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Heritage and the city. Practices of care resisting urban dispossession in Varanasi, U.P., India.

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Giuditta Soccali
Turin, September 19, 2021

Summary

This research investigates the pluralized and contested use of cultural heritage discourses and materialities in the historic city centre of Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India. Adopting heritage as epistemic entry point to urban processes, the research investigates the intertwined and conflicting ways in which the object 'heritage' is mobilized for imagining, planning and resisting alternative visions of the urban. Specifically, the research explores how urban heritage making processes relate to practices and discourses of urban dispossession and urban care.

From a theoretical and methodological perspective, the research engages with critical urban theory, political geography, cultural anthropology and recent critical literature on urban heritage governance and activism. It underpins on an in-depth, single case study analysis, developed through qualitative methods such as: field observation, document analysis, interviews, press and media discourse analysis and ethnographic techniques.

As many globally renown sacred cities, Varanasi, thrives on a tourism and pilgrimage-driven urban economy. Indian political authorities at both local and central levels envision urban development for the city as the expansion of its capacity to host visitors and pilgrims. This is achieved by materially and discursively reproducing the city as the cradle of Hindu history and religious identity in North India. This process consistently aligns the city to the Hindutva-driven, neoliberal political agenda of the current BJP party-led Indian government at both State and central level, which employs the lexicon and materialities of cultural heritage for pursuing urban change.

By exploring a local urban planning project known as Kashi Vishwanath Special Area Development Project (2018-ongoing), the research analyses the socio-economic transformation of the historical neighborhood targeted by the project area.

The research firstly delves into the political and institutional context of the project, showing how the ambitions and rationalities of local authorities intersect with the broader agenda of neoliberal restructuring and religious politics of the current Indian state government. In this context, the analysis reveals that cultural heritage – as both a materiality and a discourse – is currently employed by local and national authorities to legitimize processes of exclusionary spatial and economic restructuring.

Secondly, the research engages with the lives of the inhabitants of the area, most of whom have been or will be forced to relocate and to leave the neighborhood. This analysis investigates the various epistemologies and tactics emerging from the informal engagement of local people with local heritage – ruins, religious structures, historical narratives and the like. Drawing from studies in cultural anthropology and urban theory, the thesis argues that, in Varanasi, the relations between urban dwellers and the city's material and discursive heritages take the form of an *improvised ethno-entrepreneurialism*. This process allows locals to extract economic value from embedding individual identities to urban spaces, personal memories to collective histories, in a commodified narration targeted to attracting national and international visitors. Locals' reappropriation of historically dense urban spaces thus constitute an individual survival strategy against invisibility and erasure.

Thirdly, the research explores the more than two-decades long struggle of a local NGO for the preservation of built heritage in the historic city centre of Varanasi. Forcefully opposing the current KVSAD project as the symptom of an aggressive urban politics, the NGO is one of the few political voices raising against the use of cultural heritage for legitimizing processes of displacement and alteration to the build fabric. The research retraces the decades long activism of the NGO, underlining the role of local expertise and civic engagement as the driving forces for a vocabulary of heritage which talks of conserving and taking care of the urban history as a civic right.

By exploring these three intertwined contexts, the research advocates for a more in-depth engagement of urban scholars with the object 'heritage', whose ambivalent attributes – private vs public – and relationalities – property vs custody – inform both reactionary and radical urbanisms.

Acknowledgments

When I began my PhD, I believed it to be a substantially individual endeavour, which would have required long hours in libraries and extensive solitary writing. Now that I am finishing it, I cannot even recall the names and efforts of all those that made this journey not only possible, but collective, and for this I apologize.

First, I would like to express my gratitude to my first PhD supervisor, Giuseppe Cinà, for accompanying me during my first explorative year. His openness to dialogue and our many discussions fostered the future direction of this research. I also thank deeply Alberto Vanolo, my co-supervisor, for assisting me on the harsh moment of moving beyond my initial disciplinary boundaries and for introducing me to human geography. His reading suggestions, patient reviews of my chapters and continuous support have been crucial to the development of this thesis.

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List of Abbreviations

ACHS Association of Critical Heritage Studies

ASI Archaeological Survey of India

BJP Bharatiya Janata Party

FIR First Information Report

HRIDAY Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana

HUL Historic Urban Landscape

INSAF Indian Social Action Forum

KS Kautilya Society

KVSAD Kashi Vishwanath Special Area Development

PIL Public Interest Litigation

PMO Prime Minister Official (broadcast channel)

RSS Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

SDA Special Development Area

UP Uttar Pradesh

VDA Varanasi Development Authority

VHP Vishva Hindu Parishad

WH(L) World Heritage (List)

WIPO World Intellectual Property Organization

List of Recorded Interviews and Videos[1]

Interviews

22-11-2018 with Vrinda Dar, president of Kautilya Society, on Skype
30-12-2018 with Swapna Liddle, Director, INTACH Delhi, New Delhi
28-01-2019 with Rabindra Vasavada, Professor at CEPT University, Ahmedabad
30-01-2019 with P.K.V. Nair, public fonctionnaire, Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation
31-01-2019 with Neel Kamal, president, Centre for Heritage Management, Ahmedabad,
04-02-2019 with D, member of Kautilya Society, Varanasi
07-02-2019 with Manoj Kumar, urban planner, VDA, Varanasi
10-11-2019 with Vishal Singh, KVSAD Board CEO; Varanasi
19-11-2019 with Vishal Singh, KVSAD Board CEO; Varanasi

Videos

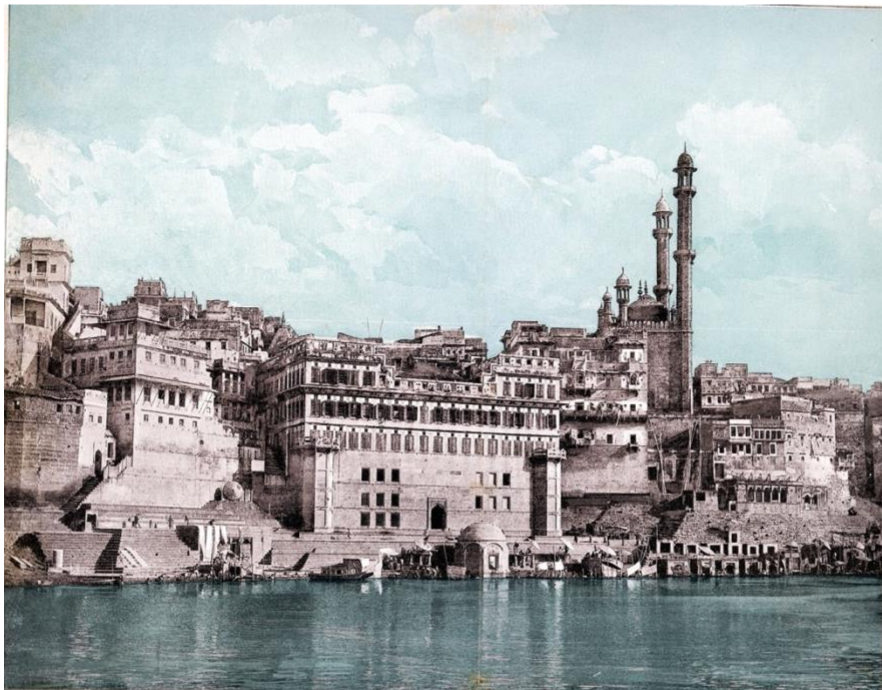
06-08-2019 with S.P., former *ghats* informal dweller, Bengali Tola, Varanasi
16-11-2019a with L. and other ex-residents, Dashashwamedh, Lahori and Garhwaasi Tola, Varanasi
16-11-2019b with L. and other ex-residents, Dashashwamedh, Lahori and Garhwaasi Tola, Varanasi
17-11-2019 with L. and other ex-residents, Dashashwamedh, Lahori and Garhwaasi Tola

[1] Only recorded and transcribed interviews are listed here. All other interviews mentioned in the text have been transcribed through written notes on field diary.

To Amrit and Meenakshi, for taking
care of me in Varanasi.

And to Lorenzo, for taking care of
me everywhere else.

Above in red, the Uttar Pradesh State in North India, with Varanasi Metropolitan District in black. Below, a view of Varanasi riverside with the palaces of the Rajas, and the minarets of the Aurangzeb Mosque .



Introduction

Geographical makings: heritage as conservative, heritage as radical

For as simple as it may appear, the notion of *heritage* is instead fuzzy and elusive. For long time considered as domain of technical disciplines, human geographers and social scientists have tended to avoid or to marginally tackle the term. Notably, critical enquiry has tended to dismiss discourses and practices labelled under the tenets of natural or cultural heritage, considering them inherently parochialist, elitist and conservative. The more evident result of this epistemological gap has been to confine knowledge production in the domain of heritage to technicians and policy makers. Why is this so, and which are the effects of such shortage of theoretical enquiry?

These questions may seem of little relevance for understanding urban worlds. However, in a global context where "to be human, one must have culture" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009: 25), cities worldwide are increasingly responding to the imperative that in order to be a city, one must have heritage, whether it is understood as monuments, museums, festivals or other tangible/intangible products. Indeed, the socio-economic wellbeing and development of cities seems to be more and more discursively and materially entrenched to the proliferation of policies that create, normalize and exploit urban cultures and urban heritage.

In 1988, geographer Dennis Hardy published in *Area*, a paper titled 'Historical Geography and Heritage Studies', with the aim of interrogating over the relation between the "traditional branch" of historical geography "and the emerging field of heritage studies" (Hardy, 1988: 333)-

In this paper, Hardy suggests that historical geographers engage with the pervasive, nascent field of heritage, which was becoming a growing sector of human activity (Hardy, 1988 referring to Hewison, 1987; Lowenthal et al., 1985; Lumley, 1988). The international scale of growth of the museum sector and of the tourism industry are two domains in which heritage assumes a pivotal role, which becomes hence interesting for cross-disciplinary studies. However, he says, it is not desirable for geographers to just "jump on a heritage bandwagon" (Hardy, 1988: 333). Geographers should engage with the very meanings of the term, and by doing so, discussing the potential and the significance it may bring to geographical understandings of place and society.

By eliciting from his analysis, the first, descriptive use of the term – according to which heritage are all inherited material and immaterial 'things' - he suggests a theorization of the concept as a multi-layered container of values, interpretations and ideologies:

> But at another level, heritage is a value-loaded concept, embracing (and often obscuring) differences of interpretation that are dependent on key variables, such as class, gender and locality; and with the concept itself locked into wider frameworks of dominant and subversive ideologies (where the idea of heritage can be seen either to reinforce or to challenge existing patterns of power). (Hardy, 1988: 333)

In this theorization, Hardy stresses the density and thickness of heritage: values are accumulated, plural, and they depend on variables which reflect the diversity of the social body. This plurality though is not without a form. Heritage is given a structure which reflects the social play between domination and oppression; heritage also obscures the diversity of meanings and values, partially concealing its own multiplicity and that of the social body. Ultimately, heritage is part of existing structures of power, contributing to or disrupting their unfolding.

In this structural understanding of heritage, Hardy considers the complexities of the concept. For him, heritage moves within society, as expression of it. The trajectories of such movements are drawn in the fractures which divide society along lines of identity such as class, race, gender and locality.

After describing the plurality and complexity of heritage formations, Hardy polarizes its discussion on two interconnected notions: that of heritage as *conservative* and of heritage as *radical*. There is a conservative facet in heritage, which reflects the sentiment of loss towards the past, a sentiment described by Lowenthal as a "universal catchword for looking back" (Lowenthal et al., 1985: 4). Such sentiment of nostalgia plays a fundamental

role in the elaboration of luminous, grandiose interpretations of the past. These interpretations, he says, are often used to support and “defend the status quo” (Hardy 1988), to conserve the social hierarchy and to legitimize state institutions. They build up on concepts of cultural hegemony and they are likely to elaborate ideas on identity based on territorial nationalism, patriotism, or ethnicity. Their role being essentially that of maintaining intact existing relations of power and class hierarchy, they also find their way in “popular consciousness [which] (...) would be moulded to suit the needs of a dominant class, readily absorbing concepts like nationalism or patriotism” (Hardy, 1988: 334). In the same period, Patrick Wright suggested a more nuanced understanding of why heritage issues are popular, pointing at their importance in the “everyday lives” of people, where heritage acts as a “travesty to suggest that we are all identically benighted dupes of the ruling illusion” (Hardy, 1988, p. 334; Wright, 2009 [1985]: 5).

Assuming that the conservative nature of heritage is always in place, Hardy suggests that the notion also holds a radical sense. In this perspective, “the heritage of palaces and imperial glory is but one perspective on a set of processes that are complex and varied” (Hardy, 1988: 335). Similarly to the interests of the contemporary *micro-history* and the “histories from below” (Featherstone and Griffin 2016; Ginzburg, Tedeschi, and Tedeschi 1993; Thompson 1991), a study of the radical nature of heritage aims to look at those heritages which are constructed from below, which are marginal, and located far from and in opposition with the spectacularism of the official past. It is the case of Jerry White’s historical analysis of Campbell Bunk, the “worst street in North London”, where the author seeks to make sense of the complexity of social and spatial relations of the community living on the street during a selected span of time (cited in Hardy, 1988). What emerges from the analysis is for Hardy a “kind of heritage [which] is not the stuff of museums that recall “our noble past”, but it is certainly “real history” (Hardy, 1988: 336). It is in this micro-perspective of the everyday local history that, he claims, the conservative nature of heritage can be challenged.

In this sense, radicalness emerges as a processual characteristic of heritage. Its role is disruptive, in that it aims to destabilize the “noble past” with micro-narrations of the local; this heritage – and the sentiment of memory embedded in it – is a place-based one, and the place is inevitably that of the everyday life.

Hardy’s seminal analysis failed to produce an immediate engagement from the part of geographers with what he addressed as “the heritage issue”. As such, in that period, heritage remained a largely technical domain in the hands of conservation studies, planning, architecture, art history, museology

and archaeology (Carta 1999; K. Taylor 1990; Tunbridge 1984; Millar 1989), with few theoretical exceptions focusing on the conceptual scope and ambiguities of the term (Babelon and Chastel, 2012; Lowenthal, 2011 [1996]).

Nevertheless, the dichotomy that Hardy raised between heritage as conservative and heritage as radical deserves attention.

In the last decades, the expansion of the heritage debate among social scientists – particularly in the Anglosaxon world[2] – has stimulated research on the nexus cultural heritage, identity, memory and place (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2000; D. C. Harvey 2015; Sather-Wagstaff 2015; D. C. Harvey 2001). The book *A Geography of Heritage: Power, Culture and Economy*, deeply informed by postmodernism and hybridization, condenses research debates on these issues until the early 2000s, deconstructing in various ways the complex and multifaceted role that the past plays in our societies – as an instrument to attaining social, economic, and political ends. Also, the book makes a case against the placelessness of identities, grounding heritage narratives and materialities into territories and geographical analysis (as in studies of historical and cultural geographies, see Harvey 2015; Harvey and Waterton 2015; Harvey 2001; Brace, Bailey, and Harvey 2006).

Mostly driven by the academic influence of the Association of Critical Heritage Studies group, cultural heritage has quickly become an intersectoral lens of enquiry – rather than a specific discipline – for exploring contemporary cultural and socio-economic processes. Always in the framework of the ACHS, but expanding initial investigations mostly linked to the European and North American contexts, the widely cited *The uses of heritage*, by Australian archaeologist Laurejane Smith, inaugurated a research strand informed by post-colonial, feminist and indigenous debates with a sharp focus on the nexus between heritage as a social construct and justice, inequality and power (Smith 2006; and for a collection of heritage-related research trajectories, see Waterton and Watson 2015). Heritage has also been crucially analysed in cultural tourism geographies as performed, experienced, imagined space at the crossroad of local/global spatialities and tourism practices (Edensor 1998; 2011; Ashworth and Tunbridge 2010; Urry and Larsen 2011; and for similar studies in Varanasi, see Zara 2012; 2015; 2016).

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[2] See, as an example, the Association of Critical Heritage Studies (ACHS), which reunites scholars investigating heritage as a field of critical enquiry (Winter 2013). See https://www.criticalheritagestudies.org/, accessed 25/04/2021.

Despite the abundant literature in cultural geography, the object *heritage* still only marginally intercepts the interests of urban scholars, so that in a recent edition of the Wiley 'Encyclopedia of Urban Studies', urban scholar Ana Pereira Roders deems urban heritage as a field "at risk of extinction" as "research and theory (…) are still highly partial, strongly influenced by their context and discipline, failing to outdo rhetorical assumptions" (Pereira Roders, 2019: 3). Heritage – whether urban, natural or cultural – seems to be a still timid engagement for critical urban scholars, who mostly leave it to the field of urban planning and management and are still hesitant on its potential as a lens for critically exploring contemporary urban worlds.

This research positions within this still fragile and tight space and aims at building bridges between critical urban theory and selected debates in critical heritage studies. Because the study of heritage is interdisciplinary by nature – as heritage is not a discipline per se (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2016; Winter 2014b) – the research develops as a cross-disciplinary dialogue, whose mandate is to question the relevance of heritage as a lens of enquiry for urban processes of dispossession and care. In this perspective, the research addresses what Hardy defined three-decades ago as the polarization between the conservative and the radical nature of heritage, but recasts it in contemporary processes of urban change, where reactionary urbanisms are resisted and challenged by everyday practices of urban activism and care.

A guide to the structure of the thesis

The research develops over six chapters. Chapter 1 discusses the emergence of the *neoliberal heritage paradigm* as a system of norms, technologies and practices that rely on the universalization and propertization of cultural and natural inheritances as *assets* and *resources*. Drawing from recent literature, it discusses the role of this paradigm in processes of urban gentrification and dispossession world widely. Dialoguing with recent theorizations of dispossession in the context of critical theory and American Indigenous thought, the chapter engages with vocabularies that challenge the logics of ownership, drawing on notions of care, custody, stewardship and the like.

The second chapter discusses the methodological approach and the qualitative tools used the research. Drawing from postcolonial, decolonial and feminist geographies, it develops a reflexive methodological account centred on issues of positionality, privilege and vulnerability. It suggests that, in the actual practice of field work, the line of privilege and vulnerability constantly shifts, making axial taxonomies such as male/female and north/south always in becoming, blurred and in need of constant negotiation. By detailing personal episodes from field experience, the chapter suggests to decodify privilege and power through grounded, situated field practice, opening up possibilities for doing intercultural, North-South research that do not reinforce essentialized positionalities.

The third and fourth chapters investigate the enactment of the neoliberal heritage paradigm in a specific urban context showing how processes of dispossession operate on the ground. Both chapters linger on the urban transformation process known as Kashi Vishwanath Special Area Development Project (KVSAD project) in the historic city centre of Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India (2018-onwards). Chapter 3 unveils the neoliberal ambitions of the project, the discursive legitimation that sustains it and its role in the post-millennial urban agenda of the current BJP-led Indian government. Chapter 4 details the spatial transformations ignited by the project, and the eviction process as narrated and practiced by local authorities and city dwellers. It highlights the dispossession of the bodies, memories and lands of the evicted and dwells on the erasure of the possibilities for intercultural coexistence and secularity in the area.

Chapter 5 the chapter explores the material and discursive making of the historic city centre of Varanasi through the lens of improvised urban entrepreneurs. Drawing from anthropological insights and recent urban studies, the ethnographic enquiry reveals that the heritage vocabulary allows individuals to carve out a temporary, interstitial space within the local urban economy. In local lives, the neoliberal heritage paradigm and processes of spontaneous care and custody intertwine each other, offering a precarious response to conditions of urban precarity, marginality and mobility.

Finally, chapter 6 offers insights into a third pathway of heritage production in the historic city centre of Varanasi. It explores the activities of a local NGO which surveyed, mapped and struggled to conserve the built environment and the social fabric of the area. Specifically, it dwells on the trial that opposed the local NGO to urban authorities and on the resonance of such trial in the public debate (2008-2016). Exploring emerging forms of urban expertise and authority, the chapter shows that the NGO merged the

vocabularies of heritage and custody/care for the city, in order to counter processes of socio-spatial dispossession and erasure.

