: acquiring competence in a foreign language requires considerable investment in terms of time, money and intellectual energy, and in some cases, as Devereux puts it quite simply, 'this time and energy might be better employed doing other things' (Devereux 1992: 19; see also Barrett and Cason 1997: 18-19).

My background in Indian studies was certainly an advantage in the field: basic knowledge of Hindi and reminiscences of Sanskrit from my undergraduate studies enabled me to have essential social interactions in everyday situations, to read signs, newspapers, and popular literature, to have a deeper understanding of the cultural and symbolic universe which language, in both its 'erudite' and mundane use, makes reference to. However, while my linguistic competence sufficed to have a general understanding of what was around me, in-depth comprehension of written texts and conversations necessitated a fluency which I neither had, nor had the resources to acquire in the time span of my PhD. In addition, since my research led me to deal primarily with tourists or with individuals in some way related to tourism, English was widely accepted – in some cases even used as a mark of social status, particularly by educated middle class Indians – as the working language.

However, I did make use of interpreters in those cases in which interviews had to be conducted in Hindi. Because these were sporadic, I did not employ professional translators; interpreters were instead either friends who offered to help me out, or local assistants and informants. Particularly helpful was the assistance of my 'cultural translators', Indian scholars who not only offered their linguistic competence (newspapers articles and relevant texts collected as research documents have been translated under the supervision of one of them in particular), but also, and most importantly, provided valuable guidance and insight into the broader cultural framework of the city and the social, ritual, symbolic practices and languages associated with it.

As for what concerns tourists more specifically, as I said, the working language used in interviews, questionnaires and everyday exchanges was English. I acknowledge that, although 'the global reach of English' (Bujra 2006: 174) allowed for great inclusiveness, that choice was exclusive of those who did not speak – or not feel at ease in communicating in – English. For this reason, I always left Italian-speaking interviewees free to choose the language in which to conduct the interview.

2.9.2 BACK HOME

It was my responsibility, then, to transcribe and translate the interviews into English. Again the power question embedded in translation arises: I tried to facilitate the respondents by letting them choose the language of the interview, but it was I who ultimately had the control over the 'finished' text and meaning. All my Italian-speaking interviewees chose to carry out the interview in Italian thereby leaving to me both the responsibility and the power to 'represent' their voices through my translation. As Silvey (2003: 95) warns, 'our ability to represent the subject of our research is limited by our distinct subjective locations and our interpretations of narrative interviews should take such limitations into account'. While there is no easy way out of the problem of language, I think that it is important to acknowledge the imbalances and approximations which are inevitably involved in every translation, and to take responsibility for it.

My choice in the translations made for this thesis was to prioritise 'contextual' meanings instead of literal ones, that means translations perhaps less accurate to the original, but ones facilitating the comprehension of the multifaceted context in which communications took place. The problem of rendering the context applies also to transcription, where the richness added by non-verbal language, background noise, gesturing, silences and everything which is not expressed in words is lost in the translation from the oral to the written text. On the other hand, the context breaks into the text through the very disruption of the latter: it manifests itself through suspension points, ellipses, missing words, gaps let unfilled because the backdrop noise – often a ceiling fan, a wedding procession passing by, chanted *mantras* from a loud speaker – covered the words being said, or because the respondent intentionally omitted them, or even because the interviewer, myself, not an English native speaker, missed some words spoken in an accent which was difficult to grasp. My choice, then, has been to acknowledge that research is made up also of these actualities and contingencies, of 'imperfect' translations and not-ever-transparent data. As Crang and Cook emphasise:

> What translation produces, therefore, are hybrid, in-between forms of cultural understanding in which choices have been made about whether and how to hide and/or highlight the failures of fit between one language and another (Twyman et al. 1999).
>
> (Crang and Cook 2007: 25)

The way in which I have meant to convey that 'con-text' in my thesis is threefold. Firstly, in my translations, I have tried to leave the most words and idioms possible in the original language, in order to render that creative hybridity – linguistic and cultural – in which I found myself working in the field. Secondly, in transcribing, I acknowledged disruptions without trying to 'correct' them with suggestion of alternative meanings, and reporting, whenever possible, what caused the disruption (i.e. words covered by the noise of a generator started off by a power breakdown).

Thirdly, in my writing, I have occasionally employed literary images and mythological metaphors drawn by the Hindu tradition, in the attempt not only to convey the symbolic language and imagery by means of which the cultural context of Varanasi unfolds, but also to signify how my own mental processes and understanding of the city were shaped by that very language which I have assimilated through the years that I have spent researching about and in Varanasi.

2.10 Ethical Issues

Ethical questions have accompanied me throughout my research work. From the very beginning of my project to the writing up stage, postcolonial ruminations on the right of the (Western) researcher to 'speak for' (Spivak 1988a) the other, feminist concerns about the power relations involved in research, orientalist critique of 'the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient' (Said 2003 [1978]: 7) have been challenging theoretical assumptions as well as practices deployed in my research.

It was in the field, however, that those questions acquired defined contours. Some of those concerns were related to the way of 'doing' research, that is to say to the methods that I had chosen to adopt and their ethical repercussions; others emerged from the socio-cultural context where I was conducting my fieldwork and from my interactions with people, institutions, and informants in place. I shall address those issues in this section, paying particular attention to two aspects: the ethical implications of doing ethnography, and the moral predicaments arising from this particular context, Varanasi, where different systems of values, cultural practices, ethics of social relations challenged my own beliefs as to what is to be considered 'ethical' and what is not, and the very assumption that there is a stark divide between 'ethical' and 'unethical' in the first place. I would like to start with an episode from my fieldwork, interspersed with some theoretical reflections.

It was the last few days of my concluding fieldwork. A couple of nights before my departure, my Banarasi friends organised a little farewell party for me. We were having fun, eating pizzas, sipping some good Indian rum (an activity that would be

itself ethically questionable since alcohol is banned from the *ghats* area for orthodox religious reasons) and joking, although a light melancholy was also in the air because we were not sure when we would meet again. Among them was one of my closest friends in Banaras, whom I have known since my very first fieldtrip in 2004, and who has been very helpful as an informant in my research as he works as a local guide; we hung out quite a lot during my stay, joined by two common interests: tourists and Bollywood films, which we used to go to watch in local cinemas. We had also shared a sad event which occurred in his family during my previous fieldtrip. He had called me on my mobile the day I was leaving from Delhi to give me the sad news. I was at the airport, checking in my luggage packed with field data, heading back to London.

> ..Yet, as researchers, we cannot escape the contradictory position in which we find ourselves, in that the "lives, loves, and tragedies that fieldwork informants share with a researcher are ultimately data, grist for the ethnographic mill, a mill that has a truly grinding power"…
>
> (Stacey 1988: 23, quoted in England 1994: 86)

Towards the end, the party turned a bit emotional, and my friend burst into tears, sobbing:

> ```
> you guys come here and…(crying)…I love you guys…
> (crying) but then you go home… everybody leaves… you
> come and go and I see you going away and I'm here
> and…(crying) my heart is full of pain…
> ```
>
> ```
> (From my field notes, 15 January 2010)
> ```

I tried to console him, but could not help thinking that he was right, that after all I was in control of the situation much more than he was, if anything, because I could decide

when to buy a ticket and come back again. It took one week for me to get my tourist visa to India, and a few savings to buy a low-cost flight ticket. Would it have been the same for him?

> […] Fieldwork represents an intrusion and intervention into a system of relationships, a system of relationships that the researcher is far freer than the researched to leave […]
>
> (Stacey 1988: 22-23, quoted in England 1994: 85)

The research encounter is never neutral, nor it is free from emotional engagement; 'getting personal' (England 1994) is instead part of the methodological attempt, informed by feminist theories, to critically respond to traditional Western epistemology, one which pursues objectivity through impersonal detachment. However, as England shows, we need to be aware of the unequal power relations that ethnographic practice involves. Indeed, the farewell party episode made me aware of the 'violence', even though symbolical, which is implicit in fieldwork (Crapanzano 1977; Hastrup 1992; Rabinow 1977). Choosing to start my ethical discussion with this episode calls into question my own right to be there as a researcher, and possibly undermines the very assumption upon which my whole work relies, whereby the researcher's right to do fieldwork is often taken for granted. Nonetheless, it is precisely by making the ethical premises less stable, acknowledging the plurality of perspectives involved in the definition of what is ethical, and taking responsibility for the partiality, imbalances, and inevitable 'violence' embedded in fieldwork, that I can perhaps engage with the ethical challenges brought about by my research more honestly.

Crang and Cook (2007: 31-32) suggest that there are two kinds of research 'ethics', 'those with a capital E', and 'those with a lower case e'. The first type refers to fixed principles, as summarised for example in research codes of practice, which constitute standard ethical requirements which academic works are generally expected to comply with. Instead, ethics of the second type 'feed into and emerge from the smaller,

everyday encounters tied together throughout the research process' (*ibid*: 32) and are hence 'messier, ongoing, impure, continually updated'.

The 'capital E' ethical issues that have arisen with regard to the methods employed in my fieldwork have mainly to do with covert participant observation. Direct observation of tourist practices and the everyday life of the city was at the core of my research. That required my study to be covert in some cases in order to grant the observation process the most veracity and spontaneity possible. There are two cases, in particular, where I did not made my agenda fully explicit to the subjects involved in my study. One was when I joined package tours, the other one was during my audio-recorded ethnographic strolling. In the first case, I believe that the data would have been significantly biased if the fellow tourists were made aware of being observed throughout their trip. It would probably have made them feel uncomfortable and affected the naturalness of their behaviours, which was actually what I was supposed to observe. However, I made sure that the tour leaders running the package trips were fully informed about my research. A similar set of issues applied to the occasional conversations and exchanges of words that ended up in my pocket digital recorder which I would carry with me in my hanging around, in order to record voices and sounds of the city. In this case as in the first one, covert observation did not mean that I used to hide or disguise my research purposes when explicitly asked about myself by the people whom I got in touch with during my observation. In both cases, I have made the ethical commitment not to make public or recognisable any of the personal details of the participants' in my ethnographic study. Moreover, since my research does not deal with vulnerable people nor tackle particularly sensitive issues, I believe that adopting a covert method in some restricted circumstances did not cause offence or raise any serious ethical issues.

Interviews also formed part of my fieldwork. I always informed interviewees about the nature and the content of my study, and asked for their consent. This was not in writing, though, in those cases in which a formal requirement such as reading and signing a consent form might clash significantly with the informal environment in which my research took place, and eventually even affect the relationship between researcher and informant. It would be worth asking, for example, to what extent

requesting a non-English speaker to sign a form written in English can be considered an 'ethical' research practice. Therefore, my attitude in the field was to 'reasonably' accomplish formal ethics requirements with consideration for the cultural context of the research.

It was actually from interactions with the cultural context of my research that 'lower case e' ethical concerns emerged. Once again, I shall return to an episode from my fieldwork. I have already mentioned elsewhere in this chapter my failed attempts to obtain detailed statistics of foreign arrivals in the main hotels in the city. My search had been rather frustrating, not only because none of the officers and hotel managers whom I contacted agreed to provide the requested figures, but also because, to my utter disappointment, I was bounced from one institution, office and hotel to another for the whole duration of my fieldwork, presented mostly with arguable – if not deceitful – motivations and provided with unreliable, incomplete or simply unofficial data. On one occasion, I was openly told by an officer that I should "give them some money" if I wanted to get this information, meaning that I should have bribed senior officers of a renowned tourist institution in order to be able to get hold of the data I was looking for. To my 'capital E' ethical preoccupations, this sounded like a major breach to the recommended code of practice for research; the 'lower case e' ethics, however, urged me to put such ethical concerns in context. Sadly, as the picture below shows, corruption is quite a common practice in Varanasi, and in India more generally. From euphemisms like 'donation' to real extortion, bribes are a sort of social currency accepted, encouraged or just tolerated to different degrees. Despite attempts now being made by the State to curb corruption, it still remains part of the cultural, social and political texture of the city.

FIGURE 2 - A SIGN OUTSIDE A PUBLIC OFFICE IN VARANASI WARNING ABOUT BRIBES (AUTHOR'S PHOTO)

Having failed to obtain the above-mentioned data in any other sensible way, the ethical dilemma that arose at that point was 'should I surrender to the shortcut of the bribe?' After all, the 'bribe culture' was part of that 'research context' that I was supposed to take into account and to deal with as a fieldworker. It seems to me that the dilemma here is not all about the blurred divide between legal and illegal, between law and social convention, between law-abiding procedures and contentious cultural practices. Indeed, it is also about the extent to which and the ways in which a researcher decides to compromise with 'the field', and to negotiate between her/his own cultural and ethical background and the different ethos which s/he is confronted with. As Crang and Cook (2007: 32) maintain, 'few, if any, of us can act like a saint who is able to go into and emerge from their research unscathed by ethical wrongdoing'.

I did not pay the bribe, in the end, but that did not make me 'a saint'. Instead, the constant need to mediate between different understandings and practices of ethics helped me to question and decentre my own right to define what is 'ethical', and to accept that the fieldworker's position is not always an ethically comfortable and completely justifiable one.

2.11 BEING IN THE FIELD: POSITIONALITY AND REFLEXIVITY

I am a woman. I am Italian, studying in the UK, researching about India. I am in my late thirties, I am white. I am able-bodied and do not need any special aids to move around. I suppose I can position myself within the middle class, although from a strictly economic point of view my background is more working-class. I am also a sociable but relatively shy person. These basic facts about myself shaped my research as much as the theoretical foundation and the methodological approach upon which it is constructed. Actually, theory and methodology themselves cannot be disentangled from the situated positions from and through which they have been looked at and engaged with. Knowledge – McDowell (1997: 112) insists – is always situated. It is feminist geography, in particular, that urges us to rethink ideas of objectivity, knowledge and power, and to engage critically and reflexively with our own research (see Rose 1997). Calling into question the positivist 'myth' of scientific objectivity, Haraway (1997: 57) points out that 'feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*'. The Australian feminist Elizabeth Grosz puts it quite straightforwardly:

> The conventional assumption that the researcher is a disembodied, rational, sexually indifferent subject – a mind unlocated in space, time or constitutive interrelationships with others, is a status normally attributed only to angels.
>
> (Grosz 1986: 199, quoted in McDowell 1997: 107)

Blunt and Rose (Blunt 1994; Blunt and Rose 1994) further enrich feminist geographies with the critical tools of postcolonial theory, while in tourism research, Veijola and Jokinen (1994) remind us that the subject – whether the tourist or the analyst – is not only socially constituted but also *embodied.* Research data, then, is not simply gathered; it is constructed, and depends upon the positionality of both the researcher and the researched.

However, what I learnt from my fieldwork is that while as researchers 'we are differently positioned subjects' (England 1994: 84-85), those positions are often unstable and ambiguous: in the field I was together 'insider' and 'outsider', researcher and researched, I was 'the tourist' and 'the analyst' at the same time. Even my body, my gender, my age 'felt different' while I was there, and activated social responses and dynamics which were new and somewhat challenging to me. Issues of positionality played a fundamental role in my fieldwork, and in this section I shall discuss them, focusing on those which I consider particularly meaningful. In doing that, I shall employ some images from my fieldwork.

2.11.1 AT KARKI'S

> *Italian traveller*: '...a research about tourists? Really? Interesting...'
>
> *Myself*: 'Yes...'
>
> *Italian traveller*: '...So you are observing us?!'
>
> (From my field notes, February 2009)

I was at Karki's, an open-air rooftop Nepalese-Italian restaurant in Assi Ghat, a popular backpacker hangout. I was chatting with this guy, an Italian traveller who was a regular at Karki's and whom I had just met there. When it came to the typical question: 'What do you do here in Varanasi?', and I explained that I was researching about tourists, he came up with the remark quoted above, which sounded together a little playful, sarcastic and challenging, and which seemed to suggest that I was there to 'sneak' into travellers' routines, to 'spy' on them and observe them like guinea pigs in experiments, to then make my (pretentious) theoretical assumptions on them. Whether truthful to the intended meaning or suggested by the discomfort that I did occasionally feel in ethnographic observation, my interpretation of that remark raised some reflections as to my positionality. Participant observation, I realised, was not a simple matter of 'observing from within', as if taking the participant stance was enough to

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unquestionably place myself as an insider. Instead, my position was more mobile: in fact, I realised that I had multiple positions in the field. I was 'insider' and 'outsider' at the same time: insider in the social community of travellers, as I was a foreign traveller myself; outsider the local community of Banarasi, where I was regarded to as a *'videshi'*, a stranger. Even within the 'foreigner community', in a way, my 'researcher gaze' positioned me at some distance: I was a traveller *observing* other travellers, I was 'observing them', as the Italian traveller pointed out, implicitly emphasising that as a researcher I was no longer part of that 'us', but was instead, or at least appeared to be, in a supposedly elevated, somewhat detached, position. My strategy – because as I said, I actually felt uncomfortable in my ambiguous role at times – was to deal with it in humorous and self-ironical way:

```
Myself: '...yes, I'm here to observe you and write
everything down... so you better behave!'
```

Through self-irony, which is basically the ability to look at oneself in the third person, I tried to acknowledge and at the same time get over the ambiguity of my position as a participant observer. Irony worked well in turning distrust into sympathy, and while some of the fellow travellers seemed to retain a defensive attitude, others became very supportive and helpful, allowing me, as the relationship evolved, great insight into their lives and experiences as travellers and helping me to broaden my contact network.

However, while I had to deal with the ambiguities of being a researcher, I also experimented with the opposite: being 'the researched'. Because of its religious and cultural importance and supposed uniqueness, Varanasi is constantly at the centre of some research. The presence of scholars, journalists, artists, TV broadcasters, writers, students, academics, researchers, photographers, scientists and the like conducting any sort of studies, fieldwork, documentaries, films, surveys about Varanasi is remarkable. I myself was asked to be interviewed on several occasions during my stay. Quite frequently in Varanasi you happen to turn from being the researcher into being

the researched, in a sort of role play that – again – constantly questions your positionality. I always agreed to give my contribution whether in street surveys, video interviews, questionnaires, or in-depth audio-recorded talks. On one hand, I was compelled by a sense of commonality which I felt with those researchers engaged in activities similar to mine; moreover, it was an occasion to exchange information, tips, impressions, sources. On the other hand, sitting in front of someone and talking about my ideas, feelings, experiences in Varanasi, has increased my empathy for 'my' respondents. I felt the cathartic effect of being free to express that storm of feelings and thoughts that Varanasi often raises, and that many of my interviewees have reported. I also felt the opposite: the difficulty of conveying ideas and thoughts in an ordered way, of providing 'finished' opinions, in the time and format of the interview. I was expected to give transparent (or transparent to some degree) and apparently simple answers, whereas I felt that any answer was actually instable and betrayed the truth in some way or another. I could not, then, disregard those same feelings when I was the one asking the questions.

2.11.2 PHOTO *KIJIYE*!

> Walking in the alleys of Nagwa, south of Assi Ghat, returning from an interview. Awfully hot, my gut still gives me problems, and in less than an hour I have to be in Cantt to meet my informant. A kid of about seven is collecting cow dung from the dirt road, in the shade of the shacks lining the street. He sees me, and immediately addresses me:
>
> '*Halò madam, photo kijiye!*'
>
> Annoyed, I think: 'Can't anyone be taken seriously here?'
>
> (From my field notes, April 2009)

During my fieldwork, I had to face the fact that being white and carrying a camera in Varanasi automatically turns you into a tourist, no matter what distinction you try to make. And actually, tourist and research practices often conflate: to an external eye, what difference does it make if you are taking pictures for your PhD or just for leisure? The gap between my self-awareness and the perception of the local social community as to my role raised challenging issues. The kid urges me to 'take a picture', as many other 'tourists' have allegedly done before me. Again, it is the returning gaze of the researched that points to yet another ambiguity of my position: that of being the analyst and the tourist at the same time, and having contrasting feelings and different responses with regard to each (see Crang 2011). However, I would like to emphasise here that the camera, together with my unmistakably 'Western appearance', were key elements in negotiating my presence in the field. Being seen as a tourist was extremely useful in eliciting data about tourism; being *always* seen as a tourist, especially when I was busy with my work, was sometimes annoying and time consuming, and I felt that it overlooked the effort and uncertainties of being a researcher, and a tourist, in Varanasi.

As a Westerner, not only I was the one expected to take pictures of 'exotic' subjects – a child carrying cow dung, a *baba* chanting *mantras* – I was also the 'exotic subject' myself. Indeed, countless times in my walks on the *ghats* I was asked by Indian tourists visiting Varanasi to pose with them in souvenir photos, and inundated with questions and curiosity about 'where was I from?', 'was I married?' – which I was clearly expected to be – and 'how did I like India?'.

Being the exotic other was indeed an instructive experience.

2.11.3 THE FIELD AS A GENDERED SPACE

> Why most of people researching on Banaras are female? I
> haven't come across many gents researching on the
> cultural aspects of Varanasi. Does Varanasi have
> something that attracts women particularly?
>
> (Excerpt from a conversation with one of my local informants)

I had never realised that most of the researchers in Varanasi were women. Actually, I am not even sure that this is true. What I did realise in that conversation with my (male) informant is that I was looked at as a woman, not simply as a neutral researcher. It is as if his remark made me self-conscious.

What I also realised is that most of the local network of informants, friends, assistants and individuals whom I dealt with for the purpose of my research were men. This seemed to be confirmed by the words of some women who were in the group of local guides which assisted me in my questionnaire survey. This is a quote from the conversation we had when I first met them at the Ganga Aarti and asked for their help:

> *Woman local guide*: 'We're happy to help you in your research. Then when you will write your thesis you will have to mention all our names...'
>
> *Myself*: 'So I need to know the names of all of you..'
>
> *Woman local guide*: 'Just mention "all the local official guides of Varanasi". But include also male *and female!*'
>
> *Myself*: 'I'll make sure that *the female* guides are included in my acknowledgments!'
>
> *Woman local guide*: 'Yes, please, otherwise people think only to the male guides'.
>
> (From my field notes, 5 January 2010)

So what did doing research as a woman in a male-dominated social context imply?

Doing research in Varanasi as a (European) woman exposed me to some restrictions and annoyances that, although never resulting in serious sexual harassment or discrimination, caused me to feel quite frustrated and upset on several occasions (see Korpela 2009). Apart from cultural restrictions connected to the religious orthodoxy of

Varanasi – women are supposed to follow proper dress codes and strict social behaviour rules, and in some major religious occurrences they are even confined to the home for their own safety – I frequently had to deal with *avances* – discreet but often persistent – by men whom I got in touch with for research purposes. Moreover, due to a general perception and imaginary about Western women in India, it was quite common to be jeered at, 'accidentally' touched or addressed with lewd comments while walking on the street, especially on the *ghats*. Similar experiences were often reported to me by female tourists whom I have talked to. The fact that I was a woman and that as such 'I could understand' because I must also have had similar unpleasant experiences, probably made them feel more comfortable and open about expressing their discomfort and anger with regard to those episodes. Indeed, McDowell (1997: 107) emphasises that 'As women interviewing women, commonalities of experience should be recognized and become part of a mutual exchange of views'.

Frequently in the field I found myself wondering whether the project may have developed differently had I been a male researcher. The gendered spatialities and mobilities of the field were an issue that would arise often in my days in Varanasi. The fact that it is perceived as safer and socially more 'appropriate' for women to move around in the company of a man, particularly in certain places and at certain times (for example the *ghats* at night), and that, in general, women are more easily exposed to moral judgement and social pressures, especially with regard to their presence in, and use of, public space, imposed significant limitations on my fieldwork. Hanging out in public spaces with fellow travellers and friends, either women or men, was one of my main research activities, besides being also a vital chill-out pastime in my busy days; on the other hand, that is also a morally charged social activity deemed inappropriate for women. As a result, I was often torn between the need to pursue my research objectives and that to assert my 'moral credibility' as a Western woman.

However, gender relations may also have affected the research in beneficial ways. I wonder, for example, how much of the data that I gathered was made available to me out of acts of gallantry or special kindness which were offered precisely because I was a woman. It might also be the case that, as McDowell notes, because as a woman I may have been perceived by men as 'unthreatening' or 'not official', confidential data

was disclosed more easily, and 'difficult issues broached relatively freely' (McDowell 1988: 167).

As a general comment, I would like to stress that, regrettably, while my access and exchanges with Western women and local men involved in tourism were relatively easy, the voices and views of local women remain under-represented in my research.

2.11.4 THE RESEARCHER AS AN EMBODIED SUBJECT

I would like to return for a moment to the episode of the cow dung kid. It was certainly not the first time that someone 'mistook' me for a tourist, but this time it 'annoyed' me. It was only a child after all, and even a sweet one, so what actually triggered my peevish reaction?

I was annoyed because I was feeling bad. I had pangs in my stomach, it was stifling hot, and the sharp smells of everything made me feel sick; anything would have bothered me in those conditions. The body, Veijola and Jokinen would be pleased to know, can hardly be ignored or silenced in Varanasi.

The physical dimension entered significantly in my research. Frequent health problems due to change in climate, food, environment and, most predominantly, to very poor hygienic conditions made me experiment a contact and a proximity with my own body which I normally do not have in my everyday life at home. Getting sick is a common experience among travellers in Varanasi; it is a sort of rite of passage which sanctions the arrival in the city. The body is indeed a frequent conversation topic among tourists, who often filter their experience – or at least their accounts in interviews and talks – through their corporeal conditions. Likewise, my research experience has been mediated through my own body. Senses were indeed deeply involved in the understanding of the city; my interpretations of facts, events, circumstances, places and people have been deeply affected by my being physically in the field; I have known through the body as much as I have through the intellectual apparatus which was supposed to frame my experience. However, as the embodied and sensual dimension is central to my research, I shall discuss this topic more extensively later in my thesis.

2.12 ANALYSIS: FROM 'FIELD WORK' TO 'FILED WORK'

Adopting a multi-method approach certainly bore several advantages which I have tried to highlight in this chapter. However, one of the consequences in practical terms is that when it came to analysing the collected data, I found myself with a large amount of heterogeneous materials that initially was very difficult to make sense of. Organising and interpreting data after fieldwork is often regarded as challenging as doing fieldwork itself. Much of the relevant literature makes large reference to the post-fieldwork phase as a tricky and critical stage of research: from effective parallels like the 'postpartum' (Barrett and Cason 1997: 115), to telling expressions like the 'post-fieldwork blues' (Devereux and Hoddinott 1992: 23), the feelings of disorientation, alienation, emotional frustration which the researcher is caught in once s/he returns home, readjusts back to her/his previous routine and lifestyle, and starts working through the bulk of gathered information have been recently acknowledged by fieldwork literature.

After having come to terms with the 'culture shock' of returning home (Barrett and Cason 1997: 119), and having finally found a way of dealing with the paralysing feeling of anxiety and discouragement which would take hold of me when sitting before the sea of materials that I had brought back from the field, I started to analyse my data. The activities of sifting, sorting and filing that this stage of research necessarily involves is very much analogous to any clerical work, and has been creatively referred to by Crang (2001) as 'filed work'.

I have identified three main phases of my analysis process, all of which overlapped in productive ways (insightful discussions on processes of analysis, interpretation and writing within a research project are provided in Cloke et al. 2004 and in Crang and Cook 2007). The first phase is what I have called the 'moving things around' phase, the second one is interpreting, the third one is writing.

The first phase of analysis was indeed all about 'moving things around': from unpacking the bulk of 'stuff' and scattering it around, to seeing what linked to what,

creating different piles and folders, moving things from one pile to another, following new threads, drawing new connections, surrendering to dead-ends. From these movements ideas came out. It was, in fact, at once an intellectual, physical and emotional process, leading to creative leaps and detours, resulting from rational as well as irrational associations, stirred up by the very materiality of my data impressed with smells, memories, scribbles. This process often made me think about the Hindu cosmogonical myth of the *samudra manthan*, the churning of the Ocean of Milk (see Bhagavad Purana, Mahabharata and the Vishnu Purana), where 14 treasures were produced out of the churning of the ocean of milk. I see the churning as a metaphor of a creative movement, just like the 'moving things around' was in my analysis process. Images drawn from the Indian tradition accompanied me in my research process as much as academic literature.

In starting to sift and sort out my data, I went back to my research questions and tried to see the ways in which the materials which I had collected in the field answered those questions. The first step was to go through the materials and figure out what I had. I made two lists: in my 'What I have' list I catalogued all the stuff, noting down a series of headings under which each material could be grouped. So for example I had lots of diverse data eliciting things that tourists do in Varanasi and where they do those things, which I put under the heading 'tourist routes and practices'; similarly, I had a 'sacred and profane' category, a 'tourists-local community relationship' one, a 'tour operators' one, and so forth. Each entry included an indication of the sources (i.e. field notes, interviews, photos etc.) and a brief description of the kind of materials comprised under the heading. In my 'What I have most' list I made a quantitative evaluation of the collected data, doing basically a mere counting of how much I had and what kind of sources my material was mostly drawn from. That helped me to start finding my bearings through the sea of data. This operation of 'naming' things is called 'entitation' (see Cloke et al. 2004; Gregory 1986; Huggett 1980), it consists in identifying and describing 'the basic entities relevant to a research project' (Cloke et al. 2004: 217) and is regarded as a fundamental process in the preliminary ordering of data.

With an eye to my research questions and one to this provisional classification, I then outlined more refined conceptual boxes, highlighted keywords, and finally created a conceptual archive framework to assist my data processing. This framework later provided the basis for the structuring of my thesis. Subsequently, it began a more 'mechanical' phase, that of transcribing, translating, word-processing, copying, filing. Of course, as I argued in section 2.9, any translation process – whether from one language to another, from a type of text (oral) to another (written), from rough copy to fair copy – is far from being a purely mechanical task. I went through my raw data again, processed, coded and 'sectioned' it into relevant boxes. In this way I constructed sets of data drawing on five overall themes related to tourism in Varanasi; these were representations, practices, geographies and spatialities, sacred and profane, and methodology (meaning annotations on a range of methodological aspects from practicalities to reflexive considerations). Because the lively and multifaceted complexity of data does not comfortably fit into boxes, this operation was neither clear-cut nor simply logical as it may appear. It was instead a continuous negotiation between abstraction and 'unruly' particulars; a dialectic movement between inductive reasoning and deductive logic (Lindsay 1997: 7) in which boxes were, in fact, overlapping. It is widely accepted within human geography that inventing categories, coding, drawing conceptual maps is hardly a straightforward process, on the contrary, it is one undermined by tensions which run, for example, between seeking and imposing order upon 'the original chaos of data' (Cloke et al. 2004: 216), or between the need to name and classify things, and the risk of fixing identities into the 'epistemology of the grid' (*ibid*.: 234). Feminist and postcolonial theorists have provided a powerful critique of the binary structures of analysis implicit in Western, male-dominated epistemologies (King 1999; McDowell 1983; Rose 1993b; 1995; Said 2003 [1978]).

Writing on the subject of analysing field materials, Crang and Cook (2007: 132) point out that ethnographic research involves 'less *and* more systematic phases, producing less *and* more systematic data, which demands less *and* more systematic data analysis'. While in this section I have explained how I went about analysing my data in a 'more systematic' way, I would like to conclude by emphasising the 'less systematic' bit which is also constitutive of the information constructed and the arguments

consequently made in my thesis. While I was processing my data the issue arose as to how to put order in my field notes. Most of my field notes are in a little red notebook which I would always carry with me and where I jotted down flash remarks and more expanded reflections, keywords and ideas, excerpts from conversations, practical annotations (the name of a particular restaurant, a phone number to contact, book references etc.), drawings, doodling; I also attached 'things' to it, like receipts, business cards, memorabilia like the flower petals used in that special *puja,* some of the colourful powders we played with during *Holi,* a hint of sandal wood scent, my favourite, rubbed on a page to impregnate it. What is more, my field diary was written in a sort of 'lingua franca' where annotations predominantly in Italian, but also in English, were interspersed with idioms in Hindi and Sanskrit words. When I attempted to codify and transcribe such material and insert it into an ordered framework, I realised that in the passage from the 'messy' to the systematised form something was getting lost, and that it was not a matter of dichotomous division between order and dis-order, it was rather about acknowledging that different 'orders' were at work in my process of analysis. When going through the content of my little red notebook, creativity was sparked by spontaneous associations of ideas following an intuitive and emotional 'order': the doodling that I remember having absently made during that discussion at Om Cafè with a fellow traveller about 'fake *babas* and real *babas*'; that pervasive smell of ashes which permeates the city and radiates from all my field materials, reminding me of cremation grounds, of ultimate pilgrimages, unleashing ideas of dark tourisms and of ethical questions implicated in the act of gazing; those scribbled notes on Sanskrit keywords like *prakriti, sanskriti, darshan,* which activate in my mind fruitful cross-cultural parallels with concepts of, respectively, nature, culture and vision. All that, and much more, which I could find in the messiness of my field notes was lost in the passage to the 'filed' notes. My diary is written in smells, memories, objects, and emotions as much as it is in words. While some of this information could be transcribed into a more organised framework (such is the case for excerpts of conversations, sign contents transcriptions, references), some others only made sense to me in relation to the context in which they were written and their position in the diary. De-contextualised, they lost their fertile imaginative potential and became dry. What the systematic order failed to account for is all that was not written

in my diary but was nonetheless there. For this reason, I ultimately decided to not translate this loose data into more structured one, and to use my little red smelly and grubby notebook as it was throughout the process of data analysis and writing of my thesis. As provisional, fragmented and gauche the pieces of information contained therein were, and as impractical my choice of leaving them like that was, the mere flipping through the pages of my notebook any time I needed to recall some information would nourish that productive flow of thoughts that I described. Of course, applying the same choice to the whole data analysis would be problematic, but I felt that leaving some room for the data to unfold on its own unpredictable and unstable terms without necessarily being tamed into analytical categories, did justice to that 'experiential richness' (*ibid*.: 131), which I had gained through the ethnographic approach, and which was, after all, the reason why I opted for this method in the first place. Moreover, it helps me think of my research as an 'unfinished' process, which is open to new directions and diversions, perhaps starting from those very unruly bits which stand alone outside my grid.

CHAPTER 3

THE AESTHETICS OF LANDSCAPE REPRESENTATION: THE 'SACREDSCAPE' OF VARANASI

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The *baba* is fully dressed up in his orange outfit. He lacks nothing of the typical *baba* paraphernalia: orange *kurta* over an orange *dhoti,* his head wrapped up in an orange turban, a vermilion *tilak* on his forehead, two large *rudraksha* necklaces standing out on his chest, long white beard, his own begging bowl, his own stick, a few personal belongings stuffed in an orange cloth bag. Orange, in its various nuances, is the colour of *sadhus,* holy men of India, ascetics wandering from place to place, mystics, monks, and all the range of different representatives of the complex Indian spiritual tradition which are commonly and affectionately addressed as *'baba'.*

Two tourists – apparently a couple – stand in front of the *baba* pointing their camera at him. The *baba* raises his right hand in the 'no-fear' pose[4] and starts to chant the *'om namah shivaya' mantra,* the *mantra* dedicated to the god Shiva.

The woman gets closer, manoeuvring her camera for the best shot. The man stands aside, making some comments while looking at the scene. They're both smiling.

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[4] This is called 'abhaya mudra' and it is a ritual gesture of reassurance and protection, used in Hindu e Buddhist iconography.

They're both in their early forties. They appear to be from a Western country. Their look is casual: the woman is dressed in comfy orchid pyjama trousers, a cosy 'hippie-chic' colourful blouse, robust closed-toe leather sandals; the man wears baggy brownish cargo trousers, a cheap blue t-shirt printed with a stylised Ganesh – the kind of cheap touristy t-shirts ubiquitously displayed in shops and street markets all around the city – and trekking shoes. The unfailing hippie-style shoulder bag and a hi-tech rucksack complete their touristy look.

The *baba* is sitting on the *ghats*. He stays cross-legged on the steps of a decaying maharaja palace. The Ganga river flows slowly and majestically in front of him. In the backdrop, wall-painted ads advertise yoga centres, multi-cuisines restaurants, silk emporia. They are all written in English. A number of them boasts a reference to some of the latest editions of the Lonely Planet or Rough Guide.

The camera clicks. That is the signal for the transaction to start. The *baba* stops chanting the *mantra*, grabs his steel pot filled with some coins, leans forwards tinkling the pot and asking for a *bakhsheesh.* The woman mutters something to her companion, they smile, then she rummages in her bag while he starts walking again and the *baba* smirks awaiting the tip; she takes out a coloured cloth wallet and quickly hands over a few rupees to the *baba*, who brings the money to his forehead in sign of gratitude and blesses the couple with a last *om namah shivaya*.

Then the woman puts the wallet back in her bag, zips it up, smiles at the *baba* gesturing a goodbye and joins her companion to carry on with their walk.

FIGURE 3 - THE BABA SITTING ON THE GHATS (AUTHOR'S PHOTO)

This is quite a common scene on the *ghats*. I would go even further and say that this is actually a 'typical' scene on the *ghats*; a *topos* (Olwig 2001), to use a term that draws together ideas of typicality and place. The vignette raises a set of questions: what is 'typical' about this scene? What are the two tourists doing on the *ghats*? Why are they there and why are they interested in photographing the *baba*? What is the meaning of the 'photographic transaction' going on there? What is the *baba* doing on the *ghats* in the first place? Why is he there? And what kind of place is the *ghats*? The complexity of interactions between the actors in this scene, and the very idea of 'scene' serve as a perfect starting point for our discussion about the intertwining of representation, place and practices that is implicit in tourism. This chapter aims at answering some of those questions, starting from one of the key points raised by the *baba* vignette: the coming together of different gazes in that scene. Accordingly, section 3.2 makes some general points about the ways in which Varanasi is constructed through the Western gaze. The chapter then delves into the different gazes at work in shaping prevailing images of the city, and it develops, in particular, into three parts: Hindu narratives, tourist narratives and 'place narratives', by which I mean local narratives. None of them is meant to be comprehensive of the whole rich production of narratives regarding this multifaceted city. What the chapter accounts for are dominant representations, but I would like to point out that there are also alternative narrations which I shall not, however, specifically consider. In terms of religious discourses, Muslim and Buddhist

perspectives, for example, are largely overlooked in this work. Partly that is because grand narratives insist on Hinduism, whereas Buddhism is more related to the near sacred site of Sarnath (see section 5.2 in Chapter 5), and Islam is mobilised especially as opposed to Hinduism in discourses of religious communalism. These and other 'minor' stories shall be dealt with as site-specific narratives in Chapters 4 and 5, where I shall look at how the master narratives illustrated in this chapter become emplaced and enacted in Varanasi. Likewise, within Hindu narratives I have selected those which feature most prominently within various forms of traditional and popular literature. In particular, this part looks into depictions of the *ghats* as a landscape laden with spiritual and mythological meaning (section 3.3), allegories of the city as the abode of Shiva (section 3.4), and symbolic representations of Kashi as a special *tirtha*, sacred place, suspended in eternal time (section 3.5). In doing so, I follow what is traditionally deemed to be the divine trinity which composes Varanasi: goddess Ganga, Lord Shiva and Kashi the Luminous. As for the part on tourist narratives, I would like to make clear that while most of the analysed material deals with tourism in a strict sense (i.e. brochures, guidebooks, advertising), I also included within the 'tourist' label other media such as films, TV, the Internet, fiction, literature which, as Urry (1990) acknowledges, construct the tourist gaze. As with Hindu narratives, I have chosen to highlight some major tropes which shape Western geographical imagination about Varanasi, the most common of which deal with ideas of spirituality (section 3.6), antiquity and timelessness (section 3.7) and landscape of death, disease and misery (section 3.8). The last part of the chapter explores how those grand narratives actually work on the ground and how new narrations emerge from people in place. Section 3.9 shows how stories are retold on the *ghats* and how the tourist gaze is reconfigured through the native gaze, remarketed by local social actors as a medium to help tourists make sense of the other. Similarly, section 3.10 deals with the creative productions of the tourist encounter by showing how the fixed-and-frozen language of dominant discourses is injected with dynamism by the crafting of a sort of 'tourist language' of the *ghats*, which can be seen as a way of locally re-appropriating modes of representation managed and circulated by the global media (see Oakes 1999); this section also offers some glimpses into the ways in which Western tourists are depicted by local narratives. The last part of the chapter provides a bridge between

representation and practice, to which the following chapter is devoted. Finally, in terms of methodology, this chapter builds on the analysis of broad tourist and popular material collected mainly for my PhD research and partly during my Master's fieldwork.

3.2 WESTERN IMAGES OF VARANASI: AN OVERVIEW

FIGURE 4 - VIEW OF 'DUSASWUMEDH GHAT' (SOURCE: PRINSEP 1996 [1831])

On our way to and from the school, I had an opportunity of seeing something of Benares, which is a very remarkable city, more entirely and characteristically eastern than any which I have yet seen, and at the same time altogether different from any thing in Bengal. No Europeans live in the town, nor are the streets wide enough for a wheel-carriage.

(Reginald Heber: *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India* (1828), in Mahajan 2003: 79)

> People come here and they search for *dépaysement*, the difference… if we come here we want to see something different.. Indian culture is different, Hindu religion is very different from our country, from Christianity, Islam…
>
> (French traveller, 22, male)

The opening excerpts report personal impressions of Varanasi by two very different Western travellers. The first one is Reginald Heber, Bishop of Calcutta from 1822 to 1826, a well-known travel writer within the vast colonial literature regarding India. The second one is a young French backpacker whom I interviewed in Varanasi. Even though speaking from distant epochs and travel traditions, there appears to be something very similar in the two travellers' accounts: Varanasi strikes them both as a very peculiar city, 'characteristically eastern' and yet 'altogether different', a city where tourists come in search for *'dépaysement'*. But how can a place be anomalous and 'typical' at the same time? The two accounts shed light on a crucial aspect in the way Varanasi is represented: the city is perceived as the epitome of 'otherness', of all that is alien to the West; it strikes and attracts because it is 'different', and through its difference it embodies and typifies the 'strange' and 'mysterious' Orient, encapsulating in itself the characteristics of the Oriental other (King 1999). The idea is conveyed even more effectively by the account of another traveller:

> I travelled to India twice: in 1996 and in 1998. I've always been fascinated by the Orient, I think only there you can find the real gap between our Western, industrialised culture and something totally different. I wanted to see something very different from the West, and India was – and to me still remains – the most different and 'elsewhere' place I know. Their concept of time, their slow pace, their *modus vivendi*… everything is so different!
>
> (Italian traveller, 55, male, quoted in Zara 2007: 48)

The interviewee talks about his journeys to India in the nineties. Although he refers here to India as a whole, the conversation was focused particularly on Varanasi and his comment can be read as an extension of what he thought was epitomised by Varanasi especially: the idea of a 'totally different' Orient; India, to him, is 'elsewhereland' (Löfgren 1999a: 1). Nourishing this narrative, the Rough Guide (2001) confirms:

> Western visitors since the Middle Ages have marvelled at the strangeness of this most alien of Indian cities – at the tight mesh of alleys, the accoutrements of religion, the host of deities, and at the proximity of death.
>
> (Rough Guide 2001: 340)

Varanasi is indeed the utterly other, so peculiar even within the Indian panorama that it has become the symbolic *locus* of the 'peculiar' Hindu culture as a whole, as if what makes Varanasi typically Eastern to the Western eyes is its own 'strangeness'. One need not look far to find the orientalist echoes at work in this representation: oddness, peculiarity, difference stand in a binary relationship with what is deemed logical, intelligible, normal, the latter set of values being associated with the 'rational' West, as opposed to the 'irrational' East/Orient (King, 1999; Said, 2003 [1978]). Even when difference is given a positive value, suggesting for example that 'their slow pace, their *modus vivendi'* is more appealing, the Western dichotomous logic is still operating in dividing up idealised conceptions of the East and West, where the enduring myth of the Orient as a lost paradise is actualised in endless ways by diverse narratives. Again, we are faced with 'the construction of an "Orient" that functions as an inversion of "the West"' (King, 1999: 3), an Orient which is the 'reflection of the suppressed "shadow" side of Western culture' (*ibid*.: 230; King builds here on Nandy 1983). Paraphrasing Edensor (1998a: 26) and his analysis of colonial representation, we can say that many Western representations of Varanasi exude 'imperialist nostalgia' (Rosaldo 1993) for a lost 'cultural authenticity', and accommodate colonial fantasies about a 'lost innocence', a supposedly pristine culture prior to the 'progress' brought

about by the European Enlightenment (see also Crang 2004: 74-75). Edensor (*ibid.*) notes that 'contemporary anxieties' about such a 'loss' continue 'to stimulate travel to the non-West' today (see also Minca 2011). The discourse of difference and its paradoxical relation with typicality is thus at the core of the Western image of Varanasi, portrayed at once as exceptional and typically Indian. This argument is central to both Western and Hindu narratives, which insist on the 'unique' character of the city, as I shall illustrate in the next sections. Perhaps the best slogan capturing this idea is to be found in the Cadogan guidebook to India, which defines Varanasi as 'India in a nutshell' (Cadogan 1993: 133), suggesting that the essence of the whole subcontinent can be found in this 'old, "eternal" city' (*ibid*.). Tourist rhetoric is filled with similar catchphrases and telling pictures, like Lonely Planet's pompous description of Varanasi as 'the beating heart of the Hindu universe' (Lonely Planet 2009: 440), Incredible India's advertising of Varanasi as 'the religious centre of the world for Hindus' (Incredible India 2007; on the Incredible India campaign see Geary 2010; Kant 2009), STA Travel's brochure stating that 'Varanasi is the quintessential Indian holy city' (STA Travel 2011: 122), or the choice made by the Lonely Planet (Lonely Planet 2002) to put Varanasi on the cover, as if Varanasi could well stand for the whole India (fig. n. 5).
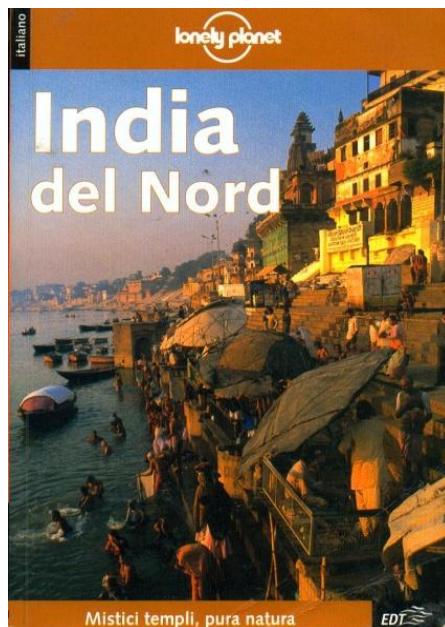
FIGURE 5 - LONELY PLANET 2002 (ITALIAN EDITION), FRONT COVER

Praise for the extra-ordinary character of this city come not only from tourist literature. Diana Eck, an established scholar of Hinduism and expert of Varanasi, defines the city as 'a living text of Hinduism' (Eck 1983: 9), and points out that:

> It is precisely because Banaras has become a symbol of traditional Hindu India that Western visitors have often found this city the most strikingly 'foreign' of India's cities.
>
> (*ibid*.)

