

City's Spatial Structure: A Concretization of Myth and Ritual

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INTRODUCTION

The increasing displacements of populations between nations and changing distributions of racial and ethnic populations within nations have created a search for a new identity. Old maps of identity- national, cultural and individual are being re-drawn. Soja in 'Postmodern Geographies' writes about Los Angeles being a theme park of World Space, "There is a Boston in Los Angeles, a Lower Manhattan and a South Bronx, a Sao Paulo and a Singapore." (Soja, 1989). "An identity implies not only a location, but a duration, a history. A lost identity is lost not only in space but also in time" (Burgin, 1996). This time of lived social space should take precedence over timelessly abstract 'mental' space (Lefebvre, 1991).

But is this phenomenon of the search of a lost identity, re-creation of the past, re-construction of a recognisable environment based on a nostalgic past, true of the city of 21st century alone? In this paper, a city 2500 years old is taken up as a case study to see how the city is reconstructed continually based on texts, myths and rituals.

Venturi has analysed the 'strip' in Las Vegas where symbolic meaning is dragged away from the built form. The architecture is designated to the back and the signage is brought on to the front, away from the built up structure. The sculptures, carving, art which used to be a part of the built fabric, adding layers of meaning to it, is now taken away from it and added to the signage in front. The architecture is reduced to being a box covered with signage, a 'decorated box' (Venturi et al. 1989). Although communication dominates space, but architecture does not play a role in it. The architecture loses its capacity to be understood on its own. It needs supplementary systems (signage, graphics) to give meaning to it. "It is a fact that the legibility of our present urban agglomerations is mostly due to the efficiency of such graphic systems and that the built-up-systems have lost their autonomy and they do not carry symbolic weight anymore" (Francoise Choay, 1986).

This paper focuses on arriving at the legibility of urban systems through conception rather than through perception.

Here the people do not rely only on the perceptual aspects of the physical form in order to understand the signification in the urban environment. Hence the approach is with the symbolic, connotative level of the image in mind. Thus the relation between the people and the city goes beyond perceptual recognition and introduces the role of ideology.

The paper focuses on external public places in a city and their effect on its spatial structure. The first aspect of the city is simply what happens – events, festivals, worships and pilgrimages occurring rhythmically. The aim of this paper is to read the city "text" in this language - in terms of rituals. The meaning of rituals has been restricted to those structured events, which refer to culturally determined implications, or connotations, which have additional meanings. Barthes in his 'Elements of Semiology' mentions about Saussure's development of the theory of signs, where the signifier only marks out plainly to what he is referring. Barthes further argues that the signs in addition, have hidden meanings or an ideology incorporated in them. This paper discusses the rituals that are signs of this kind, which besides being understood simply by being seen, or by participation, have layers of inherent meaning. In this paper myth is used in a technical sense, that is, to refer to a form of narrative that is a vehicle of different kinds of truth. Myth is not being used in the everyday, degenerate sense of 'tall story', 'nonsensical or false tale'. Through myth the individual and community are enabled, to participate, in constructed sequences of events which might represent good and evil, right and wrong, purity and pollution, life and death, etc.

Thus this analysis of the external urban spaces is about conception, the connotations and the metaphysical ideas which go behind their evolution. The paper narrows down to one urban space known as Manikarnika in Varanasi, which is read in terms of:

1. Text and Context which highlights the importance of myth in constructing a place.
2. Centre-Periphery which brings about the physical attributes of the place as important.
3. Creation-Destruction, in which the ritual is one of the keys in constructing and reconstructing a place.

BACKGROUND

“The history of a country is sometimes epitomised in the history of one of its principal cities. The city of Varanasi on the banks of the Ganges river represents India, religiously and intellectually just as Paris represents the political sentiments of France. In Varanasi, Buddhism has first promulgated and Hinduism has had her home. This city therefore, has the impulse and vigour of two of the important religions” (Eck, 1982).

With its reputation of orthodox Brahmanical Hinduism and its ancient tradition of Sanskrit learning, it is the Brahmins who set the religious tone of the city.