The empirical analysis highlights the multiple uses of the "heritage" vocabulary. In Chapters 3 and 4, the discourse and practice of heritage is used to culturally legitimize urban transformations pivoting on exclusionary development. Such legitimization causes historical oblivion and spatial-temporal alienation to both those who remain and those that have been displaced. The disruption caused by the KVSAD project irreversibly undermines the social infrastructure that sustained life in the neighborhood.

Here, the lexicon of heritage refers to the aestheticizing restructuring of places through globalizing formulas aimed at capitalizing on tourism flows. This is coherent with the identification of urban heritage as "property": buildings and spaces are being alienated through property transfer and compensation; the use of the area becomes highly exclusionary; business spaces and relations are being restructured for maximum profitability.

In Chapter 5, and more explicitly in chapter 6, the notion of heritage comes to refer to a way to live the urban that is essentially a *caring* for the city as it is. Here, the vocabulary of heritage and inheritance claims for more granular interventions aimed at maintaining and improving urban space for present and future life. Moving beyond the mere conservation of the built environment, the heritage activism of the local NGO can be interpreted as a fragile space of democratization where the civil society aims to envision alternative urban futures for the city and its dwellers.

Chapter 1
Dispossessed inheritances

Introduction

This chapter explores the *making* of heritage as a material and discursive research object. It adopts a processual lens of enquiry, which allows to decentre the attention from heritage as a settled, static notion, to processes of *inheritance*, understood as a multi-temporal and multi-spatial relational framework. Coherently with this lens, the chapter does not focus on definitions and ontologies. Instead, it investigates how processes of inheritance are mobilized, both materially and discursively, in contemporary global processes such as neoliberal urbanization, privatization, dispossession and civil activism.

The first section introduces the *neoliberal heritage paradigm* as a system of norms, technologies and practices that rely on the universalization and propertization of cultural and natural inheritances as *assets* and *resources*. Drawing from recent literature on the subject, it explores the role of neoliberal heritage paradigm in fostering processes of urban gentrification and dispossession.

The second section introduces alternative but increasingly popular ways to resist and counteract heritage-driven dispossession processes. These actions, both discursive and practical, mostly underpin on the mobilization of recognition and re-possession claims against colonial and racialized taxonomies. However, this section concludes that unless studies and practices

substantially scrutinize and challenge the normalization of cultural/natural inheritances as assets, no heritage activism can be fully emancipatory.

By comparing the terms 'cultural property' and 'cultural heritage', the third section sets the normative basis for disenfranchising the grammar of heritage from the lexicon of proprietary relationality – centred on the concepts of exploitation, exclusivity and alienability. Through addressing specific cases in literature, it shows the limitedness of the property framework in accounting for the complexities inherent in processes of inheritance, fundamentally driven by imperatives of collective transmission, custody, and care.

The fourth section explores theories of (mis)recognition and dispossession developed in the context of critical theory. It dwells on these issues for the relevance they have in explaining and informing insurgent activisms which make use (also) of the heritage discourse. Intersecting political theory with American indigenous thought and activism, it characterizes processes of dispossession as the material and immaterial expropriations of humans' possibilities to relate with spaces, bodies and times.

The last section further develops inheritance as a multi-temporal and multi-spatial relational framework. Drawing from the previous section, it suggests that expropriation processes are in fact processes of *inheritance dispossession,* or of forced dis-inheritance, which encourage the alienation of the subject from the outside world. By bridging recent contributions from critical heritage studies and theories of care, the section concludes that processes of heritage making should promote practices of collective care and custody, acknowledging the intrinsic vulnerability of human and non-human subjects.

1.1 The neoliberal heritage paradigm: globalization, privatization and the abuse of the city

The last decades have seen the proliferation of a universalist ethos towards cultural and natural inheritances, with international agencies such as UNESCO playing a prominent role (Lynn Meskell 2018; Berliner and Bortolotto 2013; De Cesari 2010). The supposed universal value of cultural and natural heritage converged in the paradigm of multiculturalism, a liberal alternative to the inadequacy of eurocentrism and ethno-centrism, all the more evident in the last decades of the 20th century (C. Taylor et al. 1994).

Multiculturally-oriented policies, aimed at the institutionalization of cultural difference and at the "anthropologization" of culture (Brumann, 2018, 2014; for critics of cultural difference approaches see Holtorf, 2017a, 2017b) encouraged the global normalization of cultural and natural inheritances by bureaucrats and experts of international agencies devoted to selecting, listing and financing heritage sites worldwide (James and Winter 2017).

With the aim of unpacking the heritage-driven universalizing discourses, scholars have suggested how it in fact corresponds to the strengthening of nation states as traditional heritage-makers. This has encouraged the use of heritage also for domestic politics. Anthropologist Chiara De Cesari has argued that while the World Heritage program seems to have the objective of transcending national boundaries, in the aim of creating an imagined, international community (Hitchcock 2002) it does not only build "upon the tradition of national heritages" but "paradoxically, (…) reinforces the nation-state", at the expenses of local multivocality in the creation of dissonant or new heritage (De Cesari, 2010: 299). On a similar line, other scholars investigated the "rush to inscribe" sites on the World Heritage List as a cultural diplomacy strategy that previously under-represented states use for enforcing political allegiances, oftentimes through "corridor diplomacy" and in overt challenge to experts' authority (Lynn Meskell 2015; 2012; L. Meskell et al. 2015).

In this perspective, the universalization of global heritage results more as a national branding strategy – oriented towards the global community as much as the national population –, with international agencies playing as marketers of national wonders (Aronczyk, 2013; Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013; Nakano and Zhu, 2020; on urban branding see Vanolo, 2017). As heritage scholar Bailey Adie suggested, the structure and functioning of the World Heritage *brand* does not depart much from a business franchising model, with state parties acting as franchisees and heritage sites as franchise units (Adie 2017). Interestingly, she draws attention to the term 'property' used by UNESCO for addressing heritage places and practices[3]. As I will show in more in detail in the next section, this terminology focuses on concepts of exploitation, alienability and exclusivity, assuming that cultural/natural inheritances are to be owned, whether by the State or by private entities.

[3] UNESCO has used the term 'property' in various conventions and in official texts, among which the Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972). In this text and in the Operational Guidelines, cultural and natural inheritances as are addressed alternatively as 'heritage' or 'property'. Text available at: https://whc.unesco.org/en/convention/, accessed, 05/03/2021.

Over the last few decades, neoliberal globalization and the universalization of cultural/natural heritage have wiretapped each other, producing tangible impacts at a global level. Consider the following sentence from UNESCO Historic Urban Landscape Declaration (2011):

> Urban heritage is for humanity a social, cultural and economic *asset*, defined by an historic layering of values that have been produced by successive and existing cultures and an accumulation of traditions and experiences, recognized as such in their diversity. (italics added, UNESCO HUL Declaration, 2011.[4])

Normalizing urban heritage as *asset* points at its capitalization, disciplining it as marketable object. The paradigm of *heritage as asset* has gained immense fortune (Throsby 2016; Licciardi and Amirtahmasebi 2012; Throsby 1999)[5]. Over the past decades, urban heritage has been addressed as a resource, as a property and as a lever for development by politicians, professionals, academia and the civil society alike[6]. The materialization of cultural assets drives the urban tourism economy, even more so since the international standardization of the intangible heritage concept (Berliner and Bortolotto 2013; Bortolotto 2013). International legal instruments have been used for privatizing a wide variety of knowledges and practices, causing the global success of "ethno-commodities" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), forging "new patterns of sociality, all within the marketplace" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009: 26).

In the early 2000s, cultural sociologist George Yúdice detected the magnitude of the transformations happening in the domain of culture. The change, he claimed, was fully epistemological:

> Culture-as-resource is much more than commodity; it is the lynchpin of a new epistemic framework in which ideology and much of what Foucault called

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[4] Full text available at https://whc.unesco.org/en/hul/. Accessed, 5/03/2021.

[5] Cultural economist David Throsby, well-known for introducing the concept of *cultural capital*, explains: "the theoretical basis for treating heritage as an asset lies in capital theory. Capital can be defined as durable goods that give rise to a flow of services over time that may be combined with other inputs such as labour to produce further goods and services. Economists conventionally distinguish between different types of capital, including physical or manufactured capital, human capital, and natural capital. Recently, the concept of capital has been extended into the field of art and culture, in an effort to recognize the distinctive features of certain cultural goods as capital assets, and to capture the ways in which such assets contribute, in combination with other inputs, to the production of further cultural goods and services. Thus, the economic concept of cultural capital has taken shape" (in Licciardi and Amirtahmasebi, 2012).

[6] As in European Union URBACT Programme (https://urbact.eu/culture-heritage), or Indian HRIDAY Scheme http://mohua.gov.in/cms/hriday-scheme.php, accessed 05/03/2021.

disciplinary society (…) are absorbed into an economic or ecological rationality, such that management, conservation, access, distribution and investment (…) take priority[7]. Culture-as-resource can be compared with nature-as-resource, particularly as both trade on the currency of diversity. (Yúdice, 2004: 1)

Investigating neoliberal rationalities, anthropologists Rosemary J. Coombe and Lindsay Weiss have argued that "under conditions of neoliberalism, (…) the enactment of government policy relies increasingly upon the self-empowerment of capacitated citizens and self-organized communities in marketized relationships which position cultural heritage as a resource" (Coombe and Weiss, 2015: 43; also see Coombe, 2012). This is because neoliberal restructuring should not be understood as a withdrawal of the state, but rather as a multiscale interdependence between state actors, private agencies and civil society, all enacting authority through specific technologies of government (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010; N. Rose and Miller 2010; Ong 2007). In the paradigm of heritage-as-resource, regulatory and managerial functions – from inventory and listing to preservation and use – have gained momentum as *distributed tasks* operated by international, national and subnational players. In this perspective, cultural and natural heritage are being "measured with reference to asset management, to the attraction of enterprise, to the facilitation of the entrepreneurial activities of the citizen as *homo œconomicus*, and to the capacity to foster accumulation" (Comaroff, 2011: 145).

Also, the supposed international duty to preserve human/non-human inheritances has contributed to their depoliticization. As Yúdice remarked:

> When culture is touted as a resource, it departs from the Gramscian premise that culture is a terrain of struggle and shifts strategy to processes of management. Compatible with neoliberal conversions of civil society, culture as resource is seen as a way of providing social welfare and quality of life in the context of diminishing public resources and the withdrawal of the state form the guarantees of the good life. (Yúdice, 2004: 279).

In his studies on urban heritage and gentrification, anthropologist Michael Herzfeld claimed that the fracture between "vernacular culture" and

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[7] Foucault initially elaborated the notion of "disciplinary society" in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Here, he addressed the evolution of technologies of control and punishment into normalizing disciplinary systems which permeates society through indirect techniques of power such as categorization, standardization or processing. These techniques come to form legitimized rationales which are aimed at correcting behaviours categorized as deviant (Falzon, O'Leary, and Sawicki 2013; D. Taylor 2011; Foucault 2019; 1980). For a rediscovery of Foucault's main corpus of work through the lens of a geography of power, see (Elden 2016).

“high culture” is still dominant in urban policies aimed at preserving urban areas (notably in Herzfeld, 2015). The protection of high culture, touted as urban preservation, ultimately reveals as the “legitimized expropriation of inner city areas” by state actors and corporations, with scientific expertise sanctioning the process as the celebration of national glories (Herzfeld, 2015, p. 5; on the impact of built heritage on the housing market see for example Moro et al., 2013). Discourses on the inevitability of market mechanisms also play the lead (Herzfeld, 2009: 255; and more generally, on neoliberalism as “inevitable” see Fisher, 2009). For scientific expertise, promoting urban spaces as assets and resources on the market seems a more acceptable alternative than viewing them altered or destroyed, even when their fear of destruction ultimately translates into an even more destructive preservation of emptied neighborhoods (Micelli and Pellegrini 2017).

Human geographers and urban scholars have recently started to analyse how mechanisms of spatial dispossession intersect with heritage conservation. Some of them suggest that urban gentrification responds to global processes of cultural colonization (Arkaraprasertkul 2019; Cocola-Gant and Lopez-Gay 2020; Hayes 2020; Zaban 2017a). Exploring transnational gentrification in the UNESCO World Heritage city of Cuenca, urban sociologist Matthew Hayes argues that “the integration into global networks of leisure mobility and heritage urbanism conjures [Cuenca’s] history of colonial caste hierarchies, urban–rural divisions, and dispossession of informal labour – particularities that give local form to global processes of accumulation” (Hayes, 2020: 2). He concludes that the cultural – colonial – lifestyle choices of affluent North Americans aimed at securing their capital in Latin American real estate markets “is a key condition of intensified neoliberal urbanism in Cuenca” (Hayes, 2020: 14; 2018). Similarly, sociologist Hila Zaban observes that the gentrification of Baka neighbourhood in Jerusalem has been triggered by the preservation of ancient buildings, as the high costs associated with preservation attracted rich foreign investors and wealthy people willing to pay for authentic or authentic-like historic homes (Zaban 2019; 2017a). Both scholars argue that the transnational mobility of high-income lifestyle migrants from Northern Europe and Northern America leads to transnational gentrification and to the planetarisation of rent gaps (Hayes and Zaban, 2020).

As the brief review above has detected, urban preservation policies likely result in expropriations and privatizations that benefit affluent investors and landowners. This process benefits from legislations adopting ownership instruments as they can be mobilized for managing transactions and resolving

legal disputes[8]. In these terms, heritage can be framed essentially as a "legalism, modelled on the concept of property inheritance" (Herzfeld, 2015: 6).

1.2 Towards an urban heritage activism

In response and counterpoint to these top-down processes, the last few decades have seen the proliferation of what can be described as *heritage activism*. This activism can be understood as the engagement of social movements with socio-cultural claims for recognitional and/or redistributive justice (De Cesari and Herzfeld 2015; Mozaffari and Jones 2019; L. Smith 2010; Emma Waterton and Smith 2010).

In her studies on Jerusalem, Hila Zaban reflects on the role that preserving Palestinian architecture could have in maintaining and igniting forms of political struggle (Zaban 2017b; 2017a). In analysing the role of Palestinian civil society for resisting cultural and land dispossession by Israeli institutions and for formulating a Palestinian cultural discourse, Chiara De Cesari shows that a field such as cultural heritage, which is deeply rooted in colonial taxonomies, can be turned into a decolonial terrain of struggle for self-determination (De Cesari, 2019: 7). In her analysis, heritage becomes simultaneously a language, connecting cultural and land claims, and a technology of government, where the civil society, acting through transnational networks and regimes of practices, fills the vacuums of the Palestinian "non-sovereign, quasi-state" (De Cesari, 2019: 7). The cultural heritage activism of Palestinian NGOs emerges as indicator of insurgent citizenry, of "governmentality from below", where artistic practice is mobilized for resisting colonial dispossession of history, memory and the land (De Cesari, 2019; also see Puzon, 2019 in Lebanon; Holston, 2009 in Brazil).

Similarly, heritage scholar Laurajane Smith has questioned the role of cultural recognition in Australian Aboriginals' claims for their lands and their past. She dismisses an epistemology of heritage exclusively centred on identity, instead she targets the interlinkages between cultural and economic claims: "recognition is thus not simply about 'valorizing group identity', nor

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[8] This has been particularly the case with intangible cultural heritage. The provision of legal instruments for safeguarding and enhancing cultural expressions has been translated into a juridical system which adheres to WIPO intellectual property rights and to more recent elaborations over the notion of cultural collective property (Aragon 2012).

can it be reduced to a 'generic human need' or self-realisation. Recognition is about addressing misrecognition and the lack of status and parity this affords" (Smith, 2010: 62; on recognition and redistribution she draws on Fraser and Honneth, 2003; Fraser, 2001).

Heritage activism, often led by non-state, local and informal actors, shows that the appropriation of heritage-making practices is pluralist and contested. It suggests that the lexicon of heritage serves different goals: reinforcing nationalist or colonial apparatuses as well as dismantling them; celebrating ethnic difference and contrasting it; transforming urban neighbourhoods as well as conserving them; expropriating lands as well as reclaiming their possession.

The coexistence of multiple interests and tactics gravitating around urban heritage conservation in postcolonial cities have brought Adèle Esposito and Gabriel Fauveaud to talk about "heritage hybridity", as a third space "shaped by case-by-case combinations of dual rationalities, short-term economic profitability and socio-political legitimation, at both the individual and collective level" (Fauveaud and Esposito, 2020: 14). In this picture, the "scope and raison d'être of hybrid heritage have deviated from the fundamental international principles of the common good and transmission to future generations. Instead, this constantly reconfigured heritage becomes a ramified, fragmented and ambiguous field of short-term empowerment" (Fauveaud and Esposito, 2020: 14).

Similarly, Michael Herzfeld warns that the awareness over the "abuses" of heritage, which is increasingly growing in cities around the world, may only serve to "align hitherto poor and marginalized communities with newly emergent or well-established elites" (Herzfeld, 2015: 20). For him, a lucid analysis should consider that heritage activists' social movements, just like other urban movements, point now more than ever to "the growing sense of insecurity, or precariousness, of disadvantaged populations, a situation that in turn threatens to submerge any new insights in the vicarious fatalism of assuming that the market must prevail in the end" (Herzfeld, 2015: 20).

These unresolved issues suggest that there is a lack of and need for epistemologies that bring emancipatory potential within the very terminology and scope of heritage practice. The point is not only to address injustice and reclaim justice, but to renew the vocabulary and meanings embedded in heritage thinking, in order to make such vocabulary more centred on human and more-than-human values.

Adopting a micropolitical perspective, Gustav Wollentz, Marko Barišić and Nourah Sammar analyse the conversion of an electric substation

in Rudnik neighborhood, Mostar, into a monument to honour mine workers (Wollentz, Barišić, and Sammar 2019). By observing and participating in the process ignited by young local activists and open to anyone in the district, the authors suggests that heritage-making can be a process in which nostalgia and professional identity are mobilized for envisioning a future based on shared values such as the dignity of work, while dismissing cultural values that are exclusive and ethnically dividing. Echoing the alternative heritages suggested by heritage scholar Cornelius Holtorf (Holtorf, 2017b; on a similar note see Muzaini and Minca, 2020), the authors introduce the concept of human dignity as a component of a new set of non-ethnic values to be celebrated through heritage-making processes:

> We argue that a process-oriented approach to heritage and nostalgia as a future-oriented basis for action are tied to the notion of personal and collective dignity. First of all, the act of allowing for people to participate and play a role in building the monument respected the dignity of the individual in the local community, whose personal creativity, input and skills were being valued and incorporated. Therefore, people felt that they were being treated with respect, resulting in a sense of self-worthiness and self-esteem. Secondly, interviewees argued that the monument treated the memory of the miners with dignity. (…) The dignity of the workers was seen as restored or revived by creating the monument. (Wollentz et al., 2019: 209).

Recasting the notions of dignity and self-worthiness as constituents of heritage-making practices is an important step towards the fertilization of the term with meanings and values that go beyond the terminologies of cultural/natural property, asset and resource. In the next sections, I will argue that in order to tackle processes of dispossession of cultural and natural inheritances, we need to unpack the paradigm of heritage-as-property and analyse the fundamental questions of ownership and possession that seem to legitimize dispossession – and re-possession – processes around the world.

In the next section, I will dwell on key conceptual and legal complexities inherent in the term *cultural property* and on the opportunities brought instead by the use of the terms *heritage* and *inheritance*. I will insist on the tension between the public nature of culture and the core features of property rationale (exclusivity, alienability and exploitation). The analysis will show that while reclaiming cultural and natural property can be a potentially emancipatory tool for groups to claim back lands or modes of production for their own socio-economic benefit, colonially imposed notions of ownership are unlikely to account for the multiple significances and claims that are constitutive of processes of inheritance.

