

Theology of *Karman*

Merit, death and release in the case of Varanasi, India

The motives of pilgrims

Pilgrimage has, of course, many aspects worth studying. To mention a few; one may focus on the ritual aspect and study pilgrimage as a ritual process, focussing on the various rituals being performed by the pilgrims on the way to their goal, or, once they have reached their goal, either by the pilgrims or by ritual specialists. One may also focus on the experiential or psychological, or on the social aspects of pilgrimage. Or, one may focus on a combination of all of these aspects, as, for example, is the case with the studies of Victor Turner (Turner 1973, 1974; Turner & Turner 1978).

In this article, I shall focus on the question as to what motives the pilgrims may have for performing pilgrimage, and, in doing this, I shall be dealing especially with the Hindu tradition, namely with pilgrimage to Varanasi, Banaras or Kāśī, which is often considered the Hindu sacred city par excellence by both Hindus and Westerners alike.

Today, Varanasi is a medium sized Indian town at the confluences of the Gaṅgā, Varuṇa and Asi rivers, situated 82° 56'E – 83° 03'E and 25° 14'N – 25° 23.5'N in the South Eastern corner of Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state of India. According to the 2001 census, the town itself has a little more than 1.1 million inhabitants and covers approximately 112 square kilometers and is the centre of the Varanasi district with more than 3.1 million inhabitants (Census 2001).

It is not uncommon to hear the claim that Varanasi is one of the oldest towns in the world with an unbroken Hindu history. However, this is not altogether correct. To judge from the so-called Raj Ghat excavations, archaeological evidence of the earliest settlement at Varanasi cannot be pushed back further than the eighth century BCE. Furthermore, we cannot talk of a truly urban settlement until some centuries later. Thanks to its situation at a confluence of one of the largest North Indian rivers, it seems to have developed into a thriving commercial city which, according to Buddhist sources, attracted

the Buddha and his followers to the nearby deer park and village of Sarnath. However, there is no evidence of Brahmanic or Hindu religion in Varanasi until the end of the third century CE, from which time the first emblems with Śaiva symbols have been found. As Hans T. Bakker and Harunaga Isaacson (2004: 20–1) have argued, the transformation of Varanasi from a commercial into a sacred town took place between the fourth and the early sixth centuries during the Gupta dynasty. This coincides with a general decay of towns in Western and Northern India which R. S. Sharma has attributed to the fall of the Kuṣāṇa empire and the resulting decline in long-distance trade with Central Asia and the Roman Empire (Sharma 1987: 132–42).

The source of this analysis will be four chapters (KK IV.1.25–8) of the Sanskrit text called *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* which is attributed to the Skanda Purāṇ and seems to reflect the conditions after the Muslim raids in 1194 CE. Thus, it was probably composed sometime during the thirteenth or fourteenth century CE (Eck 1983: 9). Of these four chapters the first deals in an overall way with Kāśī as such under the name Avimukta, the second deals more specifically with the area around the present Maṇīkarnīkā Ghāṭ, and the last two deal more generally with the river Gaṅgā. Most of the material in the analysis stems from the two first chapters.

Although this text is not modern, its traditions are still reflected in the present day Varanasi, and, although it is a Brahmanic text, it has possibly influenced many of the popular ideas about Varanasi which are found among Hindus all over India even today. The complete *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* is quite a voluminous work and may be considered an inflated glorification, *māhātmya* or *sthalapurāṇa*, of Kāśī, as I shall call it from now on.¹ These glorifications are Brahmanic texts which intend to popularize sacred places, by telling their myths of origin and, not least, by describing the fruits which visits or pilgrimages to them give. I am here using the term ‘theology’, because the thought system found in the text is fashioned by Brahmins, or theologians, and not because the article deals with ‘theology’ proper. Although I have not myself investigated the motives of modern pilgrims to Varanasi, the overall remarks of the Indian anthropologist L. P. Vidyarthi that the ‘merits of pilgrimage range from immediate relief from mundane troubles to the expiation of the sins and gaining the ultimate reality’ does, however, suggest that the motives

1 I have relied mainly on the so-called Mora-edition (Vedavyasa 1961), but in the case of doubt I have also consulted the edition of Ācārya Śrī Karuṇāpāṭi Tripāṭhi (Vyasa 1991 and 1992).

of modern pilgrims in general are similar to the motives which are described in much more detail in this text (Vidyarthi & Jha et al. 1979: 128).