Varanasi is famous for its powers of liberation as well as for death. The hub of activities is the riverfront with its eighty ghats (stepped embankments) stretching through the length of the city. Along the riverfront is Manikarnika, the sanctuary of death and place to attain liberation. It is also known as the Great Cremation Ground. Its presence is felt even from a distance because of the ceaselessly smoking cremation pyre. Death and pilgrimage provide the city with its economic base as for all its inhabitants much of the available employment directly or indirectly derives from this business.

Text and Context

Text and context are brought together to see how the myth becomes one of the keys for Manikarnika’s significance. Towards the beginning of the first millennium BCE, people known as Aryans, who crossed the Great Passes in the north-west of India began dominating the river-basins in that region. Their view of the world was developed in a vast body of sacred utterances called the Vedas. These people moved eastwards and they came to Varanasi in around 9th century

BC. This pattern of city layout was being followed by the Aryans who came and settled in Varanasi.

According to the Vedic literature, the city should be based on the Mandala, which is a system of squares. It is a cycle or a unit of space or time set apart for a specific purpose. There is a deep relation between the body and the cosmos in Vedic thought and the city based on the Mandala becomes a representation of the cosmos. Here every part is specified with the positioning of certain deities. Hence Brahma, the creator is given the space in the centre and the God of death, Yama is given the spot in the southern direction.

Excavations on the Rajghat plateau- now largely waste ground to the north of the currently built up area, suggest that it was a substantial settlement by 9th century BC. It closely follows the Vedic texts in positioning of the cremation grounds (the positioning of the Lord of Death) which were at Sankata Ghat at that time, which lies towards the south of the Rajghat. As the city grew further south, the cremation grounds were shifted more and more until Harishchandra ghat started being used as the place for cremation. This is when text influenced the shaping up the city. In 12th century AD Manikarnika Ghat started being used as cremation ground although it lay in the centre of the city. This deviation from the text in planning can



Fig. 1. Mandala

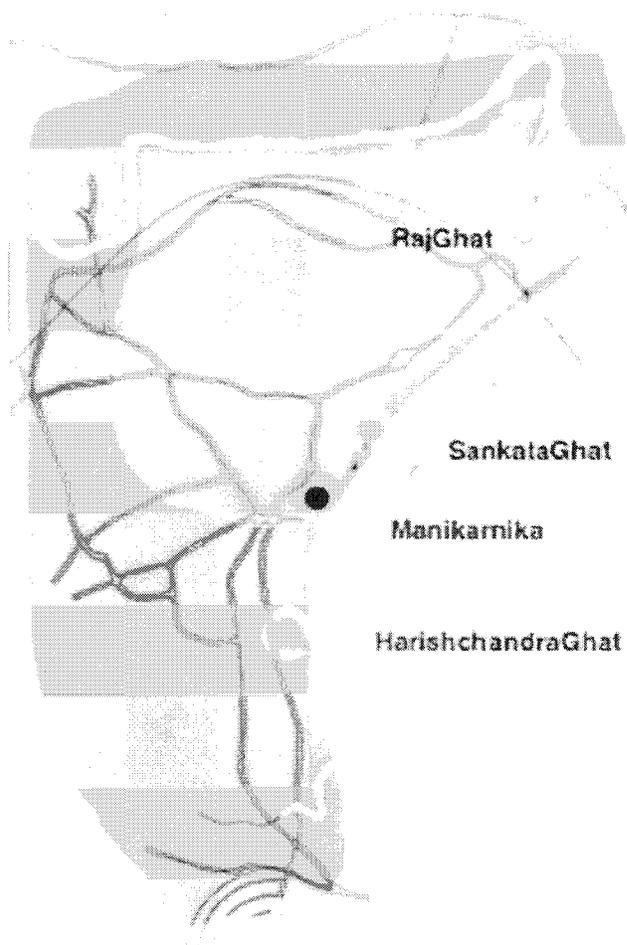


Fig. 2. Shift

be realised by the changing concepts in Hinduism between 9th BC and 12th AD.