1.3 Heritage beyond property: navigating the public/private divide

In a paper published in the *International Journal of Cultural Property* in 1992, two experts of cultural property law of the University of Sydney explored the differences between 'cultural property' and 'cultural heritage', and they argued that the latter term should be used in Common Law (Prott and O'Keefe 1992). They pointed out that the legal concept of property is too narrow for encompassing the range of values inherent in humans' relations with cultural and natural legacies. While property law essentially protects the right to exploit, to exclude and to alienate as prerogatives of the possessor, "the fundamental policy behind cultural heritage law is protection of the heritage for the enjoyment of present and later generations" (Prott and O'Keefe, 1992: 309). There has been a conceptual shift from the functionality of the ownership rationale – which looks at titles of ownership – to the temporality of inheritance processes – which point to an intergenerational and multi-spaced form of possession –, that is better expressed through the notion of custody:

> Heritage creates a perception of something handed down; something to be cared for and cherished. These cultural manifestations have come down to us from the past; they are our legacy from our ancestors. (Prott and O'Keefe 1992, 311)

This echoes the human-nature relations of Australian aboriginals, who "rather than believing that the land belonged to them, (…) believed that they belonged to the land: that it had been entrusted to them by their spirit ancestors and that they had certain duties towards it and rituals to perform on it" (Prott and O'Keefe, 1992: 310). Also, as I will show in the next section, this very concept relates to the practices of Indigenous American scholars and activists against processes of land dispossession[9]. But it also resonates with contemporary forms of environmental legal personhood conferred to natural entities such as rivers, forests and non-human animals that have recently been

[9] In *Intergenerational Justice*, Axel Gosseries reports a native American proverb: "Treat the earth well: it was not given to you by your parents, it was loaned to you by your children. We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children" (Gosseries et al. 2009, 119). Sharing a similar intergenerational perspective, other Indigenous Americans scholars and activists maintain that the possession of land responds to imperatives of custody rather than ownership (L. B. Simpson 2017; A. Simpson and Smith 2014; Nichols 2019). This issue will be further analysed in sections 1.3 and 1.4.

experimented in India, New Zealand, Ecuador, Bolivia and the United States (Gordon 2018; The Guardian 2017).

While it seems that the term 'cultural heritage' has replaced 'cultural property' around the world, their evolution in international debates runs parallel, with one prominent intergovernmental treaty targeting the Protection of Cultural *Property* in the Event of Armed Conflict – The Hague Convention of 1954 – and another addressing the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural *Heritage* – The UNESCO Convention on World Cultural and Natural Heritage of 1972. The terminology centred on cultural property is used mostly by legal scholars, and in conventions targeting the transfer and alienability of cultural sites and objects, while the concept of heritage has been widely employed by social scientists, conservation technicians, policymakers, politicians and activists worldwide. However, the conceptual gap between cultural property and cultural heritage as described by Prott and O'Keefe, is at risk of conflation, with the second increasingly leaning on an ownership-based relationality, as in the case of intangible cultural heritage being *safeguarded* through individual or collective property rights (UNESCO 2003; WIPO 2018).

In this perspective, anthropologist Lorraine Aragon coined the term "intangible property nationalism" to describe the "impulse of international organizations and postcolonial states to view folkloric cultural practices with a combined sense of ownership rights over the immaterial, drawn from intellectual property, and a sense of defensive group ownership, drawn from cultural property models" (Aragon, 2012: 271). Here, intangible heritage would essentially become the combined product of the two types of property regimes, losing the characters that Prott and O'Keefe described as exceeding and even challenging the logics of pure ownership. Aragon's investigation of intangible property nationalism in Indonesia brings her to the conclusion that this system of property rights essentially serves nationalistic goals aimed at developing new inexhaustible markets in lieu of the overexploitation of natural resources.

Hence, the creation of national cultural property laws such as the 19/2002 Copyright Law and the more recent Draft Cultural Property Law On Traditional Cultural Expressions (Aragon 2012, 288; Susanti, Susrijani, and Sudhiarsa 2019). As Aragon explains, the term 'traditional' does not recognize local communities as historical owners. It only gives them the right to exploit cultural expressions in the form of trusteeship of national patrimony owned by the state. Without being recognized of their *indigeneity*, which would allow them to reclaim lost territories or resources, local groups and communities are therefore benefitting only partial rights of possession, while

full ownership remains with the state. This clearly opens a very narrow space of participation, limited to the contribution to economic growth or to top-down development (Aragon 2012, 289).

More relevantly, the study by Aragon among Batik producers in Indonesia harshly shows the inadequateness of property law and ownership-based relationality in accounting for the multi-layered connectivity of people to times, spaces and objects. A key term in this sense is that of '*distributed*' or 'collaborative authority'. Most Indonesian artisans dismiss the demonization of copying and imitation brought by copyright laws, reflecting on the fact that "ethical forms of copying can be a method for vital cultural reproduction rather than thoughtless replication", or acknowledging that "they copy us, but we copy them too, so it's a win-win situation" (Aragon 2012, 292). Refusing to be regarded as creators of specific products, they consider themselves mainly as "followers":

> Indonesian regional artists routinely deny that they are the individual creators of the objects and performances they produce at the same time as they describe their particular innovative contribution and preeminent authority. (…) Artists (…) said that they considered themselves to be just "followers" (*penyusul*) of their cultural or ancestral tradition. (…) I would argue that this position indexes a trans-sectarian cultural context where an arts producer's publicly asserted modesty and respect for a long ancestral tradition positions him or her as a purer and more trustworthy vehicle for aesthetically conveyed moral truths. Ultimately, such a "noble" position makes the skilled producer seem a better bet for financial support and community sponsorship. (Aragon 2012, 284).

This accounts for the idea of cultural heritage as a shared multi-temporal and multi-spatial repertoire of practices, which is already regulated by precise and meaningful collective norms. The introduction of proprietary relationality not only collides with these norms, but it disrupts some of the processes fostered by them, such as economic reciprocity, rotating community service, reciprocal assistance, local solidarity and moral imperatives. The colonially imposed system of property rights is not able to match and express the diversity of the "complex social and spiritual linkages between peoples and their surrounding world", an issue raised also by legal researcher Karolina Kuprecht in her study of the U.S. NAGPRA legislation (Kuprecht 2012, 39). As we will see, these linkages can be broadly conceptualized as *processes of inheritance* that, in line with the words of Indonesian artisans, are "neither wholly individualistic nor communal" (Aragon, 2012: 301), neither spatially bounded nor temporally fixed.

The next section will draw on recent contributions from critical theorists on the themes of (mis)recognition and dispossession, relating them

to humans' relations with cultural and natural inheritances. I will draw particularly from the recently published book *Theft is Property! Dispossession and Critical Theory* (2019) by political theorist Robert Nichols, and from the insights of American indigenous thought and activism. This will allow to conceptualize dispossession as an alienating process that deprives people not only of their lands and properties, but also of their memories, bodies and roles as custodians of more-than-human bonds with spaces and times. Secondly, the analysis will engage with Nichols' proposal that countering dispossession cannot be internal to the system of ownership and, instead, should go beyond the logics of possession. This will set the premises for discussing processes of inheritance as alternative to, instead of part of, the system of proprietary relations (section 1.5).

1.4 Dispossessed inheritances: insights from critical theory and Indigenous scholarship

Critical theory offers fruitful insights to unpacking the mechanisms of inheritance and the making of heritage as contested, plural processes, where asymmetrical power relations are in place. In particular, this thesis engages with the concepts of (mis)recognition and dispossession, two interwoven areas of inquiry in contemporary critical theory debates[10].

In section 1.1, I briefly mentioned the issue of (mis)recognition as a recurrent lens of inquiry for heritage scholars, practitioners and activists. Indeed, a focus on recognition disputes allows us to explore processes of denial and destruction of material and discursive inheritances (De Jong and

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[10] Critical Theory was originally developed as the Frankfurt School of German philosophy and social thought, with prominent exponents as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and, more recently, Jürgen Habermas, Alex Honneth, Rahel Jaeggi. Horkheimer wrote that "a theory is critical to the extent that it seeks human 'emancipation from slavery,' acts as a 'liberating (…) influence' (Horkheimer 1982, 246; Bohman 2019). For feminist scholar Iris Marion Young, "critical theory is a normative reflection that is historically and socially contextualized. Critical theory rejects as illusory the effort to construct a universal normative system insulated from a particular society. Normative reflection must begin from historically specific circumstances because there is nothing but what is, the given, the situated interest in justice, from which to start (…) Unlike positivist social theory, however, which separates social facts from values, and claimed to be value-neutral, critical theory denies that social theory must accede to the given. Social description and explanation must be critical, that is, aim to evaluate the given in normative terms." (Young 1990, 5). Currently, Critical Theory is more and more pluralized, escaping a single definition and benefitting from contributions of various epistemological traditions.

Rowlands 2008; L. Smith 2010; 2007; Villar and Vicencio 2019; Emma Waterton and Smith 2010; Weiss 2007). Most of these studies draw from a model of recognition developed in the early 1990s by German critical theorist Axel Honneth. This model of recognition was also discussed by, among others, Nancy Fraser, Jacques Rancière, Volker Schmitz, Emmanuel Renault and Tino Buchholz (Honneth, 2018 [1992], 2014; Schmitz, 2018; Renault, 2017; Honneth and Rancière, 2016; Buchholz, 2016; Fraser and Honneth, 2003).

In his book, *The Struggle for Recognition* (1992), Honneth is concerned with the "moral grammar" of collective life. He draws the idea from Hegel that identity formation is essentially a relational and ethical struggle. For both Hegel and Honneth, the struggle does not aim much at self-preservation and survival, as the construction of the moral foundations to collective life. The struggle is structured on three levels or relationships: the love relationship, which defines the individual identity through familial love; the rights or legal relationship, where the individual is accepted in the "circle of human subjects" through law and his/her status as legal person; and the ethical relation, where the vehicle of recognition is labour, and the subject is morally respected for his/her self-worth in society (Honneth 2018). For Honneth, misrecognition arises out of disrespect, which materializes in the violation of the body (first level), the denial of rights (second level) and the denigration of the way of life of the subject (third level). The denial of recognition and the consequent struggle that arises are seen as crucial generative moments: "the practical confrontations that arise in reaction to being denied recognition or treated with disrespect represent conflicts over the expansion of both the substantive content and social scope of the status of a legal person" (Honneth, 2018: 118). Also, the struggle reveals the essential vulnerability of human subjectivity, resulting from the "internal interdependence of individualization and recognition". Honneth argues that "because the normative self-image of each and every individual (…) is dependent on the possibility of being continually backed up by others, the experience of being disrespected carries with it the danger of an injury that can bring the identity of the person as a whole to the point of collapse" (Honneth, 2018: 132).

Although Honneth's recognition theory has been criticized for its level of abstraction and the absence of historical contextualization to support his thesis, it has fertilized numerous reflections, with scholars discussing the relevance of his paradigm within theories of redistribution (Fraser 2000; Fraser and Honneth 2003), justice (Renault 2017), agency and the dis-identification of the subject (Honneth and Rancière 2016), and the

spatialization of recognition claims (Buchholz 2016). Urban researcher Tino Buchholz has argued that localizing Honneth's struggle for recognition is crucial "to show that it is local misrecognition of normative values of times and spaces that provides for an idea of (in)justice" (Buchholz, 2016: 22). Feminist theorist Nancy Fraser has discussed the need to detach the lexicon of recognition from the original focus on identity formation to that of collective assertion, joining recognition and redistribution claims for a more equitable distribution of labour and resources (Fraser 2000; Ohlström and Solinas 2010).

The materialization and spatialization of recognition claims through a vocabulary centred on resources and labour has allowed scholars to locate misrecognition in practical research fields such as urban housing, neoliberal institutions as the market and the enterprise, multicultural working places (Buchholz, 2016; Renault, 2017; Bona, 2018). The paradigm has also permeated the heritage debate, showing that the misrecognition of memories and histories of colonised and marginal groups has been a fundamental component of colonial and neocolonial infrastructures of erasure (L. Smith 2007; Villar and Vicencio 2019). What emerges from cultural/natural heritage debates is the observation that the misrecognition of groups' cultural claims is not exclusively linked to redistribution and the redressal of economic inequality. They are also ethical claims responding to sentiments of dignity, affect and collective worth, as in Villar's and Vicencio's "affection for preferred citizenships"[11] (Villar and Vicencio 2019, 1274). These issues are of direct concern in Honneth:

> The motives for rebellion, protest, and resistance have generally been transformed into categories of 'interest', and these interests are supposed to emerge from the objective inequalities in the distribution of material opportunities, without ever being linked, in any way, to the everyday web of moral feelings. Today, anyone who tries to (…) acquire the foundations for a normatively substantive social theory, will have to rely primarily on a concept of social struggle that takes as its starting-point moral feelings of indignation, rather than pre-given interests. (Honneth, 2018: 161)

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[11] In their study on Colina stonemasons in Santiago, Chile, Villar and Vicencio conceptualize the "affection for preferred citizenships" as "the constellation of attitudes and emotions that move people to want to feel part of the heritage of historically triumphant citizenships and, simultaneously, push those people to disconfirm alternative or different communities. The significance – although contradictory – of this attitudinal pattern is that it does not only show in the elites, but also in the subalterns. When the subaltern wants to appreciate his or her heritage, they do so by taking the status codes of the successful subjects as a reference" (Villar and Vicencio 2019). In this case, subaltern claims for recognition are put into scrutiny as underpinning on a racialized and colonial normativity.

However, it has been pointed out that the "feelings of indignation" cannot be disconnected from the lexicon of material equity and deprival that Honneth too quickly dismisses in the category of "interest", for example in struggles over territorial injustice and land dispossession.

Ultimately, Honneth's theory has been criticized for revolving too much around the issue of intersubjective identity formation, remaining "insensitive to issues of power and domination" (M. J. Thompson 2019), failing to address social transformation (Block 2019), and too quickly dismissing Marxist theory (Langman 2019; Smulewicz-Zucker 2019), which result in the failure to engage a dialogue with political economy. For political scientist Marcus Ohlström, Honneth's theory is deficient in addressing injustice, because:

> Una teoria adeguata della giustizia non può limitarsi soltanto a tracciare la grammatica morale dei conflitti sociali e quindi a lasciar giocare questi conflitti dagli attori stessi. (…) Deve andare oltre questo punto – deve essere in grado di guidare la prassi politica e di indicare la direzione verso il giusto, scansando lo sbagliato, senza riguardo per le credenze ritenute vere dai gruppi dominanti o da altri gruppi sociali. (Ohlström and Solinas, 2010: 448)

Partially in line with these critics, I would argue here that investigating the use of heritage merely through recognition claims risks to limit engagement with issues of power. These issues materialize into relations of possession and ownership that, as I have previously evidenced, reside at the core of humans' bonds with cultural and natural inheritances.

Robert Nichols' *Theft is Property! Dispossession and Critical Theory* (2019) analyses recognition within the development of settler colonialism in North America. Recasting recognition as an instrument *for* the construction of a legal system of ownership, instead of considering it as an issue per se, allows Nichols to focus on the legal structures of possession which allowed Anglo settlers to dispossess native Indians from their traditionally inherited territories.

Nichols describes dispossession as a process originally located in feudal Europe, where it emerged alongside geographical territorial expansion and the transformation of land tenure systems. In feudal Europe, classical legal and political thought elaborated the notions of *eminent domain*, expropriation and confiscation as instruments that the sovereign would enact upon its subordinates. Expropriation was legitimized by the public interest or the common good, and it entailed just compensation for the expropriated. Illegitimate expropriation – whereby criteria of common good did not hold – was conceptualized as *dispossession* (Nichols, 2019: 20–22).

Liberal thought came to conceptualize the aristocracy's land tenure as inherently unjust, and as founded upon a "massive act of dispossession". Rousseau theorized the aristocracy's land ownership as an almost extra-temporal moment of enclosure (Gourevitch 2010 [1992] cited in Nichols, 2019). Thomas Paine conceptualized the enclosure of land as an act of *theft*, not because former inhabitants were being dispossessed of their land - which was never theirs, as "there exists no such thing as land property in nature" - but because they were dispossessed of the productivity resulting from land transformation and use (Paine, 2003 [1776] cited in Nichols, 2019). Subsequently, radical and anarchist thinkers such as Kropotkin and Proudhon developed this line of thought, defining dispossession as "structured theft" (Nichols, 2019: 25). This tradition was later inherited by Marx, who set land appropriation and processes of dispossession as the roots of workers' exploitation:

> For him [Marx], dispossession came to refer to the initial "separation-process" (*Scheidungsprozeß*) that separated "immediate producers" from direct access to the means of production, thus forcing them into new labor conditions, now mediated by way of the wage. This implied a conceptual shift away from viewing dispossession in terms of "theft," strictly speaking. Whereas the original anarchist argument presented the rural peasantry as the original "owners" of the land, Marx sought to shear this critique from its normative investment in property. (Nichols, 2019: 27).

For Marx and Marxist theorists, dispossession and its counterpart, accumulation act towards the proletarianization of workers, with the consequent birth of the labour market and the polarization of society into dominant and dominated classes. This had socio-spatial consequences in the separation of agriculture and industry and in the urbanization of the masses, thus interweaving dispossession and displacement in a single act. While Marx believed these processes to be historically bounded, scholars of imperialism and colonial exploitation demonstrated that primitive accumulation has simply geographically shifted from the European countryside to colonized territories in the 19th century[12]. The temporality of the process has also been questioned. Feminist scholar Silvia Federici has observed that "a return of the most violent aspects of primitive accumulation has accompanied every phase of capitalist globalization, including the present one, demonstrating that the continuous expulsion of farmers from the land, war and plunder on a world scale, and the degradation of women are necessary conditions for the

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[12] (Luxemburg 2012; Guha and Guha 1997) and the Subaltern Studies Group.

existence of capitalism in all times" (Federici, 2004, pp. 12–13; see also Federici and Austin, 2018).

In line with this argument, Nichols claims that the colonized world should be regarded as "the most significant context to frame the development of original debates over dispossession and expropriation" (Nichols, 2019: 13). In this perspective, dispossession can be addressed as:

> The fact that in large sections of the globe, Indigenous peoples have not only been subjugated and oppressed by imperial elites; they have also been divested of their lands, that is, the territorial foundations of their societies, which have in turn become the territorial foundations for the creation of new, European-style, settler colonial societies (Nichols, 2019: 5).

This definition, centred on land as the 'territorial foundation' of society, expands the meaning and implications of dispossession from the mere theft of property (or productivity in its Marxist sense) to the eradication of the geographical and historical possibilities for the reproduction of society among colonized groups. This kind of eradication goes beyond the Marxist view of land as site of labour and production, for divesting human/nature relationships in existential terms: it comes to define a situation of both diremption and alienation, thus interweaving forms of deracination or desecration[13]. While the concept of *deracination* strongly maintains the focus of human identification with nature and space, as a form of "up-rooting" that "carries connotations of displacement and removal", *desecration* shifts focus from the human to the earth, seen as injured party. This is evident Mohawk scholar Patricia Monture-Angus' argument:

> Although Aboriginal Peoples maintain a close relationship with the land (…) it is not about control of the land. (…) Earth is mother and she nurtures us all (…) Sovereignty, when defined as my right to be responsible (…) requires a relationship with territory (and not a relation- ship based on control of that territory). What must be understood then is that Aboriginal request to have our sovereignty respected is really a request to be responsible. (Patricia Monture-Angus, cited in Simpson and Smith, 2014: 222)

While both terms, deracination and desecration, risk to account for essentialization and rigidity in the relationship between territories and indigeneity – or ethnicity –, they nevertheless encourage us to rethink land-

[13] Nichols, 2019: 29–30. He cites Simpson and Smith, 2014 which collects many Indigenous voices. For the concept of alienation, I refer to Rahel Jaeggi's *Alienation* (Jaeggi, 2014).

human bonds "away from implying that that relationship to land must in its original form be a propertied one" (Nichols, 2019: 29).