The sources of the power of Kāśī

The effects of pilgrimage are attributed to the special power of the sacred place. In the case of the Kāśīkhaṇḍa, the power of Kāśī, or, as it is also called in this text, Avimukta, is attributed to several factors.

The first and foremost of these factors seems to be the presence of the Hindu god Śiva who is said to be constantly abiding there. Thus one verse says:

Avimukta is said to be the highest secret among secrets here. There achievement is present. There the Lord constantly dwells.²
(KK IV.1.25.57.)

In fact the meaning of the name Avimukta is what is 'not left', or 'unleft', and refers to the idea that Śiva has never left, and will never leave this place.³

The same idea is also expressed later in the text in the form of a cosmogonic myth which, combining features of Vedic and Sāṅkhya cosmogony, explains how the god Śiva is identical with Brahman, Puruṣa, or the One Principle, which alone existed before creation. Śiva now created two objects or beings. Out of his own body he first created his female counterpart, Śivā, or the Goddess, who is identified with the Sāṅkhya principle of matter, Prakṛti or Pradhāna, which is again identified with Māyā or the great illusion. Simultaneously, the text says, Kāśī was created from the soles of the feet of Śiva and the goddess, for the sake of their sport, and because they never leave that spot, it is called the 'unleft' or Avimukta (KK IV.1.26.8–28).

Thus, according to this myth, the special power of Kāśī should be attributed to two circumstances. Firstly, that this place is grounded in creation, with

2 gūhyānām paramaṃ guhyam avimuktam iheritam / tatra saṃnihitā siddhis tatra nityaṃ sthito vibhuḥ //. All translations in this article are my own, although I have consulted G. V. Tagare's translation (Tagare 1996).

3 Several passages in the text, however, also make a word play on the name to the effect that the person who does not leave the unleft place (yo 'vimuktaṃ na muñcati) reaches some superior state of existence; see e.g. KK IV.1.67 and 75, or KK IV.1.77 where the one who does not leave Avimukta is said to become mukta or released.

the corresponding associations of being the centre of the world. Secondly, the circumstance that it is the eternal sporting ground of Śiva and his consort.⁴

Connected with the concept of Kāśī being the centre of the world is also the idea that it is actually not situated in this world, but in the intermediate sphere between heaven and earth (*antarikṣa*) (KK IV.1.25.58).

A second component in the power of Kāśī is the importance of the cremation *ghāt*, *Maṇikarṇikā*, which has its own mythical legitimation in the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* (KK IV.1.26.36 ff.). As has been pointed out by Bakker and Isaacson (2004: 42, 46 ff.), this place is not included in the description of the sacred area in the earliest *māhātmya* of Varanasi, probably because it was considered too impure. It may, however, have been inhabited by Pāśupata ascetics who frequented cemeteries and used to smear their bodies with ashes, and, in later versions of the *Kāśī māhātmya*, this impure place was included in the sacred area and may have contributed to the popular idea that dying in Kāśī confers immediate salvation on man.

A third component is, of course, the river *Gaṅgā*, whose waters are considered able to purify all sins and defilements. That this component was also considered by the authors of the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* is clear from the fact that two long chapters (KK.IV.1.27 and 28) praising the effects and sacredness of the river *Gaṅgā* have been added directly after the chapters that praise *Avimukta* and *Maṇikarṇikā*.

The fruits of pilgrimage

Having established what the sources of the powers of Kāśī are, let us now turn to investigate what the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* tells about the fruits of visiting or staying in Kāśī.⁵ A statement regarding the merit attributed to an observance or a ritual, in Sanskrit called *phalaśruti*, is a phenomenon which goes back to the Vedic tradition where various rituals were thought to confer different merits on the person making the sacrifice, or the *yajamāna*. In the later, and more popular *Purāṇas* such statements became much more frequent, especially the

4 The theme that Varanasi is the playing ground of Śiva and his consort goes back to the oldest known *māhātmya* of Varanasi which has recently been edited and published by Bakker and Isaacson (2004).

5 Actually, the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*, and many other similar texts, does not use the terms pilgrim or pilgrimage very often, but rather speaks about the persons who dwell in Kāśī (*kaśīvasi*), or uses various constructions implying that people go to or visit Kāśī.



