



Wastescapes of Banaras: A Reading of Select Literary and Cultural Representations of the City

A thesis submitted to the Department of English, University of Hyderabad in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the award of Doctorate of Philosophy Degree

by

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DECLARATION

I, **Vinita Teresa**, hereby declare that the work embodied in this thesis titled “**Wastescapes of Banaras: A Reading of Select Literary and Cultural Representations of the City**” carried out under the supervision of **Dr. B.Krishnaiah** is an original and independent research work. I also declare that no part of this work has been submitted previously in part or in full in this university or any other institution for the reward of a degree or diploma.

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Further the scholar has the following publications before the submission of her thesis for adjudication and has produced evidence for the same in the form of acceptance letter or the reprint in the relevant area of her research:

“Disorder, Danger and Death: The Consumerist Dystopia in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*”.

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2. Euroacademia, Lucca, Italy. **Identities and Identifications: Politicised Use of Collective Identities**. The 7th Euroacademia International Conference, 14-15 June, 2018.
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*He delivereth me from mine enemies: yea, thou liftest me up above those that rise up against me:
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(Psalm 18:48)

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“O Bhagirathi [Ganga], though I am full of sin and dirtiness,
I believe you will give me *mukti* and a place at your feet.”

(qtd. in “Idioms of Degeneracy”, Kelly D. Alley)

“It [Benares] is a vision of dusty sterility, decaying temples, crumbling tombs, broken mud walls, shabby huts. The whole region seems to ache with age and penury.... It is unspeakably sacred in Hindoo eyes, and is as unsanitary as it is sacred, and smells like the rind of the dorian.”

(Mark Twain, *Following the Equator*)

A shutterstock¹ image of Banaras has the famed riverfront steps—the ghats—in the foreground. The steps lead down to the Ganga, the sacred river, a placid shimmery expanse against the morning sun. On the ochre ghats, a man wrapped in saffron robes, who seems to be out on a stroll, stares directly into the camera, the picturesque riverfront stretches along the bank of the Ganga behind him, populated by tiny specks of humans. Ancient, regal-looking fortress palaces flank the ghats on their western side, their walls bearing the brunt of time, paint peeling and plants growing in the cracks. A cluster of boats are anchored in the water, close to the steps, appearing like toys against the vast expanse of the river which is ringed off by the vague outline of the eastern shore shrouded in the morning mist. The riverfront with the palaces and the people,

¹ <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/varanasi-banaras-uttar-pradesh-india-december-780448729>

and the river with the boats, stretch and disappear into the iridescent brilliance of the rising sun in the horizon— a picture of the transcendental sublime.

Another image of Banaras which appeared in *PlanetCustodian*,² an online magazine dedicated to environmental issues, also features the famed ghats of the city, however, the focus is different. The ochre riverfront with bright splashes of human activity forms the background to the object in focus—a putrefying corpse floating grotesquely in the inky waters of the Ganga; the stomach bloated, the guts threatening to spill out any moment and the skin starting to peel off the torso and limbs. The article which accompanies this image berates Indians for “filth and religious hypocrisy” towards their holy rivers and cities (Madan). The carcasses and corpses that are callously dumped in the sacred river, the unrestrained discharge of sewage and industrial effluents into the Ganga, and so on, are some of the evidences that the author cites for the blatant insensitivity of the Indian government and the people towards the conservation of their sacred heritage and natural resources. The magazine also carries a string of similar pictures of rotting corpses, carcasses and garbage floating in the river, in close proximity to devotees taking holy dips and bathing and washing along the banks. In the article, the authors hopes that these pictures, intended to horrify and shock, will provoke at least some citizens to become aware of and act on the pollution crisis in the Ganga.

The two images of Banaras, with widely varying connotations, draw attention to the paradoxical and persistent discourses of purity and pollution that characterize this Indian city which is considered by devout Hindus as the holiest place on earth. Banaras (known as Varanasi

² <https://www.planetcustodian.com/over-50-scary-images-depicting-filth-of-varanasi-and-river-ganges-that-went-viral-in-china/8134/>

in official records and as Kashi in Hindu sacred literature), located on the western bank of the sacred river Ganga, is imagined as a place of great antiquity and divine origins.

According to Hindu lore, the city is patronized by Lord Shiva and rests on his trident, between earth and heaven. In this sense, it is a tirtha—the place where departed souls can cross over from earth to heaven and attain eternal salvation. Hence, it is believed that all who die in Banaras will attain moksha (salvation) notwithstanding the merit of their actions while alive. Also, since it has the special patronage of Shiva, the city alone will be saved in the great cyclical dissolution of the cosmos; everything, human and non-human, is holy in the city because it is imbued with the divinity of Shiva—*rudramaya*. However, the modern scientific discourse of environmental pollution paints dire pictures of a city and river in acute crisis. In 2016, Banaras featured in the top five most polluted cities in the world³ in terms of air particulate matter, in the same year, in the *Swachh Survekshan*⁴ survey conducted by the Indian government to rank cities in terms of cleanliness, Banaras found a place among the 10 dirtiest cities in the country, in 2019, in a report⁵ released by the Central Pollution Control Board of India, the water in the stretch of Ganga (where Banaras is situated) from Uttar Pradesh to West Bengal was found unfit for drinking and bathing. According to the National Mission for Clean Ganga,⁶ 3000 million litres of sewage is discharged per day into the main stem of the river from the cities situated along its

³ For more details see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most-polluted_cities_by_particulate_matter_concentration

⁴ For more details see: https://www.swachhsurvekshan2020.org/Images/SS_2016_report.pdf

⁵ For more details see: <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/ganga-river-water-unfit-for-drinking-bathing-1538183-2019-05-30>

⁶ Also known as *Namami Gange*, it is an integrated mission launched in 2014 by the Government of India for the conservation and rejuvenation of river Ganga. For more details see: <https://nmcg.nic.in/pollution.aspx>

banks. A newspaper article, pithily titled “Grime on the ghat”⁷ highlights the failed promise of the Prime Minister of India to clean up the holy city (Ghosh). These mutually incompatible narratives of spiritual sanctity and material pollution, spoken in different registers, highlight the paradox between the Hindu imagination of a sacred, timeless and transcendental city and the acutely modern imagination of environmental pollution, disease and cleanliness.

However, this tension is by no means of recent origin and was articulated by a very modern and spiritual Hindu gentleman—Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi—in 1916⁸ on the occasion of the foundation-stone laying ceremony of the now famous Banaras Hindu University in the city. In the speech, he connects the lack of cleanliness of the temples and general disorder in the city to the character of the Indian people and opines that a culture of cleanliness and modern hygiene is a necessary prerequisite to gain independence and the ability to govern oneself:

I visited the Vishwanath temple [in Banaras] last evening, and I was walking through those lanes, these were the thoughts that touched me. If a stranger dropped from above on to this great temple, and he had to consider what we as Hindus were, would he not be justified in condemning us? Is not this great temple a reflection of our own character? I speak feelingly, as a Hindu. Is it right that the lanes of our sacred temple should be as dirty as they are? The houses round about are built anyhow. The lanes are tortuous and narrow. If even our temples are not models of roominess and cleanliness, what can our self-government be? Shall our temples be abodes of holiness, cleanliness and peace as

⁷ For more details see: <https://www.thehindu.com/features/magazine/bishwanath-ghosh-exlores-the-myth-of-varanasis-cleanliness/article7742753.ece>

⁸ For the full text of the speech, see: <https://www.mkgandhi.org/speeches/bhu.htm>

soon as the English have retired from India, either of their own pleasure or by compulsion, bag and baggage?

The concerns expressed here by Gandhi are that of the modern Hindu subject who finds the coexistence of ritual purity and material dirt and disorder unacceptable and embarrassing when viewed by the British. This points to the stark cultural differences in the way human subjectivities are constructed with respect to the perception of dirt and risk. The modern incredulity about the archetypal Indian “blindness” to garbage and disorder, especially in public places, is a result of an uneasy interaction of different subjectivities concerning waste and cleanliness. In a discussion of the modern nationalistic desire to clean and order public spaces in Indian cities, Dipesh Chakrabarty terms this interaction a battle between “the moderns and the un-moderns” (545). **This project uses this tension as a springboard to investigate how different actors engage with the dirt in Banaras in select literary and cultural representations of the city. The work also delves into the role of socio-psychological attitudes to waste and dirt in shaping the construction of the cityspace.** While doing her fieldwork among the artisans of Banaras, Nita Kumar, a cultural historian who is acutely aware of her outsider status in the city, observes her respondents’ filthy surroundings and privately expresses her wish to write about the “issues of filth and the indifference to it” (*Friends, Brothers, and Informants* 102). However, implicit in this desire is the apparent objectivity of the observer, the assumption that the modern attitude towards dirt and the aesthetics of cleanliness is beyond the realm of scrutiny by virtue of its basis in the scientific discourse of disease and hygiene. Chakrabarty is critical of this objectivity and quotes Thompson's critique of Naipaul's description of dirt in India: “It is all too easy as an outsider to spot the Indians’ conspiracy of

blindness”, emphasizing the subjective underpinnings of the modernist approach to dirt (542). **The thesis takes a leaf out of Chakrabarty’s concern with the unequal battle of sensibilities, about the modern subject’s uncritical condemnation of “dirty” Indian cities to study how attitudes to waste, pollution, cleanliness, order, hygiene, and so on, are intimately connected to subjective notions of the self and identity and how civilisational differences determine one’s affective reactions.**

Banaras and Dirt

The city of Banaras is perhaps best suited for a study of subjective attitudes to waste and associated ideas of cleanliness and hygiene. This is because Banaras is a unique site of an exacerbated and spectacular tussle between notions of purity and dirt. Unlike many other Indian cities with very historical and material origins, Banaras has claims to divine, supernatural origins and purificatory powers. According to popular lore, the combination of Kashi, Ganga and Shiva is said to be a powerful and auspicious one. However, the city does not follow the Western logic of separating the sacred from the profane —a mark of modern secular cultures according to Durkheim. If the “sacred needs to be continually hedged in with prohibitions” (qtd. in Douglas 22), then in Banaras we can see such rules of sanctity being broken on many levels. Death, seen as the ultimate polluter in material and metaphoric terms, is not viewed as dangerous or polluting in this city. The holiest ghat in Banaras, Manikarnika, considered the epicenter of creation by Hindus, is also a cremation ground where the corpses of devout Hindus are cremated within public view and their remains ritually immersed in the Ganga. Hence, the city is also known as *Mahashmashana* (The Great Crematorium). Ganga, the sacred river, also becomes a receiver of the mortal remains of dead humans and animals and the assorted dirt and debris of the human

activity on its banks. In addition to many of the sacred rituals and acts which appear to the outsider as egregious acts of environmental pollution and littering, Banaras, being a tourist–pilgrimage place, also receives a large number of domestic and international visitors, which considerably adds to the waste generation in the city. Hence, as a place where many rules of pollution and purity are suspended or broken, and as a city which has been continuously subjected to the scrutiny of the Western gaze because of its association with “Hindu India” and “strikingly ‘foreign’” appearance (Eck ch. 1) Banaras has inspired a large volume of narratives⁹ with pervasive images of material degradation, dirt and squalor. On the other hand, the city has a long tradition of eclectic spiritual and cultural movements which has produced different streams of literature and cultural representations by non-Westerners where material degradation is not the focus.¹⁰ Thus, narratives based on the city provide a rich spectrum of approaches to material and metaphoric dirt which helps one build a framework to understand the aesthetics and poetics of waste.

Clearly, the image of the city is not a static or homogenous one and notwithstanding the physical and material edifices, the city is a product of imagination and worlded via a system of signs. The following section will proceed to tease out the socio-historical factors which shaped the construction of the image of Banaras over the years, especially during the colonial times and how it is relevant to contemporary perceptions and representations of the city space. But before that it is imperative to have a cursory familiarity with the geographic and cultural coordinates of the city.

⁹ They are referred to throughout this chapter.

¹⁰ Rana P.B. Singh, in his book *Cultural Landscapes and the Lifeworld: Literary Images of Banaras* (2004), does an efficient survey of Indian literary works, ranging from the medieval to the modern, featuring the city of Banaras.

Banaras, officially known as Varanasi, is located in North India in the Indo-Gangetic plain. It is part of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh and a prominent cultural centre in North India. The city is situated on the western crescent-shaped bank of the river Ganga and is famous for its eighty-odd major and minor (in terms of religious significance, socio-cultural importance and physical size) ghats which extend to the river. As mentioned before, it is considered the holiest pilgrimage centre by mainstream Hinduism and has more than 20,000 shrines of varying religious popularity and importance. A third of the city's population consists of Muslims and among them, a sub-caste of weavers are responsible for the famed Banarasi silk garment industry in the city. Tourism is also a major industry in Banaras. In 2019 alone, the city received around 3, 50, 000¹¹ tourists. The city is also important to Buddhists since Sarnath, considered the birthplace of Buddhism, is merely 10 kilometers away from the city. Thus, as a city which is of great religious, commercial and political significance, Banaras has been subjected to numerous interpretations and representations over the years.

Representations of Banaras

In 1923, Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges published the poem "Benares"¹² as a tribute to a place he had never visited. Based on his knowledge of the city gleaned from *Encyclopedia Britannica* and other orientalist writings¹³ such as Kipling's *Kim*, he imagines dawn breaking out on the famed ghats. The poem is an excellent starting point for discussing the subjective political and historical forces that shape the image of Banaras since it emphasizes the act of imagining

¹¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Varanasi>

¹² The colonial spelling of Banaras.

¹³ It is interesting to note that the poem was revised in 1969 to omit overt orientalist references and make it less clichéd. For a detailed analysis of the two versions of the poem, refer to Fiddian (2005).

that is involved in representing a city space, the instability and fluidity of images, and the existences of several worlds in a city with differing and, at times, paradoxical ethos and sensibilities. The poem says that the imagined city of Banaras is “False and impenetrable / like a garden traced on a mirror” where there is a “play” of “doubtful images” which may not correspond to the “precise topography” of the actual city.¹⁴

Analysing the grammar of the diverse discourses that have shaped Banaras over the years and attempting to see the circumstances that gave rise to an overwhelming focus on the unsanitariness of the city will provide a vantage point to think about dirt in the city. The following sections attempt to:

(a) trace the tenuous political and cultural history behind the projection of Banaras as a transcendental and divine city and thereby highlight the material foundations of the discourse of immaterial sacredness.

(b) give an account of how the riverfront of the city was made into a spectacle and iconised by the British and Indian elites, turning it into a metonym of the “mystical and ancient” city. By focusing on the techniques of representation, I argue that the popular image of the riverfront, as seen from the river, reflects the “outsider’s view” and is the result of an objectifying gaze which has been very crucial for extant significations of the city. This section is important for putting in perspective, the outsider’s gaze which is the fountainhead of both the oriental discourse of mysticism as well as modern discourse of dirtiness of the city.

¹⁴ For the full text of the poem, see the link:
<http://shonedeeep.blogspot.com/2009/12/benares.html>

(c) see the emergence of the discourse of urban disorder as a result of colonial administration of the city in the 19th century and determine how it has shaped attitudes towards cleanliness and the ordering and sanitization of public places.

Banaras, Gaze and Imagination

Any attempt to tease out the plurivocity of representations and the constructed nature of the city should take into account the importance of the act of “viewing”. Scholars of Banaras such as Diana Eck and Jonathan Parry use the metaphor of seeing to distinguish between the religious and secular/material imaginations that constitute the city. Eck says that the Westerner cannot even “see the scope and dimensions” of the religious tradition and “do not see the same city Hindus see” (ch.1). The active involvement of extra-sensory subjectivities in “seeing” and perceiving the city space is emphasized when she categorically states that “what Hindus ‘see’ in Kashi only begins with the city that meets the eye” (ibid). She uses the Hindu concept of *darshana* to explain the act of directing one’s vision to the divine through the lens of the built environment of the sacred city; hence it becomes ““sacred sight-seeing”” as opposed to ““sight-seeing”” (ibid). It is quite evident that Parry also subscribes to this idea of “seeing” as an important part of the perception of the sacredness of the city since a description of the divine cosmogony of Banaras is preceded by the title “Through ‘divine eyes’” and he opines that only “those with the eyes to see” (11) will appreciate the religious significance of the place. Some discourses of the sanctity of the city go a step further to say that only those with the divine grace can “perceive the true eternal state of Benares” (Lannoy 14) and that the “real Kashi is in the heart” (Parry 19) and can only be seen with the mind’s eye.

The secular view is equated with the non-believer’s or the outsider’s view which is struck by the material degradation and chaos. Lannoy contrasts the divine vision of the sages with the

vision of “ordinary mortals” who can only see the city “crumbling into decay” (14), a thought put forward by Eck (ch.1) and exemplified in Parry when he switches to the “jaundiced ...eye of the outside observer” (33) and describes the Manikarnika ghat:

a complicated tangle of cobbled alleys...dangerously dilapidated ..buildings on either side... humanity flows down in the general direction of the *ghat* – running the gauntlet of packs of mangy dogs snarling over scraps, of cows being shooed away by vigilant vegetable vendors.... Mixed up with the pilgrims, daily bathers and early shoppers, coolies carrying wood for the cremation pyres stagger... under impossible loads precariously balanced on their heads.... Against the current, an emaciated elderly Brahman in a grubby *dhoti*, with a sacred thread across his bare chest ...picks his way carefully back to his crumbling house, already purified by his morning bath.... (37)

Later scholars, such as Madhuri Desai, who attempt to deconstruct the dominant narratives of purity and dirt also resort to the metaphor of “seeing” or “looking” to signify a mode of analysis involving a contrapuntal reading of the text¹⁵ of the city. In the introduction to her book *Banaras Reconstructed* (2017) Desai invites the readers to “take a closer look” at the city to pick up hints “of a more complex story” (3). Thus, “eyes” and “looking” also signify the act of reading the city, foregrounding the textuality of the space which is inscribed and re-inscribed with meanings. The notion of textuality also contains within it the idea of imagination as a necessary component of the conceptualization and representation of city space. Hence, Banaras is seen as sacred since it engages the collective “religious imagination” shaped through *Mahatmya* literature (Eck ch.1).

¹⁵ In *Banaras: City of Light* (1982) Eck refers to the “text of the city” (preface) which is to be seen together with the classical Sanskrit texts which consecrate the city as the epicenter of a divine cosmology. However, this does not mean that she explores the textuality of the city and its internal inconsistencies and gaps.

Desai reiterates this aspect, although with a different aim, when she points out that Banaras is a city created by patrons, priests and pilgrims “based in an imagination of the past” which has been connected to their immediate social realities (7). She further states that the built environment of the city was strongly influenced by the religious imagination which *preceded* it (212)[emphasis mine]. Clearly, the city can be represented and read in multiple ways and poststructuralist scholars attempt to see the inherent contradictions in dominant discourses and highlight marginalized conceptions of space in the city. Desai attempts an alternate reading of Banaras/Kashi (14) by shedding light on the concerted political and cultural interventions that resulted in the construction of the image of the sacred city that we know today. Taking into cognizance the “multiple ways [Banaras]... is visualized, imagined and culturally represented by different actors and groups” (Gaenszle and Gengnagel 7) enables one to begin to unpack the idea of the city as a timeless and transcendental place and locate it within other material discourses of the city.

Construction of the Sacred Space

Banaras derives its divine authority from the Sanskrit scriptural texts *Kashi Khanda* and *Kashi Rahasya* which form a major chunk of the corpus of texts called *Mahatmya* literature glorifying the spiritual and religious attributes of the city. They detail the sacred geography of the space, connecting it to the mythological events which render it divine. Eck opines that they are not “descriptive statements of fact about an ordinary city, but statements of faith about a sacred city” (ch 1). Based on these texts, the sanctity of Banaras is crystallized in the numerous epithets associated with the city—it is *Kashi*, the city of light which illumines liberation; *Avimukta*, the never-forsaken which will survive cosmic dissolution or *pralaya*; *Anandavana*, the forest of bliss; *Rudravasa*, the city of Shiva where every particle is imbued with his divinity;

Mahashmashana, the great cremation ground, and so on. Even while explaining the Hindu idea of Banaras to a Western audience, scholars such as Eck do not question the veracity of the puranic writings on Kashi or the role played by political patronage in developing the sacredscape of the city. In fact she patently states that “it is not the events of its long history that make it significant to Hindus; rather, it has such a long history, and it has survived and flourished through the changing fortunes of the centuries *because* it is significant to the Hindus” (ch. 1). Thus, the holiness of the city is considered a pre-given reality. Desai is critical of “academics and tourists” who visit the city and continue to indulge in the illusion that the *Mahatmya* texts “capture the image of a sacred urban landscape from a distant past” (14). The writer categorically emphasizes the role of politics—the cultural and religious transitions—that shaped the city’s sacred environment (7). She also challenges the antiquity of texts such as *Kashi Khanda* which were composed as late as the 14th century and were extensively reinterpreted between the 15th and 19th centuries (5). According to her, the political nature of these texts is evident in the Brahmanic attempts, during the Mughal period, to envision a “*Kashikshetra* crowded with ritual sites and pilgrimage routes” (15) by composing Sanskrit texts liberally quoting from older *purana* corpus (14) and the use of colonial survey techniques to reify the antiquity and sanctity of the city.

During the early decades of the eighteenth century, the Peshwa chiefs invested in the city to effect changes in the material environment in order to forge a direct link between the religious texts on Kashi and the sacred geography. This resulted in the promotion of rituals and rites at several prominent ghats including Manikarnika and Dashashwamedha ghats and the encouragement of already existing rituals such as ritual bathing and worship (Desai 126). The colonialism-mediated narratives of unchanging continuity and ahistorical “timelessness” (ibid

12) served to obfuscate the process by which “colonial regulation, antiquarian sensibilities, and Indian desires” (ibid 162) shaped the cartographies of Banaras. Several Western scholars perpetrate this point of view in their writings. Eck quotes MA Sherring (1868), a missionary who visited Banaras to reiterate the timeless traditions and sacred credentials of the city: “twenty-five centuries ago, at the least, it was famous... When Babylon was struggling...for supremacy, when Tyre was planting her colonies... she had already risen to greatness, if not glory” (ch. 1). Similarly, British photographer and writer Richard Lannoy reifies the cosmic geography attributed to the city:

Benares developed in accordance with a collective vision of the world in which profound cosmic mysteries were given visible, sensuous expression...This cartography shaped the layout of streets, squares, riverside, temples and architecture.... Theirs was an ordered whole, with boundaries encircling and clearly defining it, the outer circumference dotted with a sequence of shrines which could be read like a cosmic clock. Everything had its allotted place in this model of the cosmos. (14)

In the passage above, Lannoy is referring to the pilgrimage circuit in the city which is posited as a product of a hoary tradition. However, Desai, in her book gives a detailed description of how Indian elites and colonial administrators “corrected” the pilgrimage routes and the ritual landscape with the help of colonial surveyors and cartographers so as to make them align perfectly with the descriptions in the scriptures. The Brahmin activists “began to interpret the city’s *purana* literature as a universal and timeless discourse on the city, rather than as a collection of diverse and often fragmented opinions” (168). Further, the proliferation of print technology and maps made it possible for the perfectly aligned ritual landscape to be made into maps and circulated among the pilgrims (ibid 184), consolidating a dominant imagination of

sacred space. **Thus, the discourse of sacredness and purity is strongly rooted in the material history of colonial interventions and elite patronage; and demystifying this discourse of divinity is necessary to see how the visions of dirt and disorder coexist with notions of purity in the city.**

Iconising the Riverfront

The orientalisation of Banaras as an ancient mystical place of esoteric Hinduism is most evident in the iconisation of the riverfront landscape as viewed from the river. A discussion of the projection of the riverfront as the metonym of the religious character of the city entails a focus on the role of the Western gaze in the canonisation of the picturesque, panoramic view of the riverfront and on how the riverfront was self-consciously developed as a spectacle to be viewed from a boat in the river or from the opposite shore. Eck in her introduction to Banaras resorts to a stock oriental description of dawn breaking on the riverfront and the ghats to impress on her Western audience, the uniqueness and transcendental nature of the city. She then goes on to describe the actions of the devotees on the ghats. There are egregious generalizations about the diverse communities residing in the city. She paints the ghats as a sacred site for Hinduism where the residents, all of them devout practitioners of Hinduism, engage in “timeless tasks in an ancient environment” (Desai 209). For example, she says that bathing in the Ganges is a daily rite for Banaras residents and students of all ages perform yogic exercises and meditation on the ghats (ch. 1). Also, she points out that while other cities in India have undergone steady changes, the riverfront in Banaras has “retained its old and ageless character” (ibid). Again, Desai is critical of colonial representations of the riverfront which was “simultaneously represented as historically rooted and ageless” (187). She traces the current architectural spectacle of the riverfront to early eighteenth century when patrons used “architectural intervention and invented

rituals” to claim a role in the city’s socioreligious sphere. The ghats were seen as sites that reflected the patrons’ “pious intentions” and “refined tastes” (119). Ironically, though projected as the epitome of Hindu religiosity, many of the fortress-palaces on the riverfront borrowed from Mughal typologies and were meant to look theatrical when viewed from the river (ibid 121). Similarly, the iconic temple spires that line the riverfront horizon was a trend that emerged in the latter half of the eighteenth century when the elite patrons started adding temples to their fortress mansions in such a manner that they will be seen from the river, imbuing the building and the riverfront with religious overtones (ibid 131). Thus, the ghat-area of the city was consciously fashioned over the decades to reflect the splendor and power of the emergent elite— something that gets lost in later narratives of the city. A case in point is Lannoy’s statement that the architectural riverside rim of the city had “grown like a coral reef” (9), connoting the “organic” and natural development of the space, augmenting the “inherent” sacredness of the place.

It is quite obvious that in addition to practical functions, the riverfront was also meant to provide spectacle and to be looked at from the outside of the city. Hence, the objectifying impulse was germane to how the riverfront was envisioned. The colonial techniques of representing landscape such as picturesque illustrations, panoramic depictions and photographs worked together to project the Banaras riverfront as the material fabric of an antique land (Desai 188). The picturesque¹⁶ mode adopted by many colonial artists to represent the riverfront enabled them to selectively represent scenes, filter out the unpleasant details, and paint an oriental image of a people and culture that belonged to the past. According to Gutschow, views of the city of Banaras became available to the West from 1775 AD onwards. Due to widely circulated

¹⁶ Desai elaborates on the picturesque mode of representation where built environments are represented as “antique and dying” and the artist’s eye merely wanders over “nature in a broad sweep”, without describing particular details. Thus, the riverfront with its “monumental architecture and its masses of people” became objectified as a site of static, ancient culture (188).

lithographs and photographs, the riverfront of Banaras had become quite familiar by the end of the nineteenth century (191). Even Indian elites worked in tandem with Orientalists to buttress the image of an “undiluted” Hindu civilization. The president of Kashi Tirtha Sudhar Trust (formed to revive the Hindu sacredscape of the city) often gave European visitors to the city free rides along the riverfront in his boat (Desai 199). The panoramas of Banaras were extensively displayed back in Britain, often with descriptive labels (such as “A Native of Rank”, “Dead Bodies”, and so on) for the benefit of the English who were eager to consume the commodified slices of culture on display (ibid 204). The city became an object for the Orientalist photographer and became a “foregone halt in the photographer’s route” (ibid 207). Also, locally, the pictures of the riverfront were used in pilgrim guidebooks and famous landmarks were mentioned to cater to an increasing category of domestic pilgrims who were interested in tourism in addition to pilgrimage (ibid 208). Hence, the riverfront view, which became an icon and the quintessential signifier of the city for the outsider–tourist and traveler, is essentially a representation created and popularized by the Indian elites and colonial actors. By virtue of its externality, it presents a static and homogenized picture of Hinduism and the city to be consumed by the viewer/tourist/traveler. I make use of the concept of the city which is crystallized in the eyes of the outsider to talk about how dirt in the city is viewed and objectified by the modern subject, an outsider to at least some of the many ethos that thrive in the city, and in the later sections, I hope to use the lens of the “outsider view” as a parameter to categorise the primary texts used in this dissertation.

Seeing Dirt

Official narratives of filth, disorder and the ungovernability of Banaras emerged in the late eighteenth century when East India Company took direct control of the Banaras region. The

colonial administrators tried to envision and shape the city into a modern one with well-ordered public places and centralized administration and governable subjects with a “universal and legally regulated ‘civic’ consciousness”. Lack of urban cleanliness and sanitation were seen as a reflection of a lack of public morality (Desai 154-155). Taking stock of the “vast improvements” in sanitation undertaken by the British in Banaras, Edwin Greaves, a missionary, noted in 1909 that notwithstanding the efforts, the city could never “be as clean as a European city” (ibid 162). F. Wilford, the official who surveyed the city in 1789 and 1790, reports that there is “shocking filth and nastiness” and “intolerable stench” in the city. Referring to a principal tank in the city he remarks that it is “the receptacle of all drains and filth” (qtd. in Cohn 182-183). The concerns were not altogether unfounded. Throughout the nineteenth century, the mortality rate remained high in the city and the place also witnessed major outbreaks of cholera, typhus, plague and malaria. The influx of aged and diseased persons was thought to be a major threat to public health (Sharma and Sharma 988). The British settlement tried to maintain its distance from the “crowded, noisy and dirty” city by establishing a cantonment in Secrole, then a newly developed suburb two miles away from the city. They modeled it on the English towns back home with spacious and well-aligned roads and sprawling bungalows with English gardens (ibid). Between 1823 and 1867, substantial areas of the city were drained and reclaimed for building a city sewage system (ibid 161). Bernard Cohn opines that the “British preoccupation with the drainage of Benares characterized their stay there until the twentieth century” (183). Interestingly, James Prinsep,¹⁷ the secretary of the Local Improvement Committee “wryly commented in 1829” that while the Indian elites were busy embellishing the city above ground, “their conquerors were content to labour in humble brick underground” (qtd. in Cohn 183), positing a dichotomy

¹⁷ Ironically, his picturesque illustrations and descriptions of the riverfront of Banaras have played a huge role in the iconisation of Banaras as an ancient and timeless city.

between an Indian public indifferent to public health and hygiene and the industrious British selflessly striving to improve the Indian city.

However, by the nineteenth century, though there were minor instances of public resistance to civil projects (Desai 166), the Indian elites in the city were invested in the emerging modern public sphere, and the order and cleanliness of public places were a major concern. Dipesh Chakrabarty points out that both the imperialist and the nascent nationalist sought to cultivate citizen-cultures and make the public place in Indian cities “benign, regulated places, clean and healthy, incapable of producing either disease or disorder (544). The newspapers and journals, important stakeholders in forming public opinion in a modern society, were quite vocal about the unsanitary conditions in Banaras and demanded governmental intervention. *Calcutta Review* in an 1864 report pointed out that the “water is of deadly influence and the vapour from which fills the air with fever breeding and cholera breeding miasma” (Sharma and Sharma 988). *Bharat Jiwan* in 1893 reported that drains were yet to be constructed in the city, resulting in sewage flowing through the streets (ibid 989). The emergence of a civic consciousness and the subsequent desire for a modern and sanitary city saw an active public engaging with issues of pollution and urban management. Sharma and Sharma mention the formation of the Kashi Ganga Prasadini Sabha in 1886 by the residents of Banaras with the objective of eliminating river contamination and purifying drinking water (ibid). Therefore, the rise of the modern discourse of environment pollution, sanitation and hygiene put the spotlight on the hitherto invisible “unmodern” and unsanitary conditions of the city and the modern Indian subject was in the forefront of advocating for the adoption of new moralities of cleanliness and public behavior.¹⁸

¹⁸ In 1826, one among the city’s new elite, Baboo Kalee Shunkur, gave a representation to the local government complaining of the “nuisances” around Manikarnika ghat, referring to people defecating and urinating at the ghat and volunteered to station a guard, at his own expense.

Often, concerns regarding hygiene and order overlapped with “modern moralities” leading to concerted efforts to cleanse the city of “immoral” elements. A case in point was the colonial efforts to shift the quarters of the famed courtesans of Banaras from the centre of the city to the outskirts.¹⁹

Many elites wanted Banaras to retain its sacred geography as well as have modern public places such as parks and esplanades (Desai 162), “an ideal Banaras would be both ancient and modern, a suitable emblem of the past and an impressive city that would showcase a vibrant and contemporary Hindu identity”. But the state of the city fulfilled neither of the aspirations, and the elites were forced to face the reality of a “decaying city” which was felt to be lacking in suitable institutions, spaces, and buildings (ibid 160). The desire to juggle both modernity and to forge an “authentic” Hindu identity underlies the formation of many organizations by the residents of the city. This is reflected in the “language of ‘improvement’” adopted by organizations such as Kashi Tirtha Sudhar Trust which was formed ostensibly for preserving and enhancing the religious texture of the city. But in addition to managing aspects related of religion, the Trust also gave representations for proper sewage and waste management (ibid 198). Hence, striving to keep the sacred space and the sacred geography clean and unpolluted became an essential feature of a collective vision for an emerging Hindu public space and citizenship. Organisations such as

Further, the practice of mixed bathing at the ghat also offended the sensibilities of “‘respectable natives’” (Desai 196).

¹⁹ The tussle between the traditional “culture of pleasure” in Banaras and the prudish moralities of the colonial regime is at the heart of Premchand’s Hindi novel *Sevasadan* (1918). In her analysis of the novel, Vasudha Dalmia details how the modernizing middle classes operating under the aegis of the British imperial rule in Banaras sought to build a modern city which is devoid of symbols of immoral pleasure and debauchery such as courtesans. For more details see Dalmia’s essay “Visions of a New Banaras in the Early twentieth Century” (2008).

the Ganga Mahasabha²⁰ founded by Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya in 1905 for the preservation of “Mother Ganga” and the “*sanatan* cultures” thriving on the banks of the river combine the scientific imagination of environmental pollution with a deeply religious perception of human culture and the natural world. However, the non self-reflexive devotees in the city have different ways of interpreting and dealing with the ideas of environmental pollution and the sacredness of the city space and Ganga. The following sections will explore how they, the “insiders”, negotiate these apparently contradictory images.

The Sacredness of the Profane

Understanding the foundation of the ritual and religious importance of Banaras is necessary to get even a cursory understanding of how the local actors invested in the ritual environment of the city relate to ideas of pollution of the city and the river. In this section, I will attempt to highlight how conventional religious rules of pollution and uncleanness are suspended in the sacred space of the city, making the place a “space of exception” where actions ordinarily deemed profane become sacred. The patron deity of Banaras, Shiva, from whom the city derives almost all of its divinity, is the “holy One who challenges ordinary distinctions of pure and impure, auspicious and inauspicious”, he may be “beautiful or terrifying” and can anoint his body with fragrant sandalwood oil or the ashes of the dead (Eck ch.1). He is associated with death, and the city becomes the Great Cremation Ground or *Mahashmashana* that he inhabits. Parry opines that it is the city’s association with death that gives it immunity to the “degenerative flow of durational time” (13). Thus, death is not considered polluting and Manikarnika ghat (the most sacred place for the cremation of corpses) is also the site of creation (according to

²⁰For more details see: <http://www.gangamahasabha.org/#>

mythology)²¹ and is the “navel” or the highest centre (18) of the yogic anatomy of Kashi/Banaras, “placing it outside (normal/profane) space” (ibid 15). As a consequence, the material disorder and dirt associated with cremation—half burnt corpses and the disarray of mass funeral pyres—are not considered ritually polluting or a threat to the environment. The challenge this religious worldview posed to the environmental imagination that was replete with concepts of material pollution and contamination was exemplified in the public opposition in 1893 to the British proposal to shift the burning ghat to the outskirts of the city for sanitary reasons. The 1925 Annual Administration Report of the city municipality “concludes with resignation” that it is impossible to remove the ghats because “it is not that the ...ghats are there for the city, but that the city is there for the ghats” (Parry 46). Therefore, it will be safe to conclude that the sanctity of Banaras is founded on one of the greatest polluters imagined by human civilization—death. This paradoxical sanctity is succinctly summed up by Jonathan Barry when he says that Banaras is sacred precisely because people go there to die and get cremated, and as a result, the Hindu ideas of cosmic dissolution and regeneration is continually replayed, making it the eternal site of cosmogony (32).

The religious engagement with river Ganga is another aspect where the apparent binaries between purity and pollution get collapsed. Ganga, or Mother Ganga, as the devout Hindu sees it, is pure and life-giving in a material and divine sense. The river can make impure people pure, give salvation to deceased souls if their material remains are immersed in its waters, and so on

²¹ According to several Kashi myths concerned with creation, Lord Shiva created Vishnu to take on the responsibility of creating and protecting the world. Vishnu dug up a pond with his divine discus and filled it with the sweat of his own limbs as he sat performing severe austerities for 500,000 years. One day Shiva came that way and saw that he was aflame with the heat of his austerities. He was delighted by Vishnu’s devotion and his jeweled earring—*Manikarnika*—fell from his ear into the water of the pond and the spot came to be known as Manikarnika. (Eck ch.5)

(Alley “Ganga and Gandagi” 130). Hence, as a purifier, the river is imagined as a receptacle of impure things, giving rise to rituals of purification which involve the “offering” or “immersion” of organic and inorganic materials in the river—actions which qualify as pollution in the secular discourse of the environment. The rituals and practices which are perceived as “acts of pollution” by the environmental discourse are coded into the religious fabric of the city. However, this does not mean that there is no place for the concept of degeneracy or decay in the Hindu religious imagination of the city. However, they at times take dynamic or contradictory connotations and more often than not, refer to spiritual uncleanness or contamination.

Banaras and Metaphorical Degeneracy

Hindus interpret material decay in the city as a sign of the moral decay that characterizes the Kali yuga²² and expresses in metaphorical terms, the waning power of the mortal to perceive the divinity of the place. According to some popular narratives, the soil of Kashi/Banaras no longer looks like gold, the *shivalinga* in the Kedar temple²³ which was made of nine jewels in the Satya yuga, gold in the Treta yuga and silver in the Dvapara yuga is now stone in the Kali yuga. Similarly, the metaphysical shape of Banaras has also been deteriorating over the yugas. Originally shaped like a trident in the Satya yuga, it shrank to the shape of a discus in the Treta yuga and further reduced in size to a chariot shape in the Dvapara yuga and in the present Kali yuga, it is much smaller and shaped like a conch shell. Though this is a symbolic expression of a

²² The last yuga or epoch in the Hindu cosmic cycle. This epoch is characterized by spiritual and material degeneracy and at the end of the cycle, the sinners will be wiped out and a new cycle will commence. The other epochs are Satya yuga, Treta yuga and Dvapara yuga and represent decreasing spiritual and material prosperity. In this context it is interesting to note that though according to some narratives of the city, Banaras is always in the Satya yuga (the golden age of spiritual goodness), other narratives such as the one mentioned in this section imply that even in Banaras, the “world is manifestly imperfect” (Parry 19).

²³ A temple situated in Kedar ghat in Banaras and dedicated to Lord Shiva.

Hindu understanding of the potency of the city that is intelligible and relevant only to the devotee, it makes it amply clear that even in the Hindu imagination, there are pockets of contradiction in the discourse of the “timeless and transcendental” city.