Indeed, this idea is so ingrained in Western (and not-only-Western) discourses that it is difficult to disentangle the different narratives which convey such a representation. Varanasi accomplishes a collective imaginary about India which is constructed through multiple means, from tourist promotion to fiction and literature, from TV and cinema to colonial writing and painting. At the time I was carrying out my fieldwork I noticed an increase of filming in the city, which is always being filmed for something, whether it be documentaries, films, TV news or series. Many of these deal with spirituality, yoga, Hindu culture and religion, in a way which is sometimes in stark contrast with the surrounding context, as in fig. n. 6 showing a young, attractive Western lady, posing in yoga postures for the shooting of an American (as I later discovered) programme.

FIGURE 6 - A WESTERN WOMAN POSING IN YOGA POSTURES IN ASSI GHAT FOR THE SHOOTING OF AN AMERICAN PROGRAMME (AUTHOR'S PHOTO)

The girl, scantily clad in a sporty outfit – certainly not the kind of dress code which is recommended for women in this orthodox city – is performing in a street of Assi Ghat, to the curious and perplexed eyes of two street kids and before an amused crowd of onlookers. When I made contact with the local boy acting as a field assistant in the production, he told me 'You know, after *Slumdog Millionaire*[5] it's become trendy filming in Varanasi'[6]. *Slumdog Millionaire* was actually filmed in Mumbai but, as the field assistant explained to me later, Varanasi looks like the perfect backdrop to all that is commonly associated with India: spirituality, yoga, ancient traditions, poverty (on tourism, film and places see Crang and Travlou 2009; Law, Bunnell and Ong 2007). On another occasion, the topic of *Slumdog Millionaire* came up again in a chat with one of my Banarasi friends, who grinned: 'We have become famous now, everybody wants to come to Varanasi!'[7]; we were watching the shooting of a Hip-Hop video music in the middle of the Ganges – apparently a U.S. production again – with the main performer dressed-up like a *maharani*, rowed away by her attendant. The first general point that I would like to make about representations, thus, is that Varanasi is made to appear 'unique', 'extra-ordinary', 'quintessentially Indian'. What that 'uniqueness' and 'difference' is made of shall be dealt with in more detail in the following sections, but it is important to highlight here that such an image is in many ways 'fabricated' – to use

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[5] The reference here is to Danny Boyle's Oscar-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), set in India.

[6] From my fieldnotes.

[7] From my fieldnotes.

Duncan and Gregory's (1999: 5) expression – by a variety of means of representations and discourses which together constitute what we may call the 'grand narratives' about India and Varanasi. Despite their heterogeneity, the colonial legacy embedded in those narratives is still very much present in most of them today. The second main point to be emphasised is that nearly all those grand narratives refer to a specific area of the city: the *ghats.* Indeed, it is the landscape of the riverfront which is able to convey at a single glance the 'spiritual essence' of India and its ancient tradition. Again, the idea of the *ghats* as the fulcrum of the city's cultural and religious life and as the synecdochic image of Hinduism in its entirety is rooted in diverse representations constructed by an array of literary accounts, travelogues and visual reproductions of any kind and epoch. The allure of the *ghats* may be evoked by depictions as diverse as Allen Ginsberg's vivid descriptions in his *Indian Journals* (Ginsberg 1990[1970]), James Prinsep's nineteenth-century engraved lithographs collected in his *Benares Illustrated* (1996 [1831]), BBC (and akin) documentaries, or the profusion of pictures circulated by and for tourists where the *ghats* appear almost invariably as the banner image of Varanasi. We come here to the third main point, which has to do with the powerful role that landscape plays in Western representations of Varanasi. I would like to return to a colonial account of the city, this time by Emma Roberts:

No written description, however elaborate, can convey even a faint idea of the extraordinary peculiarities of a place which has no prototype in the East. Though strictly oriental, it differs very widely from all other cities of Hindoostan, and it is only by pictorial representations that any adequate notion can be formed of the mixture of the beautiful and the grotesque, which, piled confusedly together, form that stupendous wall which spreads along the bank of the Ganges at Benares.

(Emma Roberts: *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan* (1835) in Mahajan 2003: 82)

Besides the reference, again, to the difference and typicality of the 'extraordinarily peculiar' and 'strictly oriental' Benares, and to the *ghats*, 'that stupendous wall' which runs along the river displaying the contradictory beauty of this city, I would like to draw attention to another key aspect, that is Roberts' suggestion that such a beauty can only be captured by pictorial representations. This idea is reminiscent of another illustrious travel account, that of Flaubert in Cairo quoted in Mitchell's (1988) work on colonial discursive formations about Egypt. Mitchell reports Flaubert's disorienting experience in the streets of Cairo in 1850, where he was overwhelmed by 'a bewildering chaos of colours' (Gustave Flaubert, *Flaubert in Egypt: A Sensibility on Tour,* p. 79, quoted in Mitchell 1988: 21), where every single detail 'reached out to pinch' and 'grip' him, making it impossible to 'grasp the whole' (*ibid.*). Flaubert recounts that only after the first days did things gradually became harmonious and started to 'fall into place of themselves, in accordance with the laws of perspective' (*ibid.*). Commenting on that, Mitchell points out that Flaubert's experience can be described in terms of 'a visual turmoil', a striking mix of unusual details and colours 'which refuses to compose itself as a picture' (Mitchell 1988: 21). He explains:

> The disorienting experience of a Cairo street […], with its arguments in unknown languages, strangers who brush past in strange clothes, unusual colours, and unfamiliar sounds and smells, is expressed as an absence of pictorial order. There is no distance, this means, between oneself and the view […]. Without a separation of the self from a picture, moreover, it becomes impossible to grasp 'the whole'. […] Subsequently, coming to terms with this disorientation and recovering one's self-possession is expressed again in pictorial terms. The world arranges itself into a picture and achieves a visual order, 'in accordance with the laws of perspective'.
>
> (Mitchell 1988: 21-22)

Likewise, Roberts' account seems to suggest that 'the mixture of the beautiful and the grotesque […] piled confusedly together' may only make sense composed in the quaint

scenery of the *ghats,* and that only by reframing it in pictorial terms 'any adequate notion can be formed' of this otherwise incomprehensible, incoherent place. Very often, as Mitchell (1988: 21-22) makes clear, what is referred to as chaos and disorder is actually the lack of 'pictorial order', that is to say that we are unable to understand reality out of landscape canons. It is perhaps because the landscape tradition is so ingrained within the Western way of comprehending the world that the association of Varanasi with Venice appears as a recurrent theme within different travel narratives over time:

When I arrived in Varanasi – it was at sunset – I went straight to the old city, and walked around through its narrow lanes. Surprisingly, my first thought was: I'm in Venice!

(Italian traveller, 43, female)[8]

We entered an elegant gondola, and soon were gliding gently in front of the city, gazing on the long succession of admirable pictures unfolding themselves before us. Seen at little distance from the river, the *ghat* of Dasasvamedh forms a picture no painter could wish to heighten by a single touch.

(Louis Rousselet: *India and its Native Princes* (1876) in Mahajan 2003: 83-84)

I feel Varanasi is like Venice, maybe for the water, the spirituality…

(Polish traveller, 22, female)

In the midst of noise there is a calm, even on the most crowded *ghats*, reminiscent of the Venetian Lagoon.

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[8] From my Master's dissertation interviews, 2007.

(Richard Lannoy: *India* (1955) in Mahajan 2003: 86)

Ginsberg even seems to be describing the opening scene of the *baba:*

> A saddhu in orange robes sitting up on a stone porch on the embankment under turrets of an old small castle – rather Venetian the scene.

(Ginsberg 1990 [1970]:130)

Similarly, the British novelist Geoff Dyer draws the parallel in his novel *'Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi',* set in the two cities (see Dyer 2009).

The picturesque riverscape of the city on the Ganges easily evokes Canaletto's eighteenth-century famous *vedute*[9] of Venice (fig. 7), while the *galis,* the maze of alleys winding through the old town just behind the *ghats*, reminds of the characteristic atmosphere of the Venetian *calli,* and the small, old-looking rowing boats swarming on the Ganges may well stand for the *gondole,* the traditional Venetian boats which we associate with the landscape of Venice.

FIGURE 7 - RETURN OF THE BUCINTORO TO THE MOLO ON ASCENSION DAY, 1732 (SOURCE: ROYAL COLLECTION, WINDSOR)

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[9] Views. Canaletto was renowned for his landscapes of Venice, called *'vedute'.*

The visual power of the *veduta* – and of landscape representation more generally – is deeply embedded in the Western gaze and that is reflected also in the tourist iconography of Varanasi. In fact, I shall argue in this chapter, tourism makes extensive use of landscape to convey meanings, imaginaries and tropes connected to this 'special' city. Indeed, I would like to conclude this section with an iconic view of Varanasi taken from the Lonely Planet website (Lonely Planet 2011c). The photo engages in many ways with both Canaletto's painting and the period image at the opening of this section (fig. 4), to suggest that the visual representation mobilised within contemporary narratives of Varanasi re-actualises a long tradition of colonial gaze codified in landscape iconography, which still exerts great influence in the way modern travellers look at the city.

FIGURE 8 - VARANASI MAIN GHAT (SOURCE: LONELY PLANET 2011C)

PART I: HINDU NARRATIVES

3.3 The ghatscape and the blessing *darshan* of Ganga-ji

> Even a person defiled by many kinds of evils originating from mind, speech and body, becomes sanctified by seeing Ganga. There is no doubt in this.
>
> (Skanda Purana IV.i.27.16)[10]

The sacred texts state that the mere sight of the Ganges grants the devotee spiritual merits: by simply gazing upon the sacred river one becomes purified. Taking the *darshan* of Ganga-ji and, by extension, of the whole riverfront is considered a spiritual activity which builds good *karma* while lending pleasure to the eyes. The idea of the gaze underlying Western representations, as discussed in the previous section, takes the culture-specific form of *darshan* in Hindu narratives. The antique sacredness attributed to the Ganges and its extraordinary powers of spiritual purification have always been the central element of the holiness of Varanasi. Ganga Mam, as the Hindus affectionately call the river, is the hub of daily life in the city. In the Ganges people perform ritual ablutions, do the laundry, water herds, discharge mortal remains, the deconsecrated simulacra of deities as well as any kind of pollutant waste; in the Ganges people wash their teeth, swim, fish, pray. The placid flowing of Ganga Mam and the flight of steps descending into its waters compose a suggestive amphitheatre where the vital interweaving of sacred and secular which characterises Hindus' mundane activities (Saraswati 1975b; Vidyarthi et al 1979: 147-150) unfolds. The Banarasi show an emotional attachment to the river, which they consider as the natural manifestation of the Goddess Ganga. The Ganges represents the spatial metaphor around which the cultural identity and the sense of belonging of Varanasi's inhabitants, and possibly of Hindus more generally, have developed; indeed, the river epitomises sacred-symbolic meanings which are universally recognised in the ritual language of Hinduism. Several hymns and glorifications of the supposed holy qualities of the Ganges are found in traditional texts (especially in the Kashi Khanda), and the

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[10] English translation by Bhatt (1996: 247).

legendary proximity of the river to the divine is widely praised in mythological literature. The most popular legend has it that Ganga descended directly from Heaven. The myth goes that king Bhagiratha had his ancestors burnt to ashes by the fiery gaze of the *rishi* Kapila. As only the auspicious waters of the Ganges could purify the ashes of the dead and give them redemption, Bhagiratha prayed to Lord Brahma that he might make 'the River of Heaven' descend on earth, and to that end he engaged in long years of rigorous asceticism. The king was eventually heard by Brahma, who let the Ganges flow on earth. Because the river was very forceful and threatened to destroy everything in her path, Bhagiratha persuaded Shiva, the Ascetic, to mitigate her torrential force by letting the river run through his matted hair before falling on earth. Cascading through Shiva's ascetic locks, Ganga began to flow gently along the plains of India, following Bhagiratha, who led her from the Himalayas down to the sea in the region of Bengal where, in the confluence point known as Ganga Sagar, the holy river immersed in the nether regions, purified the king's ancestors, and granted them ascent to heaven. For this reason, the Ganges is called 'the river of the three worlds' because it is believed to flow in '*Swarga'*, heaven, *'Prithvi'*, earth, and *'Patala'*, the netherworld[11].

The 6.4 kilometre-long riverfront overlooked by the *ghats*, on the East side of the city, speaks of the 'uniqueness' of Varanasi and the rich mythological heritage that it encompasses; it appears as an imposing architectural sight of palaces and religious buildings, which have been striking the imagination of travellers since colonial times and before (a collection of foreign accounts of the river is provided in Mahajan 2003). The socio-religious ideals that have developed over the centuries, the values, the sense of place conveyed by pilgrims, devotees and their beliefs, the rituals into which those beliefs articulate, all these together are believed to form the peculiar 'faithscape' (Singh 1993: 6) of Varanasi. Singh borrows from Yi-Fu Tuan the idea of the 'spirit of place' (1996: 445; see also 1974; 2003) to argue that the city's riverscape embodies an essential cultural and spiritual meaning which makes Varanasi worthy of being considered a world heritage site. For the very same reason, the *ghats* are also the

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[11] The myth of the descent on earth of the Ganges is told in various versions in many of the traditional texts, most notably in: *Ramayana* – Bala Khanda 38-44; *Mahabharata* III.104-8; *Bhagavata Purana* IX.8-9; *Brahmavaivarta Purana* II.10; *Devibhagavata Purana* IX.11.

chosen place for businesses of all kinds, aimed primarily at tourists and pilgrims, who are present in large numbers in this area. Due to their symbolic connotation the *ghats* are also often the chosen venue for public speeches, exhibitions, protests, political claims, cultural events. The *darshan* of Ganga is deemed so blessing that the *maharajas* secured themselves a privileged view on the river by building their mansions along the bank. In that way, they made sure they had a comfortable place to retire before they died in Varanasi, which is considered the most auspicious occurrence for a Hindu. Indeed, on the over 80 *ghats* which line the river all the principalities of India are represented. It is this sight, at the same time majestic and spiritual, that constitutes the focus of tourism promotion, not only by international corporations, but also by national and local tourist offices:

> The essence of the real culture of Varanasi is on the riverfront. That's why people want to go there. Some of them stay in the Cantonment at the luxury hotels because they don't want to give up luxury.
>
> (Excerpt from interview with two officers of the U.P. Tourist Bungalow in Varanasi[12])

The story of the descent of Ganga and the praise of the *ghats* as the cultural and spiritual heart of Varanasi are widely disseminated both in the tourist literature produced locally (for example Varanasi City Guide 2002), and in the narratives of local tour guides who entertain tourists with mythical and anecdotal stories attached to the *ghats*, particularly those glorified by the sacred texts,[13] most of which have become highlights of modern city tours, like Dashashvamedha, the main *ghat,* Manikarnika and

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[12] Department of Tourism, Government of Uttar Pradesh, Tourist Bungalow – Varanasi branch.

[13] Some *ghats* derive their names from mythology, other from the temples therein located. The Kashi Khanda, the most accredited Sanskrit source on the city, mentions the *panca tirthas,* the five most sacred spots sited on the riverbank (KKh 84.107-114); these are particularly important in ritual terms because they are believed to confer special spiritual merits; they are associated with the *ghats* of Assi, Dashashvamedha, Manikarnika, Pancaganga and Adi Keshava.

Harischandra, the two cremation *ghats* and Assi Ghat, host to many Western travellers*.*

3.4 VARANASI, THE CITY OF SHIVA

Among the tourist material that I collected on site is a promotional DVD about Varanasi (see Ambey n.d.), containing a documentary film titled *Yatra Kashi dham ki,* 'Journey to the pilgrimage city of Kashi'[14]; it looks like a makeshift production by *Ambey,* which proudly advertises its 'selection of selective super hit devotional documentaries in English, Hindi, Urdu'. The DVD is aimed at tourists, especially domestic tourists and pilgrims; I bought it in a shop in the bustling old town, close to the *ghats*. The documentary-film opens on an idyllic scene: the placid Ganga shimmering in the sunrise, gently crossed by two rowing boats disappearing behind the profile of the pinnacle of a Hindu temple in close-up. Devotional music in the background echoing the *om namah shivaya mantra* adds spiritual emphasis to the scene. The narrator starts off pompously: 'Kashi, the land of Lord Vishveshvara', while the film cuts to the image of the famous *linga* of the Vishvanatha temple, the city's devotional hub dedicated to god Vishveshvara, Shiva in the form of 'Lord of the Universe'. The temple, also known to tourists as 'the golden temple' for its golden dome, is not only a mandatory stop for pilgrims, but is also a highlight of sightseeing tours, despite the fact that entrance is not permitted to non-Hindus.

Varanasi as 'the city of Shiva' is one of the first ways in which visitors come to know the city, whether through guidebooks, local guides, advertising, documentaries, brochures, books. As myths, symbols and iconographies of Shiva are deeply engraved in the landscape, tourists become gradually familiar with the stories, the meanings, the genealogies, the signs of this god, like the trident which the god carries always with him[15], or the *lingas* disseminated all over Kashi. The *lingas,* in particular, gave rise to a flourishing local narrative: stories, myths and anecdotes are told as to their special

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[14] Author's translation.

[15] The *trishula,* Shiva's weapon*.*

powers, their origins and how they came to be established in this or that place; the most popular is the myth of the appearance of the *jyotirlinga*, 'the *linga* of light'[16], traditional versions of which are narrated in the Puranas, particularly in the Kashi Khanda (KKh. 31). According to the myth, in the middle of an argument between Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva over who was to be deemed the supreme Lord of the Universe, Shiva manifested himself as a fiery column sprouting from the earth and piercing the heavens, in so doing establishing his supremacy, and marking his association with Varanasi. Other myths too emphasise this association; a very popular one has it that the god fell in love with the city so much that he decided to move in from his habitual abode in the Himalayas and settle down in Kashi with his beloved Parvati. Moreover, in his capacity as the 'Lord of Time'[17], Shiva presides over death and is therefore particularly venerated in Varanasi, where he is said to give the dying the liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

The reason why Shiva is so intimately connected to Varanasi has to do with his symbolism. Although Shiva is one of the most controversial figures in the Hindu pantheon, the metaphysical qualities he represents make him suitable to convey the sacredness of this *tirtha.* The complexity of his symbolism effectively suggests the complexity of Kashi itself and what are believed to be its peculiar spiritual characteristics. To some extent, Shiva is an anomalous deity, who does not have the celestial appearance of a god and is even outside the rules of Brahmanic orthodoxy: he does not have a lineage, nor a status, he wanders like a beggar with his trident and his tambourine[18] between the mountains and the cremation grounds, where he likes to cover himself with the ashes of the dead. He wears only a loincloth of tiger skin, a crescent moon in his matted hair, snakes as necklaces; he endlessly creates and destroys the world; his age is not clear, neither is his gender: Shiva is together the god and his *Shakti,* male principle and female energy; he is the great, imperturbable ascetic as well as the irascible and vicious god.[19] Even among the gods and sages Shiva is

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[16] A manifestation of Shiva as a brilliant column of light (definition given by Eck 1983: 372).

[17] One of his epithets, indeed, is *Kalaraja,* 'Lord of Time'.

[18] Symbolic objects associated with Shiva.

[19] Known in this form mainly as Kala Bhairava, 'Lord of Death', 'the terrible'. Shiva is also sometimes associated with the bloody Kali, 'the Black Goddess', the personification of Shiva's destructive power.

considered out of place and is sometimes excluded from divine assemblies: his wife's father, Daksha, does not invite him to the great sacrifice attended by all the other gods as he regards as unseemly someone who has no lineage nor respectable job, who drinks poison and hangs around on a bull[20] (see KKh 87.27-37); Brahma and Vishnu call him 'lord of ghosts' and deem him undeserving of the position of 'Supreme Lord' (see Skanda Purana IV, 31.29-30). Shiva is at once sacred and profane and in the multiplicity of his own aspects he summarises the all. Kashi, for the Hindus, is the essence of all things and that is why it is governed by Shiva Vishveshvara, Lord of the Universe, who retains in himself the three fundamental cosmic functions of creation, maintenance and destruction. The idea of Varanasi as a city of contradictions and paradoxes, of 'all-togetherness' and strong contrasts returns in Western discourses as well. These frequently adopt and rework Hindu narratives in order to make sense of and, in the case of the tourism industry, commercially exploit such a feeling of incongruity that the city raises – disorienting or charming as this incongruity may appear. Few guidebooks fail to report that Varanasi is the city of Shiva. An imposing image of the god with a cobra around his neck, the crescent moon and the Ganga flowing from his hair stands out on a wall behind a *sadhu* on the front cover of the Varanasi City Guide (2002) (fig. 9). Not surprisingly, the guidebook's authors have chosen an image of Shiva and a *baba* as an iconic representation of the city. They explain:

> Citizens of Varanasi will tell you with pride that their city is the one Lord Shiva chose as his earthly home. For them, this volatile, unpredictable god is not a remote deity to be feared and worshipped. They call him *Baba* – the benign old man who lives in the temple down the lane. And every morning after bathing in the Ganga, *Baba* is greeted by pouring a pot of river water on the *linga,* all the while chanting prayers of praise.
>
> (Varanasi City Guide 2002: 17, emphasis in original)

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[20] The bull Nandi, Shiva's mount.

It is this imagined Hindu heritage that the *baba* of our opening vignette embodies: he is the personification not only of Shiva, but of the whole tradition of wisdom and spiritual teaching which Varanasi has come to be associated with. Such a tradition is made of concrete signs, colours, sites, practices circulated through Hindu orthodox discourses as well as popular narratives and folkloric representations, which tourism has been not only drawing from but also, in some way, contributing to. The guidebook goes on:

> Shiva's heavenly home is the Mount Kailash in the Himalayas. There he lives like an ascetic, with long, matted hair and his body covered in ash from cremation grounds. He has three eyes, the third opening when he is angry. Snakes writhe in his hair and around his neck and he wanders the earth carrying his trident, his *damru* or rattle drum and a begging bowl. The wandering ascetic, the *sadhu,* is his human image.
>
> (Varanasi City Guide 2002: 20, emphasis in original)

Interestingly, the photo attached to this description portrays a Western-looking, Shiva T-shirted young man sitting barefoot and cross-legged on what looks like the steps of a *ghat*. Just like a *sadhu*, he is dressed in orange-yellowish, wears a *dhoti* and dreadlocks gathered in a Shiva-style bun. It is not only Shiva's iconography that the portrayed young man resembles but also another iconography: that of the many Western independent travellers who hang around in the city adopting a seemingly Indian and partly hippie style and occupying themselves mainly with yoga, *tabla, sitar* or *kathak* classes[21]. In a passage of his novel *The Romantics,* set in Varanasi and dealing with the theme of the encounter, the India-born writer Pankaj Mishra provides a witty depiction of contemporary Westerners in Banaras:

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[21] Data elicited through ethnographic observation.

Oddly, I hardly ever spoke to Panditji again. He spent his days in a haze of opium under a pile of coarse wool blankets. In the evenings he would awaken sufficiently to give *sitar* lessons to American and Europeans students – all identical with their long hair, tie-dyed shirts and stubbly, emaciated, sunken-eyed look.

(Mishra 1999: 4)

Tourists have themselves become part of the narratives of the city, as section 3.10 will show. Indeed, the fact that a certain kind of Western traveller has come to be associated with a trait of Hindu culture so deep-rooted in the identity of the city is one of the paradoxes and the cultural potentials intrinsic in tourism. This may be seen, on the one hand, as a way in which local narratives incorporate the other into a familiar cultural framework and, on the other hand, as a way in which Western travellers experiment with their identities using the tools provided by their encounter with the other in Varanasi (on processes of self-definition through travel see Desforges 2000; Elsrud 2001; Löfgren 1999a; Oakes 2005). Representations, as Bhabha (1994b) stresses, are often characterised by fixity and repetition, yet we should also think of the tourist gaze as a travelling gaze: narratives are themselves mobile, images travel, and by travelling they are conjugated into practices which produce new meanings.
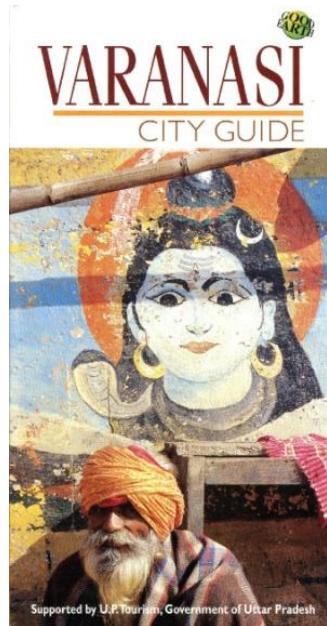
FIGURE 9 - A SADHU WITH A GIANT SHIVA IN THE BACKDROP (SOURCE: VARANASI CITY GUIDE 2002, FRONT COVER)

3.5 KASHI THE ETERNAL

The third element of the trinity which, according to the tradition, bestows upon Varanasi the status of 'holiest city of India' is Kashi, that is to say the city itself divinised into the form of 'Kashi the Luminous', the eternal entity which exists beyond time and space. Singh and Rana's 'spiritual and cultural guide' to the Banaras region highlights:

> The *Kashi Khanda* (35.10) says "The Ganga River, Lord Shiva, and the divine city of Kashi, make the Trinity of grace and perfect bliss". The Trinity is symbolised by the three hillocks as the three forks of Shiva's trident on which the city exists.

> (Singh and Rana 2002: 23)

The same reference from the sacred texts is variously redrafted and used as an authoritative source in the thriving oral and written local narratives, which foster the myth of the divine nature of this holy place and contribute to sustain the idea of the

uniqueness and exceptionality of Varanasi. The parochialism which those representations suggest is conveyed by various forms of popular literature; a cartoon book illustrating 'the history, mythology and culture of the strangest and most fascinating city in India' begins:

> People glorify Kashi as the oldest living city in the world. But Kashi isn't just a city; it is the most sacred place in the three worlds. Indeed, it is a place above all creation, resting securely on the tip of Lord Shiva's trident. […] Kashi is eternal, without beginning or end. […] To speak about Banaras is to speak of Lord Shiva and Mother Ganga. These three are as one, the same principle revealed in three different ways, a holy trio that guarantees the soul's liberation.

> (Gol 1999: 1)

Kashi rests on the trident of Shiva, right at the centre of the universe, and it is pierced by the *jyotirlinga*, a metaphor of the *axis mundi*. The special cosmic position that the city occupies is visualised in a vast production of geomantic representations and religious mapping (see Gutschow 2006; Singh 1993; 2009c). By virtue of this special cosmological position and transcendental power, the law of *karma* does not apply here, so anyone dying in Kashi shall not be reincarnated. Kashi is indeed a *tirtha,* which literally means 'crossing' or 'ford': a *tirtha* is believed to be a spiritual ford where the material and the divine meet and where one can easily cross over the river of *samsara*. The liminal quality of Kashi works as a spiritual magnifier: because of the city's privileged connection with the divine, every act performed here has a special metaphysical resonance, from everyday rituals to sophisticated Vedic sacrifices, everything is amplified by the special spiritual power of the *tirtha*. Thus, Kashi becomes a sort of geographical allegory where the material refers constantly to the transcendental, the literal to the symbolic. Borrowing from the jargon used in tourist advertising, we may say that 'Kashi is the cosmos in a nutshell', and in this capacity it encloses the whole infinite space and is suspended in eternal time.
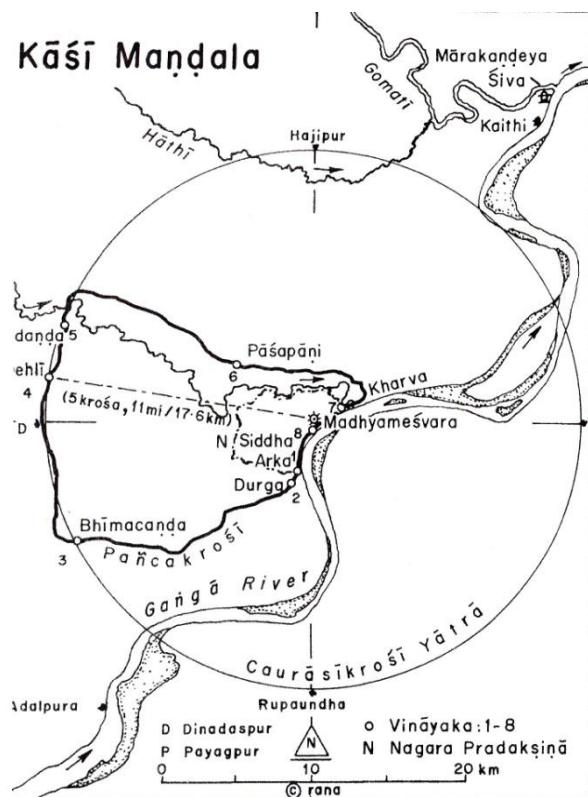
FIGURE 10 - KASHI COSMIC MANDALA (SOURCE: SINGH 2009)

The liminality and temporal suspension which characterise Kashi in Hindu discourses take various facets. In terms of cultural identity, the people of Varanasi claim that there is a distinctive 'Banarasi style', a peculiar 'Banarasi-ness' which distinguishes the city's dwellers, and that is made up of *'bhoga'* and *'moksha',* of earthly pleasures and spiritual tension devoted to the attainment of *moksha,* liberation from the cycle of rebirths (see Krshnanatha et al. 2000); as if to say that the essence of the threshold between the material and the transcendental ascribed to this place is passed on to its inhabitants as well. As we have seen, in mythological allegory, these aspects are embodied by the ambivalent Shiva. What we have also seen is that one of the forms in which Shiva governs Varanasi is that of Kalaraja, 'Lord of Time', as who he has power over time and death, upholds the universe, and wards off evil spirits. Shiva Kalaraja is said to put an end to the influence of Kali – the fearsome goddess symbolising the devouring Time – within the boundaries of Kashi where even the terrible Yama, the god of death, fears Shiva's devotees. That is why it is believed that the *kaliyug* does not enter here (Kashi-Rahasya 17.74, 79). Indeed, Kashi is considered the eternal city, not

subject to cyclical changes. According to the texts, Varanasi is immersed in an ever auspicious time:

> Here in the ashram of Vishveshvara it is always the Perfect Age. Here it is always a great festival day, and here one is never troubled by unfavourable conjunctions of the stars. Here where Vishveshvara abides it is always the blessed half of the year, always lucky, always auspicious.
>
> (KKh. 22.86-7, quoted in Eck 1983: 279)

The holiness of this *tirtha* itself makes time always favourable and keeps the *kaliyug* at bay. Kashi is destined to shine forever, never to be plagued by the destructive forces of time because its essence is constituted by the great *linga* of light and it is in this form that the city transcends the mundane world and its temporal cycles. As rhetorical and loaded with local particularism as this narrative may appear, it nonetheless sheds light on the ways in which the sense of place is conveyed by dominant aural and textual traditions. Most importantly, it unveils a different 'way of seeing' the landscape and provides some insights into the culture-specific gaze through which that landscape is constructed. Indeed, it takes the conceptual apparatus of *darshan* to understand this representation of Kashi: the radiating subtle body of the city can only be envisioned by mystics and sages; it is a transcendental gaze that is needed in order to see Kashi the Luminous. The Varanasi landscape thus introduces a third element into the 'duplicity' (Daniels 1989) of landscape: besides weaving together 'visual image and material world' (Cosgrove 2003: 254), the landscape of Varanasi has a 'spiritual quality', a *genius loci,* that is what Tuan (1996: 445) defines as 'the spirit of place' – a concept that suggests an essentialist way of conceiving place. What matters in the Hindu approach is not so much the epistemological definition of landscape within the 'visual/material' dualism, as its definition within a cosmological order. Cosgrove acknowledges this further element in the phenomenology of landscape when he says that:

> Natural symbols and animistic references abound, even in our own sophisticated culture. In the construction of human landscapes the anthropomorphism of environmental symbolism and of sacred geometry has been recognised and its cross-cultural replication noted by writers like Mircea Eliade (1959), Paul Wheatley (1971) and Yi Fu Tuan (1974).

> (Cosgrove 1984: 57)

We shall see how this idea of the 'atemporality' of the city is transformed by tourist discourses into 'antiquity' and 'timelessness', and by tourists into 'the slow pace', the 'shanti shanti'[22] of India and Varanasi in particular.

PART II: TOURIST NARRATIVES

3.6 Spirituality in the City of Light

As we have seen, Varanasi is depicted as having a special power, which makes it different and unique. But in which way exactly is Varanasi so 'different' and 'unique'?

The first and most powerful trope which gives the abstract idea of 'difference' a more concrete shape is *spirituality*; Varanasi is unique because it is 'the quintessential Indian holy city' (STA Travel 2011: 122); guidebooks explain that the Hindus call it Kashi, the 'City of Light', an appellation which has become very popular after Diana Eck's famous book: *Banaras, City of Light.* Varanasi, as we have seen in the previous sections, is eulogised by Hindu religious discourses as the spiritual centre of the universe, a special *tirtha* on the threshold between the material and the spiritual, a place blessed by the presence of Shiva, Ganga and other gods, which attracted saints, *gurus* and poets as extraordinary as Buddha, Shankara, the great Hindu philosopher who established the doctrine of Advaita Vedanta[23], Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, the medieval

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[22] A way of saying which means go slow, take it easy.

[23] An influential school of Hindu philosophy based on the doctrine of Non dualism.

devotional poet Kabir and the mystical poet Tulsidas, who translated the *Ramayana* into Hindi. Indeed, while the term 'City of Light' refers to what is believed to be the sacred nature of this city, such a sacredness has to be understood as intrinsically connected with wisdom and transcendental knowledge. Spirituality and knowledge are almost synonyms in the cultural context of Varanasi, where the presence of *sannyasis*, monks, seekers, *sadhus,* pilgrims, students of the *Vedas* and of traditional arts is deeply embedded in the social and cultural milieu. The *baba* introduced at the beginning of this chapter is indeed the mundane materialisation of this transcendental tradition: he is – or at least appears to be – one of the many wandering holy men who embody with their practices and life style the ascetic tradition of India. Varanasi is constructed as a city of knowledge and mysticism, frozen in the aesthetics of representation, by tourist discourses as well as Hindu ones. The iconic *sadhus* and *babas* with their austere physiognomies, their mysterious practices, their picturesque attire and odd signs painted on their faces are widely employed to advertise the city, thereby perpetuating that mystical aura which surrounds Varanasi and indeed the whole of India, as the two pictures below show (fig. 11, 12)[24].

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[24] The two photos are taken respectively from the back cover of the India 2007 brochure of Italian Tour Operator *Backpackers World,* and from the banner of the Varanasi City website, apparently managed by Indian Tour Operator *Savion Travel.*
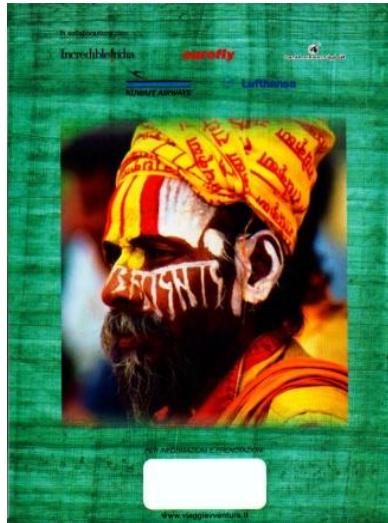
FIGURE 11 - INDIA 2007 BROCHURE, BACK COVER
(SOURCE: BACKPACKERS WORLD 2007)
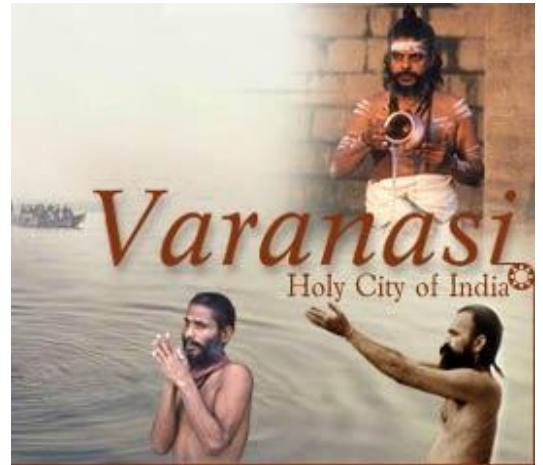
FIGURE 12 - BANNER OF THE VARANASICITY.COM
WEBSITE

Cox and Kings Tour Operator conveys the whole idea in a single lapidary definition contained in the description of their 'Across the Ganges Plain' package:

> Exploring sacred sites, ancient temples and stunning monuments, this journey travels across the plain of the holy Ganges River. Highlights include the Mughal architecture of Lucknow, spiritual Varanasi and the iconic Taj Mahal.
>
> (Cox and Kings 2011: 38)

A picture of the *ghats* of Varanasi next to the description visually emphasises the point. 'Spiritual Varanasi' – it seems to be suggested – is all the potential tourist needs to know about this destination. The metonymic, essentialised use of 'spiritual Varanasi' in order to accomplish the imagination of 'spiritual India' and cater for tourists' quest for the exotic is a prevalent strategy within the tourism market. During my Master's fieldwork I interviewed representatives of prominent tour operators in Italy; in one of those interviews, the India product manager of a leading company admitted:

> We massively exploit the idea of Indian spirituality in our brochures, but it is a stereotyped representation, which has almost nothing to do with the real Indian spirituality. In people's imagination the journey to India is a spiritual journey tout court. Indian spirituality is what attracts package tourists to India more than anything else; the spiritual aspect is very… you know… 'New Age!'

> (India product manager, quoted in Zara 2007: 34)

Indeed, the spiritual landscape of Varanasi appears in tourist advertising as an 'aestheticised' object for tourist consumption, 'reified under Western eyes as a frieze or a pageant' (Parry 1993: 299). This is one of the most powerful ways in which Western travellers apprehend Varanasi. However, while the tourist gaze is significantly influenced by the tourism industry in the proper sense, travellers' fantasies about places are also shaped by other media which if not strictly tourist, flow nonetheless consistently into tourist discourses. My interviewee continued:

> We definitely play with imaginaries: India is the Taj Mahal, the woman in a *sari,* elephants and tigers, holy men… if you move away from that, people do not recognise India anymore. But we do not create the imaginary, we nourish it, we confirm it; we just support an imaginary that the customer has already constructed by her/himself drawing from other sources, chiefly from TV, sometimes from books. But we definitely do not have the power of creating an imaginary of a destination.

> (India product manager, quoted in Zara 2007: 36)

Among those other sources of popular knowledge, one of the most widespread are film-documentaries: their authoritative, eye-catching narrations of places and cultures have a great deal of potential in shaping 'mindscapes' (Löfgren 1999b) and nurturing geographical imaginations. In those narrations, Varanasi is typically presented in its guise of religious and cultural capital of India. One such example is the BBC series

Ganges (BBC 2007) which is about 'how the majestic Ganges has shaped the landscape, wildlife and culture of India' – as stated on the front cover of the DVD, which depicts a charming scene of a Ganga Aarti celebration on the *ghats* of, presumably, Varanasi. Let us briefly examine how Varanasi is constructed through the BBC's gaze. On approaching Varanasi, the narrator resumes the story of the sacred Ganga and introduces the viewer to the holy city:

> Hinduism evolved along the banks of the Ganges, absorbing the local reverence for nature into a more complex faith. But the river always remained at the very heart of the religion. And soon she came to be worshipped as a powerful deity in her own right. Ganga, the goddess of creation and abundance. And there's one point along her waters that's considered sacred above all others…

The picture cuts to a bird's-eye view of the Ganges snaking into the plain, and the voice-over continues:

> …Varanasi lies about halfway along the Ganges on the only stretch that turns to flow back towards the mountains in which she was born.

The picture cuts again to a panoramic view of the Varanasi's waterfront while the narrator explains:

> Varanasi is the most ancient city on the river, and it has long been deeply intertwined with Hindu faith…

The narration goes on with the spiritual relevance of the city. For the whole duration of this part of the documentary – otherwise dominated by images and information emphasising naturalistic and environmental aspects of the river – the viewer is visually enticed by an interweaving of scenic shots of the *ghats* and close-ups of pilgrims bathing in Ganga, *sadhus* performing sacred rituals and exotic animals worshipped as gods. Again, the viewer is left with the impression that what lies at the core of Varanasi is its spiritual essence, and that such an essence, mediated through the gaze, is visually available in the *ghatscape,* which is, in Twain's words, 'the supreme show-place of Benares' (Twain 1898: 496). We find the same idea in the Lonely Planet guidebook:

> Spiritually enlightening and fantastically photogenic, Varanasi is at its brilliant best by the *ghats*, the long stretch of steps leading down to the water on the Western bank of the Ganges.
>
> (Lonely Planet 2009: 441)

It is once again the legacy of Orientalist aesthetics passed on to modern representations through the tool of landscape.