Mañikarṇikā cremation ghāṭ. Photo © Erik Reenberg Sand 2010.

later Purāṇic mātmyas which are, in a way, whole textual statements of the merits to be gained from reciting or listening to various religious texts like the Bhāgavāta Purāṇa or the Bhagavadgītā, or from worshipping various deities or visiting various sacred places.

Compared to the earlier Vedic or Brahmanic texts most of these texts agree in inflating the merits earned by the observances or rituals described. One way of doing so is to compare them to Vedic or Brahmanic rituals. Another way is to compare them to ascetic behaviour, thus making simple popular observances or rituals equal to those of the classical traditions of Hinduism. This was a way of empowering both the common man and his popular rituals, and, of course, also the Brahmins who stood to gain from officiating at these rituals, conferring upon them the legitimacy of the religious elites. The same is the case with pilgrimage (tīrthayātra), which in general is seen as a popular ritual available not only to the religious and social elites but also to the common man. One could mention many examples of this strategy of equalizing pilgrimage with classic behaviour and rituals in the Kāśīkhaṇḍa, but here I shall only give a very general example. Viṣṇu, in one passage asks Śiva for the following boons:

Whatever purifying things are told in the Vedas (śruti), O Sadāśiva, let this sacred place be more excellent than those, O Three-eyed one.

And whatever merit there is from the study of the four Vedas, that merit shall be produced from reciting a hundred thousand Gāyatrīs in Kāśī.

Besides, whatever merit is produced from the study of the eight limbs of yoga (aṣṭāṅgayoga), let that merit and more be produced from visiting Kāśī with faith⁶ (KK IV.1.26.83–5).

In this example the power of Kāśī is compared to the purifying rituals of the entire Vedic tradition, and, more specifically, the recital in Kāśī of one single verse of the Veda, the famous Gāyatrī-mantra (Ṛgveda 3.62.10), which is recited by many orthodox Hindus daily, is compared to the entire Vedic tradition. Similarly, the efficiency of pilgrimage to Kāśī is compared to the practice

6 yāni kāni pavitrāṇi śrutyuktāni sadāśiva / tebhyo 'dhikataṃ cāstu kṣetram etat trilocana // caturṇām api vedānām puṇyam adhyayanāc ca yat / tat puṇyam jāyatām kāśyām gāyatrīlakṣajāpyataḥ // aṣṭāṅgayogābhyāsenā yat puṇyam api jāyate / tat puṇyam sādḥikām bhūyāc chraddhākāśīniṣevaṇāt //

of classical yoga, which may here be taken to represent the non-worldly ascetic and yogic practices.

The merits of pilgrimage to Kāśī

After having characterized the genre of Kāśīkhaṇḍa's descriptions of the fruits of pilgrimage, or, perhaps, one should add, staying in Varanasi (kāśivāsa), let us now turn to investigate what the fruits are that the text attributes to visiting this place. Here we should, perhaps, add that the conceptual frame of the text is of course the idea of karman; in other words, the idea that all actions or deeds have effects on our future existence both in the life consequent upon this birth and in the next one.

In general, one gets the impression from reading the 31 pages which describe the merits of Kāśī in the form of Avimukta, Maṇīkarṇikā and Gaṅgā that there is no limit to them, or, as the text says:

How is it possible for me with my six mouths to tell the glory of Avimukta which even the thousand faced [snake of the primeval ocean] is not able to do (KK IV.1.25.78)?⁷

The following can, therefore, only be an extract hereof.

The text itself gives a brief but fine classification of the mechanism of merit and its results at the end of its glorification of Kāśī as Avimukta with the following verse:

Which wise man would not at the end [i.e. at death] take refuge to Kāśī which is destroying a flood of great sins, causing accumulation of merits, [and] conferring worldly pleasures and release (KK IV.1.25.76).⁸

Thus, on the level of karman, Kāśī, on the one hand, has the power to destroy the bad karman which the pilgrim may have accumulated in this and in earlier lives. This bad karman is called pāpa in Sanskrit which may be translated as 'sin', if one is aware that such a translation ought not to carry Christian

7 avimuktasya mātmyam ṣaḍbhir vaktraiḥ katham mayā / vaktum śakyam na śaknoti sahasrāśyo 'pi yat param //

8 mahāpāpauḥśamanim puṇyopacayakāriṇim / bhuktimuktipradām ante ko na kāśim sudhiḥ śrayet //

connotations.⁹ On the other hand, Kāśī also has the power to increase the good karman of the pilgrim which in Sanskrit is called puṇya, a term that is best translated by ‘merit’. At the level of the future results of these karmic effects, the results may be paid back to the pilgrim either in the form of worldly pleasures (bhukti), meaning pleasures to be enjoyed in this world, or in the form of release after death (mukti).