Nichols' analysis reveals that, in many cases, dispossession creates property, in the sense that it constructs a bounded object of possession and the relations of exclusivity around it. Before settler colonialism forced indigenous population to cede their territories, native inhabitants were not in legal possession of their lands. They became landowners only when colonizers needed to stipulate legitimate property transfer contracts with them. This is a process of recognition by negation, where "dispossession merges commodification and theft into one moment. (…) The dispossessed come to "have" something they cannot use, except by alienating it to another" (Nichols, 2019: 8). Nichols calls this process *recursive dispossession*. Indigenous attempts for the reclaim of lost lands have often collided with the fact that no proof of legal ownership could be demonstrated by the historical inhabitants of the lands. However, if one moves beyond the colonially imposed lexicon of proprietary relationality, one may find profound connection between native Americans and with their places and lands. The issue at stake is how to legitimize and recognize this connection in a truly emancipatory way, and at the same time, avoiding the colonizing logics of ownership.

Drawing on the experiments by indigenous scholars and activists, Nichols offers some possibilities: giving "nonhuman legal personhood" to land allows us to grant protection status and regulatory frameworks that avoid privatization and exploitation; rethinking land/human relationships in terms of care and stewardship allows us to break the grips of (dis)possession and radically revisit more-than-human relationalities; the legal instrument of *res nullius* has been used to remove objects and spaces from the sphere of ownership altogether. However, none of these tools can be considered untouchable from abuses of power and dominance, and they do not necessarily readjust wrongdoings and injustice structurally embedded in colonial exploitation.

This journey through infrastructures of possession has shown that humans create spatial and temporal connections with nature and the land relationally. This life-long endeavour is constellated by *processes of inheritance*, understood as temporally expanded relations that connect past, present and future legacies against possibilities of loss and extinction. However, framing these inheritances in terms of ownership can legitimize processes of expropriation and dispossession. Conversely, as this section has shown, relations of inheritance can be understood differently as pacts of responsibility and custody. According to Nichols and to some Indigenous

activists and scholars, only by disenfranchising human-nonhuman relationalities from the juridical grammar of property can we engage in structural processes of *counterdispossession* (Nichols, 2019: 12). In section 1.3, I investigated the grammar of heritage and inheritance, demonstrating that it *already* encompasses concerns of custody and responsibility for future generations. Therefore, I have pointed out that the use of the terms of heritage and inheritance should be consistent with these concerns.

In the next section, I will explore further the notion of 'inheritance'. Borrowing from *Deterritorializing the Future: Heritage in, of and after the Anthropocene* (2020), a recently published book edited by Rodney Harrison and Colin Sterling, I will discuss the roles inheritance have in the Anthropocene as an era of irreversible change (see notably the Introduction). By emancipating it from the grammar of proprietary relationality, the concept of inheritance will drive us to rediscover notions and practices of care, stewardship and custody that, as shown in section 1.3, are already semiotically inherent to the lexicon of heritage.

Notably, I will discuss the ideas of custody and care as emotionally and socially engaged praxis that can guide the discursive and material making of heritage. This will set a bridge to theories and practices of care and processes of inheritance as explored in *Tra Cura e Giustizia. Le passioni come risorsa sociale* (2020) by Italian social philosopher Elena Pulcini.

1.5 Custodians of the Anthropocene. Inheritance in the paradigm of care

Over the past few decades, the last frontier of critical heritage studies has deeply scrutinized conventional assumptions about heritage theory and practice: the dogma of conservation, the terror of decay and loss, the fetishization of collections growth, the cultural/natural divide (DeSilvey 2017; DeSilvey and Edensor 2013; Holtorf 2015; Morgan and Macdonald 2020; Ugwuanyi 2020). One recent contribution that collects and reflects on these developments is *Deterritorializing the Future: Heritage in, of and after the Anthropocene* (Harrison and Sterling 2020). Contributors from different disciplines respond to the questions: what is the role of heritage thinking in

the era of the Anthropocene[14]? What is it that we are inheriting and bringing to the future? The contributors focus on the word 'inheritance' as an intergenerational time frame which allows to decentre the attention from heritage as a settled category to practices of *inheriting* as an in-becoming process. In this sense, Harrison and Sterling argue:

> The framework of inheritance here responds to the multi-temporal nature of the Anthropocene whilst mobilizing a concern for the enduring and shifting qualities of diverse material legacies, questioning 'what it is that is taken forward into the future, what is inherited under the concept of the human, and what survives it as excess or exclusion within its formations?' (Yusoff, 2013: 793). (…) If this volume can be said to have one aim it would be centring heritage within the Anthropocene debate (…) as a means of expanding our collective imagination.[15] (Harrison and Sterling, 2020: 22)

Thinking through inheritance should enable to imagine the future in a constant and sustained dialogue with past and present material legacies. But how is heritage to be re-modulated within this framework, and 'where' does inheritance point to? For Harrison and Sterling, heritage can no longer "be seen primarily as a set of places or things to be 'saved'" (Harrison and Sterling, 2020: 28; DeSilvey and Harrison, 2020). Salvation and rescue – the conventional foci of heritage theory and practice – should rather cede way to different forms of engaging, such as "modes of care and stewardship (…) worked through by different actors and in different ways" (Harrison and Sterling, 2020: 28). These forms may even push us to *dissolving* heritage into more meaningful paradigms:

> We might think of this new framework as a call for inheritance without heritage, recognizing that the idea of heritage may well stand in the way of a more

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[14] Harrison and Sterling connotate the Anthropocene as "a newly designated geological time interval (…) [which] signifies a fundamental change in environmental conditions and processes across the globe, one brought about by human activities on a vast scale. From soil erosion and species loss to the chemical composition of the atmosphere, the magnitude of these transformations can only be understood in a multi-scalar fashion, tacking endlessly between the gods-eye view and the molecular, between the satellite and the microbe. (…) More than simply a temporal threshold, the emergence of the Anthropocene as a socio-material concept and empirical reality is marked by this sense of ongoing and irreversible territorialization" (Harrison and Sterling, 2020:20). On the concept of Anthropocene, they draw from (Yusoff 2018; 2013; Tsing et al. 2017; Ghosh 2016; Haraway 2015; Lorimer 2015; Dibley 2012; Zalasiewicz and Freedman 2009).

[15] They argue that the framework of inheritance is aimed at "thinking differently about the temporalities and territories of heritage, which is precisely one of those social modes of organization that Guattari identified as no longer holding up". Reference here is to (Guattari 2009).

meaningful relationship with ongoing and inherently more-than-human concepts and processes of care, transmission and vulnerability." (Harrison and Sterling, 2020: 40)

If one takes this suggestion further, one can foresee how modes of inheriting might conflate into practices of *care*, becoming temporally expanded forms of caring for more than human materialities. These forms underpin our rational and emotional choice to be regarded as caretakers instead of owners. This process would be necessarily driven by a paradigmatic shift from the ownership-based, proprietary meaning of inheritance to a more custody-based significance. This suggestion has been advanced powerfully by philosopher Annette Baier who has claimed:

> Tutti noi ereditiamo un ordine sociale, una tradizione culturale, aria e acqua, non come eredi privati di testamenti privati ma come membri di una comunità continua [...] li ereditiamo non come unici beneficiari ma come persone capaci di condividere e trasmettere tali beni a una serie indefinita di generazioni future. (Baier, 2010: 173 translated and quoted in Pulcini, 2020)

The node of future generations is a pivot of heritage thinking. The issue of future generations has informed heritage-centred debates on sustainability as a mode of living that meets "the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"[16]. However, as heritage scholars Christina Fredengren and Cecilia Åsberg observe, "the very modern idea of sustainable development still reverberates with capitalist assumptions of economic growth without consideration for planetary boundaries, and continues in the tradition of treating the nonhuman world as a resource and not a receiver of inheritances and care across generations" (Fredengren and Åsberg, 2020: 58–61).

Instead, they suggest that we position inheritance within the more congruous notion of *intergenerational care*, dismissing extractivism in toto as a "nonreciprocal, dominance-based relationship with the earth, one of profound taking. It is the opposite of stewardship, which involves taking but also taking care that regeneration and future life continue" (Klein, 2015: 169).

To my perspective, while the idea of inheritance as a process of intergenerational care should retain attention – especially in the current era of massive destruction of human and nonhuman legacies –, much work still has to be done for securing the fundamental relationship between inheritance and care within our *present* time. In other words, I would suggest that attention is

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[16] Bruntland Commission Report (1987) accessible at https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf, accessed 5/03/2021.

paid on how a situated, micro-scaled making of heritage can and should become a practice of care for the contemporary, and how this making can contrast the material and discursive mobilization of heritage in structures of exploitation and dispossession.

This practice-oriented approach to care is advocated by Italian philosopher Elena Pulcini. For her, care is an ethics of "concretedness" [*concretezza*] which must materialize into actual praxis[17]. In this sense, Pulcini quotes feminist theorist Virginia Held who claims that:

> All'etica della cura, insomma, non basta constatare la presenza di una motivazione virtuosa o di un carattere incline all'azione morale, ma le preme anche verificarne l'efficacia attraverso l'attivarsi di un impegno concreto (…) [La cura] è appunto una pratica sociale che tende a ottenere risultati. (Held, 2007 translated and quoted in Pulcini, 2020: 30)

Drawing from feminist theorists of care such as Held, Joan Tronto, Carol Gilligan, Eva Kittay and Martha Nussbaum, Pulcini deconstructs the myth "of the autonomy and independence of the modern subject"[18], showing how it has in fact "repressed the reality of our reciprocal dependency and constitutive 'neediness'"[19]. By acknowledging the state of mutual interdependence and vulnerability of the subject – as in Hegel and Honneth, see section 1.4 –, we can provide a space for caring as a meaningful practice of relating and engaging with others[20]. In her analysis, Pulcini emancipates care from relations of proximity animated by either compassion or aid-work, for positioning it beside justice in contemporary global challenges. She develops an analysis centred on the quest for care and justice towards the *other-distant-in-space*, and the *other-distant-in-time* (Pulcini, 2020: 83–144). Both relations resonate with Harrison's and Sterling's inheritance-thinking,

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[17] For Pulcini, the paradigm of care "si fonda (…) su criteri concreti e contestuali, tesi alla tutela affettiva delle relazioni e attenti alla specificità delle singole situazioni". Here, she extensively draws on Carol Gilligan's work (Pulcini, 2020:33).

[18] Original in Italian: "dell'autonomia e dell'indipendenza, su cui è stata costruita la figura del soggetto moderno", translated by the author.

[19] Original in Italian: "ha prodotto la rimozione della realtà della reciproca dipendenza e della nostra costitutiva «neediness»" (Pulcini 2020:81–82), translated by the author. For these theories of care, she draws on Eva Kittay's *Love's Labor* and Marian Barnes' *Care in Everyday Life*.

[20] In her book, Pulcini extensively explores the emotions underpinning practice(s) of care, an analysis that I will not deal with here, as it would bring us too far from the object of analysis. However, sentiments of empathy, compassion, indignation, fear of loss play crucial roles in the ways humans relate to cultural and natural inheritances. I will dwell on the sentiments of indignation and anxiety for loss and destruction in chapter 6, where I will explore the heritage activism of a local NGO in the historic city centre of Varanasi.

as a process that negotiate our present material and immaterial vulnerabilities for present and future generations.

This brief investigation into theories and conceptualisations of care suggests that positioning the making(s) of heritage within practices of care and custody allows us to engage with the fundamental vulnerability and interdepende of human subjects. Taking care of spaces and objects with and for others – the city, the natural environment, the material evidence of collective histories – becomes thus a political stance that orientates subjects to think relationally. It is possible to see here the embryos of an emancipatory ethics of belonging, echoing the call of Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou who suggest:

> [We] need to radically repoliticize "belonging," by means of acknowledging and critically engaging its colonial, capitalist, patriarchal, heteronormative, militarist, and ethnonationalist legacies, and by performatively enacting alternative modes and sites of belonging (as "collective sites of continuous political labor"), different from the ones implied by the governmentality of property ownership and self-ownership. (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 159)

Lastly, I wish to return briefly to the relevance of the concept of inheritance for exploring processes of dispossession. I have shown previously that the structural process of land dispossession enacted upon indigenous people cannot simply be interpreted as large-scale land grab or the expropriation of material possessions (section 1.4). Indigenous scholars and activists argue that for them, land dispossession entails a disruption in human/nature relationships. Therefore, drawing from Harrison and Sterling, I wish to consider processes of expropriation that break human bonds with spaces and times as a form of *inheritance dispossession*, where ongoing inheritances are being severed, broken or fully destroyed. This expands the original focus of dispossession on material expropriation, encompassing the whole range of relations simultaneously spatial, temporal, bodily and relational that are being interrupted and thus disinherited.

As shown, inheritance points to multiform attachments and legacies with both a spatial and a temporal dimension. Spatially, they are located and embodied in specific human and non-human materialities. Temporally, they are sedimented, layered, made and remade by the passing of time. By addressing the issues of custody and stewardship as the responsibility of care for what we have come to be, this framework reinforces attachment and reciprocity as inescapable forms of belonging. This echoes the words of indigenous scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson when she claims:

The opposite of dispossession is not possession, it is deep, reciprocal, consensual attachment. Indigenous bodies don't relate to the land by possessing or owning it or having control over it. We relate to the land through connection—generative, affirmative, complex, overlapping, and nonlinear relationship. The reverse process of dispossession within Indigenous thought then is Nishnaabeg intelligence, Nishnaabewin. The opposite of dispossession within Indigenous thought is grounded normativity. This is our power." (Simpson, 2017: 43)

Thus, if dispossession can be regarded as a relation of interruption, of disinheritance, the reciprocity of inheritance, in its "binding together of past, present and future in an affective embrace" (Harrison and Sterling, 2020: 206), can possibly work as an antidote to the alienation of the self as "the failure to apprehend (…) relations of appropriation" (Jaeggi, 2014: 49).

Conclusion

Over the past decades, the geographical scope of critical heritage studies has expanded, so that now various modes of thinking and researching about heritage are being developed in South America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Practice and scholarship from these regions have often focused on the inequities and injustices that have historically constructed space through violence and erasure (Hayes 2020; Arkaraprasertkul 2019; De Cesari 2019; De Cesari and Dimova 2019; Ristic and Frank 2019; Escallón 2018; Zencirci 2014; Parks 2011).

This trend urges to acknowledge that the future of heritage theory and practice cannot be but pluralist and decolonial, if it is to address à la fois the macro- and micropolitics of historical legacy, and the insurgency of alternative modes of care and stewardship for a more-than-human future (Harrison and Sterling 2020, 28; DeSilvey and Harrison 2020; DeSilvey 2017).

The issue of the ownership of cultural and natural inheritances is key to many of such enquiries. However, while it has been explored in the context of cultural property law (Escallón 2018; Endere 2014), it seems unable to permeate critical heritage debates more broadly. This chapter has tried to filled this gap, by reflecting on heritage and/beyond property. First, it has shown that when heritage spaces are treated through the logics and lexicon of property (within the legal scopes of alienability, exclusivity and exploitation), they are usually touted as 'resources' and 'assets' for the use of the owner, being it the private, the state or other. The success of this discursive logic

brought to the global success of what I defined the *neoliberal heritage paradigm*.

Conversely, if we move away from the logics of property, we are confronted with the core elements that form humans' relations with history and space, namely feelings and imperatives of custody, responsibility and care as well as their opposites. The constant unfolding and negotiation of these elements come to form what has been conceptualized here, borrowing from Harrison and Sterling 2020, as *processes of inheritance*.

Drawing from recent insights of critical theory and American indigenous scholarship on the themes of (mis)recognition and dispossession, this chapter has argued that the removal of people from their lands and histories can be understood in its entirety as a process of *inheritance dispossession*. This expands the original focus of dispossession on material expropriation, encompassing the whole range of relations simultaneously spatial, temporal, bodily and relational that are being interrupted.

This interruption makes dispossession a relation of disinheritance, or disruption, that can be counteracted only by re-enacting relations of care, responsibility and custody towards people and places. Re-enacting care can play a role in resisting alienation as a mode of life where the subject is rendered unfree to entertain a meaningful relation with the outside world (Jaeggi 2014).

After exploring the methods and instruments employed in the research (chapter 2), the first two empirical chapters will look at how the neoliberal heritage paradigm works in a specific place and time through technologies of land and history dispossession (chapters 3 and 4). This will inform and dialogue with our understanding of heritage as a neoliberal infrastructure centred on proprietary relationality.

Chapter 5 will problematize this relationality by producing an ethnography of heritage-making practices. Here, relations of inheritance are materially and discursively employed by individuals and groups for carving out a socio-economic space through what I called *improvised ethno-entrepreneurial urbanisms*.

Lastly, chapter 6 will examine a case of urban heritage activism that can be interpreted as a practical, ethically informed enactment of relations of care and custody of and for the city. Reflecting on the role of civil society in southern urban contexts, it will explore issues of expertise, conflict and care, and the democratic possibilities of using heritage for reclaiming more just cities.

Chapter 2
Positionality and Methodology

The way research is written up in academic journals often represents it as a linear, pristine, ordered process. Yet, in practice, most projects are actually more messy, frustrating, and complex. (Valentine, 2001: 43)

So, you came all the way from Italy, and you are here alone, doing research on Varanasi?? Wow! What a *strong girl*!
(personal conversation with A., field diary, 10/02/2019)

Introduction

This chapter explores the methods and techniques employed in the research, with a specific focus on those employed in the field work. Geographically, my field is in the historic city centre of Varanasi, India: the neighbourhood of Lahori Tola and the riverside *ghats*[21]. In socio-economic terms, it encompasses the life of some social groups that relate to the historic city centre with various degrees of power, expertise, and authority.

The research employs qualitative methodologies predominantly used in urban geography and heritage studies, such as participant observation, interviewing, discourse analysis and ethnography (Burawoy 2017; Desmond 2014; P. Cloke, Crang, and Goodwin 2013; Crang and Cook 2011; Flick

[21] Open air staircases forming a pedestrian area on the Ganges riverside.

2011; Crang 2010; DeLyser 2010; Gerard Forsey 2010; P. J. Cloke 2008; Delamont 2003; Limb and Dwyer 2001; Kryder-Reid 2018; Gordillo 2014; Daly and Winter 2012; Waterton and Watson 2015). Matthew Desmond's approach to relational ethnography proves useful when investigating sociological objects that are neither exclusively group-based nor place-based, as in my case, because it "incorporates fully into the ethnographic sample at least two types of actors or agencies occupying different positions" thereby allowing exploration of their roles and relationships in a given social space (Desmond, 2014: 554). This thesis follows his suggestion for constructing the ethnographic field as a space where "connections, transactions and unfolding relations" reveal that "social actors exist in a state of mutual dependence and struggle" (Desmond, 2014: 574).

While the physical boundaries of this thesis are "limited" to the historic city centre of Varanasi, the analysis investigates the conflictual co-production of the urban space with a movable and dynamic stance, following actors and processes that have been at times carefully selected, while in other circumstances have been incidentally met and later included in the analysis. This type of malleability allows the researcher to explore the possibilities of "sticking with the city we find" (McFarlane 2017), exploring the "messy complexity of the city, with its multiple and changing authorities" and the "socio-natural processes and politics of urbanization and contestation through which the actually existing city is being made" (Björkman, 2015, p. 233, also see 2017). This situated, relational approach is used for investigating urban worlds in the global South as "stratified" (Auyero and Jensen 2015: 360), "improvised" (Simone 2018), as "imperfect machines" of "distributed intelligence" (Amin 2016: 779), where change and the quest for a better life are usually "conceptualized, marketed and consumed in terms of alterations to the built environment" (Simone 2018:110).

