

Cosmic Layout of the Hindu Sacred City, Varanasi (Benares)

Rana P.B. Singh
Department of Geography
Banaras Hindu University
Varanasi, UP 221005
India

Summary

Varanasi (Benares), known as the microcosm of India and the most sacred city of Hindu religion, has maintained its cosmic layout which developed in the historical past. The passage from macrocosmos (heaven) into mesocosmos (earth) and further down into microcosmos (the temple, or body) is made spatially visible and is regulated by the network of pilgrimage routes — this is what we call *pilgrimage mandala*. In Varanasi five of the various pilgrimage circuits are well developed; taken as a sequence leading from outer to inner space, they reveal parallels between macro-, meso- and microcosmos and the related transcendental powers. Moreover, the spatial arrangement of the 56 shrines of Ganesha ("Elephant-headed God") and the routes following Vinayaka's pilgrimage journey, also form a *mandala* representing the product of 8 directions and 7 layers of atmosphere, thus the number 56. These aspects are described and the notion of cosmogonic integrity is discussed.

Résumé

Varanasi (Benares) est connue pour être un microcosme de l'Inde et la ville la plus sacrée de l'hindouisme. Elle a conservé l'aménagement spatial développé au cours de son passé historique. Ses constructions, combinées à un réseau de voies de pèlerinage, mettent en évidence au niveau spatial et structurent un passage du macrocosme (ciel) au mésocosme (terre) et finalement au microcosme (temple, ou corps) — c'est ce que nous désignons du terme de *mandala de pèlerinage*. Cinq des différents circuits de pèlerinage de Varanasi sont bien développés; si on les considère comme représentant un passage de l'espace extérieur à l'espace intérieur, on découvre des parallèles entre macro-, méso- et microcosme ainsi qu'avec des puissances transcendantes. De plus, l'organisation spatiale des 56 sanctuaires de Ganesha ("le dieu-à-tête-d'éléphant") et les routes qui suivent le pèlerinage de Vinayaka forment aussi un *mandala* représentant le produit de 8 directions et de 7 couches atmosphériques, donc le nombre 56. Ces aspects sont décrits et la notion d'intégrité cosmogonique est discutée.

1. Introduction

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

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

The manifestation of a transcendental element (called *hierophany* by Eliade) may be translated into a parallelism between the *macrocosmos* (cosmos/heaven) and the *microcosmos* (temple/human body). In between these two polarities one can also perceive a mediating spatial-sacred structure given by the (built) environment; we shall call it *mesocosmos*. An archetypal city such as Varanasi may be considered as a *mesocosmos* mediating between the *microcosmos* of the individual and the *macrocosmos* of a culturally conceived greater universe (see Levy, 1990). The interlinkage among these three archetypal levels is sometimes expressed in the idea of a central axis around which the cosmos turns. This centre serves as a communication link between heaven and earth; it is the *axis mundi* (following Eliade's terminology).

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

The cosmic layout of a "climax community" may be seen in the elaborate frame characteristic of Varanasi; it is clearly expressed in a series of sacred territorial boundaries defined by the pilgrimage routes. Within this mapping system the universe is symbolized by a circle (of course irregular), connecting a number of shrines and sacred sites. This system of spatial manifestations and pilgrimage journeys may be called *pilgrimage mandala* (see Singh, 1993, 37). In Varanasi, the pilgrimage mandala is fully developed; it has been eulogized in the mythological literature and is still maintained through the pilgrimage journeys and festivities. The spatial components of a world view, reflected in a conception of local values and practices such as pilgrimages, symbolizes the cosmic representation of the earth. Recognition of the cosmogonic aspect of spatial arrangement extends back to the time of the Vedas, ca. 1000 B.C.E. In the case of Varanasi, it goes back to the early period of the current era.

2. Varanasi's Cosmic Layout

Varanasi is one of the celestial-archetypal cities where the material environment expresses the parallelism between macro-, meso- and microcosmos, regrouping them to form a sacred spatial system. It contains five sacred territories, symbolizing wholeness: five is Shiva's number. Shiva, one among the trinity of Hindu pantheon is the controller of time and the destroyer of the universe; he is Varanasi's patron deity. The cosmic interrelationship between the five layers of sacred territories and the three levels of the cosmos is shown in Table 1, next page (see also Fig. 1).