The text does not give many express illustrations of the case that pilgrimage to Kāśī removes already accumulated sins, but, perhaps, one example was sufficient to the author, namely the most heinous crime a Brahman could think of, the murder of a Brahman (brahmahatyā) which is probably here taken as representing the five Hindu cardinal crimes (mahāpātaka), which are: killing a Brahman, drinking liquor, theft, adultery with the wife of one’s teacher, and associating with one guilty of these four crimes:

Indeed, if a Brāhmaṇa-killer accidentally were to go to the city Varanasi, [his sin of] brāhmaṇa-murder will vanish because of the greatness of that sacred place (KK IV.1.25.66).¹⁰

Now, one might, perhaps, expect that the text then would be full of examples of accumulation of merits, but that is not the case either. However, the following passage from the chapter on Maṇikarṇikā combines both destruction of evils and accumulation of merit:

Viṣṇu said:

O Lord of gods, what is the fate after death of a person who does not really know the glorification of the sacred place [Kāśī], and who dies without faith?

Śiva said:

If an unfaithful and ignorant person dies here having committed many and very great sins elsewhere, and not being even conversant with the greatness of this sacred place, what fate has been pointed out for him, listen to that, O Janārdana, of excellent vows.

The heap of sins of a person who is entering the pañcakrośī would stay outside. By no means can they enter inside.

9 Other words for negative karman used by the text are agha, ‘impurity’ and enas, ‘offence’. Both are used in the passage KK IV.1.26.111–16, quoted below.

10 brahmahā yo ‘bhigacched vai daivād vārāṇasīm purim / tasya kṣetrasya mähātmayād brahmahatyā nivartate //



Mañikarṇikā cremation ghāt. Photo © Erik Reenberg Sand 2010.

His heap of sins is staying outside because of fear of the Gaṇas roaming the border with tridents and nooses in their hands.

By entering he becomes sinless, free from all sins, [and] having bathed in the Mañikarṇikī, he obtains the unsurpassed merit.¹¹ (KK IV.1.26.111–16.)

In this passage we are told that immediately upon crossing the so-called Pañcakrośī perimeter which marks off the sacred area (kṣetra) of Kāśī, the pilgrim is freed of his sins, because the border of the sacred place is protected by Gaṇas who are attendants of Śīva.¹² Freed of his sins, he only starts accumulating positive karman when he starts performing rituals, in this case when he bathes in the pond called Mañikarṇikī near the great cremation ghāt

11 111 viṣṇur uvāca: deveśa kṣetramāhātmyaṃ yo na jānāti tattvataḥ / na śraddadhāti mriyate mrte tasyeha kā gatiḥ // 112 śīva uvāca: anyatra kṛtvā pāpāni bahūni sumahānti ca / aśraddadhāno 'tattvajño yady atra ca vipadyate // 113 mahimany anabhijño 'pi kṣetrāsyāsyā janārdana / tasya yā gatir uddiṣṭā tām niśāmaya suvrata // 114 pañcakrośiṃ praviśatas tasya pātakasantatiḥ / bahir eva pratiṣṭheta nāntar nivīśate kva cit // 115 bhayād bahiḥ sthitāyāṃ ca tasya pātakasantatau / triśūlapāśapāṇinām gaṇānām śimacāriṇām // 116 praveśamātrād anaghaḥ sarvair enobhir ujjhitaḥ / saṃsnāya mañikarṇikyāṃ puṇyaṃ prāpnoty anuttamam //

12 For these gaṇas and their relationship with Kāśī, see Eck 1983.

passing under the same name. Thus, this passage interestingly introduces a sequence, or ritual structure, between the two different aspects of the power of *Kāśī*; the power to remove bad *karman* and the power to bestow merit.

From this perspective, a relevant question would be what happens to the people who have entered *Kāśī* and thus have been released from their previous sins, but who instead of accumulating merit by performing rituals, commit more sins? Although it is not a question with which the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* is much occupied, the following passage shows that some of the authors have given the question a thought. The passage is put into the mouth of *Śiva*:

Having committed sins in *Kāśī*, if a person should die in *Kāśī*, after having been a *Rudrapīśāca*¹³ he will again obtain release (*mukti*).