The chapter is structured as follows. The first paragraph engages with reflexive approaches and interrogates over power relations between researcher and researched and analysing the concept of Western privilege, dialoguing with post-colonial and decolonial approaches. The second paragraph describes the selection of Varanasi historic city centre as a case study, and the non-linear trajectory that brought me to changing my disciplinary perspective during the first year of my PhD studies. It builds on the need for methodological fluidity, and it explores issues of field delimitation and access. The third paragraph constructs the ethnographic field as a mode of *displaced living*, arguing that the researcher may develop a research positionality that better reflects their own way of being, dismissing ideals of the *perfect* ethnographer/geographer. The forth paragraph explores

the need for transparency and ethnographic detail in building scientific authority, focusing on verbal methods, interviews and language barriers/enablers when doing research in cross-cultural contexts. Finally, the sixth paragraph engages with feminist methodologies and approaches in order to analyse the field as a gendered space.

2.1 Interrogating privilege. Towards constellations of "strategic alliances"

Over the last few decades, the post-colonial and decolonial turns have produced in social scientists an ever-growing consciousness of the epistemological, political and cultural gravity of their work for building up more equal, just, anti-colonial and anti-racist societies (W. D. Mignolo 2021; V. Mignolo 2013; Daigle and Ramírez 2019; W. D. Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Jazeel 2017; Legg 2017). The 2017 Annual Conference of the Royal Geographical Society opened with the title 'Decolonising geographical knowledges: Opening geography to the world', with the clear intention of decentring the core of geographical knowledge production from the global North – understood as Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand – to the rest of the world (Esson et al. 2017). The turn is not unique to geography: in the same year, the annual edition of the globally renown contemporary art festival 'Documenta 14' in Kassel and Athens similarly engaged in de-institutionalizing visual art production and consumption, in the aim of going "beyond the simple logic of oppositions between North and South, or the West and 'the Rest', binaries of exclusion and inclusion" (Lutz 2019, 89; Papadopoulos 2019).

Also archaeology and cultural heritage theory have long been engaged in a similar endeavour, with decolonial archaeologies and critical, post-colonial heritage studies becoming more and prominent and influent in their disciplines in the last 20 years (Clarke et al. 2018; González-Ruibal 2018; Hamilakis 2018; Winter 2014a; Zehra Rizvi 2006; Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2008). The interconnections between archaeology, decolonial ethics and social justice have developed established research strands, where

politically engaged ethnography and action research are re-discussing the boundaries between researcher and researched[22].

This research has been informed by strands of post-colonial and decolonial thought. In this section, I will refer specifically to debates in geography on Western privilege and on the unfolding of power relations between researcher and researched subjects.

For geographer Vincent Clement, the decolonizing turn encapsulates subaltern and postcolonial approaches, but it dismisses the prefix *post,* which would "suggest that colonialism is a thing of the past", thereby masking present-day colonial structures" (Clement, 2019: 3; Louis, 2007; Smith, 1999; Stoler, 2016). In a nutshell, the decolonial approach gives voice to theories and approaches "from the South" (dos Santos, 2018), rejected or co-opted by the project of colonialism through structures of epistemological dominance coherent with the maintaining of Western privilege. However, as scholars point out, having a voice is not sufficient when no one is willing to listen (Louis 2007). Thus, marginal epistemologies have passed from a condition of inability to speak for themselves (Morris 2010) to a situation of subtle but reiterated dismissal or silencing (Hunt 2014; Louis 2007). Also, as indigenous scholar Sarah Hunt notes, "there is a danger in ghettoizing Indigenous geographical knowledge as 'other' or a curiosity, rather than engaging this knowledge in broader efforts to actively decolonize geography" (Hunt, 2014: 31). In other words, Indigenous knowledges are at constant risk of remaining marginal, if they are not (rendered) able to confront and dialogue with mainstream Western theories, pushing them "to change focus, approaches and priorities" (Clement, 2019: 4). This crucial point calls for the engagement of Western scholars with non-Western academics for fertilizing current global disciplines with 'fresh' and anti-colonial insights. In this sense, the decolonial turn can be understood as a fundamentally relational project, developing through "constellations of co-resistance" (Daigle and Ramírez 2019; L. B. Simpson 2017), and operating against a "racialised political economy of containment, displacement and violence" (Daigle and Ramírez, 2019: 80; Coulthard, 2014).

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[22] See as a reference the Society of Black Archeologists (SBA) which, since 2011, brings awareness on African material culture, the history and memory of racialisation and coloniality, connecting archaeological practice to social responsibility. The *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, which leads debates on critical heritage theory and methodology (Caradonna 2021; Montgomery Ramírez 2021; Rodriguez Castro 2021; Alonso González 2016). Many of these studies stem from the bulk of work in museum studies over decolonial curating and the decades-long inexhausted restitution policies debate. I will not dwell further in this typology of studies, as they are mostly disconnected from the concerns of urban geography and critical urban studies which also inform the development of this thesis.

The decolonial turn crucially aligns with feminist and post-modernist approaches that have emerged in the social sciences since the late 1980s (hooks, 2015 [2000]; McDowell, 2013 [1999]; Sultana, 2007; Rose, 1997; England, 1994; Haraway, 1988). As scholars have recently argued, all these approaches aim at “deconstructing the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being” and they “assert the need to avoid epistemic pitfalls, particularly dead-end concepts such as ‘objectivity’ and ‘universalism’” (Clement, 2019: 9). Radcliffe notes that “the ‘decolonial turn’ builds on and extends postcolonial, feminist and critical race geography by centring the forms of knowledge production under colonial-modernity, in order to refine understandings of its particularities and to reanimate critiques of racialisation, colonial-modern resource distributions and epistemic violence” (Radcliffe, 2017: 330). Overall, it seems that the main imperative of the decolonial project is to investigate power in its various epistemological, political and social articulations (Radcliffe, 2017: 330; Stoler, 2016; Grosfoguel, 2007).

All these very relevant and urgent issues can be daunting and overwhelming for a young Italian PhD student who has never engaged with colonialism, the notion of Western privilege and the like. However, Western privilege is not a stable nor unitary notion and deserves further scrutiny.

When I was preparing for my field research, I realized that I was not leaving for Varanasi *as* a Western scholar, because the contents of this identity were not sufficiently clear for me. My professional identity in the academic world was blurred and fragile. My first supervisor, a planner and architect, had just gone retired. My new supervisor was presented to me as a ‘critical geographer’. I liked his communicative approach and felt attracted to the discipline, but I was not entirely sure about what it meant to be a human geographer. Also, I was not sure about continuing my PhD studies, and the idea of doing it within a new discipline seemed way out of my reach. Additionally, Italian academia does not fully embody the attributes of western epistemic privilege. For my work, I needed to use English, instead of my native language. From the very beginning, I was told that the best universities for studying human geography and critical urban studies were outside Italy. My own enrolment in the PhD course was the result of the harsh reality of precarious Italian graduates. Becoming a PhD student was the only professional option that granted me years of financial stability after a long period of unpaid internships and costly academic education that my parents paid. To sum up, the contents of my ‘privileged’ identity were unclear to me at the time of my first travel to Varanasi.

Assuming a reflexive stance towards these situated and contextual positionings allows deconstructing Western privilege, often depicted as a

monolithic embodiment (Griffiths 2017). In this respect, geographer Sarah Radcliffe recognizes that while the decolonial approach might be "a feasible option for established, tenured academics (such as myself), it risks taking younger, less established and untenured researchers into a territory unrecognized – unrecognizable even – by the neoliberal academy" (Radcliffe, 2017: 331). Indeed, PhD students experience a position of particular vulnerability in the academic sector, because of professional inexperience, unbalanced power relations with supervisors and short-term contracts, sometimes without salary (Oberhauser and Caretta 2019; Billo and Hiemstra 2013; Ballamingie and Johnson 2011).

Postcolonial and decolonial approaches encourage reflection over taken-for-granted research epistemologies and practices. They urge scholars in both the global North and South to deeply scrutinize their research agendas and objectives. But do they also provide guidance or practical recommendations, for example in the case of young, unexperienced researchers doing research in Southern contexts or with marginal groups? Some scholars advocate for an overt rejection of this type of research as, they argue, it would fundamentally replicate structures of colonial domination (Borghi 2020; L. T. Smith 1999). Others suggest that deconstructing colonial hegemony should not prevent us to keep researching the world as a hyperconnected system of power inequalities and struggles. Indian scholar Saraswati Raju powerfully raises this issue:

> The points that speaking for others is often value-laden and amounts to epistemological violence, and that speaking for those who are less privileged may be a way to get out of guilt are well-taken. But then what? (…) Ideally, the researched should speak for themselves, *but what if they cannot?* Not because they do not have knowledge, but because they are not equipped with the language that can be heard and responded to by those who make the decisions. *Do the privileged remain silent even if their speaking, however tinted and biased their voices might be (assuming that they would be), makes a difference?* (emphasis in original, Raju, 2002: 174)

In this line of thought, she asks whether we should consider the positionality of a researcher "so irreconcilably privileged" that "there can be no bond of commonality between the researcher and the researched" (Raju, 2002: 174). Dismissing this idea, Raju suggests instead that we operate through "strategic alliances", mobilizing collectives "to strengthen the bargaining position of all these individuals from poor, marginal, oppressed and underprivileged communities" (Raju, 2002: 177). In my perspective, her plea crucially fits the "constellations of co-resistance" (Daigle and Ramírez 2019) of the decolonial project, avoiding its epistemological ghettoization and troubling parochialist stances.

In line with Raju's commitment on the need to form "strategic alliances", this thesis understands academic Western privilege as an urgency to develop constellations of collective, politically informed relationalities between researchers and researched subjects. To this end, the research investigates and gives voice to practices of resistance to exclusive and marginalizing urban planning process, offering an analysis on heritage vocabularies as they emerge from local practice and urban activism in Varanasi.

2.2 The scholar, the plan(s) and the field: a messy path

First, this section will describe how my embryonal theoretical research on heritage production in urban contexts came to have an empirical case study. Then, it will discuss the messy relations between my theoretical research and my newly formed case study. This will set the stage for analysing a few methodological issues that accompanied me all the way through the research process and that came to form my own, provisional and very personal positionality in the field (section 2.4).

Case study analysis is a widely employed technique in critical urban studies for unveiling how global socio-economic processes articulate empirically and contextually (Clifford et al. 2016; P. Cloke, Crang, and Goodwin 2013; Yin 2008). However, geographers still timidly engage in discussing how their cases took form, which practical elements led to their choices for specific site(s), and how they moved their very first steps towards their newly formed cases (as in Ferdoush, 2020; Caretta and Jokinen, 2017; Lancione and Rosa, 2017; Jokinen and Caretta, 2016; Billo and Hiemstra, 2013; Ballamingie and Johnson, 2011; Limb and Dwyer, 2001; Katz, 1994). This echoes what Hitchings and Latham recently named "elusive geographical ethnographers", who slip relatively effortlessly into the social scenes that interest them" and that appear way too quiet about the practical challenges they face "as they embark on the process of entering and examining their respective field sites" (Hitchings and Latham, 2020b). In contrast to this slippery stance, I wish to openly describe some key elements in the genesis of my field research.

Around the end of my first year of my PhD studies, I had gathered an extensive number of studies on the subject known as 'urban heritage'. While most of them seemed to me arid and sterile both theoretically and practically, they clearly highlighted that the vocabulary of cultural/natural heritage had a

growing impact on the way cities are imagined, planned and branded. At that time, I was interested in the use of UNESCO cultural policies for cities. This led me to extensively review the literature on international networks such as the World Heritage (hereafter, WH) system. My first supervisor was an urban planner. Together we reviewed ongoing WH nominations of 'historic cities'. Also, we had harsh discussions about the use of the WH designations. His approach was enthusiastic, project-oriented and inclined to bring successful heritage-planning tools for cities in the global South. I was more cautious. My readings revealed the side-effects and drawbacks of the UNESCO nomination process. I was more sensitive to the issues of power and the unequal socio-economic effects of cultural policies in urban contexts (Soccali and Cinà, 2020). This pushed me to abandon the literature on historic cities management and planning for moving towards critical urban studies and cultural and political geography.

Before the end of my troubled first year, I had gotten in touch with a small NGO managed by an Italo-Indian woman based in Varanasi, India. She was kind and generous in her emails, and she described me the complex process of nominating Varanasi historic city centre as a WH site. She did not hide that the process was faltering, unpopular in the city and that local authorities were openly opposing it. This sounded puzzling to me, with my background literature on urban authorities pushing for the WH candidature as a mean to attract foreign investments and tourism. After gathering information from the NGO website and the draft WH candidature of Varanasi, it seemed plausible that, in this case, the nomination was an almost desperate cry to save the historic city centre against local authorities' disruptive urban politics. At that moment, my supervisor and I had planned comparative research. He had several contacts in Ahmedabad (Gujarat), another Indian city that pushed for, and obtained the WH designation. Everything was set for my first trip to India, and Varanasi became my second unit of analysis.

The tentative, early steps that I described, give the picture of a very embryonal research work, with many possibilities and doubts. What followed my first field trip to India is the story of how my comparative research became a single case study; of how I felt, was scared and uninformed of the Indian context, as a lone Western woman, lost in huge Indian cities, trying to meet the few contacts that I had. During my first trip, Varanasi became the place where I finally stopped for a while (**Figures 1, 2**). The city was offered to me as an extraordinary urban laboratory: a flagship city of Hindutva fundamentalism, imbued at once with extraordinary spirituality, merciless degradation and poverty, unabated air and water pollution and beaten by

flocks of tourists, migrants, wanderers of sorts that believe to find in Varanasi the last thing I could ever think of: peace of mind.

PhD research is widely acknowledged as a particularly challenging and unique professional endeavour for some reasons: it is temporally more extended than the studies we carry out in previous years; it is mostly designed and planned individually; it struggles with a sustained career-oriented pressure as, "the successful [PhD] project lays the foundation for our academic identities" (Billo and Hiemstra, 2013: 313). To these elements, I would add that the uniqueness and complexity of this process are not merely connected to our professional identities: for most of us, the endeavour is so intense that it requires us to deepen our knowledge of our own personality, with its strengths, limits, fears, engaging in a veritable psychological and auto-therapeutic endeavour (Bochner and Ellis 2016; Bondi 2014; 2005).

The phase in which our more or less coherently formulated research agenda encounters the messy reality of the field – "messiness of *beginning* fieldwork" (Billo and Hiemstra, 2013; also see Lanne, 2018) – is a critical, pivotal moment that is managed and negotiated according to the different personal and professional tools we are equipped with. The reality of fieldwork oftentimes imposes changes and adjustments to our research as we know it. In this sense, Billo and Hiemstra ask:

> When is it okay to change the research plan, and to what extent? How do you know when you are not just giving up, or not trying hard enough? What does a researcher do when her original research questions no longer seem valid, relevant, or answerable? (Billo and Hiemstra, 2013: 317)

Here the issues of flexibility and resilience come to the fore. Billo and Hiemstra describe their unease in readjusting coherent and well-structured research proposals and plans because of field reality. Yet, their study points to flexibility as a "necessary tool – not as a concession or a failure – (…) that can be used to the researcher's advantage" (Billo and Hiemstra, 2013: 317; also see Sultana, 2007; Valentine, 2001).

As explained, my research was originally developed through a project-oriented, urban planning perspective to World Heritage-labelled cities. My discomfort with this approach was already evident from the above-mentioned discussions with my first supervisor. Discovering urban studies methodologies and the contributions of urban geography at my second year,

prepared me to encounter flexibility before starting the actual fieldwork[23]. When I finally arrived in Varanasi, and I heard about the KVSAD project and I started figuring its immense impact on the historic centre, I confess I did not struggle much to make the city my single case study and to focus on urban life and spatial transformations in the historic centre. Here, flexibility seems to stem from the reality encountered in the field, the original methodological messiness and disciplinary turmoil.

While it is now quite common to talk about how plans changed in the course of field research, it is still rare to find open, reflective accounts of *disciplinary* messiness and confusion while elaborating both the research questions and the case studies. Yet, I believe that not everyone who writes and publishes as a geographer necessarily started her/his university studies with clear geographical epistemologies in mind. In my case, previous methodological and disciplinary anxiety found a way out – and a way forward – thanks to field observation. Field observation brought me towards relevant debates in urban studies and urban geography: accumulation by dispossession, neoliberal urban governance, displacements, urbanisms of care. It also suggested me to adopt feminist, decolonial and reflexive approaches. Existing projects and processes happening in Varanasi reinforced my intuition that the vocabulary of heritage is mobilized differently, according to different actors and visions of the urban. Thus, I agree with Billo and Hiemstra that our challenge as PhD students is "to embrace a notion of flexibility that allows (…) to approach fieldwork constantly ready and willing to assess, adjust and be creative" (Billo and Hiemstra, 2013: 318). However, a malleable approach towards disciplinary and methodological flexibility may collides with fast result-oriented academic pressure. As Sultana argues, "fluidity and openness in the research process is not always easy to enact or maintain, especially when inserted into multiple scales of power relations and institutional affiliations, time/budget constraints, and distances (physical, emotional, philosophical, political)" (Sultana, 2007: 380). Mediating between research flexibility, which requires time and critical auto-observation, and time-constrained academic pressure should thus be fully acknowledged as a key factor of stress and angst in the field.

[23] My specific academic context deserves some detailing. This PhD research has been developed in an interdisciplinary urban and regional studies department, where the cross-cutting research focus on spatiality was variously declined and elaborated through methodological and epistemological exchange among various disciplines.

2.3 Fieldwork as *displaced living*

After retracing how I *got into* my research through the fieldwork, I now wish to briefly analyse the field as a construct necessary for the pursuit of geographical research. In 1994, Cindi Katz identified the field as "a site of inquiry that is necessarily artificial in its separations from geographical space and the flow of time" (Katz, 1994: 67; also see Ferdoush, 2020; Katz, 2013; Hyndman, 2001). Unpacking its artificiality means to ask "where are the boundaries between "the research', and everyday life; between "the fieldwork" and doing fieldwork; between "the field" and not; between "the scholar" and subject?" (Katz, 1994: 67). For Katz, the researcher constructs and navigates the field through acts of *displacement*[24]. A first displacement sees researchers bounding the unit of analysis, thus creating exclusions and inclusions. With the field marked off in time and space, only researchers are able to jump in and out the fictitious boundaries they have created. Thus, we create the field as a displaced reality. Researchers are also displaced subjects. They go "to the field as a kind of 'stranger' and draws on that status to see difference and ask questions that under other circumstances might seem (even more) intrusive, ignorant, or inane to those who answer them." (Katz, 1994: 68). Even when research is undertaken in places that are geographically or culturally close to us, the researcher relies on such estrangement in order to gain her/his analytical authority: first see, then speak.

The suggestion that the field is a set of continuous dislodging speaks relevantly to my experience. A spatial displacement brought me from Turin to Varanasi several times. Far from being simply a technology of travel, my more than ten geographical displacements fuelled a sense of in-betweenness, of being in "a position that is neither outside nor inside" (Mascia-Lees et al., 1989 in Katz, 1994). This sense of in-betweenness connected to the fluidity of my personal and political subjectivity as a woman and as a scholar in the field. In parallel to spatial displacements, subjective displacements happened on a regular basis: I was a single woman in Varanasi and coupled in Turin. I was living alone in Varanasi, and with my partner in Torino. I was a scholar

[24] Katz explains: "by displacement I mean quite literally a conscious movement from one position or site to another. The implications of the term include notions of uprooting, loosening, disturbing, and dislodging. My argument is that ethnographic research is underwritten by a host of displacements that are rarely addressed by the researcher either in the field setting or in the academy. This piece is intended to problematize the displacements scholars engage in when conducting field research in order to reveal some of the political consequences and potentials of such research." (Katz, 1994:72)

with an office and colleagues in Turin, while I was a solitary, independent researcher in Varanasi (**Figures 3, 4**). These and many other shifting positions nourished alternative subjectivities: one for all, the awareness of my gendered body, which surfaced abruptly each and every time I stepped into India (see section 2.4.3). Finally, displacement allowed me to step back from the reality of the field, and to come back to my texts and theories, which pointed at the need to *displace* my results from Varanasi, and to look at them in a broader perspective.