The five sacred routes delimit their own territory and reflect the various myths; however the pilgrimage journey always starts and ends at Vishveshvara temple — the pillar at the centre of the world, or *axis mundi*. The five sacred routes/zones are also associated with the symbols of the divine body, transcendental power and sheaths. These are analogous with the five broad elements of the organism according to Hindu mythology. This spiritual perception of the sacred territories further shows the inter-

Table 1: Five Layers of Sacred Territories In Varanasi

Macro-cosmos: Elements	Mesocosmos: Sacred route/ zone	Microcosmos: Divine body power	Transcendental power	Sheath	Number of shrines on the route
1. Sky	Caurashikroshi	Head	Consciousness	Food	144
2. Earth	Panchakroshi	Legs	Action	Mind	108
3. Air	Nagar Pradakshina	Face	Cognition	Breath	72
4. Water	Avimukta	Blood	Wisdom	Intellect	72
5. Fire	Antargriha	Heart	Bliss	Bliss	72

(Source: Singh, 1991, 9; Singh, 1993, 38)

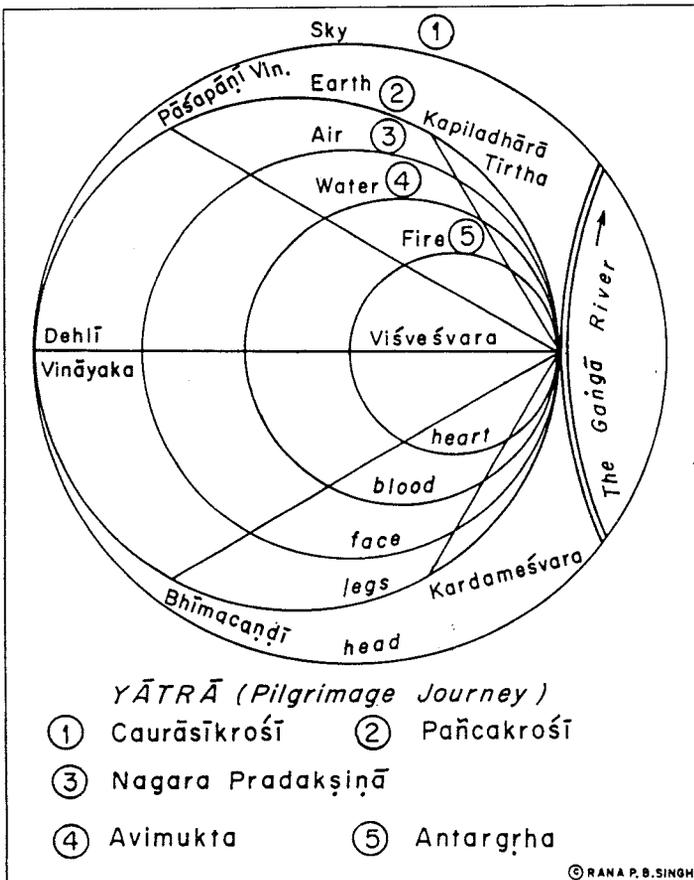


Fig. 1 Geomantic map of Kashi Mandala
 Carte géomantique du mandala de Kashi

linking relationship between human beings and the cosmos, occurring in a strong state of connection to the sacred where "one sees one's soul" (Singh, 1991, 9). Like the human body, the territory of Kashi (the total sacred territory of Varanasi) is the Brahman who illuminates the world and dwells inside the citadel of the five sheaths, the world within. In this way the pilgrimage journey transforms the macrocosmic journey into a microcosmos. It also reflects the fact that

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

That is how "the cosmos in its entirety can become a hierophany" (Eliade, 1959, 12). The revelation of a hierophany is initiated at a fixed centre, the temple of Vishveshvara (Shiva as Lord, i.e. *-ishvara*, of the world, i.e. *Vishva-*), the patron deity of the city, and it ends there. This system is maintained by the initiation and completion rites performed there. The idea is expressed in the *Rig Veda* (X. 149) that the "universe is conceived as spreading from the central point". The Vishveshvara temple, conceptualized as the pivot of the cosmos, is outside mundane space and time, even though it is a visible site on the earth as well. The arrangement of Vinayaka shrines (56) also shows another face of the cosmic layout of the city.

The five sacred territories (from top to bottom) sequentially become smaller in territorial area but higher in manifest power, reaching to the highest at the inner sanctum (*Antargriha*). This idea runs parallel to that of a shrinking world but expanding universe (see Fig. 2). The dialectics behind this are based on the notion of the creation and existence arising from opposite forces. It also shows parallels with Shiva's dance, symbolizing cosmic cycles of creation and destruction, and also the daily rhythm of birth and death as the basis of all existence (see Capra, 1991, 242; Singh, 1992, 142).