3.7 ANTIQUITY: BANARAS OLDER THAN HISTORY…

> Benares is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together.
>
> (Twain 1898: 480)

Mark Twain visited Varanasi in his journey around the world in the nineteenth century, and was struck by the antiquity of this city which seemed lost in the mists of time. So effectively his remark communicates that impression of agelessness, that it has become a sort of unfailing caption attached to any depiction of the city: it is virtually

impossible to read about Varanasi and not to run into Twain's quote at some point. Almost any informative text, written or audiovisual, will tell you that Kashi – this is the preferred name to convey the sense of antiquity – is 'one of the world's oldest continually inhabited cities' (Lonely Planet India 2009: 440). It will also tell you that actually the city *looks* old, but it is not that old really: Varanasi has been razed and rebuilt several times over the course of history and most of its buildings are not older than the seventeenth century, when they were rebuilt after the systematic destruction of Hindu edifices by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. And yet, the city continues to be narrated as a place where time stands still, frozen in 'eternal moments' (Lannoy 1999: 10):

> Banaras has repeatedly been destroyed and then rebuilt from nothing but rubble. It has not lodged its history in buildings. The real past of Banaras is a past of the mind, upon which nobody sets any store other than in its capacity to inspire the present.
>
> (Lannoy 1999: 10)

> While a number of cities and cultures have risen and disappeared, Varanasi continued to grow and to follow its ageless traditions of religious discourses, learning, arts and crafts.
>
> (Singh and Rana 2002: 31)

The first striking aspect of this prevalent narration is the paradoxical use of 'the historical'. While antiquity has to do with a certain way of measuring, framing and 'constructing', if you like, history (see for example Henderson and Weisgrau 2007; Urry 2002b), the historicity which is mobilised in the construction of Varanasi as an ancient city is an a-historical one: Varanasi is 'ageless', it is 'older even than legend', it is, in this sense, 'beyond history', not frozen in some point in history, however distant, however glorified, but frozen instead in a hazy past, continually present. Just like in the Hindu

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allegory, time stops outside the precincts of Kashi, the *kaliyug* does not enter here, an idea that in master narratives is reworked into the trope of Varanasi as 'timeless', as 'a past of the mind'. Such a peculiar (a)temporal dimension is nicely encapsulated in a passage of Geoff Dyer's novel *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi*:

> The walls and windows of the riverside palaces loomed and blazed anciently in the horizontal light. The fact that the light is horizontal does not mean that the buildings are ancient. The light is horizontal, but the buildings are not ancient. The light is ancient, the buildings are not. None of them is older than the eighteenth century.
>
> (Dyer 2009: 174)

In Varanasi 'the light is ancient', not the buildings; this suggests that the sense of antiqueness enfolding this city has not so much to do with the its material reality as with a certain aesthetic mode of appreciating and making sense of the city: it is the atmosphere, the landscape, 'the horizontal light' that make the city *look* (but also *feel,* as we shall see in the accounts of travellers) ancient. Of course, what is at stake here is not whether Varanasi is genuinely antique or not: archaeological evidence of ancient uninterrupted residential settlement found in the Rajghat plateau – on the northern side of present Varanasi – can easily testify as to the city's factual antiquity. Rather, my suggestion is that the prevalent tendency to narrate the city as 'lost in the mists of time' colludes with orientalist strategies of representation where 'the tense they employ is the timeless eternal' which 'convey(s) an impression of repetition and strength' (Said 2003 [1978]: 72; also Bhabha 1994: 102). Such a timeless depiction is continually reproduced and self-substantiated by the rhetoric of tourism. There is another aspect that is important to emphasise: what really is ancient about Varanasi is not its buildings and architecture, but its tradition, its 'living heritage', an idea which we shall look at in more detail in the next chapter. As Eck underlines (1983: 6) 'the India we see here reflects the elaborate and ancient ritual tradition of Hinduism'. Tourist advertising relies enormously on this folkloric appeal of Varanasi, on the 'real

India' effect that the performing of 'millenary', 'traditional' Hindu rituals on the riverbank conveys. Just like spirituality, antiquity is associated with 'culture': the antiquity of Varanasi is expressed by its 'culture', which comes alive through spiritual practices, traditional activities and old rituals, and is displayed 'at its best' (Lonely Planet *India* 2009: 441) on the *ghats*. As a repository of tradition and history, Varanasi is often paralleled to the magnificent and inspiring antiquity of Jerusalem, Rome, Mecca, Athens (see for example Eck 1983: 5). Referring to Lonely Planet's representations of India, Bhattacharyya highlights the ambivalent use of discourses of modernity and tradition (Bhattacharyya 1997). On the one hand, she argues, the traditional and ethnic India represents an idealised getaway from modernity, from the contemporary, industrialised world; on the other hand, that very tradition is also portrayed as 'a *decayed* tradition' (*ibid*.: 383, emphasis in original), as backwardness and poverty (see Hutnyk 1996), as if India was a memento of 'the dangers of the failure to become modernized' (Bhattacharyya 1997: 383), so that the implicit message seems to be 'that a trip to India provides the opportunity to "get away from it all", while retaining the conviction that "it all" is really the best way to live' (*ibid*.).

3.8 LANDSCAPE OF DEATH AND DISEASE [25]

In the previous sections we have seen how Hindu and Western grand narratives construct Varanasi as a symbolic site of spirituality, culture and heritage through ethnocentric (Hindu narratives) and quixotic (tourist narratives) representations which have crystallised particular features of the city into dominant stereotypes. However, although the city represents the quintessential experience of Indian spirituality, such a spirituality is not easily nor lightly experienced, deeply intertwined as it is with death, illness and suffering: Kashi is the city where the Hindus go to die, where the concentration of widows, elderly, the infirm and those in the last stage of their life is much more intense and 'visible' than somewhere else. This harsh reality has a piercing impact on the collective imagination of tourists:

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[25] This section makes large use of redrafted writings and research material from my Master's thesis, which is particularly relevant to the topic here discussed (cf. Zara 2007: 28-44).

Varanasi is one of the places tourists are most afraid of, because they fear they might be too shocked there. They identify Varanasi straight away with the pyres and the burning dead on the *ghats*, with the cripples on the street. It is one of the very few places they are able to put in some context.

(India product manager, quoted in Zara 2007: 35)

Although such a context draws on actual Hindu practices, it seems to be transfigured into a symbolic landscape where the most ancestral fears such as death and disease are projected, a scene deformed by abnormal images:

They fear they will have to jump over the dead on the streets.

(*Ibid*.)

Here Varanasi represents the exotic in its aspects of chaos and disorder, of repulsion and disorientation, as 'the negation of moral order and sanity' (Edensor 1998a: 26). Once again the legacy of the Enlightenment and its dichotomies clearly emerge: the secular, rational, scientific 'West' looks perturbed at the irrational, mystic, hideously sacred 'Orient'. And in the tourist aesthetics, such a disturbing sight has to be somehow removed:

[...] they don't want their travel experience to be spoiled by the images of corpses on the streets impressed in their minds.

(India product manager, quoted in Zara 2007: 35)

Therefore, the tourist industry reworks Western imaginary in such a way that the sacred might be experienced and consumed by the customer within a safe, 'bubble-like' environment (Boorstin 1961; Cohen 1988), and that the pure essence of Indian spirituality might be returned to her/him– cleaned up from any anxiety – through the representation of serene and beautiful scenes, which turn landscapes into spectacles, travellers into spectators. Examples of such a 'sanitised' and 'aestheticising' tourist promotions are ubiquitously available, the most striking and pervasive of which is perhaps the *Incredible India* campaign, promoted worldwide by the Indian Ministry of Tourism (see Geary 2010; Kant 2009). No traces of pain, sorrow or disease are betrayed by the happy-go-lucky male, young, cool Western traveller who journeys all across 'incredible India' with his rucksack in the leading TV commercial internationally launched by the 2008-09 *Incredible India* campaign[26] (See Incredible India You Tube n.d.).

Nonetheless, however idealised, Indian spirituality seems to have the capacity to evoke human beings' most visceral, archaic and potent fears. The depiction of India as 'a land of death' (Arnold 2005b) is rooted in Europe's colonial past. Arnold (2005b) maintains that in the common perception of early-nineteenth-century Europeans, India appeared as a land of disease and death. The origin of such a representation, he argues, is twofold: on the one hand, the sickness and mortality dramatically experienced by Europeans themselves in colonial India urged the 'medical topography' (Arnold 2005b: 42) and the implementation of scientific and sanitary reforms which characterised this period and worked as a justification for the 'civilising mission' underlying the colonial project. On the other hand, 'the Indian countryside – with its highly visible deathscapes – seemed, to Europeans, to epitomize the negatively tropical attributes of the Indian environment and, further, to reflect many of the religious abominations and moral deficiencies of Indian society' (*ibid*.). The moral judgement blatantly expressed in colonial discourses may be not so explicit today, but the dramatic accounts of colonial travellers bear remarkable similarities with contemporary representations. Here are some descriptions of Varanasi from different

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[26] The commercial is included in a promotional DVD which a government representative of Incredible India kindly gave to me during my fieldwork in Varanasi. However, the commercial can be easily found on You Tube; it was also incessantly shown at the Indian Consulate in London at the time I applied for my visa, late in 2009.

epochs and sources; the first two refer respectively to Manikarnika and Harishchandra, while the third one looks like a softened attempt to warn the tourist about the disturbing views that s/he may be confronted with in Varanasi:

> At each step we stumble over bones, and our feet sink deep into the still warm human dust, which, heaped in this spot as it has been for centuries, forms a layer of considerable depth.
>
> (Louis Rousselet: *India and Its Native Princes* (1876), in Mahajan 2003: 84)

> Sitting on rock at Harishchandra Ghat – down below a sand slope at the water's edge blackened with ashes, a high pile of firewood ablaze and a man's head bent back blackened nose and mouth unburnt, black fuzzy hair, the rest of the chest belly outlined along down thighs at top of the pyre, feet sticking out the other end – now turned toes down – cry of geese and rabble of white longnecked good goose swan boids pecking in the water's edge a few feet from fire.
>
> (Ginsberg 1990 [1970]: 129)

> Most visitors agree it's a magical place, but it's not for the faint-hearted. Here the most intimate rituals of life and death take place in public and the sights and sounds in and around the *ghats* […] can be overwhelming.
>
> (Lonely Planet 2009: 440)

The idea of Indian spirituality, therefore, works quite ambiguously: it is attractive and repellent at the same time, it is something that tourists look for, and something from which they ask to be protected, it is about inner peace as much as misery out on the street. Another tour operator confirms:

To me India is not a half-measure country: either you love it, or you hate it. On several occasions in my experience as a tour operator I had to repatriate persons who simply could not bear the strong impact of India's reality. In this sense, then, also the approach to religion and spirituality needs to be softened and simplified: the images of sacred ablutions in Varanasi already represent an 'advanced level' for a tourist in terms of emotional impact. Similarly, we try to 'mitigate' the first contact with Calcutta by making use of soft and pleasing images such as the flower market, or the traditional quarter where sculptures are made.

(Tour operator manager, quoted in Zara 2007: 42)

Inscribing frightening rituals in an aestheticised landscape, where the horrific is turned into picturesque, the archaic into timeless, the deathly into harmonious, the rhetoric of the tourist industry soothes tourists' anxieties and ensures its profit:

We make our fortune out of tourists' fears!

(*Ibid*.)

Indeed, tour operators are key mediators in the contemporary experience of the other and the elsewhere, which is epitomised by Varanasi. This point is well expressed by Edensor (1998a: 151) who argues that the quest for protection and 'normality' devolved upon organised tours 'reproduces the widespread colonial notion that India is utterly "other", a space to be negotiated carefully to minimise disorientation'.

To conclude, I would like to draw together the accounts of both the tour operators quoted above with an example of how the tourism industry commodifies tourists' fears. The anecdote that follows is about the rather common paranoia, among

tourists, to take their shoes off and enter temples barefoot, as Hindu custom entails. The two interviewees recount:

> People want to go to India, but as a detached, 'external' visitor. That's why the five-star India is much requested: people prefer watching India through a window, whether it is the window of a coach or the window of a hotel… and then in the temples: they'd rather watch a film instead! If you warn them they have to take their shoes off in the temples, some give up going to India at all, you know? I'm not joking! A protective film that you can spray under your feet in order to protect them has been even invented. A girl once replied to me: 'I don't care, I have my spray!'
>
> (Tour operator manager, quoted in Zara 2007: 42-43)

> Many customers are afraid of, or feel disgust about, entering the Hindu temples barefoot, they think they'll surely get sick, they'll surely be contaminated by some disease, so we provide them with special sock-like coverings […] which are included in the travel kit we supply. The gifts we give to our clients travelling to India also include: a colonial safari hat, a personal, fully equipped document-holder, and a guidebook to India.
>
> (India product manager, quoted in Zara 2007: 43)

These anecdotes are eloquent: in tourism narratives India is represented as a land to be gazed at, to be smelled, to be (cautiously) tasted, but never to really be touched; a land where the experience of the other occurs through a filter, a fence which virtually frames the potentially contaminating and frightening 'outside' within the tourist's categories, preserving her/him from any real contact (see Boorstin 1961; Cohen 1988), exactly like a spray film preventing any actual contact with the so-much-emphasised Indian sacredness.

PART III: PLACE NARRATIVES

3.9 STORIES ON THE GHATS

Selling India by the Pound[27].

I'm taking my usual walk on the *ghats*, it's late morning and I get to Harishchandra, where corpses are being cremated. I have time and nothing much to do, so I decide to stop and watch the ritual for a while. There is a concrete terrace overlooking the cremation ground; it's been built for the families of the deceased, they say, so that they can watch the funeral of their loved ones from there; it's actually become a kind of big balcony on the death spectacle where onlookers, often tourists, linger interested, perturbed, or just curious; *ghaters* come along almost invariably trying to hook them. I avoid the terrace and stand watching on a side instead, rapt in my thoughts. I've always found it striking and somewhat surreal, how close you can get, here, to the material reality of death. I'm sitting just a few metres away from an open-air burning corpse crackling right in front of me, wondering about her relatives.. and no one cares! In fact, somebody does care about me: I soon get approached by a modest-looking Indian man who claims to be from the Dom family, the untouchable caste which is in charge of cremations in Varanasi and has the jurisdiction over the burning grounds. Flaunting a sort of privileged control over the area, he invites me to sit on the steps closer to a corpse, which has just been washed in Ganga and is being prepared on the pyre; it's meant to be a sort of advantaged front-row view:

- You can see better from there madam! – he strikes up slipping alongside me.

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[27] A play on the title of *Genesis*' famous album 'Selling England by the Pound' (1973).

- Am I actually allowed to go so close to the pyres?'

- Yes, no problem! Come with me!

We go and sit, and after the usual questions 'where are you from?… what's your name?..' he tells me the story of King Harischandra, after whom the *ghat* is named. The story is in many guidebooks, and it's about the virtuous deeds of this legendary king, who apparently once worked as a slave for a Dom in the cremation ground, having given all he possessed, including his wife and son, to a Brahmin as a ritual fee. The story goes that eventually the king was rewarded by the gods for his humility and generosity. Then, again without any encouragement on my behalf, the man offers to explain to me the nuts and bolts of the cremation ritual, including otiose details and oddities like the average time for a human body to burn (3 hours), which parts of the body take longer (chest for the men, hips for the women), and which categories of people do not get cremated and why (*sadhus* because they already attained the liberation in life; children under ten because they're already pure, those who died of a cobra bite because the cobra is actually Shiva… and so forth). It sounds like the narrative version of something which wouldn't have been out of place in one of those eighteenth-century cabinets of curiosity! Perhaps that's exactly what he thinks tourists are after: some peculiar souvenir-stories to bring home in their traveller cabinets. And perhaps he's even right, to some an extent. After all, I scrupulously jotted down the whole mentioned list of not-to-be-cremated people once back in my hotel. It became suddenly clear, in the end, what all that generous donation of knowledge was intended for: without even understanding how, I ended up in a silk emporium owned by someone who seemed to be the man's boss, while glittering silk scarves and expensive brocades were being unrolled before me, and, sipping the complimentary *chai* that comes along in any bargaining, I was

inveighing against myself: 'why did you swallow the
bait?!'. I actually know why, and he knows too: I felt
indebted to him for that "donation of knowledge", that's
why I was persuaded to follow him in his shop 'just for
a look'! It was a fair trade after all, wasn't it? A
transaction between his culture and my purchasing power,
which as a tourist I was supposed to hold.

<div align="right">(From my field notes, 12 February 2009)</div>

It was part of my research praxis to take long walks on the *ghats* and keep records of what happened; sometimes I would label my accounts under a heading inspired by some particular occurrences, as in the case of the quoted excerpt. I have opened this section with one such ethnographic account because I find it telling as to the richly textured narrative which has developed in place as a consequence, in addition to, or as a fertile ground for dominant representations to grow. Indeed, while the grand narratives which I have been analysing so far circulate mainly through the established apparatus of mass media and authoritative literature, the ways in which such narratives are reworked in place, or new ones emerge, can be better grasped through ethnographic observation and personal accounts, like those of other travellers, which constitute a rich source of information as to what actually goes on in the city beyond the quixotic depictions of the tourist rhetoric. The opening tale anticipates a particular performative aspect of tourism in Varanasi, the practice of telling stories, which we shall return to in more detail in the next chapter. The story of king Harishchandra is just one example of the ways in which local social actors make sense of place and re-present it to the tourist. Just as in Manikarnika you are told the story of Shiva who rescued the earring dropped by his beloved wife Parvati, and in Dashashvamedha you learn about the sacrifice of ten horses performed by king Divodasa in the third century CE, travellers are dragged into the sacred geographies of the city through the gaze of local residents, guides, friends, boatmen, who 'explain' the city through their mythological framework. However, it is not all about mythology. As the opening account shows, local people are aware that what tourists are mostly interested in is

'culture', and that they get enthralled by the many striking rituals, images and practices in which this 'culture' displays itself:

> The ancient city, the religious and cultural capital of India… that's what people know and want to see about Varanasi.
>
> (Authorised local tour guide 2, interview 14 April 2009)

> […] I take them to the burning *ghats*… because of the cremations, tourists get more interested there! They want to see the rituals, if there is no cremation activities going on at that time at the *ghat*, then we just.. see.. go there and spend less time.
>
> (Boatman, interview 2 May 2009)

> People come back to Varanasi because here they get satisfied with the culture, with the knowledge […] Varanasi is a museum of cultures in itself. And it is always new.
>
> (Authorised local tour guide 1, interview 14 April 2009)

On another occasion, disembarking from a boat ride with a fellow traveller in Manikarnika, we were immediately approached by a man: 'Come this way, you can see better! I'm not a guide. I explain you Hindu culture'[28]. Even more telling was another similar dialogue which I had in Manikarnika and have recorded in my field notes:

> *Cremation is Education.*
>
> At Manikarnika:

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[28] From my field notes, 3 January 2010.

- You sit here madam, you can watch, you no come here every day! Every day here 200, 300 bodies burning...

He sees me taking notes in my red notebook, and goes on:

- If you want to write I can explain you all the ritual, because burning for learning, cremation for education.. I explain you so you can understand.

I smile kindly at him, but say nothing. He continues:

- ...but after looking, make a donation, to do a good *karma* for afterlife.

As many others, he claims to work for a 'charitable hospice' in Manikarnika which takes care of funeral rites for poor people who can't afford it. Then he asks me where I am from, I say Italy; he says:

- Where in Italy?

- Venice

- Oh, Venice! Venice like Banaras!

He speaks some Italian, a clear sign, to me, of his acquaintance with tourists and tourism business.

                    (From my field notes, 26 December 2009)

Again, as with the tout in Harishchandra, the assumption is that, as foreigners, we are interested in knowing 'their culture' and that we need the mediation of the native gaze to make sense of the exotic spectacle which unfolds before our eyes. Tradition is reinterpreted locally for tourists in ways that match themes and patterns of prevailing representations, and are 'thickened' with individual additions, variations, interpretations, as an Indian guy working as a tour guide for a famous international company once told me: 'I tell tourists my version of stories, which I have learnt from my parents'[29]. Thus, place works as a prism, where the singularity of dominant

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[29] Indian tour leader working for international Tour Operator *Intrepid Travel*, interview 04.05.2009.

discourses gets deviated and fractioned into the plurality of stories, which testify to 'the dynamic ways local cultural meaning – which are themselves a product of a dialogue between local and extra-local cultural systems – wrap tourism experience in an envelope of local meaning' (Oakes, 1999: 124).

3.10 HALÒ MADAM, BOAT? TOURIST *MANTRAS*

I was destined to hear the story of Harishchandra and to be taught about the death ritual again and again when passing by Harishchandra for a walk or a boat ride, and the same would happen in many other spots on the *ghats*. Through repetition, narratives become engrained in the texture of place, and they also give rise to new 'rituals' and narrations resulting from the productive encounters between representation and place, tourists and locals. In my field notes I used to record what I have called the 'tourist *mantras*': those catchphrases, lines, clichés, slogans routinely addressed to tourists, especially on the *ghats*. Just like *mantras*, they are a sort of formula obsessively 'chanted' to achieve some effect, be it the purchase of a souvenir, or chitchat with a foreigner, formulas which end up as singsongs and background noises in the everyday sonic landscapes of tourists in Varanasi. Among those '*mantras*' there is one, in particular, that has become a sort of leitmotif of the city, that is: 'Halò madam, boat?', a soundtrack with little variations that almost everyone who has been to Varanasi will certainly recognise, along with the sounds of temple bells and car horns. It is virtually impossible for foreigners strolling on the *ghats* not to be offered – more or less insistently – a boat ride along the riverfront for a 'very good price, Indian price', which most of the times turns out to be neither good nor 'Indian' at all. Typically, the dialogue goes:


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    - Halò madam, boat?

    - No, thanks.

    - See celebration [Ganga Aarti], good time now!
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        - No thanks

        - Cheap price, main ghat, burning ghat... good price,
        Indian price!

        - No thanks

        - Maybe tomoro morning? Morning also best time!

        - Maybe

        - Ok, maybe. Where're you from?

        - Italy

        - Italy Sonia Gandhi!

                            (From my field notes, 25 March 2009)
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The offering of 'the best view' at 'the best time' suggests, again, that the people who make their living by providing that 'front-row view' of the spiritual landscape of Varanasi are well aware of the practices of vision inherent in tourism; they seem to be aware of how the rules of the picturesque work in the construction of landscape, so that they provide the perfect view, from the right distance and perspective, at the best moment in the day which adds a special 'atmosphere' to the scene (see Minca 2007b). They seem to be aware not only that 'seeing' is the foremost activity for tourists, but also that there is a specific 'way of seeing' which has to be constructed in a certain way; by putting into practice the normative agendas set by guidebooks and tour operators as to 'what ought to be seen' (Koshar 1998), when and how it ought to be experienced, they become key mediators in 'the transformation of this concept of the picturesque from an aesthetic theory into tourist practice' (Löfgren 1999a: 19). In this process, however, they are not just mere and passive reproducers of the Western gaze; on the contrary, they dye global representations with culture-specific shades and produce their own accounts of the city. The 'tourist *mantras*', in fact, imply a cultural manoeuvre whereby the Western 'gaze' and the Hindu '*darshan*' are reworked together to create new place narratives, where the tourist is made familiar

with other ways of seeing, with other signs, images, concepts, practices drawn from the Indian tradition.

Another example of how the Hindu *darshan* and the Western gaze intertwine is in what is popularly known as the Ganga *puja*. This is one of the most common rituals which devotees and pilgrims perform in Varanasi; it consists in an act of devotion in which little floating candles are offered to the river, an auspicious act which is believed to bring 'good *karma*'. Especially in the evening, the glowing wakes of candles flickering on the Ganges provides a scenic effect which has made this worship very popular among tourists as well. When the sunset approaches, the *ghats* swarm with kids carrying baskets of *dyias,* little clay pot candles adorned with flowers to be offered to 'Ganga-ji'. The 'Hello, boat?' theme is interspersed with other tunes:

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Do you buy candle? Make puja, good karma to all family
and you!'

'Ganga puja good karma!'

'Candle-madam-good-luck puja? Make a wish, right time
karma.

                                    (From my field notes, n.d.)
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Tourists thus become acquainted with words like *karma*, *puja* and their ritual and conceptual meanings, they learn about Aarti celebrations and *shivalingas*. In this way, their prior understanding of Indian culture, built predominantly through the Western discursive apparatus which we have looked at in the previous sections, becomes enriched with local guides' explanations, with dwellers' stories, with the quick or extensive exchanges that they manage to have with people in place. On the ground, the 'recommended time' suggested by guidebooks and brochures in order to better enjoy 'the Varanasi experience' gets translated into the idea of the 'right time *karma*', as much as discourses on the 'spiritual essence' of the city acquire the popular contours of Shiva postcards, burning *ghats* stories, best-view boat rides sold,

negotiated or just exchanged with tourists on the *ghats*. The list of tourist *mantras* may go on:

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'Burning is learning, cremation is education'

'Banaras Shiva city!'

'Madam buy flower, no business today'

'Photo kijiye! Good picture!'

'Do you want to get high, fly high in the sky?'

'Ash, madam? Shiva bhang'

                                        (From my field notes)
```

Spirituality and religion are often mobilised in self-narratives of place. However, it is not always a straightforward, ready-made spirituality; quite to the opposite, the people of Banaras underline the complexity of their religion and belief system, and the ambivalent relationship between sacred and secular which seems to find a perfect equilibrium in this city; they proudly emphasise the already mentioned 'Banarasi style' that characterises their city, a successful blend of mundane enjoyment and transcendental preoccupation. Singh and Rana (2002) describe the religious landscape of Varanasi and point out that:

It is said that 'by seeing Varanasi, one can see as much of life as the whole India can show; but it is not an easy city to comprehend for those of us who stand outside the Hindu tradition'. The life style of Banaras is distinct in nature, and referred to as Banarasipan. It is an art of living, both passionate and carefree, what the Banaras dwellers call *masti* ('joie de vivre'), *mauj* ('delight, festivity') and *phakarpan* ('carefreeness').

(Singh and Rana 2002: 67, emphasis in original)

The two authors, both from Varanasi, illustrate this idea with a telling cartoon (fig. 13) which depicts the 'four faces of Kashi': doing the laundry open air in the traditional way; thrashing hemp to be used in the Banarasi special *thandhai* or *bhang lassi*; a hippie smoking chillum and chatting with an Indian ascetic and, finally, a sketch which can be summarised into the popular saying according to which you need to run away from four things above all if you want to stay in Kashi: wandering widows, bulls, ascetics and steep stairways (see Singh and Rana 2002: 68).
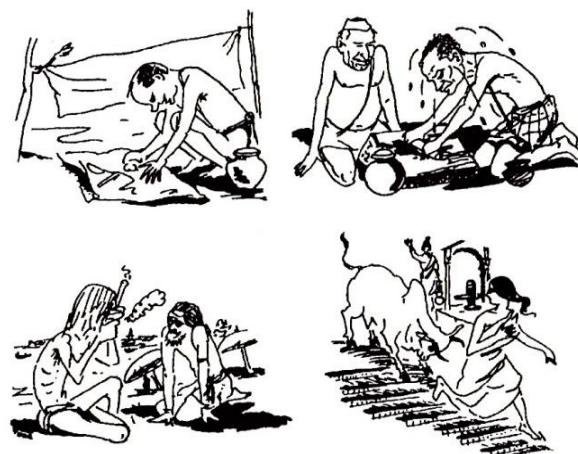
FIGURE 13 - FOUR FACES OF KASHI (SOURCE: SINGH AND RANA 2002: 67)

It is interesting noticing that Western travellers are once again included in popular representations of the city: they are considered as one of its main faces, in fact. The hippie culture in particular, attracted to Varanasi (as in many other parts of India) during the Sixties by its 'mystical appeal', had a dramatic impact on the local social and cultural milieu (on the same topic related to the city of Pushkar, in Rajasthan, see Joseph 2007). As I learnt from many of my interviewees and informants living in Varanasi, the promiscuous and libertine lifestyle of the hippie community collided drastically with orthodox Hindu social customs and gave rise to tensions and ill disposed attitudes towards Western travellers by some part of the local community. The presence of long term and habitual travellers adopting a lifestyle which recalls the hippie culture is still an important feature of the cultures of travel in Varanasi; an in-

depth study of this community of travellers has been provided by Mari Korpela in her doctoral thesis: *More Vibes in India* (Korpela 2009). In what looks like an attempt at 'normalising' the other, local popular culture has thus incorporated – at least iconographically – that type of travellers within its tradition likening them to *sadhus* and *sannyasis*, the wandering, 'tramp' ascetics. 'In fact – one of my interviewees told me – people here consider them the *rickshaw-walas*[30] of England' (hotel manager, interview 25 April 2009). However controversial, the figure of the Western tourist has entered the collective imagination of the Banarasi, and it is not all about hippies and backpackers. Indeed, there are other tropes upon which the local imagery about the '*videshi*', the foreigner, is constructed, the first of which is that all Westerners are tourists. To the local gaze, whether you are in Varanasi for study purposes, for work, or because you settled down there, as long as you are a Westerner, you still remain 'a tourist'. To his utter disappointment, a British resident of Varanasi whom I interviewed (according to my informants who put me in touch with him he fell into 'the tourist' category) told me that he is still addressed as a tourist by rickshaw drivers and street vendors, despite the fact that he has been living in the city for over thirty years, he is married to an Indian woman and he even speaks *bhojpuri*[31]. Upon the image of the Westerner-alias-tourist a set of fantasies and assumptions is played out. Tourists are rich:

> I'm checking out the place on Raja Ghat where the Clarks
> Hotel organises its Arabian Nightsesque banquets for its
> tourist customers. I am watching the *ghat* being set up
> for the event by local women and kids arranging clay pot
> candles all around the flight of steps. One of the kids
> prompts me:
>
> – Careful madam, don't break it! ..Do you want to know
> what happen?

---

[30] Rikshaw drivers are considered to occupy a low status in the social ladder.

[31] *Bhojpuri* is a dialect of Hindi. To speak *bhojpuri*, for a foreigner, denotes a great acquaintance with the native culture.

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- Yes, what happens?

- Do you really want to know?

- I do, tell me, what happens here?

- You would never imagine!

- So tell me, why are they putting all these candles all
over the ghat?

- Because the rich are coming tonight! The richest that
you can not imagine how rich they are!

- Really? And why are the rich coming here?

- Because they're having dinner in there! They paid
thousands dollars for that!!

- …of dollars?!

- Maybe not thousands… but lots of dollars!!

                    (From my field notes, 21 December 2009)
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Tourists like smoking *ganja:*

```
Walking on the ghats:

- Charas madam?

- No

- Good charas, we smoke together.