Ironically, several attempts by the elites in the yesteryears to “enhance” the sacredscape and lay claim to socio-religious space by expanding the material religious infrastructure is also interpreted by the locals as signs of the degeneracy of the Kali yuga. They get translated into oral narratives which do not have the endorsement of canonical scriptures. Jonathan Parry’s work offers two such anecdotes. In the first one, an ascetic who has been meditating in a secret cave since the time of Lord Ram was disturbed by the rebuilding of the Sindhia ghat.²⁴ He opens his eyes and looks around and exclaims that the Kali yuga must have arrived and disappears into the Ganga (19). Another myth of unverified origin talks about how the building of the city of Ramnagar²⁵ in the eastern bank of the river was perceived by Shiva as a challenge to Banaras’s fame. In order to contain the threat of Ramnagar, Shiva, through trickery, gets sage Ved Vyas²⁶ to write in the scriptures that those who die on the eastern bank will be reborn as asses (22). Thus, the fortification and expansion of the city’s built environment by political actors for their own political and social prestige is also seen as antithetical to the sanctity of the place. However,

²⁴ Madhuri Desai, in her book *Banaras Reconstructed*, talks about how the Sindhia ghat which had fallen into disrepair in the latter half of the nineteenth century was partly repaired by the municipal committee (196-197).

²⁵ Ramnagar is the political base of the Raja of Banaras and was built by Balwant Singh in the eighteenth century. His usurpation of control over the city from the Nawabs of Awadh is projected as a major episode in the story of regeneration of Hindu Banaras in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Desai 123). The Raja of Banaras is known by the title *Kashi Naresh* and claims direct descentance from Lord Shiva. The kingdom has initiated several religious events and festivities in the city and the Raja is considered the spiritual and religious leader of Banaras.

²⁶ Ved Vyas is the mythical author of the Hindu epic Mahabharata and other sacred texts such as vedas and puranas.

when it comes to ideas of environmental pollution, in the mind of the locals, the sanctity of the city and the river is often divorced from the material view of the same. The following section will explore the complex interactions between the ideas of purity and pollution in the Hindu imagination of the city and Ganga.

Pure but Dirty

The works of Kelly D Alley, an anthropologist who has extensively and consistently studied the attitudes of different actors towards the pollution of Ganga is a useful aid in discussing how the devotees and residents of Banaras negotiate contradictory ideas of environmental pollution and sacred purity. In her fieldwork in Banaras, she divides her respondents into three categories—the Hindu devotees including the priests, boatmen and ghat merchants who do not participate in the environmental discourse of the city and river; the activist residents involved in the “Clean Ganga Campaign” who while acknowledging the “inherent” sanctity of the space, try to raise environmental consciousness among the residents and the devotees; and lastly the government officials involved in state-sponsored plans and campaigns to clean up the river who speak the language of conservation policies and environmental governance²⁷ (“Ganga and Gandagi” 128).

The primary bone of contention among these three different points of view is the understanding of the term “pollution”. The government agencies use the term in a secular

²⁷ Stephanie Rutherford’s paper on “Green Governmentality” provides a useful lens to examine the formation of certain subjectivities based on the scientific, environmental understanding of nature. She says that disciplines such as ecology and earth sciences create regimes of governmentality and produce “truths about nature” (298) which enable certain subjects to talk while rendering certain subjects unintelligible. Here, one can see that certain attitudes to the river are privileged by mainstream discourses of environmental pollution and certain others are considered irrational and irresponsible. For more details on green governmentality see Rutherford, Stephanie, “Green governmentality: insights and opportunities in the study of nature’s rule” (2016).

manner to “label the problems and consequences of urban waste” (Alley “Ganga and Gandagi” 129). However, the devotees recognize different levels of impurities, both material and spiritual, and often, the Western use of the term “pollution” collapses these distinctions and obfuscates our understanding of the Hindu approaches to purity and impurity (Alley “Idioms of Degeneracy” 305). Alley terms this a “semantic disjunction” (“Images of Waste” 171) and details the different categories of purity and impurity as understood by the Hindu devotee: the Hindi word pairs (a) *saf* and *ganda* and (b) *svaccha* and *asvaccha* refer to material or external cleanness and uncleanness, respectively, and coincide with the secular term “pollution”; the Hindi word pairs (c) *suddha* and *asuddha* and (d) *pavitra* and *apavitra* describe purity and impurity, respectively, of the cosmos, soul and heart (“Idioms of Degeneracy” 306). Further, the Hindu conception of the space of Banaras, as mentioned in the previous sections, is different from the material interpretations of place and space by scientific worldviews. Kelly opines that the “symbolic representations of space in Hindu sacred texts... call for an approach to ecological understanding that moves beyond secular notions of ‘environment’” (ibid 298) and further complicates the engagement of the residents with the reality of material pollution of the city and river.

As a result of this complication, it is possible to detect a curious “balancing act” or as Alley puts it, “cultural logic” (“Ganga and Gandagi” 141) in the Hindu idea of the purity of Ganga. Ganga’s spiritual purity and the power to purify have been sanctioned by the scriptures. The power of the river’s swift flowing, living waters to receive and carry away material and spiritual impurities is the fountainhead of the sacredness of the river. Eck explains that the word root of “Ganga”, i.e., *gam* means “to go”, referring to its fast flowing, purifying currents (ch. 5). According to Hindu belief, because of Ganga’s inherent, divine purity, it cannot be made impure (*asuddha* or *apavitra*) by material impurity (*gandagi*) such as human excrement, sewage and

corpses (“Idioms of Degeneracy” 312). As a result, the ghats of Banaras witness conspicuous contradictions which unfailingly repulse many a modern subject—the image of devotees seeking purification in the river while surrounded by *gandagi* and acts of littering and material pollution (ibid 308). Also, the river is Mother Ganga to the devotee, a potent maternal figure who lovingly cleans up the mess her children make. She holds no grudges and carries away the *gandagi* into the ocean (Alley “Ganga and Gandagi” 130), giving scope for guilt-free participation in rituals that could be materially polluting. She is unaffected by *gandagi* and does not participate in the sin-game (*pap-lila*) of humans or suffer the consequences of the actions of degenerate humans. Therefore, the Hindu idea of ritual cleanness is not irreconcilable with material impurity. Moreover, potentially polluting actions such as bathing, washing, cooking, offering material gifts to the river, and so on, are indispensable for receiving the blessings of Mother Ganga. In secular discourses, these offerings are framed as “waste” and the “immersion” of sacred objects or bodily remains for purification is seen as acts of “dumping” or “disposal”, highlighting the dissonance between these two discourses (Alley “Images of Waste” 178).

At the same time, the devotees do recognize that acts of pollution such as discharge of sewage and defecation on the banks cause pollution in the river, however, they see it as a result of a corrupt, dirty (*ganda*) moral order, the degeneracy caused by the Kali yuga. They say that even uncremated or partially cremated corpses found in the river are a result of a ritual violation²⁸ due to the degenerate effect of the Kali yuga (Alley “Images of Waste” 173). Thus,

²⁸ As per the Hindu custom, through cremation by fire, the corpse is reduced to the five basic elements: fire, air, water, ether and earth. Immersing the ashes of the cremated body in the Ganga is believed to give salvation to the deceased soul. However, many who are unable to afford the rather expensive cremation at the burning ghats often release the body into the river uncremated or partially cremated. Also, the dead bodies of certain kinds of human beings such as holy men, children and lepers are not meant to be cremated, according to the scriptures, and are directly

the material degradation is seen as a symptom of moral degradation and is not a concern in itself and it does not diminish the sacredness of the river. For example, Alley notes that the residents rarely perceive the corpses in the river as an ecological concern since “she [Ganga] came down from heaven to carry out this very mission” (ibid), i.e., to receive and carry away impurities and mortal remains. This lack of disgust at the presence of rotting dead bodies in the river is exemplified in the devotee’s amusement at the “foreign anthropologist’s” horror at the same. Alley narrates her fieldwork experience: “They [priests] often pointed out dead bodies to me in phrases such as, ‘Look Madam, dead body!’ and then laughed at my disgust. Such mocking exclamations made me realize that they were not as alarmed about the uncleanness of the Ganga caused by corpses as scientists and officials claimed to be” (“Idioms of Degeneracy” 310). Further, the corruption evident in government schemes to clean up the river is also seen as spiritual dirt, another sign of degeneracy in the Kali yuga (Alley “Images of Waste” 180). However, attempts to address the absence of material purity as a concomitant of spiritual purity in Hindu thought is evident in the rhetoric and actions of certain modern Indian subjects with respect to their campaigns in the city.

Pure should be Clean

In 1986, almost seven decades after Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi spoke in Banaras about the need to keep the holy city clean, another Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi addressed a gathering in the riverfront of Banaras on the occasion of the inauguration of Ganga Action Plan, the country’s first environmental program. In his speech, he carefully chooses to forge linkages between the two distinct categories of spiritual purity and

immersed in the river. This complicates the allegation of “ritual violation” as far as the presence of the corpses in the river is concerned (Alley “Idioms of Degeneracy” 309)

material purity in a bid to win the support of the devout Hindu for the government's attempt to clean up the river. After unequivocally reiterating the "purity (*pavitrata*)" of the river, he exhorts the people to come together to remove all kinds of dirtiness (*gandagi*) from the river and make it completely clean (*bilkul saf*) (qtd. in Alley "Images of Waste" 171). Similar hybrid subjectivities are expressed by the activists who initiated the Clean Ganga Campaign, a "grassroots environmental campaign" seeking to reach out to the local community. A case in point is the (late) celebrated director of the campaign who was an engineering professor in the Indian Institute of Technology in Banaras as well as the *Mahant* (priestly head) of the Sankat Mochan Temple in the city. In many ways he straddled the apparently polar opposites of religious and secular, scientific worldviews and expresses the discomfort that a modern and religious figure feels when confronted with the pollution of the river:

...I respect and revere [Ganga] and she is like my Mother... [but] my scientific background says that Ganga water is not clean, it is polluted. But I want to take holy dip in the river... [But] I cannot accept that the water is clean... this causes a very deep internal stir and pain in my heart...actually it is this feeling ... that has given, I would say, birth to the Sankat Mochan Foundation and the Swatchcha²⁹ Ganga. (qtd. in Alley "Ganga and Gandagi" 135)

Here, the director desires to make the sacred entity conform to the standards of material purity and resolve the "cognitive dissonance" present in his own mind due to the contradictory ideals of spiritual and material purities in the Hindu thought. But it is important to note that unlike the Hindu revivalists in the nineteenth centuries, the organization did not aim to consolidate the ritual landscape of the city by enforcing modern sanitary standards. They function within the

²⁹ Another way to spell *svaccha* in English

rubric of environmental conservation and try to raise environmental awareness among the locals in the city. Although they attempt to reconcile the Hindu worship of the Ganga with an ecological understanding of the water body, the results have been mixed and many local residents claim to be left out of the campaign circle (Alley “Ganga and Gandagi” 138). The existence of a ritual ecosystem centered on death and the cremation of corpses, the practice of purificatory rituals in the river, a Hindu imagination that is quite immune to the discourse of material cleanliness and hygiene and an increasing influx of pilgrims and tourists and a less-than-perfect city governance system has resulted in conspicuous and “spectacular” dirtiness in the city. The following section will discuss how the ubiquity of dirt and death in Banaras becomes a source of incredulity, fascination and horror for the contemporary outsider and results in a certain objectification of the dirt, decay and associated pollution in the city.

The Spectacle of Dirt, Death and Decay

The three-hour Banaras heritage walk offered by LaVacanza Travel,³⁰ an India-based tour operator catering to international tourist boasts of stops at Manikarnika ghat, Matri Din and Kashi Karwat. The first spot is, as mentioned in the previous sections, the sacred spot for the cremation of dead bodies, the second is a much photographed and very dilapidated riverfront temple which is half-submerged in the river with a leaning spire, often compared to the leaning tower of Pisa and the last is a temple where according to legends, devotees went to commit religious suicide to attain quick salvation. All the three spots in the itinerary are self-evidently

³⁰

<https://www.lavacanza.in/sightseeing-tour/package/varanasi/morning-heritage-walk-of-varanasi-with-manikarnika-ghat/d22015-5588p193>

related to death, morbidity and decay and give a glimpse into how these “unsavoury” aspects of the civilization and life are objectified and commodified for the outsider–tourist in the city.³¹

The commodification of the city life for the consumption of the outsider is intimately linked to the “outsider’s view” of Banaras, i.e., the view of the riverfront from the river iconised by the colonial artists and photographers. A direct connection can be traced between the colonial obsession with the picturesque ghats and extant narratives of Banaras by foreign travelers. As mentioned before, the riverfront itself was developed by the local elites with the aim of providing “spectacle” to the viewer and highlighting the theatrical potential of Hinduism and Hindu rituals.³² Thus the ghats become, to borrow from tourism studies, a “stage” where certain “performative conventions” (Edensor 63) or “manners of gazing” are encouraged. It is quite common to find narratives of tourists who hurry to the ghats “where all the action happens 24/7” as soon as they arrive in the city (“Experiencing Varanasi” Ulli Maier). In addition to the scenes of devotees performing everyday rituals and ablutions at the ghats and in the river, the spectacle of death, decay and gore is a major preoccupation in tourist accounts of the city. As mentioned before, Manikarnika ghat which is a “smoking charnel-ground” where you can see ““twenty-four-hour cremation”” (“Maximum India” Iyer) is a major tourist attraction quite self-conscious of its status as a spectacle. The ghat has special viewing areas where the tourists can watch the cremations from a distance in addition to watching it from boats in the river. For example, a

³¹ In this context, the concept of “thanatourism” seems to be especially relevant. It refers to a broad range of tourism practices associated with death and disaster. For an elaborate discussion of the study of thanatourism, refer to Seaton (2009).

³² One such spectacle is the Ganga arati performed in the evenings at the riverfront in the city. This ritual, which was initiated in the late 1990s, has become a major tourist attraction by virtue of its spectacular and dramatic nature. The ritual consists of young Hindu priests dressed in crimson and cream robes standing on specially constructed platforms facing the river and performing worship holding flaming brass lamps. Madhuri Desai opines that the scale of the spectacle on any given year depends on the global tourism industry (211).

photograph of the ghat, published in a travel blog ("The Things" Nisa Maier) has the photographer clicking both the messy, smoky ghat as well as two boatloads of tourists viewing the scene from the river, throwing into sharp relief, the performative nature of the spectacle and the tourists. Similar representations of Banaras and the cue and hints provided by the built structure of the ghats as well as locals such as boatsmen, guides, and so on, encourage the objectification of such scenes of death in the city. Thus, the tourist repeat certain "embodied practices and meaning" which lead to a "discrete concretization of cultural assumptions" which in turn helps sustain a collectively "imagined geography" (Edensor 71). The image of Banaras as an oriental place of death and gore is further reinforced by the pictures and narratives of corpses that are found floating in the Ganga. The internet is inundated with pictures of floating corpses in various stages of decay, dogs gnawing on them and other associated scenes of disorder and dirt. They are objectified for a Western audience eager to get repulsed and excited by the macabre sights from a faraway land. For example, referring to the floating corpses that could be viewed from her hotel overlooking the river, a traveler-photographer states that it is like watching "dawn of the dead reality show daily from your hotel terrace" ("Life Along" Nisa Maier). Another traveler, after giving a list of strange and exciting everyday scenes that could be viewed at the ghats, including "the occasional corpse drifting downriver, goes on to add that "[y]ou will also get to see (if you're 'lucky') dogs gnawing on the bones which were not cremated properly..." ("Experiencing Varanasi" Ulli Maier). Hence, Banaras is projected as a macabre space where facilitated by a strange culture, one can view and consume an unrestrained and unparalleled display of the gore and decay of humanity. There are several strikingly similar orientalist accounts of city where the space is portrayed as a grotesque, horrifying, alluring and magical

amalgam of logic-defying cultural practices. A sample from “Maximum India” by Pico Iyer, a British-born travel writer of Indian origin:

Figures came toward me out of the mist, smeared in ash from head to toe, bearing the three-pronged trident of the city’s patron, Shiva, the Ender of Time. In the little alleyways behind the flames was a warren of tiny streets; a shrunken candle burned in the dark of a bare earth cavern where men were whispering sacred syllables. Cows padded ceaselessly down the clogged, dung-splattered lanes, and every now and then another group of chanters surged past me, a dead body under a golden shroud on the bamboo stretcher that they carried toward the river, and I pressed myself against a wall as the whisper of mortality brushed past.

His narrative unabashedly follows the familiar paths of orientalist incredulity at the proximity of pollution and sanctity in the city: “Its [Banaras’s] holy waters flow, for example, past thirty sewers, with the result that the brownish stuff the devout are drinking and bathing in contains three thousand times the maximum level of fecal coliform bacteria considered safe by the World Health Organization”. His tone reaches a crescendo of exoticisation and othering when he says that the “collapsing building” signify an “immemorial pageant” confirming the sense that “one has entered less a city than an allegory of some kind, a cosmogram legible only to a few”. Elements of the gothic are liberally used to convey the otherworldly and fearsome nature of the place: on the last day, he wakes up to find that “the ghostly towers and palaces...have unmade themselves in the dark”, the fog and pollution makes “every figure...look like a visitor from another world” and he feels trapped and spellbound in the “dense, feverish, self-contained model of the universe”.

Openness to Dirt—a shift in perspective

Notwithstanding sweeping hyperboles and misleading statements such as: “Varanasi is a shock to the senses: it is pure India at a ‘full speed ahead’ mode. Crowded, dirty, and bizarre.... Cows are gods. Rats are revered and eat the railroad ties, causing crashes” (“Varanasi” Tindall), there is a very unique neo-colonial attempt to simultaneously objectify the culture (death and dirt, in this context) and display an empathetic understanding and acceptance of the “other”. A case in point is the comments section in the travel blogs of Nisa Maier and Ulli Maier. After going through their blogs replete with mentions and/or pictures of rotting corpses, a reader comments that “Indian people stink” and that they have a “disgusting culture”. Nisa Maier counters it with the accusation it is “very harsh” of the reader to comment so (“Life Along”) and in another article, she empathizes with a reader’s apprehension that he may not be able to “handle” the floating bodies if he visits the city. She emphasizes that Banaras/Varanasi is not for the faint-hearted and one needs “guts” to see the place (“Experiencing Varanasi” Ulli Maier). Clearly, there are dual impulses to orientalise and objectify the rituals (associated with death) as well as claim a superior understanding of the culture of the city which purports to be different from the average Western tourist’s modern horror at the disorder in the city. The origin of this self-reflexive modern subjectivity which is very conscious of the “otherness” of a different culture and strives to become an “insider” in the city and merge into the landscape can be traced to the 1960s countercultural movement that originated in Western capitalist countries. The movement precipitated a different aesthetics and politics of travel which led to a marked shift in the poetics of travel writings and Western representations of Banaras which were hitherto marked by colonialist disgust and aversion for the chaos in the city. This can be considered a watershed moment or period as far as representations of Banaras and engagement with the “dirt” in the city are concerned and forms the logical parameter for determining the time period for the

selection of primary texts for this research. The following section will discuss in detail about the countercultural movement and its implications for modes of travel, tourism and “gazing” and the consequent representations of Banaras.

Countercultural Movement, Travel and Banaras

American Beat poets such as Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997) and Jack Kerouac (1922–1969) spearheaded the countercultural movement which was a political–cultural movement against the dominant Western values and a quest for an alternate set of values for a more ethical and sustainable way of being in the world. Travelling to the East, visiting geographical regions that didn’t fall under the ambit of “violent modernity” was one of the important characteristics of the movement and was seen as a form of rebelling (Wills). Kerouac saw travelling as a manifestation of his status as an outsider, a footloose individual who “stood against everything society demanded” (ibid). Ginsberg and several of his peers were especially attracted to Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism and travelled to India for spiritual, intellectual and artistic inspiration. Their engagement with the East was markedly different from the earlier colonial gaze which was based on racial and political privilege. The Beats who visited India “primarily took ideas from the culture of the sub-continent, rather than there being a flow of ideas from the West towards the East... the Beats provided an alternative ... set of values” to the colonial mode of experiencing India (Oliver 13).

The mode of travel was conspicuously different from the earlier colonial travels. They embraced “rough travel” which included travelling cheaply, interacting with locals, especially those living on the fringes of the society, and braving infections and diseases. In fact, Oliver comments that there was an “inverted snobbery with regard to money” (144) and they “represented a different type of culture and tourism to the affluent travelers of the colonial days”

(147). As forerunners of the present-day backpack tourists, they endorsed a unique aesthetics of travel that was inclusive and non-hierarchical, but performative nevertheless. Ginsberg popularized Hindu spiritual practices back in America and was hailed as the country's "greatest Hindu guru" (Prabhu 129). It gradually led to the "consumption [in America] of India through 'diverse commodities, rituals, language and ideas' " (Stephens qtd. in Prabhu 129). This mode of travelling soon caught on and the "hippie trail" brought the American counterculture to India in human waves (ibid). To the artists, writers, soul-searchers, drifters and journalists who made their way to India, Banaras represented the epitome of all the exoticism and otherness that they sought for in the country. As a result, the city saw a steady stream of young, foreign visitors who more often than not wrote about their experiences, painting a mutually reinforcing image of an exotic and chaotic, but spiritually enriching city.

Of immense significance to this research is the new aesthetics of dirt that was evident in the travels and ethos of the pioneering counterculturalists. Prabhu details how Ginsberg was obsessed with mortality and attempted to identify with the squalid, impoverished and the deformed and paid attention to "Indian poverty without simply condemning it" (120). Thus, dirt, waste and death play a major role in the narratives of Banaras, however, the ethics and aesthetics of their representation is different from the earlier colonial disgust and horror at the chaos and disorder that they witnessed in the city. This change in the engagement, narration and representation of dirt and waste forms a point of departure in the discourse of waste in Banaras. Also, the countercultural movement and the influx of a large number of international visitors had its own impact on the residents of the city, leading to new economic opportunities as well as cultural anxieties and encounters with the "other". This is reflected in the works of Indian

authors which in many instances explore the emerging patterns of redundancies, decadence and moral and spiritual dirt that the locals experience in the city.

My work is located at this cultural juncture in the discursive field of literary and cultural production of Banaras cityspace and probes how the representation of dirt in the city varies according to the socio-cultural locations of the subjects.

The Chapter So Far

In the earlier sections of the chapter, I highlighted the paradoxical discourses of purity and pollution that marked the city of Banaras, traced the history of the present-day representations of the city as timeless and transcendental with special focus on the iconisation of the riverfront, and gave an account of the emergence of narratives of unsanitariness of the city during colonial times. Further, I discussed the socio-cultural differences in attitudes towards sacredness, material and metaphoric pollution that informed the engagement of different actors with the ostensible material pollution of the city and the sacred river. In the subsequent sections I looked at how contemporary tourist narratives and texts objectify the scenes of death and disorder in the city and traced the roots of such representations to the post-WW II countercultural movement in the West. Hence, the trope of waste in the representations of Banaras have emerged and evolved over the years as a result of changing cultural and political persuasions.

Research Objectives

The aim in the dissertation is to understand how the cityscape of Banaras, in select literary and cultural texts, is framed in terms of the “abject”, decaying, waste and wasted and what the cultural roots and spatial implications of this framing are.

Choice of Primary Texts

I have chosen texts written in English from the post-WW II period onwards since, as mentioned before, there is a very different kind of post-colonial engagement with the city in the wake of the countercultural movement. In all the selected texts, waste or abject material is always a reference point for relating to the city. A preliminary examination of the selected texts reveal that in these works, the writers/narrators seem to have interacted with the material and metaphorical degradation of the city and those experiences seem to have mattered enough to get reflected in the texts. Many texts have direct intertextual references to the preceding narratives written about the city. For example, the novel *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi* (2009) and *A Kaleidoscope City* (2015) written by journalist-writers have directly referenced Allen Ginsberg's *Indian Journals* (1970) which is one of the first countercultural texts on Banaras. Hence, these texts form a cluster where they are in conversation with each other, either in agreement or in opposition. But some texts by Indian writers present the city in radically different ways; however, waste or abject material is always a reference point for relating to the city.

At this point I would like to borrow from Susan Morrison who in her seminal work *The Literature of Waste* (2015), elucidates how texts from various geohistorical and cultural locations can come together as a collage and form “ literary ‘neighbourhoods’ determined by accidental contiguity, genealogical isolation, and ethical encounter” (6). In a similar manner, I have chosen texts which even while cutting across genres and cultural locations, frame their own wastescapes of Banaras.

Research Questions

A preliminary reading of these clusters of texts reveal that human-waste interactions in the city result in the projection of geographic imaginations of Banaras which vary based on the cultural and political locations of the narrators involved. This entails further investigation into

the cultural subjectivities which give rise to these ideas of Banaras and the nuances and implications of these conceptions of space.

Here, I therefore address the following questions:

- How does the self of the narrator **and its relational dynamics with waste** become important for representing the wastescapes of Banaras? I seek to examine how the culturally inflected subjectivity of the narrator influences the perceptions of and approaches to waste in the city and the consequent impact it has on the representation of the city.
- Does continued interaction with waste/wasted landscape **effect any changes** in the narrator's "modern" self, which is predicated on hygienic modernity? And how does that change the perception of space? This line of enquiry helps one understand whether waste has the agency to undo or rewrite the modern idea of the autonomous individual and alter the anthropocentric world view and forge new linkages with the environment.
- How do the concepts of dirt and wasting **become a metaphor for humans who belong or do not belong in the city?** How do they challenge the mainstream imagination of Banaras as a holy Hindu city? Here, I aim to scrutinize the implications of metaphorical dirt in the conception of cityscape and the particularities of the narrative self which is the fountainhead of such perceptions.
- What kind of narrative self precipitates an **alternative affective poetics of waste** in certain texts on Banaras? This includes an investigation into the unconventional (with

respect to modernity) modes of engaging with waste and the peculiarities of the narrative self that engenders such approaches to waste.

Theoretical Anchor for the Research Study

From the discussions in the chapter so far, I conclude that the conception and representation of space, especially a cityscape, is intensely political and subjective and a pre-given, pre-linguistic reality of a space cannot be articulated. In order to analyse how the perception of waste affects the representations of the city of Banaras, it is imperative to discuss the interconnections between the idea of waste, dirt, subjectivity and their implications for the perception and representations of the city. A familiarity with the theoretical discussions on spatial representation and the fluidity and textuality of spaces is the first step towards attempting a study of this kind.

The primary sources of analysis consist solely of literary and cultural texts. Since the research aims to see the interconnections between these texts and the construction of the city space of Banaras, a familiarity with scholarly work on the role of texts (both literary and cultural) in the production of space is essential. Robert T. Tally Jr. opines that even when texts do not have direct references to space or place, readers tend to “project forms of spatiality” on it (1). The relation among texts, images, place and representations is the major focus of spatial cultural studies (ibid 3) and literary texts are considered artefacts of spatializing practices (Heever 70). Gerhard van den Heever argues that such kind of productions of space is political since the texts are produced as operations in a field of discourse and are “products and producers of sets of representations” (71) and entail an interdisciplinary approach involving disciplines

studying human interactions such as anthropology, critical geography, cultural studies, and so on (72). The study of the self and formation of subjectivity also becomes a crucial ancillary since space is also a product of relations between humans and is social in nature. Here, the formation of self with respect to waste and culturally determined waste practices helps understand the nature of the narrative/authorial subject and her perceptions of space and place. Thus, this study adopts critical insights from human geography (study of human–space interactions) and waste studies (which can be termed as a study of waste–human interactions) to analyse how the ideas of dirt and waste construct the image of Banaras in the primary texts. The following sections will briefly discuss some of the core theoretical standpoints which inform the analyses in the core chapters.

- **The Experience of Space**

The importance of the human subject and her sensory, emotional and cultural faculties are central to the perception of space. Nigel Thrift states that every space is in constant motion and is understood as a process which is non-linear and fragmented (141). He adds that the world around us is constructed out of “a spatial swirl of affects” (143) and every place is a “knot tied from strands of the movements of its many inhabitants...” (141-142). The term “personal geography” denotes the subjective and personal nature of the perception of space where all information is “inspired, edited and distorted by feeling” (Lowenthal qtd. in Pile 11). Lowenthal goes on to point out that people’s world views are partial and based on the experience of their bodies (ibid 12), highlighting the embodied nature of the experience of space. Hence, it is clear that the psyche which resides in the body plays a major role in determining how space is understood—even in a rational world, “people still inhabit a world of dreams” and unconscious processes underlie the personal, the social and the spatial (Pile 15).

- **Imagining the City**

The subjective nature of the experience of space has significant import for how one perceives and represents the city space. As mentioned before, the entire thesis hinges on the assumption that representing a city in any discourse is an act of recreating it through the system of signs and symbols. Burton Pike's "City as Image" (1981) which discusses city and literature is helpful in highlighting the subjectivity that marks any representation of the city:

The inhabitant or visitor basically experiences the city as the labyrinth, although one with which he may be familiar. He cannot see the whole of a labyrinth at once, except from above, when it becomes a map. Therefore his impressions of it at street level at any given moment will be fragmentary and limited ... For there is a gulf between the living experience of a real city and the word-city of a poem or novel ... Even the sociologist and the urban historian whose primary obligation is fidelity to empirical reality rather than to the imagination ... must "reduce" the city to words; for them as well as for creative writers, the process is one of metaphorization. (243-245)

Pike also states that city becomes an enduring metaphor for giving voice to the fragmented conscious of the citizen, in other words, the city becomes a presence, reflecting the impressions and psyche of the characters (243). However, the vocabulary and literary devices used by the author is culturally determined (ibid 245) and the "word-city" evokes deep-rooted cultural archetypes, anxieties and ambiguities (ibid 248). Thus, literary representations of the city are deeply intertwined with the cultural and individual peculiarities of the narrator and can draw on existing imaginations of the city.

- **Waste and Self**

From the above sections it is amply clear that the self of the subject—its cultural moorings—determine how the city is experienced and represented. In this context, it is pertinent to explore theories of waste and self and see how the ideas of and engagement with bodily and other forms of waste constitute the self. This study follows the liberal definition of waste to include various kinds of material “waste” such as bodily wastes, dirt, discarded matter (trash, garbage, and so on) and polluted natural resources. At a very cursory level, waste can be considered as discarded, expelled or excess matter (Hawkins *The Ethics of Waste* vii), and when the term is used as a category of judgement, it becomes a metaphor for the “bad” that stands in opposition to the “good” and forms the basis of several “moral economies” (ibid viii) and “spills over into related categories of sin, defilement and abjection (Scanlan 14). Mary Douglas, in her seminal work *Purity and Danger* (1966), states that “dirt is matter out of place” (5), elevating our understandings of waste and dirt to linguistic and structural levels, making it a contingent political category. Hence, waste becomes a by-product of the human urge to order and categorise life and life experiences. This argument is reiterated by John Scanlan who says that garbage is “the formlessness from which form takes flight” (14). The psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection as explicated in her essay *The Powers of Horror* (1982) further contributes to our understanding of the importance of waste in the construction of self. She says that the abject is everything that is opposed to the “I” or self and it is the “Other” that has to be evacuated for the self to exist (1). Here, the abject refers to aspects of bodily disintegration, morbidity and excrement which invoke extreme forms of disgust in the subject. These conceptions of the self and waste are essentially Western in origin and is anchored in modernity. Therefore, it will be helpful to look at the social processes that actively give rise to a human self predicated on hygienic modernity.

- **The Self, Modernity and Waste**

Hawkins opines that “literal and metaphoric separation from the base is one of the defining markers of modernity’s classificatory regime” (56). A similar view is put forward by Scanlan who says that the habit of separating the valuable from the worthless is embedded in the Western way of thinking about the world (8). He adds that we [the modern society] “understand the valuable...as the result of a galloping retreat from an undifferentiated mass of things (which may also be called ‘nature’) that could otherwise swamp us (13). The desire for separation from waste is most evident in the modern discourse of cleanliness and hygiene that projects the “privatized purified body” (Hawkins *The Ethics of Waste* 56) as the ultimate model of health and development. Hawkins traces the emergence of this ideal, clean human subject to the invention of the modern sanitation system which has been “fundamental to distancing us [modern individuals] from any direct role in managing our own waste (57). A similar argument is put forward by Scanlan when he states that the origin of the gradual separation of the human body from (its own) nature is the result of the “*techniques of waste*” that were developed due to the overpowering effect of waste in medieval European towns and cities (124-125). The resultant invisibilisation of human waste has turned human excrement into an object of deep disgust and horror and makes encounters with it charged and visceral (Hawkins *The Ethics of Waste* 57). Similarly, Scanlan opines that in societies where excremental waste is a feature of daily life, one can most probably detect the “absence of structures and beliefs common to modernity” and signals the low importance attached to a “notion of personal identity as corporeal individuation” (124). In his *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud writes that the excessive concern of Western societies with cleanliness and order is linked to the repression of libidinal desires (qtd. in Sibley *Geographies of Exclusion* 4) and is an attempt to distance the subject from the uncertainties and

fears of life. Essentially, hygienic modernity entails a repression of bodily processes and a perpetual quest for purity and separation from one's surroundings.

- **Humans-as-Waste**

In addition to material objects and bodily wastes that are deemed as waste, the metaphor of waste is also mapped onto humans beings when certain individuals or communities get branded as waste or wasted and as the “other” of the clean, pure and productive modern subject. In Zygmunt Bauman's work *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (2003) he analyses how modernity renders humans redundant and superfluous, and how they are managed and “disposed”. The relentless pursuit of perfection for which things and people have to be constantly made obsolete and replaced is termed as “liquid modernity” by Bauman. It “is a civilization of excess, redundancy, waste and waste disposal” (97). Similarly, the symbolic approach to humans-as-waste is grounded in cultural and religious ideas of dirt and waste. Mary Douglas' view that dirt is “matter out of place” is of relevance here. The idea of dirt, waste, sin, is more often than not, extended to refer to humans who do not fit into unproblematic, normative categories. It can include people with physical deformity, deviant sexuality, fluid gender, and so on. I make use of this concept to analyse how certain categories of humans in the city are perceived as waste or become redundant.

- **Waste and Space**

At the most basic level, waste forms the “other” which the self has to suppress and control in order to exist. Kristeva's theory of the abject makes it clear that boundaries are important to the perception of waste and the abject. David Sibley opines that the boundaries, however porous, between the abject and the self allow us to think spatially about the

“geographies of difference” (“Creating Geographies of Difference” 115). Thus, he argues that the “self can be *placed*” (ibid 116) which introduces the idea of spaces of abjection. In *Geographies of Exclusion* (1995) he delves more into how patterns of exclusion are a part of geographical spaces. Often “wasted humans”, marked by physical deformities, racial or political identities become a threat to the boundaries of personal, local and national space (ibid 24) and they are relegated to marginalized spaces or the spaces associated with them get perceived as deviant and abject. The perception of postcolonial spaces as dangerous, teeming with disease and contamination is of particular relevance to this work. Such spaces are relegated to the bottom while regions inhabited by White civilization (ibid 26) occupy the top. In many cases, crossing boundaries can induce anxiety as well as exhilaration (ibid 32) and the liminal zone becomes a space of unease which has to be eliminated for order to prevail (ibid 33). Therefore, waste has spatial implications and certain regions/space get associated with attributes of waste, an idea which is of pertinence in analyzing the role of waste and dirt in framing the city space of Banaras.

- **Ethics of Waste**

Human–waste relations need not always be marked by repulsion and denial, Gay Hawkins imagines them as dynamic, open-ended social entities where new meanings and practices of relating to waste can emerge (3). She argues that the psychoanalytic theory of abjection is “too blind to the social and political frames that mediate how all waste is subject to classification” (ibid) and that encounters with waste have the potential to disrupt habits and generate new relations and perceptions and “initiate *other* possibilities of subjectivity and intersubjectivity” (37). Recalibrated relations with waste can include among others, an acceptance of otherness and learning to live with alterity (ibid 11). Some of the manifestations

of this kind of openness or acceptance of the self include the cognizance of the “thingness” of objects deemed waste (ibid 74) and acceptance of imperfection and death—which she terms the “ordinary sublime” (127). The precipitation of a new ethics of being in and relating to the world can have implications for how the space is perceived by the self since ethics is the “problematic of the constitution of one’s embodied place in the world (Diprose qtd. in Hawkins 25). A new ethics of waste calls our attention to the agency and power of waste to define and shape the human. It highlights the vitality of waste and objects and the manner in which humans are embedded within and not aloof from the network of waste and other non-human things. “Waste has a kind of agency to enchant and disturb, its possibilities suggesting the ‘networked quality of things’” (Morrison *The Literature of Waste* 129). Waste has the capability to confront the human self with the materiality and mortality of its own being. Susan Morrison highlights the redemptive quality of waste and its potential to make us human and other-centered through the expansion of the self. In a way, it can be considered as the “compost aesthetics” of waste where the interconnectedness of all material is emphasized. Thus, “our horror at recognizing our own inevitable decay may vaccinate us to become more ethical and more humane in our dealings with others, particularly those “wasted” beings denigrated by society” (ibid 176). “Disgust ‘pose[s] a particular threat to compassion’” (ibid 174) and overcoming disgust is the first step towards the expansion of the self. This new ethics of self is important for analyzing and understanding how certain actors perceive waste differently.

- **Why not Ecocriticism?**

Since the thesis is related to the study of literary and cultural texts with respect to representations/perceptions of waste, ecocriticism, with its focus on the interconnections between texts and the environment, may seem like the obvious theoretical approach to employ. However,

due to its preoccupation with a rather static idea of nature and “commitment to environmentalist praxis” (Buell 430), this theoretical method offers limited scope for probing the different subjectivities formed out of human–waste interactions and the possibilities of living differently with waste. Gay Hawkins, whose work on the ethics of waste is a major contribution to the corpus of waste studies, opines that the environmentalist discourse, which is closely aligned with the ideology of ecocriticism, uses the concept of waste as a trope to signal the “end of nature” (*The Ethics of waste* 7) and forecloses all discussions on the dynamic and generative capacities of waste (ibid 10). On the other hand, by treating waste as an open-ended category, as a product of human systems of ordering, and by focusing exclusively on “decay, built environments, and dystopic or toxic sites” (Morrison “Waste in Literature and Culture”), the waste-studies approach allows more leeway in analyzing the nuances of the relationship between the human subject and waste. Hence, I have used principles from waste-studies theorists for studying the difference conceptions and attitudes to towards material and metaphorical waste in the selected texts.

Wastescapes

While dealing with the literary, cultural and political significances of waste in the texts that I have chosen, I use the term “**wastescape**”³³ for referring to the specific spatial and geographic imagination(s) of Banaras that is informed by myriad forms and attitudes towards waste mentioned in the previous sections. As Appadurai puts it, the -scapes are “deeply perspectival constructs, inflected very much by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness

³³ Kelly D. Alley introduces this term in her essay “Images of Waste and Purification on the Banks of the Ganga” (1998) where she comments on the photographs of pollution on the banks of the Ganga in Banaras that appeared in news media. She states that “wastescapes”, though ignored in Appadurai’s essay (1990) on imagined worlds, is recognized by different actors invested in the city such as city planners, policy makers, residents, and so on.

of different actors” (“Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy” 3). However, he makes it clear that –scapes are not purely individualistic in nature and are navigated by “agents who experience and constitute larger formations...” (ibid). This aspect is of relevance to the research since it emphasizes the social and political nature of the concept of “wastescapes” and how much it is influenced by the global cultural flow of images regulated by media networks. Also, according to Appadurai, these –scapes point to “imagined worlds” and need not be uniform, static or objective, leading to multiplicity of images and imaginations which help people imagine their own lives as well as those of others (ibid). Discussing the significance of the suffix “-scape”, Edward W. Soja comments that the addition of this suffix evokes “a visual and panoramic sensitivity, an invitation to explore the globality of whatever is attached to it” (xv). Thus, the idea of “wastescapes” is an efficient category for teasing out the nuances of the dynamic and unstable, collective “imagined world” of the city, which is framed in terms of waste and the wasted.