For men who die in *Kāśī* because of fate, even though they have committed sins, for them there is no question of falling into hell, because I am their chastiser.¹⁴ (KK IV.1.26.41–2.)

From this we may conclude that although entering *Kāśī* may well destroy our previous sins it does not mean that sins which we may commit while staying there do not have any consequences. They do. In the quotation, this is clear by the fact that the sinner will have to suffer rebirth as a *piśāca*, or demon, before he is ready for release. On the other hand, the text assures us, that the fact that the sins are committed in *Kāśī* ameliorates the consequences in comparison with sins committed elsewhere. Thus, the punishment of hell (*naraka*) is not possible for the one who sins in *Kāśī*.

If, as mentioned earlier, the text does not often illustrate the accumulation of merits in itself, it prefers instead to do so by extolling the results that *Kāśī* bestows on the pilgrims. As we saw in the above quotation, these results, in the terminology of the text, consists of worldly pleasures and release (*bhukti* and *mukti*). This pair is very often mentioned together in *phalaśrutis* in *Purāṇas* and *māhātmyas*, meaning that the results may either be this-worldly, that is, material, or soteriological, that is, dealing with the next world.

Although many pilgrims may visit *Kāśī* in order to fulfil desires of this world, for example, in order to get offspring, this is evidently not something that the authors of the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* were much concerned about. The focus is

13 Or 'terrifying *piśāca*'?

14 *ḥṛtvā 'pi kāśyāṃ pāpāni kāśyāṃ eva mriyate cet / bhūtvā rudrapīśāco 'pi punar muktim avāpsyati // kāśyāṃ mṛtānāṃ jantūnāṃ daivāt pāpakṛtām api / na pāto narake teṣāṃ teṣāṃ śāstāham eva yat//*



Pilgrims bathing in the Maṇikarṇikākunḍa at the Mahāśivarātrī festival. Photo © Erik Reenberg Sand 2010.

clearly on the other-worldly gains which Kāśī may give to the pilgrims, and for which it is still famous today.

Especially the idea that Kāśī is able to confer release from transmigration (mukti) is prominent. For example, Śiva in one place (KK IV.1.25.35) teaches the goddess that there are three means of release,¹⁵ namely the yoga of the Pāśupatas, who smear themselves with ashes, the white and black ford (sitāsita), which, according to Monier Monier-Williams (1974), is identical with Prayāga or Allahabad, and, finally, Avimukta, or Kāśī, which bestows release.

Furthermore, three verses at the end of the introductory chapter about Avimukta make Kāśī's position as a special means of release quite clear:

Whoever, with his mind not directed elsewhere, does not abandon that sacred place, he avoids old age and death [and] the intolerable dwelling in a womb.

15 Here the expression nirvāṇa, which most often is associated with Buddhism, is used instead of mukti.

If an intelligent man does not want rebirth again on earth, he should go to Avimukta which is frequented by gods, ṛṣis and gaṇas.

One should not abandon Avimukta, which frees from fear of worldly existence.¹⁶ Having arrived at the god Viśveśvara one is not born again.¹⁷ (KK IV.1.25.68–70.)

According to the author of this passage, Kāśī clearly confers release on men, but the condition seems to be that he does not leave it again, or, that he dwells there at the moment of death. The same was also expressed in the passage with which we began our analysis and which said: ‘Which wise man would not at the end (i.e. at death) take refuge to Kāśī’, and, already at the beginning of our text, Skanda in his introduction said:

There is peace in the great sacred place Avimukta, which is protected by the three-eyed one (i.e. Śiva), where Virūpākṣa, or Śiva, is in person giving release (mokṣa) to those whose life is going to its end.¹⁸ (KK IV.1.25.20)

What then, one may ask, if people, as is the case with most pilgrims, do not stay and die in Kāśī, but instead go back to their homes? Obviously, the authors of the Kāśīkhaṇḍa have thought about this, because the passage KK IV.1.26.105–9 deals with what happens with people who die elsewhere. KK IV.1.26.108–9 tells us that a person who has stayed for a long time in Kāśī, but because of fate dies elsewhere, will reach heaven and then be reborn as a king and come back to the sacred city to obtain release. Similarly, KK IV.1.26.105–7 says that a person who remembers Kāśī when he dies, though it may be far away and though he may be a sinner, will reach heaven and be reborn as a

16 The wording of some of the passages about death, transmigration, and release has an almost Buddhist flavour, speaking about birth, old age, death, and fear of worldly existence. Similarly, the immediately following passages (KK IV.1.25.74–5) describes the man dying in Kāśī as ‘realizing that human life is not permanent (aśāśvata)’, that ‘Avimukta is destructive of the fear of worldly existence (saṃsārabhayanāśana)’, and that man here ‘meets the termination of misery’ (duḥkhānta).