The religion of Aryans till this time consisted of just the sacrificial rituals based on the Vedic utterances. The power in these utterances could be harnessed through ritual practice of various kinds, not only for gaining worldly ends, but ultimately for the attainment of immortality. The ritual basically, was a resonant performance. When uttered ritualistically by those entitled to do so and with proper intentions, they resonated with power. (Lipner, 1994) During this time the text and the voice, or the voice of the text was all-powerful. But as the Aryans and the indigenous people intermingled, cultic representations became a feature of Hinduism.

Puranas, which are a part of Vedic literature mention a form of religion which was not a part of traditional Brahminic sacrificial cult and which was becoming increasingly popular soon after the Common Era. It consisted of pilgrimages and visits to holy sites and rivers, of temples and idol worship, etc. At this stage the discipline of visualisation started gaining a distinct prominence over the voice of texts in Hinduism and this shift is well represented in Varanasi. Also, by this time Shiva as the Lord of the Universe had already been established and Varanasi came to be known as Shiva's city. With this change there was a need to sacralize spots and myth provided the very base for doing this.

The myth, which led to the shifting of cremation grounds to Manikarnika in the centre of the city, goes like this:

“Shiva and Parvati were wandering and they came upon Vishnu, who for the past 50,000 years was performing austerities in order to create the universe. Shiva and Parvati saw Vishnu burning with the fire of his ascetism. Shiva was entranced, and with the violent trembling of his delight his earring dropped into the nearby tank, which Vishnu had dug up with his discus. This tank was thenceforth known as Manikarnika (jewel of the ear)kund(tank). Aroused from the difficulties of his

austerities, Vishnu was told to demand a boon. He requested that since Shiva's ear-ring had been studded with mukta (pearl), this sacred place should confer mukti (liberation).”(Eck, 1982)

Manikarnika, then, is the place where the genesis of the universe occurs. As mentioned earlier, during this time visualisation in worship had developed and hence the myth was represented in the form of Manikarnika kund (tank) and pavilion for keeping Vishnu's footprints. As this site became the most sacred spot, it was found necessary to make it the spot for cremation because it was said that to die near the footprints would lead one to liberation. A temple of Shiva was also constructed here because it is he who whispers taraka mantras (words recited at the deathbed) in the ears of the dead lying on the pyre, which liberate the soul.

Thus the Vedic texts which ruled the layout of the cremation grounds towards the south of the city were overridden by the changing context- the changing concepts of Hinduism and concepts of death where cremation was no longer considered to be impure. On the other hand it was a sacrifice and had to be adjacent to the most sacred spot. In no other city, the cremation grounds are within the centre except in Varanasi, where due to the myth associated with it, Manikarnika became a sacred spot, and hence a ground for cremation. Thus