Gaze

The earlier sections of the chapter did touch upon how “looking” or “gazing” at the city is a mode of experiencing the city and the city space. The research extends the concept of embodied gaze as an analytical category for evaluating the characteristics of various wastescapes visible in the selected texts. The positionality of the narrators with respect to the waste in their surroundings and the mode of gazing at waste form a major axis around which I draw conclusions about the nature of the space that is represented in the texts.

The Modern Subject

This research uses the subjectivities of the respective narrators as the parameter for grouping the texts and analyzing how waste is represented in them. Modernity serves as a major reference point for differentiating among the narrative subjects in the primary texts and I use the term “modern subject” to refer to the self, which is overtly repulsed and threatened by the presence of unregulated material waste and dirt in the surroundings. However, I do not intend to place the alternate/other subjectivities (reflected in the texts) at the opposite end of the spectrum of modernity as primitive or “unmodern” selves, positing an unproblematic binary. In this thesis, the “modern subject” exclusively pertains to the self which is moulded by the discourse of “hygienic modernity”³⁴ where the ideas of Self and the Other are influenced by notions of cleanliness, modern hygiene, the germ theory of disease and sustained by institutions of public health, sanitation, urban planning, and so on. Hence, I acknowledge that there could be other iterations of modernity where hygienic modernity may not be of primary concern.

A Note on Banaras-Benares-Varanasi-Kashi

Any scholarly engagement with literary narratives of Banaras faces the problem of nomenclatural inconsistency since various writers/filmmakers choose to use one of the several versions of the city name. Some favour the colonial “Benares” while others prefer the official “Varanasi”. The religious-minded refer to the city as Kashi—the city of light. However, recent cultural historians and anthropologists generally prefer “Banaras” (the Bangla-inflected version of “Varanasi”). Hence, I have chosen to use “Banaras” in independent discussions and while analyzing or quoting from particular texts, I use the version used by the author/filmmaker so as

³⁴ In her book *Hygienic Modernity* (2004) Ruth Rogaski employs the term “hygienic modernity” to describe the transformation of Chinese ideas of health and disease under the influence of colonial modernity.

to avoid confusing the reader. Throughout this work, I have used the names Banaras, Benares, Varanasi, and Kashi synonymously.

Scope and Contribution of the Dissertation

This research work is an interdisciplinary analysis of select cultural and literary texts set in the city of Banaras, and is preoccupied mainly with questions of imagination and identity in the perception and representation of the city. Though it deals with the cultural attitudes to waste and pollution, it does not concern itself with matters of “waste management” or urban governance, nor is it a comprehensive study of the “pollution problem” of the city. Also, though it draws from aspects of ethnographic studies, the project itself does not include any ethnography.

In 2013, in the introduction to the *Oxford Anthology of the Modern Indian City*, Vinay Lal rues that there is very little scholarly work on Indian cities which “focuses on the city as a site of imagination, as a nodal point for contestations over modernity, and as a location of specific cultural phenomena” and that recent works have focused more on metropolises of Calcutta, Bombay, and Delhi (xliv-xlvi). Hence, by placing a/n (non-metropolitan) Indian city at the heart of this project, I hope to contribute to the “intellectual landscape” of scholarly literature on Indian cities which are informed by insights from poststructuralist critical theory. Further, this study is possibly the first of its kind to compare psycho-cultural attitudes to waste in India through the medium of literary and cultural texts. This might, in the long run, be of use in understanding how we as a society and country relate to waste.

Chapterisation

Apart from the Introduction and Conclusion, the thesis consists of three core chapters. I have undertaken a close reading of the selected texts. Based on how the writers/moviemakers talk/relate to the material aspects of the city, I have divided the texts into three groups. The first group consists of narratives by individuals whom I term “modern subjects”, outsiders to the city, who are uncritically invested in the modern discourse of hygiene, sanitation and cleanliness. The second group consists of narratives by narrators who are residents of the city, insiders, who are more preoccupied with the metaphorical ideas of dirt, purity and impurity. The third group consists of narrators who are outsiders to the city, but have a critical engagement with modernity. The analyses of these three groups of texts correspond to the three core chapters in the dissertation.

- **Chapter 2**

The chapter examines a selection of non-Indian texts which detail the uneasy relationship between Banaras and the narrators of the texts. I try to see how scenes of dirt, waste, death and disorder infringe upon the “modern subject” whose subjectivities have been moulded by the discourse of hygienic modernity. I argue that constant exposure to the detritus and chaotic atmosphere of the city brings about certain changes in the idea of the self, leading to a more open and compassionate worldview and a better sense of being in sync with the city.

Texts:

Aslan, Reza. “Believer with Reza Aslan Season 1 Episode 1 Aghori Sadhus in India”. YouTube, uploaded by Kim Tae Hee, 17 March 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8sfmqLcD-A.

Dyer, Geoff. *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi*. Random House India, 2009.

Ede, Piers Moore. *Kaleidoscope City: A Year in Varanasi*. Bloomsbury, 2015.

From Seoul to Varanasi, Directed by Kyu-hwan Jeon, TreeFilm, 2013.

Newby, Eric. *Slowly Down the Ganges*. 1966. Picador, 1983.

- **Chapter 3**

This chapter focuses exclusively on the human wastescape of the city. I employ the term “human wastescape” to refer to different kinds and categories of “wasted”, “wasting” and “impure” humans who make up the microspaces of the city. I focus on two texts by Indian authors and examine how they challenge the notion of Banaras as an unmodern, unchanging, exotic Hindu place of pilgrimage. The two texts give two different accounts of a rapidly globalizing dynamic city where economic and modernizing forces destabilize existing categories of pure and impure humans and create new kinds of redundancy, insecurities and alliances. The first text, a narrative about the changes that globalization and international tourism has wrought in the city highlights contesting claims and ideas of the city, blurring the boundaries between the insiders and the outsiders and the sacred and the polluted; the second text revolves around the impoverished Muslim weavers of the city and their systematic exploitation, humans who get wasted, excluded from the mainstream discussions of the city.

Texts

Mohalla Assi. Directed by Chandra Prakash Dwivedi, Crossword Entertainment, 2015.

Bismillah, Abdul. *The Song of the Loom*. 1987. Translated by Rashmi Govind, Macmillan, 1996.

- **Chapter 4**

This chapter deals with alternative ways of relating to the material and metaphoric waste in the Banaras. It comprises two cases: Raja Rao’s metaphysical stories centered around the

ghats and Allen Ginsberg's narrative of the city. The discussion of Ginsberg's experiences in the city is supplemented by factual information about his travels within India from Deborah Baker's account of the Beat poet in India. I examine the affective poetics centered around waste and the ethics of compassion, openness and transcendence that is implied in these accounts. In the first account I argue that Rao's anchoring in Advaita philosophy and the concept of the immateriality of the self and the illusory world of reality and language makes him describe the city and its material waste in transcendental terms, making categories of waste, purity and pollution irrelevant. Hence, Banaras is envisioned as an absolute and undifferentiated space. Ginsberg's alternate aesthetics of waste points to a non-hierarchical, open self which sees the embracing of dirt, its material and non-material signifiers, as a political and cultural revolt against an imperialistic and capitalistic system.

Texts

Baker, Deborah. *A Blue Hand: Allen Ginsberg and the Beats in India*. 2008. Penguin Random House, 2011.

Ginsberg, Allen. *Indian Journals*. 1970. Grove Press, 1996.

Rao, Raja. *On the Ganga Ghat*. Vision Books, 1989.

Chapter 2

Of Body, Gaze and the Self: Getting Dirty in Banaras

“‘My God, this really is pretty hard on one’s sensibilities this early in the morning’. You not only have to think about trying to make a beautiful film but to wonder when some human waste is going to be squeezed up between your toes as you take your next step”.

“Well, everything is almost capsizing in Benares, isn’t it?”

(Robert Gardner, *Making Forest of Bliss: Intention, Circumstance and Chance in Non-fiction Film*)

“Beware the four perils of Kashi: widows, bulls, steps and holy men”

(Folk saying)³⁵

This chapter intends to study select representations of Varanasi, both fictional and non-fictional, and see how the modern subjects³⁶ in these texts negotiate the dirt, squalor and waste that they see in the city and to understand to what extent these entanglements both determine, undermine and reconstitute their selves. Here, I argue that the encounters with messiness, chaos and urban disorder in Varanasi actively inform the cityscape that is constituted in these narratives and that the modern subject that is predicated on the idea of hygienic modernity and is bound and circumscribed by varying emotions of disgust get infringed upon and destabilized, leading to a

³⁵ Quoted in *Kaleidoscope City* by Piers Moore Ede, page number 161.

³⁶ As explained in the introductory chapter, the modern subject refers to the embodied subjectivity of a self that is predicated on the modern scientific discourse of hygiene, cleanliness and order. Though majority of the modern subjects discussed in this chapter have Western cultural moorings, I have consciously eschewed the use of the term Western/non-Indian subject since it will be simplistic to assume that the distribution of modernity always corresponds to the geo-cultural binaries of East and West, or national boundaries.

certain degree of self expansion and organic linkages with the environment. As David Sibley argues (“Creating Geographies of Difference” 116), the idea of a bounded self also makes it imperative to include the concept of space in the discussion of bodies and the affective poetics of disgust. For the narrators, the transition of their bodies from their homes in the West to Varanasi also signals psycho-temporal transgressions of boundaries— from the West to East; from the Modern to the pre-Modern; from the Metropole to the Colony; from the realm of the self to the Other and from the Present to the Past. Thus, space and place, both external and internal, become inextricably linked with the experience of fear and disgust induced by dirt/waste. In the chapter I also argue that waste or the abject, causes an erosion of the boundaries of narrow identities and subjectivities which helps to transcend the barriers of language, self and symbols to experience space as absolute, devoid of any cultural or personal coordinates.

The texts that I have selected for analysis straddle various genres and media ranging from novel to feature film. The major focus of the chapter will be on *Jeff in Venice and Death in Varanasi* (2009) by Geoff Dyer which is a novel set in Venice and Varanasi respectively. The protagonist Jeff Atman, a jaded art reporter based in London, arrives in Varanasi for a journalistic assignment and decides to stay on indefinitely. Due to the literary and fictional nature of the narrative, the text offers more insights into the narrator’s mind and psychological reaction to the cityscape of Varanasi. Insights from the novel will be supplemented by illustrations from other texts which include *Kaleidoscope City: A Year in Varanasi* (2015) by Piers Moore Ede, an English journalist, the Season 1, Episode 1 of CNN *Believer* (2017) Series with Reza Aslan, an Iranian-American religious studies scholar who tries (unsuccessfully) to join

the Aghori³⁷ sect in Varanasi, the Korean film *From Seoul to Varanasi* (2013) which detail the actions of four protagonists, three of whom travel to Varanasi from Seoul for various reasons and a chapter on Varanasi from the travelogue *Slowly Down the Ganges* (1966) by the English travel writer Eric Newby who travels down the river in a boat with his partner.

Theoretical Framework

In her seminal work *The Powers of Horror* (1982) Julia Kristeva posits the idea of the abject which forms the boundary between the self and the Other, which the self must actively evacuate to exist. “The abject has only one quality...—that of being opposed to the I” (1). The abject exposes the precarity of the self, its frailty and constructedness by calling attention to the disorder, chaos and prospect of destruction that have to be walled out for order and self to be. However, abjection is not marked by a uniform repugnance towards the abject, it dwells within the self, becomes its alter ego and creates a “vortex of summons and repulsion” (1) leading to a situation where the abject becomes a source of jouissance and pleasure as well. “One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims—if not its submissive and willing ones” (9). Closely associated with the idea of abjection is disgust, the instinct that seems to be a necessary consequence of being conscious of “life itself—fat, greasy, teeming, rank, festering, viscous life” (Miller 21). Both disgust and abjection invoke the spatial imagination since they are concurrent with the notion of boundaries and the perceived infringement of cultural, social and psychological boundaries that can unsettle and induce fear about the collapse of autonomy of the self (“Creating Geographies of Difference” Sibley 115; Campkin and Cox 5). Hence, the primordial, pre-lingual undifferentiated reality, the abject,

³⁷ A group of ascetic sages found in the region of Uttar Pradesh who are devotees of Lord Shiva and indulge in conscious acts of self-pollution and desecration for spiritual development.

exists beyond the ordering process of the mind, in a forgotten place. Kristeva frequently uses spatial vocabulary to describe the self and the abject. She says that the abject draws the self “toward the *place* where meaning collapses” (2) and the deject (one who abjects) *strays* on “excluded ground”, the “land of oblivion [emphasis mine]” (8). Clearly, the space matters, it situates the self and the journeys that the self undertakes to mark and unmark boundaries. Mary Douglas’s pioneering work *Purity and Danger* which started the discussion on the role of language in the perception of and symbolic associations of dirt³⁸ highlights the process of ordering as a mechanism to create categories and avoid dirt. As Campkin states, in “eliminating dirt of all kinds we are involved in a perpetual spatial and visual process of arranging and rearranging the environment” (69-70). This is useful in understanding the ideology underlying the mechanism of urban zoning and the containment of disorder and also in making sense of the modern horror at the lack of a clear demarcation between the public and the private and the sacred and the profane in many a postcolonial city. In addition to theories on dirt, I also find Reena Tiwari’s ethnographic work on the role of body and ritual in experiencing and representing space in Varanasi a useful reference point for discussing the embodied gazes of the narrators which construe the cityscape with all its subjective qualities.

The Modern Subject, Disgust and the Other

Before embarking on an analysis of the chosen texts, it is important to discuss the importance of disgust in the forming and consolidation of the human identity and the othering of

³⁸ It is important to note that the dirt mentioned in the theories of the abject and disgust mostly pertain to organic matter and human bodily wastes and secretions which have the power to unsettle and evoke horror in the human mind. Urban trash and inorganic matter possess relatively less potency since “it is not dead, having never lived” (Miller 39). Similarly, see Jonathan Culler’s (1985) “Junk and Rubbish: a Semiotic Approach” for a discussion on the failure of Douglas’s theory to accommodate everyday, inoffensive junk.

different kinds of human beings. Miller highlights the role of disgust in the expression of a narrow human identity and the evolution of culture: “Disgust seems intimately connected to the creation of culture; it is so peculiarly human that, like the capacity for language, it seems to bear a necessary connection to the kinds of social and moral possibility we have” (18). He also adds that disgust decides the contours of otherness since very often, cultures which do not have the same criteria for disgust is deemed as inferior and alien (11). Ironically, the triggers of disgust is life itself, or the prospect of what the living body will become: “As we shall see, ultimately the basis for all disgust is *us*—that we live and die and that the process is a messy one emitting substances and odors that make us doubt ourselves and fear our neighbours” (xiv). Thus, it can be concluded that if disgust is essential for the identity formation of the modern individual, modernity engenders the repression and abjection of dirt and bodily wastes that remind us of our mortality and animal origins. William Cohen comments that the basic function of modern civilization is to provide means for the effective disposal of the filth that our bodies secrete and make it invisible to public consciousness (xi). He quotes Freud’s argument that the development of civilization has been characterized by the repudiation of excrement as “filthy, shameful and private” and in the process of this repression, filth becomes all the more potent and retains its psychical value, manifesting itself in the bourgeois trait of accumulating and hoarding capital (xiv). This distancing from human dirt and filth manifested itself in vigorous campaigns for cleaning up and regulating the urban space and improving sanitation in the nineteenth century. In Victorian England, the science of pathology overlapped with sanitary and spiritual discourse of filth and resulted in the metaphor of wasteful sin and corruption (Cohen xviii) and at the point of this emergent modernity, filth became a “means for both ordering and disrupting individual and collective experience alike” (xxiv). This eventually led to the development of the clean aesthetic

in city planning and interior designing (xxvii) and the control and surveillance of public spaces in modern urban centres in the west. The nineteenth-century campaigns to eradicate disease and filth from cities proved to be a mechanism to control poor populations and a means of consolidating the bourgeois identity (xx).

Needless to say, in addition to having class overtones, the cleanliness and cleansing campaigns of modernity also took on racist overtones with the White race being associated with whiteness and purity and non-whiteness with corruption, sin and filth (Cohen xvi). Thus, dirt became a line of demarcation between the colony and the metropolis and cleaning up the dirty population in nether parts of the world was one of the founding metaphors of colonial domination. The idea of the White man's burden was further supplemented by the threat of foreign (Indian) infection such as cholera which wiped out a sizeable population in London—the centre of global power in the nineteenth century (xxiii). The British in India were often horror-struck at the apparent lack of awareness of cleanliness and hygiene and primitive rituals of pollution and purity, which were in themselves physically filthy (Kupinse 254). The Indian was a subject who had to be made “clean by compulsion until they arrive at that degree of moral education when dirt shall become hateful to them, and then they will keep themselves clean for their own sakes” (qtd. in Kupinse 251). Here, Kupinse highlights the deliberate infantilisation of the Indian who does not share the same moral and psychological disgust at dirt that the civilized modern man possesses.

The conceptualization of the colonized native and the colony as a source of threat and contamination is reflected in various colonial anthropological projects, including travel writing. The anthropological gaze evident in such writings served to construct the other in the eyes of the White man. In the nineteenth century, travel writing was “inevitably involved in the Victorian

project to map, classify, and comprehend the Indian empire, both its present and past” (Teltscher 193). In her essay on the colonial representations of the city of Calcutta, Teltscher elaborates how there was a constant undertone of the “fear of contamination and corruption through the contact with Indians” (199). Similarly, the fear of contagion spills over to the concern for the unsanitary conditions of the city’s public spaces and lack of urban planning. Wellesley’s minute on Calcutta’s urban design notes: ““In those quarters of the town occupied principally by the native inhabitants, the houses have been built without order or regularity, and the streets and lanes have been formed without attention to the health, convenience or safety of the inhabitants”” (qtd. in Teltscher 199). The anxiety and concern induced by the unsanitary and dirty Indian city is a recurring trope in many colonial and postcolonial writings including those pertaining to Varanasi.

In the case of Varanasi, the colonial disgust at unmanaged urban dirt commingles with incredulity at the obdurate unsanitariness of sacred worship places and the holy river. Many of the writings wonder at the average Hindu’s astonishing capacity to find spiritual solace surrounded by detritus and excrement. They saw: “... ‘treacherous’ lie and ‘idolatrous worship.’ They saw a city about which Hindus had ‘superstition’, not faith. They saw sacred waters which were ‘stagnant,’ ‘unsufferably foul,’ and ‘loathsome,’ not cleansing. And they saw Hindus who were ‘deeply perverted,’ not religious [emphasis mine]” (Eck ch. 1).

Wastescapes, Meta-tourist and the Impossible *Flâneur*

In the quotation above, Eck emphasizes the act of seeing as a primary faculty which determines the nature of the space that is represented. Thus, the embodied gaze of the narrator imbues the space with its own subjectivities. Eck uses the concept of *darshana* (6) to delineate the differences in the conception of the sacred geographical space by the believer and the non-

believer. In the novel *Jeff in Venice and Death in Varanasi* (henceforth will be referred to as *Jeff*) the protagonist Jeff also dwells upon the idea of *darshana* as a means of perception which is dependent on predetermined signposts for viewing. His thoughts on *darshana* seems to be almost a re-paraphrasing of Eck's thoughts on the same subject: "Here in Varanasi, the ill-informed tourist did not see the same city that the thousands of pilgrims saw, the pilgrims who came here and the ones who lived here. But this was not to say that the visitor was not capable of his own form of darshan" (197).

It is in this context that the idea of wastescape becomes important since it denotes a conception of space where the body's relation to and perception of waste become important in constructing the image of the city. This hypothesis is informed by philosophies of space which state that it consists of the relationship between (and across) objects and is not absolute (Tiwari 14) and the body, along with its social, physical and mental dimensions, inhabits, constructs and represents a city and its spaces (3). I argue that the Western notions of cleanliness, ordered urban space and efficient segregation of waste makes the experience of the cityscape of Varanasi as a place of potential danger, consisting of objects and people who can be sources of contamination and fear. The stock images³⁹ in many narratives about Varanasi consist of almost identical and repetitive references to the debris-strewn river, the smoke from the burning ghat, the cows and

³⁹ At this juncture, it is interesting to take note of the anecdote (mentioned in the epigraph of this chapter) narrated by Robert Gardner, the maker of the Varanasi-based documentary film *Forest of Bliss* (1986), where he recounts how he had to take care to not step on human excrement while filming one of the protagonists. He elaborates that the artistic choice to place the excrement in the foreground in that scene was an attempt to show realism which is absent in many representations of India such as E.M. Forster's *Passage to India* and Paul Scott's *Jewel in the Crown* (41). Hence, for him, showing human waste is a part of seeing the space with fresh, uncompromising eyes as opposed to the replication of stock images of waste seen in many Western representations of the city. However, the film has not been considered for analysis in this chapter since it lacks a narrator or a narrative voice and consciously steers clear of attempting to explain the images shown. Hence, the narrative self is conspicuously absent.

dogs occupying the cremation grounds, the proximity of sewage-disposing ducts and bathing people, and so on. An example from *Jeff*: “Smoke smudged the sky, blackening the temples and buildings crowded around the fires. Cows chewed on soggy marigolds, picking through the ash at the river’s dark edge. The water was sooty and dark, burned. Some dogs were there too. Half a dozen fires were burning” (169). Ede also paints an identical picture of the burning ghats in his *Kaleidoscope City*: “Here, in plain sight, corpses smoulder among carefully stacked piles of wood, and the air is filled with the smell of burning... A skyline of soot-darkened temples formed the backdrop, and I was to wonder how much of that carbon deposit was formed of the dust of human bodies, risen on the wind and pushed back into the very structure” (10). In *Slowly Down the Ganges*, Newby also enthusiastically describes the great cremation ghat:

There was the Jalsain Ghat, the great cremation ghat with eight temple spires soaring above it, piles of wood and sheeted bodies rigid on unlit pyres, cows nibbling the grass ropes for which they have an unhealthy appetite, a few ghouls warming their hands, ashes and marigolds on the foreshore and all the time more and more bodies arriving.... (218)

It is clear that death, the burning of the corpses, is in the limelight of the narrators’ gazes and they, like most other tourists, are drawn to the very things that are considered disgusting and repressed in modern culture. Rozin gives a list of disgust-triggering aspects: “The core expands beyond food to include bodily products and animals and their wastes and then five additional domains: sex, hygiene, death, violations of the body envelope (gore, amputations), and sociomoral violations” (qtd. in Miller 6). Unsurprisingly, the everyday activities in the ghats—burning the dead, disposing of animal, human remains and sewage in the river, ablution performed on the river bank—prove to be sources of anxiety, fear and disgust for the outsider. However, in Varanasi, the presence of a local, religious populace which seems to be immune or

insulated from the disgust makes them less civilized and more primitive in the eyes of the modern tourist. Hence, the tourist is simultaneously appalled, repulsed and attracted to the apparently morbid scenes which allow him to see the disintegration of the human body and all the goriness associated with it. I would like to refer to this tendency to travel to “strange” places to view the theatrics and materiality of death as a form of thanatourism—a term coined by Tony Seaton to connote the “existence of a broad range of tourism practices associated with death and disaster” (521). Tiwari uses Goffman’s terms “emic” and “etic” to describe the insider’s view and the outsider’s/tourist’s view (8). The concept can be employed to explain the nature of the tourist gaze which is directed at the Manikarnika (burning) ghat from viewing platforms and from the river. It constitutes the consumeristic gaze⁴⁰ and transforms the activity on the ghat into a spectacle to be viewed and consumed from afar.⁴¹ The alienation involved in the production of a spectacle is detailed by Debord who opines that the “spectacle’s function in society is the concrete manufacture of alienation” and that it is “heir to all the weakness of the project of Western philosophy, which is an attempt to understand activity by means of the categories of vision” (23).

The discussion of the tourists gazing at the ghats of Varanasi aids in analyzing how the selves in the texts under consideration try to place themselves in the fluctuating socio-cultural context of viewing and experiencing the city. Jeff is a journalist assigned to spend a week in

⁴⁰ In the later sections in the chapter I discuss how the tourist gaze is challenged and destabilized by the oppositional gaze of the objectified people.

⁴¹ Tiwari details her experience of watching the cremations at Manikarnika ghat from three levels—from the privileged position of a viewing platform where she gazes and is not gazed at (the gaze of power), from a close quarter, but still at a distance where she gazes and is gazed at (voyeur’s gaze) and from the boat in the river which she describes as the tourist’s gaze. She concludes that the gaze from the last position is the most alienating and consumeristic one (51-55).

Varanasi to write a run-of-the-mill travel piece on the city, but he ends up staying on, getting transformed in the process. Ede on the hand visits and lives in the city for a year and writes a book based on his experiences and for Newby, it is a brief stopover in the larger adventure of travelling down the river Ganga. Aslan, perhaps the most bumbling one of them all, attempts to “become” an aghori as part of his television series on exotic religious practices across the world. Thus, in all these cases, there is an attempt to be more than a tourist, to be a writer–anthropologist and make new meanings about the city. The distancing of themselves from other tourists is evident in varying levels in the ironic references to the “tourist rituals” and a conscious attempt to be not part of them. On arriving in the city, Jeff tries to “look as if...[he] had been here for weeks, was no stranger to lepers, was in no hurry to see bodies being burned at Manikarnika ghat” and ironically states, “That’s where I was hurrying, to see bodies being burned” (168). Ede, after having paid a boatman for rowing him out to the river where he can take in the cremation scenes at Marnikarnika ghat from the panoramic position of the outsider, focuses his attention on a tourist in the ghat: “... and from an alleyway behind the ghat I watched a Japanese tourist emerge excitedly, camera poised, then visibly quail as he took in the scene. He removes a white mask from his pocket and snapped it over his face, like a surgeon preparing for the operating theatre” (11). There is a distinct sense of being (or wanting to be) different from the ubiquitous, ill-informed, eager-to-be-grossed-out tourist in the city. For instance, Ede, in the introduction to the book, talks about hoping that the “city herself would respond”, and that he might cease “to be an outsider and penetrate the city’s heart” and comes to Varanasi “with one small bag of clothes, no camera and the germ of an idea to write about” his experiences (3). Hence, there is a tendency to assume the position of a “meta-tourist” who is at once aware of

how he is perceived as a tourist and critical of the stereotypical tourist experiences and performances.

This perspective of the meta-tourist is further consolidated in Jeff's case by his unbridled display of contempt for the backpacker-hippies very commonly found in the city. He finds their pursuits of spirituality a gimmick and says that "they were as keen to see corpses being burned at Manikarnika ghat as the next person" (200), and "conforming to an international standard of scruffiness" (199), had "developed the trick whereby vacancy could be taken as a mode of superior awareness, gormlessness of wisdom, near-catatonia as enlightenment"⁴² (211).

However, the strangeness and foreignness inscribed on the non-native body renders the position of the meta-tourist extremely slippery and ambiguous. Hence, though Jeff, while viewing the Ganga arati from a boat in the river, realizes that you "don't have to be a particularly discerning tourist to see that ... [it] was an exhausted pageant, drummed up for tourists" (173), he seeks refuge in the company of tourists watching the cremation from an elevated platform when he is hustled by touts for money. He says: "I went and stood near them and felt safe again" (172). Similarly, Jeff is as enthusiastic as any other tourist in graphically describing the refuse and dirt in the city. Millers points out that disgust is a more visceral emotion than others and hence provokes very concrete sensual descriptions of the object in terms of slime, ooze, creepiness, and so on (9). Jeff's description of a rubbish heap is particularly remarkable for its attention to micro-details and a perverse delight in indulging in sensual, graphic language:

Some of this rubbish had been compacted down into a dark tar, a sediment of concentrated filth, pure filth with no impurities devoid of everything that was not filth.

⁴² Later in the novel, it becomes evident that Jeff contrasts his spiritual transformation with that of the spirituality- and ecstasy-seeking "crusties" (211).

The layer on top of it comprised a mulch of rotting vegetables from which a suitably adapted creature could derive a vestige of nutrition. On top of this was an assortment of browning marigolds, bits of soggy cardboard... and freshish-looking excrement...The whole thing was set off with a resilient garnish of blue plastic bags. In its way, it was a potential tourist attraction, a contemporary manifestation of the classical idea of squalor. I was quite excited by it, was tempted to ask the driver to stop so that I could take a better look, perhaps even take a picture. (191)

This impulse to “consume” scenes of waste is complemented by the tendency to view the activities of the ghats from a distance, from the balconies of hotels and rented rooms. The height and distance from the ghats automatically render the viewer an outsider framing, gazing and consuming the scene of unsanitariness, death and disorder. Ede describes the view from his room in the rooftop overlooking the Ganga:

From mine I gained an extraordinary view over the river itself. There was the bustle of the Assi ghat, with its frequent festive occasions, snake-charmers and buffalo. There were widows holding out their hands for alms, the one-armed beggars, the ascetic sadhus bearing magnificent beards and robes the colour of tangerines. There were goats dressed in old cardigans during cold weather...For several days I noticed a horrifically wounded dog... (115)

The narrators sees the panorama below his balcony as a neatly laid out spread to be consumed, the etic space which cements the viewer as the outsider, outside the everydayness of the city.

The feeling of being unsafe and the sense of danger marks most of the experience of the narrators in the cityspace. The bodies which come from other privileged spaces with clear

boundaries demarcating the self and the outside find the chaotic, unpredictable and unruly space of Varanasi unsettling. The infringement of the judicial territory of the self, or the territorial preserve (which increases in proportion to the bodies' privilege and status) induces fear, indignation and disgust (Miller 50). Jeff experiences on approaching the ghats the first time are telling: The traffic was "beyond any idea of terribleness. It is beyond any idea of traffic... everything began to converge, contract and — this was an interesting part — accelerate... The streets were narrow, potholes, trenched, trashed, gashed. There was no pavement, no right of way—no wrong of way— and, naturally, no stopping... There was uncomprehended meaning everywhere" (164-167). The feeling of being out of place, or the space thrusting itself upon the body comes across sharply in Ede's narration too:

I notice the shock and exhaustion... dust-red eyes from whizzing auto rickshaw rides, ears resounding with the blasts of incessant horns, mind spinning with the velocity of it all...in Varanasi that energy seems more highly charged: spinning faster, amplifies somehow so that basic human tasks such as simply going to buy rice become shattering experiences of navigating two-hour traffic jams, throwing oneself against the side of an alley to avoid being crushed by a roaring Tata motorbike, or weaving between unruly cattle in the course of crossing the street. The crush of human numbers, the crumbling medieval architecture built upon and compressed by concrete structures, the hissing charge of frayed electric wires used as ropes by monkey troupes, the appalling pollution and a thousand other environmental factors combine to make the city an alchemist's crucible, transmuting all who live there. Should you after returning home across the city, wipe your face with a white cloth, it will be stained black from the traffic fumes. Your

lungs burn, your eyes stream, your stomach purges, and yet despite all this your spirit soars. (3-4)

The last phrase “...despite all this your spirit soars” comes as an unlikely denouement to the narration of the long list of physical and psychological privations and assaults undergone by the author in the city and focuses attention on the duality of the experience of being constantly under threat as well as finding a strange sense of calm in the midst of the chaos, the vacillating between the positions of the insider and the outsider, a body of out place, not at home,⁴³ always caught in a state of ambivalence, rendered superfluous and out of rhythm in the city.

In this context, the image of Benjamin’s *flâneur*, the figure who strolls through the city crowds, observing from a position of privileged aloofness is a relevant point of comparison. The *flâneur* “remains aloof from the crowd, and observes it from afar” (Leach 51). The narrators in these texts are failed or impossible *flâneurs*, their ambition to observe and note are frequently thwarted by the sense of danger and bodily disintegration and most importantly, the gazes of the subjects that they are trying to observe and inscribe. Jeff’s stroll down the ghats is frequently interrupted by various actors whom he terms “hustlers” who try to offer him various services—“He was kneading my hand and wouldn’t give it back...I was the tallest person around, towering over everyone like a radio mast, broadcasting the fact that I had just arrived in Varanasi, was new to India and had no idea how to cope. I was easy prey, fair game...” (168). The momentary half-frivolous sense of amputation is allayed when he says “I got my hand back” (168), but the underlying sense of menace is not undiscernible and gets further explicated in later parts of the

⁴³ The sense of being or not being at home is important in determining the narrative self’s engagement with the urban waste and squalor in the city and in the conception of space. The Beat poet Allen Ginsberg’s notes on the city are marked by a strong sense of being at home and in place in Varanasi. In *Indian Journals* he writes that he felt “at home & happy” (127) after procuring a room to settle down in Varanasi.

novel. The gaze when returned, has the capacity to “embarrass, humiliate, humble and shame” (Denzin qtd. in Tiwari 55). For Jeff, the gaze is not only discomfiting as a form of intrusion, but also a nagging reminder of his status as a tourist. He says:

On my first day at the ghats I'd felt like a visiting royal and ...of being the object of curiosity and scrutiny...I may have despised them...” (221) and later, frustrated at not being able to get to know the city and its intellectual life, [I] was left to play ... [my] part, grudgingly, in the eternal *jugalbandi* of tourist life: ‘Boat, sir?’ ‘No, thank you’. ‘Rickshaw, sir?’ ‘No, thank you.’ ‘Very cheap.’ ‘No, thank you.’ East meets west. Fusion: *Raga* Rupee; *Raga* No Thank You. (226-227)

The Abject City and Monstrous Beings

The examples given above make it amply clear that in many material ways, the unpoliced, unregulated and unplanned environment of the city acts as the abject other of the archetypal clean and sanitary European city. Varanasi is often described as a city from the past, the mourners, the animals, the dark spires do not give any hint of it being in the twenty-first century (Ede 17). This observation is reiterated by Jeff who feels that the death and cremation scenes are like “the dawn of industrial revolution, as it might have occurred if there were no industry and a vast surplus of manpower, all employed in the service of death” (169). Thus, the city is projected as an unmodern space where death is unrepressed, unsanitised, in public display without any connotations of terror and grotesqueness—a space which constantly thwarts the boundaries of the modern hygienic self

In addition to this, In *Jeff*, the author artistically blurs the line between Jeff's wakeful and dreaming states to project Varanasi as a primordial and ancient space,⁴⁴ the premonition of which is embedded in the glittering, dream-like city of Venice. Hence, Varanasi becomes the site of the uncanny and his mind slips in between the cracks of language to access the Real, undifferentiated abjected space of the city. In the airconditioned hotel room of Venice he dreams about "a canal, a wide, fast-flowing Venetian canal. The city looked even older than it really was, more decayed and dirty, rubbish-strewn" (48). Kristeva's idea of the abject is also related to forgotten time and land. "The abject from which ... [the self] ... does not cease separating is ... in short, a land of oblivion that is constantly remembered" (8). Thus, Varanasi becomes the land which lies simmering just below the surface of the make-believe world of Venice,⁴⁵ inherent and inseparable from it. The abjected space of Varanasi constantly return to him, through his dreams, existing on the border of the conscious and unconscious, an uncanny experience which can pierce through the veneer of magical Venice. In the story, Jeff comments that he feels that Venice could evaporate overnight, "it was easy to imagine waking up to find the once-watery city stranded and stilted in foul-smelling mud, the lagoon turned into an expanse of nothingness, a moist brown desert in which the last few fishes flapped and gasped" (38).

However, it is important to note that the space is not inherently uncanny or primordial, it is the juxtaposition with other spaces that renders it so. In the novel, Varanasi is understood in

⁴⁴ It is interesting to note that Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* draws a direct connection between the city of the past and the primitive part of the brain that survives in the modern man. For an elaborate discussion about the use of psychological symbolism of city images, refer to Burton Pike's "The City as Image" (1981).

⁴⁵ Elsewhere, I argue that in the novel *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi*, the elusive, magical Venice cityscape gets associated with the illusory, symbolic self of the protagonist and Varanasi becomes the primordial abjected Other which the self unsuccessfully attempts to distance itself from.

relation to Venice, in a similar vein, in the movie *From Seoul to Varanasi*, the chaotic streets of the city and the frenetic activities in the ghats is contrasted with the stark whiteness of a wintry, desolate and sanitized Seoul. Also, the messiness of the city form the backdrop for the culmination of catastrophic events including a bomb blast engineered by terrorists and the murder of one of the protagonists. “Thus, ‘here’ is understood in relation to ‘elsewhere’” (Tiwari 24).

In the texts, the abject, threatening nature of the city is reflected in the manner in which the narrators find themselves constantly deracinated, their bodily integrity always under threat. Jeff jokingly imagines devising a video game named *Varanasi Death Trip* where the challenge is to travel from “Taj Ganges to Manikarnika without getting crushed, losing a limb or having your nerves shredded” (185). In another instance, he and his friend entertain themselves by imagining a TV show featuring an English health official trying to enforce UK health standards in Varanasi and cracking up (210). Though it was said in jest, it throws light on the underlying paranoia of imminent destruction of the body and self, surrounded by pathogens and possibly pathogenic humans. Thus, the anxiety of being infected is uppermost in Newby’s and his partner’s mind during their stay in Varanasi. He humorously describes the Americans and the Europeans wondering whether “the soda water which had been added to their enormously expensive whiskeys was safe to drink” (212) and when offered tea at an aghori ashram for lepers, the fear of being infected swells up within him “it seemed craven to say no....” and wonders whether the man who served him tea was a leper himself and says: “For a moment before I drank it, I thought I was going to faint” (226).

For Reza Aslan, the fear of the aghori transcends the mere squeamishness of food poisoning. In a misguided attempt to get inducted to the aghori sect, he is confronted with

aghoris who appear sub-human (in modern eyes) due to their conscious violation of all civic notions of cleanliness and hygiene, wearing a wreath human entrails. After being literally forced to rub the ashes of the dead over his body and ingest, what looked like burnt pieces of human flesh, Aslan looks disconcertedly at the camera crew and whispers to them that he feels unsafe. Within a few minutes, the “cremation theatrics” (17:16) turn menacing with the aghori spouting expletives and Aslan running for his life, against the background of thumping music. Thus, here the anthropologist, seeking to “know” and “study” and “record”, is confronted with the almost diabolic theatrics of aghoris calculated to horrify the sensibilities of the “civilized” modern individual.

Jeff has his own encounters with “monstrous” humans when on one of his many rickshaw rides, his driver swerves off the main road to travel through the more dilapidated and shady areas, symbolic of a psychological journey through the uncanny interior space of the mind. He is understandably alarmed to find himself “straying” into uncharted territory as far as he is concerned. The detour resembles the self being forced to go off the well-laid and ordered course of the symbolic order and confront and explore the “excluded ground” of the primordial reality of the abjected psychological space. His sense of danger is actualized when the autorickshaw is attacked by a group of street children who tries to rob him. The surrealistic manner of narration of the misfortune enhances the ominous nature of the assault. To him, the children do not even seem human or remotely relatable: “They were hyena children, urban prairie dogs. Wild, feral creatures. More accurately, they were detached, highly animated parts of a single swarming entity with dozens of eyes and multiple arms and hands” (191). Jeff attempts to save his possessions, his bags, wallet, camera, and so on—the accoutrements of a traveler–tourist— from being snatched away. It is significant that he describes the children as bordering on the

monstrous. The children, dehumanized by poverty and destitution, serves as the Other of the tourist-self of the protagonist and infringes on his being and identity, symbolically attempting to destabilise his precarious identity. Similarly, in *From Seoul to Varanasi*, friendly children who accost Ji-yeong (who follows her lover to the city) turn out to be menacing thieves. Later, after surviving a bomb blast attempt in the city, she is shot dead by her lover's religious fundamentalist friend. All the undercurrents of violence that remained subterranean in Seoul gets their release in Varanasi, the city's alleys and congested roadsides projecting it as an ideal setting for intrigue and deception.