If the field can be understood as a set of continuous displacements – *What am I in relation to these people and how am I to dialogue with them? Where does the field end and how am I to be different here/there?* – it is because, despite being extracted by us from the flux of reality, the field is, just as life, a space of struggle, power and negotiation. Katz points out that constructing the field means that researchers powerfully impose themselves "on the time-spaces of others" (Katz, 1994: 68). Once created though, the field seems to unfold with and among others, instead of upon them. Can the research field, created by the authority and power of the researcher, become a space of engagement and empowerment for all those who are within it? In their works on urban marginality, Michele Lancione and Elisabetta Rosa reflexively argued that, for them, working in the field is "a way to express our unexpressed (or inexpressible) desire of being and becoming in a way able to augment rather than reduce freedom, both ours and of l'autre" (Lancione and Rosa, 2017: 141 quoting Deleuze and Guattari, 2009). For this to happen, it is necessary to expand the limits of ethnography and field research from the mere writing *of others* to a reflexive analysis of our situated, relational and constantly negotiated self. This line of thought brings Lancione and Rosa to conflate ethnography with auto-ethnography or *égo-géographie* (Calbérac and Volvey 2015; Dupont 2014; Butz and Besio 2009; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995), when they suggest that:

> For us, ethnography is more: it is the way we do things and the approach we have towards the field; it is how we negotiate access and how we live; it is about writing about the other but also about ourselves. *Sharing* is what ethnography is before writing it: it is about the *ethno*, what links people and makes their doings and claims possible. (Lancione and Rosa, 2017: 137)

And, consequently, that:

> Fieldwork is, in this sense, a way to always (re)find our way to be in the world [*il nostro modo di stare al mondo*]. (Lancione and Rosa, 2017: 141)

Together with Lancione and Rosa, I consider this ego-oriented reflective work a requirement to the construction of the field as a site of dialogical engagement between subjects. In this sense, the reflexive and auto-ethnographic turn seems to operate for reconciling field to life (Bochner and Ellis, 2016; Butz and Besio, 2009; on a similar note see also Katz, 2013b, 1994; Rose, 1997; Valentine, 2008).

Some scholars have brought this reconciliation further, fundamentally undermining the construction of fieldwork as a "distinct phase of research that progresses relatively independently of the life trajectories of those involved in it" (Wimark et al., 2017: 1). By using a life course approach to field research in geography, they contend that life trajectories of both researchers and participants are interwoven in ways that exceed the field as a temporally and spatially bounded moment (Fois 2017; Gambold 2017; N. M. Lewis 2017; Ng 2017; S. Lewis and Russell 2011). These contributions help to centre our attention on present and previous life experiences that inevitably form, to cite Lancione and Rosa again, "our way to be in the world". They also suggest that what happens in our lives before, during and after fieldwork is inevitably intertwined to the field itself (Fois 2017; N. M. Lewis 2017). This allows us to reconfigure the subject from a monolithic entity to a contingent, context-dependent one. In this sense, the life course approach "centres the subject without making the subject the sole owner of the emotion" (Wimark, 2017: 439; see also Ng, 2017).

Assuming the field as a displaced, reflective and socially engaged practice that is not so different from how we live our lives allowed me to position *truthfully* towards myself, and to avoid feeling guilty for being/not being or doing/not doing things according to an idealized idea of what the *perfect* researcher should and should not do. I realized – and accepted – that my way of being and living would necessarily transpire in the field, and vice versa. In my case, this meant approaching the field with little fears, strong energy and eagerness to develop my local social network, to grasp feelings and to understand discourses. This paralleled with methodological messiness, days of extreme tiredness, painful overlapping between what quickly became two different lives – me here/me there –, shifting moments of extreme enthusiasm and deep nostalgia for home. Since I am a quite outgoing and communicative person, the position of a lone, serious and detached researcher did not really fit me. Thus, one of my first concerns in Varanasi was to develop a support network, to weave up my 'family' there, understood as a hub of sharing and care (Gupta and Kelly, 2014; Jazeel and McFarlane, 2010; Ellis, 2007; on going beyond sharing in emancipatory research see Swartz, 2011).

Looking backward, I now realize how essential this process has been for me, for my own way of engaging. The fact that someone established relations of care with me allowed me to become part of the city, with its social infrastructures and embedded relationalities. "When are you coming back, Giuditta, *didi*?" This sentence, reiterated many times, gave me an identity of sorts. This made me felt accepted in and by the city. Indeed, weaving this type of prolonged, temporally expanded personal relations, partially disconnected from my professional identity, was one – very personal – crucial feature of my life in the field.

2.4 Exploring qualitative methodologies

This section reflects on two interconnected issues: my positionality as a Western, lone, inexperienced woman researcher, and the use of qualitative methods and techniques as instruments for navigating the field.

It is divided into three parts. The first one explores the elements that construct geographical authority. It refers to my experience in accessing and 'delimiting' my field of research. While it agrees on the commonly held view that the amount of time spent in the field is essential to the development of the research, it also argues that the organization of time, the engagement with people and places, and the role of gatekeepers and initial informants are essential constituents of the field. Therefore, they deserve detailed characterization.

The second part scrutinizes oral communication tools – interviews, casual conversations, informal talks – and puts them in relation to practices of observing, participating and listening. It aligns to recent studies that challenge the orthodoxy of interview in geographical research, trying to set a bridge between textual and more-than-textual ethnographic contents. For example, it suggests that setting an interview may be a pretext to more in-depth ethnographic exploration, and that researchers should be careful observers of unexpected performances, instead of focusing solely on textual data.

The third part discusses the need to adopt a reflexive stance towards intersectional axes of identity such as gender, race, age, status and physical ability, because these axes are not contingent but core in the development of field research. It explores the role of "racialized performances" (K. T. Fisher 2015), gendered and abled bodies when doing field research in cross-cultural contexts. It argues that immersive field approaches have been mostly

developed around the ideal of an abled, male ethnographic researcher. This ideal foreshadows issues of unsafe conditions, vulnerability, fear and violence. In line with feminist perspectives, I suggest that women researchers should speak loudly about their gender-based vulnerabilities in the field not as scattered episodes, but as the normalized result of patriarchal hegemonies.

2.4.1 Transparent authorities

Scientific authority in ethnographic geographical research often seems to emerge merely from the amount of time spent in the field. After reviewing around 200 human geography papers – most of them used ethnography as methodological approach –, Hitchings and Latham noted that geographers who travel significantly far for undertaking their field research tend to legitimize their scientific authority *simply* by advocating for the duration of their fieldwork (Hitchings and Latham, 2020b, p. 2; as in Cook, 2018; Grant, 2018; Naylor, 2018; Clark et al., 2017). While it is true that time plays an important role in developing knowledges and relations, and "cultural understanding comes through a slow process of engagement" (Hitchings and Latham, 2020b: 3), such a focus on duration risks to downplay the need to detail other elements that also constituted work in the field. This is not meant to challenge the clear assumption that authority comes from staying long time in the researched place, but rather to better scrutinize the black box of 'far-away fields' in order to detail how we actually lived, and how occasions for observations, dialogues and data collection emerged.

I organized my field research as a temporally expanded activity made of three trips lasting around 2-3 months each between December 2018 and December 2019. During my first field visit, I travelled between Delhi, Ahmedabad and Varanasi, where I stayed longer in January 2019. Since then, I spent my whole time in the field in Varanasi, with the only exception of some research activities occasionally carried out in Delhi.

Although travels with several layovers were long and tiring between Italy and India, I preferred diffused travels to a condensed 6 months fieldwork (as in Caretta and Jokinen, 2017). Distributing my overall time in the field into three periods allowed me to live Varanasi in different moments of the year. In a tropical, monsoon-driven geography, this meant that I was able to detect seasonal changes in tourism flows, socio-economic activities and urban life in general. This workplan had significant effect on my research: in

January and February, I engaged with local *ghats* dwellers and did extensive observation of economic activities on the *ghats*. This would have been impossible between August and October, when the riverside is submerged by monsoon floods (**Figures 5, 6**). Also, this prolonged time period spent in Varanasi allowed me to follow the various phases of the KVSAD-project demolitions in Lahori Tola neighbourhood, which I extensively analyse in chapters 3 and 4. Also, I spent the field visits with a – very personal – impetus for maximizing my occasions to socialize, to interview and to observe, these time periods were too tiring – perhaps also too frantic – to devote myself to theoretical research and writing, except from everyday diary-keeping. Lastly, going back home after two or three months in Varanasi was also a personal choice of *decompression*. It was a relief period of sorts, where I could live and share my otherwise lonely research period with peers and family (on sharing and networking against loneliness in the field see Billo and Hiemstra, 2013; Caretta and Jokinen, 2017; Heller et al., 2011).

In Varanasi, I found two accommodations: for the first three months, I lived at Kautilya Society guesthouse, paying a reduced price because of my research interest on the NGO activities (**Figures 7, 8**). During the second part of my fieldwork, I opted for a shared apartment with other foreign residents in another area of the historic city centre (**Figure 9)**. This choice was driven by the will to minimize my expenses, and by the necessity to live closer to some friends that could assist me for commuting, especially in the evening. The choice to live alone and to quit the NGO premises surely brought me closer to my affective and personal relations and distanced me from my objects of study – the Lahori Tola neighbourhood and the NGO (**Figure 10**).

In a similar situation, Johanna Carolina Jokinen confesses that "she sometimes did not consider herself to be a 'real geographer', as she lived alone and was not continuously taking part in locals' everyday life activities. Nevertheless, based on her previous research experience, she preferred a private and comfortable living environment to mitigate her personal vulnerability" (Caretta and Jokinen, 2017: 277). In line with her thoughts, I felt that mitigating my vulnerability and being safe were important premises to doing my work at best, even if it entailed being closer to intimate friends than to the field (Jones et al. 2015; Ballamingie and Johnson 2011). Additionally, the shift from one location to the other became an ethnographically dense moment where my position as female, lone and Western researcher came violently to the fore. I analyse this event in section 2.4.3. Here, I wish to suggest the productive nature of such displacing moments, where the researcher is able to 'shuffle the cards' of her supposedly fixed and stable positionality in and through the field.

My research activities started where it was easier to start: from my contacts at the NGO. After a few days of staying with them, we planned 4 semi-structured interviews and a dozen unstructured conversations about their professional and personal experiences, the birth and the evolution of Kautilya Society's activities. Thanks to their kindness and generosity, within a month I could collect both their draft candidature for UNESCO and the main official documents pertaining to the legal trial against Varanasi Development Authority (chapter 5). Some documentation was lacking, and I tried to collect it by contacting local authorities. Because they did not reply to my repeated emails and phone calls, I decided to squeeze the best out of the documents I already had.

Living at the NGO premises also allowed me to observe its work and to be up to date with publicly relevant facts happening in the city. At the end of February, my informants talked informally about a large-scale redevelopment project that was to be undertaken in the Lahori Tola neighbourhood (the KVSAD project, chapters 3 and 4). We went together for a walk in the planned demolition area (**Figure 11**). Also, I decided to conduct some research on the project, and I tried to establish contacts with local authorities: the Varanasi Development Authority (VDA), the Vishwanath Temple Trust (VTT), INTACH Varanasi, and the Archaeological Survey of India, U.P. section. The Archaeological Survey never replied to me. VDA scheduled a meeting with me for the end of February: but the official I interviewed was not involved in the project and had very little information to share. Overall, I had to wait until November 2019 for my first, real meeting with the Chief Executive, and not even in that meeting I could finally interview him as I had planned (chapter 4).

While between September/October my contacts with the project authority were (finally) established, I was still struggling with finding the former residents of the Lahori Tola neighbourhood. One day at the beginning of November, frustrated and almost hopeless, I approached one lady working for the NGO at the guesthouse. I asked her if she lived in Lahori Tola; she replied that she was not from there, but her husband knew many people in the area, and all those people had to relocate to the suburbs because of the redevelopment project. I enthusiastically asked for an appointment with her husband – weird move! – in order to organise a meeting with the former residents of the neighbourhood. After kindly insisting and reminding her to arrange the meeting for me, I could finally get to my informants.

In her doctoral research on Western lifestyle migration in Varanasi, anthropologist Mari Korpela extensively dwells on the sequencing of her field activities. She details the problems, failures, hopes and fears of accessing the

social group she studies and of securing her participation in social gatherings (Korpela 2009). In her methodology chapter, for example, she details the despair of not being able to access the community of Westerners: "I was feeling very frustrated during my first two months in the field since I did not have much contact with the people whom I wanted to study. I could not conduct interviews because I did not know whom to interview and I could not be a participant observer because I did not know when and where something worth observing was happening. (…) I felt ignored, lonely, and angry with myself and it was a very stressful time. (…) I even considered giving up the idea of doing a Ph.D." (Korpela, 2009: 49). Later, after months of struggle of becoming part of the community, she admits that the key social events analysed in her thesis resulted from tirelessly attending everything she could: "Having become an insider among the Westerners did not make my life easy. First of all, I was obsessed with being involved in every possible party and gathering, and I was constantly worried and feeling guilty about not being somewhere else" (Korpela 2009:56).

This type of narration deconstructs the seemingly effortless epiphanies of field research, those "magic ethnographic moments" extensively employed by geographers, where the crucial facts and acts of the investigation seem to coalescence in a paradigmatic vignette (Hitchings and Latham, 2020b: 3). Similarly to Korpela, I managed to attend crucial events and to gather important facts mostly through desperate stubbornness, chance, and who-knows-who informal chatting moments. While I will use vignettes and key events descriptions throughout the thesis, my aim was to provide a more transparent version of my fieldwork in this section, countering what Samantha Punch detects as the "sanitization" and "smoothening" of many geographical methodological accounts (Punch, 2012: 86).

2.4.2 Learning to talk and to see. Interviews, languages and beyond

Interviewing is arguably the most commonly used qualitative research technique in human geography today (P. Cloke, Crang, and Goodwin 2013; Flick 2011; DeLyser 2010; DeLyser et al. 2010; Dittmer 2010). Interviews have become so widespread and normalized that, as Hitchings and Latham have pointed out, "many of the issues associated with using them have receded into the background hum of the discipline" (Hitchings and Latham, 2020b: 8). I argue that these issues can be summarised in the following three

points. The first one concerns the visibility/invisibility of the researcher – here, the interviewer. It deals with how we make our presence intelligible in the unfolding of the interview, how we present the modalities in which the interview has been planned and developed, and how our particular engagement with the interviewed plays a role in the ways that person responds to us (as in Dery, 2020; Parsons and Lawreniuk, 2018). (In)visibility concerns are about making as much manifest as possible, the ways in which we 'treat' our interviewees and the ways they 'treat' us. For example, it interrogates what Hitchings and Latham refers to as "quotation cultures", namely the reasons and modalities behind researchers' use of quotations. Undertaking this type of analysis can unveil "how social groups are differently engaged and represented by human geographers according to what they want from them" (Hitchings and Latham, 2020b: 7).

The second issue refers to what has been called the more-than-textual content of interviews (Dowling, Lloyd, and Suchet-Pearson 2018; 2017; 2016). Already (Crang 2005; 2003) insisted on the embodied nature of field research. A more-than-textual approach to interviews – intended as temporally and spatially bounded dialogical events – points to the observation that information and "data" are not exclusively verbal. Interrogating on the physical context and setting of the interview, on its social dynamics and on what happens around the interview not only enriches the interpretation of the text, but may prove richer and denser than the text itself (Dowling, Lloyd, and Suchet-Pearson 2018; 2016; Pile, Bartolini, and MacKian 2018; Finlay and Bowman 2017). Considering the interview as a more-than-textual event allows us to keep our eyes open on the multimodal processes of meaning-making that unfold within the time and space of the interview. Sometimes, as I will argue with an example from my own experience, a planned interview may unexpectedly reveal to be just a passage for something else.

A third issue regards the need to disenfranchise the act of interviewing and doing interviews in a purely individual and personal 'style', towards a more collectively shared and discussed learning technique (as in Crang and Cook, 2011). Collective methodological discussions with my PhD colleagues revealed that many of us fear that unsuccessful interviews may result from our personal (in)competences and relational anxieties. Failures, doubts and uncertainties in undertaking interviews deserve increasing attention and collective discussion in doctoral methodological training, for example on the themes of: accessing and securing informants availability (Crang and Cook 2011); choosing the right interview modes (Jenner and Myers 2019; Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst 2017; Finlay and Bowman 2017); interviewing authorities and elite groups (W. S. Harvey 2010; K. E. Smith 2006).

This research has used interviews mainly for investigating the discourses of elite groups, authorities and professionals in the performance of their duties[25]. All semi-structured and structured interviews have been recorded and transcribed through a virtual software. At the NGO Kautilya Society, I conducted 4 one-hour long interviews with members, and 2 virtual Skype video interviews with the NGO founder (on online interviewing see Jenner and Myers, 2019; Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst, 2017). I planned the questions and timing of the interviews in advance, and while I generally left the control of both time and themes to my informants during the interviews, in all cases I was careful to obtain at least a limited amount of information on selected topics. Unstructured and semi-structured interviews worked effectively with my informants at Kautilya Society, as the interviews allowed them to retrace facts and events with a flexibility for giving space to opinions and emotions thereon.

Additionally, I conducted a total of 9 one-hour long semi-structured interviews with 'elite' informants from various institutionalized authorities. Methodologically, my experience builds on Harvey's arguments on the challenges of getting access, holding in-depth thematic knowledge, and being flexible while interviewing 'elites' (Harvey, 2010: 203). To build on that, I wish to stress the complexities in interviewing public and political informants in de facto undemocratic or farce-like democratic settings (Janenova 2019; Glasius et al. 2018; Gentile 2013; Koch 2013). Although India is still the largest democracy in the world, attempts at silencing or co-opting independent research critical about the current government are not unusual (Goel, Gettleman, and Khandelwal 2020).

While researchers may generally benefit from directly stating their institutional affiliation for gaining access (W. S. Harvey 2010), it should be noted that, once access is gained, political 'elites' may exploit that affiliation for securing their propagandistic discourses amongst academics and knowledge producers. Also, as noted by Smith, these individuals mobilize

[25] Smith unpacks the use of the term 'elite' in qualitative geography research, analysing power dynamics between researchers and interviewees. He argues that "the identification of individuals as 'elite' often relies on structural notions of power which have been usefully critiqued elsewhere in geography" and challenges the use of 'elite' as an "unproblematic category of people" based on the assumption that "it is possible to clearly identify 'powerful people'" and that "the power associated with people through their professional positions will transfer directly onto the interview space" (K. E. Smith 2006; Cochrane 1998). For the shifting relations of power and privilege between interviewers and interviewed see also the exchange between (McDowell 1992; Schoenberger 1992). In this section, I will use the term 'elite' with reference to informants whose level of technical expertise and knowledge and/or influence in decision-making is high.

power and influence in order to maintain professional hierarchy also in the setting of the interview (K. E. Smith 2006; Mullings 1999). While one can agree with Smith that "there is little evidence to support the idea that any areas of concern relate *specifically* to interviewing 'elites'" and that, instead, "there seems to be an assortment of potential problems which *all* interviewers *may* encounter" (Smith, 2006: 652), my experience suggests that political 'elites' of de facto authoritarian contexts see the interview essentially as an opportunity of co-optation for producing a public message that aligns as much as possible to official propaganda. This problematizes the need for the ethical transparency of the researcher in highly un-balanced power relations.