                    (From my field notes, 6 April 2009)
```

Tourists – women – are loose:

> Walking on the *ghats*; a boy of about eighteen approaches me, the same story... 'where're you from... what's your name..'; I don't shake hands and he, withdrawing his hand, 'accidentally' touches my breast and whispers: 'Come in my room...'

> (From my field notes, 6 April 2009)

Tourists have a tough life in the West:

> '...They [Western travellers] work like crazy in their country, they have many taxes to pay, they work like dogs! And when they come here they just want to be "*shanti*" and forget all the things'.

> (From a conversation with some Banarasi friends at a *chai* shop in Assi Ghat recorded in my field notes, 5 May 2009).

Tourists are shallow:

> On the road near by Shivala Ghat; a man approaches me and my friend; I can't be bothered to tell where I'm from for the hundredth time...
>
> – ...from Australia?
>
> – No
>
> – Where?
>
> – Italy
>
> – Oh Italy! Where, Milan? Venezia? Rome?
>
> – Venezia

>   – Oh, Venezia! I had a friend from Italy, very good
> friend. He died from cancer, his name's Tezzano
> Terzani[32], very good man, he lived in Varanasi, in
> Ganges' View[33] for 25 years. He was good man, very deep,
> veeery! Not like you!
>
>   – Well.. thank you!!!
>
>   – You are tourist, but he was not, he lived many years
> here, became very deep.
>
>   (From my field notes, 29 December 2009)

Of course, this is not meant to be an exhaustive account of the ways in which tourists are represented; however, I believe that these ethnographic glimpses give a general sense as to how 'the tourist' is constructed by the local gaze, and emphasise the fact that not only do popular narrations produce their own discourses on place and culture, they also produce their own discursive representations of tourism itself.

3.11 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter aimed at answering two of the key questions that inform my research: how do Western tourists imagine Varanasi? How is this city represented in tourist narratives? In order to address these questions, it has been necessary to look not only at Western tourist narratives in strict sense but also to Hindu and local popular representations more broadly, as the three together significantly contribute to construct the imagery of Varanasi. Indeed, these three main narratives come together in the discursive practices and representations of Varanasi in many ways. I have shown how the tourism industry appropriates and reworks popular Hindu myths about the city in order to reinforce essentialist narratives about the uniqueness of Varanasi. At

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[32] Tiziano Terzani is a very popular author in Italy; he wrote extensively about India and spent many years of his life there.

[33] Small Hotel in Assi Ghat very popular among western intellectuals and middle class travellers.

the same time, Western travel writing and popular tourist literature are reworked at a local level: references in famous guidebooks are publicised by local restaurants and guesthouses and used to promote local tourist business; excerpts from travel literature are employed to emphasise the supposed exceptionality of Varanasi, as is the case with Mark Twain's famous remark about Banaras being 'older than history'. Moreover, not only do local social actors rework dominant discourses, they also produce their own narratives, as our discussion of 'the tourist *mantras*' have shown. As a result of this interweaving of global and local, Western and Hindu, dominant and alternative narratives, Varanasi is depicted as 'unique', a city exuding spirituality, antiquity, wisdom and tradition, a place which is at once quintessentially Indian and peculiarly different, and that in its 'difference' embodies 'the Oriental Other'. That is reflected in – and achieved through – the aesthetic construction of the tourist landscape: Varanasi, and its riverfront in particular, are visualised as a picturesque scenery which responds to the European aesthetic canons encoded in landscape representation. Such an aesthetic tradition implements a colonial way of seeing which is deep-seated in contemporary tourist representations insofar as they re-affirm 'the distanced authority of the onlooker and the consequent passivity of the scene under view' (Edensor 1998a: 16) and reframe any disturbing or disorienting sight into an aestheticised landscape. However, the ideological visual construction of Varanasi does not draw only on Western discourses. As we have seen, Hindu narratives too are mobilised in discursive representations of Varanasi, particularly through the idea of *darshan*, a spiritually-informed way of seeing. The Western gaze and the Hindu *darshan* construct the landscape of Varanasi as an aesthetic object embodying a spiritual essence: the material, the representational and the transcendental come here together in the 'landscaping' of Varanasi and its *ghats*.

It is such a coming together of the picturesque and the spiritual, of difference and aestheticised otherness that the *baba* scene, described at the opening of this chapter, typifies: the *ghats* embody the spiritual essence and the quaint beauty of the landscape of Varanasi, where the presence of ascetics adds a touch of mystical exoticism. The *baba* is on the *ghats* because, complying with the Hindu normative construction of the *darshan,* it is by the 'sacred' Ganges that the blessing vision of Ganga-ji lavishes its spiritual beneficial effects. Such a sacredscape attracts Western

tourists for it materialises the whole dominant imagery about the 'spiritual', 'timeless', 'traditional' Varanasi. In photographing the scene, then, the two tourists re-enact the longstanding European tradition of framing sights and visually possessing the other, and help to maintain that very visual discourse which prompted the 'photographic transaction' described in the vignette. However, tourists do not merely or mechanically reproduce dominant discourses: while their doings are certainly informed by those discourses, the dialectics between representation and practice are complex and characterised by active, inter-subjective, embodied interactions where imaginative geographies and expectations are negotiated in place by different social actors, and the aesthetics of landscape are confronted with the materialities, the practices, the multiple lived meanings which constitute it. It is indeed to look at how representations work in practice that the next chapter turns, where I shall ask: what do tourists actually do in the landscape of Varanasi?

CHAPTER 4

TOURIST PRACTICE IN THE SACRED CITY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the thesis so far I have been arguing that the gaze is a key framework in order to make sense of Western tourism in Varanasi. Drawing on the iconographic approach to landscape (Cosgrove 1984; Cosgrove and Daniels 1988; Daniels 1993) and theories about the gaze (Urry 2002 [1990]) discussed in Chapter 1, in Chapter 3 I analysed how the tourist gaze is constructed through dominant – Western and Hindu – representations of India and Varanasi. But how does the gaze actually work in practice? What practices of vision are put in place by and for tourists in Varanasi? What other practices construct the tourist landscape here? And what if we stop looking at tourists as 'all eyes, no bodies' (Löfgren 1999: 9) constantly searching for sights, and begin to consider the body of the tourist, instead, and the ways in which the senses shape tourists' experiences of the city?

The first part of this chapter – 'Gazing upon the Landscape' – aims to answer the first two questions by discussing two defining visual practices in Varanasi, namely the boat tour of the *ghats* (section 4.2) and the Ganga Aarti celebration staged daily on the main *ghat* (section 4.3)*.* These two activities are highlights of the city tour and are very popular among both package tourists and independent travellers. The landscape that this part refers to is that of the *ghats,* analysed mainly in the Cosgrove tradition, but with an emphasis on vision as a tourist practice. However, as Cosgrove himself (2003:

265) makes clear, 'vision is never entirely disconnected from other sensual, cognitive and affective aspects of human conduct', and while travel retains an accentuated oculocentric character, its connection with performance and practice (Adler 1989; Crang 1997; Crang and Franklin 2001; Desmond 1999; Edensor 1998; Löfgren 1999) and its essential relationship with the body and the senses (Jokinen and Veijola 1994; Veijola and Jokinen 1994; Crouch 2005; Edensor 2006; Urry 2000) are as constitutive of tourism as sight itself.

Accordingly, the second part of this chapter – 'Practising landscape' – looks at how the landscape of Varanasi is constructed through other tourist practices, focusing in particular on practices of talking (section 4.4) and walking (section 4.5), and exploring how spirituality and tradition are reworked in the tourist encounter. Indeed, section 4.6 looks at the tourist encounter as occurring through practices of seduction where different social actors negotiate ideas of difference, cultural identity and reciprocal fantasies about the other. Issues of cultural identity are also the focus of section 4.7, which shows how the 'living heritage' of the city is played out by locals and pilgrims as much as by Westerners eager to perform, learn and practise the rituals and the traditional knowledge of Hinduism. While the *ghats* are still central to this part, here the landscape takes a more 'diffuse' form as the activities considered expand beyond the riverbank into other parts of the city.

Part three– 'Sensing the landscape' – delves into the sensual and the embodied: here I argue that the body is the prime means by which tourists make sense of landscape in Varanasi, where even sight seems to be subdued to the body. Of course, that is not to say that sight is not itself part of the body. However, as the arguably 'noblest' of the senses has been dealt with extensively in Chapter 3 and partly forms the focus of this chapter as well, Part 3 is devoted to exploring the wider embodied sensorium of the tourist. Accordingly, section 4.8 is concerned with hearing, both in terms of the everyday noises and sounds constituting the sonic landscape of the city, and as the sense principally involved in one of the defining activities of Varanasi: music. Touch is instead implicated in another crucial and somewhat controversial practice, discussed in section 4.9: bathing in the Ganges, regarded here also as a metaphor for tourists' yearning for, and fear of, immersing themselves in the landscape of this sacred city.

Section 4.10 deals with taste and smell insofar as they are the senses mainly involved in eating food, which is explored as a cultural practice where the other is mediated through the body, particularly the bodily function of ingestion, and the symbolic meanings attached to it. The 'faulty' body is the focus of the last section, which looks into what is effectively a 'rite of passage' that marks one's arrival in Varanasi and spreads a sense of commonality among travellers: getting sick. Finally, the conclusions sum up the main ideas addressed in this chapter.

PART I: GAZING UPON THE LANDSCAPE

4.2 BOATING THE *GHATS*

On top of the list of highlights of Uttar Pradesh, the Lonely Planet guidebook recommends:

> Take a pre-dawn boat ride along the river Ganges to witness Varanasi and its bathing ghats at their spiritual best.
>
> (Lonely Planet 2009: 398)

In the list, the *ghats* boat tour even comes before the unmissable visit to the iconic Taj Mahal. Even compared to must-see attractions rated on a national scale, the 'soul-soothing dawn boat ride along the *ghat*-lined Ganges River' is still up in the Lonely Planet's 'top picks for India' (see Lonely Planet 2011), where it comes second in the rating, after the hill station of Darjeeling. Boating the *ghats* is deemed to be the quintessential experience of not only Varanasi but India as a whole. My questionnaire results show that the boat ride along the Ganges is the most popular activity among tourists in Varanasi: over 87% of the respondents included it in the main activities carried out, so placing the boat ride on top of the ranking[34]. Local tour operators

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[34] For more details on the results of the questionnaires, see appendixes 1, 2, 3.

confirm: 'Most of the sightseeing tours are related to the Ganges'[35], and explain that the boat trip is the focus of package tours, which normally stop for one or two nights in the city. Even when the schedule provides only a one-night's stay, the boat cruise is included twice: in the evening on the day of arrival, and again the following morning. The tour typically starts from the main *ghat*, Dashashvamedha, at dawn when Hindu pilgrims and devotees perform their ritual ablutions, and continues upstream (southbound) towards Harishchandra to view the death rituals, to then turn back downstream (northbound) towards Dashashvamedha, heading to Manikarnika, the main cremation *ghat,* where tourists either disembark for a short walk through the narrow lanes of the old city escorted by their local guide, or head back to the departing point where, as soon as they step down from the boat, they are inescapably mobbed by a crowd of sellers, beggars, snake-charmers, cripples, kids (see fig. 14).
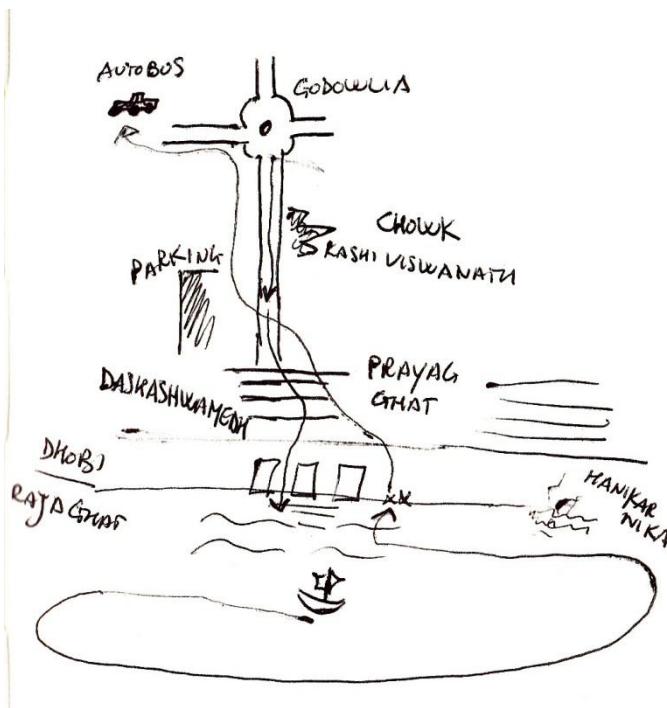
FIGURE 14 - SKETCH OF THE BOAT SIGHTSEEING ROUTE DRAWN DURING MY OBSERVATIONS

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[35] Varanasi branch head of *Le Passage to India,* interviewed on 11 April 2009. *Le Passage to India* is a leading Indian tour operator headquartered in New Delhi (see Le Passage to India n.d.).

The evening boat ride is instead largely devoted to viewing 'the ceremony' – that is how most tourists refer to the Ganga Aarti – from the river, and to performing the suggestive candlelit Ganga *puja* mentioned in Chapter 3. My main interest in this important tourist activity was to find out what happens during the trip, what tourists do, and what the salient points on the route are. I asked guides, tour operators and boatmen, I took several boat trips either on my own or with friends and fellow travellers, and I joined some of the package groups touring the *ghats.* An answer to one of my questions has already been suggested by the boatmen quoted in the previous chapter: tourists become more interested at the cremation *ghats*, they want to see the rituals, and if no cremations are being carried out at the time of their visit, they spend less time there[36]; to make sure they are not missing anything, tourists are still given the chance to see more at Manikarnika. The vision of Manikarnika – as of the other burning *ghat* – stirs up ambivalent feelings and reactions. On the one hand, cremation rituals epitomise the peculiarity of Hindu culture so tourists get excited at the possibility of witnessing the everyday enactment of an ancient Indian spiritual tradition; on the other hand, such a straightforward, unmediated exhibition of death appears to be quite unsettling. Tour guides told me that sometimes 'you see ladies getting very upset' because viewing Hindu rituals to them is 'a cultural shock, especially the cremation'[37]. There is indeed a prevalent suggestion that the practice of Indian spirituality is a cultural shock to Westerners:

> …on the boat, eyes can roam, noises soften down, the atmosphere turns peaceful… and then come the cremation *ghats* and reactions are very intense, the sight is all focused on seeing, understanding… it's a voyeuristic gazing, perhaps even genuinely interested: cremations are not allowed in the West, I mean, you don't really *see* them, so there is bewilderment, perturbation sometimes. Cremations have a transgressive nuance: here death

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[36] Cf. boatman interview excerpt, 2 May 2009, quoted in section 3.9.

[37] Both quotations are from an interview with a *Le Passage to India* tour guide, 11 April 2009. However, the same theme appears in many of the tourism worker interviews I conducted.

is revealed, is exposed, and that requires explanation, but the tourist is not always willing, or does not always have the time, to listen to that.

(Tour leader, *Mistral Tour* [38], interview 14 April 2009)

Tourists' remarks confirm such an impression of ambivalent feelings, of cultural shock, which the cremation *ghats* seem to raise:

[…] The burning of the bodies is a little confronting but fascinating, the boat ride on the Ganges at sunrise is stunning and quite spiritual in a way.

(Australian tourist, 39, female)

Really lives up to the hype… I was really taken aback at the burning *ghat*. I would imagine it shocks a lot of people.

(British tourist, 20, male)

Very impressive and emotional. A big impact the cremations.

(Italian tourist, 32, female)

So what do tourists do during the boat ride? The unanimous answer to this question, elicited by my interviews with tour leaders and guides, was: 'they ask lots of questions and take lots of pictures!'. While I shall dwell on tourists' practice of asking questions in section 4.4, I would like to briefly look at taking pictures: what do tourists photograph most? (on photography as a tourist practice see, among others, Crang 1997; Crawshaw and Urry 1997; Desmond 1999b; Edensor 1998: 128-135; Robinson

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[38] *Mistral Tour* is a popular Italian tour operator; it is a leading brand in travels to India (see Mistral Tour n.d.).

and Picard 2009; Scarles 2009). Given that photographs at cremation grounds are forbidden – although it would be interesting to consider the negotiation practices that the existence of this ban frequently creates between tourists and local social actors, whereby some people are able to take pictures if an appropriate 'donation' is paid – it is worth asking where the 'photographic eye' (Crawshaw and Urry 1997) turns to. In my participant observations I noticed that, apart from the iconic view of devotees praying in the river, the attention of tourists is captured by the so-called *dhobi ghat,* the laundrymen's *ghat*, where women in colourful *saris* and skinny men in *dhotis* stand in the water for hours washing clothes in the traditional way. It is a scene of the past which lives up to expectations as to the antiquity of the city, as if it were visual evidence that Varanasi actually *is* 'older than history' (Twain 1898: 480) after all, with its ancient traditions, displayed on the *ghats*, available for public visual consumption. The sight of the *dhobi ghat* effectively conveys the 'real life' effect (MacCannell 1999 [1976]: 91) which tourists are taught to expect from Varanasi. The interest that this scene rouses in tourists seems to corroborate the common-place equation according to which the 'real India' is the traditional, rural, 'non-modern' one.

As we have seen, the boat ride is a must of package tours. However, backpackers and independent travellers also enjoy this activity, which despite being seen as 'touristy', still retains its charm:

- What are your main activities in Varanasi, your daily practices?

- Well, the practice of music for me is the main thing. […] And then walking along the *ghats*, and the boat, especially in the morning and evening. […] Going on the *ghats* gives me the feeling of being a tourist, whereas I feel I'm part of the system, of the city… and on the *ghats* instead I feel like a tourist, I mean the locals make you feel a tourist: the children who come and ask you 'candle?', the boatmen, the characters who sell you the dope, silk… but it is also a moment of relaxation'.

(Italian traveller, 48, male)

FIGURE 15 - TOURISTS GAZING AT THE GHATS (AUTHOR'S PHOTO)

The boat ride seems to accomplish different gazes. The *ghat* sightseeing would certainly not make any sense if there were no people around as the whole point of taking the boat trip, and taking it at particular times, is to gaze upon other people 'doing things': bathers performing sacred ablutions, locals attending to their daily chores, *sadhus* practising yoga on the foreshore, Brahmins providing religious services to pilgrims sitting on the characteristic wooden platforms shaded by bamboo umbrellas, mourners and cremation workers executing funeral functions. The archetypal image that the boat ride is supposed to 'certify' (see Albers and James 1988: 136, and Edensor 1998: 129 on the 'hermeneutic circle' of images) is that of the *ghats* crowded with people, a typical example of which is shown in fig. 5 in Chapter 3. In this sense, the boat sightseeing realises what Urry (2002 [1990]) defines as 'the collective gaze', where 'other people give atmosphere or a sense of carnival to a place' (Urry 2002: 43). These 'other people' are not only the locals or the Hindu pilgrims; in fact, to conferring atmosphere onto the whole scene are also other tourists walking, drinking *chai*, making music on the *ghats*, or taking a boat trip themselves in those quaint, gondola-like rowing boats which, as we have seen, compose the typical 'sacredscape' of Varanasi widely reproduced and circulated. In this respect, the gaze is perhaps more 'romantic' (Urry 2002 [1990]) than collective: the sight of the *ghats* accomplishes a particular aesthetic taste and sensibility. Indeed, the folkloric beauty and 'paintability' (Löfgren 1999: 19) of the landscape to be enjoyed from the boat, and

its spiritual resonance, point to a visual practice informed by romantic ideals, where the quest for picturesque sceneries and a 'semi-spiritual relationship with the object of the gaze' (Urry 2002: 43) are predominant themes. Moreover, the 'timing of the gaze' (Edensor 1998: 123) at sunrise and sunset designed to allow tourists to enjoy the 'magic' atmosphere of the *ghats* 'continues the influence of a particular nineteenth-century discourse, which is rooted in colonial methodology of how to consume "romantic" sights' (*ibid*). Even when performed in a group, the boat sightseeing seems to retain an 'auratic' (Urry 2002: 78) overtone which connotes this type of gaze as 'romantic'. However, I believe that there is something about the tourist gaze, which is place-specific, and that cannot be explained by adopting only the above-mentioned categories of the gaze. In Varanasi, this is particularly related to the object of the gaze and with the way in which the gaze is performed. The practice of the boat ride typifies a way of seeing which is laden with ethical, spiritual, existential tinges: the bare sight of death, poverty, backwardness, but also of deep devotion, of religious zeal, of celebrative joy arouses reflections, concerns, and sometimes anxieties in the viewer. The boat sightseeing allows for a sort of 'cinematic view' of life, where glimpses of existence flow before the eyes as in a film; it works like dramatic camerawork which delivers a somewhat neo-realistic, somewhat picturesque visual account of life. Viewed from the boat, the *ghats* appear as a big stage for the *mise-en-scène* of the spectacle of existence, with the natural cycles of life visually juxtaposed to convey that sense of 'all-togetherness' which many tourists say they are struck by:

> I feel quite emotional here… people drinking Pepsi, next someone is burning, someone swimming in the middle, cows a bit further…
>
> (Polish traveller, 22, male)

> …everything is together in one place, it's quite overwhelming…
>
> (German traveller, 32, female)

…yeah, there's a very thin border between life and death here, and this is fascinating.

<div align="right">(Polish traveller, 22, male)</div>

What is performed in Varanasi is a pensive, thought-provoking gaze, embroiled with spiritual and transcendental – not necessarily religious in a strict sense – ruminations and concerns. While this applies to other activities as well, the boat ride realises this particular way of seeing in an exemplary manner. Borrowing the notion of *darshan,* not so much in its devotional aspects as in its liminal connotation, as a visual practice which activates connections with what lays 'beyond', we may term the kind of tourist gaze enacted in Varanasi as a 'contemplative' gaze. In a way, as tourists themselves note, sight seeing in Varanasi puts you in contact 'with the other world':

'Beyond expectations. Connection with the other world.'

<div align="right">(American tourist, 63, male)</div>

'Nice place; Siva (Sanskrit for "essence of life") is easily felt here. […] Omshanti[39]'.

<div align="right">(American tourist, 32, male)</div>

In their accounts tourists tend to associate gazing with a spiritual experience, meant not only in terms of faith and religious feelings, but predominantly as an emotional turmoil which stirs up reflections about the meaning of life and what transcends life itself. The tendency to frame the tourist gaze as *darshan* also is embedded in local tourism professionals, who construct the sightseeing activity as an act of spiritual contemplation loaded with cultural meaning:

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[39] *Om shanti* is a mantra, commonly used as a form of blessing greetings.

Ganga is not 'attraction', it is our faith, Westerners come to see and to also do Hindu rituals, this for us is a medium to spread our culture.

(U.P. Tourist Bungalow officer, interview 15 March 2009)

One of the characteristics of Varanasi is that the primary object of the tourist gaze is actually a *subject*: it is people that tourists look at, and one may wonder what happens on the other end of the gaze, how those people react and respond to the tourist gaze or, in other words, what the returning gaze adds to understanding the ways in which tourism occurs in Varanasi. I have spoken to *dhobi-wala,* the laundrymen, and Ganga bathers in order to explore their feelings about being looked at as 'tourist attractions'; I shall delve into their accounts later in this chapter (section 4.9). Not only then does the boat ride constitute the quintessential experience of Varanasi, it also constitutes the quintessential experience of landscape itself: from the boat, tourists can gaze upon the scenery, have a sense of Indian culture, witness ancient living traditions, whilst at the same time enjoying a detached position which accomplishes a visual perspective through which they can frame the disorienting other. The boat ride, in other words, can be seen as a place-specific way of implementing tourist practices of landscape (see Minca 2007b) and reproducing, live, the imagery which shapes Western representations of Varanasi. However, we should also note that tourists observe the scenery from a rowing boat: it is a 'floating', unstable gaze enriched with a sensorial and emotional immersion in the landscape (see Jokinen and Veijola 2003 on embodied visualities). Fixed-and-frozen representations are set in motion by the physicalities of the boat experience: the rocking of the boat, the enfolding misty humidity of the early morning on the Ganga, the sharp smell of smoke by the burning *ghats*, the sound of bells, chants, shouts and background noises coming from the shore.

In Chapter 3 I discussed the Western image of Varanasi and showed how the visual construction of the city continues an established tradition of landscape representation imbued with colonial echoes. In order to convey this idea visually, I selected and drew parallels between three portraits, each one 'typical' in different respects: a 'typical'

colonial depiction of the city portraying a view of the *ghats,* by James Prinsep*,* a 'typical' contemporary tourist depiction, portraying again a view of the *ghats,* by the Lonely Planet, and a view of Venice, a canonical landscape painting by Canaletto, the famous *veduta* artist. However, my point is that if the tourist gaze has interiorised landscape as a device for framing reality and tends to reproduce pre-conceived visualisations, landscapes are also in part constructed through tourist practices. Thus, I would like to juxtapose a fourth image to these three: a view of the riverfront at dawn which I took during my fieldwork (fig. 16). The 'rather Venetian' – to paraphrase Ginsberg (1990 [1970]: 130) – scene shows the river swarming with the picturesque rowing boats, most of which carry tourists and pilgrims come to 'have the *darshan*' of the *ghatscape*; the orange-dressed *baba* sitting on the shore facing the rising sun, the yellow-clothed *brahmacharin* lying on his mat practising yoga, the kid standing watching in the margins alongside the *dhobis* doing the laundry, the serene atmosphere and the little boats dotting the Ganga, all convey that pictorial touch which we find in typical visual representations of Varanasi. Thus, the boat sightseeing, itself ends up in iconic views of the city as a constitutive element of the landscape, and the tourists who set out to enjoy the 'soul-soothing dawn boat ride along the *ghat*-lined Ganges River' ultimately become an active part of the aesthetics of the landscape themselves.

FIGURE 16 - VIEW OF THE VARANASI'S RIVERFRONT (AUTHOR'S PHOTO)

4.3 THE SPECTACLE OF THE GHATS: THE GANGA AARTI CELEBRATION

'Rows of pedal rickshaws out of the expensive hotels of the Cantonment at around 6pm to carry tourists that go to see the Ganga Aarti *puja* on the main *ghat*. This is a tourist attraction and a religious ritual. Hindu people don't mind being watched by tourists, it's a way of sharing their culture. Tourists go to the *ghats* by taxi, but for the Aarti *puja* they go by pedal rickshaw'.

(U.P. Tourist Bungalow officer, Varanasi branch, interview 17 March 2009)

At the main *ghat*, preparations have been going on since the early afternoon: the *ghat* has to be cleaned up, washed, the liturgical objects organised, the stage set up. Actually, being a daily event, the ceremony takes place in a sort of permanent theatre where the flights of steps and the terraces of the *ghat* itself function as natural stalls, circle and balconies for the audience, and the stage is formed by stable platforms used for mundane purposes during the day. The entire amphitheatre and the stage overlook the Ganges, which is the true object of reverence of this celebration. The river, in turn, is used as a privileged location from which to view the ceremony: during the performance the waterfront is teeming with boats full of tourists and pilgrims watching the ritual from the river, taking pictures and making *dip dan,* the offering of little candles to the Ganga. The flashes of cameras dotting the dark watery background throughout the celebration and the flickering candles floating downstream bestow a glittering effect upon the already colourful and glowing performance. Package tourists are treated to this event, which adds a touch of glamour to the 'experience' and is therefore always included in the tour, even in very short stays:

One-night visitors arrive at the airport, are transferred to the hotel, and then in the evening we take them downtown: Aarti ceremony, short boat ride, short rickshaw ride. We have to give them the experience in short.

(Varanasi branch head, *Le passage to India*, interview 11 April 2009)

As if going to a theatre night out, tourists are expected outside the hotel by their chauffeurs – as the opening quotation suggests – and arrive at the ceremony by pedal rickshaw, the local folkloric version of the taxi. The rickshaw ride is indeed part of the 'experience':

…if you want to explore Banaras you have to add some adventure: the cycle rickshaw, the boat, walking into the old part [of the city]… On the rickshaw they [the tourists] feel that they're moving with the crowd, but they're away from the crowd. Besides, cars cannot go near the *ghat*, and we cannot make them walk too much.

(Varanasi branch head, *Le passage to India*, interview 11 April 2009)

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'...they  arrive  with  rickshaw  from  the  big  hotels  of
Cantonment,  the  rickshaw-walas  are  all  white  dressed.
Arrive  in  main  ghat,  watch  ceremony,  like  20  minutes,
then they come here'.

        (Notes from a conversation with a child on the ghats, 21
                                             December 2009)
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Once there, the guide either takes them onto the balcony, where they can enjoy a nice view from above, comfortably seated, without having to mingle with the crowd (fig. 17), or helps them to the prearranged boat for a view from the river. Alternatively, if it is a very small group or a couple, or even a single tourist, the guide secures them a seat

in the front row, very close to the performers, where there is always some space reserved for VIPs, donors, or for customers of 'the big hotels'. All around are common people, residents, pilgrims, passers-by, travellers, backpackers, visitors, Indian families on tour, and a crowd of street vendors, snack and drink retailers, hawkers, postcard and 'candle-*puja*' sellers, street kids, 'do-I-make-you-henna' girls, *sadhus* posing for pictures, beggars asking for *baksheesh.* The *ghat* is a public space and the show is free, the spectacle is open to everyone. However, the founder of Gangotri Seva Samiti, one of the two NGOs which manage the Ganga Aarti, speculates:

A ticket to see the Ganga Aarti? Yes, that day will come.

(President of Gangotri Seva Samiti, interview 12 May 2009)[40]

The toot of conch shell horns starts the ceremony off. The seven *pujaris*[41] lined up on the platforms stand impeccable in front of the audience and Ganga-ji, holding vessels of burning incense, the first of the ritual objects to be used in the liturgy. They are young, good-looking Brahmins dressed up in full regalia, rigorously trained for months to perform this ritual. Devotional songs, praise of Ganga, bells and the rhythmic clapping of the attendees accompany the celebration. Derived from Vedic fire rituals, the Aarti revolves around the offering of fire: blazing cobra-shaped lamps and elaborate chandeliers are waved in circular movements by the celebrants, who repeat the movement in four directions. This is the most suggestive moment, highlighted by clever scenic effects:

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At the Ganga Aarti. I meet a very nice kid, we chat all
the time about the ceremony, he speaks good English, and
is very smart and funny. When I ask him why they switch
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[40] Interview conducted at Dashashvamedha Ghat during the preparation of Ganga Aarti.

[41] Celebrants, those who perform *puja* worship.

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off the stage lights at the moment of the fire, he
replies promptly:

-      For looking beautiful!

Of course.
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FIGURE 17 - TOURISTS AT THE GANGA AARTI (AUTHOR'S PHOTO)

My metaphorical use of theatrical jargon here is deliberate (on the use of the theatre metaphor in tourism see Desmond 1999; Edensor 2000). This is not to suggest that the Ganga Aarti is simply a *mise-en-scène* of the sacred which bears no real significance in ritual terms, nor do I wish to propose that tourists are passive, gullible consumers of set-up religious spectacles. The Ganga Aarti is a religious celebration performed daily on the *ghats* to pay respect to the river Ganges in the form of goddess Ganga-ji*,* or Ganga Mam, the Mother. The Ganga Aarti is a common Hindu ritual: the picture below shows a *sannyasi*, a holy man, performing it alone, at sunrise, on a makeshift podium on the riverbank (fig. 18).

This ritual has become a major tourist-religious event, which is widely advertised in tourist promotions. Undoubtedly here the ritual is turned into spectacle, and this of course raises questions as to the relationship between the authentic and staged or even fake, and questions about the merging of sacred and profane. Yet this is not just a matter of 'staged authenticity', as Dean McCannell (1999 [1976]) would put it. One should not forget that the very origin of the theatre, in ancient Greece, was connected to the religious sphere: the Greek theatre was originally a ritual space in the middle of which stood an altar where the priest or the shaman performed their rites while bystanders gathered around. The deep, ambiguous if you like, intertwining of spiritual purpose, exterior ritualism and gaze performance – both the spectators' act of gazing and the performer's exposure to the gaze – which lies at the origin of the theatre, is revived in the Ganga Aarti. Elements of religious ritual, aesthetic intention and entertainment come together in this performance, which revolves around the celebration of the *darshan* as the sacred act of seeing and being seen: it is the divine vision of Ganga-ji that is celebrated and symbolically brought to the altar, at the centre of the stage. The gaze is ritualised into the Aarti ceremony in what may be considered as the staging of the *darshan*. At the same time, the altar-stage itself becomes the object of reverence of the devotee-spectator, the catalyst of the gaze, and the priest-

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performer in the spotlight interpreting the liturgy of *darshan*, becomes the visual focus of the crowd, as if a godly effigy on a pedestal, a *murti*[42], an idol, a rock star on stage, an actor on set. The Ganga Aarti, therefore, activates multiple and intersecting practices of vision: those of the tourists positioned on terraces to dominate the view and enjoy the best vista (see Minca 2007b), or lured into boats by the promise of the best photographic shots, the practices of devotional gaze by pilgrims and devotees, the mystical gaze of the performer to the deity, and that of the crowd to the performer, the *aestheticisation* of the ritual, the turning into spectacle of the *ghat* landscape, the commodification of the gaze into postcards and DVDs of the Ganga Aarti, the surveillance eye of the state pointed to this site, considered a particularly sensitive area[43]. And yet, if on the one hand the Ganga Aarti is the ultimate celebration of vision and aesthetic landscape, tourists' sensual involvement in this event is not confined to the sense of sight. Tourists gaze upon the scene being immersed in it, although such an immersion may be once again controlled and directed in different degrees:

Respondent: As a guide I always say: Varanasi is not to be seen, but to be felt! Feeling, and watching something, is totally different. […] What is called Aarti is just not a show that you can go and see and come back.. no! You have to sit there and watch the Aarti, watch the steps [of the ceremony], and then you should know that these steps have got a meaning, every step of our religious activity has got a meaning. […] So many times I took the tourists and asked them to perform the ritual too, I ask the priest.. even in the Aarti, before the Aarti, people go and they perform a little ritual and then they're declared as the 'sponsors' of the Aarti: in that particular day the Aarti is in the name of you, if you have performed that ritual on that place. So I take so many people, whole groups I take, they perform the ritual, before the Aarti starts, and then they sit there and enjoy the Aarti. […] I mean, I don't want to make it a show, because sometimes people ask me: 'when the show will start?', and I say:

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[42] Sacred image, 'the image of the deity, as a focus for worship and *darshan*' (Eck 1998: 105). As such, the *murti* is believed to put the devotee in connection with the divine by means of visual interaction.

[43] Following recent terrorist attacks, additional CCTV cameras have been installed in this area. See *The Times of India* (2011), online article.

Come on! This is not a show! [Chuckles]. And then suddenly I decide: no, I don't want to show them from the boat. I said: no, no, no, you've seen the things from the boat for some time, and now you come, sit there and enjoy! Then they see the people over there: they just enjoy that beautiful ritual, the Indian people, and then they realise this is not a show, this is a kind of religious activity going on, you know. But lot of people find this confusing: 'Oh this is especially organised for the tourists!' [Chuckles].

Myself: Well, it looks like that, in a way, I mean the way they organise it, the decoration…

Respondent: But still! Let me tell you: whether a temple is a small or a big, or very ornamental, or very simple, activity is same! [Chuckles].

Myself: So you take them among the people…

Respondent: Oh yeah! Always! I make them sit among the people! Very rarely I've heard 'No I don't want to sit', everybody loves to sit there!

(Authorised local tour guide 1, interview 14 April 2009)

Whether spontaneously or guided, tourists get involved in the Ganga Aarti. An example is provided by the photo below (fig. 19), which shows a female tourist pulling the thread linked to the bells that are kept sounding throughout the celebration. In so doing, 'tourists collaborate "in the production of the spectacle"' (Edensor 2000: 334, quoting Chaney 1993: 164), and become 'performers' themselves (see Edensor 2000), playing their role both in the spectacle of the sacred staged on the *ghats* and in the choreography designed by the tour operator, where some room is provided for the tourist to feel participant and not simply a spectator.

FIGURE 19 - TOURIST RINGING THE BELLS AT THE GANGA AARTI (AUTHOR'S PHOTO)

It is worth noting that while the gaze of independent travellers and backpackers is less constrained into specific locations and patterns and is in fact free to circulate and select its own perspective and modes of involvement, the performances of the gaze often conflate at the Ganga Aarti: independent travellers may end up rubbing shoulders with package tourists on the free-access terraces, *ghat* steps and front-row seats, or watching the show from a rented boat side by side with a vessel full of tourists taking pictures and listening to the explanation of their guide.

Because of its popularity and symbolic importance, the Ganga Aarti has also become a site for the mobilising of different claims and discourses. Sadly, some of those claims have taken the form of violent political and religious fundamentalisms. Following earlier bombings in other hotspots of the city, the Ganga Aarti has recently been targeted by a terrorist attack as a result of the longstanding Hindu-Muslim communal dispute: on 7 December 2010 a bomb went off in the adjacent Sheetla Ghat while the Ganga Aarti was being performed, leaving a baby girl dead and several injured. The blast was caught live by a tourist who was filming the ceremony[44]. However, the religious discourse that is played out around the Ganga Aarti is not only one fuelled with communal hatred. Rather, religious claims seem to be revolving more on the

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[44] See YouTube n.d., 'Varanasi bomb blast video caught live by a tourist'.

orthodoxy and authenticity of the performance. The opinions of the people whom I spoke to – tourists, residents, tour operators, institutional representatives, scholars – are generally divided into those who praise the ritual as a true reviving of tradition, those who dismiss it as a mere show business emptied of its original spiritual significance, and those who simply enjoy the celebration without questioning its real purpose too much. The Ganga Aarti is run by two NGOs and is in fact double: the Ganga Seva Nidhi and the Gangotri Seva Samiti each run their own Aarti, which takes place simultaneously in the two bordering *ghats* composing what is understood to be the main *ghat*. From my interviews with the presidents of both organisations and my ethnographic observation, I gathered that there is a sort of bland competition going on among the two. Claims over orthodoxy are mainly made on the basis of the supposed adherence of the performance to the original Vedic rite, and the 'authenticity' of the ritual is measured in terms of attitude, of purely spiritual intention not distracted by the lure of profit making. Comparing the two Aarti, the president of Gangotri Seva Samiti states:

Aarti is the same, Ganga is the same, but mind is different. We stay in Kashi Vishvanatha, Ganga is our original mother, Aarti is just a regard of my mother. In the respect of the mother, when we are burning the fire is for two reasons: one is that it is the gaze of our mother's face; and second thing is the pollution: fire has a purifying power'.

(President of Gangotri Seva Samiti, interview 12 May 2009)

As the above quotation suggests, religion is not the only discourse mobilised in the Ganga Aarti. The environmentalist mission which animates the patronage of the Aarti constructs this celebration as an act resonating with social, political and cultural values. The symbolism of spiritual purity embedded in the Ganga worship is employed to promote ecological awareness and implement actions for the preservation of the holy river. Both the organisations are particularly committed to this cause; in a

promotional DVD produced and distributed by the Ganga Seva Nidhi the narrator explains:

> Aarti is a symbol of reverence to the divinity of Mother Ganga. It is not only prayer to awake the spirituality, but a constructive effort to reawaken the latent consciousness of people towards the sordid impurities and pollution of Mother Ganga.
>
> (Ganga Seva Nidhi 2006)

Other forms of social commitment are put in place: the Gangotri Seva Samiti, for example, provides support to the poor by supplying food and blankets to the local beggars. Westerners are often involved either in the management and promotion or in the sponsorship of the Aarti, although Indian private donors and associations too are among the contributors. Interestingly, as acknowledged in the above quoted DVD, one of the major sponsors of the Aarti is the Hotel Taj Ganges Varanasi, which is part of the Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces Company, a leading brand in the high-end hospitality market. In fact, besides social action, the Ganga Aarti constitutes an opportunity for economic interests and commercial exploitation.

To conclude, the celebration of vision and the beautification of the landscape of the *ghats*, elevated to natural altar for the worship of the sacred river, are key aspects of the Ganga Aarti. That in turn produces a multiplicity of acts and behaviours on the part of tourists who put in practice, in this occasion especially, what we might call the best tradition of Western practices of sight: they gaze upon, photograph, and frame the view by selecting angles and placing themselves in vantage points. In doing so, they are often directed by a tour guide, or by the organisation of the event itself which, as we have seen, encourages these practices by constructing the ceremony as a spectacle. At the same time, tourists and travellers feel the experience of being in a 'real' place and not in a theatre, they 'flirt with space' (Crouch 2005) and participate actively to the celebration by clapping their hands at the sound of *bhajans*, ringing the bells, doing *dip*

dan, interacting with people, either locals or tourists, many of whom are Indians journeying to Varanasi. Indeed, as Crouch (*ibid.*) argues, tourism is an 'intersubjective practice' and the simple being in 'the crowd' can be considered as a form of performance: 'The feeling of being together can animate the space. Sociality, then, includes "closeness" of shared activity, as a proxemic tribe, and participation in a loose crowd of, for example, tourists, or football supporters (Maffesoli 1996)' (Crouch 2005: 29); he adds: 'even if people are not spoken with can be part of the practice (Birkeland 1999)' (*ibid.*). The Ganga Aarti thus brings together ideas of vision and performance, and therefore acts as a perfect introduction to the next part of the chapter, which deals with (not-only-visual) tourist practices more specifically.

PART II: PRACTISING LANDSCAPE

4.4 *Chai*chatting, questioning and storytelling: tourist practices of talk

Chitchatting, gossiping, telling stories are among the mundane activities of tourists and tourism workers. From informal chats among fellow travellers to scripts recited by tour guides, the importance of talk and narration in discourses and practices of travel has been highlighted by several scholars (Adler 1989: 1367; Edensor 1998; Hutnyk 1996; Löfgren 1999). As 'an ontological condition of social life' (Somers 1994: 613), narrative is deeply involved in processes of definition of self and place. Of course, narration is intimately linked to representation, it is a practice of representation, in fact. However, rather than dwelling upon narratives in terms of discursive strategies – as I have done in the previous chapter – I would like to emphasise on narration as a *practice* in itself, as 'a form of performance especially pertinent to tourism' (Edensor 1998: 69). As such, narration has to be understood as a spatial practice: it occurs in concrete places, within and across different social groups, and circulates through various forms and 'languages'. In this section I explore chatting and storytelling as defining activities of tourism in Varanasi, looking in particular at stories told by travellers, and stories told *to* travellers. That implies dealing with different sites, social settings, and narrative

conventions which, if overlapping in the everyday geographies of the city, retain nonetheless their own particular characteristics. I shall start with the talk of travellers.

4.4.1 THE 'INDO-BABBLES'

Among other things, gossiping is about exchanging information. Hutnyk (1996: 63) highlights 'the importance of casual talk and information-sharing – not always correct, sometimes wildly exaggerated – among travellers'. More often than not, travel itself constitutes the main conversation topic: stories and anecdotes about the journey, tips on accommodation, places to see, best shopping, cheap flights, the sharing of nightmare experiences and amazing adventures, etc. dominate the conversations of travellers. However, the practices and spatialities of talk vary significantly between different groups of travellers, the most substantial difference occurring between backpackers and package tourists. The regulated nature of package tours is more likely to constrain talk within certain settings and times, whereas backpackers' talk is more free-flowing and boundless. That does not mean, however, that the verbal practices of independent travellers and backpackers are not linked to particular places and times. In fact, there are some key sites around which these practices are constructed. Travellers chat on the rooftops and courtyards of budget guesthouses, restaurants and cafés, especially those located in the *ghat* area; travellers also converse at concerts and cultural events widespread throughout the city; the many rooftop parties that Westerners organise are also popular places for gossiping, and so are bookshops where travellers linger and meet, like the Harmony Bookshop in Assi Ghat which has become quite a popular hub. Then of course there are the lounge spaces of silk shops, where travellers literally spend hours chatting, shopping and sipping *chai.* Indeed it is around the '*chai* culture' that chatting is constructed: having *chai* with friends or offering it as a courtesy to guests and customers is one of the most common Indian social practices, a habit which has been taken up by Western travellers as well. *Chai* stalls in India, and most definitely in Varanasi, are key spaces for social interaction, information exchanges, cross-cultural encounters, leisure time and chill-out breaks. The physical fact of the *chai* stall helps generate that sense of a laid-back, easy-going, sociable place where Westerners feel they can be more in tune with the local lifestyle,

and enjoy loitering and pottering around. *Chai* stalls are makeshift, open-air booths mainly located in open spaces like the *ghat* steps or roadsides, and they have a basic, shanty-like and somewhat unhealthy appearance – 'it wouldn't be India otherwise!' I once heard a Western traveller say while drinking *chai* on a bench over an open sewer drain. The informality that these spaces of talk foster is appealing to travellers who favour the type of informal, open-ended conversations where they may end up chatting with a fellow traveller as well as engaging in hazy philosophical discussions with a *sadhu*. My interviews revealed that drinking *chai* on the *ghats* is actually part of the routines of travellers in Varanasi, and of course what the interviewees meant is not the mere act of swallowing tea, but the whole social and place experience that comes with it:

> ...I spend time with friends, most evenings I walk on the *ghats*, have *chai* on the steps, in Assi Ghat...
>
> (Australian traveller, 37, male)

> ...the boat ride, walking on the *ghats*.. I did that in my first days, now I feel more like going to the Ganga, take a *chai* there...
>
> (Chilean traveller, 26, female)

> I like meeting people, taking *chai,* talking to people...
>
> (French traveller, 22, male)

'*Chai* chatting' is revealing as to travel practices and identities in at least three respects. First of all, it defines different ways of being in and moving through the city: independent travellers and backpackers have freedom of movement and spare time which package tourists do not have, so they can venture into places, linger around

chitchatting, drinking *chai,* smoking, strumming on guitars and *tablas*; the time for talk is much more expanded for them, both temporally and spatially, and besides, the unsanitary conditions of *chai* shops, as folkloristic as they may appear, are of little appeal to five-star-hotel tourists. Secondly, the informal, talkative, friendly style of communication among backpackers is actually reflective of a specific travel style and philosophy, which this group of travellers share. Those recommendations, tips, stories that backpackers exchange at *chai* stalls, rooftops, *ghat* steps, concerts, etc. help build a sense of commonality and collective identity. Hutnyk (1996: 63) notes that 'These informal exchanges of information constitute and confirm the norms of backpacker identity', and points out that Lonely Planet guidebooks owe much of their success to the adoption of a '"chatty" style' which reproduces 'this kind of traveller talk' into text. Finally, I would like to highlight the fact that *chai*chatting is as much a traveller activity as it was, for me, an ethnographic practice: the exchange of information, the networking, and the opportunities for participant observations that this activity enabled were paramount for my research.

So what do travellers talk about? What is it that travellers exchange through talk? There are some recurrent themes and tropes in the conversations of Westerners in Varanasi. We may borrow the expression from Amitav Ghosh (2002: 244) and call them the tourist 'Indo-babbles', meaning those discourses, clichés, images, ideas which persist in travellers' narratives; these are expressed through a 'pidgin of the Varanasi traveller' made up of buzzwords and a 'situated lexicon' drawn from the routines of travellers in the city. In this a sort of esoteric jargon 'Hi there!' becomes alternatively '*Hari Om!*' or '*Om namah shivaya!*', 'concerts' turn into '*dhrupads*', anything peaceful or slow is replaced by '*shanti shanti*', 'cool!' is no longer cool but '*accha!*', 'let's go' becomes inevitably '*chalò!*', the body suddenly turns into a concentrate of *chakra* points along the spine, and anyone is busy talking about their *guru-ji,* or their progress with *sitar* and *ragas*, or how much that *bhang lassi* got him/her stoned last night. The sharing of this common language gives a sense of community, which an interviewee refers to as a 'tribe' (on this topic see Maffesoli 1996):

My relationship with the other travellers is very good, and uhm… I really like travellers, it's a kind of person, the traveller, that I really like because… I'm in tune…and… I feel comfortable when… it's as if travellers had always something to tell me, to give me, to teach me… so… I learn a lot from the other travellers, I always ask, enquiry, exchange. Here in India I'm having much more contacts with travellers than with Indians, almost only with travellers actually. Relationships with Indians are more… formal, I mean, cordial… I talk with them… if they invite me somewhere I go, but… [he sighs] feeling actually at ease.. honestly, it's with other travellers that I feel at ease. I quite like the idea of this tribe of people.. around the world, you know, that meet in places, exchange experiences… the nomadism…

(Italian traveller, 35, male)

Many of the stories and the ideas that travellers exchange about the city recall the grand narratives that we have seen in the previous chapter: spirituality, antiquity, difference… In a way, travellers seem to confirm the dominant imagery about the city. However, the 'Indo-babbles' of travellers are drenched with experience, with their own reflections, feelings, personal histories and trajectories, they are emotionally laden. I would like to provide an example of that by focusing in particular on the theme of spirituality. Indeed, spirituality and the various ways in which it is perceived, represented, signified, verbalised, acted out, is a very common topic of conversation in Varanasi. However, travellers seem to be cautious and have ambivalent attitudes when it comes to this subject, perhaps they do not want to slip into the 'spiritual Varanasi' cliché, or perhaps spirituality does actually raise ambivalent feelings when it engages with the actual experiences of travellers:

Varanasi is very powerful, not spiritual, just powerful: many people, noises, there is life in the streets, lots of noise, smells, colours…

(French traveller, 22, male)

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There's everything here in Varanasi! I've seen many cities in India, but here there's just everything! There is the Ganga… it's a very spiritual city, it's more… it's like India amplified, there are lots of ceremonies… it's a more spiritual city, yeah, seriously! I mean, I liked Kerala, very beautiful, but there's not… this spirituality, very strong, this energy that is here, you don't find it there.

(Belgian traveller, 34, female)

[…] so according to Hindus this city is….you know, this is it, this is the Mecca, so to speak, for Hindus, and.. you know, and also the fact that is one of the oldest cities on earth, really, and.. and.. you know, the fact that people are just.. honest, praying here… is amaaazing to me, in the intensity, and of course you can't ignore the burning *ghats* and the dead bodies that keep passing on the river, I don't know, it's a sad one, but… It's also that, again, this idea that life is… in the West we try to sort of categorize it, sterilize it, sanitize it but here it's like, there it is! And I think more than in any other place Varanasi celebrates all the different cycles of life it seems to me, birth, death… I've seen quite a few marriages, marriage processions coming down to the river for blessing, I've seen people bringing babies down to the river, and dead bodies.. you know, it just feels like…uhm.. it feels like life to me!

- So here you find this spirituality that celebrates the circle of life…

Yeah! I like the fact that… I wake up in the morning and you know there's this big open-air *mandir* of ready plast [not clear], I love this! And I hear *'oomm'*… I hear… I can't… I'm not very musical, I wish I could represent it, but they, they play this chant for about an hour in the morning and it's beautiful! *'Om namah shivaya'…* it's beautiful! It's musical! And I just like, basically, to be honest, I jump on the bed and right dance it around the room, you know, I love it, it affects me, makes me happy! I really miss the worshipful, the

genuine joyful worshipful god. We don't have this in Canada, I haven't seen that. But here it's like eeverywhere! And I loove it!

- So you mean there's something in Hindu ritualism that makes you feel well..?

- Yeah, in fact it is the joy, I feel there's a lot of joy, joy and acceptance. It's like the opposite of Catholicism. Catholicism has central authority, it has a dogma, the catholic tells you what you have to believe if you are catholic. I love the fact that there are probably as many different variations of Hinduism as there are Hindus.

(Canadian traveller, 49, female)

As I mentioned, the topic of spirituality is not always dealt with enthusiastically or positively, rather, it is often a matter of debate, a controversial argument which elicits scepticism and disenchantment, or just genuine uncertainty:

People make places holy, it seems that some places are spiritually powerful… I wouldn't be able to answer this question. People are just very suggestible.

(Spanish traveller, 27, female)

Varanasi a spiritual city? Yeah, well, there's no question about that. But.. uhm.. it's more mysterious to me though, I dunno... there's something that is… uhm… there's some kind of… there's something magical, the spirits… and I don't have a framework to put them in… it's more like.. mysterious.

(Australian traveller, 37, male)

> There is something that really attracts me and drives me away at the same time about Hindu, or Indian, spirituality. I don't know, it's like I'll never be able to… I mean, we are different, I can never be like that, I was not born here, I'll never be able to completely understand.

<div align="right">(Italian traveller, 35, male)</div>

The discourse of spirituality in travellers' talk is deeply embedded in subjective experience: it moves from sensual involvement in the landscape, where spirituality may take the sonic form of an *'oomm'* spread out in the air and danced along in a hotel room; it is framed into one's own experience of places, where Varanasi may be perceived as 'more', 'less' or 'equally' powerful and spiritual than other cities visited; it is laden with personal speculations, uncertainties, doubts, so that Indian spirituality may differently become deceiving, mysterious, perplexing, the measure of an unbridgeable distance between 'us' and 'them'.

In this subsection, my aim was to offer a glimpse into the themes, context and jargon of traveller's talk. In doing so, I relied on extracts from my interviews with travellers in Varanasi. While I am aware that interviews – unstructured as they may be – can hardly be characterised as spontaneous, informal chats, I used interviews as a way of looking into what my ethnographic observation suggested were the prevalent themes in the chitchatting of travellers; in other words, interviews are meant here as a sort of close-ups of the tourist 'Indo-babbles'. Among these babbles I have focused on spirituality, neglecting other equally important themes, such as music, which has a central place in the chats of Westerners in Varanasi. My accounts centred on a textual description of the traveller talk. I would like to conclude this section with a visual account, instead. It is a photo that I took in a popular traveller hangout in Varanasi and gives the sense, I believe, of the laid-back, easy-going (and often stoned) atmosphere of the '*chai*-chat' (fig. 20). The same photo was taken by the two friends I was sharing the table with, as it was deemed very 'symbolic' and representative of Banaras. The two elements in close up show a book, the Italian edition of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), and a mini *shivalinga* made out of *bhang,* Shiva's favourite substance*.* The book, the *shivalinga*, the *bhang* metaphorically capture the intersection of narratives, cultural symbols and activities that makes up the traveller talk. Western (the book) and

Hindu (the *shivalinga*) narratives merge into, and shape, the flow of babbles, often associated with the socio-cultural practice of *bhang* consumption; this practice is loaded with religious and ritual meanings drawn from the Hindu tradition and with values inherited from the hippie culture. Drug use in Varanasi is in fact one of the practices around which the sociality of travellers is constructed.

FIGURE 20 - A SHIVALINGA MADE OF BHANG. DETAIL CAUGHT IN A TRAVELLER HANGOUT IN VARANASI (AUTHOR'S PHOTO)

4.4.2 'THEY ASK LOTS OF QUESTIONS!'

One of the questions that I used to ask tour leaders and guides in my interviews is what tourists do while sightseeing. As I mentioned, the frequent answer was that, alongside photographing, tourists ask a lot of questions. That raised further curiosity: why do they ask so many questions? What do they inquire about? Where and how do the questions take place? What sort of answers are they given?

I remember a conversation I had with an Italian friend, a PhD student doing research on Varanasi; her relatives had come to visit her in Varanasi, it was their first time in India and although she was happy to show them around, she also felt the burden of 'having to explain everything to them':

> '...it's difficult, though, having to deal with people
> who have never been here before, you've got to explain
> everything, they ask you about everything, even things
> that are so obvious as not to have an explanation, like…
> 'Why is that guy dressed in white?' …eh, why! Because he
> likes it, that's it! I mean, when you live here for some
> time you realise that many things are just so and that's
> it, that there isn't a deep, cultural, religious, or
> ritual explanation behind every thing!.

> (From a conversation with a fellow researcher recorded in my
> field notes, 16 January 2010)

I often had the same experience, particularly with Italian tourists travelling in small groups, who I joined during my fieldwork:

> Tonight I joined the group of Italian tourists for
> dinner. It was a lovely, chatty dinner. They seemed
> overwhelmed by questions, and I felt overwhelmed too:
> when I told them about my research interests on India and
> Varanasi, they directed most of their questions to me:
> the *babas* on the *ghats*… are they real or fake? The social
> condition of Indian women... The castes, the poverty...
> why do they passively accept that? The dirt, the
> unsanitary environment... they revere the Ganges and then
> pollute it... why is that? The cremations, the rituals,
> Shiva.. and then eating, shopping, sightseeing... do I
> have any special tips? What would I recommend? It often
> happens with groups of tourists that I get in touch with:
> because of my studies they assume that I have an in-depth
> understanding of Varanasi and Indian culture, so that I
> suddenly find myself in this awkward position whereby I
> become a sort of 'foreign insider', an improvised local
> guide whom they temporarily rely on. Especially with
> Italian tourists, I often end up acting as sort of
> cultural mediator: I speak their language, I share the

same cultural background and at the same time my
familiarity with Varanasi gives me some insights into
'the culture of the other', which apparently puts me in
the perfect position to answer their questions. It is as
if tourists ask me to interpret the city for them, to
help them make sense of this disorienting city,
disorienting culture, and put some order in the emotional
turmoil that it raises.

(From my field notes, 31 December 2009)

Not only do tourists want to 'see', as I have emphasised elsewhere, they also want to 'understand': through questions, they attempt to make sense of their experience in Varanasi and appreciate the culture that they have come to see. Furthermore, tourists' persistent inquiring about even the most self-evident details of the everyday life of people is revealing as to a sort of expectation of meaning that Westerners have in relation to India: everything in India is expected to conceal some deep significance, and that seems to be particularly the case in Varanasi. It is as if the most 'spiritual', 'different', 'extraordinary', 'intense' of Indian cities was not allowed to be also 'banal', ordinary as any other city.

Asking questions is a practice especially relevant to package tourists. Here verbalisation occurs within a specific setting which provides that there is a person who gives information, the tour leader or the guide, so that communication is predominantly unidirectional and exchanges take place either between the group and the leader mostly in the form of questions, or within the group or subgroups within the same party – a married couple, friends travelling together, etc. – in the form of free conversation. There is hardly any verbal exchange between tourists and the local population, unless it is the hotel staff or other service personnel, and in that case too communications are typically mediated by the tour leader. It is a practice of verbalisation which we might define endogenous as it occurs within the group without significant exchange with the outside; the mediator with the outside is usually the guide, or the tour leader. Talk here is not free-flowing as in the case of backpackers but directed to a recipient: questions are directed to the tour guide and that is how

communication primarily takes place. Moreover, although questions arise out of spontaneous curiosity, the timing and place for enquiry tend to be subject to the constraints of the schedule: tourists ask questions mainly during the sightseeing, that means at pre-established times and sites, like hotel lobbies where groups collect before and on return from the tour, dining rooms and lounges where tourists dine and chill out in between visits, in city hot spots where guides dwell on explanations, on the bus during transfers from site to site, or on the boat during the *ghat* cruise. Sometimes verbal practices are negotiated by the tour guide in compliance with what is deemed to be the appropriate behaviour in relation to local customs and sensibility:

> […] we explain to them that cremations are private rituals, so we explain everything *before* going to the site, as a form of respect for the Hindus in place, who may not like to see people around asking questions. We tell them that from afar they can take pictures of the riverfront…
>
> (Local guide, *Le passage to India,* interview 11 April 2009)

Indeed, many of tourists' frequent asked questions relate to etiquette:

> …and the first question: 'Is it possible to take pictures here?' [Laughs]. And most of the time we have to say 'No, you cannot take pictures inside the shrine'. And the second thing, the funny question, everybody knows that we are in India and we have to go to the temple and we have to leave our shoes: 'Do we carry our… you know the.. temple socks?' [Laughs], '..Yes, yes, please!' [Laughs], because we're going to open the shoes [take the shoes off]. And sometimes, lots of people, out of my experience with people, they say: 'Ok, we don't want to go inside the temple, because we don't want to leave our shoes outside' […].
>
> - So the shoes issue is one of the main…

- …it's the first question, yeah! Whenever we say that we are going to see the Durga temple, the first question is the shoes, and the second question is the photography. And *then* comes the cultural aspect, you know.

(Authorised local tour guide 1, interview 14 April 2009)

While most questions are about religion, the rituals, Indian society and the castes, tourists are also curious about otiose details and petty aspects of the everyday:

Tourists are interested in trivial details: 'what are those people doing?', the fabric, the wood…[45]

(Tour leader, *Mistral Tour,* interview 14 April 2009)

People mostly ask about the cows, people read about the cows and they ask me why the cow is sacred […]. Then about marriages, what age people get married, are there child marriages, what is the marriage age […]. They ask about the caste system, what is caste, because they read some briefs about India and they want to know about religion, Hindu religion, how it is practised, how many gods we have, because everybody reads different stories on the number of gods, so they are always curious of the number of gods, cows, religion, marriages, caste system... but number one is the cow!

(Indian tour leader, *Intrepid Travel*, interview 4 May 2009)

The city of burning and learning, this is what they read in books; they want to know why the city is called Kashi, Banaras… they ask about the communities

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[45] The wood probably refers to tourists' curiosity about the minutiae of cremation rituals; the fabric alludes to silk shopping, for which Benares is popular.

living in the city, the communal relations between the locals [the relationship between Hindus and Muslims].

(Local tour guide, *Le passage to India,* interview 11 April 2009)

…another big question is: 'Where are the women?' I say traditionally man is supposed to work and woman is supposed to take care of the children, that's why you see more men […], women don't go out that much as men go out.

(Indian tour leader, *Intrepid Travel*, interview 04 May 2009)

They want to see very close to the cremations, they ask questions about rituals, caste system… some of them have already ideas; they want to know how the cremation is done, why, why cow is holy, why the Ganges is holy… they want to know the basics.

(Local tour guide, *Le passage to India,* interview 11 April 2009)

Indeed, as for the boat ride, cremations seem to catalyse tourists' attention and inquisitiveness:

…even today, I had the morning boat ride, at the most special shore about cremations, you know, people ask me what do we do, how does the ritual start when a person dies, when do we start cremating the body? How long does it take? What are the timings, is there a specific time when we cremate the body? Morning… or evening… in the afternoon…? I tell them in general we do not cremate before the sunrise and after the sunset but in extreme cases that happens as well. They ask me what do we do after.. how long does the body burn for, and then I tell them that, you know, traditionally it takes a long time, there is a whole ritual there, on the body, on the woods… these

days in the cities we have electronic cremation presses as well, even in ten minutes you get the ashes, but in general it takes long time, next morning we collect the ashes. So I tell them the procedures and they are very curious about how long does it take and what exactly do we collect when a body is cremated, when it is turned to the ashes, do we collect the bones? Do we collect the whole pyre of ashes? What part do we collect? What do we do with those ashes? And I tell them we take them to Ganga. People ask me: are everyone's ashes offered to Ganga in Varanasi or any other place? And then I tell them, ok, no, this is not the Varanasi only, people go to the closest place where Ganga is. […] People ask such questions about the cremations, you know, and.. yeah all these questions.

(Indian tour leader, *Intrepid Travel*, interview 4 May.2009)

The questions betray a store of information and clichés informed by dominant discourses, where curiosity revolves once again around spirituality, tradition, ritualism and the perception of India as a country of ancient wisdom as well as of social backwardness and stark contrasts. At the same time, though, asking questions may also be seen as a way of questioning such a discursive apparatus and reframing it through one's own subjective understanding:

Normally tourists come with a bit of knowledge about Hinduism and India, they ask questions to elaborate their knowledge, for example: how many gods are there? Why is that one god has many names? …and so on.

(Authorised local tour guide 1, interview 14 April 2009)

Varanasi and Hinduism represent the unfathomable, the disorienting other, and that needs extra explanations, which tourists seek through questions. The practice of inquiring is regulated and inscribed within defined spatio-temporal routines; yet, to some extent it can also be considered as tourists' effort to engage critically with the

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set of pre-constructed information that they are provided with in advance and during their journey. Through the practice of questions tourists attempt to actively construct their own knowledge instead of passively – and silently – absorbing it from the tour operator, thereby claiming their own subjectivity and agency within the standardised logic of the package tour. Through questions tourists and tour operators construct partial, inter-subjective, situated knowledge, they exchange their gazes in the *hic et nunc* of travel.

4.4.3 TOURISTS LIKE TO LISTEN TO STORIES…

> Telling stories is an essential way of making sense of the world and transmitting identity.
>
> (Edensor 1998: 69)

When I talk about Banaras I tell them.. I start with Varanasi: why this name? The old name was Kashi, why it was Kashi? Because Kashi is the main area between Varuna and Assi; Kashi came after Assi, somehow, Varuna and Assi: they're two different rivers, two different sides, which mix in Ganges, and Varanasi name came after Varuna and Assi. This is the one thing I tell them about the name. Then I talk about Banaras: this is the oldest living city in the world, this is the place of holy river Ganga, this is the place where all the gods live, Lord Shiva lives here, upon cremation, because you know, there are three major gods: creator, preserver and destroyer. Life starts, created; life is struggling, moving ahead, doing different things.. And then life is ending, and when it ends it goes back into Shiva. So I tell them the story of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, about the river Ganga, how did it come on earth, about king Bhagiratha. I tell them how the Ganga actually, even in heaven, how Ganga was originated […] There are so many.. you know, every religious story has a lot of different points of view, a lot of… everyone tells a story in a different way, so I tell these stories my way, which I heard from my grandparents and read in the books. So I just tell them in general these

stories: gods, goddesses, number of gods – which amazes them – I tell them there are 30 million gods and.. they are shocked, they are shocked. I tell them some interesting stories, and they, they just enjoy it!

<div align="right">(Indian tour leader, Intrepid Travel, interview 4 May 2009)</div>

The classic way in which tour guides answer tourists' questions and re-create, manufacture, perpetuate tourist narratives of place is by telling stories. This activity is common in tourism as it serves many purposes: it is entertaining, it is educational, it provides a great deal of information on aspects as diverse as the histories, geographies, religions, customs and traditions, attitudes of peoples and places. Moreover, as a social practice through which identities and meanings are exchanged and set in motion, oral narrations of places and cultures cater to that quest for 'understanding' the other which we have seen animating the curiosity of tourists. In Varanasi, this activity is further associated with a culture-specific element, especially connected with the practices of pilgrimage: telling stories to pilgrims is one of the main occupations of *pandas,* the Brahmin priests (usually associated with specific *ghats*) who take care of all the necessary arrangements for pilgrims and act as a sort of travel agent for them. In particular, the role of storyteller is carried out by the *vyasas,* who entertain the devotees with religious stories from the Puranas, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata; that follows the *katha* tradition, the telling and performing of stories from Hindu religious texts, folk tales, devotional stories related to gods, myths, particular festivities, days of the week, astral conjunctions. As Narayan (1989: 5) notes, 'folk narrative is a dominant medium for the expression of Hindu insights' and it constitutes a chief vehicle of instruction and moral teaching. It is in this rich narrative tradition that the practice of storytelling by tour guides in Varanasi needs to be contextualised. Like modern *vyasas* of the global industry of tourism, local tour guides help the tourist-pilgrim elaborate his/her understanding of Varanasi and Indian culture by providing an interpretative framework made up of stories, simplified philosophical explanations and cultural interpretations. The didactic purpose which inform Hindu traditions of storytelling is alive in the activity of tour guides, who represent

themselves as 'cultural ambassadors', as mentors who have to 'instruct' the tourist-learner on 'the basics' of Indian culture:

> For me tourist is a new-born baby [laughs]... so I have to teach them how to eat, and how to do the *datun*[46], you know, that stick that we wash our teeth... I have to teach them how to eat the *paan,* and how to drink the tea in the small, you know, the clay pots.. so for me he's like a new-born baby!
>
> (Official local tour guide 1, interview 14 April 2009)

So what are the stories that tour guides tell tourists in order to familiarise them with India and Varanasi? Some of the leading narratives have already been illustrated in Chapter 3: the myth of the descent of Ganga, anecdotes about Shiva, allegories on the superhuman power of Kashi, the legend of king Harishchandra. Further popular narratives, as the opening excerpt suggests, concern the toponymy of Varanasi: its different names and the different tales and etymologies associated with them. Guides' stories also deal with divine genealogies, with the city's sacred geographies, with socio-cultural explanations: why the cow is holy, how death rituals are performed and what their meaning is, how the caste system works, and so forth. Sometimes these stories are spontaneous, extemporary, and accidental in their spatio-temporal enactment: they flow out of occasional curiosity and questions from the tourists, prompted by the contingencies of travel. More often they follow prearranged patterns and choreographies (see Edensor 1998; 2000; Seamon 1979b; 1980). As the practices of talk of tourists and backpackers are spatialised within specific time-place routines, so is the storytelling of guides. Stories are told at intended points and times in the tour, following a predetermined script meant to create 'the Varanasi experience': tales of Ganga-ji are better enjoyed during the morning boat ride or as a commentary to the Ganga Aarti ceremony in the evening; the nuts and bolts of cremations are disclosed while gazing on Manikarnika and Harishchandra; the powerful symbolism of Shiva and

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[46] Neem twig used for oral hygiene; it is usually chewed and works as a kind of natural floss, toothbrush and paste.

the *shivalinga* is nicely exemplified by the Vishvanatha temple, to which the tour group usually proceeds after the boat ride, while the 'Varanasi-city-of-knowledge' discourse finds its spatial concretisation in the visit to the Banaras Hindu University, one of the highlights of the city. In some cases these narratives realise a topographical fabulation whereby some particular spots in the route are transfigured by mythological accounts, which create very suggestive narratives of place. Such is the case of a very frequent myth told by local guides during the tour, that of Parvati's earring. At Manikarnika, a main cremation *ghat* there is a sacred pool called Manikarnika Kund, which is a mandatory stop in pilgrims' routes. The pond is said to have been dug by Lord Vishnu and filled up with the water from the god's sweat. Popular versions of this puranic legend have it that Parvati dropped her earring and asked her consort Shiva to search for it, and the place where the earring was found is called Manikarnika Kund; another more faithful account has it that it was Lord Shiva himself who dropped his 'jewelled earring', after which the *kund* and the *ghat* were named[47]. In other cases, narratives retold at particular spots serve the purpose to corroborate master representations and inscribe them on to places: the re-telling of the history of the 'Golden Temple' at Vishvanatha, for example, and how it was repeatedly razed by Muslim rulers in the past, reinvigorates the communal discourse which constructs India as a country in perennial conflict between Hindus and Muslims. Closed to non-Hindus, the temple is usually glimpsed upon from the adjacent buildings, where tour guides direct the tourists' gaze to the 'relevant' sights: the golden dome of the temple, the Gyanavapi Mosque erected by the 'terrible' Mughal emperor Aurangzeb on the ruins of the earlier Hindu temple, the Gyanavapi, 'the well of wisdom', which is said to hide the primordial *shivalinga,* removed from the original Vishvanatha temple to be protected from Aurangzeb's destructive fury. Other narratives are intended instead to confirm exactly the opposite, by constructing Varanasi as a multi-religious city where different faiths coexist. In all cases, what matters is the role of storytelling in conveying a sense of place, cultural identity, and in framing the tourist experience. Places become romanticised by recurrent narratives, which in turn express the 'imaginary heritage' that lies beneath local cultures, but also the dominant discourses that inform tourism

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[47] These are the most common versions of the myth which I heard reworked in local tourist narratives. For versions more faithful to the texts see Eck 1983: 239-245; Singh and Rana 2002: 118-119.

in Varanasi. In this process, however, the narrative construction of places does not proceed one way. It is not only tour guides who have control over tales told in and about sites; indeed, as we have seen, tourists engage in narration through questions and the construction of their own stories and 'babbles'. Practices of talk, in their multifarious enactments and different narrative registers – from informal chat to structured verbal exchanges – can thus be considered constitutive of the tourist experience and of the various ways in which self and place constitute each other in the tourist encounter in Varanasi.

4.5 WALKING THE *GHATS*

> As most cities, I think one should have time to learn about it. Walking around a city is also the best way, in my opinion. I like the light along the Ganges, as a photographer, but this is very personal of course. While walking along the Ganges the touts (boat, massage, hash…) are a great nuisance to most tourists I believe. Shit and pee as well of course. It is also what most short-time visitors will remember and tell to friends at home about Varanasi, unfortunately.
>
> (Belgian tourist, 56, male)

Taking a walk on the *ghats* is often regarded as one of the best ways to experience the city. Indeed, that is what most tourists do, whether on their own or directed by a tour guide. In my questionnaires, walking comes third in the rating of the activities most mentioned by tourists, after the 'must-do' boat ride and general 'sightseeing'. As an activity which engages with multiple dimensions, from the sensual, the material, the performative and the affectual, to the social, the political, and the arts, walking has been the object of investigation by fields as diverse as philosophy, ethnography, cultural studies, literature, transport studies, policy making. Practices of walk have recently attracted the attention of geographers, particularly within social and cultural geography (Butler 2006; Middleton 2011; Wylie 2005). Walking as a performance has a particular relevance to landscape, inspiring academic work informed by

phenomenological approaches (for example Wylie 2005), experimentation in the arts (for example the art work of Richard Long), and the flourishing of contemporary psychogeographies (for example Iain Sinclair and Peter Acroyd in literature, or Patrick Keiller in film-making). In tourism, Edensor applies the metaphor of choreography and the idea of place-ballet to tourist practices of walk at the Taj Mahal, uncovering different patterns and ways of moving around at this symbolic site (1998a; 2000).

Borrowing some of Edensor's ideas and drawing on broader academic writing on pedestrian performances, in this section I analyse tourist walking in Varanasi, with particular regard to the *ghats* area, by which I mean the riverfront, the old city and the area immediately behind the *ghats*. Indeed, we should perhaps start by asking where tourists actually walk and give more definite contours to this spatial practice as it is performed in Varanasi. As so much emphasis is laid on the *ghats* in discursive representations, this is the stretch of city where tourists' walks predominantly occur. The physical appearance of the *ghats* itself, reminiscent of a promenade, lends itself to this activity, which is in fact also encouraged by tourist advertising. Lonely Planet promises:

It's a world-class, "people-watching" stroll.

(Lonely Planet 2009: 443)

Besides the *ghats* themselves, tourists – either guided or not – also venture in the maze of lanes of the old city; the characteristic *galis* of Varanasi are considered as conveying the true 'feel' of this city:

The city is believed to be out of this world, and you have to try to see it through the eyes of a Banarasi, "the dweller of Banaras". Only by walking one can realise that. A British, settled and transformed himself into a Banarasi, suggests "You have to try and get lost in the maze of lanes and then find your own way out".

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For package tourists the short walk from Godaulia crossing, where tour buses park, to the Main Ghat already constitutes a very intense immersion in place: walking instead of watching from the bus window or even from the rickshaw exposes them to a physical engagement with their surroundings – cripples and kids pulling at their jacket, snake charmers approaching them, the dirt and the dust… – which often proves to be overwhelming. Of course, the *ghats* are not the only area in the city where tourists wander: in Chapter 5 I shall show that there exist more 'diffuse' geographies of the city; however, the riverbank and its immediate surroundings are the main scene of Western pedestrian practices. To refer to these practices in plural terms points to the fact that there are actually different ways of walking and moving around. Edensor (1998: 107) highlights that most package tourists follow 'disciplined collective choreographies' where 'bodies are tutored and disciplined, kept together and directed by assumptions about what is deemed "appropriate", by group norms, and principally by the orders of the guide'. Backpackers and independent travellers, on the other hand, 'tend to be more improvisational in their movement' (*ibid.:* 111), they wander more freely, following their own pace, indulging in detours and pauses, so that their '"place-ballets" (…) tend to be less confined' (Edensor 1998: 112; on the notion of place-ballet see Seamon1979b; 1980; Shields 1991). Edensor's theorisations centred on the Taj Mahal, but the same ideas can be used to shed light on tourists' walking in Varanasi, although the *ghats* are less regulated and policed than the iconic monument in Agra analysed by Edensor. All the more so, tourists here need to be guided, escorted, sometimes even shielded by the 'overwhelming humanity' that reaches out to them during their walking tour in the city. The path needs to be shown by the guide in the confusing labyrinth of Kashi Vishvanatha, the inner city, and tour leaders need to make sure that nobody gets lost on the route. Walking in Varanasi, indeed, is not for everyone:

The walking tour at the *ghats* is not very common. We include this offer for those who are mentally prepared to Banaras, those who know about Banaras. We take them to Assi, just to start from there and walk through the narrow lanes; Assi Ghat is easily approachable.. so we let them explore the area near Assi. But there is always a guide with them.

(Varanasi branch head, *Le passage to India*, interview 11 April 2009)

Conversely, many independent travellers actually take pleasure in getting lost in the picturesque lanes, and promenading purposelessly along the *ghats*: it is not getting from A to B that matters to them; instead, walking per se, without necessarily having a designed destination, is enacted as a way of exploring and understanding the city. Just as we find the European legacy of landscape in the visual practices of tourism so, in tourists' strolling, we find echoes of another inherently European tradition, that of the *flâneur,* the male bourgeois, typically the artist or the intellectual, who walks the city as a way of experiencing it. Theorised by Charles Baudelaire (1861) and elaborated by intellectuals as notable as Walter Benjamin (1973), De Certeau (1984) Guy Debord (1967), *flânerie* is understood as the activity of sauntering conducive to the understanding of the modern urban experience; not the sheer physical act of wandering, then, but a way of knowing the city, of apprehending and contemplating urban life and modernity. Although *flânerie* is originally associated with a specific setting – the urban milieu of nineteenth-century Paris – and class – the bourgeois intellectual – the figure of the *flâneur* bears interesting resemblances to that of the tourist (see Jokinen and Veijola 1997). Two such resemblances are the leisure dimension involved in strolling, and the epistemological implication of walking, meant as an attempt to construct some kind of spatial knowledge, be it the workings of the metropolis or the secrecies of the inner lanes of a Hindu sacred city. Moreover, for both the tourist and the *flâneur,* strolling is constructed as an act of contemplation: the city unfolds before the eyes of the walking subject as a spectacle to be consumed (Debord 1967). Such contemplation, however, is not only aesthetic: as for the boat cruise discussed in section 4.2, this activity too is charged with emotional and pensive suggestions, it is a pondering walking:

I like strolling… only by walk, no rickshaw, no anything, only walk, I like it most. I see the people, the shops, the food, the colours, many colours, flowers for *puja,* the writings on the walls… it's of great inspiration to me. I do that on the *ghats*, and in the inner city, in the alleys behind the *ghats*. I like it in the morning, when there are not many people around. To me, when I go in the morning it's like a spiritual thing, it's a bit like a meditation on foot… a simple thing… you feel well with yourself and that's it, you don't expect anything, you only breath the air, see things, take the energy of the atmosphere..

(Belgian traveller, 34, female)

We have seen how from the boat tourists observe the display of life, and how that raises emotional and reflective responses, which thicken their sightseeing experience. Unlike the 'boating gaze', though, in walking tourists not only observe from a distanced point, but literally pass through, both physically and metaphorically, different stages and conditions of life: joy, dallying, poverty, death, work, marriage, deception, devotion, spirituality, degradation, misery, compassion; all the spectrum of emotions and life situations condensed in a walk, all in that natural dis-order. Yet the movement here seems to go into reverse: from the boat it was life that flowed before them, in the stroll it is them going through those existential scenes. Walking was part of my own routine. As an Italian, during my strolls I could not help retrieving from my cultural imagery the vivid scenes of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, and instinctively draw parallels between the *ghat* walk and Dante's allegorical passing through the three worlds of the afterlife. Indeed, Wylie emphasises the 'fanciful allegorical quality' that walk – especially solo walking, he notes – can acquire (Wylie 2005: 240). Again, tourist and ethnographic activities mingled in the field: a *flâneur* myself, I adopted strolling as a way of immersing myself in the context and observing it from within, becoming, to paraphrase Baudelaire, 'a botanist of the *ghat*-walk',[48] although unlike Baudelaire's

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[48] Baudelaire' original phrase is 'a botanist of the sidewalk'.

detached *flâneur* I was more like an engaged voyeur, scrutinising people and places which my strolling led me to get involved with. The physical engagement with the landscape is indeed an intrinsic characteristic of peripatetic practices, where 'the relation between self and landscape is not always or strictly that of observer and observed' (Wylie 2005: 243). Of course, the boat ride also allows for sensual involvement, but on the boat the positioning of the viewing subject is more conducive to an observer-observed mode of interaction, where distance is secured by the river, which acts as a natural demarcation between the viewer and the viewed whereas in the walk such a boundary is much more blurred. Thus, spaces are framed, known, sometimes even renamed after the 'affective' and 'perceptual' experiences mobilised in walking (see Wylie 2005 on notions of affect and percept implicated in walking):