Shit and Moral Outrage

One of the major sources of the modern subject's horror and outrage in Varanasi is the presence of "unpoliced" and "unmanaged" shit in the public places. As mentioned before, human excrement is the one of the major generators of disgust in the human mind, and the body's ability to control and dispose of its shit efficiently, and to display disgust at the sight of excrement is the hallmark of the modern, civilized individual. Jeff is constantly worried about coming into contact with shit. On many occasions, the threat of being polluted by real or imagined shit is defused by external contraptions. For example, in the attack by the "hyena children", he imagines that they hurl "A projectile — a stone or a brick, conceivably a lump of dried shit" (192), and it hits the roof of the rickshaw which acts as a barrier between him and the possible collision with shit. Likewise, he is thankful for his sandals which protect his feet from the "dusty, shit-splattered lanes of Varanasi" (189). However, it is interesting to notice that in Venice, the genitals, anus and urine of the woman with whom he was having a torrid sexual affair proved to be erotic and arousing to Jeff. Thus, excrement and excrement-producing orifices of the body is acceptable in the modern faecophobic world in the framework of erotic activities. "Shit was horrible, revolting

stuff, but women's assholes...the only thing in life contemporary man loves more than eating pussy is licking ass" (141). This irony of affective politics is elaborated by Laporte who remarks that "that which occupies the site of disgust at one moment in history is not necessarily disgusting at the preceding moment or the subsequent one" (qtd. in Jewitt 612). Though Laporte is referring to linear time/historical process as a determiner of disgust, it can also be said that the space and geographical location of shit (or any object to disgust) also determine the socio-cultural reactions to it.

In Venice, Jeff is in control of his bodily processes. References to him making use of the efficient modern sanitation system are numerous. At one point, his bowel movements appear as though they might go out of control, defying the disciplining and disciplined self. He feels the urge to shit while in the street and "had to trot the last hundred yards and sprint up the stairs to make extravagant use of his en suite bathroom... the relief at having made it..." (50). Thus, surrounded by modern sanitation and a well-ordered living space, the threat of shit is contained, but the threat of anarchy is always present on the sub-liminal level.

However, in Varanasi with piles of shit on the ghats and other public spaces, Jeff's being gives way to horror. His thoughts travel along the trajectory of the modern sanitation discourse and replicates the colonial horror at the coinhabitation of dirt and sanctity:

...there was shit everywhere in the City of Light... Every kind of shit: animal (monkey, goat, cow, buffalo, dog, bird, donkey, cat, goose), vegetable...and human. In certain auspicious places there was probably even god shit. Prabhu ghat... also doubled as a default toilet ghat. It was horrible walking along there. The sight entered your eyeballs and stench entered your nostrils...one was destined to ingest shit...How could a culture

with a horror of pollution be so indifferent to the most offensive form of pollution? (223-224)

It is important to note that the visceral repugnance to shit is more resonant with a psychological horror at having to confront the apparently demeaning processes of the human body than a concern for health and hygiene. Julia Kristeva reiterates the point “It is ... not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). In Varanasi, Jeff slowly loses control over his body and his bodily waste, and ironically, despite his tirade against public shitting, he is forced to shit on the street: “I started running, hoping I could make it to somewhere with a toilet. But it was impossible. Crouching down by a wall, I squirted vile-smelling ooze over a pair of old, sun-dried turds”

In another unfortunate incident, Jeff gets swatted on the face by a cow’s “shit-drenched” tail. He is gripped by the paranoia of being infected and is overcome by waves of disgust and nausea. “There was a sharp intake of breath—mine— as my mouth opened in shock. I sort of shrieked (259)” and frantically he tries to eject the sense of shit (because it not clear whether shit has actually entered his mouth), the shock of having come into close contact with the abject. As Kristeva elaborates, when the abject threatens to breach the body, the body abjects itself, “I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself” (3). In an uncanny illustration of Kristeva’s point, Jeff falls terribly sick:

...later that evening, *I exploded... I farted horribly and often, farts that smelt as disgusting as other people’s...I was on my hands and knees, puking into the toilet, the smell of vomit instantly making me gag again...I was shitting yellow ooze into the toilet...My*

body was engaged in a frenzied attempt to get rid of whatever it was that had got inside it that it was in danger of tearing itself apart” (260-261)[emphasis mine].

When confronted with the abject within, the glorious figure of the modern autonomous human breaks down, forced to bend and kneel and deal with the horrendous ejections of a body breaking down. Thus, shit and shitting serve as abject reminders of the primordial reality of the human body and the self. Shit defies human systems of order and control and in this case, highlights the limitations of the human in maintaining the integrity of the human body and how the being is inextricably linked to the environment. It is shit which finally provokes Reza Aslan to beat a quick retreat from the aghoris. The simmering threat posed by the aghori finally explodes spectacularly on screen when the man starts eating his own shit and throwing it at Aslan. The narrator’s polite, civilized and uneasy tolerance of the aghoris gives way to naked fear—the coprophagic man not only pollutes himself, but also threatens the very idea of the human which is based on the repression and “active not seeing” (Hawkins “Down the Drain” 49) of shit. The fleeing figure of Aslan stands as a sharp contrast to his earlier imposing muscular, erect figure which straddled the boat, foregrounded against the background of the riverfront vista. Shit becomes a potent disruptor of the modern identity.

Ganga, a “Giant Toilet”

The polluted state of the Ganga is a great source of disgusted fascination for the average tourist, including the narrators in the texts. The unimaginable levels of pollution of an extremely sacred river, and the ability of the devotees to both pollute it and revere it simultaneously creates a cognitive dissonance in many of the protagonists. During Jeff’s first boat ride in the river, he explains his reluctance to touch the water “...none of us touched it to find out. The only thing we wanted on our hands was the anti-bacterial handwash that we all carried” (174). The water with

its amalgam of debris, rotting human and non-human remains and sewage represented the most dangerous source of infection. The disgust is escalated by the fact that there is no logical segregation of the disposal of waste and other cleaning/sacred activities in the river. Newby incredulously observes that the main drainages empties the sewage into the river just above the sacred junction of river Barna and Ganga (216). Jeff sardonically notes that the cremation ghat disposed of the remains of the dead just upstream from the washing ghat where clothes were beaten to submission. He comments: "In this sense, illogic was upstream from logic. We were heading upstream" (175), the ridiculous cleansing of dirt in dirty water becomes a symbol of the illogical messiness of the people, culture and religion. The view is repeated by Aslan who is perturbed when asked to take a dip in the Ganga as part of the initiation rituals of the aghori sect. A self-confessed germophobe, he says: "I don't want to be an American asshole or anything...but there is no way I'm getting into this water...I had actually seen three cow carcasses... cups plastic bag, marigold and slush...yesterday I saw a guy take a shit directly into water... it basically is a giant toilet" (17:20).

In an act of frustration, Jeff pisses in the Ganga, to protest against the dirtying of the river (225), morally outraged at the callousness of the people who pollute and allow it to be polluted. Jeff's concern requires a particular kind of distancing from the religio-cultural imagination⁴⁶ of the river which prevents him from sympathizing with the impropriety of the behavior observed, and the "failure of sympathy, depending on the exact nature of the impropriety, can end in disgust" (Smith qtd. in Miller 188), in this case, he pisses into the river. In all these examples, the source of disgust is the desire to prevent the boundaries of the self from being infringed upon, to

⁴⁶ This is exemplified in the manner in which religious Hindus consider the river Ganga sacred and purifying in spite of it being heavily polluted in the environmental sense of the term. According to Hindu belief, Ganga is "unpollutable" since she is holy. For a detailed discussion of this, see Kelly D. Alley (1998).

maintain the sanctity of the body bound by the skin. Ede talks to a member of an NGO in Varanasi working on cleaning up the river and here, the moral and bureaucratic corruption associated with governmental failure to clean the river becomes a kind of moral dirt which pollutes as well as enables the pollution of the river, painting a picture of wastage and sin. ““So many millions wasted. And still she is full of poison””, rues the man (109).

Many a time, the feeling of sublimity and ethereality that the Ganga projects when seen from a distance or in dim light is rudely disturbed by the sighting of rotting matter or trash. Jeff describes a scene of tranquil beauty “As the boat drifted past the darkening ghats, I was caught in the ebb and sob of the sarangi...The current was strong enough for the boatman to do little but steer. Twilight was falling. Candles floated alongside the boat...Soon the stars would appear...Tugged along by the sarangi and then urged on by the tabla, we passed a dead cat, floating in the water like a dark log” (215). The sighting of the corpse of the animal proves to be an anticlimax to the description of the serene beauty of the river, destroying the “sublime illusions constructed by vision and hearing” (Miller 99). However, once the disgust for the polluting water of Ganga is overcome, it is possible to truly see the beauty and the hidden secrets which survive in the river despite the pollution, a coexistence of the abject and the sublime. Towards the end of the novel, Jeff spots the almost mythical river dolphins in Ganga, connoting the changed nature of his *darshan*: “One morning, I saw the dolphins that were rumoured to live in the river. Two of them, black and sleek in their wet suits, surfacing and diving and with long smiles. It seemed hard to believe that they really existed, but the fact that they did tells you something, about dolphins and the Ganges and existence generally” (289). The *darshan* of the believer.

Taking a Dip

The waters of the Ganga receive the discharges from the city, the remains of the dead, the dirt of all cleansing activities and the debris of the ritual, becoming a cauldron of messiness and mixing. Hence, it dissolves all identities and demarcations and all systems of human ordering and a dip in the river is a symbolic surrendering of identity and a willingness to let the body be open to invasion and dissolution.⁴⁷ The evolution of the various protagonists of the texts under consideration and their levels of engagement with the perceived abject environment of the city is reflected in their attitude towards bathing in the Ganga. Newby is very conscious of his status as an outsider, a traveler passing through, and says that he can have no part in the ritual of bathing in the Ganga (218). Aslan on the other hand, attempts to desperately overcome his queasiness and take a dip in the river at the injunction of the aghori. Though he immerses in the water, it is with full consciousness of playing the part of a performing anthropologist who tries to imagine his way into the mind of a Ganga devotee. The camera zooms in on the rotting debris at the edge of the river as he reluctantly walks towards the water, and as he steps in with a “fuck, let’s do this” (20:25), his voiceover says: “it is time for me to put aside my fear I may have for germs and disease. Just simply accept the experience for what it is” and as his head goes underwater, the background score changes dramatically. Thus, the documentary strives to frame the scene like a gut-wrenching thriller where the intrepid explorer immerses himself in the grotesque rituals of an alien culture. Thus, there is very little evolution of attitudes or the self. After emerging from the river, he says that it was not as bad as he expected it to be and attempts to find sublimity in the experience, but does not quite succeed: “It was peaceful, especially

⁴⁷ Though Glucklich argues that the pilgrim’s dip in the river is an experience of proprioception where the full immersion, the tactile flood and the vision of the dazzling sun contribute to a primary sense of a corporeal cohesiveness and sense of an embodied ego operating in an environment (qtd. in Rosin 378), in the context of Westerners stepping into the river, I argue that the impulse to come into contact with the river stems from a willingness to suspend disgust and loosen the boundaries of identity and ego.

seeing the burning ghats, the ashes being dumped in here, the ashes mingling with my body, it was kind of a profound thought,... also a little gross” (21:01).

In *Jeff*, the transition of the self is almost analogous to the transition in the spaces in the city that Jeff occupies. Initially, on arrival in Varanasi, Jeff stays in the sanitized comfort of the Taj Hotel, a five-star hotel located far away from the chaotic and polluted surroundings of the ghats and the river. After weathering the environment of Varanasi for some weeks, he moves into the homely, albeit unprofessionally managed hotel overlooking the ghats and the river. In the final stage, he steps into the Ganga, for the dip, unlike the tourists, he becomes the non-tourist, signaling a dissolution of identity. Hence, throughout the second half of the story, Jeff has been steadily progressing towards the river that had once invoked acute horror in him, a symbolic breaking down of the barriers between the self and the primordial. His dip in the Ganga is of primary importance as far as the evolution of his self is concerned. Once in water he says: “Now the water felt quite warm, but other than that it did not feel like anything. It did not feel dirty and it did not feel sacred; it felt just like water” (281). Thus, in some sense, he has moved beyond the self and the associated feelings of abject and sacred, a symbolic moving beyond the constructions of language. It is also possible to see a reversal in the way he associates with the prospect of garbage: “I felt something touch my leg and glanced into water, fearing it was something horrible, a form of sewage, but it was just a sodden coracle with a few dead flowers in the bottom. The water may not have been clean, but it didn’t look or feel dirty” (282). Thus, disgust gives way to relief, the fear of threat is replaced with an acknowledgement of the material ordinariness of the discarded object, a transcendence of disgust, a sign of spiritual advancement.

Becoming the Non-Tourist

The changes undergone by the self can be interpreted using the metaphor of duress or shock wearing down the barriers constructed by language and culture. To study the effect of duress caused by the impinging of abjected objects, beings and experiences on the psyche and self of the protagonist, I would like to draw on R. Thomas Rosin's work⁴⁸ on the use of the Hindu concept of traffic or flow (across human and non-human realms) as a conceptual device for explaining the purification of substances. According to Rosin:

...to participate in traffic is to enter a flow that transforms one's proprioceptions and perceptions, resulting in a phenomenological change in self-perception. One feels differently from entering the traffic to one's leaving it... To enter traffic is an immersion, a submission to noise, smells, repugnance, jostling, the breathlessness, of rapid acceleration, sudden fear and in the worst case scenario, an alteration in pulse and breath in the panic of recognizing immediate danger. (378)

Rosin argues that traffic can act as a purifying force which, by virtue of its churning effect, converts/breaks down residues into their elemental states and make them pure. I find his thesis about the creative and purifying nature of traffic very useful for analyzing the transformation of Jeff. Rosin envisions traffic as a type of flow in all its philosophical complexity. "Traffic is a flow, and conceptions of flow, both within and across boundaries and channels, are central to notions about bodily processes, health and the interrelations of person and environment" (372) and it can churn, break down and purify. Thus, Jeff who is hurled into

⁴⁸ In his paper "Wind, traffic and dust: The recycling of wastes" (2000), R. Thomas Rosin studies the Hindu social custom of treating specific kinds of dust, which undergo certain natural process on the street, as pure, possessing purifying properties. He attempts to integrate the Samkya and Ayurvedic discourses of humoral flow into the study of how traffic (of natural and man-made elements) on the street becomes a purifying flow which turns residues into purified/pure dust.

the literal and metaphoric traffic of beings, wastes and dirt, the din and dust of an alien, exotic country undergo very visible physical and spiritual changes. I argue that these changes involve a gradual disintegration of the self and the arrival at a more organic and inclusive idea of the self. The new self or non-self is based on linkages with the surroundings and environment which form the primary underlying principle of the Vedic idea of flow which searches for “‘secret sympathies between domains’ that link the human body to the ‘non-human spheres of man’s experience’ (Rosin 372). In the novel, the abject exerts an abrasive effect on Jeff, causing a churning, both spiritual and material, causing a disintegration of the individual self and the transition to a more universal sense of being which seeks to transcend the idea of the self and abject, pure and impure, and so on

Bathing in the Ganga is just of the many indicators of the changing self of the narrators. The formation of his own rituals and ways of identifying with the space and place of Varanasi is another indicator. The “rituals start defining the users of space as individuals, where their bodies begin to influence the construction and articulation of space” (Tiwari 59). Jeff starts to relate to the city in a different way and seems to feel more at home, free of the uncanniness that used to haunt him before. The hitherto abject becomes tolerant to Jeff. His bodily ailments and secretions become less threatening: “walking along the ghats and hawking up green lumps of phlegm became one of the routine pleasures of life in Varanasi” (258). Anomalies and chaos acquire a new sense of rhythm and order in his expanded world view and he arrives at the wise conclusion that “there was no such thing as being ridiculous in Varanasi. The very idea was ridiculous” (283). The routine exposure to diseased and disabled people who bore their sufferings stoically, without the hope of ever being cured (232) makes him more accepting of the precarity of the human body. The place-induced physical unease becomes a routine habit:

My cough had not got better, but I had grown used to it that I scarcely gave it a thought. Coughing was just a form of breathing, a slightly noisier function of being alive. I had gotten into the habit of crapping, liquidly, after every meal...Thought bore a curious resemblance to headache... my whole system was under siege— from within. As happens, I adapted to these new conditions, got used to them. (282)

The expansion of mind and the steady disintegration of the external markers of identity are reflected in the changes in appearance too. He shaves his head and eyebrows, a custom observed by the Hindus to grieve death, a symbolic marker of the old self dying (278), starts wearing a dhoti, gets over the inhibitions about exposing his body (283) and generally starts looking like a “castaway” (277). Ironically, towards the end of the narrative, he realizes that he has lost his passport (275), signaling the symbolic and material loss or transcendence of identity. He is no longer a tourist, no longer a misfit in the landscape of Varanasi, he says “The world stops singling you out; you stop feeling singled out by the world” (279). Getting into the rhythm of the city, or rather creating his own sense of rhythm becomes an important part of sliding into place. In one telling instance, Jeff encounters a procession of dancers who seemed unruly and wild, a scene that would have normally seemed intimidating to the non-native. However, Jeff slowly becomes part of the group : “I nodded my head for a bit and then began dancing...I didn’t let go completely, took care not to reel and lurch into the really crazy guys, but once you were in the midst of it, all this lurching and reeling was actually less dangerous than it seemed from the outside, to an onlooker.” (246). It is significant that he stops being an onlooker and becomes part of the crowd which used to terrify him earlier. Thus, the place and the environment exert a transformative influence on the being of Jeff.

To a smaller extent, Reza Aslan seems to find his place in the aghori sect when he is introduced to the modern version of the cult which focuses on education and community service irrespective of class and caste considerations. The clean and well-ordered space of the ashram and modernized volunteers are far removed from the coprophagic, skull-bearing, human-entrails-wearing aghori from whom he had fled earlier in the documentary. The scene opens with a worker sweeping the place clean in the foreground which denotes the balancing of the modern notion of hygiene and cleanliness and the egalitarian principles of the aghori sect. Aslan participates in the cooking and serving of food and finds it rather effortless to ease into the rhythm of charity and service championed by the institution located well away from the mess and chaos of the river and the ghats. Thus, as far as Aslan is concerned, the levelling of hierarchies and subversion of human systems of order symbolized by the idea of untamed dirt is better embraced by remaining firmly within the idea of hygienic modernity.

Man, Animal and Everything in Between

One of the interesting steps towards the openness to the “other” that we find in *Jeff* is the relentless questioning of an anthropocentric world and the idea of the human. The unordered and unsegregated space of Varanasi results in frequent encounters between the protagonist and animals of various kinds. These encounters with animals and inanimate objects and the increasing affinity he seems to have for non-human beings can be considered as a critique of modernity’s enforced amnesia of our animal origins and the linkages we have with the environment. Monkeys who are closely associated with the human form prove to be a source of great fascination for Jeff. In his initial days in Varanasi, he is fascinated by the close proximity of men and monkeys and the surprising agency and freedom that they seem to exhibit. It leads

him to humorously ruminate on the precarious moral, spiritual and physical evolution of the idea of the human:

We began as thieves, swinging from trees and stealing whatever we could lay our paws on—books, bananas, marigolds. Then, over time, we learned to sit cross-legged and talk and listen, and the urge to pilfer and steal gradually diminished. In the larger scheme of things, the fact that some of us went on to make films or write poems called ‘Howl’ was irrelevant. (183-184)

Ironically, later in the novel as he falls sick frequently, he resorts to eating exclusively bananas, prompting his friend to comment: “‘You’re living like a monkey’... ‘Next, you’ll be stealing bananas from people’s plates. Creating a commotion’” (234), as though, progressing away from the human state in an act of reverse evolution.

In another curious encounter, a monkey grabs his sunglasses from the table and Jeff, in all earnestness, tries to have a “negotiation” using “trans-species” gestures. He realizes that notwithstanding all his human superiority, at that moment, he was at the mercy of the monkey’s whimsies, a hugely humbling moment. But he wills the monkey to rise up, evolve, redeem itself of its “chimpness” and return the glasses and in the process, he lowers himself to the level of the monkey, in supplication, his hand lowered, hanging at his hips like an ape (255). Miraculously, the monkey drops his sunglasses and makes away with the bananas that it had been offered. Thus, Jeff manages to find a middle ground, the chimp displaying its humanity and Jeff demonstrating a willingness to befriend the non-human being on its terms. As the narrative proceeds, Jeff, in a hallucinatory mood imagines that he is having a conversation with a goat that he met on the ghat. The goat is interested in having a “philosophical” conversation with Jeff and wants to know “How human consciousness is different to goat consciousness”. Jeff replies that

he does not know how it is to be a goat and the goat replies that he doesn't know how to describe "what it is to be a goat". He responds: "'Well you see, that is probably the difference. The ability to articulate things. Self-examination...' I didn't know what else to say. It seemed that I was lacking exactly the qualities I claimed distinguished me from my interlocuter. The more I tried to articulate the difference between myself and the goat, the more we had in common" (268-269). This exchange can be interpreted as a barely veiled challenge to the idea of human identity and its assumed superiority. As Jeff evolves, he finds it increasingly difficult to clearly demarcate between himself and the beings surrounding him.

He wonders about the human elements that he notices, at times, in other non-human beings. A case in point is his impression of a terribly mangy dog which had patches of "pink, horribly human-looking skin" reminding him of the animal nature of humans and vice-versa. "It was as if a botched reincarnation had taken place, as if the dog he was destined to become was still partly the human he had been...And so his considerable physical torments came to seem to be the manifestation of what was obviously the far worse psychological malaise of being suspended between two lives, two species" (216). The ambiguity of human nature and the possibility of interconnectedness of species form one of the cornerstones of Jeff's evolution and transcendence of narrow identities. The ultimate stage of evolution in the self occurs when he imagines himself to be "ganoona", a hybrid creature with the qualities of an otter. On being asked what a ganoona is, he replies "'Ganoona is all that which is not anything else. But it's also

that which is everything else” (257) referring to an identification with a larger sense of the self which is beyond the constructions of language.⁴⁹

Losing the Self

The illusion of the self and the ego is sustained by our reflection in the mirror or being mirrored in other people's eyes. The anxiety about the outsider's perception of us is characteristic of the unstable and conflicted self and Miller opines that the look of others can be unsettling since “we fear what they might be seeing when looking at us. Their penetrating vision is very much a part of the genesis of our self-consciousness...” (91). This anxiety about what others may see in him is Jeff's constant companion in Venice where he aggressively socializes and parties. However, after he gets acclimatized to Varanasi, he approaches a holy man and asks whether he can look into his eyes. For Jeff it is an act of opening up and choosing to confront his vulnerability. He observes the reflection of his face in the eyes of the man for some time, gradually, he stops focusing on himself, “I zoomed out and the sight of my face, which had been full-frame, in tight close-up, receded and took its place as a single detail within the larger picture of his face” (243). Thus, he lets go of the obsession with his reflection and image and gets lost in the larger scheme of things and life, a step in the direction of overcoming the ego. It is no coincidence that the second part of the novel is narrated in first person, as opposed to the third person narrative in first half. The “I” stands out in the second half and enables the author to bring out the processes by which “I” slowly takes the backseat in the narrative: “But what had happened in Varanasi was that something was taken out of the equation so that there was nothing

⁴⁹ It is important to note that Jeff's interactions and gradual identification with animals need not necessarily signal an empathetic engagement with them, rather, it is more symptomatic of the steady dissolution of his identity as an autonomous human being.

for unhappiness to fasten itself upon...All I'm saying is that in Varanasi I no longer felt as I was waiting, The waiting was over: I was over: I had taken myself out of the equation" (281).

Jeff Atman's journey from Jeff to Ātman (the Sanskrit term for soul) seems to be complete as indicated by the final scene where it appears as if he has stopped being "human" altogether. He narrates himself as a being located in the pouch of a divine mystical hybrid man-animal— a Ganoona— who is worshipped by the people around as it steps down the ghat towards the river and Ātman peeks out of the pouch—"leaning forward and letting go, leaning on *nothing*" (291) [emphasis mine]. Thus, the novel ends on nothing, a dissolution of boundaries between the self and the abject, between the human and non-human and the sacred and the profane. The capacity of the city to engulf and assimilate the individual self is poignantly reflected in the final scene of *From Seoul to Varanasi*. Yeong-woo, one of the main protagonists and a powerful and intimidating presence in the publishing world of Seoul gets lost in the constricted alleys and mind-boggling traffic of Varanasi. In the last shot, he is seen painfully negotiating a busy traffic-laden junction in the city, the frame adorned by the tangle of electric wires and animated by the nameless and faceless crowd. The camera doesn't move till he becomes a tiny speck and finally disappears in the crowd, signaling the city's capacity to dissolve all individuality.

The City of Dissolution

The architecture and spatial peculiarities of Varanasi has a huge role in the way the self perceives and locates itself in the cityscape. Located on the crescent-shaped bank of the sacred river Ganga, it is considered a tirtha (a point to crossover to the other world) which hangs between the earth and heaven. Lannoy elaborates that a tirtha is a "combination of natural energies with an overarching metaphysical framework. In other words, there are three forces

involved: the natural, supernatural and the human, interwoven to weave a complex fabric” (8). Here, it is clear that the environment of the city is not merely a product of human engineering. The riverfront, the wide river and the sandy shore on the other side all combine to produce an effect of transcendental sublime which simulates a sense of dissolution in the individual. Both Ede and Jeff give almost identical descriptions of the first glimpse of the riverfront and the Ganga: “After the claustrophobia of the streets, my first sight of the mighty Ganges and the sky stretching over the opposite bank was a glimpse of another, more spacious world” (Dyer 167). Ede’s reactions mirror Jeff’s:

I will never forget my first sight of the river in Varanasi, from the narrowness and constriction of the alleys, thronged with activity, to the sudden release of the waterfront, the labyrinth’s end. It was not the river in isolation, perhaps, that stunned me so much as the river and the ghats as one entity, and the open plain beyond it, and the spires of dark smoke before it, and the silence, and the white sky, and the sense of being utterly at the centre of a profoundly ancient world. (98)

Thus, the land-river-waterfront complex metaphorically charts the passage of the soul across the river, from the world of coiled energy and frenetic activity, to rest in the netherworld of the shore opposite the city. This association with death and the release of the soul imbues the space with a feeling of nothingness which aids in the feeling of dissolution and otherworldliness.

An important feature that becomes relevant in this context is the “far shore” or the sandy plain forming the other bank of the river. According to Hindu belief, the land connotes everything that Varanasi, the city on the other bank is not. While it is auspicious to die in Varanasi, those who die on the other bank is believed to be reborn as donkeys. Thus, the far shore becomes the Other space, even within the sacred geography of Varanasi. Many writers and

artists who have worked on Varanasi have commented on the uncanny similarity that the experience of taking a boat out to the shore has with the crossing of the mythical Greek river of death Styx (Newby 214; Gardner 17). In *Jeff*, the far shore represents the ambiguous, prelingual psychological realm of the mind and Jeff's journeys to the far shore can be interpreted as a repressed desire to visit the abject. On one of the visits, he realizes that the boat in which he is travelling is leaky (265), a symbol of the fluid ambiguous, precarious self which constantly needs to wall out the murkiness of the abject to exist. Many of Jeff's anxiety about the self gets played out in the far shore. The constant fantasy of bodily disintegration manifests itself in the dead body that he discovers on the bank and the uncanny dream that he had in Venice, of being eaten by a dog, gets materialized in the abject shore of the Ganga. It is strongly implied that Jeff is metaphorically the dead body that is slowly decaying and disintegrating. The man's face is hidden, but he says that he recognizes one of the dogs—a unveiled reference to the dream in Venice: "The dogs looked up, looked at me, then resumed their meal. It seemed a strange place to start, the arms. Maybe they started there because it was easy to get their jaws around limbs" (265). Fantasy and reality sharply coalesce at this juncture and the abject embraces Jeff, and vice versa. As mentioned before, jouissance is one of the feelings that the self derives out of the abject, it is "simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become alter ego, drops so that "I" does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence" (9). Jeff finds the dead body strangely fascinating and takes out a boat to watch the progress of the disintegration of the body. "The dead man being eaten by dogs had become a tourist attraction" (265). Jeff goes back again to watch the dead body and on the third day he finds that the "dead man was no longer there. There were dogs, eating bits and pieces of something, but nothing to indicate that this something—just a general mess—might once have been human" (266). Thus,

the once whole human body becomes a “general mess”, an ominous reminder of the ephemerality of the material and ideological foundation of the idea of the human. And by association with death and the dead body, the far shore becomes an exterior manifestation of the uncanny and repressed parts of the human mind.

On this waste-littered bank of the Ganga, Jeff undergoes a mystic experience which is narrated in such a way as to connote a spiritual rebirth and pollution and dirt get juxtaposed against sublime eternity and afterlife. Jeff finds “nothing remotely holy” (246) about the bank which appeared “like a boggy moon, with pools of brackish water, patches of moss and slime... It has been possible, beforehand, to believe that this other shore was the place where souls came to rest. If this was the case, then eternity now seemed a polluted, defiled place” (ibid). Hence, there is only a thin line between salvation and pollution and in the novel, both commingle. Shortly, salvation “catches him unawares”—he starts to “feel sleepy” and realizes that his whole life was flashing before his eyes (247). The experience, like many others in the novel, is narrated ambiguously where dream and reality seamlessly combine to produce a tenuous and fluid narrative:

I jolted awake, suddenly afraid that I was on the brink of dying, that this had been my destiny, to die here and be reborn as a donkey, a donkey with a brain, a donkey troubled by a stubborn but inadequate inkling—not a memory, just a nagging doubt really, —of *what it meant to be human*.

I got to my feet uncertainly, like a *newborn foal*. The other tourists had gone. I was alone on the far bank of the Ganges. (248) [emphasis mine]

Thus, there are clear indications that compare his experience to the birth of a foal, a young donkey, implying that the new self, or “non-self” is far removed from the idea of an autonomous, human figure. Hence, the far shore becomes the abject place located on the far side of the mind which can cause sublimity leading to a transcendence of narrow notions of identity.

The ghats of the city also have their own metaphorical significations of being category-defying structure situated on the liminal space between nature and culture. This sliver of man-made structure extending into and partly submerged in water are the confluence of life and death, identity and dissolution, mirroring the essentially uncategorizable nature of life. For Newby, they represent the urban decrepitude and uncontained waste, “some with their lower steps collapsing into the river where the water and sewage percolating from above had undermined the clay and limestone which constituted their foundations...” (216). This image of neglect and dilapidation adds to the conception of the place as ancient and primordial. He also describes the temple spires above the ghats as “monstrous growth of fungi” (216) including a temple leaning in to the water, balanced by its weight (216). Jeff terms this “Varanasi’s leaning tower of Pisa”, a structure in a permanent state of suspension (202), ancient and in disrepair. To the modern mind, the alienness of the place is further exacerbated by the organic and haphazard nature of the buildings—houses built around trees “whose entire living room might have been filled with the trunk of a big old tree” (Dyer 165) and ugly rooms inhabited by friendly mice (Ede 4). Thus, in Varanasi, the architecture and the physical geography of the city come together to augment a sense of otherworldliness which corresponds to the primordality of the human mind.

Nothingness

In *Jeff*, the sense of self is gradually transcended by the protagonist; the evolution of the self to a place of non-self is detailed in the novel. This trajectory also signals the arrival of a

stage where the external senses become immaterial to the perception of space, which is experienced as absolute, unmediated and undifferentiated—symbolic of an advanced spiritual state. This spiritual imagination helps Jeff see Varanasi as all space and time “a mandala, a cosmogram. It contained the cosmos” (204); ““To be in Varanasi is to be everywhere”” (287), the way certain sects of traditional Hinduism imagine it to be. Hence, the physical and geographical coordinates become irrelevant for the conception of the city and the city exists beyond the realm of language, culture and subjectivity. The numerous representations of the dirt and squalor of the city, and the other signposts become superfluous when one stops seeing with one’s eyes and through other people’s eyes. He imagines a *darshan* “in which there is nothing to be seen” (238) and the idea of -scape transforms into non-scape—the nonrepresentation of space, where there is no differentiation between the viewer and the viewed:

“All that will remain is Allah’s name,

He who is absent but present too,

He who is the seer as well as the seen” (Faiz qtd. in Dyer 238)

Summing Up

The chapter attempts to see how the modern subject born out of and rooted in the discourse of individuality and medical discourse of disease and hygiene interacts with the material waste in Varanasi and the resultant perception of the space in the city. The chapter argues that despite attempts to avoid stereotypical tourist performativities, the (neocolonial) outsider gazes of the modern subjects objectify the dirt in the city, focusing obsessively on the cremation ghats, human remains and carcasses. Also, using theories of abjection and disgust, I elaborate that the chaos, squalor and dirt in the city impinge on the precarious, narrow notion of

identity of the modern self and generates paranoia in the narrators. The city becomes the abject, primordial space, the opposite of the well-ordered, sanitized western cities. I also elaborate that the constant exposure to the waste in Varanasi exerts an abrasive effect on the self of the narrator of the principal text, Jeff, which helps in expanding the narrow limits of his White, male identity and embracing the larger surroundings of the city. Thus, this sense of sublimity induced by dirt helps him transcend the limitations of language and significations and see Varanasi as all space and time. Hence, there is a transition from the projection of the wastescape of Varanasi to the merging with the non-scape of the city.

Chapter 3

The Human Wastescapes of Banaras: Insiders and Outsiders in the City

“Hari is in the East: Allah is in the
West. Look within your heart,
for there you will find both Karim
and Ram;
All the men and women of the world
Are His living forms.
Kabir is the child of Allah and of
Ram: He is my Guru, He is my
Pir.”

(Kabir)

This chapter consists of the analysis of two texts, the feature film *Mohalla Assi* (2015/2018)⁵⁰, which is an adaptation of a short story from Kashinath Singh’s Hindi novel, *Kashi ka Assi* (2004) and the novel, *Song of the Loom* (1996), which is the English translation of the Hindi novel *Jhini Jhini Bini Chadariya* (1987) by Abdul Bismillah. Both the original texts are by Indian men who have been residents of the city. Precisely because of this, there is a difference in the gaze and conception of city space in the texts. Contrary to the texts written by Western or non-Indian authors where the actions seem to be set mostly at the ghats, the texts under discussion in this chapter deal with specific localized spaces in Banaras and the micro life-worlds of the people living in those localities. Here, the local neighbourhoods traditionally termed mohallas and marketplaces/bazaars and the insides of private dwellings form the locations of action. This is very significant since it points to a non-homogenising view of the city and helps to

⁵⁰ The movie which was slated to be released in 2015 was released only in 2018 after a protracted legal battle with the Central Board for Film Certification over the “objectionable” depiction of Hindu gods.

understand the multifarious ways of identifying with and conceptualizing the city or spaces in the city.

This chapter argues that in the texts chosen for study, the ideas of waste, wasting and dirt act as metaphors for individuals, categories of humans and communities who/which are rendered redundant and impure in the face of economic, social and political contingencies and addresses questions related to who belongs and does not belong in the city, and who has the rightful claim to the space. This argument is further extended to state that the projection of certain humans as waste and the spaces they occupy as threatening or impure is a result of the insecurities and anxieties that different actors and stakeholders in the city face as a result of a globalizing Banaras. Also, the texts illustrate that the categories of humans-as-waste are temporal, political and dynamic and people can move up and down the chain of value. Finally, the chapter argues that these spaces of waste occupied by the wasted/wasting humans offer resistance to homogenous, Hinduised conception of the city and raises questions regarding who is a true “Banarasi”.

“Banarasi-ness” and Mohallas

The idea of a “true culture” of Banaras forms one of the cornerstones of patterns of othering and marginalization which render humans as waste/superfluous/threatening in the city. Therefore, it is important to have a cursory idea of how a stereotypical resident of Banaras is pictured and the claims and contestations surrounding it. The idea of “Banarasi-ness” (Banarasipan as it is called in the local language) has much currency among scholars of Banaras. For example, Nita Kumar (1988) in her analysis of the popular culture of the artisans in the city states that those who define themselves as “Banarasi” have a similar “life-style and ideology of work, leisure and public activity” which supersedes caste and religious differences (226).

However, Marzia Casolari gives a different point of view in her essay on the construction of a Hindu political identity in the city. She opines that segments of culture which were common to both the communities are being steadily appropriated by Hindu right-wing forces as a part of a concerted political movement to Hinduise the city (1417). The analysis in the chapter proves that cultural anxieties about authenticity and purity abound among various communities and groups in the city and certain sections are altogether excluded from dominant narratives of the city.

Another idea that is closely related to insider-outsider questions in the city is the concept of the mohalla. Both the texts predominantly deal with the life-world of communities and groups as experienced through the spatial arrangement of mohallas— a term for neighbourhood or locality in North India. Mohallas are one of the remnants of the Islamic rule in the city and country, they used to be autonomous residential and tax units and had independent policing and sanitation arrangements (Yanagisawa and Funo 385-386). However, the introduction of modern systems of urban administration has gradually made this system irrelevant in terms of urban governance. However, it still holds cultural sway over the population and in the texts, the boundaries set by the mohallas form axes of inclusion and exclusion and its erosion induce different kinds of anxieties.

Mini-Spaces and Humans-as-Waste

Before moving on to the analysis of the texts, it is important to discuss localized perceptions of space and also the concept of humans-as-waste. In the introduction to *Visualizing Space in Banaras* (2008), Gaenzle and Gengnagel say that space is constructed differently by different actors and there is bound to be conflict “over the appropriate ‘handling’ of a place” (9) and that though the residents of Banaras may have a common ethos, “there has always been competition in the appropriation of space and its meaning” (ibid). The experience of space is also

a result of everyday practices and it located in the use of “ ‘one’s habitat’ flats, houses, courtyards, the neighbourhood, the ghats, tanks, places of work and leisure, shrine of regular worship and the like” (ibid 15). This observation is crucial for the discussions of the texts that follow since it deals with the lives of various residents of the city who unconsciously construct the cityspace and gives an insight into how social spaces and processes are important to the making of the image of the city.