17 *ananyamānaso bhūtvā tat kṣetraṃ yo na muñjati / sa muñjati jarāmṛtyuṃ garbhavāsaṃ suduḥsaham // avimuktaṃ niṣeveta devarṣigaṇasevitam / yadicchen mānava dhīmān na punar jananaṃ bhuvī // avimuktaṃ na muñceta saṃsārabhaya mocanam / prāpya viśveśvaraṃ devaṃ na sa bhūyo ‘bhijāyate //*

18 *avimukte mahākṣetre kṣeman tryakṣeṇa rakṣite / yatra kṣiṇāyuṣāṃ sāksād virūpākṣo ‘sti mokṣadaḥ //*



Ghāṭiyā priests at the steps of the Gaṅgā, ready to serve bathers and pilgrims taking care of their clothes as well as performing simple rituals. Photo © Erik Reenberg Sand 2010.

king and come back to Kāśī and get release. Although the observances which produce merit are different in these two cases, the relationship with Kāśī is common, and likewise is the result of the merit, namely heaven, rebirth, and final release. Both point to the fact that one does not obtain immediate release if one does not die in Kāśī, but on the other hand the relationship with Kāśī frees one from sins and secures heaven.

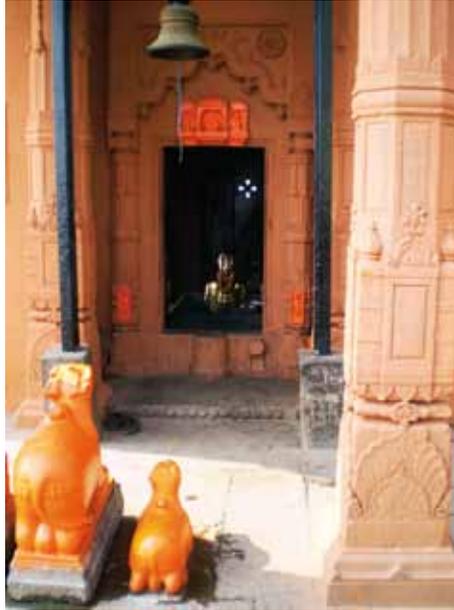
The idea that people who die whilst dwelling in Kāśī will attain release is probably one of the most characteristic elements in the concepts and practices connected with this sacred place, setting it apart from most other Hindu sacred places, perhaps with the exception of Prayāga or Allahabad which, before the advent of the Muslims, was famous for its akṣayaṇa-tree, a huge Banyan tree (*ficus indica*), from which people committed suicide by throwing themselves down from its branches (Dubey 2001: 51–73).¹⁹ The idea that Kāśī is the right place to die is still very strong among Hindus and attracts many people to Kāśī in order to die here and get release. To serve these pilgrims several hospices for old and dying people have been erected, for example, the

19 For religious suicide more generally, see Dubey 2001 and Sircar 1971.

so-called Mumukṣubhavan, the abode of those who desire to be released, near Asi Ghāt.²⁰

How can it be that people who die in Varanasi get release from the cycle of birth and death? According to the authors of our text, it is due to the presence of Śiva, and we are told that at the time of death people lose their memory and in the moment that the soul departs from the body Viśveśvara, or Śiva, confers upon it a special mantra called *tāraka brahma* by which the deceased becomes able to identify himself with the divine and get release. The name *Tāraka* means ‘carrying over’ or ‘rescuing’, and the idea of this mantra is still alive among modern pilgrims as there is a temple for Śiva in his form as *Tārakeśvara*, the Rescuing Lord, near the *Maṅikarṇikā* tank.²¹

Another connection with death, which the authors of the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* attribute to *Kāśī*, is the cult of ancestors, or *pitṛs*. Thus, every pilgrim in *Kāśī* is recommended to offer rice balls to his ancestors (*śrāddha*).²² Since, however, this feature is not specific for *Kāśī* and, furthermore, is not directly contributing to one’s own release, we shall not deal in more detail with it here.