```
...this city clenches you... when I walk in the narrow
galis of the old town I feel like I'm tight all around,
compressed in space… the city hugs me...
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(Brazilian traveller, excerpt from my field notes, 10 May 2009)

Steep stairs, slippery steps, a stumble, a fall, forced diversions by wandering cows impinging the way, zigzag walking to avoid dung, rubbish, drains, fumbling walks in blacked-out streets and non-lit *ghats*, the contact of bare feet with the bare stone of temples… the landscape is re-scripted through the 'corporealities', 'materialities' and 'sensibilities' of walking (*ibid.*). The landscape actually becomes, as Wylie notes, the very means through which we see:

Landscape is neither something seen, nor a way of seeing, but rather the materialities and sensibilities *with which* we see.

(Wylie 2005: 243, emphasis in original; see also Wylie 2007: 211-215)

This dialectic between landscape and movement favours creative perceptual re-mappings of the city; so for example the road between Godaulia crossing and Dashashvamedha Ghat turned into 'the cough road' to my friend and I:

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Meet Vera at the cough road at 6pm; watching Ganga Aarti
together.
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<div align="right">

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(From my field diary, 5 April 2009)
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</div>

I was, in fact, always taken by a coughing fit when walking on that stretch of road where the penetrating dust and fumes inescapably entered my throat and lungs, so it was easier for us, in absence of clear road signs, to identify that particular location on the basis of shared experiential topographical knowledge. Another example is Prabhu Ghat, commonly dubbed 'the public toilet *ghat*': a sharp smell of excrements and the inglorious sight of people carelessly defecating against the wall in public welcome you to this *ghat*, which has even earned a mention for its unhappy sensory poignancy in a novel:

> Prahbu ghat, where the dhobis pounded their laundry into submission, also doubled as a default toilet ghat. It was horrible walking along there. The sight entered your eyeballs and the stench entered your nostrils. I felt like writing a sign next to the 'I LOVE MY INDIA' sign: 'If you love it so much, then don't shit all over it'.

<div align="right">

(Dyer 2009: 224)

</div>

The example above colourfully highlights the fact that the *ghats* constitute not only the preferred promenade of tourists, but also the setting for the everyday choreographies of inhabitants. In fact, if we look at the landscape as criss-crossed by and constructed through movement, the *ghats* appear as an intersection of different

routes and pedestrian practices: the orchestrated movements of package tourists, the contemplative, erratic strolls of travellers, the daily trips of bathers and *dhobis*, the place-ballets of *ghaters* roaming the river path in search of customers, the sacred circuits of pilgrims, the wanderings of *sadhus* and beggars, the daily processions of mourners carrying litters down to Manikarnika. Walking, therefore, and its fortuitous twists predisposes to encounters; these may be human – as the one with the *baba* described in the opening of Chapter 3 and discussed in section 6 of this chapter – and non-human, as the frequent encounters with stray animals – typically dogs, monkeys, bulls, cows – which many tourists report:

[…] Wild dogs also a huge problem. Was attacked by 3 dogs on the *ghats*.

(British tourist, 23, female)

Ghats fascinating; considerable hassle – auto drivers at train station. Attacked by stray dogs at the *ghats*.

(British tourist, 22, male)

Moreover, encounters may be non-human in that they may resonate with super-human or divine dimensions and strolls may become occasions for minor epiphanies, enlightenments, meditations on over god, faith, spirituality, or the ultimate meaning of life.

During their walks, however, tourists and backpackers do not always look ascetically rapt in their thoughts; in fact, they appear quite busy doing other things as well. Walking may be seen as an activity per se, but it also involves other actions: during the stroll tourists take pictures (on street photography and the camera as the tool of the flâneur see Sontag 1979), they may be diverted into shops, stop along the way to look at rituals, cremations, wedding celebrations, have a *chai* and chat with people, sit down on the steps and just look, write, sometimes draw, put on their headphones and

listen to music, bargain with boatmen and *rickshaw-walas*. The gaze here is immersed, is within, at times wide-ranging, at times fractured by walls and buildings. Unlike from the boats, it captures the details rather than the panorama.

4.6 THE ALLURE OF THE SACRED: PRACTICES OF SEDUCTION IN THE TOURIST ENCOUNTER

> What a tourist does is a process of seductive encounter […]
>
> (Crouch 2005: 23-24)

One less famous name of Varanasi is Avimukta, the Never-Forsaken (see Eck 1983: 28-29). According to the myth, the city is never forsaken by Shiva and Parvati, so enthralled by Kashi that they established their eternal abode there. In popular narratives, Varanasi is said to have 'something' that deeply attracts and binds people to this place: some Hindu pilgrims take a vow never to leave the city,[49] while travellers too seem to be fascinated by 'Avimukta', to the point that they often end up changing their travel plans in order to spend more time in Varanasi, or becoming so intrigued by the city that they return several times[50]. Indeed, there appears to be something particularly charming about the city that makes travellers divert, detour, that allures and leads them astray… in one word, that *seduces*[51] them. That 'something' is certainly connected to the city's spiritual aura and cultural poignancy, but it also has to do, as we have seen, with difference and strangeness. Thus, in this section I question how tourism engages with seduction, the sacred and difference in Varanasi, and to what extent tourist practices can be rethought as acts of seduction. Issues of tourism and seduction, particularly in relation to the sacred, are largely left unexplored in tourism

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[49] These are called the 'Kashivasis', the 'dwellers in Kashi', and this particular vow is called *kshetra samnyasa* (cf. Eck 1983: 28-29).

[50] Data elicited in interviews and informal conversations with independent travellers.

[51] Etymologically, to seduce comes from the Latin verb *seducere,* to lead away, lead astray.

research; notable exceptions include Cartier and Lew 2005; Crouch 2005; Henderson and Weisgrau 2007; Jacobs 2006. In order to do so, I would like to return to the *baba* vignette opening Chapter 3 and analyse it more thoroughly from this perspective.

At first sight, it may seem a typical tourist scene, and indeed it is: a couple of smiling tourists, a camera, an exotic subject; the ingredients are all there. But if we look closer, the picture says something more. This is actually a scene of seduction. The *baba* seems to be employing drama skills and aesthetic awareness in attracting the couple: his attire, his posture, the holy formula that he repeats as if it were a line in a play, the backdrop of the *ghats* creating the right atmosphere: it is the sacred that goes on stage, it is an ancient tradition reworked and displayed to seduce. The sacred is perceived here as the quintessence of difference: to the eyes of the two tourists the *baba,* with all his strange vestments and his mysterious *mantras,* appears as the emblematical representative of the other. By photographing him, they attempt to capture otherness and rephrase it through their own iconographic language. In that way, the other is made familiar and even captivating. Difference, indeed, is what strikes and attracts. This also emerges from some tourists' remarks collected in my questionnaires. Asked to comment on Varanasi, they said:

> 'Very different. […] The lifestyle, the people, the colours and smells all amazing and so different'.
>
> (Australian tourist, 39, female)

> Pour un Européen, une autre Culture une autre philosophie.[52]
>
> (French tourist, 67, male)

As with any game of seduction, this too is a play of expectations, imaginaries, gazes and rituals: the fascinated gaze of the tourists is turned into a voyeuristic gaze by the

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[52] To a European, a different culture, a different philosophy.

eye of their camera, the performance acted out by the *baba* to entice the couple, the seduction of difference conjugated into the allure of the sacred, the beauty and the exoticism of the scenery. The landscape where this ritual of seduction takes place – the city's riverfront with its suggestive *ghats* – plays a fundamental role, not just as a backdrop for this sensual play but as a seductive player in its own right, as our discussion about landscape has already made clear. The *ghats* are the place to be if you really want to experience the 'real' Indian way of life. Furthermore, seduction has to do with power and it is interesting to notice the power relations mobilised in the tourist encounter occurring on the *ghats,* whereby the tourists are – or are supposed to be – in the powerful position of 'buying' a piece of 'the ancient spiritual tradition of India', while the *baba,* on the other hand, capitalises on his power of 'selling' the supposedly 'authentic' experience of that very tradition. Here we touch upon another key element in the seduction ritual, the play of camouflage, where the real and the fake, the genuine and the artificial, the naïve and the cunning end up being equally part of the same game of seduction implicitly shared by all the players. The big question among tourists is: 'But are all these *babas* on the *ghats* real? Or are they just fakes?', and nonetheless, tourists cannot help indulging in this seductive engagement with the sacred, whether they believe it to be authentic or staged (see MacCannell 1999 [1976]), whether they do it with a sceptical, amused, ironical, or persuaded frame of mind. And after all, tourists themselves exercise their own art of seduction on locals, pilgrims and other fellow tourists as well, trying to persuade them that they are 'authentic' travellers, genuinely interested in the 'real' Indian culture, truly involved in the spiritual dimension of the city, in its traditions and customs; they constantly struggle to differentiate themselves from the 'superficial', 'gullible' tourists. They too do that through specific performances, gestures, dress codes, activities, which stretch from wearing Indian-style clothes, to taking traditional music or yoga classes, to drinking *chai* on the *ghats,* to even performing the ritual bath in the Ganges together with Hindu pilgrims and devotees. Again, it is about negotiating difference through rituality and seduction, and it seems to me that what this produces in terms of cultural negotiations is far more interesting than dwelling upon the simple contrast between 'real' and 'fake', 'sacred' and 'profane' that is involved in such a process.

One of the main ingredients of seduction is imagination: the way we imagine the other, the evocative feelings that attract us to a person or a place, the way we fantasise about it, they are all part of the complex dynamics of seduction. In the case of places, geographers have long been emphasising how imaginative geographies contribute to shape, re-shape, and make sense of places, causing them to variously become attractive, repulsive, exotic, symbolic, contested, and so forth (see for example Cartier and Lew 2005; Gregory 1995; 1999; Hutnyk 1996; Jacobs 2006; Minca and Oakes 2006). It is particularly the allure of spirituality that attracts tourists to Varanasi. As their accounts show, they understand spirituality as a distinctive and constitutive trait of Indian culture:

> Varanasi was a 'must see' on my Indian itinerary. I found the river and the *ghats* mesmerizing. I am infinitely glad I came here. You can really feel the history and the spiritual importance of this place.
>
> (Australian tourist, 25, female)

> I came to Varanasi to see the culture, experience life in the city, to see the river Ganges and ceremonies nearby.
>
> (British tourist, 58, male)

> Varanasi is an *intemporel*[53] city and I think it is maybe in the world the only one; very powerful city, like India.
>
> (French tourist, 36, female)

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[53] Timeless.

I came here to experience Indian practice of spirituality especially at the end of life.

(American tourist, 59, female)

However, some of them are more critical and sceptical:

I feel, like with most of India, there is <u>no</u> spirituality here at all. The pursuit of money is at the heart of everyone: Brahmins etc..

(Irish tourist, 31, male)

But even when comments are loaded with criticism, it is interesting to note how deeply the discourse of spirituality is rooted in tourist narratives: as I have pointed out elsewhere (Zara 2007: 58-59), whether it is judged 'true' or 'hypocritical', India is always expected to measure itself with spirituality. To the Westerner's eyes, religion and spirituality seem to be a sort of yardstick by which 'authenticity' and 'non-authenticity' – of the culture, the people, the city or even the whole country – can be measured.

However, representation hardly remains just a matter of abstract speculation in the tourist experience; quite the opposite, in fact. Driven by fantasies, imaginations, anticipations, tourists go to – and are confronted with – actual places, interact with real people, *do* concrete things. The tourist gaze is an embodied gaze; bright colours, strong smells, spicy tastes, sounds and noises… a deep sensual involvement characterises the journey to India, where imagination gives rise to specific practices and behaviours. Another key factor in seduction, indeed, is the practices through which we attempt to draw close, to allure the other. The play of gazes occurring between the two tourists and the *baba* materialises into the telling performance described in the vignette. It is worth highlighting here the 'returning gaze' of the *baba,* who acts as he probably assumes the tourists expect him to act: that is, as one of the

many holy men depicted on the cover of tourist brochures and guidebooks, as the representative of that 'ancient Hindu tradition' which visitors come to Varanasi to witness. By that very act, the *baba* projects into the couple of tourists his own imagined geographies about 'the West', which is 'the other' to him, and in what it appears to be an exemplary act of seduction, he engages them in a sort of intercultural dialogue where mutual understanding of difference and spirituality come into play and joins together to create the 'typical' landscape of Varanasi, a landscape made up of old traditions as well as of modern processes and practices of identity. Thus, my point is that the sacred functions here as a seductive element in the tourist encounter, where all the actors are engaged in a sort of game of seduction in which spirituality merges with aesthetic enjoyment, difference attracts and perturbs at the same time, and the other is imagined, perceived and approached as both dreadful and sensuous, mystical and worldly, authentic and fake, naïve and mischievous. In this way, we may look at the pilgrimage site not only as a place for the re-enactment of tradition but also as a modern 'cultural laboratory' (Löfgren 1999: 7) where different identities are negotiated and where the travelling subject – be it the tourist, the ethnographer, the pilgrim, or the wandering hermit – articulates his/her own subjectivity through the encounter with the other (see Crick 1991; Galani-Moutafi 2000; Oakes 2005).

4.7 PLAYING OUT TRADITION AND SPIRITUALITY: THE CITY OF 'LIVING HERITAGE'

> Tourists come to Varanasi to learn something: there is medical tourism, people come to learn *ayurveda,* music tourism, yoga tourism… this is a peculiarity of Banaras, because Banaras has its own style, take *kathak* dance for example: there is the Banaras style of *kathak*…

(U.P. Tourist Bungalow officer, Varanasi branch, interview 17 March 2009)

The tourist officer goes on to explain that knowledge and spirituality are actually the same thing in Hindu culture. He gives me some examples: dance, which is an important part of Hindu traditional knowledge, is associated with the god Shiva. It is Shiva

Nataraja, Lord of Dance, who creates, preserves, dissolves the universe by his cosmic dance (*tandava*). Music too is considered a divine art: goddess Saraswati is prayed to at the beginning and at the end of any performance. The goddess is the personification of knowledge itself. He elaborates:

> We pray god at the beginning of every action we take, any everyday practice. We Hindu believe god to be everywhere, we worship everything, trees, nature… We don't really separate the sacred from the rest, because everything is spiritual. Spirituality is an *attitude* that we have.
>
> (U.P. Tourist Bungalow officer, Varanasi branch, interview 17 March 2009)

Traditional knowledge, everyday practice and spirituality are presented here as the fundamental components of Hindu cultural identity. Academic debate about heritage has long been emphasising the social and political functions of heritage, highlighting how this constitutes 'a primary instrument' in the construction of national identity (Graham, Ashworth and Tunbridge 2000: 12), and in fostering a sense of belonging to place, and how antiquity and the past convey an idea of continuity which links the past with the present (Lowenthal 1985; 1996; on critical heritage see also Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Crang and Tolia-Kelly 2010). If heritage is understood as the preservation of the past and continuity with the present, in relation to ideas of cultural identity and sense of belonging, the heritage of Varanasi is not so much its material environment, or a single specific monument, as the living tradition that every day livens up the city's landscape. Devotees performing rituals, traditional funerals, classical music concerts and dance performances, yoga, ascetic practices, Sanskrit learning, astrology, temple celebrations, wedding processions, ancient arts and crafts, religious festivals: all of this is what makes Varanasi 'the cultural capital of India'. Varanasi is considered, and promoted, as 'the heritage city of India'. In Chapter 3 we have seen how Varanasi is invariably dubbed as 'the oldest living city in the world' and how this special status is visibly revealed on its riverfront. Singh (2009: 148) confirms: 'The *ghats* of Varanasi represent one of the finest ensembles of monumental

architecture linked with the everyday activities of the pilgrims and the local people, and they are the symbol of the heritage tradition of India'. He highlights three main aspects of Varanasi's heritage (*ibid.:* 142): the 'tangible heritage', that is to say the built architectural and art and craft heritage; the 'intangible heritage', constituted by the local religious and cultural life of the city, and finally what he calls 'the cultural landscape heritage', meaning 'the unique identification of the natural setting of the Ganges with the specific religious importance of the *ghats* area'. The peculiarity of Varanasi's heritage, therefore, is that it is constituted by a set of practices and rituals inscribed in a specific landscape. Fig. 21 provides an example of that; the photo portrays young students from a renowned religious school performing their daily yoga exercises on the *ghats*, to the delight of tourists who cannot help capturing the scene with their cameras. Because this is actually what tourists come for: 'to see the culture', 'to experience life in the city', 'to witness' ancient rituals and ceremonies (cf. tourists' comments quoted in section 4.6).

FIGURE 21 - HINDU STUDENTS PRACTISING YOGA ON THE GHATS (AUTHOR'S PHOTO)

What is interesting about the idea of the living heritage, is that it produces particular dialectics of heritage performance both on the part of tourists who come to Varanasi to get a sense of the 'authentic' Indian way of life, and by local people who embody and enact such a cultural heritage. And indeed, the latter embody the tradition in their everyday practices as much as they display it in what we might call 'the staging of

tradition', as in the case of the Ganga Aarti discussed in section 4.3. There we have seen how the sacred is performed not only by local people, or by pilgrims, but also by tourists, who want to actually *experience* the life and the culture of the city. Further evidence is provided by an article from the Hindi language daily *Dainik Jagran*, one of the most widely read newspapers in India. The article headlines: 'Foreigner did marriage again to a lifelong relationship',[54] and shows a foreign tourist couple celebrating their wedding for the second time in the Hindu ritual (see fig. 22); the caption recites: 'they adopted Hindu tradition, the marriage party set off from the hotel, they celebrated in the temple'.

एक दूजे के लिए...

♦ हिंदू रीति को अपनाया, होटल से निकली बारात, मंदिर में निभी रस्म

FIGURE 22 - WESTERNERS PERFORMING HINDU WEDDING (SOURCE: DAINIK JAGRAN, VARANASI, 5 MARCH 2009)

The article opens by highlighting the fact that increasingly people in India are neglecting their traditions whereas foreigners are becoming more interested in adopting them. The couple, it appears from the piece, is from Holland and was on tour in Varanasi. While wandering near the *ghats,* they reportedly met an old man who revealed that according to the Indian tradition, if a couple performs a marriage in Banaras, their relationship will last for seven generations, and in other words, it becomes indissoluble. Already passionate about Hindu culture and religion, the couple

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[54] *Dainik Jagran,* Varanasi, March 5[th] 2009, translated literally from the original in Hindi. All translations from Hindi sources have been done with the support of my Hindi-native-speaker cultural advisor in the field.

decided to embark on a Hindu (re)wedding. Interestingly, the ceremony was managed by a tour operator. I interviewed the travel agent and the tour coordinator involved in the organisation of the marriage. What follows, is an abridged version of the passage in which they explain how the whole thing took place:

Travel agent: Actually we organised all the things for them. First they have contacted our company for the marriage. They contacted the *Hi Tours* Delhi office saying that they want to marry in the Hindu ritual system. And then the *Hi Tours* Delhi office gave me the responsibility to organise all the marriage. […] We did all the rituals which are going to be happening in the marriage, all the rituals!

Myself: You mean in a very Hindu traditional…

Both the travel agent and the tour coordinator: ..Yes, all the rituals, all things that happen in the marriage!

Tour coordinator: So that's not a thing which happens every now and then, you cannot hear about that, you know. That was a real marriage.

Myself: So how did the whole thing happen? You said they contacted you.. and then?

Travel agent: ..then I organised the priest for them, and the place, the right place, because the temple is the right place, in front of god they are doing the marriage… because I cannot marriage in the hotel also, but it will be better if I organise in the temple. […] It was the Lord Hanuman temple, the monkey god temple, Mahavir temple[55]. […] So they came here and we had organised the things for them, and then they wear Indian dresses, Indian traditional dresses: the woman wear *sari*, she take henna on the hands, and some make up also [chuckles]… everything. And the groom also take the Indian dress and turban on the head.. Everything was there, dresses.. everything was matched to the Indian tradition. And then the priest started marriage, like.. and they

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[55] The temple is nearby the Hotel Ramada, where the interview was conducted.

exchanged the rings also, because they said "we want to exchange our rings", so we said ok, you can do this thing also.

Myself: So this was a kind of cultural mix, they exchanged the rings...

Travel agent: Yes, because in the India we have exchange of ring before the marriage, but they said "we want to do in our culture also, that we want to exchange our rings" so we helped organise that thing also. […] And then they went back to the hotel and.. you know, I have organised a surprise for them also, in the room! Because previously I have given them the suite room, and then in the bedroom we had some decorations from the flowers, because this is also in our culture, so we decorate the rooms from the flowers, and uhm.. put a cake in the room also, for the happy marriage life! [Chuckles]

Myself: Were they happy?

Travel agent: Yeah, very much happy!

Myself: And after that? They went back home..?

Travel agent: Yes, they went back home after one day.

Myself: How long did they stay here, overall?

Travel agent: ehm.. overall in India twenty days.

Myself: and here in Banaras?

Travel agent: two nights. Two nights, three days.

Myself: so in two days they got married here..

Travel agent: yeah.

Myself: Did you have chance to talk to them and understand why they wanted to do this?

Travel agent: yes, actually they have learnt about the Indian culture, Indian tradition, because they are very much impressed about the Indian marriage, the things that we do, the marriage in the Indian tradition… They have learnt

about Indian tradition from the Internet, books and the people who visited already India…'

One may see a blatant folkloric aspect in this revival of tradition, along with juicy profit opportunities for the tourism business; yet most tourists appear to show a genuine mindset when it comes to engaging with the spiritual legacy of Hinduism. A fitting example comes from yoga. Indian spirituality and yoga are a dyad well rooted in tourist imagery. This discipline, together physical, mental and spiritual, intercepts tourist practices in various ways. Some come to Varanasi with previous acquaintance of this activity, which they have been practising regularly at home; others take advantage of the trip to India to get a taste of the most typical and 'global' of India's spiritual practices. To do yoga in India may be likened to taking tango classes in Argentina or studying Renaissance art in Florence, and indeed tour operators capitalise on cultural heritage and collective imagery by often including yoga classes in package deals as a way of enhancing the 'India experience' offered to their customers. To all, however, the particular landscape of Varanasi provides the perfect ambience for the fulfilment of this activity. Tourism agents, tourists and local *gurus* all emphasise the fact that to do yoga in the city of Shiva, in front of Ganga-ji, is the quintessential experience of Indian spirituality, the realisation of what yoga is all about: calmness, harmony, energy, connection with the transcendental. This was underlined by a yoga teacher whom I interviewed, who is popular among travellers in Varanasi, and in fact works almost exclusively with 'Europeans'. The interview was conducted on the terrace of the temple where he usually teaches his students:

Ganga-ji gives powerful power to Banaras. Some beginners, they feel too much energy… they get afraid and sometimes go back! Some others can control energy and go deeper.

Once again, landscape aesthetics, traditional heritage and cultural practices merge to create a 'new' landscape re-signified by tourists practices, as the picture below (fig. 23), appearing in the popular newspaper *The Times of India,* tellingly shows.[56]

FIGURE 23 - A WESTERNER PRACTISING YOGA ON THE GHATS (SOURCE: THE TIMES OF INDIA, VARANASI, 4 MARCH 2009)

The best setting for the exercise of yoga is provided not just by the *ghats*, but also by the rooftops of the many riverside guesthouses, occasionally turned into real yoga gymnasia (*ashrams*) as in the case of the locally renown Yoga Mandir, 'The Temple of Yoga' in Nagwa Ghat[57], or simply used by guest travellers as suitable open spaces for their daily meditation exercises, as in the picture below (fig. 24).

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[56] Source: *The Times of India,* Varanasi, March 4th 2009.

[57] See Yoga Mandir (n.d.)

FIGURE 24 - WESTERN TRAVELLER DOING YOGA ON A GUESTHOUSE ROOFTOP FACING THE GANGES (AUTHOR'S PHOTO)

Some travellers commit very seriously to learning yoga, to the point that, as my yoga teacher interviewee told me, they come back to Varanasi regularly to proceed in their spiritual path with their *guru*.