Also, a discussion of the concept of human-as-waste helps us understand how the structural, symbolic and metaphoric ideas of waste can act as a symptom of the questions of identity and belonging that have been raised in the previous sections and how such tropes create human wastescapes of the city. The humans-as-waste approach attempts to look at the manner in which some human lives are wasted away or considered as waste and deemed as disposable, literally and metaphorically. In other words, this social science approach uses the concept of waste to throw new light on human inequality and exploitative development. In the Discard Studies Compendium, Hudson McFann (discardstudies.com) gives a comprehensive account⁵¹ of the concept of humans as waste. According to this, key phrases such as “wasted humans”, “child as waste”, “discarded people”, “disposable people”, “waste population”, “garbaged bodies”, and so on, have been formulated by various writers for tackling this concept. In addition to this, McFann identifies three major approaches to the idea of humans as waste. The symbolic approach consists of the methodology adopted by Mary Douglas⁵² and Julia Kristeva⁵³ to talk about how humans are considered as abject or dirt/impure. The biopolitical approach to humans-

⁵¹ <https://discardstudies.com/discard-studies-compendium/#Humansaswaste>

⁵² *Purity and Danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo* (1966)

⁵³ *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982)

as-waste is mainly based on writings on biopower, sovereignty and state. The last approach situates the consignment of humans to the realm of waste within a Marxist framework and discusses the devaluation of human life against the background of the popular developmental rhetoric, globalization, capitalism and modernity. New forms of marginality etched out by a neo-capitalistic world order are the foundations of the economic approach to humans-as-waste. This approach entails a critique of modernity and its attendant paradigms of development. Zygmunt Bauman's work *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* forms one of the seminal texts in understanding the economic and social processes that make humans redundant and superfluous and the means by which they are disposed. The work is an enduring critique of modernity, which constantly throws out the old and replaces it with the new. Modernity includes only certain human beings and the others are discarded and rendered superfluous. In a modern capitalistic world, the worth of an individual is often decided by the economic value or productivity that the individual is associated with. Hence, those who were dependent on an economic order that had become redundant become increasingly valueless to the new world order. "Economic imperialism values those qualities which help in utility maximization. Other values, for example, moral worth, become redundant" (Schwartz 179). According to Bauman, they become permanently superfluous population. Davis sums it up concisely when he says "[referring to slum and shantytown dwellers in the global South]... this is a mass of humanity structurally and biologically redundant to global accumulation and the corporate matrix" (qtd. in Yates 1679). Michelle Yates in her paper "The Human-As-Waste, the Labour Theory of Value and Disposability in Contemporary Capitalism" opines that the internal logic of present-day capitalism encourages waste and wasting and creates surplus population—populations whose labour has become unnecessary, hence disposable. "Once relegated as permanent surplus,

meaning that capital no longer needs these populations as labor, these populations are little more than human-as-waste, excreted from the capitalist system” (Yates 1680). She goes on to argue that even when the labourer is employed, his/her body is “used up or wasted at accelerated rates in order to secure the most profit” (1680). Marx refers to the phenomenon of creation of surplus labour with the increase in surplus capital as the capitalist law of population. He spells it out clearly: “The working population therefore produces both accumulation of capital and the means by which it is itself made relatively superfluous; and it does this to an extent which is always increasing. This is a law of population peculiar to the capitalist mode of production” (qtd. in Yates 1689).

Symbolic approach to humans-as-waste is grounded in cultural and religious ideas of dirt and waste. Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* is a landmark work in this area which categorically states the dirt is “matter out of place” and forms a challenge to the political order of society. The idea of dirt, waste, sin is more often than not, extended to refer to humans who do not fit into unproblematic, normative categories. It can include people with physical deformity, deviant sexuality, fluid gender, and so. Also, in countries like India, caste-based purity and impurity are essential for maintaining the hegemonical dominance of the upper castes. Hence lower castes have graded impurity thrust on them. These are sanctioned by religion and helps in maintaining a hierarchical and exploitative social order and emphasizing the so-called divine purity of the upper castes. The fear of contamination and pollution informs the social relations between the different castes. The lower castes are literally and figuratively treated as dirt and waste. Thus, traditionally they are not allowed to come into physical contact or within the line of vision of the “pure” castes. Here, one can see a social structure which deliberately creates categories of inclusion and exclusion and treats the excluded ones as waste in human form.

The following sections consist of close-readings and analyses of the texts in the light of the theoretical frameworks discussed above.

***Mohalla Assi*⁵⁴(2018)**

Based on the short story *Pandey Kaun Kumati Tohe Lagi?* [Pandey, what foolishness are you doing?] in Kashinath Singh's Hindi novel, *Kashi ka Assi* [The Assi of Kashi](2004), the movie *Mohalla Assi* (2015/2018) is a satirical take on contesting claims to the city by various residents and the socio-economic forces of globalisation that radically revamp the idea and reality of Banaras. The story which is set in the decade spanning from the late eighties to nineties revolves around the character of Dharamnath Pandey, a panda⁵⁵ by profession and a self-proclaimed guardian of vedic dharma. The story details Pandey's tireless efforts to safeguard the cultural purity of his neighbourhood, Mohalla Assi, and by extension, the city of Banaras, by resisting the venality and commercialization of the city due to the increased inflow of tourists and pilgrims. However, the latter half of the movie describes the uneasy compromises that Pandey makes in the face of increasing poverty due to changed social circumstances and how he gets inducted into the cycle of commercialization. The movie can be considered as a lively cacophony of dialogic discourses by different residents regarding who belongs to the city and who doesn't and what the "true" culture of Banaras is.

⁵⁴ The Assi ghat is the southernmost ghat in Varanasi. In this movie it means the geographical locality in and around this ghat.

⁵⁵ A class of Brahmin priests who specialize in conducting funeral rites at the river ghats in the city.

- **Sweeping Human Wastescapes**

Over the course of the narrative, it is possible to see that various categories of human beings are branded as corrupting, corrupted, useless and wasted at various points of time with respect to the perceived spiritual and cultural sanctity of the city. The movie commences with sweeping visions of the venality that has seeped into the mainstream modes of living in the city. The opening scene is set in Banaras railway station, the literal and symbolic meeting point of the insiders and outsiders of the city, the point of arrival. One of the major characters, Kanni, a college-educated tourist guide, well versed in the art of chicanery and fleecing tourists is shown as attempting to woo a newly arrived White tourist couple to accept his services. He mouths clichés in broken English about the city, referring to its potential to offer materialistic pleasure as well as spiritual enrichment, revealing a city and culture which has been parceled out for the consumption of the tourist. He grandly proclaims that Banaras is the “land of mistakes”, the tourist interjects whether it is “mistakes or mystics” and he laughingly responds “mistakes, mystics— same” (2:20) and proceeds to proclaim that it is “the land of yogas and bhogas”⁵⁶ (2:32). Hence, it is clearly stated that material/hedonistic pursuits and spiritual pursuits exist side by side and seep into each other. The humans who are involved in these transactions become wasting, corrupting individuals who actively collude with market forces to commodify the city. The reality of commodification and the attendant “corruption” is exemplified in the following scenes where the tourist couple photograph and consume the city as they travel through the chaotic, narrow alleys of the city in a decrepit autorickshaw. On being stopped by a traffic police

⁵⁶ Bhoga refers to “sensual pleasure” in Sanskrit language.

for checking, Kanni loudly chants “Har Har Mahadev”⁵⁷ while quietly slipping some currency notes into the hands of the policeman who waves them away (3:46).

The idea of humans who sully or dirty the city is taken to material and literal levels where in one of the following scenes, as Kanni points out to the river to explain the greatness of the city to his tourist clients, the camera ironically pans on a group of faceless, nameless men defecating on the banks of the Ganga. Tanni, one of the self-appointed patrollers of the ghats drives them away and the men jump into the river and swim away to escape being beaten by the man (8:00). Thus, the defecating, identity-less⁵⁸ human figures become part of the wastescape of the city which is viewed by the outsider–tourists, dirtying and becoming dirt themselves, symbolically getting driven away and disposed of in the river like garbage. However, the multifarious networks of corruption and dirt that connect the humans of the city is thrown into sharp relief when it is clearly highlighted that Tanni lets off the defecators by collecting minor bribes from the latter and he unabashedly declares that “corruption is our national character” (8:34). Therefore, Tanni is morally polluted and polluting and not very different from the men who defecate on the riverbank.

- **Pandey and Waste**

Dharamnath Pandey, the protagonist of the movie in many ways, is precariously positioned in the nebulous realms of purity, corruption and dirt. In the first half of the movie, he is seen constantly resisting and actively fighting forces, especially the business of cultural and

⁵⁷ A chant in praise of Lord Shiva who is considered the patron god of Varanasi/Banaras.

⁵⁸ Of relevance here is Arjun Appadurai’s observation in the essay “Deep Democracy” (2001) that shitting in public because of lack of accessibility to toilets renders the people invisible in the eyes of the state. Hence, they become valueless and are denied personhood.

spiritual tourism that he perceives as corrupting the sanctity of the “Hindu” city. He frequently indulges in tirades against the corrupt priests and the locals of the city and says that the Brahmin neighbourhood in Mohalla Assi, where he lives, is the only untainted island of purity (25:00) and on another occasion, he vehemently asserts that he will not allow “The ghat to become a picnic spot and the Ganga to become a swimming pool” (33:54). His contempt for greed and materialism and his stubborn adherence to ideals is mirrored in the story of Nachiketa⁵⁹ that he teaches his Sanskrit students.

However, notwithstanding his rhetoric of purity and dharma and confidence in his place in the religious fabric of the city, Pandey is constantly on the brink of redundancy. In one of the light-hearted satirical moments in the city, when he chastises a tout dressed as Shiva for extracting money from tourists, the latter retorts that he is Shiva, the original resident of Banaras [*adivasi*] and everybody else, including Pandey, is an expatriate [*pravasi*] (15:53). Both the Sankrit school where he teaches Brahmin students and his house are rundown, in need of maintenance, mirroring the obsolescence of his ideals, his contempt for change and the way of living he stands for. His current redundancy is foregrounded in the narrative where one of the characters, an erudite and jocular retired university professor, recounts the history of the orthodox, self-righteous priests of Banaras who fell on hard times in the wake of the abolishment of the feudal system in newly independent India (1:07:30). Hence, Pandey, a professional priest seems to be a victim of a second wave of redundancy brought about by new global forces of modernity and is rendered economically and culturally superfluous when he loses his teaching

⁵⁹ The protagonist of a story from Katha Upanishad who rejects offers of material pleasures and asks Lord Yama—the God of Death—to reveal the mystery of death to him.

job due to his lack of English knowledge. Thus, he effectively becomes a wasted remnant stuck in the past.

In addition to slipping into redundancy in a rapidly modernizing Banaras, Pandey is also shown as actively taking part in the Ramjanmabhoomi movement,⁶⁰ which is essentially about laying to waste, a culture's place of worship. The pointlessness and foolishness of marching to Ayodhya is exemplified in the movie when one of the characters urges a tout dressed as Lord Ram to follow the crowd to the disputed land saying that he will be fed lavishly and given a government pension thereafter. Immediately, the narrative cuts to the scene where Pandey tells his wife that he is going to Ayodhya, drawing a comparison between the imposter and Pandey (48:19-49:27). Thus, he becomes part of a wasteful politico-historic force which has been kindled and propagated by equally wasteful, destructive humans. Also, he symbolically and physically gets "wasted" when he is hit by a bullet in the police firing that ensues at the place of conflict. As a result, he is hailed as a revolutionary by the Mohalla right-wing faction while his wife Savitri and the other more "corruptible" Brahmins in the neighbourhood smoulder with indignation at his unwarranted and unsolicited idealism. His wife chastises him for courting unnecessary risks and says that "everyone wants a revolutionary in their neighbourhood, but not in their own backyards" (52:34), highlighting Pandey's status as an unwanted, threatening and inconvenient presence in the very mohalla whose purity he is committed to protect and preserve.

⁶⁰ A religio-political movement spearheaded by right-wing Hindu forces for demolishing a historical mosque situated in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, and building a Ram temple in its place. The leaders of the movement claim that Lord Ram was born at that site and that an ancient temple dedicated to the god was demolished by Muslim rulers to build the mosque. The movement and its aftereffects continue to exert a deeply polarizing influence on the nation. In the movie, Pandey is shown taking part in one of the many mobilizations of Hindus that culminated in the demolition of the mosque on 6 December 1992 by Hindu extremists.

Paradoxically, in an inversion of the objective of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement (which was about restoring the rightful place of a mythical god), Pandey symbolically displaces Lord Shiva from his assigned place in the puja room⁶¹ and disposes the broken idol in the Ganga in order to make room for his new French tenant. Thus, he becomes a wasteful and ruinous force antithetical to the life force of the spiritual fabric of the city. Overcome with guilt, he laments that he dumped his “Baba”⁶², Lord Shiva, the same way people dump their aged and dying parents in Banaras (1:47:00), becoming part of and perpetuating the human wastescape of the city.

- **Vidharmis⁶³, Vidheshis⁶⁴ and Mlecchs⁶⁵**

The Hindi words vidharmi, vidheshi, and mlecch are used synonymously in the movie to refer to outsiders, especially Western tourists, who according to many a local resident, pose a threat to the spiritual and material culture of the city. They form a distinct category of wasted/waste humans who are perceived as corrupting and corrupted. In mohalla Assi, the site where most of the contestations and actions take place, an overzealous Pandey strictly forbids his fellow Brahmins from tainting the purity of the neighbourhood by renting out rooms to “vidheshis” who are by default, perceived as junkies and idlers. Their potential to pollute the ritual purity of the Brahmin and his household is emphasized when Pandey says that the

⁶¹ A room in a Hindu household which is demarcated for placing idols and worshipping deities.

⁶² A colloquial term for “father”.

⁶³ A Hindi word which can be translated to mean a heretic who acts against the principles and ideals of a religion.

⁶⁴ The Hindi term for a foreigner.

⁶⁵ The Hindi term for barbaric and uncultured people.

Brahmins of Assi must not follow the way of the less-pure lower castes such as Mallahs⁶⁶ who rampantly rent out rooms to foreigners (31:12). Hence, the foreigners get indirectly inducted into the hierarchy of caste purity and impurity by their association with or ostracization by certain caste groups. This is further illustrated by the fact that both Pandey and his wife Savitri use notions of physical and moral impurity closely aligned with caste-based discrimination. When his colleague Upadhyay⁶⁷ consults with him regarding the possibility of renting out his room to foreigners, the latter bursts into a tirade about the gradual erosion of Brahmin purity due to close social and business transactions with the Westerners, how those who did not dare enter the Brahmin neighbourhood without bathing in the Ganga, during the olden days, now freely enter the households without bathing or washing, mix with their children and morally and physically corrupt them. He proceeds to ask an embarrassed Upadhyay whether he wants “things” that occur in lodges and hotels to happen inside Brahmin households as well (30:11-30:41).

This “othering” or “wasteisation” of the Western visitors is also evident in Savitri’s objections to accepting a French resident student in their house. She angrily echoes her husband’s previously held opinions about the foreigners— that they are dirty, unwashed and wiped their asses with paper⁶⁸ (1:24:00), feeding into the discourse of uncleanness and filth associated with the foreign other. In the conversations between Savitri and her Mallah friend Ramdin, they use derogatory language to describe White women’s loose morals and tendency to

⁶⁶ People belonging to a lower-caste who traditionally ply boats for a living.

⁶⁷ A Brahmin caste.

⁶⁸ Nita Kumar (1992), while describing her fieldwork experiences in Banaras, recounts how her guesthouse manager, a Sanskrit scholar, was horrified when she requested for more toilet paper (27). It goes on to prove how cultural differences in toilet habits can engender mutual disgust for each other.

tempt the local men. Catherine, Ramdin's American paying guest is described as being "too hot between the legs" and promiscuous (39:01). Their perceptions get validated when Catherine is found having a sexual relationship with her tourist guide and later, elopes with him. Also, Marlene, the French paying guest that Pandey eventually accepts into his home is initially introduced by Kanni as a "wretch"⁶⁹ who knows neither English nor Hindi (1:22:50), an in-between, and hence, an even more reprehensible being.

The concept of foreigners or the "vidheshis" as dirt in society is clearly articulated by the retired professor who frequents "pappu's teashop", which is one of the major venues where conversations occur. He unambiguously terms them as "the filth of their nations" (36:44) like the poor are in our country. Having lost all value and means of sustenance in their own societies, they seek refuge in poorer regions like Banaras, India, where they can live like kings, with respect and comfort on the little money that they receive from their well wishers back home. Hence, the foreigners become wasted human beings who are ejected from the more prosperous and ordered societies of the world and find their places in the dirty material and human debris of the city.

However, once they make the city their home, according to the locals, they extend their corrupting influence on the cityscape and mould the space to suit their purposes. In another scene, the same professor in a diatribe on the evisceration of the city by the foreigners says that they buy property and establish their own businesses in a Banaras which is unwillingly inducted into a globalizing world. Thus, in a certain way, they are seen as malignant invaders who are themselves wasted and lay waste to their surroundings (1:19:00). The Western tourists such as

⁶⁹ In the original Hindi dialogue, he uses the word "bhosedike" which literally means one who has emerged from a prostitute's vagina.

the bisleri-water-bottle-carrying clients of Kanni, guided by him, gaze and consume the “shitscape” of defecating humans on the banks of the Ganga (8:00) and try to intrude into the house of locals in a bid to photograph the “culture” of the people (14:35). They commodify the city through their consumerist tourist gazes and are juxtaposed against the Western writers and scholars who try to interpret the city to the West and give dire warnings about a “dying Varanasi” (1:18:00). According to the professor in the movie, the latter is dangerous since it reveals imperialistic and colonialist tendencies to “take over and save” and preserve Banaras for posterity. Interestingly, the character uses the images of dirt and cleanliness to convey his point about the usurpation and appropriation of the city by outsiders. While rebuking the American woman Catherine (who makes her reappearance in the movie as a scholar on Banaras) for pointing out the erosion of the traditional demography of the city, he fulminates that the Westerners want the city to remain degenerate and dirty, with fraudulent holy men and cow dung in the streets so that they can take ownership with promises of making it “new and shiny” (1:20:11). Similarly, Catherine is also described as a “dirtying” figure, who cannot be trusted and when one of his friends try to pacify the vituperative professor, he retorts whether he should allow her to “pee on his head?” (1:18:24).

- **The Corrupt Within**

The locals or residents of the city who are socially and professionally associated with the foreigners are as susceptible to “wasteisation” as the latter. Pandey believes that swadeshi (local) Brahmins pose as much a threat to Hindu culture as foreigners (6:40), drawing attention to the corruption and degeneration present in the local Banarasis⁷⁰ as well. The trope of degeneration is

⁷⁰ A term to denote a resident of Banaras. More often than not, this identity is attributed with cultural authenticity and belonging.

rooted within the venality and chicanery that springs up in the wake of the boom in international tourism. The movie conveys an image of Banaras that is dangerously seeped in corruption and populated with touts who prey on foreign tourists. They range from tourist guides like Kanni and house owners, who rent out rooms at exorbitant rates, to *behrupiyas*⁷¹ who dress up as gods and seek money from tourists.

Kanni the tourist guide, figures as a prominent character who benefits from the tourist business. Although a high-born Brahmin, Kanni is considered by Pandey as a tout who lives off the commodification of the city and the exploitation of tourists. He, in many ways becomes the link between the old world and the new, the insiders and the outsiders, the foreigners and the residents, facilitating (often uneasy) contact between the two. He also becomes dirt, potentially dangerous and polluting by virtue of his liminality, by his non-adherence to the “Brahmin virtue” that he was born into. His impurity and moral degradation are hinted at in casteist terms when Pandey contemptuously taunts him for doing what lower castes do, i.e., mixing with foreigners and making money off them (33:35). Similarly, his sidekick Nekaram, the barber, who aspires to be like Kanni, is derided as a “*varnsankar*” (33:15), a hybrid, not belonging to any caste and hence an anomaly.

Within the “sacrosanct” limits of mohalla Assi, all those who do not strictly adhere to Brahminical codes of purity are deemed as an impure and polluting presence. These bodies become an unwanted and malicious presence in the rarefied neighbourhood. The Brahmin house owners religiously avoid renting rooms to “*vidharmis*” and “*mlecchs*”, making sure that no meat-eaters are let in. However, when two meat-eating students lie their way into a tenancy in the

⁷¹ An impressionist who dresses up as various entities.

vicinity and accidentally deposit leftover bones after a meal on the pavement, a ruckus breaks out and Pandey makes it a point to question them about their caste and accuse them of dietary impurity, indirectly referring to them as buzzards and crows, scavenging animals which dirty the locality (19:30).

Also, it is possible to detect a category of locals who are projected to have been inadvertently morally corrupted by the contact with the foreigners. Ramdin, the wife of the boatman who rents out a room to Catherine, on discovering that Nekaram is having a sexual affair with her tenant, blackmails him into sleeping with her. Thus, she apparently violates the matrimonial purity codes and becomes a polluted body herself. Similarly, the socio-political developments on a national/regional level also have their repercussions in Banaras, creating new categories of otherness and redundant human beings. In the movie, following the rampant mobilization for marching to Ayodhya to demolish the Babri Masjid, the only Muslim character in the movie, the neighbourhood vegetable vendor, feels singled out and his identity gets communalized. He says that he had lived in Assi his whole life, emphasizing his sense of belongingness to the place. However, following the communal mobilization, his existence had become precarious and contingent on the political affiliations that he overtly displays. After conversing with his Hindu counterparts (both communal and secular), he leaves dejected, commenting that “no one will ever believe me” even if I vote for the people you want (57:36). Thus, the Muslim body becomes a politically insidious or inconvenient, wasteful presence in the neighbourhood.

- **Transitory Spaces of Purity and Impurity**

In the movie, the wasted/wasting/wasteful human bodies share a bilateral relationship with the locations and spaces which they occupy. The spaces are circumvented and contained by

invisible lines of purity and impurity and they determine the nature of the social transactions that are carried out in those spaces and the humans that are (allowed to be) involved in it. An analysis of the spaces of action in the movie presents us with a model of concentric circles of purity with the Pandey household, dominated by the puja room with the Shivalinga⁷² forming the epicenter of purity and the marketplace/bazaar dominated by Pappu's teashop, which opens out into the ghats, forming the outer limit. It is obvious that, in this proposed model, the lines of purity and impurity roughly coincide with private and public spaces.⁷³

Pappu's teashop located in the marketplace/bazaar is shown as a vibrant public sphere where many (male) locals, especially the elderly and the retired, and visitors come to sip tea, gossip, discuss politics, argue and fulminate. In one scene, it is glorified as the only seat of politics and democracy in Assi (9:10). Located near Assi ghat, it forms an undifferentiated space without segregation, where different castes and communities mingle freely.⁷⁴ Precisely for this reason, the teashop is also seen as a site of contagion, moral and material dirt, and more importantly, occupied by idle and corrupting bodies. It is described as a "den of addicts and junkies" (08:57) and is mostly, populated by vocal and critical old men who are waste humans in the eyes of the authority — a useless, if not an inconvenient presence in society. These locals

⁷² The phallic idol of Lord Shiva.

⁷³ A similar spatial arrangement based on relative levels of purity is mentioned by Kelly D Alley in "Idioms of Degeneracy" (1998). There, she refers to Alter's description of akharas/wrestling grounds in Banaras. The sacred well with drinking water lies at the centre of the ground surrounded by swampy ponds where ablutions are performed. Alter finds that this system of hydraulic classification structures the akhara space and the resident's movement through it (308).

⁷⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992) contrasts the "ritually enclosed inside" of the household with the unenclosed outside—the bazaar—which is deeply ambiguous in character. He says that the bazaar is seen as a place from which one needs protection since it has all that do not belong to the " 'inside' (family/kinship/community)" and violates rules of mixing. Hence it is a place where one encounters strangers and danger (543).

who patronize the shop in many ways become champions of the “wasteful”, “dirtying”, “obscene” culture of Banaras which coexist with puritanical religious perceptions of the city. The elderly “intellectual” men such as the retired university professor, lawyer, and so on, are shown as criticizing the puritanical Hindu revivalist forces which try to censor and condemn the free-flowing, amoral intellectual and social culture of the city. In one scene, one of the elderly men condemns the attempt by local cultural vigilantes to ban a poets’ meet in the city and brand it as something “vulgar, cheap and bad” which should be performed outside the city, across the river where nobody can hear the poets, strikingly, evoking the metaphor of waste and its disposal (9:30). Similarly, they defend the abusive, obscene language that is the norm among the locals who do not even spare the gods when it comes to cussing. They hail it as Assi’s mother tongue (09:30-11:00). In the same fashion, the selling of cannabis in the shop is justified as a sacred tradition⁷⁵ that is associated with the gods who use it as an intoxicant. The retired professor resists the shutting down of the teashop by the police and humiliates the police officer by commenting that he who shits in a Western toilet will not appreciate the sacred tradition of Assi and Banaras (12:55). Thus, Pappu’s teashop becomes a vibrant and virulent site of resistance to forces such as cultural puritans and the police who endeavor to control and order society.

On the other hand, Pandey’s Brahmin neighbourhood in mohalla Assi is a strictly ordered realm where codes of segregation and purity are observed. A steep flight of steps lead up from the messiness of Assi ghat to the rarefied atmosphere of the Brahmin neighbourhood, symbolizing the assumed superiority, exclusivity and purity of the space. The neighbourhood,

⁷⁵ Lord Shiva, the patron god of Banaras is believed to a lover of cannabis and his devotees often use the intoxicant as part of worship. In fact, Nita Kumar (1988) details that an important aspect of being a “Banarasi” is a devotion to leisure and “masti” [joy of life], including the use of cannabis or “bhang” (82). Here, the movie critiques the tendency of modernity to control and outlaw aspects of local culture which do not conform to its codes of morality.

policed by Pandey, has a strict policy of not letting “mlecchas” reside there. The Pandey household takes the idea of purity further up a notch. They staunchly shoo away “corrupt” middlemen such as Kanni from entering their households and their lives. Notwithstanding the rundown nature of the house, Savitri, Pandey’s wife is constantly seen as sweeping, washing and purifying the inner courtyard, especially while having conversations about the importance of keeping foreigners away and shunning the tourist business. Hence, it is projected as a pure place, materially and morally. The purity of the place is primarily attributed to the Shivalinga which has the pride of place inside the house. All visitors pay their obeisance to the idol before proceeding further into the hall.

However, these spaces of purity and impurity are not rigid and the lines often get blurred which corresponds to the changing social and moral dynamics of the humans acting in those spaces. When Pandey compromises his ideals and decides to accept a French paying guest, he is forced to displace the idol from its sacred place and in an instance of stupendous paradox, converts the puja room into a Western toilet for his tenant(1:36:01). The change in spatial dynamics is also reflected in physical movement and actions of Pandey. A much subdued and meek Pandey ventures into the dirty, garbage-ridden alleys of Banaras in search of Kanni whom he finds urinating on the pavement, signaling the dirtying of his self (1:21:12). The hitherto reviled Kanni gets easy access to the Pandey household, and when he first enters the house, Pandey is shown as emerging from the toilet with his sacred thread tucked behind his right ear (1:23:13). This is of immense significance as far as the idea of purity is concerned since, when a Brahmin wears the sacred thread around his ear, he is believed to have suspended his state of purity for a short while to indulge in impure acts. Hence, in the movie, Pandey is shown as suspending/soiling his purity by becoming part of the commodification of culture.

The instability of the category of waste is further highlighted by the change in the “value status” of some of the “useless, wasted” characters in the movie. For example, Nekaram, the barber, who was considered a tout, reappears in the movie as a highly popular and successful holy man who is granted free access to the Pandey household. Similarly, the lower-caste boatman Jaggu improves his lot by renting out his room to foreigners. Savitri complains that their once dirty houses have become clean and the dirty children and women have become neat, tidy and well-dressed and engage in fruitful pursuits (59:00-1:00:12). Thus, not only the bodies, even the spaces occupied by the once impure humans get revamped and redeemed.

- **Making Friends with the Other**

In a psychological sleight of hand, a morally tormented Pandey gets a divine visitation from Lord Shiva in his sleep. In the vision, Lord Shiva, who appears in the form of the Shiva imposter (Behrupiya) who inhabits the Assi ghat, rebukes Pandey for imprisoning him, the lord of the Himalayas, in a dank matchbox-like room, near a “sewer, which reeks of piss and shit”. He demands to be removed from the ground and placed under the skies, where there are stars and breeze. The Shiva vision turns the binary of purity and impurity on its head by declaring that he feels suffocated in the dirty enclosure that the ritually pure humans had designated as his sacrosanct home. Also, he appears in the form of the Shiva imposter who had been routinely derided and chastised by Pandey for resorting to dubious means to earn a living. Thus, he skews the distinction between pure and impure humans, and it is further reinforced when he says that he “created humans, not Muslims, Hindus or Christians” (1:34:39-1:35:52).

In the religious council to review the decision of the Brahmins of Assi to remove the Shivalingas from their homes and reinstall it elsewhere, the Brahmins vigorously argue that Shiva is present in every element and that the whole universe, including Banaras is Shiva,

effectively obliterating divisions of pure and impure, dirty and clean (1:40:18-1:42:22). Hence, albeit motivated by hypocrisy and venality, they suggest that the spatial demarcations based on dirt and waste get obliterated. The power of global capital to dissolve ritual conceptions of purity and to redraw cartographies of human marginalities is emphasized in the movie. In the concluding scenes, the French student Marlene—“the vidharmi”—finds her place in the Pandey household and Savitri falls at the feet of the Shiva imposter(1:49:37), symbolizing their newfound openness to the other and the willingness to appreciate the divine in every body.

The Song of the Loom (1996)

The novel is the English translation of the Hindi work *Jhini Jhini Bini Chadariya* [The delicate shawl woven by God] (1986) by Abdul Bismillah and gives an almost ethnographic account of the exploitative conditions under which the Jolahas— the community of Muslims weavers who produce the famed Banarasi silk saris— exist. The plot revolves around an impoverished weaver, Mateen, who weaves saris after procuring the raw materials such as silk and gold thread on credit from a wealthy merchant–weaver of his own community. The novel details Mateen’s futile attempts to improve his lot and the gradual physical and economic degradation of the weaver community. The narrative ends on a hopeful note, hinting at a workers’ revolution spearheaded by the second generation of educated weavers.

The Song of the Loom gives a glimpse into the lifeworld of a sizeable section of the Muslim population in Banaras. In many ways it offers a contrapuntal version of the timeless “Hindu” Banaras centered on the ghats and the Ganga. The history of the Muslim population in the city essentially talks about the material history of the city, which is antithetical to the idea of

a mythical, essentially divine supra-geographical region. By focusing on the Muslim weavers of Banaras and the Banarasi sari, the product of their craftsmanship, the novel highlights the waves of migration, conquests, destruction and resurrection that have marked the city's coming into being and reveals a city that is susceptible to wasting and destruction.⁷⁶

- **The Jolaha Identity and Dirt**

The Jolahas are a lower-caste Muslim artisan community who traditionally practice weaving. More often than not, they are impoverished weavers who are starkly different from their materially better Ansari brethren who are mostly merchant-weavers of higher status. In the novel, the author dwells at length on the sharp economic divide between the Jolahas, the weavers who are exploited and the Ansari merchants who exploit them. Thus, it is possible to identify a human wastescape comprising of wasted humans who in addition to being materially degraded, bear the stigma of being considered ignorant and worthless.⁷⁷ Sociological studies of this community indicate that over the years of Islamisation of the various Muslim communities in India, the Jolahas emerged as an especially “impure” and less-religious community because of their adherence to syncretic, Hinduised forms of worship. The novel, in the process of realistically portraying the lived reality of the Jolahas also touches upon practices such as the

⁷⁶ Madhuri Desai (2017) in her work on the socio-political forces behind the construction of the sacred Hindu image of Banaras details how the riverfront Muslim mosques—built at the sites of former Hindu temples and seen as symbols of Muslim iconoclasm— were selectively excluded from several panoramas and pilgrimage-maps of the city (194 and 206).

⁷⁷ The Muslim Jolaha/Julaha is a low-caste community of weavers whose syncretic beliefs and practices are generally condemned by the more orthodox upper caste Muslim communities. For a detailed elaboration of the Julaha identity formation, see “The Fuzzy Boundaries” *Julaha Weavers’ Identity Formation in Early Twentieth Century United Provinces* (2013) by Santosh Kumar Rai and “The Truth about Muslims in Banaras: An exploration in School Curricula and Popular Lore” (1990) by Nita Kumar.

worship of martyrs and other relics which are condemned by Islamic purists who believe in textual religion. For example, Kamrun, one of the weavers' wife, visits a mosque to worship the holy hair of the last prophet of the Muslims (223-224). The ironic tone used in the narration of this episode and the fact that the relic is discarded hair that is considered in many contexts as an object of disgust and dirt, highlight the wasted, wasteful nature of a hybrid community which is not deemed Islamic enough by other "superior" Muslim communities. It is also a community where opportunities to improve themselves and gain "value" constantly elude them. A case in point is the state of education of the weaver children where prospects of getting English education—the language of power and upward mobility is frowned upon. Aleemun, Mateen's wife says "Arre, what would a Jolaha's son do by earning English?" (163). The lack of adequate knowledge of written Hindi also acts a signifier of backwardness and disempowerment in a predominantly Hinduised city like Banaras where Hindi is the language of state power.⁷⁸ This fact is amply illustrated where Haaji Ameerulla, in spite of his wealth and power can hardly read the Hindi newspaper which publishes important information regarding his trade (140). Elsewhere in the novel, Basheer, one of the long-suffering weavers dejectedly comments that they are exploited everywhere, in the sari market as well as in the mansions of merchants. "There was no peace anywhere" (164).

The marginality and backwardness of the Muslim weavers in the city are often reflected in the dirtiness of the domestic and commercial spaces they inhabit and the unhygienic nature of

⁷⁸ The rise of the Hindi Movement in Banaras towards the end of the nineteenth century marked the marginalization of Urdu, the language spoken by Muslim communities, and increased political patronage was extended to Sankritised Hindi which was made to closely align with a sanitized Hindu identity. It played a considerable role in the marginalization of Muslim cultural traditions of Banaras and consolidating the current "Hindu" image of the city. For a detailed description of movement, please refer to Christopher R. King's "Forging a New Linguistic Identity: The Hindi Movement in Banaras, 1868-1914" (1989).

their socio-religious practices. As part of the Eid celebrations in the community, the weavers buy “overripe bananas and rotting guavas” from the hawkers. The crowd surges to buy “special” dates, sold from carts, “soggy, with flies and wasps buzzing all over them” (79). The novel paints a picture of an impoverished community who thrive on poor quality, spoilt food. In a similar vein, the Bakreid celebrations are also inextricably linked with dirty, disorderly Muslim spaces in the locality. The goat market that sprang up in the area spreads stink and dirties the place. “The entire area began smelling of goats and the roads were covered with goat droppings” (107). Following Bakreid, the author dramatically and graphically describes the dirtied landscape:

Stink! A terrible stink! Bakreid was over, but its foul smell permeated the atmosphere even now. Rubbish heaps dotted the roadsides and tons of entrails of the sacrificed buffaloes lay decaying on them. At one spot their thick intestines lay rotting, while at another their burst entrails with the putrid muck lay exposed. The hooves of a calf lay on one rubbish heap, while the gouged eyes of a buffalo lay on another. The entire atmosphere has turned mucky. (110)

The special emphasis on the carcasses and the dismembered body parts of the sacrificial animals conjures images of eviscerating traditions and forms of feasting which seem to lay waste to the environment. Further, they also communicate the ignorance and “un-modern” nature of the community which insist on consuming the sacrificial meat despite clear indications of it being contaminated. For example, Lateef’s son consumes the bad-smelling meat and falls fatally sick. In the same way, Aleemun also eats the sacrificial meat without paying heed to the doctor who had advised her against eating buffalo meat. A curious juxtaposition of religious obligations and spiritual corruption and material waste can be observed when Aleemun tells herself that it “would be sinful surely!” if she doesn’t eat the sacrificial meat even if it is contaminated. Thus,

in the novel, the customs and traditions of the Jolaha community waste their bodies as well as the spaces they occupy.

The association between rituals bordering on superstition and dirt is reiterated in the novel in the description of the surroundings of the shrine of Makhdoom Shah. The men and women who stay overnight in the place can be seen “defecating side by side in the fields—without any sense of shame! Oof! The stench was unbearable” and there is also an ironic mention of the sacred pond located a short distance away from the defecating bodies (84). In another instance in the novel, a mosque, where purportedly the holy hair from the beard of the last prophet of the Muslims was kept, coexist with a pet market where “dead carcasses of animals and birds ... floated down the drains” (223). One can see a parallel between the market where birds are caged and sent away to foreign shores and the worship place showcasing the hair of the prophet which has been similarly commodified and exported to different regions of the world from the point of origin. In the former case, the creatures are degraded, their lives endangered while in the latter case, a discarded part of the human body is apotheosized, pointing to the wastefulness and corruption involved in the practice.

Similarly, the commercial spaces inhabited by the weavers, especially the spaces associated with their profession such as markets selling weaving tools are also represented as being dirty and dilapidated. “The stretch of road ... was in a very bad condition. It was full of mud. Black and smelly, there was even an uncovered manhole. Someone’s latrine was blocked and the main was getting it cleaned” and is immediately followed by the descriptions of the weaving equipment on sale (101). A clear contrast is drawn between the shops that help weavers produce exquisite saris and the unsanitary location of these shops. The sense of unsanitariness, disease and lack of hygiene is once again highlighted in the image of dirty, naked children

playing in the neighbourhood: a boy had “yellow mucous ...running down his nose which he would whiff up every once in a while” (173). The material degeneration becomes a symbolic reflection of the life of the weavers when Aktaruniya, Lateef’s daughter reflects on the grim living conditions of her community—“they were all living the same life—full of oppression and stench” (150). Thus, stench and dirtiness become dominant metaphors of the lived reality of the community.

The impoverished weavers become one among the first communities to get affected when natural calamities hit the city. The novel contains realistic descriptions of weavers who live in poorer areas of the city prone to flooding and water logging and get dislodged from their places when the city gets flooded. They become dirt which gets swept around, with houses under water and possessions washed away (245). The novelist draws a parallel between the flood in the city and the exploitative practices of the merchant. Both wreak havoc and disaster in the lives of the weavers: “The havoc of floods continued for about twenty days and with it ended the remaining strength of the weavers. The exploitative conspiracy of the merchants and traders continued unabated” (246).

- **Alter-nationalism and non-Hindu Banaras**

However, even the relatively wealthy members of Muslim community are not immune to othering in the name of their Muslim identity and they share a common sense of being strangers in their own country of birth. When Habeebulla, one among the rich Ansari sets out on Haj, his brethren exclaim that “we are all steeped in sin” and that Muslims in Hindustan are a persecuted lot, exemplifying the sense of being unwelcome in their own country (162). But, a similar tale of being othered gets repeated when he comes back and recounts that even in Mecca (the holy city

of Muslims), “Haajis from India are detested by everyone” (181). Thus, the community seems to belong nowhere, and exist in a state of precarity, superfluous and disposable.

The sense of being strangers in their own country is also evident in a complex form of alter-nationalism/other-nationalism where notwithstanding their sense of home in India, many members of the Jolaha community display a complex affinity for Pakistan. The writer talks about the men who assemble in the palm grove to drink toddy on the sly, “engrossed in talking about Allah and His Prophet, singing praises of Pakistan and heaping abuses on Hindustan” (9). The erring, sinful members of the community who violate the laws of Islam, is further seen as ambiguous, problematic figures who do not merge into the nationalistic fabric of the country. In another example of non-affiliation with India, the Jolaha toddy drinkers listen to the commentary of an India vs Pakistan cricket match with anxious excitement:

“Pakistan will win, myan! The pitch is favourable to them.”

“Want to bet! Mark my words, Pakistan is sure to win! And win with a big margin too!”

(186)

It is interesting that most of this “pro-Pakistan” conversations occur in the palm grove, away from the structured mohallas of everyday socially sanctioned activities, where the humans who occupy the space of “sin” and display this kind of alter-nationalism gets attributed with multiple levels of deviancy. A different kind of deviancy is exhibited by Kikki, the paan shop owner who distributes free paan whenever Pakistan wins a match. The author makes it a point to draw attention to the colourful calendars that have pictures of humans, Sufi saints and other paraphernalia associated with Islamic mythology and religiosity that he hangs in his shop which

is an overt defiance of aniconism⁷⁹ prevalent in orthodox (and hence “superior”) forms of Islamic practice. Thus, in the novel, pro-Pakistan sentiments also get associated with a false, misguided version of Islam and the humans involved are pictured as being flawed and fallible, contributing to the backwardness of their community. However, the warped sense of home is symbolically indicated when Lateef, one of the regular toddy drinkers, accepts a free paan on Pakistan’s victory over India and returns “slowly—homewards” (188). Thus, the Muslim Jolaha life-world in Banaras is peopled with humans who are simultaneously at home and not at home in the spaces they occupy.