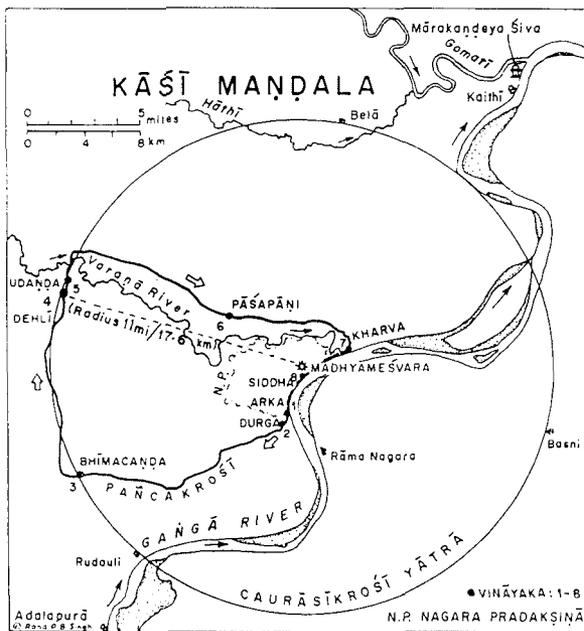


Fig. 2 Kashi Mandala (spatial frame).
Mandala de Kashi (cadre spatial).

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

2.1. Caurashikroshi (84-krosha¹ sacred territory)

The outermost pilgrimage route forms a complete circular shape; nowadays it is rarely followed. The temple of Madhyameshvara serves as the centre and the shrine of Dehli Vinayaka ('the entrance gate') is the radial point; the radius covers a distance of 5 *krosha* (11 miles / 17.6 km) and thus, the circumference measures 168 miles (296 km). Symbolically it represents the outer limit of the universe within which lie four other sacred territories. Thus, circumambulation of this territorial route symbolizes the sacred journey to the cosmos (Singh, 1987, 503). A number and varieties of deities associated to space (direction) and time (yearly cycle) finally emerge to form the greater pilgrimage mandala of Varanasi, known as Kashi Mandala (Fig. 3). In each of the eight directions, twelve "power goddesses" (*Shaktis*) represent "power" in twelve months; they are further supervised by the "leading energy goddess" (*Durga*) and her male partner (*Bhairava*) who looks after the rhythm of 'time' and 'death', and assisted by a directional guardian (*Dikapala*) and three auxiliaries (*Ishta Devas*). Thus their total number reaches 144, i.e. 96 *Shaktis*, 8 *Durgas*, 8 *Bhairavas*, 8 *Dikapalas*, and 24 *Ishta Devas* (for a full list see Singh, 1993, 40-41).

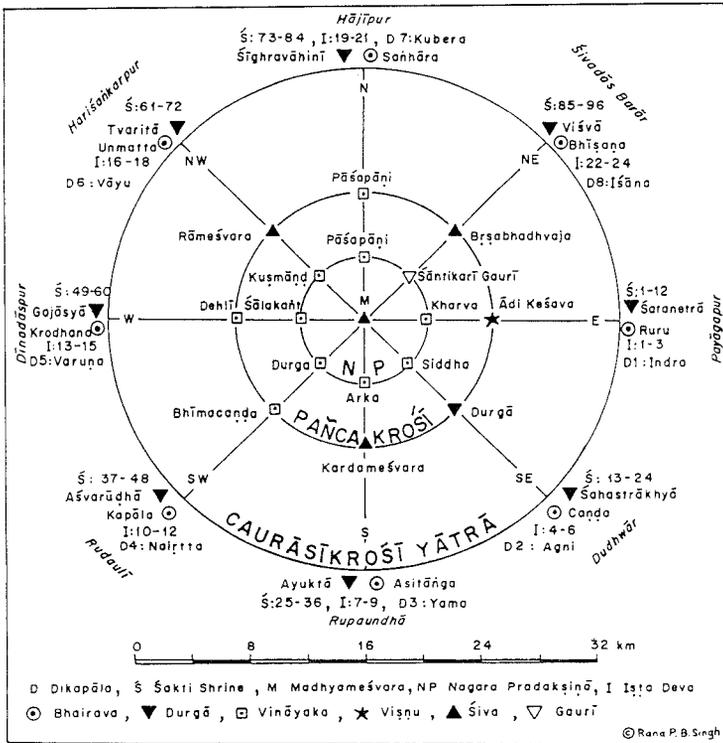


Fig. 3 Kashi Mandala: Sacred Yatras and Directional Deities.
Mandala de Kashi: Yatras sacrés et divinités-guides.