> I'm also yoga student so for me studying yoga in India is, of course… the place! […] Here I'm gonna get the authentic teachings and the depth and the cultural context, all the things you just can't get anywhere else. So that's the big one for me.
>
> (Canadian traveller, 49, female)

Music too is a fertile terrain for the multiple and multicultural playing of (and with) the tradition. Again, evidence of the productive negotiations of heritage and tradition in the tourist encounter is found in the local press. Next to the Western spouses committing to each other in the Hindu marriage, the above mentioned newspaper shows an Italian man playing an original instrument he crafted himself, and headlines: 'Amazing instrument and unbelievable sound'[58]. The music produced, says the article, is believed to be healing and the peculiar instrument captured local attention. It is

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[58] *Dainik Jagran,* Varanasi, March 5th 2009.

noteworthy that in a city which stands out for its musical heritage, a city that produced world-class musicians like the sitarist Ravi Shankar, and that is considered the stronghold of Indian classical music, innovation may come from the multicultural fusion of sounds, expertises, interests and music sensibilities imported by the travelling subjects.

विशेष वाद्ययंत्र के साथ डेविड।   -जागरण

FIGURE 25 - A FOREIGNER PLAYING MUSIC ON THE GHATS (SOURCE: DAINIK JAGRAN, VARANASI, 5 MARCH 2009)

What we witness in Varanasi is a fascinating role-play where tourists participate as active subjects in the re-enactment of the tradition, and ultimately become part of the heritage landscape of the city itself, as the picture discussed in section 4.2 (fig. 16) anticipated, and as the above quoted examples confirm.

The case of Varanasi, with its peculiar merging of architecture, environment and practices, suggests two key ideas. The first draws attention to the notion of 'living heritage': heritage can be something alive and not just the freezing of the past. The second idea is that we need to rethink heritage as produced and sustained through practices; in Varanasi these practices are negotiated in place by different actors: inhabitants, pilgrims, tourists, tour organisers. This, I believe, calls for more dynamic ways of conceptualizing heritage, shifting from common understanding of heritage as objectified culture – to be preserved, restored, consumed – to heritage and culture as a process (see Crang 2004 on culture as a process).

PART III: SENSING LANDSCAPE

> […] Love it or hate it, Varanasi evokes strong feelings. This holiest of Indian cities supports a seething mass of humanity, out to celebrate both life and death. It can be confounding and disorienting, a place of sensory overload. At every step, the senses are assailed by sights, colours, smells, sounds and tastes; the aromas of spices, incense, perfume and food meet the odours of human sweat, cows and funeral pyres. The chanting of sacred texts, often at ear-splitting volume, can have a hypnotic effect, known to drive people into trance. It takes perseverance, luck and a somewhat sturdy constitution to come to understand and enjoy the city's many facets: the temples, the river, the pilgrims, the rituals and sadhus.
>
> (Time Out, 2010: 257)

4.8 THE SOUNDSCAPE

> It's very much about music, you know, music and religion. The understanding of music here is related to spirituality, people sing for god, play for god…you never have silence here, always there is some music.
>
> (Chilean traveller, 26, female)

In the course of this thesis I have often mentioned the importance of sound and music to Varanasi. In this section I delve into these aspects by looking in particular at the soundscape of Varanasi in two respects: one revolves around the city being an eminent centre of music, the other deals with the sonic geographies of Varanasi as sensually experienced by travellers and by myself through my ethnographic explorations. In doing so, I rely on relevant academic literature on the notion of soundscape and the geographies of sound (see for example Atkinson 2007; 2011; Blesser 2007; Butler

2006; Cohen 1995; Garrioch 2003; Leyshon, Matless and Revill 1995; Smith 1994; Urry 2000)

Many of the travellers I met during my fieldtrips in Varanasi were engaged in some music-related activity: whether they were learning sitar, tabla, or taking dancing and singing classes, whether they were long-term students returning regularly to Varanasi to their *guru*, novices approaching Indian classical music for the first time, or omnivorous explorers trying a one-off thrill with tabla or *kathak*, the routines of Westerners in Varanasi seemed to be significantly occupied by music. Interviews confirmed that:

> The practice of music for me is the main thing: I go to class and practise; I've been studying Indian classical music for several years, *sitar, darbar* and singing. Then in the evening I hang out with friends, we exchange ideas and musical notes, we go to concerts...
>
> (Italian traveller, 48, male)

> In the morning I practise music, I get up at 4.45am and go to the *ghats* to do *dhrupad* exercise, music exercise, it's mixing sound and breath; it's to be done before the sunrise. It's pleasant to be near Ganga, so I stay there until the sun rises, that means about 5.45am, sometimes I do little more, I do a little *raga*, sometimes. Then in the afternoon I rest; then again music, singing. And then meeting with people.
>
> (French traveller, 64, male)

> […] The same night at Karki's I meet Britney, from California. She too talks about her *guru-ji*, but she calls him just 'teacher', you can tell she is new here! She arrived in Banaras from the South, and is heading to

```
        Dharamsala, where she has a friend. She's been staying
        here for 10 days. She looks about thirty.

        -    I didn't know it was a centre of music!

        So she took the chance for some flute and harmonium
        classes. She's been playing piano since she was 12.

                                (From my field notes, 23 April 2009)
```

When I met Britney she was upset because she felt she had been 'ripped off' by her 'teacher', who made her pay for things that she had not asked for, and charged her a double fee for the classes. Music, in fact, makes up a fair share of local business: besides a thriving network of classical music lessons and *gurus*, the local economy also profits from a prolific trade in musical instruments, accessories and components. Above all, it is the city's cultural scene that benefits most from music: Indian classical music festivals, *dhrupads* and concerts take place in the city throughout the year. They may be organised in temples by the *mahant,* as the famous Sankat Mochan music festival, in public spaces by cultural institutions, in private venues by patrons, connoisseurs, hotel managers, as in the case of the Ganges View Hotel, whose owner is locally known and esteemed as a patron of the arts. In homage to the sanctity of Kashi and the divine presence of Mother Ganga and Lord Shiva, most public events are free and open to everyone. The quality of performances is generally of a high standard, which contributes to maintain Varanasi's reputation as a centre of excellence. The 'great tradition of Banarasi music' (see Varanasi City n.d. 2) lives in these events, which are increasingly attended by foreign tourists, giving rise over time to a growing music tourism.

FIGURE 26 - ADS OF MUSIC CONCERTS DISPLAYED IN POPULAR TOURIST HANGOUTS (AUTHOR'S PHOTO)

The sociality of tourists in Varanasi, then, revolves significantly around music. Occasions for social interaction based around common musical interests may involve activities as diverse as chatting (music, as mentioned in section 4.4, is a prevalent topic in traveller talk), attending concerts, attending classes, improvising jam-sessions on the *ghat* steps, on rooftops, in courtyards, producing, recording, exchanging, buying, downloading, uploading, and circulating music. As for the latter, many examples can be found on YouTube (see for example YouTube 2007; 2011). The shared experience and practice of music creates spaces of identity and affect (Crang 1998: 92), where travellers meet, bond, and connect; indeed, as Crang goes on to argue 'spaces of dance and listening can create affective, emotional communities' (*ibid.*) and these spaces form a recognisable 'sonoric landscape' (*ibid.*), which in Varanasi is constituted by the places and practices above described.

However, the consumption of music by travellers can also have a purely individual and solipsistic connotation, taking the form of 'sound walks', that is 'walks in the outside world guided by recorded sound and voice, usually using a personal stereo' (Butler 2006: 889), or the form of lone exercises with the instrument in private rooms, or the meditative tuning in with the 'cosmic vibration' via the reciting or listening to of mantras. The solitary enjoyment of personal soundtracks played as background to the

surrounding landscape, often causes this to become transfigured and emotionally re-signified through music:

> One day I was on a balcony overlooking the *ghat*, on the Ganges, and.. it was dawn, the sun came out.. at some point I saw some *babas* who were bathing in the Ganges and I thought, I had the music in the background you know, and I thought: Oh man! This is the same as.. I think it's the same as two thousand years ago! The same situation, you know? I mean… it's just like that! Here's just like seeing the origins of something… it's remained!
>
> (Italian traveller, 35, male)

Atkinson (2011: 20) indeed notes that 'there is also a magical quality to encounters with urban space while wearing headphones' (see also Bull 2000; 2008).

The soundscape described so far refers to an active engagement with sound: it stems from the cultural significance that music is given in this specific context and the practices resulting from – and in turn constituting – that. Again we can note how landscape and practices constitute each other, in this case through music. The sonic landscape and practices hitherto analysed engage with the sense of hearing in terms of active 'listening' as opposed to passive 'hearing' (Atkinson 2011). This type of soundscape is constructed around a sound that is ordered, selected, socially sanctioned, spatially organised and culturally signified. Here, tourists retain a certain control over sound: they can switch off their iPods, Walkmans and portable music devices, stop or start playing to their liking; they can decide whether to join or avoid concerts, classes, venues, they can negotiate (to some extent) the volume of music-playing with their room neighbours.

But tourist practices and the landscape can be shaped by sound in another respect, which has more to do with noise, ambient sounds and the spontaneous aural constitution of space. As I have mentioned elsewhere in the thesis, the sources of this acoustic background are varied and overlapping: they may be human, like the chanted

prayers emanating from temples and minarets, the cheering of kids playing cricket on the *ghats*, the 'tourist mantras' illustrated in Chapter 3; they may be animal: monkeys screeching, dogs barking, birds chirping, goats bleating, buffaloes or cows mooing; they may be mechanic or technological, like the sound of loud speakers and amplifiers, mobile ringtones, radios, engines, generators, car horns. Noises may be a nuisance, they may construct landscape as an irritating cacophony:

We were shocked by the traffic, the chaos, the noise...

(Italian tourist couple, 64 and 62, male and female)

I don't like the noise and the rubbish...

(Spanish tourist, 33, male)

...terrible traffic on the streets.

(American tourist, 44, male)

or they may reconfigure it as an inspiring harmony:

[…] they play this chant for about an hour in the morning and it's beautiful! *'Om namah shivaya'…* it's beautiful, it's musical!

(Canadian traveller, 49, female)

The sonic reaching out of the context contributes to making the city recognisable through noises that gradually become familiar and sound-tracks which fit perfectly into the mindscapes of tourists: the 'spiritual Varanasi' takes the sensorial form of temple

bells and *omnamashivayas*, the peal of cycle rickshaws becomes a quotidian companion which turns into tinnitus in the silence, a ringing in the ears which stays for a while. Soundscapes shape the geographies of the city and the movements and routes of tourists in the urban space. I adopted sound walk as an ethnographic practice to explore the acoustic geographies of Varanasi. Here I mean sound walk as the attentive listening to and recording of ambient noises while moving through the city, normally on foot, sometimes by cycle rickshaw. I was not the first nor the only one engaging in this sort of aural urban explorations; academic work on the geographies of sound has been previously highlighted, besides, a sound walk of Varanasi has been made available online as part of the 'Soundwalk' project, 'an international sound collective based in New York', which creates 'immersive sound journeys' among its creative art productions (see Soundwalk n.d.). Moreover, some tourists too experimented with the acoustics of the Varanasi's landscape as part of their leisure activities:

[…] I record music, noises, sounds, random noises, mantras… I'm thinking about making a CD.

(Italian traveller, 35, male)

As a result of my explorations, a fairly distinct sonic layout of the city emerged, a rhythmic geography (see Crang 2001; Edensor and Holloway 2008; Edensor 2011; Lefebvre 2004) flowing from the peaceful ambience of the *ghats*, to the cacophonic chaos of the city centre, to return to the aural calm of the Cantonment; a sort of minuet, a musical movement in three parts, an urban symphony with different tempos, from adagio to allegro to andante, through crescendos and diminuendos, as we proceed in the city from East to West. The acoustic space of the *ghats* is dominated by the chirping of birds, the toll of temple bells, the background sound of human activities, animal voices, singsongs, the '*Raam naam satya hai*'[59] dirge resounding in Manikarnika, the lapping of the river, the gliding of boats on the water. Conversely, the

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[59] 'The name of Rama is truth', invocation chanted by the mourners while carrying the dead body to the cremation ground.

bustling of the city is a piercing mix of car beeping, ear-splitting amplified sounds, engine noises, broken cries, confused voices and shouting, loudly and persistent ringing of rickshaw bells and tuk-tuk horns. The dissonant symphonies of the city's traffic are perceived as so annoying and disorienting that the *ghats* becomes a sort of 'aural refuge' (Atkinson 2011: 17) to many tourists:

I like that there is no traffic along the *ghats*, no beeping from horns!

(Australian tourist, 35, female)

I love the contrast of busy city traffic and cycle rickshaws with the silence and peacefulness of the Ganga boat trips.

(Canadian tourist, 40, female)

[…] you go in Godaulia, lots of noise… and once you go to see the Ganga, its waters.. it just refreshes your mind, you know, it's.. like you go on top of mountain or you go to the sea or desert.

(French traveller, 22, male)

The calm returns in the Cantonment area, where the atmosphere is again made pleasant by tweets, the swoosh of trees, occasional rickshaw bell ringing, the rustling of a passing bicycle, sporadic car noise.

Of course, the tripartite division of the sound space described above is not to be considered definitive. First, the soundscapes of the city change with the changing of time and seasons. What I have illustrated is a daytime sonic landscape, but nocturnal geographies of sound may reconfigure that landscape in a different way: the busy streetscape turns into a quiet, almost spectral environment in the night, whereas the daytime idyllic aural space of the *ghats* may be disrupted by the howling of stray dogs

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at night. Also, a good night's sleep may be very hard to achieve during the major religious festival of Shivaratri, when celebrations prolong well into the night and prayers are chanted loudly all night long, particularly in the Shiva temples in the *ghat* area. Moreover, also in the day time, the *ghats* and the Cantonment are not the only aural refuges to the frantic sonorities of the city: the tranquil, tree-lined BHU campus in the southern part may accomplish the same effect, and so may do a visit to the near Ramnagar Fort, southeast on the opposite side of the river, or to Sarnath, just a few kilometres northeast, or to some quiet temples within the city, like the Kabir temple, right in the heart of the city centre.

However, the three zones outlined by means of my audio walks mark a general but consistent spatial definition of Varanasi which returns also in relation to other observations carried out in my research. Indeed, since such a three-fold topography of the city encompasses aspects which go beyond the acoustic spatialities of which it is constituted, I shall return to this topic in the next chapter.

4.9 IMMERSING IN LANDSCAPE: BATHING IN THE GANGES

As we have seen, tourist rhetoric places great emphasis on 'feeling' as a way of approaching Hindu culture and lifestyle in Varanasi: the tour is constructed as an opportunity for a sensual involvement in the city, although as we have also seen, that involvement occurs in different degrees and it is ultimately always controlled by the tour operator in the case of package tourists. Tourists themselves, either free independent travellers or package tourists, emphasise their desire to 'experience' the culture and the city that they have come to visit, and they give great attention to the corporeal implications of the travel in their accounts. Immersing oneself in the surrounding physical and social environment is purportedly one of the best ways to understand the local culture. The idea is nicely conveyed by the quote below, by a Varanasi tour guide:

[…] So that is the reason I always say: if you want to enjoy this city, just close your eyes and feel this city! [Chuckles] …People love this! [Chuckles].

(Authorised local tour guide 1, interview 14 April 2009)

The suggestion here is that by prioritising senses other than sight, one can fully enjoy the city and establish a deeper sensual contact with it. The idea of immersion points to one sense in particular, that of touch: being 'immersed' suggests a tactile feeling of proximity with the surroundings. Certainly immersion involves other senses, too: hearing, for instance, is deeply implicated in sensual immersion in the landscape, and so are smell and taste, for example through the consumption of food. Moreover, we should beware of making an argument on the basis of a binary logic opposing sight to other senses, where sight is considered as constructing 'distal' and detached knowledge, whereas other senses allow more for a 'proximal' understanding of reality (Dixon and Straughan 2010: 452; on 'proximal' and 'distal' forms of knowledge see also Hetherington 2003). Instead, Young suggests that 'we might conceive of vision that is less a gaze, distanced from and mastering its object, than an immersion in light and colour' (Young 1994: 204). However, as specific attention to the other senses involved in tourist embodied practices in Varanasi has been (and shall be) given in other relevant sections, I here focus on immersion as an act especially imbricated with touch, looking in particular at the cultural symbolic implications that touching and corporeal immersion have in the practices of tourists in Varanasi.

There is one activity that more than others embodies the physical and cultural qualities of immersion literally, and that is bathing in the Ganges. In this section I explore meanings and performances mobilised around the physical act of immersing oneself in the waters of this river. Geographical thought has long been concerned with exploring how human beings construct spatial knowledge through their body, senses and their corporeal as well as emotional feeling. Humanist geography (for example Yi-Fu Tuan 1974; 2003; Seamon 1979a) and more recently non-representational theory (Thrift 1996; 2010; Lorimer 2005) have largely contributed to develop this strand of studies; part of that literature specifically analysed touch (Dixon and Straughan 2010), while in

tourism such an approach has been developed by, among others, Crouch 2005; Obrador-Pons 2007.

For Hindus bathing in the Ganges is believed to wash away the bad karma of many previous lives; it is therefore a crucial ritual performance both in the fulfilment of pilgrimage rites and in the routines of the inhabitants. Also in funeral rites it is prescribed that the corpse be immersed in the river before proceeding to the cremation. Dipping in, sprinkling, sipping, touching the sacred waters of Ganga is a central part of Hindu practices in Varanasi. That applies to mundane activities as well: a dip in Ganga is not only an act intended for spiritual purity, it is also carried out as part of personal hygiene, as a relaxing practice after hard work, as a pleasurable, refreshing activity during the hot season, or purely for fun when the river swells for the monsoon and the *ghats* turn into large diving boards from which youngsters plunge into the water.

But how do tourists engage with this activity? What does the physical contact with Ganga mean to them and how is it acted out? Bathing in the Ganges is perhaps one of the most controversial of tourist practices in Varanasi. This is a ritual activity – and I mean ritual here in terms of both religious and lay routines – upon which different identities are played out: not only is it the practice that more than any other differentiates Western tourists from Hindu Indian pilgrims and tourists, it is also a performance which is considered as a sign of the different degree of penetration in Indian culture shown by Western travellers. While most tourists would never take a bath in the Ganges – many of them are even afraid of *touching* the water – some more committed or adventurous travellers do. Thus, in someway, bathing in Ganga-ji is a sort of yardstick activity on the basis of which the 'authenticity' of the travel experience may be measured. The notion of touch here is particularly relevant: touching and *not* touching the water, immersing in or detaching oneself from the material texture of the riverscape is charged with cultural and social values, and affective and perceptual connotations which frame the way in which the landscape is made sense of. Through the tactile connection (and non-connection) with the river the landscape is at once felt and invested with meaning: it may be constructed as spiritually purifying, hazardously polluted and infectious, sensually appealing,

insalubrious and demanding (for example by the launderers soaking in water for hours every day). Bathing in the Ganges may be then framed in terms of 'the feeling of being in touch/out of touch' (Dixon and Straughan 2010: 453), which refers to 'the emotive aspects of touch' and the ways in which these operate to convey 'a sense of self and place' (*ibid*; similar explorations on how self and landscape constitute each other through sensual immersion have been undertaken by Wylie 2005; 2006). To some travellers regularly or occasionally taking a bath in the Ganges, being in touch with the water means, being in touch with the culture and the lifestyle of the place, as well as establishing a sort of spiritual or generally beneficial contact with themselves, or between their self and an extended 'exterior', but it also means simply indulging in a playful divertissement, a 'feel-good' activity:

Ganga is incredible, very incredible! Because it's life! In monsoon time when the water is a bit higher I take a bath everyday, I like it! And I enjoy and.. not only for ritual bath, also for swimming with friends and.. there are also boys coming and playing.. I enjoy it! […] No, I'm not scared, I think nothing can happen to me, I don't mind too much… and I take precautions anyway, I'm not drinking water from Ganga.

(French traveller, 64, male)

FIGURE 27 - WESTERN WOMAN BATHING IN THE GANGES (AUTHOR'S PHOTO)

While the above mentioned connection – with self, pleasure, with the environmental and social context, with the spiritual – is activated through haptic engagement and corporeal immersion (on geography and the notion of hapticality see Dixon and Straughan 2010: 449; Golledge et al. 2005; Obrador-Pons 2007), sensory dis-connection too, meant as intended detachment or even abjection, is revealing as to the feelings, emotive grip, values, and cognitive elaborations which underscore tactile interactions with the Ganges. The different degrees to which tourists allow themselves to get involved in those interactions result in different performances, which range from touching and being touched by the water in habitual or occasional dips in the Ganges, or just by putting one's feet or hands in the river, to actively avoiding contact with its waters, and even, if any contact does accidentally happen, thoroughly washing the piece of skin exposed to what is by many perceived to be a contaminated and contaminating water[60]. Not infrequently, this sort of contact paranoia extends to air as well, as the picture below shows (fig. 28).
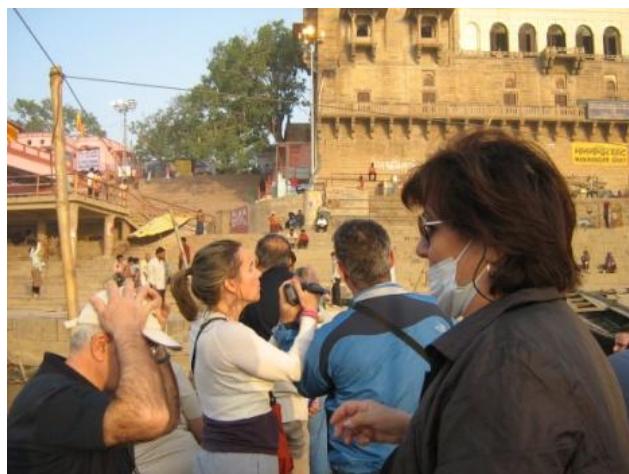
FIGURE 28 - TOURIST WEARING A SURGICAL MASK DURING THE BOAT SIGHTSEEING (AUTHOR'S PHOTO)

Drawing on Smith and Davidson's (2006) work on phobias, Dixon and Straughan (2010: 453) point out that 'fear and disgust are certainly embodied emotions, insofar as they are manifest through a range of physical symptoms and are directed toward an

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[60] Information gathered through my ethnographic observations.

avoidance of touching particular objects, but are also expressive of prevailing socio-cultural conditions that mark a border between the social and the natural' and set normative agendas on what is hygienic, appropriate, sensible to touch and what is not. In some cases sight may work as a surrogate of touch: abstaining from doing it themselves, tourists enjoy watching other people bathing in the river; indeed, as we have seen in section 2 of this chapter, ritual ablutions constitute one of the main attractions of the boat sightseeing, along with *dhobis* doing the laundry in the river. So intensively is the gaze exercised here, particularly the voyeuristic gaze of the camera, that it may be perceived as a symbolical visual reaching of touch establishing an obtrusive contact:

Ganga is a very holy river, everyone comes here and pray, take Ganga in their mouth... Women take bath, change clothes and people come and take photos, this is not good, it should not be allowed, someone complained with the administration.

(Ganga bather, N.5, interview 26 April 2009)

I don't mind being pictured if they ask permission. If nobody asks, then I get angry! [...] Yes my wife feels the same.

(Ganga bathers, N.3, interview 26 April 2009)

In the moment they change their clothes, especially women, some Hindus think that it should not be allowed to take pictures.

(Boatman, interview 26 April 2009)

In most cases, however, being photographed while taking a bath or washing clothes in the Ganges does not seem to bother the bathers and the launderers too much; on the contrary, some of them even show a kind of pride in this respect:

I feel relaxed after the bath! It's a holy moment, I don't mind if someone takes pictures, this is my culture, this is Hindu religion!

(Ganga bather, N.2, interview 26 April 2009)

Taking bath in Ganga is a holy activity, we don't believe that is a personal thing so we don't mind if tourists take pictures. We believe that they can understand our religion and culture, and maybe join us!

(Ganga bather, N.4, interview 26 April 2009)

I don't know why they're interested in that, but I don't mind if they take pictures while I'm doing my job, I enjoy that, I'm proud to be shown abroad, to show what India's culture is like.

(Laundryman, interview 24 April 2009)

Bathing in the Ganges is then a practice bearing multiple meanings: it is a way of engaging deeply with place and self, a way of 'getting in touch' by means of one's own embodied sensorium, a way of knowing physically, of apprehending the texture of place that is revealed through kinaesthetic and epidermal modes of perception; it is also a way of performing cultural identity, of negotiating otherness through touch or the absence of it, a way for tourists of defining temporary identities by performing space in different ways: by immersing, detaching, watching other people, approaching gradually.

4.10 Ingesting the other: negotiating the encounter through food

FIGURE 29 - CAFÉ SIGN ON THE GHATS (AUTHOR'S PHOTO)

The opening image shows the sign of a restaurant café on the *ghats* assuring: 'all fruits and vegetables have been washed with purified water'. The sign warns us immediately about the fact that eating, in Varanasi, is anything but a trivial matter: it is, in fact, something to be dealt with carefully as it may otherwise easily result in sickness and health problems. A sign of this kind would probably look odd in cities like London, Paris, Rome, where the consumption of food is not immediately perceived as a potentially harmful activity, and where the implementation of minimum hygienic standards is generally taken for granted. Whether Orientalist assumptions underlie common understanding as to what constitutes hygiene and where it is, or is not, to be expected is open to question, but the fact remains that this sign, located on the *ghats* and aimed primarily at tourists, betrays the importance of attitudes, imaginaries and practices around food among Western travellers, the tourism industry and local social actors. This section explores the practices and spatialities of food and taste in Varanasi as an important locus where tourist encounters occurs. In my analysis I draw on relevant literature on the cultural geographies of food, with particular reference to tourism (see, among others, Cook and Crang 1996, 1999; Hage 1997; Hooks 1992; Narayan 1995; Oakes 1999).

The attention of foreign travellers to eating is not all resolved around the health issue. Instead, Indian cuisine is generally known, and promoted, for the fragrance of its

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spices, the tantalising look of its colourful dishes, the audacious mix of strong tastes, the blend of finely balanced exotic flavours, and more generally for its great regional variety. Tourist promotion does not fail to highlight Varanasi's specialties: the delicious *mithai,* the famous *paan,* the tasty *lassi* and *thandai* of Banaras (see Varanasi City Guide 2002: 162; Rough Guide 2001: 352-3). Dominant tastes and dishes are seasoned with cultural and religious ingredients and their consumption is regulated by ethical and social norms: Varanasi's cuisine is the result of the blending of the culinary traditions of the different communities settled in the city (Muslim, Nepali, South Indian, Bengali etc.), and it is predominantly strictly vegetarian: as mentioned before, the consumption of meat and alcohol is prohibited in the *ghat* area in compliance with Hindu orthodoxy. Food also serves ritual purposes: *mithai,* for example, are an offering particularly appreciated by Lord Ganesh and so is the consumption of *bhang lassi*, blessed by Lord Shiva. In the Hindu caste system, food is given great importance: its preparation, consumption, and composition are deemed to be a crucial vehicle of ritual purity or contamination; different types of food, it is believed, incorporate, and are conducive to different spiritual and moral qualities, which range from lightness, or the upward tendency (vegetables are in this category) to weightiness, or the downward tendency (meat is in this category). Food and its symbolism are also a fundamental part of death rites. However, the cultural and multicultural meanings and practices revolving around food in Varanasi are not limited to the rich diversity of indigenous traditions and ethnic groups which make up the city's socio-cultural milieu, but are increasingly informed by the presence of international travellers and foreign residents who bring in their own food habits, tastes, traditions, and demands. The result is an amazing variety of fusion cuisine, restaurants, dining events where what is consumed is not simply the food but 'the experience' of Indian food. Indeed, as the India product manager of a leading Italian tour operator explained to me in an interview (cf. Zara 2007: 47), tourists seek comfortable, clean five-star hotels where a buffet is available, because they want to *see* what they eat, and in buffets food is clearly displayed and labelled. At the same time, he goes on to explain, they also want to try some Indian dishes because they want to be able to report on at least two or three typical Indian flavours to friends back home. 'So some Indian food is ok – says my interviewee – but not too spicy, not much chilli, nor coriander…' (*ibid.*). The

respondent refers here specifically to what he calls the 'typical' Italian tourist customer of the brand that he works for, but the idea of a controlled encounter with Indian tastes, and the reconfiguring of eating as an experience conducive to the accumulation of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; 1991) are common to package tourists in general and, to a lesser degree, to backpackers and independent travellers as well, although the contexts in which food consumption occurs here are far less regulated and sanitised. The practices and spatialities of eating in Varanasi and the way they engage with tourism are multifarious: the culture of *chai* mentioned in section 4.4, Ayurvedic cooking, continental restaurants, street food consumption are just some examples. In this section I would like to dwell on two of them in particular.

The first one is about the sumptuous dinners arranged by the Clarks Hotel for its customers. The Clarks is a luxury hotel located in the Cantonment which caters mainly for international package and high-end tourism, and domestic business tourism. As part of the services provided for their customers, the hotel offers 'the Peshwa Palace Experience' (see Clarks 2008): these are banquets organised in the Peshwa Haveli, a nineteenth-century palace on Raja Ghat, owned by the Clarks Group. The traditional, pure Hindu vegetarian, lavish dinners taking place in this suggestive historical location on the Ganges are actually described as 'a traditional cultural show at an authentic Brahmin refectory' (*ibid.*). The hotel manager, whom I have interviewed, confirms: 'this is a very exclusive activity that we organise for groups of tourists, at least 20 people, as it is very expensive. The place can accommodate up to 100 persons' (Clarks manager, interview, 6 May 2009). Photos of the event are exhibited in the hotel foyer, where the interview took place; they show cheerful tourists wearing *malas, pandits* celebrating rituals, elegantly prepared tables, flower decorations and the whole *ghat* beautifully lit up with decorative little candles (pictures can be found on the website). The meals, as the online description recites, are 'served in authentic Indian style by waiters attired in traditional Indian dress', and are accompanied by the performing of classical dance and music, Vedic rituals, and special Aartis. Eating is constructed here as event, it occurs in a completely safe, sanitised environment where the pleasures of the palate are blended with entertainment and the exhibition of culture. In this staging of food, tradition, history, religion and the arts are mobilised to convey the 'authentic feel' of

Indian culture; flavours, colours, aromas are carefully selected and arranged, and the tourist can ingest the other without fear of being poisoned or contaminated by it.

The second example is the Vatika Pizzeria in Assi Ghat, where I was a regular during my fieldwork, driven by my research interests as much as my all-Italian inclination to pizza. Of course I do not wish to perpetuate arguable stereotypes by suggesting that all Italians eat pizza, or that all Indians love spicy food: I was as attracted by Vatika's pizza as I was by their delicious *dal*, in fact. What I do wish to suggest, instead, is that taste is situated, and that my own explorations about food in Varanasi were influenced by my own personal taste, my physical condition, my cultural attitudes toward food, and other basic facts. Restaurants and eating places in Varanasi are indeed spaces of intersection of different cultures of food; more importantly, they are spaces where tourists and local people experiment with their identities, construct new meanings, share or contest values through the ordinary, embodied, material act of feeding themselves. The symbolism embedded in ingesting food is very powerful: by swallowing, digesting, assimilating 'exotic' food we literally incorporate the other. That process may be hetero-directed, dramatised, cleansed of any pollutant element as in the example of the Clarks' dinners, but it can also take more faceted forms, where the other becomes a mobile, fluctuating concept constantly redefined by practices and spaces of encounter. In one of our chats during my habitual visits at the Pizzeria, the waiter told me:

> At the beginning there were no Indians, very few. They looked at this strange pizza thing that tourists were eating… Then slowly slowly they wanted to try the food of tourists, and pizza became fashion. Indians started to come and eat pizza and tourist food because they wanted to show themselves 'modern'. Now also many Indians come to this place, not only tourists. (…) Then the people near here started to understand that the tourist food could be a good business, so many other restaurants opened, they tried to steel the secrets of pizzeria, the recipe. (…) Actually pizzeria started from an idea of tourists, who almost forcedly pushed my boss

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to open this pizzeria. It was a challenge at the
beginning'.
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I was interested in learning more about the history of the Pizzeria and the impact that it had on the local population, so I interviewed the owner. Here are some edited extracts from the interview:

I started this place in '93, with the help of some tourists, Italian and American, good friends of mine. In the beginning it was really very difficult. I used to go to Nepal and other places to buy cheese. And then I started to prepare it myself. Now the mozzarella cheese is available in India.

[…]

The concept of preparing this kind of food was unique here that time; there was only Indian food available for tourists, spicy, greasy… and everybody was missing this kind of food, because many people they come here to study music, yoga, Sanskrit… so they feel homesickness, you know, without their own food. That's why we decided to start this place. This thing was really new for local people, for everyone. In the beginning only two, three percent of my clients were Indians.

[…]

Tourists they like to try Indian food, they ask for Indian food, they say 'we are in India and we want Indian food'. I made the choice of serving Italian and Indian, I specialised in these two types of food. Many Indians they love Italian food and they know, they became expert of foreign food.

(Pizzeria' s owner, interview, 1 may 2009)

The punters in the Pizzeria are very interesting: tourists who want to be Indian – who eat Indian food, the Indian way, with their hands – and Indians who want to be 'modern' through the consumption of 'tourist food'; Westerners who 'miss their food' and seek a bit of home in familiar tastes, and locals who reinterpret and reproduce those tastes their own way, with their own products; foreign students and Indian youngsters who gather around a pizza, occasionally, Western *sadhus* and hippies who indulge in apple pie, Vatika's famed house specialty, and package tourists who have ended up in this 'alternative' hangout as an exotic diversion to the international-standard cuisine of their hotels. At the Pizzeria not only tradition, but also modernity is negotiated through food, not only different cultures of eating, but also different cultures of travel, and different ways of inhabiting the city come together around food.

The Clarks' banquets and the Pizzeria show two very different modalities of consuming food in Varanasi by tourists. What I hope both the examples show, however, is that spaces and practices of eating become spaces and practices of encounter and negotiation of identity, and that although these processes vary significantly depending on the specific place, social group, and even time in which they happen, they form an important part of tourists' everyday practices.

I would like to conclude with an anecdote. Interestingly (and agreeably to me), the interview with the Pizzeria's owner ended with a sort of cross-cultural culinary performance: quite unexpectedly, the owner asked me to test – actually to taste would be more appropriate here – a new dish that he was considering adding to the menu, spaghetti with Indian gravy, an experiment in Indo-Italian fusion cuisine. I suppose I was consulted by virtue of my 'Italianness', which would allegedly put me in the best position to judge a dish of spaghetti; or perhaps what led my interviewee to seek my advice was more generally the fact that I was a foreign tourist myself, interested in other tourists' attitudes, what's more. At any rate, the pasta was not bad at all, and I was given the opportunity to overcome in a forkful the vexed academic question about dealing with non-representational subjects by means of representational tools: it was a fully embodied, performative way of exploring the tourist geographies of taste in Varanasi.

4.11 GETTING SICK IN VARANASI

> Stomach disorders are a common phenomenon in Varanasi, so stick to bottled or treated water and be careful when choosing where you eat.
>
> (Rough Guide 2001: 353)

This recommendation from Rough Guide links nicely to the previous section: the ingestion of food is what mainly causes tourists to get sick in Varanasi. In another respect, Rough Guide' s injunction also links back to section 8 in Chapter 3, where we discussed depictions of India as a land of death and disease reminiscent of colonial discourses; indeed, the guidebook goes on to reporting the death from 'food poisoning' (emphasised in bold as a warning) of two Irish women travellers, who allegedly fell victim of 'a bizarre scam involving unscrupulous restaurateurs and medical staff poisoning customers in order to claim medical costs from the victim' s insurance company' (Rough Guide *ibid.*). Rough Guide's scaremongering advice clearly fuels tropes constructing India as an unsafe, dangerous, unhealthy place where disease and death, caused either by unsanitary environment or by human misconduct, are always lurking. It is undeniably true, however, that falling ill in Varanasi is quite a common occurrence among tourists. Thus, moving from the politics of representation to the embodied actuality of disease, in this section I look at ailment and sickness as perceptual and affectual ways of mediating the tourist experience, where the landscape is perceived, shaped, re-signified through the faulty body.

Getting sick in Varanasi is a sort of traveller's rite of passage: everybody is expected, sooner or later, in a mild or more vehement form, to be halted by some health problems, normally connected with the stomach and the intestines. Suffering from diarrhoea, vomiting, nausea inspires the sympathy of other travellers who have been going through the same trouble and often respond with witticism and an eloquent smirk saying: 'welcome to Varanasi!'. But how does disease really engage with tourism, landscape and practice?

The first consideration is that sickness gives rise to a set of 'dis-connections': the disrupted body of the tourist (and of the researcher) withdraws from the hustle and bustle of the city, suspends the activities, temporarily disconnects from the outside world and retreats in hotel rooms and quiet places in search of relief and recovery. Such a disconnection may be physical as well as emotional:

```
Mi sento da schifo! Sono andata al bagno per la decima
volta, sono le tre del mattino, ho la nausea, ho
vomitato già due volte e non so cos'ho. E fuori cantano
mantra…! Al diavolo l'India, Varanasi e la ricerca!61
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(From my field notes, 21 February 2009)

…was sick with food poisoning and the weather was 40+ degrees so unfortunately I wasn't able to give it as much energy and enthusiasm as I normally would.

(Australian tourist, 36, female)

What I do depends on my stomach! […] At the beginning I came for working in an NGO, but I got ill, had to take medicines… so I was in the NGO to make contacts, but I didn't finish, and now I just have one week more…

(French traveller, 22, male; 10 March 2009)

Weekly progress: I was ill for most of the week.

(From my fieldwork reports, 18 December 2009)

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61 I feel awful! I went to the bathroom for the tenth time, it's 3 o'clock in the morning, I feel sick, I vomited twice already and I don't know what's wrong with me. And outside they chant mantras…! Damn India, Varanasi and research!

Sickness momentarily interrupts the rhythm of the tour (Edensor and Holloway 2008), the rhythm of work, the social life of the tourist and the researcher; sickness interrupts the harmony with the surrounding landscape, where what a moment before came across as a soul-soothing melody of sacred chants turns into an annoyance bringing further affliction. Discussing the painful experience of landscape in footsore walking, Wylie notes: 'the footsore body "can no longer experience the sublime"' (Michael 2000: 116, quoted in Wylie 2005: 244); the landscape perceived through the aching body 'emerges as malignant', 'the body-in-pain *and* its environs appear as a duo of othered antagonism' (Wylie 2005: 244, emphasis in original; on this topic see also Scarry 1985). Sickness, furthermore, temporarily interrupts contact with one's own enthusiasm, motivations, passions: my affection for India and Varanasi, and the desire to go further with my research were not only disrupted but even to blame in that moment of misery, for they appeared as the real, remote cause of my suffering (see Silvey 2003). Indeed, the feeling of disconnection, uneasiness, of being 'unwell' with the surroundings, not necessarily caused by illness, may stir up sentiments of anger and loathing:

```
Here is totally different from elsewhere in India,
they're so backward here! They piss and shit in front of
you, all is old… I've just seen a sign of a place saying
'all-organic food'… of course is all-organic! Just take
a look around: can you see something non-organic?!
Everything is organic here, look there: they collect cow
dung! They're so behind!
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(From my field notes, excerpt of a chat with a traveller met on
                                the ghats, 23 February 2009)
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At the same time though – and we come here to the second point – the body that gathers itself, that curls up in physical pain and emotional discomfort creates new connections: with itself, with others, with the landscape; it re-connects in new ways. I

remember having moments of pure bewilderment mixed with concern at seeing what was happening to my body, particularly, but not only, when feeling sick: my bodily functions, my physical reactions, the very material consistence of my body appeared completely new to me; my whole body felt different, it was like I could not recognise it anymore: I was dealing with a new corporeal 'me'. Along with that, my mood, my way of feeling, my thoughts, my emotions followed the swing of such a new corporeal entity which I was trying to familiarise myself with. It was as if through the sick body I reconnected with a new 'myself', a new 'my-Indian-self'. In fact, the connection was between myself and that particular place, made of that particular climate, food, environmental and hygienic conditions, sounds and smells. The connection between my body-mind and the environment had never felt so clear: I was what I ate, what I smelled and breathed, and the cause-effect of my interactions with the landscape were immediately signalled by my body, especially by its defective functioning. This sort of extended perception and affect, however, is not only inward:

City of the body

Never like in Varanasi I heard so much talking about shit! That out there, one's own… physical conditions become a very frequent topic of conversation and exchange among travellers/tourists in Varanasi. The same is true of emotional, psycho-physical conditions. It seems like Varanasi favours this kind of sharing among tourists, who are evidently much more inclined to talk about their psycho-physical conditions here in Varanasi (would they be so in New York or Paris, too?). Also the strong emotional responses that Varanasi arouses are a recurrent subject in traveller talk. It's the effect of Manikarnika, of the dirt, of yoga, music, poverty, ascetics…

(From my field notes, 18 December 2009)

To go through the same sort of physical ailment and pain draws tourists closer: they talk, make new connections, share experiences of sickness, share bodily, intimate details which normally people do not share in occasional chats; all that talking about diarrhoea, entrails, bowel movement, body flows, physical conditions, mental dizziness and emotional turmoil creates a sense of commonality and intimacy, it inspires feelings of sympathy which make it easier for travellers to get in touch. It also encourages practices of care: tourists exchange medicines, medical advises, tips on good local pharmacies, visits; on several occasions when I was unwell I received visits from fellow travellers who came to bring me some fruit, a dish of plain rice, or simply knocked at my door to check how I was. Such an experience of proximity extends to the landscape as well: the weakened, exposed body-subject engages with the landscape in new ways; these are often characterised by an increased sensitivity and susceptibility to the material and affective qualities of the landscape:

Varanasi è così, un giorno sei up, un giorno sei down...[62]

(Italian male traveller talking on skype to his darling back home, overheard in a cybercafé, 18 December 2009)

I had headache all day today… it's that strange sun, that strange light, very annoying, that there was today...

(Excerpt from a conversation with a young man traveller in a café, 17 December 2009)

..I feel so emotional, so moody, it's like everything is magnified here!

(Excerpt from a conversation with a woman traveller in a restaurant, 23 April 2009)

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[62] Varanasi is like that, one day you're up, the other you're down.

Connections, moreover, are created on a transnational scale as well: any time I came back from my fieldwork I brought a bit of the field home: emotionally, through smells, memories, stuff which reconnected me with Varanasi, but also materially through bugs and illnesses that I had to treat for months (see Cresswell 2000 on infection and mobility):

```
London 22/01/2010

It's four days now that I'm back. Images of Banaras are
already gone, but in my body still the signs: unsettled
gut, intestine which retains the exotic bacteria
ingested over there, swollen belly, dizziness…

                                    (From my field notes)
```

As in any rite of passage transformation occurs through some form of suffering; one goes through ordeal and momentary loss – of health, strength, certainty – to then gain reward, and whether this consists of juicy data for the researcher, or of a tick on the list of the 'done' countries for the tourist, for both it is about a self-transforming, learning experience (see Arellano 2004). Healing then comes with a self-transformational gain where new identities of self and landscape are constituted. In this respect, tourists may be equalled to pilgrims (Turner 1973; 1974): as for pilgrims spiritual uplift is achieved through penance, so for tourists in Varanasi cultural elevation entails almost unavoidably getting sick. However, such an experience may be exclusive, it may exclude some tourists (and researchers): paradoxically, getting sick in Varanasi is only for the healthy and wealthy, that is, those who can afford to go through physical debilitation without this easily resulting in seriously or even lethally compromising their immune system – as is the case for those suffering from pre-existing medical condition – or those who can afford to stay in luxury hotels where threats of contamination are minimised, although even in that case tourists still have some limited interactions with the world outside their 'bubble'.