By emphasizing the strictly local identities and affinities of the Jolaha community and the history of their immigration to the city from other regions, the narrative offers an alternate history of the Hinduised city of Banaras whose residents, in popular mainstream narratives, seem to uniformly partake in the sacred geography and culture. The narrator says: “In a way, the entire world constitutes a single community. Within there is another community known as India. Within India too, the Hindus have their own community, the Muslims their own” (4). He further traces the origins of Mateen’s (the protagonist’s) community to Hazrat Ayoob Ansari, a companion of Prophet Mohammed, hailing from Saudi Arabia, highlighting the Arabian and Islamic heritage of a sizeable section of the residents of the city. He also recounts the trajectory of the introduction of the art of weaving in the city—by the Nawab of Lucknow—again harking back to the Muslim history of Banaras (4). They do not have a homogenous “Banarasi” identity, the primary identities of the weavers are determined by the mohallas they belong to, and place they originally migrated from. The mind-boggling kinds of internal distinctions and divisions are narrated in a benevolently satirical manner:

⁷⁹ The avoidance of visually representing sentient beings in certain religions and cultures.

There was also distinction between the Banarasiya⁸⁰ and the Mauwale. Mauwale were those who had come over from Maunath Bhanjan in Azamgarh district. The educated among the young referred to them as the ‘M Group’ while the others were called the ‘B Group’. There was a continuous slanging match between the ‘B Group’ and the ‘M Group’.

A further distinction was made between the Alaipurias⁸¹ and the Madanpurias.⁸² There were groups within groups, like the numerous strands unraveled from a single, partially coloured silken thread, each strand slightly different from the other.... (5)

The novel tries to inject spaces of Muslim bodies into the mainstream narrative and puncture the popular imagination of Banaras as a Hindu city. The author appropriates clichéd sayings about the city and includes Muslim presences to make it inclusive: “Banaras was full of madarsas. In fact, the city was famous for its temples, mosques, ghats and the madarsas” (36). The marginal space occupied by the weavers in the popular imagination of the city is starkly evident in the poetry that is presented in a poet’s meet to assure the Muslims of their rightful place in mainstream Banarasi society. The scene is described as follows:

Janaab Maaroo Shareefi Banarasi came to the mike and began reciting his famous poem *The City of Banaras and the Weavers* without singing—

Look, the beautiful city on the lips of the river

Look, the Ganga flowing in the lap of the city

⁸⁰ The inhabitants of Banaras

⁸¹ Residents of Alaipuria mohalla in Banaras

⁸² Residents of Madanpuria mohalla in Banaras

The charm of the rays scintillating on the waves

Look, the alluring beauty of morning in the city of Banaras

These pretty ghats of Banaras, and its beautiful scenery, Yes, this is the city

That nourishes thousands of weavers....(204-205)

The poem describes the iconized image of the city as seen from the river, replete with Hindu connotations of Ganga and the ghats which are far removed from the physical and cultural spaces occupied by the Muslim weavers of the city, revealing, contrary to the intentions of the poet, their marginality in the popular imagination of the city.

Tellingly, the author quickly cuts to the description of Iqbaal's, Mateen's son's, growing impatience at the naiveté of the poem. He walks back to his house and at the entrance of his neighbourhood, "the houses stood in a row, silently, like orphans, and the moonlight seemed to be laughing at them" (205), signaling the irony and paradox of the poem.

The tension surrounding the claims of Hindu and Muslims respectively to certain worship places in the city also focus attention on the traditions of violence and destruction that the Muslim community are accused of inheriting. Incidents of apparent syncretism in the form of co-existences of Muslim and Hindu worships places (such as Laat Bhairav temple–Lat mosque and the sacred Gyanvaapi well in the precincts of a Muslim mosque by the same name) may seem to point to peaceful coexistence of Hindus and Muslims in the city and even signal an ideal equality, but they also stand for the historical precarity of Muslim claims to space in the city.⁸³

⁸³ There is extensive literature on Hindu-Muslim riots in the city. The Jolaha community seems to have been particularly affected by these communal outbursts against the backdrop of increasing Hindu nationalism. Please see Elizabeth-Chalier Visuvalingam & Sunthar Visuvalingam's "Between Mecca and Benares: The Marriage of lat Bhairava & Ghazi Miyan"

According to legends, the Gyanvaapi mosque stands in the place of the Vishwanath temple which was destroyed by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, and it aims to highlight the violence and wasting that was necessary for Muslims to create their own space in the Hindu city,⁸⁴ augmenting their image as intruder or outsiders (92).

- **Wasted Weavers**

The socio-economic system that gradually and steadily lays waste to weavers and their families is the major theme of the novel. Mateen, the protagonist of the novel, attempts to form a workers' cooperative to escape the eviscerating middlemen, but his efforts are wasted when Haaji Ameerulla, the merchant he weaves for, creates a fake society and avails the benefits. The novel paints a wastescape of dejected, overexploited people, who carry on with work, in spite of being defrauded—"...and lungi clad people with stubbles on their cheeks and deepened furrows in their wrinkles, with their feet in the pits, continued to watch the caper of the shuttle..." (126). Entrapped in a web of economic exploitation Mateen sells his loom and becomes a daily wage labourer at Ameerulla's weaving unit. This marks his degradation in the value chain from a semi-independent weaver to a labourer-weaver, and he wonders "would the day ever dawn when an ordinary weaver would be able to live a better life? When he would be considered a craftsman, not a labourer...?" (80). The dehumanized, dignity-deprived state of the daily wage labourer is elaborated in the scene where the novelist describes them as "monkey-like figures" who sit huddled over the looms, "artisans who could not afford their own loom or silk, or those who

(1991); Gyanendra Pandey's *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (1990); Asghar Ali Engineer's "Banaras Rocked by Communal Violence" (1992).

⁸⁴ Nita Kumar (1990) opines that the Hindus consider the Muslim sacred spots in the city as places of Muslim conquests which rightfully belonged to them, i.e., the Hindus, and that elements of conflict are built into the geography of Banaras (86).

were not established enough to get silk on credit, and so were forced to work as daily-wagers” (13). The use of non-human, animal imagery to describe “wasted” characters is seen in another instance in the novel where a grief-stricken Mateen is described as sitting “on his haunches on the ground with his head on his knees, silently, like a sick monkey” (192).

The introduction of the power loom adds to the woes of the weavers and makes their labour superfluous and their bodies redundant. Basheer, one of the weavers is rendered jobless when his employer installs a powerloom. The weavers who had come from other villages to work in Banaras return to their homes, but “where could Basheer myan go?” (162). Thus, Basheer become a body displaced in his own city and observes “how this devil, that went under the name of powerloom had made the handloom artisans redundant” (139). Coupled with redundancy, it leads to further exploitation of the workers as they are forced to buy looms on loan and work on their own. Basheer says: “Although people were taking loans to install a loom it was proving to be quite expensive, because not a single thing was theirs now. The loom was on loan, the silk was on loan—only the labour was theirs” (163). Thus, even in the apparently, timeless and sacred city of Banaras, the capitalistic mode of production ejects labourers from economic system, devalues their labours and makes them vulnerable to further exploitation.

Mateen, in a desperate bid to get some respite from the unrelenting poverty in Banaras makes up his mind to move to Mau, in the neighbouring district, in search of work. Thus, he is rendered superfluous both economically and physically in Banaras. The scene at the train station where Mateen waits to board the train to Mau is striking in the sense it viscerally describes the sea of superfluous bodies which, ejected from their own homes elsewhere, travel to Banaras, looking and feeling out of place and become an excess in the city, objects to be preyed on:

At that moment a train arrived from the direction of Bhatni and disgorged some rustics whose very faces proclaimed them to be unworldly. Seeing them, a man wearing a knee-length lungi, and carrying a towel on his shoulders, pounced on them and started talking to them in an undertone. In the meantime, another man with a towel arrived there but was scolded in a code language and sent away by the first man. It seemed as if a dog feeding on a cadaver had barked at another dog and frightened him off. (132)

Thus, the “disgorged” humans become “cadavers” to be exploited by devious humans who are like “dogs” while Mateen is driven out of the city in the opposite direction, highlighting a pointless transaction of deprived human bodies.

Also, the act of migration has multiple connotations of wasting as far as Mateen is concerned, since as a member of the Jolaha community whose identity is forged strongly based on place-space linkages, he gets unhinged on various levels when he leaves the city. In the brief account of the origins of the Jolahas and their spatial coordinates, the distinction between Banarsiya (one belonging to Banaras) and Mauwale (one hailing from Mau) is clearly articulated and by choosing to move away from Banaras, his home, and relocate to Mau, he becomes a displaced member of the Banarasi Jolaha community, occupying an ambiguous, uneasy place in space. Displacement is followed by further degradation and in one striking scene, when a deracinated Mateen, separated from his family, cooks using rotting vegetables—“gourd which was two days old and had turned black” and when he kneads the dough for roti, it turns black: “[the dish] had a crack in the centre, so that as Mateen pressed the dough the dirt on the ground got mixed with the water and seeped into the dish. Mateen was unable to separate it from the dough. Thus the dough was slowly turning black...”, he sighs, “No matter what the degree of his poverty he would have never been reduced to eating such rotis if Aleemun [his wife] had been

there..." (173). In this scenario, the dirtied food that he ingests compounds the griminess and superfluous state of his life.

His sojourn in Mau leads to physical emaciation, "his hair had begun greying...grey stubble shone on his chin.... His cheeks were sunken and the veins on his arms and legs were quite pronounced" (174). Once back in Banaras, on being informed about the various tragedies that have befallen his fellow beings, he turns "into a graveyard himself" and is aggrieved at the "leprous affliction that affected his community" (177). Thus, the body degenerates, dies and becomes the depository of lifeless remains, the body becoming the metonym of the dying, oppressed individual and his community.

The female members of the patriarchal community are wasted and othered within the community in various ways. Apart from the usual sanctions on mobility and moral conduct by Islamic patriarchy, their bodies become sites of disease, exploitation and unacknowledged, and hence unvalued, labour. Several scenes detail the labour that the women put in for helping their husbands, brothers and sons in weaving. Tiresome, labour-intensive preparatory tasks such as untangling silk thread and spinning the yarn are performed by women and children who are not given much credit for the saris that the male members of their families produce. In addition to this, in the novel, Aleemun, Mateen's wife, wastes away due to tuberculosis, frequently coughing up blood as she goes about her domestic and weaving-related works. When she suffers from a particularly bad spate of sickness, Mateen is forced to sell his loom for money to treat her, mirroring him further in poverty and dependency. Aleemun's physical degradation is narrated by contrasting her appearance as a young bride with her altered physical state after contracting the disease. She reminisces that her "face had been full and pretty" and the hard work at home had actually "imparted a glow to her body" and "her hair had been just like black silk" (50).

However, after Mateen returns from Mau, he notices that her hair “had turned salt-and-pepper, and her nails had begun to wear out. Her skin was quite wrinkled now and her face had turned dark” (174). Hence, the disease insidiously eats away at Aleemun’s body and her family’s economic stability.

They also become bodies which are highly vulnerable to exploitation from others outside the community. For example, Rehana, Basheer’s daughter is sexually assaulted by Ameerulla’s son. Following this traumatic event, Rehana starts to wither and waste away, suffering from bouts of seizures, hysteria and physical emaciation. Her previously attractive body “turned black like a griddle and her arms and legs had become thin like bamboo shoots!” (175). She eventually dies a premature death. Thus, the women in the novel are especially prone to “wasteisation” due to multiple levels of oppression related to gender and patriarchy.

- **Living Wasted**

Even while living in wasted conditions and oppression, it is possible to observe instances of agency, of the ability to creatively live amidst waste. A case in point is Mateen and a few other workers who rebel in small ways in spite of being part of an eviscerating system of economic and social exploitation. Altaaf, one of the Jolaha weavers, resorts to using low quality materials to counter the exploitation by the Ansari merchants. In this sense, dirtying or “corrupting” the purity of the Banarasi saris becomes an act of resistance. Also, he refuses to let his body be tamed by his merchant weaver, choosing to work on his own pace and time. “He was his own master, was Altaaf. He would weave if he were in the mood for it, otherwise he would sit idle” (14). Idleness, or the waste of time, also becomes another form of assertion in the face of

pervasive exploitation.⁸⁵ At another point in the story, Mateen, who is a daily wager at Ameerulla's place, pauses working, provoked by unwarranted bullying by his supervisor. The author minutely describes his act of stopping the loom, the half-finished design on the sari and the stillness of the loom and the shuttle to capture the power that the weaver has over his work and the ability to rein in time to do "nothing" and bring the rhythm of production to a standstill: "Mateen's hands stopped moving. He directed a fiery glance at Sharfuddin and sat quietly for a while. The 'leaf', design traced on the sari, hung above, beneath it was the loom, and on the loom, the shuttle. The shuttle lay still, waiting for Mateen" (99). Later, he waits outside his workplace and watches his master stomp off in impotent rage, "sauntering" in and getting back to work after exchanging quiet smiles with his fellow workers (100). Following the incident, while contemplating moving to Mau to work, he reflects on the degree of freedom that he can afford as a free, untethered worker, "he would be able to come and go whenever he pleased...Arre, that was the advantage of doing one's own work, one could work or not work when one pleased!" (130). Hence, Mateen's wasted body gets vested with a small⁸⁶ degree of "untameability" as his undisciplined body crosses lines and boundaries of order and control.

Rare images of the weaver bodies animated by movement and vital energy serve to illustrate creative, life-affirming ways of finding new meanings in their wasted surroundings and discarded objects. The author narrates the scene where the children of weavers play cricket in a cemetery where they improvise with the available materials, the stumps are erected with bricks placed one over the other, a piece of bamboo serves as the bat and the ball is fashioned out of

⁸⁵ Of interest here is Nita Kumar's (1990) argument that the Muslim weaver community idealise freedom and follow a "leisure ethic" which is partly a response to the insecurity and inflexibility of artisan labour (83-84).

⁸⁶ Though the migration is fuelled by visions of freedom, the fact remains that his migration was precipitated by conditions of unfreedom and exploitation.

discarded cloth. Thus, there occurs a bricoleur-like skewing of connotations of waste and usefulness, of life exceeding the limitations set by language and naming. The life-affirming nature of this particular image composition is evident in the description of exuberant bodies engaged in play: “Wearing a lungi, his slender lips full of paan juice, Shareef ran down with a ball made of cloth and bowled lustily” (35).

The creative use of space also emphasizes the capacity of the community to be bricoleurs, organically merging with and moulding the space to perform in multidimensional ways. The weaves use the public places and places meant to contain human remains such as the cemetery for drying thread and silk for weaving. In the scene mentioned above, the boys play cricket with the thread for the warp drying next to them in the cemetery. There are several instances which refer to the blurring of domestic, professional and public spaces. In the lanes of the mohalla, “every available inch of space was occupied, either by the thread for that warp that had been spread there by the artisans, or by the children of the mohalla who were romping about” (31). The bodies and the thread literally and figuratively get entangled when the author says: “These warp threads could be seen everywhere— in the lanes, in the graveyards...All available space was occupied by the warp and the weavers. It seemed as if each weaver had become metamorphosed into an inextricably entangled warp...” (87) In the same section, the author gives a sweeping view of the space punctuated with people working on thread, “In the lanes, row after row of tussar silk for the warp was spread out and the people were busy disentangling the threads” (87). Therefore, as opposed to the dominant images of wasted, wasting and burdened bodies, we are presented with industrious, ingenious, robust figures who creatively make use of their surroundings to produce value. This also gives a very rare glimpse of the non-iconised

artisan space in the city which is far removed from the over-represented ghats of Banaras, putting a spotlight on Muslim body-performativities and space.

Another evidence of the community's ability to see new dimensions of order and value in spite of the debilitating, "wasteising" circumstances is the contrast between the ordered, interior domestic spaces of weaver homes and the dirtiness of the external spaces. Gender is an important factor in this ordering and demarcation of spaces. For example, Rauf's uncle's living quarters, tended by his wife and daughter, is an epitome of thrift and clever and efficient utilization of space and order. Mateen observes the room:

There were two cots on one side of the room and a chowki on the other. The bedding lay folded on these. Articles of household usage lay neatly arranged on the numerous shelves on the walls. In one corner lay a large trunk with two boxes on top, all of them locked. An assortment of weaving tools hung from the numerous pegs that dotted the wall—spinning wheel, spindle, spool...A hurricane lamp hung from one peg and there were a few earthen pots in a corner". (18)

The novel offers us yet another glimpse into the minutely ordered domestic space of the weaver settlement when the narrator describes the one-room dwelling of Kamrun who puts it together precariously after her husband Lateef divorces her in a fit of rage, rendering her destitute. Notwithstanding the obvious poverty and frugality of the room, the neatness and order, the presence of a working loom, and so, calls attention to the potential of making value even while leading apparently wasted lives:

"On one side, a hole had been dug where the loom was installed, and on the other rest of the household items had been arranged neatly. Two trunks, stacked one on top of the

other... two canisters, and a few jars, two or three old earthenware pots, bottles, and a few aluminium utensils—that was the entire microcosm of the room”. (159)

The role of gender requires special emphasis in this context since, it exclusively refers to the ability of the female wasted body to thrive even in dire circumstances, intensified by poverty and parochial gender norms. This is illustrated by Kamrun who after she reuniting with her husband, cleans up his household, which had fallen into disarray: “She busied herself in the house as soon as she had come back.... The house was in very bad shape. Filth held sway everywhere. The walls had turned black and the corners were full of stale pieces of roti, mice droppings, broken bottles and other junk of the same variety. She spent an entire day clearing the rubbish ... and she herself white-washed the walls” (236).

Dirt also becomes a place for the rise of resistance and politics of survival. Iqbal, Mateen’s son who educates himself on communism and socialism mobilises the artisans in the decrepit interiors of a neighbourhood teashop. The disorderly and “murky” surroundings with its “dirty bench” become symbolic of the potential of a class of wasted dirtied individuals to rise up, revolt and take charge of their surroundings (240). They sprout like weed, signaling the power of the unwanted and the insignificant to make their presence felt; as the novelist puts it, the weavers thronged the protest site like “grass growing in the cracks between the stones” (247).

- **Sari, Weaving and Wasting**

As mentioned in the sections above, the weavers are predominantly associated with images of destitution, poverty, dirt and waste and they seem far removed from the aesthetic and economic value of the saris that they weave for a living. Throughout the novel one can see a paradoxical tension between the artisan and the product of his labour where the latter is both life-

affirming and a source of degradation for the former. In several parts of the novel it is mentioned that the act of weaving and producing the saris integrates each Jolaha weaver into a continuum of history and material value. In Mateen's phantasmagoric dream, he is part of the great tradition of Muslim artisans who have given shape to wondrous cultural artefacts: "Mateen's small being merged into greatness as he sat weaving his sari on his loom. He was no insignificant creature. He had become a living throbbing part of his country's history and its tradition" (viii). The subsumption of the artisan's self in the process of merging with a grand tradition is also reflected in the spiritual ecstasy and meaning that they derive while weaving. Mateen observes that Rauf uncle looked exactly like the picture of the mystic saint Kabir while he weaved and the saris that he is weaving and the process of weaving take on spiritual dimensions; "Golden thread was coiled...as if the sun and the moon were shining together in the sky as the loom of the universe moved in an incessant rhythm..." (28). Weaving in other words, become a means to remain in communion with the universe. The spiritual significance of weaving is further elaborated when Mateen starts weaving after many days: "As soon as he sat down at his loom he felt a rush of new life within". For Mateen, weaving is a source of meaning and life. Further, the author pays attention to describing the aesthetics of the process of weaving, which is sublime, divine and spiritual:

Mateen's feet were active below and his hands were busy above. His entire body seemed to be set to the rhythm of some music and to have become melodious...[The sound of the loom] Softly at first, then in a rising crescendo, beginning with a low note, then a little higher, finally reaching the highest note....the cadence of music and design emerging in the texture of the sari fused with the consciousness of the artist at one point, till it vanished altogether. As though the spiritual consciousness spiralling up slowly through

the vessels of life, and piercing the six mystical circles of the body, had become concentrated at the mystical aperture of the crown. (51-52)

When Mateen is forced to sell his loom, the void left by the machine becomes symbolic of a lack or void in his own soul and the violence of prising away the machine from where it belonged is reflected in the description: "...there was only a hole where the loom had been. Also the marks that were left behind when the loom was dug up" (78).

In addition to giving spiritual and cultural capital to the weaver, the saris that he produces stand testimony to his skill and the economic value he is capable of producing. Mateen comes across a grandiose newspaper article proclaiming the talent and heritage of the Banarasi weaver:

A skilled craftsman can create at least twenty-five different varieties of embossed designs with the silk thread alone...The weaving of handloom fabrics has contributed to the development of cotton, silk, and woolen garments, and the softness of its threads lies on the body like golden sunshine. The artistic beauty of the clothes reflects the expertise of the loom-shaft. As early as three thousand years ago, India had impressed the entire world with the skill of her handloom weaves—their deep study of colours, beautiful designs, and technical expertise. (21)

Since the value and merit of a weaver seem to overtly hinge on the quality of the sari produced, a degrading of the sari results in a corresponding degradation of the producer. Hence, when the merchants find flaws and imperfections in the sari with the explicit aim of driving down the price, the being of the weaver gets degraded, devalued and "wasteised". Mateen bemoans the unfair deductions: "No matter how perfect the weave, he could never hope to get more than ninety rupees" and then he proceeds to list out the deductions, "five rupees for a stain,

or three rupees for uneven weaving or darning, or maybe for some other blemish, real or imagined” (6).

The image of the imperfect sari gets extended to become a metaphor of the weaver’s low sense of self worth and irrelevance in the large scheme of things in a modern world. In the bank when Mateen realizes that Haaji Ameerulla has frustrated his attempts to form a genuine weaver’s cooperative society, he feels dejected and worthless, “suddenly it appeared to him that he was surrounded by a stain here, an uneven weave there, a blemish there, ...he started walking on the road like a sick man” (124). It is important to note that the use of the metaphor of the sari/cloth and the blemish (or lack of it) to describe the human body woven by the divine master weaver is a commonly used theme in Kabir’s poetry, the patron saint of the Jolaha community. The novelist seems to incorporate the same technique to project the weaver body “taut like the cloth being woven in the loom” (125). Thus, the weavers’ bodies get blemished, polluted and maligned like a cloth and this analogy is especially significant because the original Hindi title of the novel *Jhini Jhini Bini Chadariya* refers to Kabir’s poem about the pure, unpolluted human tapestry woven by the master weaver and the subsequent soiling of the cloth by man’s sinful deeds. Hence, the body of the weaver gets closely aligned or merges with the woven cloth.

In addition to representing the tainted, wasted body of the weaver, the sari also acts as an eviscerating object, extracting labour out of the weavers, draining them of energy and health. Throughout the novel we see Aleemun laboring with her husband, helping him weave saris while she withers away due to poverty and ill health. The sari symbolically seems to be dyed with the blood that she coughs up frequently. Mateen’s dream of merging with the sublimity of the loom is cut short by the vision of Aleemun spewing blood: “As Mateen wove on joyously listening to the music of the spheres and saw the rainbow colours weaving themselves into the warp and weft

of his sari he suddenly saw those colours changing into a gory red... ‘Blood!’ he said turning to his wife, Aleemun. ‘Horrors, your sputum is also stained with blood’ (viii). The weaving of the sari also becomes a form of deprivation for Aleemun who desires to, but is unable to, have one of the exquisite, elegant Banarasi saris for herself. Just before dying, Aleemun with a “wasted face” gazes at the bright red sari that Mateen has woven and strokes it with her thin, shrivelled fingers, wanting to “assimilate within herself this fruit of her husband’s labour” (228). The redness of the sari serves as a motif, of life-sucking poverty which dyes the sari with the colour of their blood, rendering them bloodless, lifeless, and wasted.

- **Wasteful Humans**

In addition to the humans who are wasted and rendered superfluous by the socio-religious and economic systems that they exist in, the novel also deals with a category of humans who indulge in active wasting of both resources and humans. In this particular context, they predominantly form the merchant class, the Ansaaris who exploit the vulnerable Jolaha weavers of their own community. The dehumanization that they themselves undergo in the process of actively perpetuating a corrupt system is oft reflected in the animal terms that are often used to describe them. Lateef feels that Haaji Ameerulla “resembled a big, bearded leech” while his son Kamruddin “looked like a small, smooth-chinned leech” (12). Similar feelings are echoed by Altaaf who observes that his merchant to whom he owes money looks like a crocodile with “the same expression of a wolf” (146). In another instance, Ameerulla’s son who becomes an MLA through corrupt means is likened to Sugreev, the monkey warrior in Ramayana, who presides over his army of corrupt, toxic humans, “a crowd of scoundrels, hoodlums, ruffians, jokesters, rhymesters, wags, and a variety of criminals” (211). The Haajis of another locality in Banaras are

given derogatory nick names which correspond to places, animals and other undesirable inanimate objects and attributes:

The Haajis of Madanpura had such strange nick names...! Haaji Chootar (buttocks), Haaji Chamaar (cobbler), Haaji Bandar (monkey), Haaji Amreeka (America), Haaji Tavaa (griddle), Haaji Kabrastaan (graveyard), Haaji Lavang (clove), Haaji Jhuttha (liar)...Apart from that even some distinguished people had strange names, such as Isaac Makkhi (fly), Zanakha (eunuch), Jalaaluddin Bail (bull), Yusuf Pant (trousers), Lallu Gaiya (cow), Usamaan Godaam (godown) etc. (99)

The tendency of the merchants to literally and figuratively lay waste to the lives of the weavers is illustrated when Ameerulla pushes Basheer, a poor weaver, into a debt trap in order to take possession of his dwelling. He demolishes the house, renders the weaver destitute, becoming a wasteful, destructive force: "...thus did Basheer's house come into the possession of Haaji Ameerulla giras! Well, the dilapidated structure could hardly be called a house; a pile of debris was more like it. Twenty-five donkeys were hard at work to clear the rubble" and the weaver is forced to move into a more expensive, miserable, rundown place and loses his ability to concentrate on work (58). A similar kind of wasting/tainting occurs when Ameerulla's son violates the modesty of Basheer's daughter Rehana. The dehumanized nature of the abuser is highlighted when the author says that Sharfuddin placed "his paw" on her breast (48) and a traumatized Rehana wastes away and dies prematurely.

Wasting of resources by the rich is another associated theme in the novel. For example, during Bakried, Ameerulla makes sure that he sacrifices an expensive goat as well to imitate the upper-class, upper-caste Muslim communities—"...since sacrificing a goat had become a

symbol of status and grandeur, then, dammit! Why should they be backward! Truly, it was a matter of establishing one's status..." (107).

The cycle of exploitation and appropriation is repeated when Ameerulla outbids a piece of water- inundated land that the weavers were trying to buy. The weavers seethe in impotent rage at this injustice, "Mateen had been furious...Whatever they wanted in life, Haaji Ameerulla was sure to set his eyes on that very object..." and the others spewed "out stream of filthy abuses against Haaji Ameerulla!" (227). Thus, waste takes on multiple meaning where resources are wasted as well as the degraded resources of the poor are usurped by the rich.

Also, the greed for material goods that can underlie spiritual endeavours is evident when another rich Ansaari, Habeebulla get into trouble with the customs officers while returning from Haj: "Arre, times had changed now!...his wife had instructed him to get two lady's watches, his daughter had asked him for a tape-recorder and his son continued to remind him till the very last moment to get a Seiko-5 Japanese watch, and a camera for him. How could he leave any of these items behind? And what sin was he committing, pray?" (180). The list of material goods, a sign of upward social mobility in a globalizing world, become symbolic of the hoarding and wasting of resources.

In addition to this, Ameerulla and his son literally lay waste to Banaras when they collude with the local politicians to instigate a Hindu-Muslim riot in the city. Starting from the act of damaging the Durga idol that was being carried as part of a procession, to the stones, broken bottles and acid that were used to attack the procession, to the murder of people and molesting of women, scenes of wasting and waste become a recurring theme (195-196). After the riots when the curfew is lifted, a horde of deprived, starving people "pounced on rotten potatoes and shrivelled gourds" (198-195).

The latrine and Haaji Ameerulla's act of using the latrine in his house become symbolic of the corrupting, damaging effect he has on the weavers. While the modern "flush-system latrine in a corner" of his courtyard is a sign of affluence (13), it also exists in close proximity to the daily-wage weavers who work at the looms placed in the premises of his house. Thus, he symbolically seems to "defecate" on and dirty the beings and lives of the weavers. Ameerulla's acts of defecation almost always coincides with his machination to further victimize the weavers who work for him. In one instance, he enters the latrine and sits for a "long time brooding over something" (140) and it is juxtaposed against the arrival of the powerloom which rapidly made the weavers redundant and the merchant's efforts to manipulate the state mechanism for his own benefit. In a final moment of stupendous irony, when Ameerulla shows off the brand new toilet in the "English-style" house that was built on usurped land with the savings that his son made as a corrupt "dirty" politician, he is dismayed to find that there is unflushed fresh turd in the commode "in which a vile looking worm was performing contortions" (244). Thus, the wasting and dirt that went into the making of the swanky building get symbolically highlighted.

- **Traffic and Hippies**

A sense of not belonging and being out of place is experienced by both Mateen and Ameerulla when they step out of the familiar space of their mohalla. It is often exemplified in their interactions with the rickshaw pullers who consider local men as one of the most non-lucrative categories of passengers. Mateen is frustrated when he is unable to get a rickshaw to go to the bank and grumbles "These rickshaw pullers of Banaras are such sons of bitches. If a college girl were to come along they would willingly go..." (15-16). Similarly, Ameerulla is also ignored by them since he was neither a "hippie or a pilgrim" and his lungi and topi proclaimed that he was a local man (137) and in an earlier instance, not seeing even a single rickshaw, he is

forced to walk back all the way home, cursing that the “entire bloody day had been inauspicious!” (70). In a similar manner, Ameerulla’s son is unable to get an auto since all the rickshaws pullers were busy attracting hippies atrociously pronouncing English phrases such as “come on, come on”, “only four rupees”, “only three rupees”, surrounding the hippies like a gang of dacoits (188). Thus, ironically, the external markers of their identities which establish their rootedness in the place estranges them in the city, making it a hostile place to be, highlighting the precarity and localized nature of othering and belonging.

The alienation that they experience while they are out of their home spaces in the city is manifested in the difficulty that they have in negotiating the traffic on the road. Ameerulla experiences “few moments of pure terror” as the wheels of the rickshaw that he travels in “lurched into a pothole” and he feels sure that it was going to overturn (138). In another point in the novel, while he travels out of his locality for business, he finds the traffic cumbersome, and is left helplessly stranded:

Evening was fast approaching and there was a traffic jam at Bisesarganj. A truck had been parked diagonally across the road so that traffic on either side could not proceed. The rickshaw pullers, in their impatience to move on, had stopped parallel to each other, instead of lining up one behind the other. The cyclists, in their desire to weave their way out between the vehicles, were stuck here and there like small fibres of meat between teeth. As a result, Haaji Saheb’s rickshaw too, got wedged in one spot. His irritation increased. (69)

Mateen too gets stuck in traffic, but for him the consequence is higher since it impedes his quest to procure money for emergency medical care for his ailing wife. Thus, for the poor like Mateen

who occupies a higher position in the hierarchy of marginalization, the city becomes fatally hostile and alienating:

The road was quite busy. Its narrow dimensions had become more constricted due to the cycles, handcarts, cattle and pedestrians. At one spot four of five paan-chewing idlers stood rooted, supremely unconcerned about everything—the cycles, the handcarts, the cattle, the people. They were laughing at something and making extremely obscene gestures. Mateen got out from there somehow and moved on. (77)

There is a marked contrast between the idle, unhurried bodies which are at ease, and most importantly, at home, amid the traffic, without any pressing contingencies and the desperately trapped body of Mateen who attempts to “move on” somehow, signaling how the wasted bodies are engaged in an ambivalent tussle to claim right to the city. In the larger context of the presence of Muslim bodies in a city that is touted to be predominantly Hindu, the act of getting stuck in traffic become symptomatic of the othering and “out of placeness” that they feel while traversing the larger economic, social and cultural spaces of the city.

The White foreigners or the “hippies” (as they are referred to in the novel) are also ambivalent bodies who are at once exploited and despised by the locals. For example, Naresh an artist who runs his own shop in Banaras is “fond of girls’ breasts and hippies’ hair”. Though he is friendly with the “hippies”, he makes use of their ignorance of the local language to verbally abuse them in the native tongue while the uncomprehending hippies joined in the laughter: “As the foreigners did not understand Hindi he would abuse them in chaste Hindi every once in a while, singling out the women. Whenever a female hippie indulged in a bit of coquetry he would say something rude to her in Hindi and burst out laughing. The hippies would laugh too” (72). They are economically exploited by corrupt weavers who sell them artificial silk Banarasi sarees

at double the rate of the originals (95). On the other hand, Sharfuddin finds them, with their patched trousers, bare bodies, long hair, ganja-smoking habit and public display of affection, a threat and wonders if they are “hatching a conspiracy to colonize our country again” (189). Thus, they are vulnerable bodies who are also seen as superfluous corrupting beings who make the city alien to the locals.

Summing Up

The chapter attempted to demonstrate how, in the two texts by Indian authors, the metaphor of wasted, wasting, impure human beings serve to highlight the changing power and cultural dynamics of Banaras. Using the theories of humans-as-waste propounded by Zygmunt Bauman, Julia Kristeva and Mary Douglas, I argue that global economic forces, political contingencies and attendant tourism industry create new categories of redundant or “polluting” humans—the “outsiders”—who do not fit into acceptable definitions of “insiders” in the city. In *Mohalla Assi*, the self-proclaimed cultural patrons of a “Hinduised” Banaras become increasingly obsolete in a globalizing city even while they consider the Western tourists as morally corrupting the “true” culture of the region. In *Song of the Loom*, the Muslim bodies in the city, especially the Jolaha weavers, lead a precarious cultural and economic existence, alienated from structures of power and influence. More importantly, the focus on the human wastescapes of the city is a result of a localized imagination of Banaras, centered around mohallas, which challenges the dominant, upper-caste Hindu and colonial images of Banaras as an ancient, timeless and transcendental Hindu city.

Chapter 4

Alternative Conceptions of Waste in Banaras: Divine Matter and the Dirty Poets

“garbage has to be the poem of our time because
garbage is spiritual...”

(A.R. Ammons, *Garbage*)

“In the gullies of Benares the smells are exuberant.... The gutters leap through the side streets, open up by corners, and gay they go half-full with dark fluids to any Ganga Ghat, and leap down under pipal trees. For all of here must be holy, and even the sewage has to rush in cascades, and be hallowed by the pipal’s knotted roots.”

(Raja Rao, *On the Ganga Ghat*)

This chapter attempts to look at alternative conceptions of the wastescapes of Banaras which go beyond the usual tropes of disgust and environmental concern for the degradation of the city and the Ganga. They skew the usual binaries of dirt and purity and also explore the creative and revolutionary potential of dirt. The chapter consists of two distinct sections: The first one deals with Raja Rao’s *On the Ganga Ghat* (1989), a collection of 11 narratives set in the ghats of Banaras, which reflect a radically different imaginative representation of the city and transcends the material ideas of waste, degradation, death and pollution. The second section examines texts which pertain to the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg’s and his companion Peter Orlovsky’s travels in India, including Banaras, and how they related to and represented the dirt and squalor that they saw in the city.

While analyzing the alternative attitudes to waste, the subjectivity of the perceiver, or the self is of immense importance. While the modern subject who is situated in the discursive field of hygienic modernity sees waste as the other which has to be eliminated for the self to exist, there could be other kinds of subjectivities which can see constructive ways of being with waste.

Gay Hawkins who has written extensively on the ethics of waste says that is possible to disrupt waste habits where waste is seen as a “primordial threat to the drive for wholeness” (*The Ethics of Waste* 35). She says that visceral encounters with waste can “intiate other possibilities for subjectivity and intersubjectivity” (ibid 37) and an “ethos of critical responsiveness” enables “various practices of self modification and helps one “work on the self in the interest of recognizing the plurivocity of being and denaturalizing identity as stasis or essence” (ibid 39). She further elaborates how our affective responses to waste can disrupt oppositions between self and other and open us up to the processual rhythms of being:

It can allow us to see how we are in and of the world.

Sensing how we are in and of the world, not separate and the centre of it, means sensing our similarities and interdependence with waste. It means sensing the inevitability of our own wasting. Wasted things in all their various stages of decay—rotting, broken, abandoned—speak of time and endings.... to be blind to waste and its materiality is to be blind to death and the fact of loss. The refusal to notice waste is also the refusal to notice the finality of life. In this way, waste defines the scope of ethics. Waste is inevitable, and how we deal with this, what sort of calculations and values we create to make this inconvertible fact meaningful, is the terrain of ethics. (ibid 121-122)

Thus, alternative ways of looking at waste, being open to the creative possibilities of waste, translates into an engagement with an ethics of waste. This chapter looks at the ethics and poetics of waste as manifested in Rao and Ginsberg. I argue that in the former, the ethics of waste implies a transcendence of our ideas of self and other, making irrelevant, the categories of waste, while in the latter, the politically and socially sensitive self of the subject tries to compassionately engage with and see creative, literary and spiritual potential in waste

On the Ganga Ghat (1989)

Raja Rao locates the city of Benares in the philosophical and spiritual discourse of Advaita Vedanta which posits the oneness of spirit that animates all living and non-living beings in the universe. It immediately catapults the city and the elements to a realm beyond the material structures of human cognition and language. Hence, it questions the very categories of waste and dirt and self⁸⁷ and puts forward a poetics of perception which transcends the sensory coordinates, a kind of *darshan* which dislodges even the religious conception of the city which hinges on, to an extent, in the physical manifestations of the city. In this section I attempt to see how the spiritual and philosophical conception of the city transcends the idea of wastescapes or a coherent representation of physical space and also, I scrutinize whether there is an alternative form of aesthetics visible in the author's portrayal of the beings and activities at the Ganga ghat which is commonly construed as dirty or polluting in the broader environmental and outsider's perspectives of the city.

- **Note on the text**

Raja Rao commences this work with a note to the reader stating that “these stories are so structured that the whole book should be read as one single novel”. *On the Ganga Ghat* is a series of 11 stories/narratives that are deep philosophical mediations in themselves and feature various actors taking part in the everyday life at the ghats in Benares. They are bound by the association with the divine river and death. What is of primary interest in the narrative style is the vitality and personhood accorded to all human and non-human elements and the micro-level

⁸⁷ Waste studies as a discipline bases its core tenets on the assumption that dirt is primarily a psycho-linguistic concept.

perspectives of life-worlds which are otherwise unavailable to the readers from the point of view of an outsider–self which is more often than not, ill at ease with frenetic activity and mortal and material degradations visible at the ghats and the river. Thus, we see the author imaginatively entering into the lives and minds of various beings who have wound up their way to the “Ganga ghat”—some as an act of finding the final resting place while awaiting death, some as indifferent actors in the larger scheme of life, going about the busyness of life. We are introduced to Raja Rao, the author himself; Moti Ram the driver; Bhim and Rupvati—the sacred parrot-couple; Krodha, the vulture who is their devotee; the Siddheshwarji who resides in the tree where the parrots live; the ants who feed on the grains offered by the devotees; the dogs who seem to know more about Death than the average human; Madhoba the firewood seller; Muthradas, the rich merchant who renounces his wealth to settle down in Benares and await death; Bhedia, the lovable mad man on the ghat; Jhaveri Bai, the fine Brahmini cow who was abandoned at the ghat years ago; Shankar, the college-educated Brahmin who dreams of reconciling cosmology and astrology; Bholanath, the mechanic who refuses to leave the city after his daughter dies in Benares due to cholera; Rani Rasomani, the royal widow whose only reality consists of Benares and her spiritual guru; Shivalal, the dispossessed tribal who follows a sadhu to the city; and Ranchodoss the prosperous jeweler who leaves his business to follow his ascetic daughter to Benares. Hence, there is a rich medley of characters who people the ghats and whose consciousness the readers get access to.