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

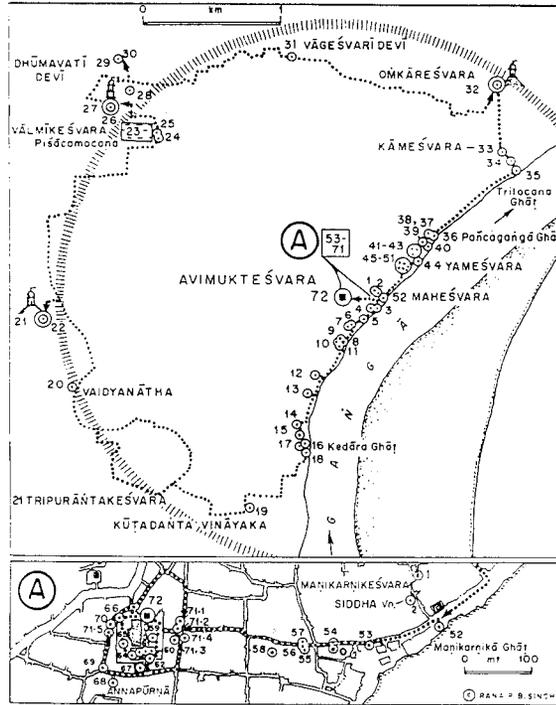


Fig. 4 Varanasi: Avimukta Yatra.

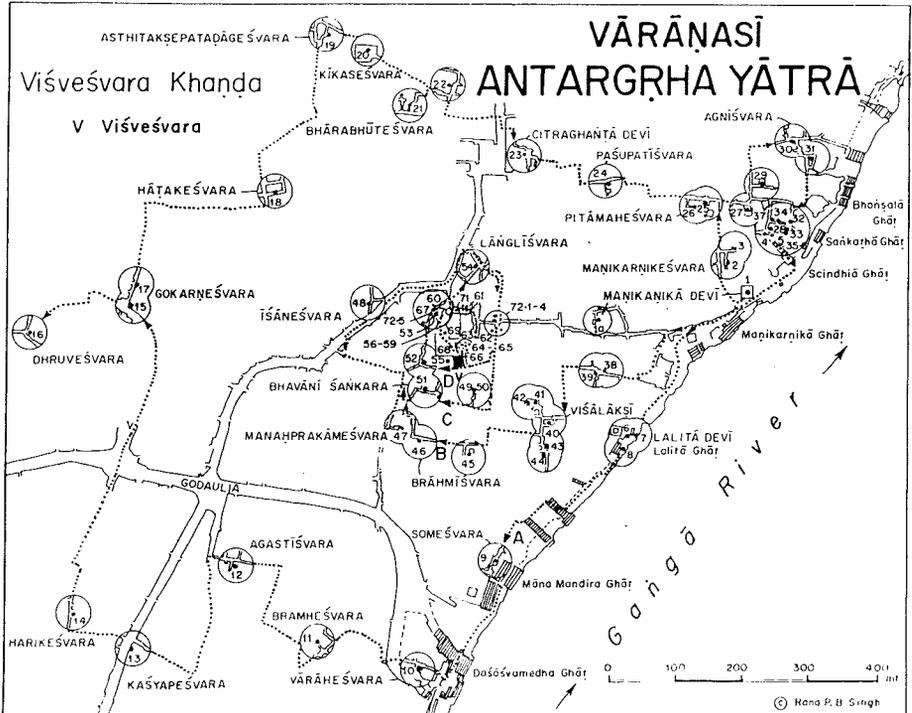


Fig. 5 Varanasi: Antargriha Yatra.

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

2.2. *Panchakroshi (25-krosha sacred territory)*

The route delimiting this territory (see Fig. 2, Fig. 3) covers a distance of 55.2 miles or 88.5 km. It is divided into five parts identified with the five spots where pilgrims stay overnight in the rest-houses (numbering 44 in total). This itinerary has now replaced the earlier one and it is the most popular one. The myth referred to this route in ca. 12th century C.E. and it is found again in a more developed form in later myths (ca. 16th century C.E.). An abundance of myths concerning this sacred journey are also found in literature (see Singh, 1991).