The physical dimension heavily entered my research and gave me the opportunity to understand how significantly it affects tourists' experience and practices in Varanasi. And again, even the disrupted body of the researcher and the tourist tells something more about the city. Here we come to my conclusive consideration. If on the one hand Varanasi is praised as a spiritual city, on the other it also very much is a corporeal, sensual city; it is in fact symbolised by the paradoxical Shiva, 'the erotic ascetic' (Doniger O'Flaherty 1973). The practices and experiences of sickness so far described resonate with the cultural symbolism of the city and its fundamental ambiguity as a place of death and illness, and of spiritual healing at the same time (see Parry 1994 on 'death in Banaras'; see also Urry 2004 on tourist places of death). The environmental and the cultural here are deeply intertwined: Varanasi is known as the city of ultimate pilgrimage, it is the place where Hindus come to die; the aspects of sickness, pain, physical decay are ingrained in its landscape; it is a city that deeply engages with embodiment and materiality, and that is also called 'the great cremation ground' where everything, from the physical layout to the social organisation, constantly leans towards the cremation ground (see Parry 1994; Justice 1997). It is a place of physical, emotional and spiritual instability, as we have learnt from the accounts of tourists. At the same time, Varanasi is a city of spiritual healing, the city that dissolves all bad karma and gives liberation, releasing human beings from the burden of reincarnations. It is a city of physical healing as well: the city of *ayurveda* medicine, of music healers, of curing remedies by prodigious *gurus* to whom Westerners increasingly turn.

Thus, the symbolic, the material and the embodied come together: the faulty body of the tourist and the researcher creates new practices, new landscapes, new meanings; the living (and suffering) body becomes instrument of knowledge (Merleau-Ponty 1962 [1942]; 1968 [1961]), the means by which the tourist and the researcher gain understanding of the world that they have come to visit and study. The experience of sickness and physical challenge 'allows the achievement of a reflexive awareness of the body and senses' (Arellano 2004:71) which is either constructed 'with' (Wylie 2007: 215) and projected on to the landscape; an awareness which actualises practices of connection – through sharing, commonality, care – and disconnection – through retirement, abjection, isolation – and which engages with different, context-specific cultural ways of signifying suffering and penance.

4.12 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter was devoted to exploring tourist practices in Varanasi. I argued that those practices actualise dominant representations and discourses, for example through the staging of the gaze, as in the case of the Ganga Aarti, and of the tradition, as in the 'purely Hindu' banquets of the Clarks Hotel. Representations and discourses are also actualised in visual practices where the gaze is performed from a detached position, be it the boat or elevated terraces securing dominant views; these practices sustain a colonial 'way of seeing' ingrained in contemporary tourism. Furthermore, tourist tropes are enacted through orchestrated performances of sightseeing, through practices of seduction which play with the imaginaries of – and about – tourists, through activities reviving the ancient spiritual tradition of Varanasi, such as yoga classes, *kathak* dance performances, *dhrupad* concerts. In all these practices the landscape plays a key role, as it constitutes the perfect framework for the realisation of tourist imaginaries: the Ganga is seen as the ideal backdrop for practices of spirituality, the picturesque *ghats* with their display of rituals and everyday life, the characteristic *galis* and the folkloristic bazaar in the old city all cater for tourist consumption of exotic views. Yet, the central argument of this chapter is that the landscape does not simply act as a backdrop for the activities of tourists and local social actors, rather, it is both constitutive of and constituted by these; tourists boating the riverfront, photographic transactions on the *ghats*, guided or strolling around the city, traveller talks at *chai* stalls, backpackers playing music on rooftops and *ghat* steps, tourists performing yoga and getting involved in local rituals – so creating, in turn, new forms of rituals resulting from the encounter between indigenous traditions and tourism – all these diverse spatial practices constitute the tourist landscape of Varanasi.

Moreover, one should not forget that what weaves social practices and landscape together is the body, which 'is the condition and context through which I am able to have a relation to objects' (Grotz 1994: 86; see Merleau-Ponty 1962 [1942]). Thus, we need to think of the tourist as a gazing subject *and* a listening body (Atkinson 2011: 12), as someone who grasps things cognitively as well as physically, as a travelling body

moving through places *and* a subject assimilating places into her/his own body, as a healthy, lively as well as weak and exposed body. In this perspective, the practices of tourism become practices of identity through which tourists experiment, construct, and negotiate ideas and perceptions of self, other and landscape; these practices are neither purely individual nor completely shaped by global discourses and representations; instead, they are characterised by a constant swinging between master narratives, stereotypes, staged performances, and the subjectively making sense and signifying of the tourist experience and the landscape in which – and by which – it takes place. While in writing this chapter I have structured my argument analytically and divided tourist practices of landscape in Varanasi in 'gazing', 'practising', and 'sensing'; I hope that it will be clear at this point that such a division is artificial and only motivated by the need to provide an organising frame for my argument. Tourist practices are 'a messy business', in fact: representation and practice, the gaze and the body, cognitive and sensual modes of apprehending reality merge in tourist practice, and there is no such thing as the gazing subject as opposed to the sensing body. Epistemological tools merge, too: the spatial practices of tourists bring together theories of landscape and place (see Cartier 2005: 4; Wylie 2007: 167); iconography and visual theory, humanistic perspective and new phenomenological approaches are mobilised in making sense of the practices of Western tourists in Varanasi. Although my analysis of tourist practices in this chapter was not detached from their spatial dimension, the next chapter turns to analyse tourist geographies in Varanasi more specifically, looking more closely at *where* tourists do the activities that we have so closely examined in this chapter.

CHAPTER 5

THE UNSTABLE CARTOGRAPHIES OF TOURISM IN VARANASI

5.1 INTRODUCTION

> ```
> What do you do with guide? You don't
> need a guide in Banaras! You walk from
> there to there… (he points to the two
> ends of the ghat Riviera) …and that's
> it! You just need yourself in Varanasi!
> ```
>
> (A child on the *ghats* addresses me while looking at my LP
> guidebook. From my field notes, 21 December 2009)

The child insisted that anywhere else in India you do need a guidebook to get around, but not in Varanasi: in Varanasi everything there is to see you can do with a walk along the *ghats*, from Assi to Raj Ghat, the two ends of the Riviera. No need for the Lonely Planet: you just need yourself, just need to 'be there' to understand the city.

It is with this exhortation to give up official mappings of the city that I start this last chapter about the tourist geographies of Varanasi. It may seem a contradiction: I will be arguing that the geographies of Western tourism in Varanasi do in fact follow official directions. And yet, this very contradiction drives us straight to the crux: as in any other tourist city, the geographies of tourism in Varanasi are the result of a constant tension between the adherence to official mappings and the tendency to

constantly transgress them, between clearly identifiable patterns and 'grey zones', between regulated and less regulated, heterogeneous and less heterogeneous spaces. Tourists do, in fact, listen to their guidebooks, their tour leaders, the websites and blogs that they consulted: they do follow selected itineraries, dine in recommended places, stay in some specific areas. But they also 'disobey': they venture into the alleys of the *chowk* by themselves, explore the urban environment in erratic walks, are led astray by the lure of getting lost, go around shopping, conduct their business throughout the city (on the 'banal and mundane' practices of tourism see Obrador, Crang and Travlou 2009; Obrador-Pons 2003; on the disobedience of tourists see Minca and Borghi 2009). The geographies of Western tourism in Varanasi are geographies of obedience and disobedience, of lure and anxiety; they are made up of designed choreographies and improvisational movements, of landmarks and interstices. They baffle the cartographic logic: mapping tourist practices is indeed a puzzling task.

At the same time, though, the child's words point to what appears like a simple, evident fact in the geographies of tourism in Varanasi: tourists do come here to see the *ghats*. The child's assumption that that is all there is to see (or that the *ghats* is all that the tourist wishes to see) allows us to identify immediately the gravitational centre of tourism in Varanasi, the very core of the city: the *ghats.* These work as a geographical simplification, as if in tourism the whole complex geography of Varanasi was resolved around the strip along the Ganges. The *ghats* function here as a geographical metonymy: Varanasi *is* the *ghats.*

In an attempt at capturing tensions and contradictions of the tourist space in Varanasi, the chapter develops in two main parts. The first one maps out some key, recognisable zones of the city connected with Western tourism; I have termed these the '3+1' zones of Varanasi. Section 5.2 explores these zones, which consist of the *ghats,* the city centre, the Cantonment (popularly called 'Cantt' by the Banarasis), and the adjoining Buddhist site of Sarnath. Section 5.3 suggests that the three main zones which unfold from the *ghats* in the Eastern part of the city to the Cantonment in the Western part may be read as a spatial metaphor of a journey from 'the Orient' to 'the West', where the predominantly 'heterogeneous' space of the *ghats* contrasts with the largely

ordered, 'enclavic' space of the Cantonment (see Edensor 1998a; 2000) where most of the incoming package tourism is based. Opening the second part of the chapter, section 5.4 questions such an apparently stable demarcation by acknowledging the trans-gressive movements of tourists across 'heterogeneous' and 'enclavic' spaces. Indeed, following the shifting cartographies of 'the wandering tourist', Part II investigates the blurring tourist spaces of the city: if there are recognisable 'zones' where we can locate tourist practices, we should also ask what lies between those zones, what the spaces of the 'disobedient tourist' are, what flows and networks constitute the spatial texture of the tourist landscape. Section 5.5 tackles these questions by exploring the 'grey zones' of tourism: places scattered around the city, scripted with tourist practices yet not clearly mappable. Section 5.6 goes on to analyse such a diffuse tourist landscape by describing some of the most defining scenes which compose it. Finally, the conclusion sums up the main arguments discussed in this chapter.
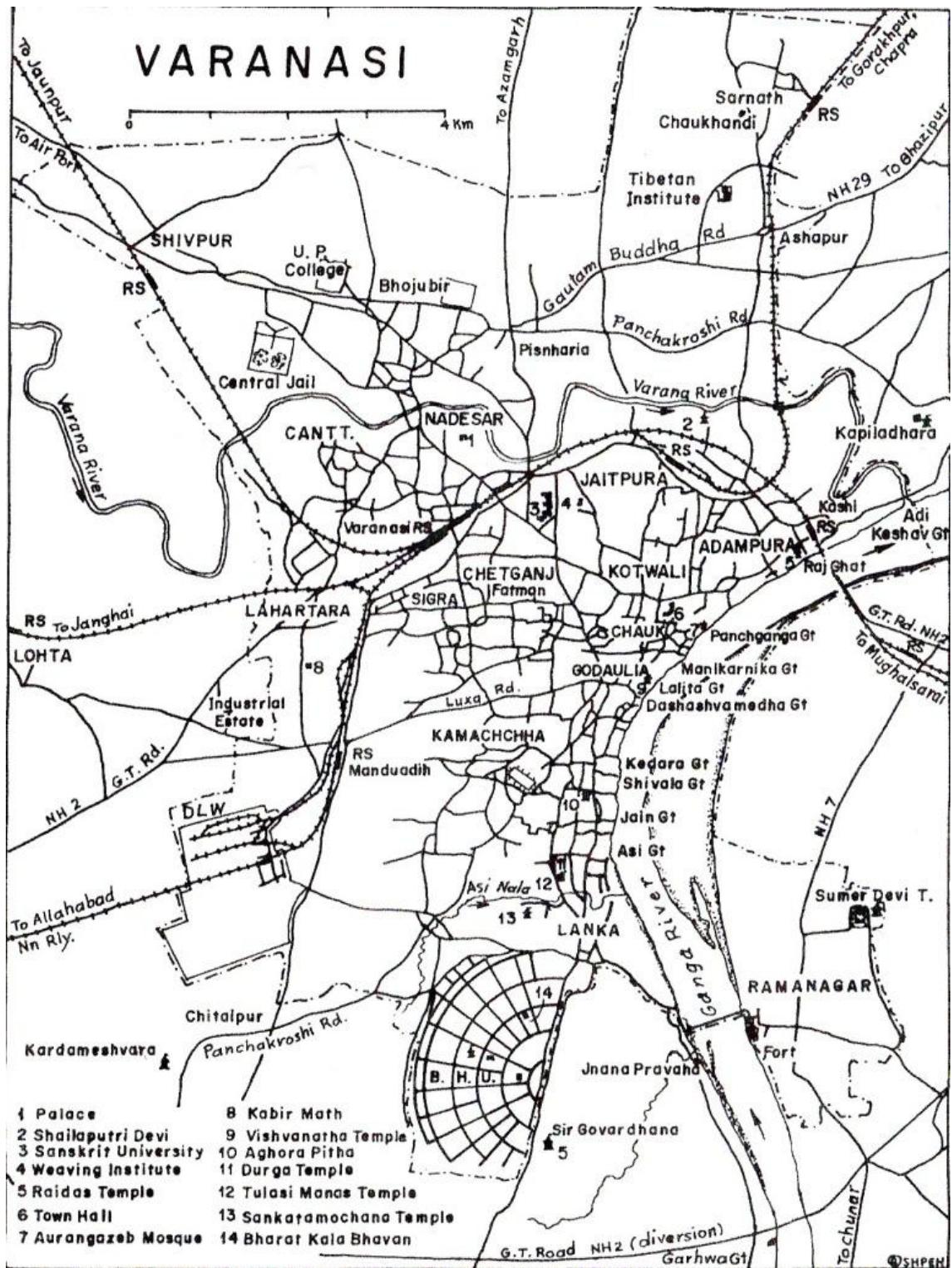
FIGURE 30 - MAP OF VARANASI (SOURCE: SINGH AND RANA 2002)

PART I: THE '3+1' ZONES OF THE CITY

5.2 'THE TOUR OPERATOR RECOMMENDS...'

> Ghats, Sarnath, spirituality, centre of learning: these are the things on the basis of which Varanasi is marketed around the world. Everything is resolved around these things: morning boat ride, more recently Ganga Aarti, and Sarnath: this is what tour operators provide.
>
> (Officer of the Government of India Tourism Office, Varanasi branch, interview, 28 March 2009)

The opening quote already outlines a first defined geography of Varanasi: tourist interest centres around the city's reputation as a place of spirituality and traditional knowledge, and that is spatialised in some distinct areas through some specific practices: the *ghats,* boated and celebrated in the Ganga Aarti, and the Buddhist centre of Sarnath, about 10 kilometres north-west of Varanasi. Whether package tourists, backpackers or independent travellers, visitors always include these two areas of the city in their tour, and if Sarnath may be occasionally left out in some itineraries, the *ghats* in most cases constitute the very reason for travelling to Varanasi. However, the movements of tourists through the city follow different patterns, needs and interests: centres of tourist attraction may not be the place where tourists actually spend most of their time, while zones of transit may be attractive to some tourists. In the case of upmarket tourists, for example, the spaces of hospitality are in fact separated from those of attraction: package tourists sightsee on the *ghats* and dine, sleep and chill out in the Cantonment. Transit zones such as the railway station or some busy roads of the city centre may be perceived as 'typical', 'authentic' and therefore retain a certain charm:

> I spend most of my time on the *ghats,* because it's *shanti,* you know. But I like sometimes to go in the city centre, because real India is in the *puja*, you

know, but the real India is also in the centre of Banaras, real India is on the *ghats* and real India is in Godaulia, yeah, both.

Following the flows of Western tourists in Varanasi, their corporeal movements and their networks, their imaginative as well as perceptual geographies, the trails and itineraries of tour operators, the logistics of the tourism industry and its implementation in the urban structure, a tripartite geography of the city emerges. This consists, roughly, in three major zones: the *ghats* (including the adjoining Old City), the city centre and the Cantonment. In addition, an area stands out which is at the same time an integral part of the Varanasi municipality, and topographically and culturally somewhat distinct: Sarnath. Such a three-fold geography is not only shaped by official mappings codified in guidebooks, tour operators' itineraries, and government tourist office indications; it also emerges out of tourists' perceptual construction of the landscape, as our discussion of Varanasi's soundscape has shown. What is more, a differentiation can be made on the basis of the way space is performed by tourists (see Edensor 2000):

There are basically two types of tourists: the backpackers and the upmarket tourists. The backpackers try to *experience* the city, they don't look for luxury, they're looking for a little adventure: they negotiate with rickshaws, look for their own guesthouse… They stay mostly near the ghats, in the old city. And then there are the upmarket tourists: they just want to *feel* the city, not to experience the city, they don't stay in the old city, don't go in the narrow lanes… They spend ten, fifteen days in India, everything is organised, they move on a fixed itinerary, they cannot change the programme; they stay one, two nights maximum in Varanasi, in luxury hotels here in this area, in the Cantonment.

(Varanasi branch head of a renowned Indian tour operator, interview 11 April 2009)[63]

In this perspective, we may define the *ghats* as a prevalently 'heterogeneous' tourist space as opposed to the more 'enclavic' Cantonment (Edensor 1998a; 2000), as I shall return to later. However, as I have stated in the introduction, tourist practices cannot easily be framed within this clear spatial subdivision: the above mentioned 'zones' are not an homogeneous space, they are instead constituted by various 'scenes', and are continually criss-crossed, entered and exited by tourists moving within and beyond their blurring boundaries. Tourist spaces, moreover, have to be thought of as embroiled with the life of the city, with the complexity of cultural practices and meanings that Varanasi accommodates and that are reflected in its urban setting. The city is indeed constituted by multiple and complex geographies each one mirroring the intricate religious, economic, social and ethnic composition of the city. The sacred topography of Varanasi, for example, its sacred circuits, pilgrimage routes, *mandalas* and *yatras,* its religious landscape and geomantic representations have long been the focus of scholars from different disciplines (Gutschow 2006; Singh 1993; 2002; 2009c; Vidyarti et al 1979, to name but a few) and so has its social and cultural landscape (see, among others, Dalmia 2008; Freitag 1989; Gaenzle 2008; Kumar 1988; 1989; 2008; Schütte 2008). Indeed, Gaenszle and Gengnagel (2008: 15) point out that:

> How space is organized in everyday practice is a fluid process, dependent on networks of actors (action space), pathways of habitual movement, and the interaction of users who appropriate space in the pursuit of private intention. Banaras is not one space for all uniformly; rather it is constituted by numerous "mini-spaces".

It is within this framework of 'mini-spaces' that Western tourist geographies have to be understood: if on the one hand tourist spatial practices have their own specificity,

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[63] The interview was conducted in the Varanasi's branch office, located in the Cantonment.

on the other they are caught up in the web of movements, spaces, infrastructures, ritual-spatial contexts which make up the urban texture of Varanasi. Sacred and tourist topographies, everyday and solemn practices, spaces of work and leisure intersect, run parallel, ignore each other or encounter in some points. Gaenszle and Gengnagel (*ibid.*) continue: 'these everyday spaces, which may include imaginary boundaries, are never entirely fixed and determined but tend to be subject to negotiations and often contestations'. The idea of Banaras as constituted by many 'mini-spaces' has been developed by Freitag (2008) in her comparative study of three urban places in Northern India: Jaipur, Lucknow and Banaras. Freitag argues that 'visions of modern Banaras that have come down to us are of a society marked in important ways by both "syncretic" and "overlapping" understandings of space and practice' (2006: 247). It is with this idea of continually criss-crossed and blurred tourist spaces in mind that I now turn to describe what I have schematically defined as the 3 + 1 zones of Varanasi.

5.2.1 THE *GHATS* (AND THE OLD CITY)

The *ghats* themselves are the flights of steps that descend into the river and form the long embankment which stretches approximately 6.5 km from South to North in the Eastern part of the city. However, what is commonly referred to as the *ghats* often comprises a larger area. There are no clear boundaries defining this area topographically, but it generally consists of the stretch of town that extends in the immediate surrounding of the riverbank, which thereby includes, northbound, the inner old city (developing around the Kashi Vishvanatha temple), the *chowk*, the old market place, the busy Godaulia crossing, and the *mohallas,* boroughs, of Kotwali and Adampur. Southbound, it stretches along Madanpur and Sonarpur Roads through the *mohalla* of Bhelupura down to Nagwa. In this Southern area the popular temples of Durga (in Durgakund), Tulsi Manas and Sankat Mochan are located. All along the riverbank, the maze of lanes winding just behind the *ghats* are usually considered as the backside extension of the *ghats* themselves. The riverfront, as we now know, is the ritual and tourist fulcrum of the city, a fact acknowledged by tourists themselves:

> Varanasi just links its name pretty much to the strip along the *ghats*, I don't
> know anyone doing so much in the rest of the city, this strip is really… uhm..
> interesting and.. and.. beautiful and.. the rest of the city is smelly…

<div align="right">(Australian traveller, 37, male)</div>

Not all the *ghats,* however, constitute a tourist attraction, only the – albeit extended – strip from Assi to Manikarnika. After Manikarnika, as you proceed through Panchaganga Ghat all the way up to Raj Ghat, the frequency with which you come across other tourists drops dramatically. Even within this long promenade, some *ghats* are far more tourist-populated than others, Dasashwamedha being the leading attraction. We have seen how the *ghats* are scripted with multiple narratives, both Hindu and tourist, popular and official. Master representations are inscribed on to trails and itineraries crafted by tour operators: sightseeing the *ghats* typically includes Dasashwamedha, Harishchandra, Assi, Manikarnika, all of which are embroiled with Hindu mythological narratives reiterated by tourist promotion. Sightseeing also frequently includes a brief incursion into the bustling, picturesque *chowk* in the old city; here the Vishvanatha Temple, a landmark of Varanasi, best known among tourists as 'the Golden Temple' is located. These trails are meant to convey the feel of Indian real life and spirituality, emphasised by tourist rhetoric. The *ghats* are teeming with guesthouses and budget accommodation, restaurants and cafés, silk and handicraft shops and they accommodate most of the backpackers and independent travellers visiting Varanasi.

5.2.2 THE CITY CENTRE

Defining what the city centre is, in Varanasi, is not straightforward. In many ways the 'centre' of the city, as we have seen, are the *ghats*: these are the hub around which ritual and tourist activities revolve. However, what is customarily referred to as 'the city centre' is the middle town between the *ghats* and the Cantonment areas, corresponding roughly to the *mohalla* of Chetganj, including the busy Sigra, a

neighbourhood with a high concentration of banks, shops, offices, residential and commercial properties. It is not the actual topographies of the centre, however, but its perceptual geographies that tourists rely upon to define this zone: the 'city centre' is a spatial metaphor used by tourists to name the hectic, confusing, noisy part of the city. As our discussion of the soundscape of Varanasi highlighted, the city centre is often identified with its sonic landscape: it is the strident, cacophonic bit, the part that contrasts with the '*shanti ghats*'. The defining features are not only acoustic: the 'haptical' (Golledge et al. 2005; Obrador-Pons 2007) impression of 'density' that many tourists report points to other senses too, and so do some expressions that the interviewees used in describing the city beyond the *ghats*: a 'colourful disaster' (Italian tourist, 64, male) 'the smelly rest' (Australian traveller, 37, male), the 'too dirty, noisy and crowded' city (Swedish tourist, 29, male). In the narratives of tourists the city centre is constructed as a perilous, threatening, irrational space:

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The first thing I thought when I arrived here from the
railway station was: 'they're all crazy here!'
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(From a conversation with a female Italian traveller recorded
                          in my field notes, 23 March 2009)
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I arrived airport [Delhi] to airport [Varanasi] in night time, and went straight to Lanka[64]. The first thing I thought was: 'Oh my god, what is this?!' Cows, kids on the road.. My expectation was.. Varanasi is a big city, it should be at least organised! Visually it reminded me of my own country, the little town where I used to live, a wild place where there is no order. Everything seemed so menacing… I slept for three days! In order to cross Lanka you need to be clear!

(Ecuadorian traveller, 32, female)

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[64] One of Varanasi's *mohallas,* a busy area in the southern part of the city, which is home to the BHU, where the interviewee stayed for a study period.

The 'crazy traffic' is the metaphor that many tourists use in referring to the city centre, which has thereby unclear boundaries but constitutes a very vivid, distinctive tourist 'mindscape' (Löfgren 1999b). Tellingly, the French traveller quoted at the beginning of section 5.2 links 'the city centre' to Godaulia, despite Godaulia being topographically part of the *ghats* area. To him, though, Godaulia embodies that messy space, far less idyllic than the *ghats*, which is identified with 'the centre' and that, as he says, is equally representative of Banaras.

Moreover, this area seems to be better described by movement, rather than by coordinates: tourists arrive at the airport or the railway station, cross the city to reach the *ghats,* and that is where they get the sense of the congested, chaotic space that they later frame as 'the centre', as opposed to the riverfront. The centre is a zone of transit, of flows: tourists don't stay in the centre, they *pass through* it in their transfers from the Cantt to the *ghats* and vice versa, in their movements from and to the railway station and tourist offices, in their way to or from Sarnath, to or from the airport. To me it was also a zone of commuting: my research activities frequently required me to go to the hotels and offices in the west side, so it was like going to work in the Cantt and coming 'home' to Assi Ghat. Crossing the city centre is indeed often represented as a journey in itself; a journey that often takes the tinges of an 'adventure', usually on board hazardously driven tuk-tuks. In his novel, Dyer (2009: 184-185) gives a witty description of the Cantt-to-*ghats* rickshaw ride, and fantasises about making this into a videogame called '*Varanasi Death Trip*' where 'the idea would be to travel from the Taj Ganges to Manikarnika without getting crushed, losing a limb or having your nerves shredded' (*ibid*: 185). Thus, the city centre constitutes a key material and imagined space in the tourist geographies of Varanasi.

FIGURE 31 -THE TRAFFIC IN THE CITY CENTRE (AUTHOR'S PHOTO)

5.2.3 THE CANTONMENT

The Cantonment is the area which extends North West behind Varanasi Junction, the city's main railway station, in the Western part. Varanasi Cantt is one of the urban 'sub-units' which constitute what the Census of India has identified as the 'Varanasi Urban Agglomeration', an urban area covering more than a hundred square kilometres, of which the Varanasi District is the major part (Singh and Rana 2002: 25; see also Singh 2009a: 27, 31). There are no particular tourist attractions in the Cantt, but this is in many ways a key area for Western tourism. Logistically, it is the headquarter of organised tourism and its institutions: international hotel chains, tour operator branch offices, the Government of India and the Uttar Pradesh tourist offices, airline branches and various facilities including a modern shopping centre and a park are located here. Most of the package tourists visiting the city are hosted in this area. Strategically, the Cantt is particularly convenient for the movements of organised tourism as it is close to main roads and transport links like the railway station, the airport, the Grand Trunk Road, and to Sarnath. Moreover, unlike the *ghats,* where the space available for building development is considerably reduced, the Cantonment is a constructible area which leaves scope for tourist businesses to invest. There is 'more space' in the Cantt, not only for business development, but also for the fatigued tourist who comes from the congested roads of the city centre, from the lively crowd of the Ganga Aarti, from the narrow lanes of the old town, and finds relief in the spacious

streets of the Cantt and the peaceful atmosphere of their comfortable five-star hotels. A traveller loads this spatial characteristic of the Cantt with a social connotation:

> ```
> In the Cantt people have more space: there's more space
> there compared to the ghats area and the old city. It is
> the privilege of the rich: to have more space.
> ```
>
> ```
> (From a conversation with a traveller volunteering for a local
>             day-care centre for disabled people, 10 May 2009)
> ```

However, I shall return to these ideas in the next section, where I look in more detail at the Cantonment as a tourist space.

5.2.4 SARNATH

In tourist choreographies, after the visit to the *ghats*, the tour usually proceeds to Sarnath. This is a pleasant, green area in the outskirts of Varanasi, which is believed to be the place where the Buddha preached his first sermon, spreading the Dharma teachings and so initiating Buddhism. Sarnath has indeed become an important Buddhist sanctuary with the prestigious University of Tibetan Studies and several Buddhist temples and monasteries of various Asian countries located here. Among the main attractions is the imposing Dhamek Stupa, a sixth-century high cylindrical building which is said to be built on the spot where the Buddha gave the famed sermon. Next is the archaeological park which features the remains of Buddhist edifices of various periods; among these remains is the famous Ashoka pillar, built by Ashoka the Great, a Hindu emperor who embraced Buddhism in the third century BC and became an ardent follower of this religion, establishing numerous Buddhist temples and sites all over the Indian subcontinent. Ashoka disseminated his extended empire with pillars scripted with his pious edicts, which have become the symbol of his enlightened and humanitarian ruling. The Ashoka pillar was surmounted by the characteristic Lion Capital, a sculpture of four lions facing the four cardinal directions,

which has been adopted as the national emblem of India. The Lion Capital is housed in the Sarnath Archaeological Museum, a highlight of sightseeing in Sarnath, together with fine works of Buddhist sculpture. Tourists also visit the Deer Park where it is said that the Buddha used to go and meditate. Sarnath continues the narrative of Varanasi as a spiritual centre which accommodates different religious traditions; it caters, in particular, for the recent Western quest for Buddhist spirituality which is increasingly emerging as a new way of consuming the Orient, a quest that the tourism industry has seized upon and reworked into travel itineraries and offers. Laden with the Buddhist ideals of peace, non-violence and harmony, Sarnath is represented as a peaceful, pleasant place that fosters tranquillity and meditation. It is interesting to notice how Sarnath's idyllic landscape is often constructed in relation to Varanasi's landscape, as if the two were in a dissonant and yet complementary relationship. The demanding landscape of Varanasi – the intense *ghats,* the hectic city centre, the bustling markets and alleys of the *chowk* – makes some places appear as a sort of longed for isles of peace, green oases, 'aural refuges' (Atkinson 2011: 17). Sarnath is such a place, and this is both reflected in travellers' accounts and reinforced by official tourist narratives:

[…] I went to Sarnath, I needed to see trees! It's vital for me, I need to see some green every day, you know? Back home I go to the park almost every day!

(Belgian traveller, 34, female)

'...oh thank goodness! I feel I can breathe here!'

(Remark of a fellow traveller on arrival in Sarnath from Varanasi, recorded in my field notes, 30 December 2009)

Though only 10 kms away from Varanasi, the two places are a study in contrasts. After frenetic Varanasi, Sarnath envelops you in peace. In the time

of the Buddha, the place was called Rishipattana or Issipattana after the *rishis* or sages who came to meditate under its shady trees.

(Varanasi City Guide 2002: 130)

The idea of Sarnath as a place of harmony and spirituality is also conveyed by the emphasis that popular tourist literature and guide narratives put on the figure of Ashoka, widely praised for his philanthropic ruling, inspired by the values of wisdom, tolerance and compassion underlying Buddhism. Tourists are told stories about 'the great emperor' who converted to Buddhism and promoted religious syncretism; they are dragged into the rhetoric of Varanasi-Sarnath as an essentially multi-religious space, with Sarnath embodying the harmonious and contemplative spirituality of Buddhism, scripted on to the landscape by the 'shady trees' under which 'the *rishis* came to meditate', the archaeological remains testifying as to the pious deeds of Ashoka and the devotional zeal of early Buddhism, the Institute of Tibetan Studies continuing the tradition of wisdom of the Dharma teachings, and by the multicultural architecture of modern Japanese, Burmese, Tibetan, Chinese, Korean Buddhist temples and monasteries framing this site. The narrative of harmony and religious tolerance ingrained in the landscape of Sarnath is also reiterated by tourist commercial practices; the photo below (fig. 32) shows some posters on sale displayed on a wall by a street vendor: sacred images from Christian, Buddhist and Hindu iconographies are juxtaposed to convey that sense of spiritual multiculturalism, concord and peaceful atmosphere which makes Sarnath attractive both to the tourism industry in search of marketable Oriental spirituality and to the traveller in search of 'a bit of green, a place to relax and chill out' from the intense Varanasi.

FIGURE 32 - SACRED IMAGES FOR SALE IN SARNATH (AUTHOR'S PHOTO)

FIGURE 33 - THE DHAMEK STUPA AND THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARK, SARNATH (AUTHOR'S PHOTO)

5.3 *Ghats* to Cantt: from East to West

The geographical position of the *ghats* and the Cantonment and their distinctive characteristics invite a parallel with an allegorical journey from East to West, and vice versa. In this section, I analyse the spatialities of the *ghats*, to the East, and the Cantonment, to the West, by suggesting that these two ends of the city can be seen metaphorically as the spatial embodiment of the Orient and the West, respectively, and of the geographical imaginations underlying them.

We should start by asking what kind of space the *ghats* are. In the course of the thesis I have employed various metaphors in order to make sense of tourist practices and representations in, and of, this crucial part of Varanasi. We have seen how the *ghats* can be described as a 'theatre' in J.B. Jackson's (1979) terms, that is as a landscape constructed through everyday, embodied practices of both tourists and inhabitants, like walking, chatting, bathing, eating, and so forth. Some of these practices configure the *ghats* as a 'theatre/spectacle' (Daniels and Cosgrove 1993): the Ganga Aarti for example, or the boat ride. In this respect, the *ghats* can also be represented as a 'stage' (MacCannell, 1999 [1976]), a peculiar stage where front and back regions are both exposed to the tourist gaze, which enjoys the spectacle of life with its enchantment and its miseries. The *ghats*, moreover, can be framed as a panorama (Gutschow 2008), a way of seeing that reveals typically European aesthetic practices,

ranging from painting to tourist photography, where the landscape is represented from a vantage point and the viewing subject disappears from the scene. The *ghats* are, above all, a space of encounters, where different social actors, imageries, activities, routines, objects, bodies interact in various ways activating processes of identity which challenge stable definitions of self and other, place and belonging. In this sense, the *ghats* are a 'contact zone' (Pratt 1992: 6-7; Clifford 1997b), a zone where subjects from very different historical, geographical, social and cultural, religious backgrounds intermingle and make connections, as fig. 34 tellingly shows and the previous chapters discussed by means of several examples.

Foriegn music to Indian ears

A local girl enjoys music from a foriegner's music player as the tourist gets busy with his camera, in Varanasi on Wednesday.

FIGURE 34 - "FOREIGN MUSIC TO INDIAN EARS" (SOURCE: HINDUSTAN TIMES, LUCKNOW, 7 MAY 2009)

The diversity of people and activities going on in the *ghats* area, the constant, variegated flows of passersby, workers, pilgrims, tourists, vehicles, the intersecting of ritual, labour and leisure routines, the architectural pastiche of palaces and makeshift huts, temples and guesthouses, the multiple uses of space for private and public, legal and illegal, religious and lay pursues, the sense of all-togetherness, the overlapping of life and death, wellbeing and illness make the *ghats* an inherently 'heterogeneous tourist space' (Edensor 1998a; 2000). Here package tourists and backpackers, pilgrims and inhabitants, *babas* and priests, wealthy brahmins and drug dealers, vendors and

snake charmers, beggars and cripples, human beings and animals, living bodies and dead bodies come together, make contact or just pass by. Their patterns, performances, and body movements criss-cross and constitute the space of the *ghats*. These are spaces 'pregnant with the possibility' (Chakrabarty 1991: 26, quoted in Edensor 2000: 333), open to chance encounters and sensually overwhelming, drenched as they are with smells, colours, sounds, like the sharp smoke smell from the cremation grounds, the lively colours of the *puja* flowers, or the ubiquitous sound of temple bells and chanted prayers. The heterogeneous nature of the *ghat* space is what strikes many tourists:

All life is down there, isn't it, people washing in the river and the buffalos roaming there, in the Ganga rather, and everything is... it's all happening there. It was nice, my first view of the *ghats* was breathtaking.

(British traveller, 56, female)

...I think it's definitely the sense of an open space, and.. I find the architecture's really interesting... and the social life is very interesting. I mean everywhere in India there's a very active social life in the open space, which is... we don't have in Australia, we don't have this culture... but particularly on the *ghats* it seems to cater for this whole range of different activities: the social, the religious, the drug pushers, the *pandas* [...] and I like the fact that the architecture allows that, or encourages that, this sort of multiple uses of space. The *ghats* is a place where anything and everything goes.

(Australian traveller, 37, male)

Frequently, however, this very spatial promiscuity appears disorienting, demanding, upsetting or even threatening:

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...half of the group got annoyed and scared for being
'assaulted' by so many vendors, beggars, people.. and
left, they went back to the hotel the [Taj Ganges]. They
were also tired from the tight schedule: they've just
arrived from Delhi, heading to Khajuraho tomorrow…
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The *ghats* embody the space of chaos and disorder that Orientalist discourses associate with the Orient. At the same time, irrationality is reframed as 'exotic' and consumed as 'picturesque', and the intensely sensual experience of the *ghats*, perceived as attractive by many travellers, fuels the trope of the Dionysian Orient (see King 1999). As the Orient itself, the *ghats* are an ambiguous space: frightening and yet enticing, repulsive and sensual, irrational and yet spiritually enlightening. As one proceeds Westbound through the city centre, the sense of bewildering confusion and sensory overload increases in the 'crazy' traffic.

By entering the Cantonment, conversely, the ambience changes dramatically. As we have seen, the Cantt is the logistical base of organised tourism and several institutions, including the India Tourism Office, Air Force India, Christian missions and schools. Although not strictly policed in its whole extent nor markedly enclosed by fences and walls (although a gate welcomes you as you enter the area on the Eastern side, and physical delimitations are irregularly present) the Cantt does appear more regulated and bounded than the *ghats* and the city centre. The etiquette, spatial order and organisation which are in force in the premises of the high-ranked hotels, administrative offices and businesses that occupy this area extends also to the streets and the immediate surroundings, so that everything looks clean and tidy compared to the mayhem outside the Cantt. Rows of tour coaches are neatly parked on the side of the spacious roads not congested by the traffic as in the rest of the city; nobody shouts, there is no deafening horn, no wandering *babas,* nor litters with corpses; the streets are clean, the buildings are interspersed by open spaces as opposed to the wild

construction that characterises other areas. The tourist, as emphasised in the excerpt above quoted, retreats in the comfortable hotels of the ordered Cantt/West after the demanding sensual immersion in the chaotic *ghats*/Orient. The construction of the Cantonment as a refreshing oasis of peace is sustained by the narratives of the tour operators. Advertising a renowned international hotel sited in this area the Kuoni brochure suggests:

> Guests returning after a day soaking up the vibrant sights of this holy city can relax in the pool before dining in one of the stylish restaurants showcasing fine Chinese, Indian, Thai or International cuisine.
>
> (Kuoni 2010: 39)

Five-star hotels are among the most evident examples of 'enclavic tourist space' (Edensor 1998a; 2000), that is space where 'performances are monitored through surveillance and by what is considered "appropriate" in dominant discourses' (Edensor 2000: 328), and where 'tourists are cut off from social contact with the local populace and are shielded from potentially offensive sights, sounds, and smells' (*ibid.*: 329). These are 'Westernised' spaces that:

> [...] tend to receive financial support from development agencies and national and local state organizations. The local state, usually in conjunction with powerful commercial interests, imposes "Western" standards (air-conditioning, cleanliness, deference, decor, "quality control" of commodities) and a range of disciplinary measures over the enclave'.
>
> (*Ibid.*: 328)

Although the Cantonment is a much more permeable 'bubble', it nonetheless retains the features of a highly controlled enclosure: the maintenance of buildings, parks,

streets, the normative prescriptions that discipline this area with clear indications of restricted zones, no-parking areas, road signs, a more regulated land use, the fact that street vendors and hawkers are barred here, the fencing and policing of many buildings give this space the characteristics of the 'enclave'. In fact, the very foundation of the Cantonment was enclavic in its intents: the cantonments in many Indian cities represent the spatial legacy of British colonialism; they were the strategic area where the British established their headquarters: administrative offices, military logistics, Christian churches and schools, the railway station were all located in the Cantonment area, where they still are today. The Cantonment was the stronghold of the West, the urban spatialisation of its imperialist project. Dodson (2010a) suggests a similar parallel when he argues that the location of the Benares College founded by the East India Company in 1791[65], in between the *ghats* and the Cantonment, points to the Company's alleged purpose of acting as an educational 'common ground' between the scholarly traditions of East and West – while actually concealing, the author argues, the intention of establishing 'the ultimate truth of Western thought' (Dodson 2010a: xi).

FIGURE 35 - AIR FORCE ENCLAVE IN THE CANTONMENT (AUTHOR'S PHOTO)

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[65] Now the Sampurnananda Sanskrit University.

PART II: THE SHIFTING CARTOGRAPHIES OF THE WANDERING TOURIST

5.4 A PACKAGE TOURIST IN THE HIPPIE HUT

An Englishman in New York[66]

Dinner time. Like many evenings, I'm at the Karki with my friend, a fellow researcher from Italy. We are sat on the floor, around one of those low tables, in the dark: another blackout. In the darkness, Babaji[67] and his disciples arrive too: a white Westerner, in his fifties, burly, blue-eyed, with his white beard long and his hair tied up in the manner of Shiva, together with his younger clones. Holding his trident to the ground as if to support himself, he arranges his fiery red *dhoti*, and allows himself to slip cross-legged to the floor. It looked like such an effort: he is quite stoned. He says hello to some friends at the table, a group of Italian hippies:

- '*Om namah shivaya*!'

- '*Om namah shivaya* Babaji! How are things today?'

- 'Eh… I've smoked a bit of everything today!'

- 'Still at the Kal Bhairo [68]?'

- 'Yes, still there with the other *babas*...'

In the background some travellers are jamming. The light comes back on and after a while we notice a strange guy sitting at the table opposite us. He looks odd there in between the hippy types and the idle Nepalese staff. All neat and tidy, in a bright orange polo T-shirt, clean jeans, compact little rucksack. No shoulder bag, long

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[66] The reference here is to Sting's song of the same name.

[67] Invented name. The real name has been omitted for privacy reasons.

[68] Kal Bhairav (also known as Bhairo or Bhairon) is a temple dedicated to Shiva in his frightful form. It is an important temple in Varanasi and it is the focus of worship of Shaiva ascetics.

shirt or Shiva dreadlocks. He looks as if he had just landed on the moon, lost. He looks over at us uncertainly a few times, then he dares, and comes closer. He has understood that we are Italian and seems relieved at the idea of being able to speak in his own language, to tell and to ask. He's from Treviso, in the rich and productive North East of Italy where people work hard, vote for the *Lega Nord*[69], and go to church on Sundays. I grew up in the same area.

- 'I'm at Clarks, a bit far, but I wouldn't know how to explain where it is from here…'

Of course, the Clarks in the Cantonment, like all the luxury hotels. He's on a kind of hybrid holiday though, half way between a package and a do-it-yourself, and that's how he has ended up at the Karki, somehow, he's not even sure himself.

- '...but it does seem like the kind of place that should be seen, it's part of India too, isn't it? I can already picture the look on my friends' faces when I tell them about it!'

He continues to look around, astonished by the fact that so many people are sitting around, completely relaxed and at home, eating pasta cooked by a slightly high Nepalese guy. He is so sure he will be able to get a taxi outside at any time to take him back to his hotel that we don't have the heart to tell him that it is not like that, that around here taxis are a rare thing. But at least we enlighten him as to the location of the Ganges, which he has been looking for in the Cantonment all day. He asks us what we do, and my friend says she is doing a PhD in Indology.

- 'Indianology? Sounds interesting... and what will you do after that? 'Cause I mean, it's interesting

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[69]Literally 'Northern League', Italian separatist and anti-immigrant party.

but....all those years studying and what if you're unemployed at the end of it! Couldn't you have done Engineering? That's a degree that pays back! But yes of course it's interesting to study a different culture. I mean, the people here are all really happy, even if they are poor… I think we have a lot to learn from this culture...'

Probably the Karki, the Ganges, the *ghats*, us too – messed up enough to be able to stay for long periods in this equally messed up place – the whole of Varanasi, must seem rather 'picturesque' to someone who lives in a city famous for its xenophobic sheriff-style mayor. But there's also something genuine in this man's venturing beyond the reassuring confines of the Clarks, into the city, in his attempts to engage with the Karki's people, with 'the culture of the other', with the 'alternatives'.

The next evening, my friend tells me that the 'alien of the Karki' must have found a taxi and the Ganges, as she met him along the *ghats*, at 2 in the afternoon, under an unforgiving sun. His shirt dripping with sweat, he was walking with three friends, some tourists he met in his adventures through the city, with that happy look of who has just found the Authentic Life of Varanasi, or has just discovered America.