- **Darshana and Non-Scape**

The idea of darshana is important as far as the representation of the cityscape is concerned. Diana Eck in her book *Banaras: The City of Light* explains that darshana does not occur with mere mortal eyes. It is an outcome of a complex interaction of sensory, psychological

and spiritual faculties. Thus, the uninitiated tourists are struck more by the material signifiers than the transcendental symbolized by the material. Eck says:

In an important sense, we [westerners] do not see the same city Hindus see. We see the waters of the River Ganges, we see stone images adorned with flowers, and we see cows browsing with leisurely sovereignty through the streets. So do the Hindus. We see a city of narrow lanes surging with life, streets noisy with the jangling of rickshaw bells, buildings crumbling about the edges and sagging in the balconies. So do the Hindus. But it is as if we see these things in one dimension, while Hindus see them in many dimensions. What Hindus “see” in Kashi only begins with the city that meets the eye. (ch.1)

The concept of wastescapes become relevant only when the representation of space is firmly embedded in the symbolic structure of language which demarcates between the dirty and the pure, the self and the other, and so on. In the book, Rao espouses a kind of darshana which is not dependent on any kind of material co-ordinates. While travelling at night in the city, the authorial self wonders:

One saw neither palace, temple nor minaret of mosque—one only saw the curve of the Ganga. Was Benares a city or a Sanskritic statement? Did not a million people live there? Were there not colleges, universities, judicial buildings, town hall, the palaces of the rich, where were they all? From the bridge there was nothing seen but the sacred river turning, bending in her legendary crescent form, and sprays of gathering upper luminosities, and then the stars. The silence is alarming”. (16)

Here, it is implied that the materiality of the city gets subsumed within the sacredscape of the city dominated by the divinity of the Ganga. However, towards the end of the stories, the author goes a step further to state that true knowledge takes one beyond the constructs of the pure and the sacred, and real knowledge “is of the mind” (125) and we must “listen to ourselves” (127) to realise that the real Ganga is in the mind a “form of Consciousness pure”(ibid). He comes a full circle when he says that “For if you dare have a deep look on the *Ganges* evenings, and see the Ganga unflowing, then you know there is no Ganga. Water is just water” (127) [emphasis mine]. Thus, Rao lifts the idea of the city and the sacred river out of the realm of a religious discourse to situate it within the realm of non-material, metaphysical, transcendental knowledge. It is important to notice that he uses the anglicized name “Ganges” to refer to the physical river from the outsider’s perspective and Ganga, to denote the river of ultimate knowledge. The physical attributes of the city become immaterial and Benares becomes “no place”, as a sadhu in one of the stories says: “The city of Kala Bhairav is no place, for everything is destroyed there as it arises” (104). Therefore, for Rao, Benares is non-scape which can be perceived only with the mind’s eye. Conversely, Benares also becomes “all place” which encapsulates absolute time and space. The authorial self contemplates at length on the meaning of space and place: “Where the here, where I am? A point is no space. Nor do a series of points make space, as a series of perceptions make not an object. The object is not in seeing but in perceivingness. There is no here, Lord, there is no space, no movement, therefore I am the Ganga that flowing flows not” (127). Hence, in this work, the author asserts that the city essentially should be perceived as a “non-scape” which exists independent of representations and language.⁸⁸ The futility of basing

⁸⁸ In fact Raja Rao explicitly makes it clear that language—the word— which originates from silence, when materialized, loses some of its “light” and that the writer should go back to the silence, to the light where words originate from (qtd. in Rosser and Rani).

one's vision of the city on material externalities in order to achieve true knowledge is succinctly encapsulated towards the end of his narrative: "How simple is the truth if only we listen to ourselves. But we prefer to listen to the crows on the Ganga Ghat, to the chatter of Brahmins at the funerals (and in our temples) and to the ekka drivers (who frighten you with talks of death and taxation) and to those dead to death, the sadhus" (127).

- **Inter-connected Matter**

In this context, it is pertinent to discuss how the physical attributes of the city, especially aspects of pollution, both ritualistic and material, dirt, waste and death—the common tropes that feature in popular representations of Benares—are depicted in *On the Ganga Ghat*. As mentioned before in the thesis, the concept of a securely bounded self is the fountainhead of perceptions of otherness and associated feelings of disgust and danger. Objects and entities which are considered as abject, dirty, wasted are often elicitors of these visceral reactions. However, Rao's work which is steeped in Hindu Advaita philosophy talks about the interconnectedness of materials, both human and non-human and the fluidity of physical and metaphysical realms, birth and rebirths. Hence, it can be argued that it thwarts the notion of an autonomous human identity which is essential for the process of othering. In story number 10, Ranchoddoss the jeweler who renounces his wealth to spend the rest of his life at the ghat recollects his favourite purana story where the principle character, having undergone several births and rebirths, realise that there is no I and You, but only the universal Brahman:

“...Look, look at me, but tell me, King, am I my face, my limbs, my nose that dips this snot, am I, I? Tell me truly, who am I?’ Then he told the king of his past lives, which he remembered so well, and of the king who loved the little deer so, and of the deer he was born as, and again of the Brahmin he is now. ‘Who indeed am I?’ And boldly asked of

King Suvera: ‘And how shall I denominate you, Sire? Are you your body? Who are you king? And, what pray is a king? Tell me, please, what is an object? Is this a palanquin? Of what wood however is it made? Do you know its name, and whence it came, and where sawed out, fixed, and made into a palanquin?’ And the Brahmin finally said, ‘just as the universally distributed air, going through the holes of a flute, makes for variegated melodies... yet all this is but one piece of bamboo. There is no I, there is no you.’” (118)

The philosophically pregnant passage dwells upon the futility of language-mediated naming of ideas, objects and beings and the need for the transcendence of any narrow conceptions of the self and the other. This effectively removes the basic predicates for perceiving waste and invalidates reactions such as disgust and fear. Thus, all matter seems to be interconnected and infused with the same spirit, making categorization, segregation and the idea of waste redundant. In other words, all matter matter equally, dislodging the anthropocentric world view and creating a non-hierarchical mixture of vibrant things⁸⁹ not bound by relational social bonds of utility, value and non-utility. In the beginning of the work, Raja Rao asserts that in Benares, “...no act has any consequence. An action must have cause and effect. In Benares, there seems no reason for a cause, thus result is, no effect. No act breeds an act. And so eternity, the bent meaning of the river” (9-10). Precisely due to this disinterested/indifferent relationship

⁸⁹ At this juncture it may be tempting to use western theories such as Latour’s Actant Network to explicate the non-hierarchical web of human and non-human elements with redistributed agency and the potency of things. For example, Susan Morrison makes use of vibrant materialism and ecomaterialism to talk about recovering “the worth in stuff, objects, and things” and the dignity of things (*Literature of Waste* 12). However, Rao’s philosophical imagination which encompasses the material, the supra-material and the extra-linguistic realms while projecting the ephemerality of all physical matter made meaningful by the structures of human cognition may lie beyond the scope of materialistic theories of the interconnectness of things and beings which operate within the physical world. It is important to note that while ecological imagination is the foundational concept of such material theories, Rao focuses on disinterested action or “action without effect” which blurs the boundaries of dream and reality and the perceptions of thingness of things. This raises pertinent questions about the agency of humans and other elements.

between things, there is neither dirty matter nor pure matter, neither disgust nor delight: “In Benares, everything—bullock carts, rags, human excreta (in cones or flat), fallen wayside hay, tree-tops, burnt charcoals, abandoned bus horns, beggars, ugly names on worn walls (may be of politicians)—everything, everything benefits from all acts” (9). The author lists out exclusively things which are considered as garbage and superfluous, at times even clarifying their specific qualities within parentheses to ironically highlight the discernment of the narrator even while implying the irrelevance and immateriality of categories and definitions. The absence of effect seems to signal the absence of affect too. The disinterested bonds that connect all things in the universe, including the narrator and his friend who come to the city is further reiterated towards the end of story number one: “Who made this rope that wove the charpai? And the tree, the timbers from which the charpai was made? Whence came they? What destiny brought the rope and the string together, and I and Paul to Benares? Event is always single, simple. Event is action without object” (18).

- **Beyond the Pure and Impure**

In addition to skewing the categories of useful and non-useful and superfluous things, Rao also touches upon the ridiculousness of the Hindu concepts of ritual purity and pollution. In the second story about Bhim the sacred parrot, the communities of birds residing by the bank of the river become metaphors of the preposterousness of caste segregation and discriminatory practices of pollution and sacredness. He dedicates several passages to the description of the intricate rites of pollution and taboo practiced among the birds: “If you eat too much onion or carcass or butcher’s scrap or steal the manes’ offerings from crows or the grain—gifts from cows or peck into gutters like some low birds do, you are out of your circle” (24). An account of the strict segregation practised between the vultures of the “right” and vultures of the “left” satirizes

the futility of the idea of pure and impure since all of them ultimately survive on carcasses and leftovers:

The vultures of the right do not eat with the vultures of the left—there are strict rules not only about eating but about mating. You have on the right vultures born life after life feeding on the fishes, the thrown-off meats of pilgrims, and even a good carcass or two. It depends on whose it is. But on the left you must eat all sorts of things, and even share a buffalo with crows or a host of curs... And the two provinces are so clearly drawn that the two types of vultures— vultures on the left and the vultures of the right— never invade each other's domains. That's the law. And the vultures, you may know, are great obeyers of the law. (24)

Bhim, the parrot, who seems to be more spiritually enlightened than his counterparts says: “In Benares we know no caste, but virtue” to which the vultures of the “right” retort, “Oh, ho...what about us then? You don't want us to be like those butchers on the other side eating buffalo flesh?” (26). Bhim chooses to not argue futilely and turns to his meditations.

Thus, the author questions not only modernity's ideas of dirt and waste, but also the traditional narrow Hindu conceptions of cleanliness and ritual purity. Similarly, prescriptive morality, the moral and the immoral, the good and the bad, the sinful and the virtuous, and so on, become irrelevant in Benares which seems to transcend human conceptions of time, space and action. “Virtue does not grow easily in Benares. And vice has no better place, For all comes here to burn” (35). The city becomes a place which immaterialises the material and all things end up by the river where life plays out by not limiting itself to the constraints of right and wrong:

For, remember, what you find not bad and good in Benares, you know you will see no such truths any elsewhere on earth. Here, in this most sacred city, I can tell you, whoever wants to hear that in final wisdom, there is neither virtue nor vice, for both burn like those pyres on the ghats, equally — to ash. Don't you understand this? Even the curs here know it. (119)

The equality of all objects, irrespective of their hierarchies in the human world, and the divinity that they enjoy (hence making the categories of pure and impure meaningless) in the cityscape of Benares is clearly communicated in the last part of the book:

The gutters go their way making time, carrying little broken claypots (that milk and tea and curd have used for man's satiations, and that ritual purity has destined for their formal destruction)—the gutters have broken baskets, little threaded sweetmeat trays, an ant-eaten umbilical cord, torn sackcloth on which bees sit for a better taste of funeral honey. The gutters leap through the side streets, open up by corners, and gay they go half-full with dark moving fluids to any Ganga Ghat, and leap down under pipal trees. For all of here must be holy, and even the sewage has to rush in cascades, and be hallowed by the pipal's knotted roots. (125)

In essence, the author gives a vibrant picture of the wasteways of sewage which is usually described using the vocabulary of environmental pollution and contamination. The narrator on the other hand puts forth a radical imagination where even the dirty and the reprehensible, human remains and discarded materials share a common vibrancy which is inspired by the holiness of the Ganga to which they all ultimately flow. Here, the idea of Benares and Ganga as a wasted space is written over and replaced with the picture of joyful matter beyond the categories of pollution and dirt.

- **Death and Destruction**

The transience of matter and the ephemerality of things and beings are one of the dominant tropes in the text. However, since all destruction seems to imply dissolution or merging in the Ganga and the obliteration of man-made categories, it is seen as a quasi-religious experience of mere transcendence from one realm to the other. Even objects, imbued with a vitality inspired by the divinity of city await inevitable destruction. The Dalhousie bridge spanning the Ganga laughs at the “immensities he linked” and he knew that one day “he too will fall into the Ganga, though the steel had come from Cumberland or Glasgow. There’s hope for everything on earth, man, beast, and iron ore” (15). The elemental equality of all entities in the universe at the moment of their destruction, whether they are deemed as loathesome or exalted, is hinted at in the image of the final journey of Ganga who flows “...carrying princes and dancing girls, fishes and carcasses, the pyres burning on her side, reminding you the Truth is but one indivisible flow” (122).

According to the narrator, in Benares only death has real meaning even though “the turrets and carvings of Benares architecture seem to name life as real...” (126). Every visible structure by the bank of the river is destined for “decay and disappearance” and they fall “to the depths from which no one will ever retrieve its stones” (126). In an intellectual play of points of view and philosophical strains of thought, Rao’s narration pits the conceptions of life and death against each other to convey the existential immateriality of both these events—“the fact of existence is this—action and reaction. Action and reaction again” (126).

Images of waste and disease are often deployed to signify the absurdity and meaninglessness of life and how in the end, notwithstanding the affective dimensions of these objects, they all prove the miracle of life:

The puppy that sits on that ash and dungheap and cries. Its one eye is sore. Flies do not leave him in peace. So, he cries for his mother. The donkey, above him, finding no cucumber scrap to chew shakes its head to wave off its flies, and tries to suck the puppy's ears. But the donkey's flies prefer the larger ear. And somewhere, there a child's undershirt lies in flowery rags. Whose child might it have been? How tenderly its mother must have pressed him to her rounded breasts. The rag is a sign that in life's finality nothing matters. The fact that you live at all is the miracle. (126)

In the grand vision of chimerical life, those that are deemed as diseased, superfluous and wasted, objects discarded at the end of their social circuit are all connected by an ethos of compassion without the binaries of good and bad. In other words, it is the insubstantiality of life which enables the narrator to introduce a poetics of objective compassion while writing about waste, excrement and dirt.

But Rao complicates the linear idea of life and death by obliterating the boundaries between the real and the unreal, dream and reality. He asks "what is dream and which reality, then?" (122). The idea that dream and reality, life and death are stages of the same continuum is unequivocally stated in story number 10 of the work:

It was a dream after all. But it was deeply real. He was fully awake in his dream, just as he now was. Who was he, the king in the dream? ... Who is to decide which is real ... who indeed? ... Life is just that. Behind both is the absolute reality, Brahman... It is beyond Kala, time, and Desa, space. ... The waking state and the dream state are both states equally wakeful. (121)

Death has no meaning, “an empty event”, like a “superstition” (126) and therefore the affective dimensions of death should also be disregarded and notions of achieving immortality or mortality depending on one’s place of death also becomes farcical. Hence, though he talks about the divinity that materials acquire due to their association with the sacred city of Benares, Rao turns those ideas on their head by asserting that the bloated body of the dog and the pig that are afloat in the Ganga are as immortal as human body that gets cremated at the ghat. Thus, mortality and immortality are myths and all matters are equal at the time of decay. Absolute reality embodied by the Ganga has no end since there is no beginning and also, there is no middle since there is no beginning and end. Death becomes “the grandest fib man ever invented” (127) and in its absence, all categories of human perception, affectivities, waste and non-waste fade into insignificance.

- **Aesthetics of Death**

As explicated above, the author complicates the idea of death and its linear perceptions and precisely due to this reason, death becomes uneventful and non-spectacular (at least from the micro-level perspectives of the human and non-human actors at the ghats). Therefore, the series of stories which revolve around various beings who are associated with the “business of death” at the ghats in different capacities reflect a different kind of aesthetics of death and waste. For example, Rao gives an insider’s view of the commercial aspects of cremation in the city —the everydayness of death and the mundanity of having to deal with mortal remains and the disintegrating human body. This is exemplified in the third story about Madhobha, the employee of the firewood merchant who sells the wood for cremating the bodies. “It’s gay with the dead of Benares, you talk of them as you talk of tamarind or mangoes, or of trains” (30). Thus, the fear and disgust associated with the cessation of life and the public display of degeneration of the

human body is replaced with the craftiness of striking deals, extracting money from customers and the busyness of skillfully cremating the body. Thus, narrations of cremation centre around the mental preoccupations of Madhobha which is mostly about arranging firewood in the pyre in the most efficient manner and the different types of corpses that come for cremation:

And when the dead comes... you say “and now to the job”. Madhobha knows exactly where to lay the firewood and helps the Dom about so that it does good work. For example, the sprintly ones have to be on a side so that the wind might carry the fire over to the centre. The big ones have to be in the middle, otherwise they will never get dry.

The art of arranging firewood for a pyre is a complicated business. (33)

This is markedly different from the aesthetics of disgust and morbid fascination that is inherent in numerous accounts of cremations by several non-Indian authors. The horror at the breaking of the skull, the spilling out of brains, the exposure of bones and burning of fat, and so on, become irrelevant in the mindspace of characters who view the cremations as part of their professions or their daily lives at the ghats in Benares. Madhobha views the bursting of the head of the corpse by the Dom⁹⁰ merely as an exigency which requires more strength and skill (33). Also, the cremations are seen as processes which can induce enlightenment about the general nature of life and death. The author describes the burning pyres while travelling to the city at night:

Once in a while a lean tongue of flames flares up— some dead whose body was being slowly turned to ash, which would finally be dissolved in the Ganga. Pyre and pyre again, became prominent as we neared the river. The flames seemed so alive, the only nightly action in this visible universe. The string of lights seemed but reflections seen from the other side. Who were they, the one, two, or three, which had died, banker, virgin, retired

⁹⁰ The caste which is professionally associated with cremating the bodies at the ghats in Banaras.

police constable or Maharaja? And the yogis must watch these pyres as they open their eyes after their midnight meditations. The pyres make death alive. He who has seen a body burn, know he will never die. (15)

Thus, cremation becomes a delicate sublime sight from a distance, a spiritually transformative experience to the onlooker and a catalyst for philosophical musings—a far cry from minute, graphic descriptions of smoke, heat, the debris strewn in the burning ghat, the smell, the sound of wood crackling and the sight of bodies burning which are generally seen in the popular representations of the city. Death is such a commonplace fact that the act of dying gets equated to catching a car to travel to someplace. Muthradas, the protagonist of story number 6, “waits for death... as one waits for a car, a car that will take you to the Railway Station” (46).

- **Offerings to Ganga**

The unconventional poetics and aesthetics of death are further extended to the depiction of the discarding and disposing of objects and mortal remains in the Ganga. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the immateriality of the world and the inevitable destruction of matter are captured in the metaphor of dissolution in Ganga, the flow of pure consciousness. Hence, the river gets posited as the receiver of the debris of civilization and the ultimate resting place for everything worldly. Therefore, seemingly “polluting” activities such as disposing of corpses, discarding material objects and bathing in the river is imbued with a kind of poetics which is in tune with the religio-philosophical mindset of the actor involved. A case in point is the author’s narration of Bholanath’s act of giving up the dead body of his child to the river.⁹¹ “The child

⁹¹ One of the major environmental concerns about the stretch of Ganga flowing past Banaras is the rampant “dumping” of semi-burnt and unburnt corpses of humans and carcasses of animals in the water body. Jonathan Parry (1994) says that the *shesh* or the remainder of the corpse is

lived three days further, and it sank too in his arms to death. Bhola came to the river with this little body in his arm— it was night and he wanted to let the child float down, a gift to the Ganges, ‘let mother Ganga who gave him to you, take him too,’ he wanted to say “(82). The poetics reflected in these lines is radically different from the environmental vocabulary that is usually deployed to talk about the decaying bodies floating in the river. Here, Bholanath considers surrendering the body to the river as an act of love and devotion.

Similarly, immersing and cleaning oneself in the Ganga is described from the point of view of the devotee who sees it as an essential demonstration of his/her faith in the goddess river and it becomes a mystical experience where the ideas of water pollution and sanitizing the body become irrelevant. Bholanath describes the experience of dipping in the river:

“He who has not slipped into the Ganges and felt the lightness of the Ganges knows not water. You plunge and plunge again into the Ganga. And you are suddenly aware of a fragrance of holiness and the touch of a deep white truth. And when you spit that water out, how your belly gurgles in happiness” (84). The affective poetics at work in these lines are completely dissociated from the horror and revulsion that the narrators in various other texts express at the idea of coming into contact with the water in the river.

Also, discarding objects and other materials in the Ganga acquires metaphorical and metaphysical significances which are at odds with the mainstream poetics of contamination and pollution. In the ninth story, Shivilal, the ex-pimp, leaves his trunk of cash by the riverside and later, he and his guru proceed to tear the notes and throw them in the river, symbolizing the renouncement of worldly possessions and desires. “...on that well-lit auspicious night Shiv and

offered to the water as a seed of future renewal (50). It is possible to see that the poetics of the act of giving up the corpse to the river has positive connotations for a devotee.

the sadhu sat by Mother Ganga and threw each bit of paper one after the other, into her waters. And the papers hissed as they entered the water, thus did Shiv celebrate his Divali” (111). Ganga becomes the spiritual and physical cleanser of the civilization which thrives on its/her bank and remains eternally unpollutable.

This section discusses Raja Rao’s portrayal of the material aspects of the city of Banaras such as waste, chaos and urban disorder which are treated with disgust, incredulity and oriental fascination in mainstream narratives. This study argues that Rao uses transcendental philosophy to write about waste and dirt in the city, where an affective poetics of disinterest or spiritual transcendentalism is evident.

Indian Journals (1970) & A Blue Hand: Allen Ginsberg and the Beats in India (2008)

This section dwells at length on the accounts and experiences of the prominent Beat poet Allen Ginsberg in the city of Banaras and sees if there is a unique strain of poetics and aesthetics of dirt that is markedly different from the usual tropes of disgust and incredulity that mark the narratives of the city by writers from the West. I also intend to situate Ginsberg’s representation of and the engagement with the wastescapes of Banaras within the larger framework of Beat culture and philosophy of art and life which exhibits a distinct affinity for the creative possibilities of material and metaphorical dirt.

- **A Note on the Texts**

In 1962, a deeply conflicted and spiritually ambiguous Ginsberg and his lover Peter Orlovsky set sail to Mumbai and spent over a year in India, their sojourn covering a wide swathe

of the country from the Indo-Tibetan border in the Himalayas to the plains of the Gangetic basin and Central India. His aim was to find a guru “whom he could love” and learn something that could offer a spiritual solution to the “perversities of the American society”. Their travel intersected with the journey of Gary Snyder, the well-known litterateur who is closely associated with the Beat generation, and his then wife Joanne Kyger, a lesser-known Beat poet.⁹² Ginsberg and his companion were one of the first members of the American Beat movement who travelled to the apocryphal “East” as an unequivocal act of political rebellion against their home country and perfected a mode of travel⁹³ which laid a premium on economy and close interactions with the locals and a predominant search for spirit-enhancing indigenous intoxicants. It also entailed the letting go of the image of the civilized clean individual who is the paragon of hygienic modernity and exhibiting willingness to get grimy and engage with the ground realities of the largely poverty-stricken regions that they travelled to.

The primary texts for this section comprise two accounts of the travels of Ginsberg in India. Deborah Baker’s *A Blue Hand: Allen Ginsberg and the Beats in India* (2008) is a highly

⁹² Both Snyder and Kyger published their India travel notes as books titled *Passage Through India* (1972) and *Strange Big Moon: The Japan and India Journals, 1960-1964* (2000), respectively.

⁹³ It is interesting to note that as far as the counterculturalists were concerned, the mode of travel was as important as the destination of travel. Travelling “rough”, on a shoe-string budget, hitch-hiking, depending on hospitable natives for accommodation or cheap boarding, deliberately courting danger and adventure were part of the anti-establishment sensibilities that they sought to project. The overland route to the Indian Subcontinent, known in popular parlance as the “Hippie Trail” which ran through Greece, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan symbolically signaled the increasing proximity to danger, disease and contamination. For example in *All About My Hat: The “Hippy Trail” 1972* (2015) by Alun Buffry, the protagonist Al embarks on the journey to India from Greece and the intensity of the dirtiness and sense of contamination steadily increases as he nears India and once he reaches his destination, he promptly collapses and gets diagnosed with Hepatitis. Thus, travel essentially meant going against the practical logic of safety and in a daring act of bohemian rebellion, moving towards danger and disease.

engaging biographical narrative⁹⁴ of Ginsberg's time in India. She draws upon numerous letters, travelogues, newspaper articles, interviews, and so, on to give a nuanced picture of an oft-neglected literary phase in Ginsberg's career. Though the account commences *in media res* where Ginsberg is travelling in the overnight train from Calcutta to Benares, it traces back to his peripatetic life in America and the spiritual and political meanderings that build up to his decision to head to India. The book also attempts to place the poet in the matrix of fellow poets, family members and life events which greatly shaped his nature of travel and the literary output during that time. The second text is Ginsberg's travelogue *Indian Journals* (1970), aptly described in the title page as "Notebooks, Diary, Blank Pages, Writings". It is a motley compilation of the poet's observations, descriptions of dreams, doodles, photographs, half-composed poems and other literary debris which are highly unstructured and at times obscure. Baker's work often serves as a co-text, providing a rich source of background information and helping the reader grasp the import of an obscure reference or a character mentioned in the journal.

- **Aesthetics of Waste**

⁹⁴ Since the author uses literary techniques and a fragmented narrative to recount the travels of Ginsberg, it is natural to have questions regarding the historical accuracy of the events and descriptions in the text. However, Deborah bases her narrative on personal interviews, published and unpublished archival materials such as letters and transcripts and standard published sources such as books, newspaper and magazine articles and includes extensive notes and references in the appendix of the book. In a panel discussion on the book, she emphasizes that it was necessary to adopt a fragmented and literary narrative to capture the fragmented and fluid experiences of the Beat poets. The video recording of the segment can be viewed here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9meCfmQQySA&ab_channel=AzimPremjiUniversity

I choose to focus on the historical facts and events included in the book. A deeper investigation into the historical veracity of the narrative will entail an engagement with the larger questions on the literariness and textuality of history and personal and biographical narratives. This is beyond the scope of this work.

This section is theoretically grounded in Susan Signe Morrison's thesis on the literary and transformative potential of waste which is detailed in her *The Literature of Waste* (2015). Drawing on Gay Hawkins' *The Ethics of Waste* (2006), she says that the metaphor of waste, when skillfully deployed in literature has the ability to highlight the ephemerality of our human bodies and forge new connections with human and non-human actors in our environment, precipitating a new and radical ethics of compassion and cohabitation. Morrison also puts forward the idea of the poet as the homeopath (181) who cures spiritual malady through literature on dirt and "dirty" literature. Morrison envisions the poet as a bricoleur or ragpicker who compassionately deploys the metaphor of waste and "creates new and unexpected metaphors, enabling profound insight ... [The poet] by confronting us with our inevitable decay, would act as a spiritual homeopath" (194).

- **Ginsberg: Spirituality and Criticism of America**

It is against this theoretical background that I attempt to analyse Ginsberg as a public figure and a poet who demonstrates an ethical affinity for the abject and the dirty, both material and symbolic, in his personal life and literary pursuits⁹⁵ (as reflected in the texts chosen for analysis). It is important to keep in mind that both the texts pertain to Ginsberg's "Indian

⁹⁵ It is possible to see that dirt has several layers of significations as far as Ginsberg is concerned. Firstly, his poetry has been accused of being obscene and dirty. Secondly, he as a poet has been considered a morally ambiguous dubious figure with a "perverse" sexual orientation and an affinity for psychedelic drugs. Thirdly, the physical body of Ginsberg can be considered as site of transgression, often exhibiting a deliberate disregard for conventional dressing and grooming standards and a high degree of scruffiness. Lastly and most importantly, dirt becomes an aesthetic category in his work. However, a detailed discussion of these aspects is beyond the scope of this chapter and should be made the subject of a larger project.

experience” as a whole and does not exclusively focus on his time in Banaras ⁹⁶ and the references often criss-cross and narratives go back and forth. Hence, it will be structurally impossible to discuss the Banaras episodes in isolation since the sensibilities and aesthetics reflected in these portions form a part of a larger continuum of Ginsberg’s life experiences in India and America. I feel that short incursions (and digressions) into the previous and subsequent legs of the journey and certain biographic elements are indispensable for situating and understanding the intricacies of the poetics of Ginsberg’s Banaras wastescapes.

By the time Ginsberg left for India in 1962, his life and poetry has amassed significant notoriety in his home country. His poetry was considered obscene ““an interminable sewer of a poem that sucks in all fraudulence, malignity and unmeaning slime of modern life and spews them with tremendous momentum into the reader’s mind””. It did not help matters that he was in the centre of a subculture which was branded decadent and perverse by mainstream society: they were perceived as a bunch of delinquents who “smoke pot, eat peyote, sniff heroin, practice perversion” and avoid “soap and water, live in dingy tenements or, weather permitting, take to the road as holy hoboes, pilgrims to nowhere...” (*Time* article qtd. in Baker 122) and a literary critic opines that Allen Ginsberg had brought plague on the city of San Francisco (ibid 71). On the other hand, Ginsberg was equally critical for the American government which pushed its own imperialistic and capitalistic agenda which had the potential to precipitate a global crisis. Baker narrates his impassioned tirade against the US:

America dropped the bomb and was applauded...America executed the Rosenbergs.

America supported Franco in Spain. America destroyed domestic radical opposition.

⁹⁶Out of the 14 months in India, Ginsberg spent roughly six months in Banaras from December 1962 to May 1963.

America financed France's war in Algeria. America used foreign aid programs as weapons in the cold war. America used obscenity laws to censor Burroughs, Miller... America chased out homosexuals and Communists from all government posts. America attacked the Cuban revolution and ran South American governments according to American self-interest. In America moneymaking was the only index of social status.

(59)

This goes on to prove that Ginsberg who travelled to and wrote about India was not the archetypal modern privileged White male writer with a tendency to view the landscape via pro-colonial lens of progress and civilization. It was precisely his status as an intellectual outcast and an infestation in America that made him better-equipped to view other cultures with honest curiosity and respect and form new linkages.

Similarly, he embodied a curious variety of spirituality that was grounded in the material, more specifically, in the morally ambiguous and the dirty. Buddhadev Bose, a prominent Bengali poet thought that "Though his shoes lacked polish and his trousers were rumpled, ... the heart of ... [the] Russian Jewish American youth [Ginsberg] was lit with the holy fire that had been so evident in young Rabindranath...(Baker 63). On another occasion, his poet-friend Gregory Corso exclaims that Allen is like a saint and goes from village to village spreading the word of God (52). Though he kept the company of petty thieves, drug peddlers, criminals, delinquents, among others, and was committed to the mental asylum on more than one occasion, his primary goal was to open up the spiritual potential of his mind. "You know what I'm seeking? I'm seeking inspiration! I want the heavens to open up before me. I want God!" (Ginsberg qtd. in Baker 63). Unsurprisingly and quite befitting of the paradoxes that he stood for, Ginsberg believed that LSD other mind-altering drugs was the key to finding God, and a spiritual

experience was an exact “objective symbolic correlative” (Baker 150) to the prickling sensations experienced while taking drugs. Thus, he was clearly aware of the ambivalence the dirt represented and was more than happy to get dirty.

- **Ginsberg in India**

While in India, his and Peter’s physical hygiene and appearance progressively deteriorated. Baker narrates:

In Bombay, Allen and Peter were assumed to be some sort of Western holy men. Peter, encouraged by his Indian admirers had become quite expansive. He would wander happily around curio shops in nothing more than a torn undershirt and drawstring churidars rolled up to his knees, humming Bach. (136)

This can be seen as an instance where they adapted to as well as actively adopted dirt. Ginsberg is later seen trying to coax his friend to come and join him in India, trying to paint tempting pictures of shady opium dens and allaying the former’s fears of death and disease in India. He writes to his friend: “ ‘IMAGINE THE BEAUTIFUL DRAMA, back alleys up a ladder to a narrow attic, laying on our hip with our head on a brick while the dealer cooked and prepared a classic old smeary black pipe for us’” (qtd. in Baker 138). The romantic figure of the poet, wallowing in the under belly of the city is a recurrent trope in the journals and the biographic account of Ginsberg in India. Moreover, he seems to have transcended the fear and disgust that Westerners usually have for the quintessentially crowded and dirty Indian cities. In the letter to his friend, he continues: “All the horror stories about India were no more than old-lady hysteria ... India wasn’t at all uncomfortable” (Baker 138) and in Calcutta, he again reiterates “Everything here is paradisal” (ibid 146).

In Calcutta, it appeared as though they had timed their visit to coincide with a heat wave and cholera outbreak (ibid 148) and the young *Krittibas* poets⁹⁷ in Calcutta were taken in by the dirtiness of Allen and what it said of the larger Beat culture that he was an unwitting ambassador of. They wondered about his “beard and nervous tics” (ibid 161), they were surprised to see Ginsberg squat to pee in the street (ibid), they couldn’t understand why he would dress like a poor person and “stay in a third-rate Mussalman hotel, in a damp room with dirty walls, windows that would not shut, and two small beds full of bed bug ... The bathroom was indescribably dirty. It was beyond... imagination that White Americans could tolerate such hardships” (ibid). They conclude that this might be a kind of *sadhana* signaling a higher level of spiritual existence, much like the Baul singers who were considered as “infestations” (ibid 205) and resided on the margins of the society.

A new ethics of living and being in the geographical space of the Other is clearly evident in these passages about Ginsberg in Calcutta. The lack of disgust or insistence on a clearly Western idea of hygiene further translates into the manner in which he interacts with the local poets and commoners in the city. He consciously unseats himself from the pedestal of White superiority and seemed to overlook “all that they’d [*krittibas* poets] been schooled to find backward—their poverty above all, but also the decay of their city” and they were impressed by how patiently he repeated himself when they couldn’t understand his accent and how he explained to them difficult lines from his poems and charmed by his tenderness with every rickshaw wallah (ibid 161).

⁹⁷ A group of anti-establishment poets associated with the Bengali *Krittibas* poetry magazine in Calcutta.

Disdainful of the hierarchy and linguistic superiority of the literary establishment, Ginsberg wondered why they were caught up with “the gods of modernism” (162) and finally gets accused by the literary elites of Calcutta of polluting the youth of Bengal⁹⁸ and gets transformed into a dirtying and threatening presence in the high-culture society of Bengal—a poet who becomes dirt and is aware of his potency. Much later, Paul Engle, chair of the English Department, University of Iowa says: ““He [Ginsberg] succeeded in doing the hitherto utterly impossible—bringing dirt to India”” (qtd. in Baker 216).

While in Calcutta Ginsberg gets approached by the self-proclaimed sage Asoke who takes him to the infamous burning ghats of Calcutta located in Nimtola by the banks of the Hooghly. Ginsberg follows with “black puddles of mud spackling his calves as he navigated the broken pavement” (Baker 168) in search of new metaphors of waste to live by.

- **In Banaras**

Hence, having learned or even delighted in the Bohemian, scruffy way of life in Calcutta, Ginsberg was more than prepared to encounter the dirt in Banaras when he hurtled away into the darkness of the night in a musty third-class compartment of the train heading towards the city:

Smoking plain chain cigarettes, coughing crosslegged in my bunk, all the lights on and one blue glare protector, the silent moving dusty fans, —but a clean car bright rocking along the rail to

Kashi oldest in the world, continuously inhabited city. (Ginsberg 118)

The *Indian Journals* was probably one among the first works that popularized Banaras among the followers of the countercultural movement. The scenes of Banaras that he faithfully records have been often reproduced in numerous other books that followed. From up the balcony

⁹⁸ Ironically, the *krittibas* poets retorted that they were happy to be polluted.

overlooking the ghats he objectively describes the rhythm of the environment, corpses being carried, devotees walking down to the river and the animals that punctuate the scene:

Several times a day on the street a small group carrying a shoulder-high bamboo litter with a corpse swathed in orange or white shroud...threading their way thru slow moving cows, rickshaws...the procession to the burning ghats passing down a main street or into little streets... bearers carrying wicker baskets of brown hot noodles& roast peas. (138)

However, the eye that views the scenes and the sensibility conveyed by the writer is markedly different since there is none of the feeling of threat, danger, revulsion and suffocation that characterize the accounts of many of the later writers. Ginsberg describes the scenes with near indifference, without any discernible wonder or disgust. This could be partly because his nerves were already hardened by his visits to the Nimtallalah ghat in Calcutta.

He extensively walks along the ghats and spent considerable time hanging out at the cremation ghats, watching the corpses burn and smoking pot with the sadhus and other locals. The description of the burning corpses is one of the recurring elements in the journal. But it is difficult to see the graphic, consumeristic gaze that is very evident in the narratives by later tourists. Rather, they are mere objective descriptions of cremation scenes:

...going I saw a stairway down, I walked one level above it all only the waterfront—saw a ragged man scooping down the stair head burnoosed in winter scarf passed on to the burning ghats & there squatted...turning over a black doll-like small charcoaled corpse—of a child with thin legs, a dwarf—smoke in my face—acrid smell of musty wood, musty bone all the same.... (122)

He doesn't exhibit the perverse interest of the tourist gaze. Rather, he sees it as liberating experience, where a graphic description of a burning body—“fires playing orange around from black cranium along the sides, over the lifted hand”—is followed by the observation that it was “like fear burning away” (Ginsberg 125) and he feels that the “dross” inside him is burning away (ibid 125) as he watches the disintegration of the body. Four days later, he again describes another scene of a body burning, but this time, the everydayness of death is highlighted with Ginsberg juxtaposing the Dom—the “Pole man”—pushing the “pole against the black head (lain back with open black throat & adam's apple silhouetted against the small flames against the green river) til the body's balanced on the centre of the collapsing, charred logs”—against other mundane scenes from the ghats such as children playing, a sadhu meditating, boats sailing down the river. He records death without drama, coexisting with life and accepted with equanimity. Ginsberg casually comments: “rather Venetian the scene...” (129-130). Thus, he seems to have overcome the oriental fascination with the unveiled display of the disintegration of the corporeal body and death appears like an ordinary event, devoid of disgust or paranoia. Later, he goes a step further and wonders whether the living things that he sees on the streets are also dead bodies: “I stared in wonder—are they all walking corpses? At the burning ground the bodies are just the same, only they're not moving, they're dead corpses, here...” (137).