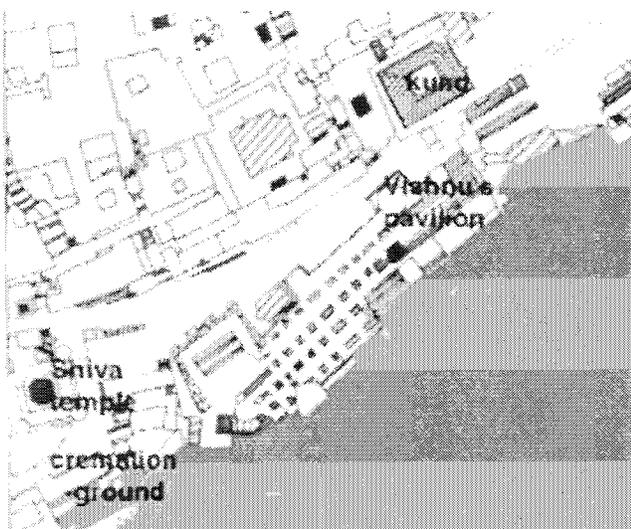


Fig. 3. Manikarnika Ghat

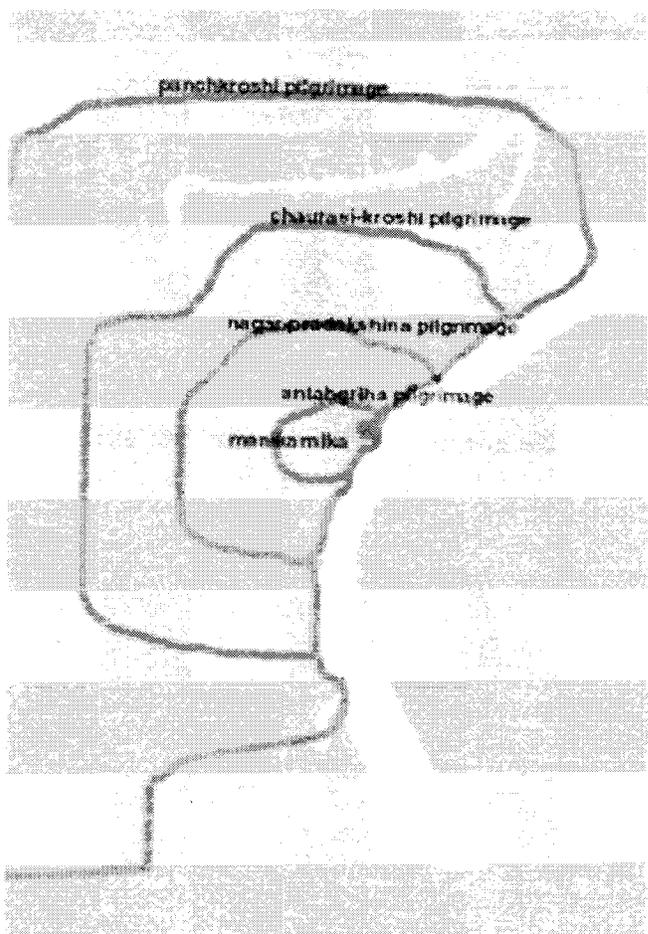


Fig. 4. Centre-Periphery

myth became one of the key factors in making Manikarnika significant.

Centre – Periphery

As already discussed in the mandala, the centre is the highly energised point. The most significant aspect of devotional dynamism in Hinduism is circumambulation, which proceeds in a clockwise direction around a sacred person, image or object and even around the temple itself. Circumambulation is a rite constituting a bodily participation in movement and prayer. The centre functions as a focus and there is a radiation of energy outwards, from the centre towards the periphery. This notion is evident in terms of the city, the built-forms and the body.

Varanasi is a kind of symbol, which condenses whole of India into a great sacred circle, a geographical mandala (cosmic map). The city is zoned into progressively smaller circles. Each zone has its own pilgrimage of circumambulation. For eg. The great Panchkroshi road circles the whole of Kashi and to live within the confines of this zone is considered to be auspicious by the residents. The pilgrims take five days to circumambulate taking this route on foot and visit 108 shrines on their way. This route passes through urban spaces such as Manikarnika and thus ties them up together. There is a set- sequence, which is followed. For eg, it begins and ends at Manikarnika, as it is Manikarnika which symbolises the creation and completion processes. At the beginning of the pilgrimage Manikarnika, forms a part of the periphery but at the end, it becomes the centre, the focus of the circumambulatory route. Geographically, it stands at the dividing line between two equal divisions of the city. Thus location of the site vis-à-vis the city played a key role in making it what it is.

This idea of centre periphery is also evident when we look at the Shiva temple and the Manikarnika kund located here. In the case of the temple, the centre reaches high in the form of shikhara (spire at the top of the main chamber), whereas in case of the tank it is a vertical shaft of space going down. The link between the heaven, earth and the world under is represented physically here. It is here, at the centre, that the worshipper may experience transformation as he comes into direct contact with the cosmic order.

This notion is carried forward again in the case of ritual. During the cremation the body is placed on the pyre and the person performing the ritual circumambulates it seven times. This is to energise the centre from where the 'prana' or the spirit slowly rises up and is released. Based on idea of centre-periphery the ritual has been able to link the body and the space, both at the level of the built-form (micro level) and that of the city (macro level).