(From my field notes, 8 April 2009)

In an attempt to map the geographies of Western tourism in Varanasi, there is the risk of treating tourists as stable subjects that dwell in certain zones and move on fixed trails: package tourists stay in the Cantonment, backpackers in the *ghats*, they move from the Cantt to the *ghats,* from one *ghat* to another, from the riverside to Sarnath, and vice versa. Tourists, however, are inherently mobile subjects: they move in the flow, following patterns, occupying distinct areas, but also just *wandering*, drifting along, lingering through the city in a series of improvisational movements, following

routes that cannot always be traced to guidebooks or the roadmaps of tour operators. Tourists, sometimes, just go off the map. It happens that they truly get lost, not as a romantic way of exploring the city, but as a spatial disorientation, a loss of one's bearings, just like the luxury tourist who ended up in the hippie hut. But that 'getting lost' has also other interesting implications. First of all, it is a result of a movement of 'trans-gression'. The Latin root here helps: *trans gradior,* to pass over, to go beyond, points to both the physical act of trespassing a boundary and, figuratively, to the will to go beyond a limit; it also carries a moral meaning as an act of overpassing a rule, of disobeying an order, that, in this case, of the (tourist) map. Secondly, then, as a desire to go beyond a limit and to transgress official cartographies, the movement of the 'disobedient tourist' takes the form of a movement of research, an epistemological movement through which the tourist attempts to construct her/his own knowledge of the city. S/he may get lost, but in losing her/his bearings, the wandering subject finds new routes, discovers new places, makes new connections: the disoriented tourist at Karki's meets other travellers, gets tips and information, and the day after continues his drifting on the *ghats* with a more confident pitch and new friends. Thirdly, trans-gressing a boundary, as our example shows, can easily turn you into a stranger, and drag you into unfamiliar zones. Interestingly, though, the tourist in the account was not so much 'alien' to the city, as to the hippyish ambience of Karki's: he appeared to be 'out of place' (Cresswell 1996) in the traveller community spatially defined around this haunt. Karki's indeed constitutes a specific space of identity, an homogeneous tourist space where travellers share a particular style of travel, mindset, political views usually informed by left-wing, anti-capitalist sensibilities, and ethical awareness as to issues of, for example, fair trade, organic produce, social justice, multiculturalism. The Karki's punters, many of whom are Italian, mockingly call themselves 'the *rimastoni*', a hardly translatable term – perhaps 'bohemians' or 'neo-hippies' or 'new agers' may convey the sense of the Italian meaning – which alludes to those people who have been 'remained' (in Italian 'rimasti') somewhat attached to the culture and lifestyle of the hippie movement, despite the fact that many of the '*rimastoni*' lingering at Karki's are travellers in their twenties and thirties, hence some generations away from the hippie era[70]. The crowd at Karki's is a mix of nostalgic hippies, neo-hippies, New Age

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[70] A more common variation of 'rimastoni' is 'fricchettoni', an Italianisation of the English 'freaks'.

travellers, backpackers and gap-year drifters, researchers, long-term Western visitors; it is also made up of local youngsters playing with their 'Western' identity, challenging what in our conversations they often referred to as the 'traditional values' of the context in which they grew up, and positioning themselves in between the local community and this particular community of Western travellers, based in Assi Ghat. The luxury tourist clearly did not belong there: his tidy look, his up-market style of travel, his conservative and stereotypical views on 'the local culture' made him look out of place among the Karki's community. Whether he actually felt out of place or just looked like it, is open to question, but it is worth noting how, to some extent, Karki's tourist space is no less exclusive and 'enclavic' than the luxury hotel where the 'alien tourist' had come from. In this respect, then, tourists do not simply 'occupy' space, they in fact 'create' space (Lefebvre 1991). Movements of transgression destabilise clear definitions of 'enclavic' and 'heterogeneous' tourist space. We have seen how the *ghats* can be largely identified as an heterogeneous space. And yet some practices reframe it as enclavic, too: the regulated movements of package tourists strictly bound to limited places and routes, shielded by the tour guide and the organisers; the surveillance eye of CCTVs at Dashashvamedha and the presence of state police patrolling the main *ghat*; the restricted access to the Kashi Vishvanatha temple, barred to non-Hindus; the latent control of *mahants* and *pandas* over the *ghats.* Similarly, the Cantonement, an inherently enclavic space, is 'disrupted' by heterogeneous movements: the poor living and going after their chores in the shacks that line some streets of the Cantt; the swarm of peoples, vehicles, animals that make up the railway station area, a highly varied, disordered space, yet part of the urban unit identified as 'Cantt' (see Singh 2009a: 31, 49). Moreover, the Cantonement space may be seen as heterogeneous in that it accommodates many diverse 'mini-enclaves': the Air India Force Enclave, for example, the Christian Convent School, or the small shopping centre standing in the heart of the Cantt, a fenced, policed edifice that gathers almost exclusively middle-class Indians, mostly young. Neither tourists of the nearby hotels nor low-class Indians enter here: tourists because they probably have no interest to, lower-class Indians and the poor because they are prevented from doing so by the

security guards and police who patrol the centre. In any event, the shopping centre constitutes a non-tourist space in a markedly tourist area.

Furthermore, if tourists create spaces, spaces in turn shape their journeys: deciding to have your accommodation in one place or another, to visit one particular spot or another, at a specific time, season, or another, results in conveying very different senses of place:

> Where you stay is paramount! When I was at the other hotel, it was out of the station, in the Cantt area, and it was horrible, horrible.. it was just a road, with…you really get shocked there, lots of children playing in the dirt and there's this beautiful.. well.. nice looking hotel from the outside… […] But I thought at least here is outside the city, outside the *ghats*, because the *ghats* are so noisy… But when I did come here and see the *ghats*, see my accommodation here… I was quite surprised really, and that was my second day here and I think, by then, I think.. if I stayed in that hotel, I would have missed Varanasi, because it was impersonal, with no feeling of the place at all.… but here you have lots of interaction with nice people… and that makes a lot of difference, and I'm just beside the *ghats*, that I think it's great.[71]

> (British traveller, 56, female)

As for the British traveller, so too is the luxury tourist's understanding of the city likely to have been influenced by the experience of the place he stayed in: it made perfect sense, to him, to expect to find a taxi in Assi Ghat at whatever time, as that was probably what his five-star hotel provided as a standard facility. Again, if official mappings have a great deal of influence over tourists' movements (see Hutnyk 1996 on 'cartographic Calcutta'), tourists also construct their own geographies, their own personal, emotional and perceptual maps as they drift along in the city, choose their accommodations, transgress enclaves, create new spaces. The movements of the

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[71] The interview took place in the interviewee's accommodation located on the *ghats*.

wandering tourist baffle the researcher-cartographer who tries to map the spaces of Western tourism in Varanasi. Tourist spatial formations are themselves shifting and mobile: they can be at the same time enclavic and heterogeneous, inclusive and exclusive, bounded and free-floating. In these unstable cartographies, some places stand out, others hide in the interstices, some areas are clearly mapped, others are more diffuse, spreading, as they do, along networks and mundane whereabouts. The next section turns to explore these 'grey zones'.

FIGURE 36 - A DETAIL OF KARKI'S (AUTHOR'S PHOTO)

5.5 IN BETWEEN A AND B: TOURIST GREY ZONES

> It seems as though when confronted by the elusory and insubstantial subject of tourism the response is to try ever more desperately to fix it into analytical place.
>
> (Crang 2006: 64)

Analyses of tourism in the past have tended to focus on tourist destinations as discrete places with their own trends and 'life' (Butler 2004); they looked at the movements of tourism in terms of 'flows', that is as masses of people moving from one point to another, as chartable trajectories, patterns, where the agency of tourists and the

mobile, unstable nature of places themselves (Crang 2006; Minca and Oakes 2006a; Sheller and Urry 2004) were disregarded.

Crang (2006) argues that even those strands of tourism geographies which emerged as a critique of quantitative analyses and focused, instead, on the production of images and representations constructing tourist places paid little attention to the processes, actions and practices which make them. He points out:

> What both these approaches share is quite a strong sense that tourism makes places and those places are delimitable and definable – and that tourism occurs out there. They produce oddly fixed versions of the world for a mobile and fluid process.

> (*Ibid.*: 48)

It is still common in mainstream tourism geography in India (see for example Dixit and Sheela 2001), and in official analyses of tourism more generally (see for example UNWTO 2011), to think of tourists as either depersonalised subjects moving from A to B, or as 'guests' *staying in* A or B; the results are studies that focus primarily on, for example, hospitality management, or that frame destinations and cultural heritage as 'products' (see Dixit and Sheela 2001). This approach dwells on binary constructions of home and away and conceives of tourism as made up of extra-ordinary places, movements, activities. Even when the cultural geographies of tourism are investigated – and I refer here more specifically to Varanasi – they tend to be represented as bound to discrete places and defined by stable cartographies (for example Singh and Rana 2002). The previous section called into question this way of conceiving of tourism geographies by highlighting the transgressive movements of the disobedient tourist. This section continues to follow the wanderings of tourists and explores the grey zones of tourist Varanasi, that is spaces in between 'A' and 'B', where A and B stand for chartable zones and locations, as opposed to the shifting places, movements, places-within-places which characterise tourist fleeting spatialities. The geographies of

Western tourism in Varanasi are indeed made up of uncertain spaces: tourists move through the city to go to classes, cafés, to go shopping, go volunteering, go to their *gurus*. They linger in *chai* stalls, meet in guesthouses, gather at concerts. These tourist spaces are spaces of the everyday, which have to do with the mundane practices of tourists, with activities other than sightseeing and visiting sites of interest; they include places like bookshops, post-offices, pharmacies, silk emporia, *ashrams*, music shops, *gurus*' houses, friends' houses – either local friends, or long term travellers who are renting a house. Although many of them are still located in a roughly identifiable area, the *ghats*, they nonetheless form a network of connections, of encounters, of hybrid spaces between public and private that is hardly chartable; some of these places are to be found on *ghat* terraces, others in the mazes of alleys in between the *ghats* and the old city, in between one *ghat* and another, in between the *ghats* area and the centre. Some of them are inherently mobile: rickshaws, for example, are a means of transportation but at the same time they are also a defining site of tourists' experience of the city. Rickshaws materially tie places together: tourists move predominantly by rickshaws, either tuk tuks or cycle-rickshaws, which thereby become an intrinsic part of tourist mobility. But the rickshaw is also one of the sites around which tourists negotiate their presence in the city, their interaction with the local people, their identity as travellers: we have seen in the previous sections of Chapter 4 how bargaining with rickshaws is considered as part of the 'experience' of being a backpacker, or an independent traveller, how 'the rickshaw experience' is also provided to package tourists by tour operators, which give tourists the opportunity to 'have a feel' of Indian everyday life by moving along with the bustling traffic on these picturesque vehicles, without actually having to mingle with the crowd. The rickshaw is also a means through which tourists interact with – often disrupt, apparently – the local socio-economic functioning:

> `'Tourists... they come here, pay 100 rupees a rickshaw and they mess everything up!'`
>
> `(From a conversation with some Banarasi friends at a chai shop in Assi Ghat recorded in my field notes, 5 May 2009)`

The interaction with *rickshaw-walas* also engages tourists emotionally in relation to the ethical concerns and the issues of power relations raised by that very interaction; if, on the one hand, many tourists prefer to move around by cycle-rickshaw because 'it's fun', on the other, many also express a discomfort in being shuttled around by a poor, skinny man toiling on the pedals for a few rupees. Their excessive payments – on the already inflated prices charged to tourists – are often a way of paying back for their sense of guilt. Overcoming that sense of guilt and demanding a fair price is likewise an attempt to engage with the context in a more suited way, as well as to negotiate the paradox of being a tourist but not wanting to be dealt with as one.

If the rickshaw brings into focus the interactions of tourists with the local context in particular, other places are constituted also by multi-scalar practices. One such place is the cybercafé. Cybercafés are spread all around Varanasi and are much frequented by tourists. They are both meeting places and, primarily, places where travellers go to get in touch with their families and friends back home. The space of the internet café problematises sheer divisions between home and away, here and there. In fact, cybercafés are places where tourists go to find a bit of home, places where they are at the same time here and there: they are catapulted into the living room of their house back home via skype video calls, while sipping *chai,* nibbling *masala* chips or chewing *paan* in a fan-ventilated poky little room in the middle of the busy *chowk,* or eating vegetarian food and drinking *lassi* in a *shanti* restaurant on the *ghats.* Cybercafés are indeed places 'here' connected with places 'there', which complicate the dialectics of presence and absence (Crang 2006; Minca and Oakes 2006a). Arguing for 'the *instability of producing destinations*' (Crang 2006: 47; emphasis in original), Crang notes that:

> The presence of tourists inscribes absent locations into places. Tourist places are haunted by many others outside the locale, while […] tourists seeking to experience sites, to be present in them, are haunted by other times and roles they play back home.

Multi-scalar spaces of tourism in Varanasi are also, in a way, the *chai* stalls and bookshops where travellers linger; they are in fact local sites of international encounters where travellers from different nationalities do not simply meet and chat, but occasionally also initiate collaborations, projects, establish lasting relationships which travel beyond the boundaries of Varanasi, beyond the ephemeral time of the journey and continue in other places, sometimes for a long time.

Among these places are also silk shops. Silk shops are a characteristic of Varanasi, which links its name to silk manufacture; the Banaras silk and brocade *saris* are famous all over India and are the highlight of tourist shopping. Most of these silk shops are a sort of all-purpose store where you can find pretty much everything, from silk to clothes, to perfumes, to handicrafts, to flight tickets and train reservations. Tourists spend a lot of time in these places chitchatting, pottering around, shopping. These stores often constitute important hubs for tourists to get information; some of them have become key points of reference for the community of travellers in Varanasi (see Korpela 2009: 141-145). The silk shop is also the space of bargaining, a practice that is at once commercial, social and cultural and that is by many considered distinctive of India itself (as it is the case for many other Asian and African countries as well); guidebooks abound with advice, warnings and indications about where and what to shop, what the 'fair prices' are and how to deal with bargaining. A shopkeeper whom I interviewed lamented:

I have fixed prices, don't like pushing tourists to buy… but you know they read in the Lonely Planet that in India always you have to bargain, so they ask for discounts and try to bargain…

(Shopkeeper, interview 27 April 2009)

This relation between representation, place and practice is also evident in other tourist spaces. One fitting example is the railway station. The tourist narrative about the

Indian railways and stations is flourishing: the railway network is described as 'a quintessentially Indian institution' (Rough Guide 2001: x), 'railways in India are not just a means of transport, they are a way of life' (Lonely Planet 2011b). Many tour operators provide 'the train experience' on 'classic rail journeys' on board of heritage trains, as well as luxury voyages on the routes of the Maharajas on board of the 'Maharaja express' (Cox and Kings 2011); railway stations are often represented as picturesque spaces where one can 'watch the world go by, with hundreds of people from all walks of life eating, sleeping, buying and selling, regardless the hour' (Rough Guide 2001: x), and where 'booking is an art form' (Lonely Planet 2011b). The Varanasi Cantt Station (alias Varanasi Junction) does not disappoint: it perfectly fits into such a mindscape. So the train station is a tourist space in two respects: it is a space of tourist imagination which nourishes and confirms tropes and 'the fabulation' (Hutnyk 1996: 64) of the Indian railways, and it is the material place of transit continually criss-crossed by the trajectories of travellers arriving in and departing from the city, going to the station in order to book a ticket or to ask information at the Tourist Bungalow of the station where – several editions of the Lonely Planet assure – you can find 'the patient Mr Umashankar' who 'has been dishing out reasonably impartial information to arriving travellers for years' and is 'a mine of knowledge' (Lonely Planet 2009: 441; see also 2006: 413).

Moreover, if one spends some time in Varanasi as a tourist, one gets the clear sense of the fact that much of what goes on in tourist life in the city happens on rooftops: Westerners often organise rooftop parties, most of the tourist restaurants along the *ghats* consist actually of rooftops (whether with or without a view on the Ganga), travellers practice yoga, read, write, play music, do their laundry, sunbathe on the rooftops of guesthouses. Again, these are both concrete places and symbolic spaces of identity, spaces of networks and connections which escape stable mappings; they 'link dwelling with mobility' (Crang 2006: 64), leisure with the everyday, and if they may appear 'grey' in their spatial location because their boundaries are blurred, they nonetheless convey a very vivid sense of the ways in which tourists both 'flirt with' (Crouch 2005) and 'create' space in Varanasi.

5.6 City scenes

We have seen how the movements and shifting places of tourists in Varanasi form a 'diffuse' landscape where delimitations between one zone and another are never fixed and flow instead into one another in a *continuum* which knits the routines and the spatialities of tourists with the rhythm and the unfolding of the city. This landscape is composite and made up of various 'scenes', some of which are more clearly bound to specific locations in the city than the fleeting spaces that we have explored in the previous section, and yet not inscribed in the 3+1 zoning. I employ the term 'scene' to convey the marked representational connotation that characterises the places that I am going to describe; these are indeed at the same time material settings and defining scenes that compose the imagined landscape of Varanasi.

5.6.1 Godaulia

FIGURE 37 - POSTCARD PICTURING A VIEW OF GODAULIA (SOURCE: INDICA CARDS NEW DELHI, PHOTO BY RAJ VERMA)

In souvenir shops and among the merchandise sold by hawkers on the *ghats,* it is not uncommon to find postcards picturing 'the busy lanes of Godaulia crossing'; they are meant to provide the tourist with a memento of the characteristic and picturesque hectic Indian street life, where a cow is invariably depicted sitting placidly and undisturbed in the middle of the traffic. Earlier in this chapter we have seen how in

tourists' mind Godaulia often represents the quintessence of the chaotic 'city centre'. It is however the physical engagement with this busy area and the sensorial impression that it leaves that mostly shapes the contours of this scene in the tourist landscape of Varanasi. Godaulia is above all the rumbling sound of traffic in the ears, the daze of the confusion, the air heavy with fumes and pollution that gets stuck in the throat, the beggars that stick to you, the pestering *rickshaw-walas*, the disordered sight of vehicles, cows, shouting vendors, cripples. I always remember coming back from Godaulia with a headache and a great sense of exhaustion in my trips around town. Although Godaulia covers a fairly wide area merging with the larger Chowk borough, tourists know Godaulia mainly for the road that connects the crossing of the same name with Dahashvamedha *ghat*. This road affords easy access to the main *ghat,* although not easy enough to let tourist buses go all the way to the *ghat* so that tourists have to walk. Especially early in the morning, when package tourists are taken to Dashashavamedha for the boat ride, the bus parks near Godaulia crossing and tourists walk the distance to the river. This is not done only because of traffic restrictions, it is also meant, as several guides and tour leaders told me, to give tourists the chance for a brief experience to 'the real life' of Vanaranasi, the everyday activities of people in the lively market and streets of the area. Moreover, doing this in the early morning when the atmosphere is still relatively calm is a way of softening the impact of this 'characteristic' but potentially shocking experience to tourists, who in fact are always very impressed and often disturbed by it, as the accounts they gave of it to me revealed.

5.6.2 THE BHU

As with Sarnath, when one enters the gate of the Banaras Hindu University (BHU) campus from the mayhem of the city centre, one feels a great sense of relief. The tree-lined avenues of the campus, the edifices ordered in blocks and the quiet, sporadic traffic convey a sense of peace and 'order'. The contrast here is even neater; firstly, because the BHU is located within the bustling borough of Lanka, contiguous with the rest of the city, so because of this proximity, you really feel a starker contrast between chaos and calmness as soon as you cross the entrance gate of the campus. In the case

of Sarnath, instead, as it lies in the outskirts of the city, one can move progressively from the hustle and bustle of the city centre to the tranquillity of the more rural area of Sarnath. Secondly, unlike Sarnath, the BHU is encircled by a fence, with a proper guarded entrance gate: its spatial demarcation is well defined, and it conveys a neat sense of 'inside' and 'outside', with the BHU constituting a sort of ordered enclave contrasting with the chaotic Lanka outside. Such a binary construction of the BHU space is perceptual as much as representational: it is in fact fuelled by popular tourist literature, as the extract below from the Lonely Planet shows:

The wide tree-lined streets and parkland of the 5-sq-Km campus offer a peaceful atmosphere a world away from the city outside.

(Lonely Planet 2009: 445)

Most package tours provide a visit to the BHU campus, usually after the morning boat ride, and before proceeding to Sarnath, although the schedule may vary. Independent travellers too often include the campus in their sightseeing. The two attractions that draw tourists to the BHU are the Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum, an Indian art and archaeology museum whose importance is recognised nationally and is especially famous for its fine collection of miniature paintings, and the New Vishvanatha Temple, in the middle of the campus. This imposing white marble temple was built in 1966 as a replica, it is believed, of the old Vishvanatha temple in the old city. As a tourist site, the temple is constructed around narratives of inclusiveness and harmony: guidebooks and tour guides highlight the fact that the new Vishvanatha, unlike the old one, welcomes people from any caste and ethnic and religious background, 'in accord – Sing and Rana's (2002: 141) guide to Varanasi stresses – with the idea of the founder to promote Neo-Hinduism'. In addition, 'beautiful, neat and attractive lawns are maintained around the temple where a visitor finds a peaceful rest' (*ibid.*). As for Sarnath, tourist representations load the material and symbolic landscape of the New Vishvanatha Temple with ideals of peace and harmony. The temple is a markedly Hindu space, literally scripted with Hinduism, with verses from the sacred texts all over

the walls, *linga* shrines and niches on its two-storey space, and with *aarti pujas* and devotional rituals celebrated throughout the day. Yet, the temple is scripted also by other practices: the routines of tourists visiting the temple, listening to (or reading through) their guides' stories, taking pictures, chilling out in the lawns, the university students coming to study in the cool of the temple's wide marbled halls, or coming for a good-luck *darshan* before an exam, the 'hustle bustle of the shoes' at the entrance of the sacred complex, where tourists leave and pick up their shoes before entering or on return from the temple. This is, in fact, a devotional, tourist, contemplative and recreational space all together. The BHU campus more broadly is a multiple space. It is a representational space which sustains the trope of Varanasi as the cultural capital of India:

> Long regarded as a centre of learning, Varanasi's tradition of top-quality education continues today at Benares Hindu University.
>
> (Lonely Planet 2009: 444)

It should be noted that it is a space of *Hindu* knowledge in particular, although often depicted as representative of Indian knowledge as a whole. The semi-circular radial plan of the campus – it has been pointed out – symbolises the 'half moon on the forehead of Shiva' (Singh and Rana 2002: 141). At the same time, the BHU is promoted as a 'modern', multicultural, international space of education, 'the largest residential university in India' (*ibid.*: 141). The BHU is a representational space also in regard to the idea of 'isle of peace and order' that it projects. In this respect, the campus can indeed be framed as an enclavic tourist space. Many of the arguments made for the Cantonment apply here as well: the BHU is even more clearly defined, materially enclosed by fences, policed, regulated; the 'isle' is even 'virtually turned into a fortress' (The Times of India 2009, press article that reports on a state visit to the BHU) in occasion of state visits or other official occurrences, an operation facilitated by the fact that the campus is already itself a self-enclosed space. And yet, as for the Cantt, the BHU cannot be regarded as an homogeneous space: the 'multiple space' of the New Vishvanatha temple, the comings and goings of rickshaws, the flows and networks of

international students, tourists, the staff working in the campus and belonging to different castes, religions, social and cultural backgrounds, all this makes the BHU a more regulated, but still diverse tourist space.

5.6.3 RAMNAGAR

FIGURE 38 - RAMNAGAR FORT (AUTHOR'S PHOTO)

Ramnagar is one of the districts of Varanasi's urban units (Singh 2009a: 49); it extends on the Eastern bank of the Ganges and it is famous for its eighteenth-century fort standing decadent but impressive on the riverbank and hosting the residence of the Maharaja of Benares. Ramnagar is in many respects a zone 'apart'. It is so topographically, as it sits on the opposite bank of the Ganga and it is thereby physically separated from the rest of Varanasi by the river. The fastest way to reach Ramnagar from the Western bank is either by boat, or via the unsteady pontoon bridge in the Southern part of Varanasi; the bridge can be accessed only by light vehicles and it is removed during the monsoon season. Alternatively, two roads connect Varanasi with Ramnagar from, respectively, the far-Northern and far-Southern parts of the city. Links between these two areas are therefore not very convenient. Ramnagar is indeed often left out by package tours, most definitely by those spending only one night in Varanasi. A visit to the fort and the royal palace of Ramnagar is instead likely to be included by independent travellers, typically as a half-day trip, a diversion in their *ghat*-centred stay. Guided tours of Ramnagar and guidebooks direct the tourist gaze to the fort, the

palace and the annexed museum, mobilising history in the 'fabrication' (Duncan and Gregory 1999: 5) of the glorious past and former splendour of what used to be the capital of the state of Benares in British India, Ramnagar, indeed. Whilst one side of the Ganga, along the *ghats,* tells stories of gods, *sadhus* and sacred shrines, the other, at Ramnagar, tells stories of *maharajas, nawabs,* pomp and conquests, medieval battles and royal hunting. It is interesting to notice how local and Western popular tourist literature highlights different aspects of this same narrative: guidebooks produced by local authors and institutions focus on the celebration of the royal past and its cultural heritage providing more detailed historical accounts and information about the museum's collection and other important sites of interest nearby (see for example Varanasi City Guide 2002: 124-129; Singh and Rana 2002: 175-178). Western guidebooks, on the other hand, highlight that past as 'decadent' (Rough Guide 2001: 352) and dwell on the oddities of the 'eccentric' (Lonely Planet 2009: 445) museum, so reinforcing ideas of India as the space of the exotic. Moreover, Western narratives frame the 'crumbling but impressive' (*ibid.*) Ramnagar Fort as a picturesque and romantic sight, 'a beautiful place to watch the sunset over the river' (*ibid.*). However, in constructing Ramnagar as a tourist site, popular tourism literature in general draws on the grand narrative of fabulous regal India (deployed at its best in the tourist promotion of Rajasthan – see Henderson and Weisgrau 2007). In a sense, then, Ramnagar can be seen as the celebration of the secular as opposed to the sacred Kashi, literally on the opposite side of the river. And yet, once again, spaces merge and the sacred and the secular are in fact deeply interconnected. They are actually connected in the figure of the *maharaja,* renowned for his patronage of the arts and of many cultural-religious events going on in Varanasi. The most popular of these events – the one for which Ramnagar is actually famous – is the annual Ram Lila, a cycle of plays staging the epic of the Ramayana, celebrating the story of Lord Rama. The month-long event initiated by a former king of Varanasi in the nineteenth century is still sponsored today by the *maharaja.* In this occasion, the whole Ramnagar literally turns into an extended theatre where this folk religious performance takes place every night.

5.7 Conclusions

This chapter focused on the spaces of Western tourism in Varanasi. It sought to answer my initial research question about where tourists carry out their activities, where they position themselves in the landscape of Varanasi. My findings have suggested that my initial question was possibly poorly conceived: tourists do not simply 'position' themselves 'within' the landscape, as if the landscape was a sheer container of their practices, rather they constitute it. Tourists – this chapter has shown – *create* space, and this space is hardly a uniform, single, definable and measurable space, rather, it is made up of movements, connections, shifting places. And yet, there are more stable, bounded cartographies of tourism in Varanasi: the *ghat* strip from Assi to Manikarnika, the fixed itineraries of package tourists, the tend-to-be enclavic Cantonement, the 'exclusive' hang-outs of hippyish travellers. There are, in fact, some zones that can be identified as particularly relevant to Western tourism: the *ghats,* the Cantonment, the city centre, Sarnath. Some of them retain the characteristics of the 'enclave', others can be framed as 'heterogeneous' tourist spaces. The spatial practices of tourists tend to follow the 'normative agendas' of guidebooks (Crang 2004: 77; Koshar 1998) and tour operators: package tourists stick to planned itineraries and stay in certain zones, independent travellers see the recommended sites, do the recommended activities, dine and sleep in the recommended restaurants and guesthouses. However, the key argument in this chapter was that tourists also 'disobey' maps, and that spaces, too, 'disobey' fixed definitions. Varanasi is indeed made up of multiple geographies: sacred – whether Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, etc. – and 'lay' geographies (Crouch 2005: 28), 'obedient' and 'transgressive', ordered, regulated, and improvisational, bounded and blurring, perceptual, embodied, and imagined. These geographies sometimes overlap, sometimes run parallel, sometimes intersect, sometimes enclose themselves within discrete boundaries. Ironically, I often felt lost in my attempts at mapping tourist practices in Varanasi; it occurred to me that as the tourist gets lost in the mazes of lanes of the city, so the researcher – myself – gets lost into the geographies of tourism in Varanasi. Like the tourist, though, by getting lost one often discovers new perspectives. The perspective through which I have looked at tourist geographies in this chapter was not the 'god's-eye view' (Rose 1997: 313) of the map,

where the researcher-cartographer seeks to project stable order on to the map thereby freezing the mobile, fleeting geographies of the tourist; instead, the adopted perspective here was that of the wandering tourist, who in fact disrupts the order of the map. By acknowledging the instability of cartographic representations of tourist practices, this chapter has sought to respond to the call 'to thoroughly *mobilize* both the tourist and the places in our analyses of tourism' (Crang 2006: 64, emphasis in original), providing an account of the unstable cartographies of Western tourism in Varanasi.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this thesis was to investigate Western tourist representations and practices in Varanasi. My research was prompted by the questions of how Varanasi is represented in tourist narratives and how these narratives are put into practice and negotiated in place. Thus, the core part of my research was concerned with finding out how tourists and the tourism industry imagine and depict this city, what tourists actually do in Varanasi, and what their geographies of the city are, in order to uncover and investigate the relationships between tourist practices and the discourses and representations that inform them, and that they in turn reproduce, looking in particular at the new meanings emerging from their encounter. In order to answer these questions I undertook extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Varanasi, where I collected data through participant observation, interviews with Western travellers, city dwellers, tour leaders, guides and tourism officers, and through tourist questionnaires, photography and audio-recording. From a theoretical point of view, I have drawn extensively on theories of landscape, which I consider particular well suited to my aims of exploring the way in which tourists see Varanasi, how their gaze is constructed by diverse narratives, and how their embodied gaze and other practices become entangled in productive encounters, which themselves constitute the landscape of the city.

My research has highlighted that tourist representations of Varanasi have to be understood within a broader interplay of discourses bringing together colonial imaginations and Hindu narratives, global tourist marketing and the appropriation and reworking of tourism by local social actors. The axis on which those diverse discourses converge is the representation of Varanasi as 'unique' and 'different', that is to say as

an essentialised landscape embodying different meanings: in tourist representations it embodies 'the other', in Hindu discourses the luminous essence of Shiva and in travellers' narratives a 'special energy'. The 'uniqueness' and 'difference' of Varanasi are constructed mainly upon ideas of timelessness, spirituality, traditional knowledge, but also decadence, misery and death. These are framed within an aestheticised landscape which reproduces a colonial way of seeing, where otherness is 'tamed' and the viewer is distanced from the scene, which becomes an object over which the gazing subject retains control. However, the gaze that is at work in the tourist landscape of Varanasi is not only constituted by the legacy of the European colonial past. Varanasi's landscape is in fact also laden with the contemplative and liminal characteristics of the Hindu *darshan,* the transcendental gaze which is believed to connect the devotee/viewer with the divine/scene. The gaze here is supposed to put the viewing subject in connection with – instead of separating him/her from – the scene under view: by taking the *darshan* of Ganga-ji the devotee establishes a metaphysical relationship with the divinised landscape of the river, engaging in an activity which is at the same time aesthetic and ecstatic. In tourist promotion, this is reworked into the construction of the *ghatscape* as a vision revealing the essence of Hindu life and its intrinsic relationship with the spiritual. The sight of the riverscape is in fact at the centre of the activity that almost every tourist in Varanasi undertakes, that is the boat ride along the *ghats,* but it is also celebrated in the sacred/tourist ritual of the Ganga Aarti, and enjoyed up close by tourists in their walks on the *ghat* promenade. However, tourist representations of Varanasi are not only fuelled by grand narratives – whether Western or Hindu. My research has shown how the tourist discourse on Varanasi is also constituted by narratives 'from below', produced by the interactions of social actors *in loco*, that is to say by travellers, tourists, *gathers*, unofficial guides, boatmen, *babas.* These give rise to a rich, context-specific language and narrative flow, which I have described as 'the tourist mantras' and, in the case of traveller talks, as '*chai*chatting'.

What emerges from the discussion of the first part of my empirical findings is that the representation and the visual construction of Varanasi cannot be disentangled from the practices that actualise and nourish them. That leads to the second key question posed at the beginning of the thesis: how do Western tourists practise the landscape

of Varanasi? What do they do in this sacred city? One of the challenges in writing the results of my research was to harness the 'messiness' of practice into the analytical necessities of writing: in the field, representation and practice merge, it is not possible to analyse one without dealing with the other. The systematic nature of a thesis, in a sense, forces one to put some 'order' into the messiness of the tourist practice. And yet, it is that very messiness that allows us to better understand the tourist experience. In analysing the practices of Western tourism in Varanasi, I dwelled on some defining activities. I examined key visual practices specific to Varanasi: the *ghat* boat sight-seeing and the Ganga Aarti celebration; I brought into focus practices of talk, walking and the seductive interplay in the tourist encounter; I looked at the activities through which tourists enact the 'living heritage' of Varanasi, for example by practising yoga, *kathak* dance or performing Hindu traditional rituals. I also looked at the sensual engagement of tourists with the landscape: I delved into the soundscape of Varanasi and showed how tourists aurally perceive the city mostly as a contrast between the harmony of the *ghats* and the cacophony of the city centre; I showed how they engage actively with the sonic construction of the landscape by listening to and playing music, a practice which is particularly relevant to Varanasi for its reputation as a centre of Indian classical music. I also looked at another defining activity in Varanasi, bathing in the 'holy' Ganga, as a way for tourists to literally immerse themselves in – but also, for many, to maintain a distance from – the spiritually loaded landscape of the riverfront. I explored tourist practices centred on the consumption of food, and looked at how the landscape is reconfigured through the weakened body of the sick tourist. These practices enact different gazes, where the social actors involved negotiate different imageries, imagined landscapes, understandings of self and other. Indeed, tourist practices are to be thought of as practices of identity which dynamically engage with dominant narratives and individual imaginations, with the global patterns of the tourism industry and personal trajectories, with fantasies, dreams, expectations, and materialities, objects, bodies, with the aesthetic and the lived landscape. In Varanasi, practice is reframed through the Hindu concept of *karma,* with which tourists are made familiar through the account of their guides, travel readings, local touts, children or *pandas* inviting tourists to make donations, buy 'candle-*puja*', perform rituals for 'good *karma*'. Where the

idea of *karma* is particularly relevant to tourist practices is its imbrication with the ritual aspect. In the Hindu conception of ritual practice, it is the repetition of a particular action, its performance in a specific place at a specific time that makes that action meaningful and spiritually beneficial. The performing of the ritual dip in the Ganga at sunrise, for example, or the carrying out of death rites on the *ghats* are believed to be actions that build good *karma.* The repetition of practice is what contributes to construct the tourist landscape as well: the boat ride in the early morning; the ritualisation of traveller talks into a specific jargon made up of '*shanti*', '*chalò*' and '*om-namah-shivaya*', and its enactment in particular places like the *chai* stall or the guesthouse's rooftop; the choreographies of package tourism; the bargaining, buying and lighting of 'Ganga-candle-*pujas*' that tourists (and pilgrims) let flow in the river as the night approaches. As proper ritual actions lead to build good *karma,* so tourist practices lead to build cultural capital and ensure, at the same time, that the landscape of Varanasi is constantly recognised, sustained, reproduced. In a sense then, as the ritual action is meant to reproduce and maintain the cosmic order, so tourist practice re-produces and creates the tourist 'ritual' space.

This drives us straight to the last key question that the thesis has tried to answer, which has to do with the tourist geographies of Varanasi. My research has highlighted that there are some areas within the city that are particularly connected with Western tourism: the *ghats* and the old city*,* the city centre, the Cantonment and Sarnath. These areas are defined both by the imaginative geographies of tourism promotion and by the repetition of practices and the corporeal engagement of tourists with the city. So for example the *ghats* are criss-crossed by the reiterated movements of walking and boating; the city centre is identified as a space of sensual confusion and chaos; the Cantonment serves as the headquarters for the regulated activities of organised tourism; Sarnath is the mandatory stop in the pre-designed itineraries of package tours proceeding from Varanasi to the next destination.

However, what also emerged from the research is that these cartographies are actually unstable and shifting. They are indeed challenged by the practices of the wandering tourist, who disobeys the official cartographies of tourism and makes connections, creates networks and spaces off the map. These compose what I have defined as the

'grey zones' of tourism in Varanasi, that is zones to be found in the interstices of the city rather than in its hotspots, zones constructed by the ordinary routines of travellers rather than by the trails of sightseeing and guided tours, zones made up of mobile and multi-scalar places, zones that are at the same time 'enclavic' and 'heterogeneous'. These fleeting spaces, I have shown, include *chai* stalls, cybercafés, rooftops, silk shops and private homes, rickshaws, yoga *ashrams,* bookshops. In such a diffuse landscape, some scenes stand out: the vivid and chaotic Godaulia; the peaceful campus of the BHU, the royal Ramnagar with the aesthetic decadence of its fort and the *maharaja*'s palace. What I argued, therefore, is that the geographies of Western tourism in Varanasi are constituted by a continuous tension between the inclination of tourists to abide by paths, routes, places indicated by guidebooks, tour operators, tourism offices, and the constant transgression of official mappings through improvisational movements, mundane practices and purposeless wanderings. In turn, tourist spaces are interwoven, to different degrees, with a range of diverse spatial practices, from the circumambulations of pilgrims to the everyday activities of the city dwellers. Indeed, while the concepts of 'enclavic' and 'heterogeneous' spaces (Edensor 1998; 2000) constitute a helpful framework in order to understand tourist spatial formations, one should beware of using them within a binary logic, as doing so does not account for the actual messiness of the practices and spaces of tourism; instead, tourist spaces may be 'more' or 'less' heterogeneous, 'more' or 'less' regulated, and tourist practices be more or less predictable, disciplined, or spontaneous.

These findings draw on, and contribute to, the wider academic debate on the tourist practice. I have shown how the context of Varanasi has its own specificity which allows for further insights into tourist representation and practice. Indeed, my research engages Western theorisations of gaze and practice with alternative concepts of gaze and practice drawn from the Indian, and specifically Hindu, context. It brings together two different traditions and practices through which to look at the tourist experience: the notions of *darshan* and *karma* dialogue with the corresponding Western concepts embedded in the constructions of the tourist landscape. Varanasi, then, constitutes a space of negotiation in these two different ways of understanding gaze and practice, and it shows how, on the one hand, places are 'available' to our analyses and, on the other, they 'take hold' of, and rework, our practices. The realm of practice, then, is one

in which we 'learn' from place: as it is intrinsically enmeshed with the context, it entails working across diverse traditions and enriching our analyses with different concepts and frameworks deriving from that very context. In focusing my research on Varanasi I have contributed to widening the literature on gaze and practice by decentring European/Western ideas and bringing in 'alternative' concepts – the core of postcolonial theorising. At the same time, by analysing the practices and geographies of Western tourism in Varanasi I have contributed to filling the gap in research on Western tourists in this city, a field of enquiry which has been largely neglected, the relevant literature being mainly focused on religious tourism, pilgrimage and sacred geographies.

However, investigations on the practices and embodied performances of tourism leave scope for further research. In fact, despite recent tourism research which focuses on the body of the tourist (Minca 2011 forthcoming), we still know little about whose body it is. Broadening empirical research is important as it reduces the risk of constructing homogenous representations of the body of the tourist, as if the practices, feelings, affects and performances of, say, children and adult tourists, able-bodied and disabled tourists, male and female tourists, and so forth could all be gathered and represented under a uniform idea of body and perceptions. One of the aspects that caught my attention during my recent fieldtrips was the increasing number of Western tourists travelling with children in India. Seeing how those children negotiated space and their encounter with the other through play, how they interacted with (exotic) animals roaming freely around the city, how parents reportedly re-framed their own experience of the country 'through their children's eyes', raised questions as to the place of children within tourism research – focused mainly on adult travellers – and suggested the need for research investigating tourist imagination and practices from the perspective of child travellers.

Questions also emerged in the field as to the problematic use of the category of the 'West': I have often found myself asking who the 'Westerners' in Varanasi actually are. Should, for example, British, American or Dutch tourists of Indian origin – of whom I met many in Varanasi – be considered 'Westerners' in all respects? How should we refer to Western foreigners who have been living in Varanasi for many years? Are they

still to be labelled as 'Western travellers'? And what about the conspicuous presence of South-Asian and Eastern tourists in Varanasi? Or the increasing number of Indian middle-class tourists who in many respects reproduce typically modern Western ideas and practices of travel? All these questions point to possible new research topics related, respectively, to the emerging of 'Diaspora tourism', the rising of Indian middle-class tourism, the increasing of Asian – south-Asian in particular – tourism in India, fostered by the implementation of the 'Look East policy'[72] by the Indian Ministry of Tourism.

Finally, while in the thesis I dwelled on what I considered being the most defining practices of Western tourism in Varanasi, some other equally relevant activities have been left unexplored and would deserve attention. Among these is the 'performance of silk' in Banaras. As I have mentioned, Varanasi is widely known for the silk and brocade manufacture; the Benares *saris* are the pride of the local arts and craft and the focus of tourist shopping in the city. Indeed, the strategies and performances enacted by both silk vendors and tourists around the silk bargaining would deserve more consideration in that they would provide more insights into both the tourist practices inherent to Varanasi, and the engagements of tourist performance with the material cultures of tourism.

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[72] Tourist marketing strategy aimed at developing South-Asian tourism in India, with particular regard to Buddhist tourism. Information provided by my informant employed in the Government of India tourism office in Varanasi.

APPENDIX 1

Tourist Questionnaire

My name is Cristiana Zara, I am an Italian PhD student looking at tourism in Varanasi. I would be very grateful if you answer a few questions. The information is purely for academic use and will not be used for commercial purposes. For any queries feel free to contact me at the details provided at the end of the questionnaire.

Date: Nationality: Age:

Gender: F   M

Occupation:

Package tourist   ☐   FIT (Free Individual Traveller)   ☐

When did you arrive in Varanasi?

Total length of your stay in Varanasi:

Previous destination:

Next destination :

Your accommodation in Varanasi (please indicate also where it is situated):

Why did you decide to come to Varanasi?

What have you done or will you do during your stay in Varanasi? (Choose as many as you like):

Boat ride on Ganges	Listening to music	Sitting on the ghats
Ganga Aarti ceremony	Meditating	Shopping
Writing	Photographing (or videotaping)	Chatting
Drawing	Playing music	Dancing
Reading	Practicing yoga	Walking
Gazing	Praying	**Other:**

Sightseeing (please indicate what you have been visiting)

In which part of the city have you spent or will you spend most of your time?

Ghats	Sarnath	City

Your comments about Varanasi?

If you are willing to answer a few more e-mail questions about your experience in Varanasi please put your e-mail address here:

Thank you very much for your time!

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Questionnaires: Overview of the sample

Number of questionnaires distributed: approximately 190.

Number of questionnaires collected: 135, from which 27 have been taken out as the respondents were non-western tourists.

Number of questionnaires filled out by western travellers: 108.

Age	N.	Nationality	N.	Gender	N.	Occupation	N.
0-10	0	Argentina	2	F	50	Employed (e.g.: Healthcare support, Education, Management, etc.)	74
11-20	10	Australia	10	M	58	Students	19
21-30	22	Austria	4	N.g.	0	Retired	6
31-40	27	Belgium	1			Other	2
41-50	16	Brazil	2			N. g.	7
51-60	15	Britain	19				
61-70	9	Canada	8				
71-80	4	Colombia	2				
N.g.	5	Czechoslovakia	2				
		Denmark	3				

		Holland	2				
		France	14				
		Germany	6				
		Ireland	4				
		Italy	4				
		Mexico	2				
		South Africa	1				
		Spain	1				
		Sweden	1				
		Uruguay	1				
		Usa	17				
		N.g.	2				

N.g. = not given

APPENDIX 3

Tourist questionnaire: Summary of tourist activities in Varanasi

Ranking based on the results of the questionnaires distributed to tourists in Varanasi.

Number of questionnaires distributed: approximately 190.

Number of questionnaires collected: 135, from which 27 have been taken out as the respondents were non-western tourists.

Number of questionnaires filled out by western travellers: 108.

	Activities	Preferences	%	Comments
1	Boat ride on the Ganges	94 / 108	87.03	
2	Sightseeing	79 / 108	72.22	They mainly mean the Ghats-temples-BHU-Sarnath tour
3	Walking	62 / 108	57.40	
4	Sitting on the ghats	61 / 108	56.48	Perhaps some meant the Ganga Aarti as 'sitting on the ghats'
5	Photographing	60 / 108	55.55	
6	Ganga Aarti Ceremony	48 / 108	44.44	Perhaps some tourists did attend it, but didn't know that it was called Ganga Aarti, so they didn't mention it in their activities
7	Shopping	39 / 108	36.11	
8	Reading	29 / 108	26.85	

9	Gazing	27 / 108	25.00	Perhaps non-English speakers didn't know this word
10	Chatting	18 / 108	16.66	
11	Listening to music	17 / 108	15.74	
12	Meditating	13 / 108	12.03	
13	Praying	13 / 108	12.03	
14	Writing	7 / 108	6.48	
15	Practising yoga	6 / 108	5.55	
16	Drawing	3 / 108	2.77	
17	Playing music	3 / 108	2.77	
18	Dancing	3 / 108	2.77	
19	Other (e.g.: swimming; having Ayurveda massage; engaging with locals; tracing one's grandfathers life; staying in hospital for a few days; meeting holy people)			

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