Another important aspect of Ginsberg's account of Banaras is the sense of peace and belonging that he seems to feel there. He is “at home & happy” (126) in his spacious rented room which seems to symbolize compassion, openness and an inclusive way of living, opening out to trees, monkeys, and beggar streets (126). Of course it is possible to argue that Ginsberg objectifies and romanticizes poverty, looking down at the squalor below from the comfort of his

room, framing the scenes (literally too through his photographs⁹⁹) and apotheosizing dirt, often leading to dubious ethics. Though Ginsberg is a tourist in Banaras in many ways, he seems to distance himself from other tourists, concluding a description of the Manikarnika ghat by adding drily “American tourists floating by in rowboats” (128), seeming to indicate that the latter were temporary fleeting presences in the city, viewing the city from afar while he was a more permanent fixture, living in and getting to know the city intimately. A similar argument is put forth by Gayathri Prabhu who opines that he pushes his tourist persona, “throwing himself into the most alien and morbid and then staying immersed in it till he can glean some form of personal truth” (126). The distance between the viewer and the viewed is bridged in many instances. For example, Ginsberg describes a scene where he attempts to smoke with the sadhus at the burning ghat and one of them insists that he take photographs of him. Here the power dynamics between the gazer and the gazed is skewed and a new form of respectful bonhomie emerges between the two subjects where both are in the process of becoming. Ginsberg describes the scene where the sadhus asks for his photo to be clicked: “as he don’t talk but makes finger gestures— he got to his feet, stripped off his g-string & pulled down his cock under between his legs—one yogic ball jumping out— like cunt—for a photo—I took a dozen ...” (130).

Similarly, at the ghats, one sees an easy commingling of different kinds of humans, Ginsberg one among them— sadhus, university bursar, naga and a strange “silver haired fellow” (139), all sharing a pipe, with all worldly hierarchies levelled, the political boundaries “rendered

⁹⁹ Ginsberg extensively photographed scenes of squalor, chaos and poverty in India. The edition of *Indian Journals* used for analysis includes his photographs of destitute people, beggars, lepers, dismembered body parts on railway tracks, maimed animals, and so on.

extraneous to the connection that one human life makes with another” (Prabhu 126), an illustration of Morrison’s compost aesthetics.¹⁰⁰

Unlike other narrators of various texts based in Banaras, Ginsberg does not distance himself from the polluting and dirtying of the river and the surroundings. In fact, he becomes part of the ecology of pollution, his White self barely distinguishable from the natives who use the river for ablutions and washing. Ginsberg too takes part in the web of peeing, shitting and washing in the river, writing about it in a matter-of-fact manner, never hiding his own implication in the network of waste:

...arrived on street thru woodpile up alley down steps take a crap by the riverside,
pushing aside open rear of my dhoti, sick diarrhea, washing my skin on the steps of the
river...

I squatted to pee over a high stone path right down into the river, with bubbling noise
falling down the 15 feet—/As squatting to pee/ On the night Ganges—... .(139)

While describing the environment, the smoke and the soot, he also focuses attention on the things that are waited to be discarded in his room, the banana and orange peels for the cows, cigarette ash to be swept away by the sweeper (133). He humorously describes his own and his partner’s diarrhea, that visitors to the building can see, “the diarrheic mud bubble down from the asshole of P. Orlovsky & Company, Inc “ (130), both of them becoming objects of squalid interest. Thus, he acknowledges himself to be a waste-producer, the first step towards engaging creatively with waste and understanding the precarity and connectedness of his own self.

¹⁰⁰ According to Morrison, compost aesthetics entails the “acknowledgement of a “common humanity rooted in waste” and an ethics of interdependence where the individual self is decentralized, leading to a recognition that “we *all* are wasted humans, humans with waste, humans who produce waste” (174).

Ginsberg's descriptions of the animals in the city are particularly note-worthy. In a marked departure from the usual staid and lifeless description of diseased and maimed animals, he talks about the vitality of the animals that he sees around him. The cow pricks up its ears when Ginsberg whispers "om" (121), the cow which rests its head on his lap (128), the three-legged dogs, who are fed by him (138), and so on. It denotes an attempt to endow human-like qualities to beings which are apparently agency-less and to destabilise the anthropomorphic point of view. For example, the "big white cow" licks the "mangy three legged dog's neck with his big wise tongue" (139) and the dogs are "Breughel curs with gentle manners" (138).

The trope of wasted humans and humans-as-waste is very important as far as Ginsberg's account of is concerned. He writes about them without moral outrage or disgust. While in the city, he and his partner take care of lepers and reach out to beggars. It can be observed that their lack of disgust towards dirt brings about a new ethics of living:

The man dying covered with sweat his thin stick arms & legs corpse stretched out on the
Ghat under the Tree — Prasad's Kankal — I gave him 2 ½ cents — all week watching
him waste away & bleed from bony hips —

The two American boys who slept on floor, their ... twin innocence, search outside of
America to see life of people. (197)

Here, it is clear that Ginsberg attempts to humanize the dehumanized, referring to the sick destitute by his name—Prasad Kankal— and attempts to transcend the cultural and linguistic boundaries that separate him and the beggar. "Disgust 'pose[s] a particular threat to compassion'" (Morrison 174) and overcoming disgust is the first step towards the expansion of the self. Expansion of the self implies a certain opening up of the mind to the entities and beings

which have been hitherto othered and finding a common ground between the human and the non-human. In another instance, a dying beggar at the ghat calls out to Ginsberg for water:

Beckoning with kindling thin bony arms—the brown foot swollen & shiny—calling me—Down steps—he opened his eyes & said Panni! He? Panni— and a clay ashen cup at his head—

... I washed cup at the lower step & brought large mouthful—he lifted his arm birdcrane hand with the red brickcolor teacup... Poured water into his deep mouth—“My sadhana was pouring wine & being poured”... (179-180)

For the poet, taking care of the sick, destitute man is a form of spiritual exercise, his “sadhana” and elevation and expansion of the spirit is found in pushing one’s narrow boundaries of individual identity and indulging in simple, daily acts of kindness and reaching out to the wasted and the wasting.

The waste human is also a potent literary tool. Ginsberg uses the image of Kali Ma (the goddess of revenge and death) to poetically refer to the beggar woman who lived next to his building. Hence he tries to destabilise the association of waste and wasted humans to alert the readers to the redemptive possibilities of waste (171).

A closely allied idea is that of Ginsberg as a dirty and dirtying presence in the city. From his guilt-ridden trips in the neighbourhood in search of garbage bin to “leave ... [his] cannibal bones hid from Hindu Paranoic gazers” after eating chicken (138) to indulging in homosexual acts considered transgressive by conservative society—“.../just come into Peter’s mouth/with his cock in my mouth and his pubic hair spread on my beard/cupping his soft ass halves in my palms...” (133)—the poet himself becomes a liminal, threatening presence in Banaras, an object

of contamination to be suspected, questioned and contained. Eventually, towards the fag end of his stay in Banaras, Ginsberg is accused by the special police of being a trouble-maker (visiting only “lower-level sadhus, lower-class types, no high-class ones...” (qtd. in Baker 197)); of having overstayed (“ ‘Why do you stay here in India so long? What do you DO here? There must be some reason for you to stay so long’” (ibid)); and of not being productive enough;¹⁰¹ leading to the threat of abrupt termination of his Indian visa. Thus, the poet of dirt becomes superfluous in the city, almost a Christ-like figure—“shoeless and shattered, his hair matted with ashes”—who is faced with the imminent prospect of ejection (ibid 197). In a sense Ginsberg can be considered as a skillful deployer of the idea of dirt to evoke new poetics and imagine humans, others and cityscapes in a compassionate manner. As Morrison says, poetry is the “cesspit of our imaginings... writings are the rubbish heap or the composted waste of the mind. The poet mosaics together shards, recycles litter, and salvages fragments” (199) and Ginsberg was able to see beyond the dichotomy of the self and the other, the East and West—he was a *homo viator*¹⁰² (Rotter qtd. in Prabhu 126).

¹⁰¹ According to a 1972 report in the *Washington Post*, many North Indian cities, including New Delhi, were filled with drug-addicted hippies (who followed in Ginsberg’s footsteps) and due to their perceived loose moral and licentious behavior, there were occasional demands in the Indian parliament to ban them. For the report see: “Drugs Plentiful in New Delhi”. *Washington Post*, 24 September 1972, *Poppy Politics: Hearings Before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, Ninety-fourth Congress, First Session, Pursuant to S. Res. 72, Section 12, Investigation of Juvenile Delinquency in the United States : Cultivation, Use, Abuse and Control of Opium*, U.S Government Printing, 1977, pp. 799.

¹⁰² A term coined by the philosopher Gabriel Marcel to describe “man who is on a pilgrimage”.

Summing Up

The first section on Raja Rao's *On the Ganga Ghat* demonstrates that thinking from the vantage point of Advaita philosophy, when the mind transcends the limitations posed by language and cultural categories, the idea of waste becomes irrelevant and all matter become equal. The text also details the affective poetics of the Hindu devotional activities centered around the Ganga which follows the internal poetics of reverence and submission which is incongruent with an environmental imagination. Because of the author's emphasis on non-dualism and transcendence, Benares is imagined in terms of absolute space and non-place where the idea of -scape and representational subjectivities become irrelevant (as far as the author is concerned). However, thinking from a meta-textual perspective, this is one form of representation, emanating from an investment in a particular branch of Eastern philosophy which emphasizes on transcendental reality and the immateriality of material and resists the modern sense of self and other which is root cause of perceptions of waste and dirt.

The second section on the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg's experiences in Banaras highlights the poet's intense preoccupation with the material dirt and squalor in the city. For him, dirt matters, and Banaras, with its rich landscape of humans living on social margins, dirt, pollution and chaos, becomes a land of pilgrimage where compassionate engagement with waste and the wasted is a spiritual and artistic exercise originating from and sustaining an ethics of compassion and connectedness. Dirt is both an artistic inspiration and a potent tool for rebellion, for pushing the boundaries of Ginsberg's White American self and for advocating an alternate mode for being in the world.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

“With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.”

(Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*)

This research work started off with the assumption that notwithstanding its material edifices, the city is necessarily an act of imagination where psychological, political and cultural subjectivities come together to mould the perception and representation of the cityscape. For the dissertation, I chose to study select literary and cultural representations of the city of Banaras, a Hindu pilgrimage city, which has been the subject of much oriental gaze and is an important political and cultural centre in India. As mentioned in the Introduction, the city has also given rise to contradictory discourses of transcendental purity and material pollution. Against this background, the study focused exclusively on how the tropes of dirt and waste figured in the narratives selected for study and how they constructed the wastescape(s) of Banaras.

This work has asked and attempted to answer the following broad questions:

Who writes about/represents the waste in Banaras? How do they write about/represent waste in their narratives? Why do they write about/represent waste in the city?

Since the work was predominantly concerned with how space is experienced and represented and the cultural approaches to waste, it made use of insights from studies of space and literature and waste studies. It hinged on the initial hypothesis that the socio-cultural locations and the identities of the narrators influenced how they saw, experienced and engaged with dirt in their narratives. The identities in turn determined the gaze of the narrators, which resulted in a specific geographic imagination, which I term “wastescape”, getting reflected in the texts. Based on this, the texts were divided into three groups which corresponded with the three core chapters.

Chapter 2 consists of the analyses of *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi* (2009)—a novel by the British author Geoff Dyer; *Kaleidoscope City: A Year in Varanasi* (2015)—a travelogue by Piers Moore Ede, another British writer; an episode from *Believer* with Reza Aslan (2017)—a documentary series hosted by Reza Aslan, an American scholar of religious studies; *From Seoul to Varanasi* (2013)—a Korean movie, by the South Korean filmmaker Kyu-hwan Jeon; and a section on Banaras from *Slowly Down the Ganges* (1963)—a travelogue by Eric Newby, a British traveler. The chapter argues that these narratives are produced by modern subjects whose subjectivities are predicated on a narrow identity of a modern autonomous individual who is constantly threatened by the notions of the abject and dirt. The narrators are travelers, non-residents of the city and their outsider-gazes sharply focus on and objectify scenes of dirt and squalor in the city. Using Julia Kristeva’s theory of the Self and the Abject, the chapter posits that in these narratives, Banaras becomes a space of the Abject, the undifferentiated Real where the modern self is constantly ill at ease and finally disintegrates. In the novel by Dyer, the narrator undergoes a spiritual and identity transformation where the constant exposure to dirt and

imminent danger helps him embrace a larger, expansive self which transcends narrow differentiations of pure and impure, self and other and see Banaras as absolute space and time.

Chapter 3 deals with the English translations of two texts by Indian authors who are/had been residents of Banaras. The first is *Mohalla Assi* (2018), a movie adaptation, with English subtitles, of the short story *Pandey Kaun Kumati Tohe Lagi?* from Kashinath Singh's Hindi novel, *Kashi ka Assi* (2004) and the second text is *Song of the Loom* (1996), an English translation of the Hindi novel *Jhini Jhini Bini Chadariya* (1986) by Abdul Bismillah. The insider-gaze evident in these texts focuses on metaphoric, rather than material dirt. Deploying the idea of humans-as-waste, the chapter posits that these two texts project human wastescapes consisting of communities and individuals whose existences in the city are rendered redundant and precarious by changing political and economic forces. Also, waste becomes a metaphor for humans who are perceived as outsiders in the city and are construed as polluting and threatening to the "true culture" of the city. The chapter also argues that these human wastescapes challenge the oriental idea of Banaras as an ancient and unchanging holy Hindu city.

Chapter 4 looks at alternative ways of perceiving and writing about the waste in Banaras. The two texts under discussion are Raja Rao's *On the Ganga Ghat* (1989) and Allen Ginsberg's *Indian Journals* (1970), which is supplemented with information from Deborah Baker's *A Blue Hand: Allen Ginsberg and the Beats in India* (2008). These texts represent two different ways of pushing the limits of the modern subject and fashioning a radically different subjectivity. The narrators are outsiders, but their gazes are different from the outsider-gazes discussed in Chapter 2. Here, one can detect a curious tussle with modernity in their perceptions of waste in the city. Rao makes use of Advaita philosophy to highlight the immateriality of all the material objects in Banaras—humans, animals and objects, including waste. Hence,

according to the narrator, there is no distinct self and the other, pure or the impure; all categories and systems of naming are ultimately meaningless in the context of transcendental reality. Thus, waste is not treated with the disgust and revulsion evident in the narratives in Chapter 2 and Banaras is ultimately seen as a transcendental city, where it becomes an idea in the mind which is independent of all material coordinates. On the other hand, for Allen Ginsberg, the dirt in the city becomes a means for him to push the boundaries of his American self. Compassionate and meaningful engagement with the wasted, diseased and the dirty is a form of attaining spiritual and artistic fulfillment and the city, with its ubiquitous dirt and squalor, is seen as a land of pilgrimage for expunging the ills of modernity.

Intertextuality and the Many Wastescapes of Banaras

From the chapters it is clear that the texts which engage with the dirt in Banaras do not exist in isolation. They exist in clusters and there are both intra- and inter-cluster engagements and they actively borrow from, contain traces of or are in a dialogic continuum with each other. This intertextual imagination is very important for an understanding of the wastescapes that these texts conceive and represent. The lack of absolute autonomy of a text is explicated by Burton Pike: “A writer does not speak to us directly from his experience, but through language and the rhetorical conventions of literary forms. These cultural artifacts are historically determined; a writer can express himself and be understood by his readers only by using the literary conventions, vocabulary, and imagery available to him at his particular cultural moment” (247). In other words, the author of a text is deeply enmeshed in his cultural surroundings which is an ecosystem of words, traces and, in this context, modes of seeing. James Porter reiterates this point: “The writer... is a collector of fragments, an archaeologist creating an order, building a framework, from remnants of the past” (34). Thus, texts which contribute to the conception of

the wastescapes of Banaras are situated in a matrix of literary and cultural discourses based on the city and are part of a global flow of images of the city. Here, the discourses include colonial narratives such as travel accounts and literary narratives, paintings, photographs, etc.; and contemporary tourist narratives including blogs, photo essays, movies, documentaries and environmental reportage. The narrators/narratives in the second chapter are steeped in the canonized colonial conceptions of the city as an exotic, oriental place, mind-bogglingly polluted and a place of esoteric religious and cultural practices. The disproportionate focus on the city ghats is a proof of this, since, as mentioned in the beginning of this thesis, the colonial administrators and travelers iconised the riverfront and projected it as the metonym of the city. Chapter 2 shows that in the case of Banaras, stock wastescapes like the burning bodies, the chaotic cremation grounds, the beggars, the pollution of the Ganga, and so on, follow the trajectories of travelogues and reportages of pollution in the city that preceded these texts, hence they exist in a state of interdependence, seeing through the “eyes” that saw before them, a product of touristic engagement with city. According to Edensor, tourism contexts generate a “shared set of conventions about what should be seen, what should be done and which actions are inappropriate” (60), and visitors “are rarely left to draw their own conclusions about objects or places before them” (Neumann qtd. in Edensor 73). Thus, they reinforce and institutionalize a particular geographical imagination of the place being visited via the texts and images whose circulation is intensified through “global mediascapes” (Appadurai “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy” 6). Thus, Banaras becomes a primordial place of the abject which threatens the modern self. However, in most of the texts analysed in Chapter 2, there exists an ambivalent tendency to objectify and express incredulity at the pervasive presence of dirt as well as to futilely desire a more intimate, “insider’s” knowledge of the city which will

make them stand apart from the stereotypical modern tourists. The novel by Geoff Dyer, Piers Moore Ede's narrative and Reza Aslan's documentary clearly exhibit this duality. It is precisely this ambivalence which leads them to focus obsessively on dirt, expressing their disgust, anxiety and disturbance and later narrate how their selves became spiritually enriched (to various extents) due to the continuous exposure to the waste and chaos in Banaras. This places their narratives at the opposite end of the orientalising spectrum where Banaras changes from a wastescape to a "non-scape", a timeless and spiritual city which has to be perceived with the mind's eye.

Chapter 4 when read as a diptych with Chapter 2 throws up some interesting insights regarding the role of personal politics and subjectivity in initiating a dialogic conversation with fellow texts which are located in and sustain the discourse of the wastescape of Banaras. Both Rao and Ginsberg are outsiders to the city of Banaras, but the former, in keeping with his concept that the "idea of India was greater than the terrestrial entity, transcending the material world" (Rosser and Rani) chooses to eschew affective poetics altogether while writing about the materiality of the city, including waste. The writer sees the same scenes of chaotic squalor at the ghats that the Western narratives talk about, but he seeks to break off and disrupt the habits of seeing by adopting the vocabulary of transcendental philosophy to describe the scenes of waste, to a Western audience used to stock narratives about the city, leading to a disjuncture in the discourse of the wastescapes of the city. Hence, Rao's Banaras becomes a spiritual space of transcendental reality where ideas of waste and dirt are immaterial. On the other hand, though Ginsberg sought out, saw, and wrote about waste in Banaras and triggered the circulation of the wastescapes among the counterculturalists and the succeeding generations in the West, the poetics and aesthetics of dirt in his travel notes in Banaras are different from the conventional

tourist narratives replete with perverse objectification of dirt in the city. As mentioned before, dirt and being dirty become a way of rebelling against and resisting modern Western values of capitalism and imperialism and Banaras with its dirt, becomes a spiritual purgatory for the cleansing of the modern subject. One cannot gloss over the fact that in these texts in Chapter 4, the orientalisng impulse is evident in the focus on the ghats with its material waste and scenes of death, and the tendency to apotheosize the city as a transcendental idea or a source of spiritual salvation. However, the ethics and poetics of the engagement with waste signal compassion and openness to the other, which is a product of a critical engagement with modernity.

The insider's gaze, which does not "see" the material dirt in the city is evident in the texts discussed in Chapter 3. In terms of intertextuality, it reflects the oppositional gaze which looks back at the Western subject, the "tourists", as polluting and threatening presences in the city and refuses to focus on the stock images of material dirt at the ghats. Rather, metaphoric dirt, in terms of wasted, wasting, polluting and impure humans takes the centre stage in the texts. Material dirt, if at all mentioned, acts as an appendage to emphasize an individual's/community's status as waste. As a corollary to this, it can be seen that the texts rarely repeat the iconised, colonial image of a homogenous Hindu Banaras. By focusing on mohallas, markets and domestic spaces, far removed from the ghats and the Ganga, the human wastescapes of Banaras highlight a city in political and social flux where identities are undermined and reinscribed and contesting claims to the space are exercised by various political actors.

Texts, Habits and Waste Ethics

Since the clusters of texts embody certain habits of seeing or writing about waste, it is important to trace the implications that they have for the space and place that are being

constructed.¹⁰³ The waste habits and the aesthetics of waste¹⁰⁴ reflected in these texts place them in a particular “habitat”—a socio-cultural and psychological space which is ruled by a particular mode of being or ethos—which I term wastescape. The spatiality of habits (and also aesthetics in the case of literary and cultural texts) is explained by Gay Hawkins: “Habits locate us not simply in a social context but in a habitat, a specific place of dwelling or position. Our interactions with that place—what we make of it, what it makes of us—generate a mode of being or ethos that structure social behavior, often below the hold of conscious decision making” (*The Ethics of Waste* 25). In the quote above, she also draws our attention to how the conceptions of place also reflect an underlying sense of ethics. From the thesis, it is clear that, these varying wastescapes of Banaras are generated by and generate different kinds of ethos or ethics, ranging from essentialist, objectifying approaches to compassionate creative engagements and openness to the other, with respect to waste.

A Changing Banaras

Notwithstanding the surfeit of narratives on the city which focus on the tropes of waste and pollution, it could be a short phase in the ongoing history of visions and images of Banaras. The city is a cultural text which is written and overwritten with meanings which reflect the social and political contingencies of the time.¹⁰⁵ For example, the current government of India is much

¹⁰³ Heever argues that all kinds of representations, including literary–textual representations, are means of space construction (76).

¹⁰⁴ Here, the term “aesthetics of waste” is used to refer not only to the beautification of waste or finding beauty in waste. It is used in a more liberal sense to suggest a wide range of representations of waste, which trigger diverse affective responses including disgust and disturbance.

¹⁰⁵ For example, Victorian London was notorious for being dirty and polluted and it was reflected in the literature of the time. Following the Sanitary Reform marked by the construction

invested in changing the image of Banaras and projecting it as a world-class religious city conforming to international standards of aesthetics and hygiene,¹⁰⁶ much like the Indian elites in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who meticulously engineered the religious landscape of Banaras to conform to a mythical past. Also, ever since the incumbent Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi executed two consecutive electoral successes with the city as his constituency, “Modi’s Varanasi” has become inextricably linked to Hindutva ideology and national politics. Other political upheavals are also underway with right-wing Hindu organizations demanding the demolition of a prominent mosque located at the ghats,¹⁰⁷ further adding to the project of invisibilising the Muslim past of and presence in the city. The image of the city is in constant flux and it reflects the visions, ambitions, desires and fears of extant political players, subject to endless significations over time.

Contributions

This research work highlights how our varying and dynamic **waste habits** can give rise to **multiple wastescapes**, which are informed by a spectrum of waste ethos ranging from disgust to compassion. By investigating the cultural roots of our attitudes to waste, the dissertation

of sewers in the city, the image of the city underwent a drastic change and today, the “dirty old London” of the nineteenth century is a faint memory in the global imagination.

¹⁰⁶ In 2019, the Government of India mooted the Kashi Vishwanath Temple Corridor project which aims to directly connect the iconic Kashi Vishwanath temple with the ghats. It entails the demolition of the famous narrow labyrinthine streets in the city leading to the ghats —the subject of much colourful descriptions in tourist narratives— and the removal of historical architecture. It has invited protests from several sections of the society. See: <https://www.financialexpress.com/lifestyle/travel-tourism/visiting-varanasi-will-not-be-same-this-is-how-kashi-vishwanath-temple-corridor-is-changing-the-ancient-city/1510779/>

¹⁰⁷ Right-wing Hindu parties claim that the Gyanvapi mosque in Banaras was built by the Mughal emperor Aurangazeb after demolishing a part of the ancient Vishwanath temple and they have demanded an investigation by the Archaeological Survey of India to ascertain whether there are temple remains beneath the mosque.

foregrounds the **unstable** and political nature of our **ideas of waste**. Above all, the existence of multiple wastescapes as a result of various attitudes to waste highlights the **unstable textuality** of the city where signs are inscribed and reinscribed, proving that our conception and imagination of space is predicated on **cultural and political contingencies**. Therefore, the surfeit of images of waste in the representations of Banaras could be just a phase in the ongoing cultural history/histories of the city.

By focusing on the embodied subjectivities of the narrators which engendered specific wastescapes of the city, the research study highlights the dynamic, fragmentary, embodied and relational nature of space and the spatiality of waste. The relational study of the multiple wastescapes engendered by cultural and literary texts, which portray specific waste interactions, also demonstrates the constitutive relationship between the aesthetics and ethics of waste. In other words, the manner in which a narrator depicts waste in a text signifies his/her underlying ethos of waste. It also illustrates the possibility of disrupting and refashioning waste habits and subjectivities to precipitate a more compassionate way of living with waste that leads to a corresponding alternative conception of space, which is more open and inclusive. Thus, the study points to the larger spatial dimension of ethics and the interconnections between ethics, and the experience of place and space could be the subject of more detailed research. This study focuses solely on literary and cultural texts in English, hence, the observations are limited in scope, however, a wider investigation into other social and cultural realms and other non-English texts can provide richer insights into the linkages between waste and space.

Also, the research work reveals how ideas of waste and dirt are central to the formation of human subjectivity and conversely, how cultural and social differences in subject-formation can influence how one perceives and engages with material and metaphoric waste. This enquiry into

the linkages between modernity, perception of waste and subjectivity can be of relevance to urban studies and urban planning since it will help us understand how we order ourselves as a society, especially in the Indian/South-Asian context.

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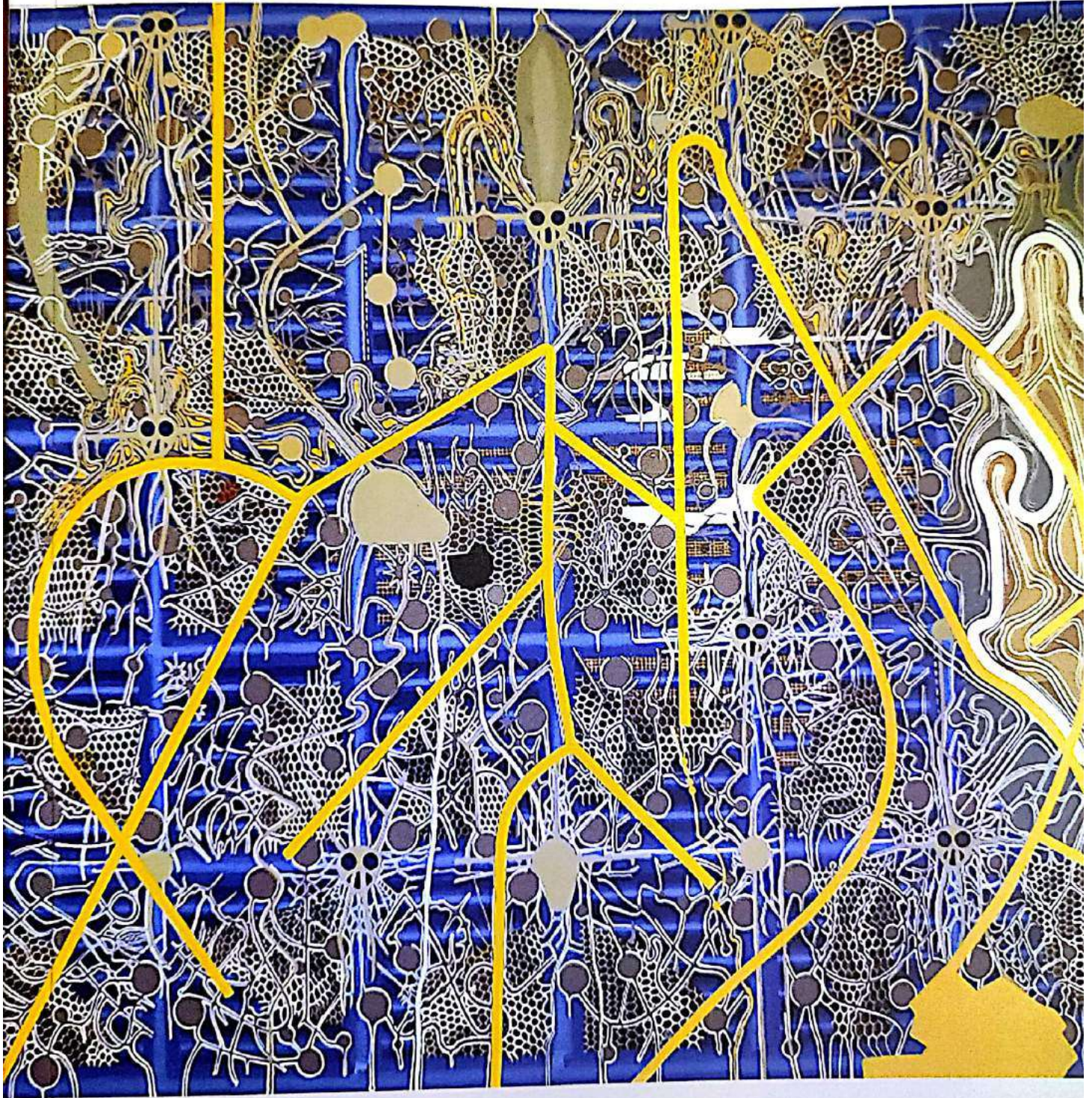
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**Pradeep Puthoor**

Pradeep Puthoor is a well known painter who received prestigious awards like Adolph Esther Gattlieb Award from Gottlieb Foundation, New York in 2021, British Royal Overseas League's Overseas Award for painting in 1997, Pollock Krasner Fellowship for painting from PKF Foundation, New York in 2003 and 2009, Senior Fellowship for painting from Ministry of Culture, New Delhi during 2008-2010, Residency Programme Scholarship Berlin in 2006 apart from several National level and state level awards. His life and works have been documented for BBC London during 2016 titled 'Art, Pray and Love'. He conducted several exhibitions in and outside India. Pradeep Puthoor lives in Thiruvananthapuram.

Disorder, Danger and Death: The Consumerist Dystopia in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

Abstract

This paper attempts to analyse the tropes of dirt, disorder and death in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* where consumerism and commodity fetish constitute modern subjectivity, identity, and order. The paper argues that the modern subject, in a bid to realize consumerist capitalism's promise of immortality and mastery over the precarity of life, seeks spiritual salvation in objects, science, and technology which imbricates the self in never-ending acts of acquiring and discarding, a mark of consumerist dystopia. To achieve the above mentioned aim, I make use of the theoretical lens offered by Mary Douglas in her seminal sociological work *Purity and Danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo* (1966) and general insights from material cultural studies which help see how habits and everyday rituals of modern life mediated by materialism are built on an aspiration to keep disorder and death at bay.

Key words: consumerism, dirt, Don DeLillo, garbage, new materialism, waste.

"What if death is nothing but sound?"

"Electrical noise."

"You can hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful."

"Uniform, white." (*White Noise*)

This paper attempts to analyse the tropes of dirt, disorder and death in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* where consumerism and commodity fetish constitute modern subjectivity, identity, and order. The paper argues that the modern subject, in a bid to realize consumerist capitalism's promise of immortality and mastery over the precarity of life, seeks spiritual salvation in objects, science, and technology which imbricates the self in never-ending acts of acquiring and discarding, a mark of consumerist dystopia. To achieve the abovementioned aim, I make use of the theoretical lens offered by



LITCRIT

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Confirmation of Conference Participation

2nd July 2019

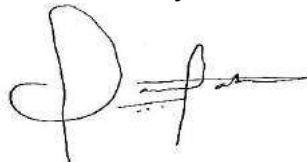
Dear Sir or Madam,

This letter confirms that **Ms. Vinita Teresa**, a PhD candidate at the University of Hyderabad, attended a conference entitled “**Liminal Borders: Constructing and Deconstructing Borders in World History**,” held at St. John’s College from 17-18 May 2019. **Ms. Teresa** presented a paper entitled “**Borders of Contamination and the Poet(ic)s of Dirt: The Beat Poets in India.**”

The conference was organized by the conveners of the World History Workshop, Faculty of History, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom. <https://www.hist.cam.ac.uk/graduate-students/training/workshops/world-history>.

Please do not hesitate to contact me (see details below) should you require additional information.

Yours faithfully,



Adewumi Damilola Adebayo
Conference co-convener

Faculty of History, University of Cambridge,
West Road, Cambridge CB3 9EF

Tel: +44 (0)1223 3 35340
Email: gen.enq@hist.cam.ac.uk;
worldhistoryworkshop@gmail.com

<https://www.hist.cam.ac.uk/graduate-students/training/workshops/world-history>

The 7th Euroacademia International Conference
Identities and Identifications
Politicised Uses of Collective Identities

Certificate of Participation
as
Conference Speaker
for

Vinita Teresa

Lucca
Italy

14 - 15 June 2018

Auditorium - Agora Cultural Centre
Piazza dei Servi, 55100

President of Euroacademia:
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Date:

15.06.2018

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15/12/15

UNIVERSITY OF HYDERABAD

NOTIFICATION OF RESULTS

Course: Ph.D.
Subject: English

Month & Year: November'2015
Semester -I

Sl.No	Regn.No.	Name of the Student	Course No. Credits – 04	Course No. Credits – 04
			HE-801	HE-803
1	15HEPH01	Monica Kanga T	HE-808 PASS	HE-804 PASS
2	15HEPH02	Vinita Teresa	HE-809 PASS	HE-807 PASS
3	15HEPH03	Saidul Haque	HE-806 (ABSENT)	---
4	15HEPH05	Vishnu Priya T.P	HE-801 PASS	HE-802 PASS
5	15HEPH07	Hamari Jamatia	HE-801 PASS	HE-802 PASS
6	15HEPH08	Anuja Saha	HE-803 PASS	HE-805 PASS

Course No.	Title of the Course	No of Credits
HE-801	Critical Approaches	4
HE-802	Research Methods & Diss. Writing	2
HE-803	Theory of the Novel	4
HE-804	Reading Poetry	2
HE-805	Dystopian fiction	2
HE-806	Discourses on Education:18th Century Perspectives	4
HE-807	Theories of Waste	2
HE-808	Feminist Theories	4
HE-809	Advance Theories of Region and Space	4

Dated 14.12.2015

Controller of Examination

Copy:
Head Department of English

[Signature]
Head
Department of English

Exam/1224
23/5/17

UNIVERSITY OF HYDERABAD
NOTIFICATION OF RESULTS

Course: Ph.D.
Subject: English

Month & Year: April'2017
Semester: IV,

Sl .No	Regn. No.	Name of the Student	Course No. Credits-4	Course No. Credits-3
			EN-872	RS-573
1	15HEPH02	Vinita Teresa	Pass	Pass

Tourse No. Title of the Course

EN-872 Revisioning Postcolonialism -4
RS-573 Development and Disasters -4

Dated: 22.05.2017

Copy to

Head Deaprtment of English

Controller of Examination

O/c Angeli
22/5/17

22-5-17
22-5-2017

274
21/5/17

Ref.No.UH/Exam/CW/Ph.D/2020 2196

OFFICE NOTE

Sub: Request for exemption of Ph.D. coursework.

Ref: 1. Request received from the Schools-Reg.

2. VC's approval dated 28th, 31st August, 2020 & 2nd, 7th & 8th September 2020.

xxx

With reference to the requests received from the Schools as cited in the subject mentioned above, the following students are exempted from Ph.D. coursework with reference to the Office Note No. UH/DRAE/2020, dated 16.06.2020 and further recommendations of the DRC/RAC of the respective schools and approval of Competent Authority cited above. This is in view of the fact that they have already completed the required course work as per 2009 UGC Regulations during their M.Phil. course:

S.No	Enroll	Student	Subject	Name of the Institute (M.Phil awarded)
1.	08SEPH11	Devonath Narzary	Economics	UoH (Economics)
2.	08SEPH07	Dipali Bosumatari	Economics	UoH (Economics)
3.	15HEPH01	Monica Kanga	English	University of Madras (English)
4.	09SEPH07	Kirtti Ranjan Paltasingh	Economics	UoH (Economics)
5.	09SEPH06	Pratap Kumar Jena	Economics	UoH (Economics)
6.	16SEPH24	Saloni Bhutani	Economics	UoH (Economics)
7.	15HEPH02	Vinita Teresa	English	UoH (Comparative Literature)
8.	14SEPH22	Subhash Chandra	Economics	UoH (Economics)
9.	16SEPH22	Raghavendra Kushawaha	Economics	UoH (Economics)
10.	13SEPH03	Hemant Khachi	Economics	UoH (Economics)
11.	11SGPH01	Sunil Kumar K	Economics	UoH (Economics)
12.	14SEPH03	Jitender	Economics	UoH (Economics)
13.	15SEPH01	Nityasundar Manik	Economics	UoH (Economics)
14.	16SEPH20	Priyanka Sahu	Economics	UoH (Economics)
15.	16SEPH16	Kuldeep Singh Nagi	Economics	UoH (Economics)
16.	09SEPH22	Asis Kumar Senapati	Economics	UoH (Economics)
17.	14SEPH24	Debashis Padhan	Economics	Sambalpur University (Economics)
18.	14SEPH04	Rohit Padhan	Economics	Sambalpur University (Economics)
19.	11SEPH06	Imnasangla Ao	Economics	UoH (Economics)
20.	15SEPH06	Asharani Samal	Economics	Pondicherry University (Economics)
21.	14SEPH16	Ummalla Mallesh	Economics	Pondicherry University (Economics)
22.	16SEPH06	Bruhida Rabha	Economics	UoH (Economics)
23.	12SEPH19	Kalpana Negi	Economics	UoH (Economics)
24.	11SEPH04	Susanta Nag	Economics	UoH (Economics)
25.	15SEPH14	Susanta Kumar Sethy	Economics	UoH (Economics)
26.	15SEPH04	Feba David	Economics	Central University of Gujarat (Economics)
27.	15SSPH08	Arosmitta Sahoo	Sociology	Pondicherry University (Sociology)

28.	13SEPH21	Md. Kashif	Economics	JNU, New Delhi (Applied Economics)
29.	14SEPH20	Faizan Ali	Economics	MJPRU, Bareilly (Applied & Regional Economics)
30.	14SEPH10	Jaganath Behera	Economics	UoH (Economics)
31.	15SEPH22	Topunuru Kaladhar	Economics	IIT Hyderabad (Dept. of Liberal Arts)
32.	14SPPH03	Jadhav Prathap Singh	Political Sci.	UoH (Regional Studies)
33.	16HEPH01	Boniface G Kamei	English	UoH (English)
34.	15SSPH06	Abdurahiman P C	Sociology	Mahatma Gandhi University Kerala
35.	15SSPH07	Jangkhosei Touthang	Sociology	The Gandhigram Rural Institute Deemed University
36.	13SEPH20	P Balaji	Economics	JNU, New Delhi (Applied Economics)
37.	13SEPH14	Dontha Prashanth	Economics	UoH (Economics)
38.	13SEPH11	Anju Susan Thomas	Economics	UoH (Economics)
39.	14SEPH14	Mamta Waiker	Economics	MGAHV, Wardha (Women's Studies)



Deputy Registrar
(Acad & Exams)

To
All Students Concerned

Copy to:

1. Dean, School of Economics
2. Dean, School of Social Sciences
3. Dean, School of Humanities
4. Head, Department of Sociology
5. Head, Department of English
6. Head, Department of Political Science
7. Academic Section (SO)
8. E-Governance (Cell)

उप कुलसचिव / Deputy Registrar
(शैक्षिक एवं परीक्षा)
(Academic & Examination)
हैदराबाद विश्वविद्यालय
University of Hyderabad
हैदराबाद / Hyderabad - 500046