A total of 108 sacred sites and shrines are found along this route. The number 108 has a cosmogonic scope related to the constellations (lunar mansions) and the rhythm of human cognition. It thus defines cardinality, centrality and circulation. Further, it refers to a product of 12 (the yearly cycle of time of months in a year) x 9 (the cosmic space denoting nine planets in Hindu mythology). Other cosmogonic parallels are: a product of 27 constellations, and 4 parts of the day, or 4 directions; a product of 36 *crores* (360 million) divine beings, and 3 mythical realms; and also the product of the powers of the three basic integers, i.e. $1^1 \times 2^2 \times 3^3$ (see Singh, 1991, 13).

2.3. *Nagar Pradakshina (city circuit territory)*

This, an abstract form of the sacred territory above, has been vividly described in the mythology. It denotes the outer boundary of the city of Varanasi (see Fig. 2). The route covers a distance of 25 km (15.5 miles) and passes 72 sacred shrines and sites.

The cosmogonic homology of the number 72 may also be interpreted in several ways: a product of 12 months, 2 hemispheric routes of the sun (northern and southern), and 3 mythical realms (the heaven, the earth and the atmosphere/sky); 12 zodiacs and 6 seasons; the 9 planets and 8 directions, etc. Pilgrims believe that the sacred journey to this territory provides relief from all types of sins and allows them to be purified with a view to receiving divine bliss. This journey is completed in two days.

2.4. *Avimukta ("Never Forsaken" territory)*

The myth says that the Lord Shiva does not leave this territory even in times of dissolution and that is why it is called *avimukta*. The mythology mentions that this sacred area preserves the infinite mystical power of the Lord Shiva, initiated with his three forms of qualities, i.e. the truth (*sat*), the pleasant (*cit*) and the blissful (*ananda*). 72 sacred shrines and sites are also spread along this route. The route moves four times in a spiral form (see Fig. 4).

2.5. *Antargriha ("Inner sanctum" territory)*

The sacred route (Fig. 5) of this journey moves seven times around the Vishveshvara temple. It includes 72 sacred shrines and sites, among which 56 are Shiva's form. This symbolizes cosmic integrity, i.e. 7 *chakras* (spinal energy zones, or plexuses) and 8 cardinal directions. This is how Shiva protects his territory in the same way as Kashi protects his own body (see Singh, 1993). The seven-round *spiral* symbolizes the understanding of reality, both physically and transcendently, and reminds the pilgrim that the centre of the patron deity Shiva is everywhere but the circumference nowhere. In terms of hermeneutic philosophy, this may be seen as the essence of the archetypal — "the circle never closes". It is also a symbol of the mystical struggle

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

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

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

2.6. *Cosmic layout and Vinayaka Ganesha shrines*

The form of Ganesha ("Elephant-headed-God", the son of the Lord Shiva), as protector from obstacles at eight cardinal directions in all the seven layers of the realm between earth and heaven (symbolically representing seven layers of the atmosphere), is known as Vinayaka. His number reaches to 56 (i.e. 7 layers x 8 directions). The number and location of the 56 Vinayakas can be represented in a spatio-cosmological model showing the eight directions, seven layers, three realms/segments and the interlinking routes of pilgrimage journeys (Fig. 6). This clearly symbolizes the concept of a universe within the universe. The pilgrimage is performed on the 4th day of dark-fortnight (waning of the moon) of each month, and if Tuesday falls on that day it becomes more merit-giving (Singh, 1987, 519).

The number 56 refers to the symbolism of the guardian. Courtright (1985, 27) has explained this fully:

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

According to the textual reference and tradition,

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

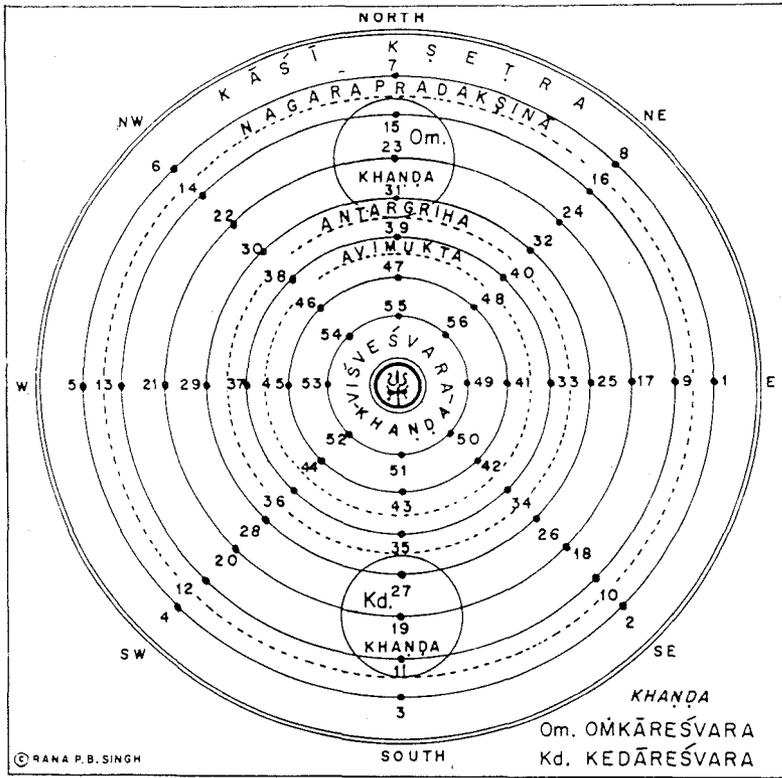


Fig. 6 Kashi Mandala: 56 Vinayakas and 3 Khandas
Mandala de Kashi: 56 Vinayakas et 3 Khandas.

3. Cosmogonic Integrity

The number of sacred sites and shrines along the five sacred routes of pilgrimage symbolizes the cosmogonic integrity. This can be explained by the symbolic cosmic numbers and their products (see Table 2).

Table 2: Sacred Sites and Shrines, vs. Cosmogonic Integrity

Sacred Segment/ Pilgrimage territory (route)	Macro- cosmos: Planets x	Meso- cosmos: Directions x	Micro- cosmos: 3 mythic realms/ 2 parts of day	Number of shrines on the route: 1 x 2 x 3
	1	2	3	4
1. Caurashikroshi	9	8	2	144
2. Panchakroshi	9	4	3	108
3. Nagar Pradakshina	9	4	2	72
4. Avimukta	9	4	2	72
5. Antargriha	9	4	2	72

The total number of all the shrines comes to 468 which in itself forms a parallel to the product of 9 planets x 13 months (including an intercalary month) x 4 directions, or mythical parts of a day. It is also a product of 12 zodiacs x 13 months x 3 mythic realms.

The symbolic forms and numbers characterizing the shrines and sacred routes have emerged to form an established order through the binding of faith and belief system. In fact,

"the belief system serves as a vital link between the place of pilgrimage and its extensive geographical and religious hinterland." (Morinis, 1984, 242)

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

4. Concluding remarks

Varanasi presents a unique model of cosmogonic integrity. Varanasi is Varanasi, Kashi the Holy! This bestows salvation to all forms of organisms living here — human or non-human. In fact,

"by condensing the cosmos into a small sphere, its laws can be observed and experienced more clearly, and human lives can be placed more accurately in accord with them" (Swan, 1990, 35).

The series of pilgrimage routes and territories may not be assumed to form a hierarchically structured network — each higher level contains the lower, but not vice-versa. There is no hierarchy but rather a series of levels of abstraction where the whole is present in each part, or layer, and in each level of existence. However, at every step there appears a living reality that is total and unbroken and individual, and that is in everything — maybe at different degrees (see Singh, 1994). But this again does not mean that the degrees represent a "higher" or a "lower". Following C.S. Lewis' terminology, this can be formulated theoretically as follows: the "higherarchy" is above and the "lowerarchy" is below, but we need both to reveal the whole more completely. The Sun is perceived as father (higherarchy) and the Earth as mother (lowerarchy), thus there is no hierarchy, and these are the two ends needed to understand the ultimate reality of wholeness. The myths involved in narrating these systems are not only things of the past, they direct new vision of human understanding. The spatial nature of a cosmogony pertaining to series of sacred sites and their interlinking routes refer to a paradigmatic reiteration of the archetypal meaning of heaven and earth, this of course as mythically separate. After all every system or symbolic structure has its own kind of power over the individual, and has its own way of linking human consciousness.²

² This article is a token of tribute and dedication to my German friend, collaborator and copilgrim, Niels Gutschow, together with whom I performed pilgrimage journeys to the various sacred territories of Varanasi during 1991-1993.

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