Casual conversations and informal chatting with other types of informants have been essential to both the development of the research and the construction of 'my' field of enquiry, with its spatialities, networks and practices. Mobile conversations – or conversation on-the-move – have proved effective ways for people to bridge personal feelings and urban spaces, as in the case of an afternoon spent with the ex-residents of the Lahori Tola neighbourhood in the area (chapter 4, section 4.4). Researchers have used "mobile interviews" (Finlay and Bowman 2017) with a renewed interest for materiality and for "enriching the interview" (Dowling, Lloyd, and Suchet-Pearson 2016) with more-than-textual, embodied and emotional dimensions (Pile, Bartolini, and MacKian 2018). Far from just "enlivening" the interview (Hitchings and Latham, 2020b: 5), conversations on-the-move allow us to displace discursive contents from memory and imagination to the materiality of objects, peoples and spaces, oftentimes provoking unexpected social encounters, emotional surges and moments of self-reflection (Anderson 2004; Hitchings and Jones 2004; Kusenbach 2003). They also encourage the use of visual methods such as drawing, video and photo making (Dowling, Lloyd, and Suchet-Pearson 2018; G. Rose 2016; Shaw, DeLyser, and Crang 2015; Crang 2010). I extensively used both photos and videos during my fieldwork in Varanasi (**Figures 12, 13**).

All interviews were conducted in English, while few informal conversations with residents of the Lahori Tola neighbourhood were done in a mixed English/Hindi jargon. This type of improvised language, where English sentences were complemented with popular Hindi terms, quickly became my preferred – or more spontaneous – vocabulary while in the field.

I had no mediators in the strict sense of the term, as occasional translations were made by the same informants that took part to the development of the field research. This made their presence more real, less transparent, and fully engaged in the topics.

Varanasi locals are largely familiar with foreigners staying long-time in the city or visiting more times a year. As both (Zara 2012; Korpela 2009) acknowledge in their doctoral fieldwork in the city, English is widely employed and mastered by local residents that relate with tourists or foreigners. In my field experience, this capability seems to be partially disconnected from caste or class belonging (as demonstrated by my Chapter 5, where all participants to the research spontaneously talked to me in fully understandable English). My own language competences improved a lot from my exchanges with participants in the field. For lifestyle migrants (Chapter 5.4), merging Hindi terms to the use of English as an international *lingua franca*, fits that constellation of practices that construct their identities as different from those of short-term tourists and travellers. As it emerged from various conversations with western migrants, a *real* foreign resident in Varanasi should speak basic Hindi with locals: whether this comes from a sense of respect towards local people or from the need to construct the new self as in line to Indian culture could interestingly be object of future research.

As mentioned, interviewing has become one of the most popular and effective ways to collect and construct geographical information (Hitchings and Latham 2020a; 2020b). Geographers struggle hard to find contacts, schedule meetings and finally get to that epiphanic *event* which, we believe, will feed our research with essential and new material.

However, my field experience has pushed me to sometimes consider the interview as a mean, rather than an end. What if scheduling an interview becomes a road to something else, where we are observers and/or enablers of meaningful acts and facts happening in our presence? This would build on the enrichment of geographical ethnography with tools and strategies that recast *observation* and *participation* at the core of field enquiry (as in anthropological ethnography, see Madden, 2017; Gerard Forsey, 2010; Delamont, 2003; Gans, 1999). It would partially respond to the question of "what, for current "geographical ethnographers" is the relationship between interviews and observation?" (Hitchings and Latham, 2020b: 5). A practical example that occurred to me while on fieldwork is worth mentioning here.

As mentioned above, in November 2019, I finally managed to schedule a meeting with the CEO of the KVSAD Project. He gave me appointment at the entrance of the temple complex on Godowlia Road. When I got to the entry point, two armed guards came to escort me to the offices of the project Board. While walking with my assigned guard, silently, I looked around and realized how unusual that visual perspective was to me – I had visited the temple only as a tourist, thus taking a different road and a different entry. I glimpsed the military cantonment established after the 1992 riots, and

I was shocked by the numbers of the military personnel patrolling the area (Malik 1994). When I met the CEO in his office, I was surprised by the number of people surrounding him and constantly following his moves. My figure is short and skinny, and I embarrassingly tried to make myself visible among dozens of men. After quickly presenting myself to the CEO, I sat on a chair and waited for him. Quite soon, I realized one crucial thing: I was not there for interviewing him. Clearly, he had no time for me. Why he made me come all the way to Godowlia Road if he had no time to talk? Perhaps he wanted me to come just to see how busy he was? After a while, still neglected by the CEO, I realized that my position as a Western academic had some relevance there. Officials occasionally talked to me and repeatedly asked about my institution and my role. I had presented myself to the CEO as willing to understand and learn from Indian urban experiences. The CEO and the staff believed that I could be *useful* to them in terms of international visibility, provided that they could influence my opinions and my research on the KVSAD Project. After what seemed to me a very long time, waiting and doing nothing, I was asked to join the staff to the temple main chamber, where the CEO would have performed a ceremony. Why asking me to join a private ceremony, as the only woman in the group, with no role other than being an *observer*? I was frustrated, with my questions in hand, feeling neglected and fooled. Yet I joined and documented what happened next (for my diary excerpt see chapter 4) (**Figure 14**).

The social scene at the ceremony became one of the most ethnographically dense moments of my field research. It introduced my informant in ways that no interview or document could have done. As chief of the ceremony, the CEO emerged as a figure imbued of both spiritual and political authority, testifying the merging of roles and competences that is characteristic of BJP politics (for this analysis, see chapter 4). When I got home that day, my list of questions was still unanswered. However, participating at the events of the day had been the most meaningful way to engage in my field and to produce data. This personal example highlights the unmissable potentials of ethnographic participation, and the limits of interviewing as a fundamentally extractive methodology. Interviewing seems to inevitably centre the event around the interviewer as the maker, or facilitator, of what is about to happen – or to be said. Instead, in the episode above mentioned, my role was resized, displaced, until I became a passive observer/participant of a performance that was carried out as if I was not there. And yet, my *being there* was crucial, because it allowed me to construct a connection between myself and my informant. A connection in which

authority was performed (by him) and accepted (by me). This performed relation set the stage for our later encounters.

2.4.3 Talking about racialized, gendered, abled bodies in cross-cultural geography research

I am preparing for going out with my friends. I dress up and sit in front of the mirror for a quick make-up. I look at myself in the mirror. I see that I made myself pretty for the evening, as I used to do it in my country. But this makes me feel uncomfortable. Is my outfit too tight? Should I avoid kajal, or other make-up, for avoiding men's looks and comments? What makes me feel comfortable at home, suddenly becomes threatening. I decide to respect myself and my freedom as, overall, I do feel appropriately dressed. Walking down the lane I am confronted by stares, smiles and comments by local men in Hindi. The alley gets dark quickly after sunset. After ten minutes, I regret my choice and feel totally uncomfortable. Am I safe here? How can I be serene and focused on my work while constantly feeling vulnerable? (From field diary, 11/08/2019)

Verbal abuse, lewd gestures, stalking, sexual threats mark and make the experience of public spaces for women in India. (*Why Men Get Away with Rape*, visual essay by V. Geetha, illustrations by C. Mandugula, EPW, 2013.)

In section 2.4.1, I described my choice to move from the guesthouse where I was renting a room, to an independent flat in the southern area of the historic city centre (Assi) (**Figure 15**). When I asked my acquaintances how to find a room for medium-term rent in the city, some of them took the lead and offered to help me with local brokers and renters. I accepted their help, and together we begun scouting the informal hiring sector of Varanasi historic city centre.

After a week or two, I was frustrated and started doubting that I would ever find a house. From my field diary:

Today one friend brought me around with yet another broker. This person is not transparent with me. All the time, they talk in Hindi, and they translate only minimum parts of their conversations. Sometimes my friend gets angry with him. The broker expects money from house owners, who will give him a slice of the pie (the pie is my rent). I doubt that we are losing many possibilities simply because this broker is bringing his greed too far. (From field diary, 27/08/2019).

Some days later, my friend called me saying that they found a good place for me. He told me that I could leave the guesthouse and go to the place

with them both. The meeting point was at Assi Crossing at 6pm. I got there with my luggage and all my stuff packed. After waiting around an hour for the guy to show up – the usual Indian delay, he laughed! – we went to the flat, where, to our surprise, the owner of the house was showing the flat to a young Indian woman. What followed was a more than one-hour discussion between the owner, my friend, the broker and the Indian girl. I waited – feeling stupid for being in Varanasi and not knowing Hindi. Finally, my friend came to me saying that the owner changed his mind. He preferred to rent to the Indian girl as "she is young, as you, but married. And she is Indian, so they think she will have a more appropriate behaviour than you, as a Westerner" (field diary 29/08/2019). He apologised and firmly said that there was nothing more for us to do there.

After listening to his words, I was shocked and frustrated. Why did the owner not ask for *my* conduct, instead of assuming it from other "Westerners"? And if the agreement between our broker and the owner was already made, why did he let some other people come to see the flat? My disappointment was quickly replaced by anxiety: where would I have slept that night?? I had my bags with me, and my former guesthouse had no rooms available for the night. My friend calmed me down: he said he could not host me – because his family was "very traditional" (field diary 29/08/2019) –, but another (male) friend who lived alone would be happy to help. I was confused: my Indian friend insisted to help me. But I felt that sleeping at someone's place was beyond the line, even if my friend recommended him. After all, I thought, *I am a woman*. Yet, people having lived and worked in India probably know how difficult it is to firmly refuse without insulting those who offered to help. Thus, I accepted and slept at my acquaintance's house. I had a bad night, feeling unsafe, uncertain about how he would behave with me, wondering about my mistakes and about how vulnerable I was in that moment[26].

If I narrated this episode at length is because of a number of reasons. First of all, I see it coherent with the aforementioned willingness for increasing transparency of our professional and personal lives in the field. This transparency must pass also from the detailing of practical difficulties and the anxiety of not being (cap)able to pursue our work (Jokinen and Caretta 2016; S. Smith 2016; Billo and Hiemstra 2013). Second, I narrated it for building on accounts of the researcher's position as constantly unstable.

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[26] The story has a happy ending. The day after I could come back to the guesthouse and have my room back. A week later, I found a charming flat in Assi thanks to a contact I had from the community of Western residents.

As Katz noted, displacement happens not only when one gets in and out of the field: our position in and through the field is constantly displaced and in the making (Katz, 1994; also see Rose, 1997). The simple decision-act of moving from a guesthouse room to a flat became a thick, autobiographical account where my being in Varanasi as a lone researcher came abruptly to the fore, together with my bodily vulnerabilities. This connects to the third reason why I talked about this episode: the practical observation that my racialized, gendered and abled body was not a contingency to my research but a pivotal feature of it.

Feminist research has extensively investigated race and racialization as intersectional axis of identity constituting the positionality of both the researcher and the researched (K. T. Fisher 2015; Nayak 2011; 2006; Price 2010; Valentine 2008; 2007; Kobayashi and Peake 2000; Kobayashi 1994). Karen T. Fisher argues that "different understandings of 'race' mediate relationships between researcher and research participants" and that "the persistence of race as a category influences how researchers are perceived by their participants and how this can affect research interactions" (Fisher, 2015: 457). Anoop Nayak claims that although race as a scientific category no longer holds, it continues to be socially constructed in essentializing terms as "fiction only ever given substance through the illusion of performance, action and utterance, where repetition makes it appear as-if-real" (Nayak, 2006: 416). In this perspective, scholars have talked of *racialized performances*, shifting attention from race as a stable and abstract construct, to the unfolding of race-related social practices (e.g., practices of whiteness or blackness) (Nayak 2011; Price 2010; Nash 2003; McGuinness 2000). During my field research, racialized performances informed – and were informed by – transcultural understandings and perceptions of North/South, Europe/India as fundamentally dichotomic, where spaces of hybridity and *mixité* are the exception (K. T. Fisher 2015; Sultana 2007; Ladino 2002). Also, in my case, imagined geographies of class privilege intersected racialization, enriching the much-investigated race-gender axis with other categories, as Michael Brown suggested (Brown 2012).

The above-mentioned autobiographic episode demonstrates the role of racialized performances in the construction of a relational space between me – a white, European woman – and my acquaintances – black, Indian men. The broker saw me as an opportunity to make good money, as I embodied the *rich West* (as for Fisher, 2015, who was perceived as "big, rich, white, Americana"). The owner refused to rent me his apartment because the conduct of a Western woman was, to his eyes, more dissolute than that of an Indian girl. Also, my Indian friend counted on the openness somehow

embodied in my ‘Westernity’ when he offered me to sleep at an unknown friend’s house. It was a suggestion that he would never give to a lone, female Indian friend, as he later confessed to me.

The construction of my whiteness by my acquaintances and informants in Varanasi facilitated some aspects of my research. On the one hand, as a white researcher, everyone understood that I was relationally “open” to meet everyone that could benefit my work, with no distinction between males and females, and I did not need to be accompanied. This is of some importance in a conservative religious city such as Varanasi. On the other hand, some racialized features imposed on me were problematic and stressful. As a Western, unmarried girl in her late 20s, I was constantly seen as a woman that came to Varanasi for having fun, a sort of ‘party girl’, libertine, and fascinated by Indian culture, elements that pertain to the image of Western tourist women by local residents.

As field-based accounts by women researchers reveal, living the field as young, lone women entails issues that may threaten researchers’ well-being and personal safety (Ross 2015; Gifford and Hall-Clifford 2008; Nast 1994; Moore 1993; McDowell 1992). Nevertheless, as Karen Ross critically claims, “an idealized male researcher continues to be held up as the archetype by which ‘good’ fieldwork is conceptualized” (Ross, 2015:181). She reflects on how the mainstreaming of this archetype still “inhibits recognition of the highly gendered nature of fieldwork experiences and the need to plan for safe practices” (Ross, 2015:181). The masculinist archetype of the “good researcher” entails, among other things, an abled-body, and full control over both the research agenda and the personal and bodily experience in the field (on ableism see Jokinen and Caretta, 2016). As Ross argues, a sense of guilt, shame and self-blame for “not being able to maintain control” is likely to emerge when women researchers who experience harassment and violence are deemed as acting “like fools” in the field (Ross 2015; Moreno 2003). Fearing that they may be considered as *fools* by colleagues and supervisors, many women researchers prefer to mask or silence experiences of violence, thus reiterating patriarchal assumptions that stigmatize and blame the victim. However, as Juanita Sundberg suggests, this type of silence “fails to provide adequate guidance to students preparing for research, leading many to individualize and therefore conceal the challenges they encounter”, obscuring “the power relations that constitute researcher and researched, thereby masking the relationship between power, knowledge, and inequality” (Sundberg 2003, 187–88).

These insights are useful for critically scrutinizing immersive research as a methodology that aims to reduce the distance between researchers and

participants. Dismissing ideas of research as a detached and neutral practice, feminist scholarship have long advocated for collaborative and horizontal perspectives, which usually translate in immersive approaches that require building up relations of trust and care (Davies 2012; K. England 2008; K. V. L. England 1994; G. Rose 1997). However, trust and care come through intimacy and sharing, which are not abstract acts undertaken by archetypical researchers, but everyday practices that make the personal lives of researchers and participants in the field. In their accounts, many women researchers observe that long time spent together, intimacy or simple physical proximity with male informants is likely to be interpreted through sexual desire, encouraging the fashioning of the researcher as a sexual object (Malam, 2004; Cupples, 2002; Hapke and Ayyankeril, 2001; Markowitz and Ashkenazi, 1999; Ortner, 1996; and, for discussing the researcher as erotic subject, De Graeve and De Craene, 2019). This can be particularly relevant when the woman researcher is immersed in a male dominated environment, and when the research requires intimate and autobiographical reflection by informants (Yassour-Borochowitz 2012).

As mentioned in the extracts at the beginning of the section, also my experience testified continuous, everyday anxiety about threats of harassment, both verbal and physical, as well as the fear that my trust in my – mostly male – acquaintances and informants was misplaced. For example, the night I spent, reluctantly, at my acquaintance's place required me to take a defensive stance towards his overly friendly and flirting behaviour. Thus, I would argue that gendered bodily presence and the threat of sexual harassment are leitmotiv of women's life in the field. This also builds on the necessity to challenge the relationship between researcher and researched as asymmetrically dominated by the researcher. Following this logics, and leaning on her personal experience of sexual abuse, Ross asks if it is right to assume that female researchers "should inherently be trying to reduce distance with participants in the communities in which they work" (Ross 2015, 182). If it is arguably necessary for cross-cultural researchers to engage in socio-cultural immersions, positioning with care and respect towards participants, and engaging with compelling social issues, it is also important to counteract the normalization of research immersion as a risk-free prerogative of white, male, abled bodies.

Figure 1 People gathering for a festival in Assi ghat during the monsoon period, August 2019. Author's picture.

Figure 2 A BJP rally near Assi Ghat before U.P. State elections, April 2019. Courtesy of A., local informant.

Figure 3 My work location in Turin. The Valentino Castle where DIST Department is located and a shot of our PhD office.

Figure 4 My first residency in Varanasi, room at Ram Bhavan Guesthouse with small courtyard overlooking Bengali Tola lane. Author's picture.

Figure 5 Me at Vaatika Pizzeria terrace on Assi Ghat during monsoon flood. Author's picture.

Figure 6 Assi Ghat during the dry season in February 2019. Author's picture.

Figure 7 The entrance of Ram Bhawan Residency on Bengali Tola road, Varanasi. Author's picture.

Figure 8 Guests having lunch in Ram Bhawan's internal courtyard. Author's picture.

Figure 9 Assi Crossing in day time. From Wikimedia Commons.

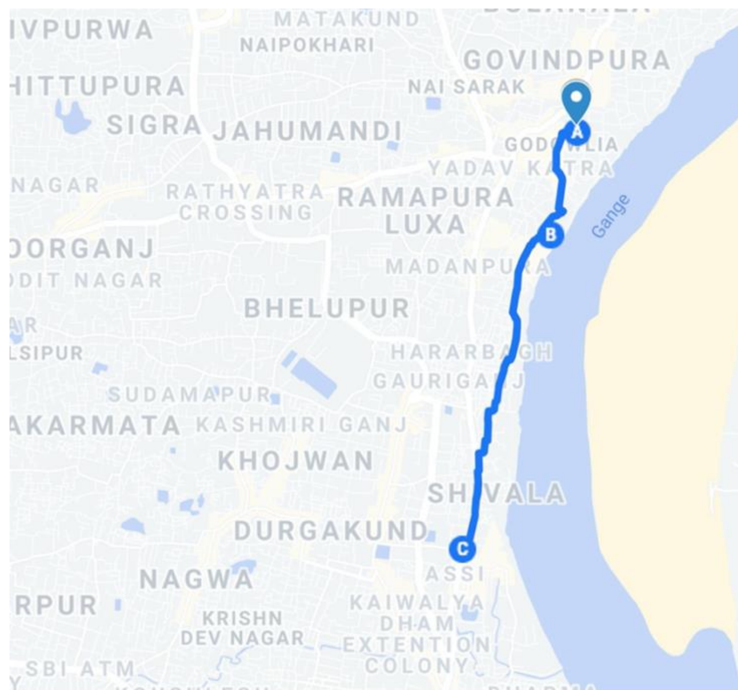

Figure 10 The distance between the site of my field analysis (A), my first residency at Ram Bhawan Guesthouse (B) and my final flat accomodation at Assi Crossing (C).

Figure 11 One of the lanes located in the area targeted by the KVSAD Project. Author's picture.

Figure 12 My acquaintance showing me the area demolished by the KVSAD Project. Author's picture.

Figure 13 The structures emerging from the demolitions in a spot where I stopped talking with informants during one video-interview.re

Figure 14 Prime Minister Narendra Modi offering to the Shiva lingam in the Vishwanath Temple main chamber. From Newsroom Post.

Figure 15 The sight from my flat at Assi Crossing. From Google Images.

Chapter 3
A tale of gods and muscles: envisioning a (almost) world-class Varanasi

Introduction

In this and the next chapter, I will explore the discursive use of cultural heritage within an urban politics of spatial dispossession and displacement. For so doing, I will extensively analyze a recent urban re-development project targeting the historic city centre of Varanasi (UP, India) begun in 2018 and underway.