Creation- Destruction

Manikarnika evolved as a place for creation based on the myth related earlier. In early Brahminic Hinduism, that is, during the time when the settlement was at Rajghat, the sacrificial ritual was all-important. In the Sacrificial ritual the altar had to be built in

the right shape, facing the right direction and with the requisite number of bricks. Then the ritual began to the accompaniment of the Vedic chants.

The space where the sacrificial ritual was performed became sacred for a temporary period, and was sometimes referred to as navel or centre-point of the world. The time during which it was performed became the sacred time opening the doors of immortality. The yajna (ritual) was likened to a womb with the patron as an embryo. The sacrifice gave birth to the patron and as such was the bridgehead to the transcendent.

There are quite many similarities between this and the death ritual. The site for cremation is prepared in exactly the same way as in fire-sacrifice, the prescriptive use of ritually pure wood, the purification of the site, its consecration with holy water and the establishment of Agni (fire God) with the proper use of mantras. Having dispersed his own body in the sacrifice, the dead reverts to the embryonic state and is then reborn. Thus Cremation is not merely an act of destruction but simultaneously an act of creation. (Lipner, 1994)

This union of the opposites is well displayed in the lingam of Shiva temple at Manikarnika. In imagery, Shiva is the erotic ascetic, a figure of contrasts. His symbol is the phallus, a shaft of black stone, standing in the centre of the tear-drop shaped bowl of the same material, representing the female sexual organ, God at one with the Goddess, male with female, the reconciliation of opposites.

Thus Manikarnika is the spot where the opposing forces unite, and this is represented both ritually and physically. Although Manikarnika, evolved as a place where the genesis of the world occurs, but it was the death ritual by which it is prominently known. This was because of a shift in the perception of death.

This is just one urban space in Varanasi. In a similar way the city as such can be divided into distinct physical areas based on the rituals taking place in the external public domain. The ancient streams and pools, the temples and its ruins, the lanes and pilgrimage routes give us clues to the various aspects of the city. Some of these places which were important in the earlier times are no longer there. The city has changed a lot in the past 700 years, with hardly a stone left upon stone. It has seen the comings and goings of different rulers and their powers. Muslim rulers destroyed parts of it several times between the twelfth and the seventeenth centuries. In the eighteenth century substantial parts of the city were reconstructed. "And yet with all this change, most of those places of the great Sanskrit tradition are still here, remembered and reconstructed by way of rituals" (Eck, 1982)

CONCLUSIONS

Myth, physical setting and the rituals form a vocabulary for reading an urban space. There is a specific structure for the evolution of the place. In the case of Manikarnika, the locational aspects of the site came first. Then a myth was attached to it and was represented by the architecture physi-

cally. Structured events highlighting the myth began and then it became a cyclic process where the three affected each other and were (still are being) transformed over a period of time.

The city can thus be read in terms of rituals occurring in external public spaces. "These spaces are directly lived through their associated images and symbols and hence are the spaces of 'inhabitants' and 'users'." (Lefebvre, 1991)

The rituals link these external spaces of the city with each other. Although the space has an individual identity but it is a part of the whole. To understand it one has to see it in the context of whole city and viceversa. This external order when seen in terms of myth and rituals helps in arriving at a spatial structure that links the people to the city. This linkage is not only on the basis of visual recognition but also largely on ideology (at a symbolic, connotative level).

We have a world that is increasing in population, becoming more urbanised, is more aware of world issues, however is becoming increasingly alienated from social interaction and sense of place. People are distanced from events and issues through the filters in place due to globalisation. A stronger connection is required between the human being and their sense of place. And this can perhaps be done by a city design, which has a legible structure of urban spaces easily identifiable due to rituals or events.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

- Figure 1. *Mandala*
 Figure 2. *Shift*
 Figure 3. *Manikarnika Ghat*
 Figure 4. *Centre-Periphery*

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