Visualized Space: Exhibition and Colloquium of the Varanasi Research Project

The history of South Asian cartography has long been understood as being based on Western cartographic traditions. Maps of India were regarded as being produced by foreigners—not by Indians in India. The contributions of Suzan Golé (1985) and Joseph E. Schwartzbärg (1992) have gradually changed this commonly held view during the last two decades. The Varanasi Research Project ‘Visualized Space’—Constructions of Locality and Cartographic Representation in Varanasi (India)—concerns itself with aspects of Indian cartography, visualizations of space, and forms of locality and spatial orientation.

The extraordinary position of Banaras among the Indian pilgrimage towns is linked to its special geographical location and its sacred topographic site. The city is situated on the western bank of the Ganges, which at this point flows to the north. The limits of the city’s sacred territory are marked by a surrounding curbstone procession road (Parshaktoshribhutya) that starts and ends at the central temple complex of the ‘Lord of the Universe’ (Vishvanatha, a form of Shiva), moves along the riverfront, and then forms a half-circle leading from the confluence of the river Asi in the south to that of the river Varuna in the north. The bathing places or ghats face the rising sun. From this western bank of the river the water is flooded during the monsoon, thus making the construction of buildings impossible. The view to the other side of the river is therefore a view from urban space towards wasteland. Favoured by this position the riverfront of Banaras has become a unique landscape in the course of the city’s history. The bathing ghats are a place for manifold public activities. This is the place for bathing and washing, for exercises, for visiting temples, and for performing processions and rituals. Ascetics meditate in the sun, vendors sell pilgrimage souvenirs, and boating is open to customers.

These features of the urban landscape have lead to a variety of questions addressed by the research project: How does this sacred topography of Banaras influence the representation of space in pictures, diagrams, and cartographic representations? How do the inhabitants perceive space, be it profane or sacred? How does the corpus of eulogistic Sanskrit literature on Banaras, with its large quantity of ‘spatial texts’, relate to the daily practice and the actual performance of pilgrimage and the pilgrim’s orientation in space? The first results of the research project have been published by Axel Michaels and Jörg Gengnagel. So far the electronic publications of the Varanasi Research Project comprise an extensive Banaras Bibliography, an electronic Index of the Kashiakhanda, and an interactive presentation of the religious map Mirror of Kashi (Kashidarpana). This map was printed in Banaras in 1876 for Kailasanatha Sukula. The map’s virtual representation with its extensive legends and inscriptions is the outcome of its first complete reading. It is shaped in the form of a mandala and shows the basic features of the city’s sacred topography. This ‘word picture’ consists of more than 1,250 names of temples, gods, goddesses, and places. All these names and names has been indexed, 723 pop-up windows contain additional textual and visual information. This project is affiliated with the Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative (ECAI) of Berkeley.

A panoramic view

One focus of the exhibition Banaras—Representations of a Sacred City was the display of various panoramic views of Banaras—a form of spatial representation, documented for the first time by the publication of a Banaras panorama by Joseph Treffenthaler (Berlin 1876). The displayed panoramic views of Banaras reach from the original panoramic scroll Shri Kashi (22 x 440 cm, c. 1900) painted on paper to a photographic panorama of the whole riverfront with a length of almost 20 metres. This photographic panorama taken in 2001 by Stanislaw Klimk and Niels Gutnick was contrasted with picturesque views of the riverfront produced by various artists during the nineteenth century and with the early works of professional photographers collected by Joachim K. Bautze.

There are two rare pictorial maps painted on paper and cloth dating from the second half of the eighteenth century that represent another aspect of Indian cartography—Kailasanatha Sukula’s Kashiakhanda (1876) and Krishnakanda Shrama’s Kashiakhandaupari (1877), lithographed in Banaras, both illustrate the tradition of pilgrim maps. The works of these Indian cartographers were shown next to the two earliest topographical maps of Banaras: the map drawn by James Prinsep (1799–1840) in 1812 and the first map commissioned by the colonial administration in 1867.

References


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