Tārakeśvara-temple with the Tārakeśvara-liṅga, covered by a bronze mask. Photo © Erik Reenberg Sand 2010.

20 For a detailed description of such phenomena, see Justice 1997.

21 See Sherring 2001, Kane 1968, Eck 1983, Lannoy 2002, Gutschow & Michaels 1993, and Singh & Rana 2002.

22 See, e.g., KK IV.1.27.38–9, and KK IV.1.28.7–22, both of which refer to the banks of the Gaṅgā.

Differentiation of merits

It turns out, however, that all is not as simple as these programmatic announcements of the wonderful effects of pilgrimage to, or staying in Kāśī will let us believe. Thus, a later passage of the first chapter of our text (KK IV.1.25.59–65) informs us that such things as the right attitude of mind, that is, mental purity and self control, knowledge of Kāśī, faith, and also the time spent in Kāśī are important in measuring the merit received.

Furthermore, the next chapter of our text, dealing with the origins and effects of Maṇikarṇikā (KK IV.1.26), becomes still more prosaic in also introducing various rituals, such as recital of the sacred Gāyatrī mantra, feeding thousands of people, and gifts of wealth in the hierarchy of merits to be earned. So in actual life, mere dwelling in Kāśī is obviously not enough for the Brahmanic authors of our text. The pilgrims had also better contribute to the existence and wealth of the local *paṇḍas* and Brahmins.

All in all, the text is a composite work of several authors and cannot be expected to display total internal agreement, as is also the case with most



South Indian pilgrims performing ancestral offerings (*śrāddha*) at Kedāra Ghāṭ. Photo © Erik Reenberg Sand 2010.

other belief systems. For example, the idea of Kāśī as the place of release is also differentiated by the text.

Most contradictory to the main spirit of the text is, perhaps, the single verse which almost defiantly says:

O Viṣṇu, constant dwelling in Avimukta is capable of uprooting *karman*.
Only in case of two or three purifying persons does it generate release
(*nirvāṇa*) (KK IV.1.26.110).²³

Conclusion

In this article, we have analyzed a small part of a text which, although it was authored by Brahmins and written in Sanskrit, has had, and still has, great influence on the conception of Varanasi among many Hindus all over India. The chapters we have chosen for our analysis deal mainly with the fruits of performing pilgrimage to Varanasi, or Kāśī, as it is called in this text. Given some agreement between this text and modern practices, it could tell us something about the motives of modern pilgrims to Varanasi. In our analysis we found that the sacred power of Varanasi has three sources: the eternal presence of Śiva from the time of creation, the cremation *ghāt* and the presence of the river Gaṅgā. Furthermore, we found that the most characteristic thing about the power of Varanasi is its connection with death and its power to confer on the pilgrim the fruit of complete release from the circle of birth, death, and rebirth, something which is normally the privilege of the adherents of ascetic and other non-worldly systems. This feature is still reflected in the fact that many elderly people come to Varanasi in order to die and get cremated here, and many people from the surrounding areas still take the bodies of their dead relatives to Varanasi for cremation. If people cannot manage to have their deceased relatives cremated in Varanasi, some may still take their ashes to Varanasi in order to have them immersed there in the waters of the river Gaṅgā.

In addition to this, we also found that the authors of the Kāśīkhaṇḍa, in their zeal to propagate their sacred city, tried to construct an ingenious system of ideas incorporating their rituals with the ideology of *karman* and involving ideas about both the destruction of sins and the accumulation of

23 *viṣṇo 'vimukte saṁvāsaḥ karmanirmūlanakṣamaḥ / dvitrāṇāṁ hi pavitrāṇāṁ
nirvāṇāyeha jāyate //*

merits, a system which, seen from their perspective should be viewed as an alternative to and an improvement upon both the Vedic tradition and the tradition of the ascetic and non-worldly traditions. In this way the authors offered the common man an easy means of salvation, although the main aim of their endeavour probably was to propagate and legitimate pilgrimage to Kāśī, especially at a time when this institution might have been threatened by Muslim invasions, and in this way help empowering themselves and the local Brahmins.

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