The project targets the wards of Dashashwamedh, Lahori and Garhwaasi Tola and extends over around 40.000 sq. m. (**Figures 16, 17**). It entails the demolition of 300 residential and commercial properties, with the consequent displacement of around 600 families. The project develops a new *chowk* (square) adjacent to the major Hindu temple of the city, the Kashi Vishwanath Mandir, and a new pedestrian corridor connecting the Temple to the river. Its developers maintain that the new area will be equipped with pilgrimage and tourism amenities, cultural and recreational hubs such as a museum, a newly refurbished Sanskrit library and a theatre (**Figures 18, 19**).

The chapter is articulated as follows. The first section introduces the city of Varanasi, presenting selected contemporary and historical

sources about the city. This partial, non-exhaustive appraisal will allow to discuss the relevance, both discursive and material, that the city holds as a crucial religious, conservative and touristic hub of Uttar Pradesh and North India. By adopting locals' suggestive dichotomic lens 'Varanasi/Mumbai', I will discuss the position of the city in the current geographies of urban development in India.

The second section details the establishment of the responsible project authority by the Uttar Pradesh State government. It examines the Act of constitution of the new authority and explores its relation to contemporary technologies of governance in urban India.

Section Three dwells on the speech delivered by the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, for the official inauguration of the project. It develops a detailed discourse analysis aimed at highlighting the key features of Modi's arguments for legitimizing the project, and it explores them in the frame of Modi's neoliberal and muscular political agenda.

In direct connection with the former, the last section concludes this discursive analysis by exploring the legitimized narrative of the Project as developed by the responsible authority. It finally introduces the frictions brought by undisciplined, local voices to this previously investigated official, singled out governmental narrative.

3.1 "This is not Mumbai!" Introducing Varanasi, U.P., India.

In one balmy, humid evening of August, I was enjoying the riverside view of the Ganges with local Indian friends at a terraced Indo-Italian Pizzeria located on Assi *ghat*, Varanasi (**Figure 20**). The staircases on the *ghat* were crowded by flocks of youngsters. They were chatting loudly, drinking *chai*, chewing betel or smoking. My friends and I were looking around and chatting informally. One of my friends pointed to the crowd saying:

> Look around! Does this look like Varanasi? To me, it looks like Mumbai! [Looking at me] You see those girls, with short pants? Look at how easy going they are… They are in a group with male friends. And they smoke together. Now, it is dark, it's night-time… Some years ago, this would have been very unusual. Look, I am very feminist… I tell you: *it is not about women*. At all. These things, you find in Mumbai… and it's totally ok. But here, it's Varanasi. This is not Mumbai! (Conversation with A., field diary, 09/08/2019)

I listened carefully and didn't quite know how to interpret his words, as I had no experience of Mumbai and very little knowledge of Varanasi. But his talk got deeply into my head and ignited my curiosity: what *kind* of city was Varanasi? And what was *different* from Mumbai?

For what I knew, Varanasi was a medium sized city located in the alluvional plain of the Middle Ganga River basin in the State of Uttar Pradesh, North India. The urban district has a population of more than 1.4 million people, who mostly inhabit the metropolitan area stretching out from the historic city centre on the western banks of the river[27] (**Figures 21, 22**). The historic core of the city, what inhabitants properly call "Varanasi", is undoubtedly very old: Buddhist and historical texts reporting the wanderings of Buddha locate in Sarnath, northern edge of Varanasi, the place where he gave his first sermon (Asher 2020; Eck 2013). However, Varanasi cultural history is most commonly associated to Shivaism, and Hindu religious texts describes the city as founded by god Shiva. Historical material evidence testifies the role of religious Hindu patronage in the city, which constellated the urban space with temples and shrines, among which the Kashi Vishwanath Mandir, one of the most sacred Shiva temples in North India (M. S. Desai 2017; Dodson 2016; Eck 2013) (**Figures 23, 24**).

When scouting for historical information on Varanasi one easily gets lost in the plethora of religious studies which connect the city to this or that deity, or to this and that spiritual, mythological, mystic tradition. In these accounts, permeating also orientalist imaginaries, the city is mainstreamed as the cradle and core of Hindu religiosity (Eck 2013 is the most reknown example in point). However, my intention is not to dwell into this type of history. Instead, by scrutinizing various studies, I will try to give a critical appraisal of how Varanasi has come to be *discursively* articulated in ways that reinforce and support the ideological and political project of the current Indian government.

First and foremost, Varanasi is just one of the many names the city has. To my knowledge, the city is also called: Banaras, Benares, Kashi. It is also referred to through paraphrases and metaphors. Varanasi is "the city of light"; "the city of salvation" and, less commonly "the city of Shiva".

The Sanskrit name Kashi – literally meaning *shining* – permeated the nomenclature referring to brightness, illumination and, consequently, salvation (Eck 2013). The Hindi term 'Varanasi' comes from merging the names of the two main underground rivers of Varanasi, the Varuna (or Barna)

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[27] Data retrieved from Official Census of India, at https://www.censusindia.gov.in/, and from Varanasi Municipality official website, at https://varanasi.nic.in/. Both accessed 13/05/2021.

river and the Assi river (Dubey 1985). This geographical appellation is also the one adopted by this thesis.

Interestingly, researching literature on Varanasi or on Benares/Kashi gives different results. My investigation on 'Varanasi' revealed a city that is enquired for its air pollution, traffic noise and waste management issues and its connection to water pollution and associated diseases (Ahamad et al. 2018; Pathak, Tripathi, and Mishra 2008; Sharma, Agrawal, and Marshall 2008; Tripathi, Sikandar, and Shukla 1991). Environmental and engineering research reveals a contaminated city, where the water infrastructure is scarce and the river basin highly polluted. Recent studies on urban tourism, migration and spatial practice also tend to use the term "Varanasi", as in (Zara 2016; 2015; Korpela 2009). Thus, "Varanasi" seems to be more employed in research on the contemporary city.

Conversely, research on 'Banaras' – also in its British transliteration 'Benares' – and 'Kashi' mostly deals with the city's cultural and political history. For example, scholars writing about Banaras/Benares/Kashi dwell on the city's secular traditions, on its modern history under Muslim domination and British colonization, and on its sacred and secular urban geography (Casolari 2002; M. S. Desai 2017; Dodson 2016; Eck 2013; Freitag 1992; Gaenszle and Gengnagel 2008; KUMAR 1988).

Some of these studies share a complex and multifaceted understanding of the urban history of Varanasi, overcoming mainstreamed discourses centered on Hindu mythology, and re-assessing the role of cultural patronage and political movements in the construction of the urban space (Gaenszle and Gengnagel 2008; Freitag 1992). Notably, historian Marzia Casolari assesses the long-lasting position of Varanasi as a political laboratory for right-wing, fundamentalist Hindu ideology, known as *Hindutva* (Casolari 2002; Chatterji, Hansen, and Jaffrelot 2019). Cultural historian and linguistic Vasudha Dalmia shows how the urban history of Varanasi intertwines that of Bharatendu Harischandra – considered the founder of modern Hindi literature. Her book examines how "a dominant strand of Hinduism in North India – the tradition which uses and misuses the slogan 'Hindi–Hindu–Hindustan' – came into being in the late nineteenth century", exploring the life and writings of a key figure in Indian cultural history (Dalmia 1997) (**Figures 25, 26, 27**).

These two accounts suggest that mainstreaming Varanasi as a traditional, holy city is consistent with the current political project of Hindutva nationalism pursued by the dominant political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (R. Desai 2010; Rajagopalan 2010). Recent development projects centered on the preservation and promotion of religious urban

heritage in the city support this evidence. Notably, the national HRIDAY scheme, launched in 2015 "with the aim of bringing together urban planning, economic growth and heritage conservation" has involved 12 'heritage cities' of India, among which Varanasi[28]. In the documentation of the scheme, Varanasi is presented as

> A centre of learning, enlightenment, culture and civilization for more than 3000 years. (…) The culture of Varanasi is closely associated with river Ganga and the river's religious importance. People often refer to Varanasi as the city of temples, the holy city of India, the religious capital of India, the city of learning, culture capital of India et al.. (Indian Institute of Urban Affairs 2015)

Like the other 12 cities targeted in the scheme, Varanasi has been selected for its religious importance. The scheme spotlights key material evidence of this (mostly Hindu) religiosity in specific areas of the city: the riverside *ghats* – the pedestrian staircases used for water rituals in the Ganges; the monumental buildings of the kings and rajas of the 18th-19th centuries; the Hindu Kashi Vishwanath Temple; the packed lanes stuffed with traditional road-side shops and markets (**Figure 28**).

Enquiries on urban life in Varanasi are rare (Kumar 1988 on the community of Muslim weavers is a notable exception). As the sociological studies by Sandra Freitag and Nita Kumar suggest, life and cultural identity in Varanasi seem to be structured around the *mohalla*, a group of neighboring families counting between 100 to 2000 people (Freitag 1992; Kumar 1988). In the '90s, studies considered the *mohalla* as the basic cultural unit of socio-economic life in the historic city centre: for Bidyut Mohanty "cultural and religious activities tend to be *mohalla*-based – festivals and other performances are organized around, based in, named after and identified with a particular mohalla (Mohanty 1993, 316) (**Figure 29**). However, studies exploring the configurations of this mode of life in more recent times are lacking.

The neighborhoods and urban fabric of Varanasi have never been object of extensive geographical and architectural analysis. However, modern

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[28] The scheme was launched in 2015 as part of a bigger urban re-development project targeting Indian historic cities financed and designed by World Bank, Cities Alliances program and the Indian Government (IHCDP, 2011 to 2018). HRIDAY was conceived as a second phase (2016-2018) where targeted cities would develop state-driven revitalization guidelines. Further information at WB Cities Alliances program (https://www.citiesalliance.org/sites/default/files/AdP-n%C2%B0107-GB%205.pdf) and HRIDAY project document (http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/pt/407351563435455053/pdf/Heritage-City-Development-and-Augmentation-Yojana-Guidelines.pdf). Accessed, 15/03/2021.

travelers, scholars and British colonial administrators documented the old core of the city by drawing and photographing some of its monumental complexes (M. S. Desai 2017; Dodson 2016). In particular, the complex of the Vishwanath Temple and the adjacent Gyan Vapi Mosque gained scholarly attention because of its long, conflictual history of demolition and reconstruction[29] (**Figure 30**).

Historians have now established that the Vishwanath Temple worshipped today is the ca. 1781 reconstruction of a former Shiva temple, destroyed and rebuilt at various times, originally located where the Mughals constructed the present Gyan Vapi Mosque (ca. 1669) (Desai 2017). A narration of desecration and destruction by Muslim rulers is mainstreamed in the city, although it has been subject to historical scrutiny in recent times (Dumper 2019; Desai 2017; Dodson 2016). For more than two centuries, the two buildings have flanked each other as part of the same complex, with the shared precinct being object of contentions among the two religious communities[30] (Dumper 2019; Desai 2017; Dodson 2016).

In the 1930s, when the British colonial administration limited the use of the mosque solely to the Friday prayer, and entrusted it to the local community of Muslim weavers, the mosque lost the prominent role it had under Mughal rule. However, the building scale and history make it one of the most iconic monuments of the city, disturbing the sentiments of radical Hindus. Many of them still do not recognize the space as pertaining to Islamic spirituality and reclaim it by invoking narratives of historical precedence, in a way that parallels the relentlessly conflictual dispute over the Babri Masjid in the Uttar Pradesh city of Ayodhya (see recent articles such as The Hindu, 2019; The Wire, 2019; The New York Times, 2019; and also Johnson-Roehr, 2008; Ratnagar, 2004).

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[29] This is not the place for an extensive reconstruction of the urban history of Varanasi. However, basic historical data will be given here referring to established references on the subject. Varanasi was conquered by Muslim conquerors in the 12th century. Muslim dynasties ruled the city until 1737, when the Kingdom of Banaras was officially created. However, already since the beginning of the 18th century and the death of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, Hindu dynasties of the Maratha and the Bhumihars ruled the city. The Kingdom of Banaras was preserved under the British Raj and later dissolved when India gained Independence and the state of Uttar Pradesh was established (historical analysis in Dodson 2016).

[30] Madhuri Desai recalls that "a peepul (*Ficus religiosa*) tree within the precinct was claimed as an object of worship and veneration by Hindus, a sore point with Muslims who wished to trim its branches. This impasse continued into the twentieth century with protestations from the Muslims about bird droppings from the tree desecrating an ablution tank connected to the mosque in 1924" (in Dumper 2019, citing Sherring, 1868, p. 53).

Indeed, the enquiry by Madhuri Desai over the spatial transformations of the complex reveals that Varanasi has been object of ethnically based urbanisms that echo in nature the violent trajectories of other multi-religious, contested sites (M. S. Desai 2017; Dumper 2019; R. Desai 2010; DUMPER and LARKIN 2012). Knowing that, Hindutva-driven urban projects that target the religious complex risk to fuel on existing Hindu-Muslim conflict, rather than heading for an appeasement of the relations between the two communities[31].

Bearing this context in mind, let us return to the issue that my acquaintance from Varanasi raised in that summer night: which kind of city is Varanasi? And why it is *not like* Mumbai?

With the tourism and pilgrimage economy being a major source of employment in the city[32] and knowing that tourists and pilgrims come for experiencing sacred Hindu places, Varanasi benefits from being discursively constructed as 'spiritual', 'conservative' and 'Hindu'. To the eyes of Western travellers, the city crucially represents Indian otherness – epitomized in mysticisms and spirituality (Zara 2012). Tourists in Varanasi sense, perceive and stage their bodies and identities in direct connection with the products of Indian – more specifically Hindu - spirituality such as yoga, meditation, the offering and adoration of Hindu deities (Zara 2016; 2015; 2012). But the point of describing Varanasi through opposition with Mumbai is not simply to present Varanasi as a conservative, religious city. Rather, it is aimed to construct it discursively as an entity that cannot be narrated and performed as a (wannabe) world class city.

Indeed, to the eyes of Varanasi youth, Mumbai embodies futurist, distant visions of development, understood as a transformative force that has long bypassed stagnant, traditionalist Varanasi[33]. In India, the global city,

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[31] The position of the Vishwanath Temple/Gyan Vapi Mosque complex in the KVSAD Project will be extensively analysed in chapter 4, section 4.1.

[32] Already in 2006, the tourism industry was the second major source of employment after manufacturing. In more recent years, tourism flows in the city have been steadily increasing, with the exception of the year 2020-2021 due to the spread of Covid-19 pandemic. Data retrieved from the 2006 City Development Plan for Varanasi (Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission) at https://web.archive.org/web/20140223090737/http://gangapedia.iitk.ac.in/sites/default/files/CDP_Varanasi.pdf, and UP State Tourism Statistics at www.uptourism.gov.in. 2006.

[33] This representation permeates life and narrations on Varanasi, although recent infrastructural projects in the metropolitan area do bring more and more substantial change to the mobility infrastructure. For example, the completion of the International Airport Lal Bahadur Shastri in recent years (2005), expanded and strengthened connectivity to main urban poles in both North and South India as well as to key international pilgrimage nodes in Nepal and Thailand. This said, before the approval of the KVSAD Project, Varanasi was still largely peripheral in the concerns of Indian world class urbanism.

Mumbai, in fact constantly reproduces its antithesis – the slum city – in the seemingly immovable urbanism of middle-sized cities like Varanasi. Here, for decades, there has been no "road map for urban transformation" and no emphasis "on massive investments in infrastructure (especially transportation infrastructure—railway, harbor link, airports) to facilitate the growth of "high-end services" (it, media, entertainment, and telecommunications), to attract investment (particularly in real estate), and to create "hygienic and aesthetic surroundings" that will increase land values" (Björkman 2015, 252) (**Figures 31, 32**).

However, while my acquaintance, as other locals, struggle to reaffirm the specificity of the city, which "is not Mumbai!", urban re-development projects are starting to beat Varanasi as well. The political narrative employed to legitimize these transformations borrows from the global success of world-class cities initiatives, suggesting that also middle-sized cities take part in the geographies of urban aestheticization and spectacularism that transformed Bombay into Mumbai, and may one day re-brand Varanasi to Banaras once and for all[34].

3.2 Governmental technologies: corporate urbanism and the rescaling of State power

In September 2018, the State of Uttar Pradesh passed the Shri Kashi Vishwanath Special Area Development Board Act[35]. The Act establishes a Special Development Area (hereafter, SDA) and a responsible Board that would "create, formulate, implement, regulate and maintain the Special Area under its jurisdiction". The KVSAD Board responds directly to the UP State government and is made of 18 members: 6 officers are ex-officio nominees of U.P. state departments; 4 are representatives of the Varanasi Development Authority, the Varanasi Nagar Nigam (Municipal Corporation), the Varanasi Jal Nigam (Water Supply and Sewerage Authority) and the Purvanchal Vidhyut Vitaran Nigam Limited (Electric Power Supply Corporation). The

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[34] On Indian megacities and their roadmaps towards world-class transformation, see (A. Roy and Ong 2011; A. Roy 2011a; Follmann 2015; Bhan 2009; R. Ellis 2012). For the story that brought Bombay to become Mumbai a good synthesis is in (Björkman 2015). For a 21th century analysis of Bombay urban development projects see also recent (Frazier 2019).

[35] Hereafter, it will be referred to as the Act. Full length text of the Act in the Annex Section under reference: UP Act no. 31 of 2018. In this section, quotations are taken from the Act, unless otherwise specified.

Varanasi District Magistrate and the Police Superintendent also figure as members of the Board.

The KVSAD Board is created with the aims of "developing and maintaining the cultural, spiritual, mythological and architectural aesthetics in such area, and to promote tourism in consonance with the rich cultural heritage thereof". After defining the extension of the SDA to the wards of Dashashwamedh, Lahori and Garhwaasi Tola – the Act sets: the composition of the board; its powers and functions; its funding and credit instruments; the procedures of accountability and auditing by the state government; the terms of the Act; the overriding effect of the Act.

As per provisions of the Act, the Board is entrusted full authority on the management and development of the SDA. It should prepare and implement development and rehabilitation plans for the area; it contains provisions for the relocation of residents; it should design and implement a long-term heritage conservation plan. The Board is entitled to acquire buildings and lands within the SDA perimeter via "mutual negotiations, purchase, donation, transfer, lease, rent or otherwise" (Art. 6). Properties acquired by the Board can be transferred any time to the State of UP, and they become full property of the State in case of dissolution of the Board.

The Board has the power to issue directions on the construction, demolition, occupation, maintenance of buildings in the SDA; it can and should enforce owners, occupiers and transferees to properly maintain their buildings. It may act with residents' financial resources if they are not compliant to maintain the buildings; it may levy taxes and services charges in the area and it may impose penalties to owners, occupants or transferees. Board officials have the faculty to enter buildings or lands for inspections, and owners or occupants are compelled to allow access and facilitate inquiry (Art. 10, 11). The Board is also entitled to confiscate any site or building should the Chief Executive order to do so (Art. 9: 3). To the discretion of the Chief Executive, in concert with the State of UP, the Board may also exempt owners, occupants and transferees from the provisions of the Act. The Board maintains its own fund and is entitled to use its financial resources for implementing the provisions of the Act, as well as to invest credit in any activity deemed consistent with the Act provisions. The State of UP. will transfer money in the form of grants, loans or other to the deposit fund of the Board. The Board is also entitled to raise its own funds from other sources. Yearly budgets and accounting of funds are required and verified by the state government. Finally, the document expresses the overriding effect of the Act, which means that its provisions apply "notwithstanding anything contrary

contained in any law of the State of Uttar Pradesh for the time being in force" (Art. 31).

As it emerges from the provisions and objectives of the Act, the Board is given full powers over the urban zone identified as Special Development Area. These powers are conferred to it by the UP State Government, thus legally and de facto depriving the local municipality of its jurisdiction over the area. Thus, a number of functions, such as tax collection, are conferred to the newly created entity. The Board is conceived hierarchically, with the Chief Executive holding full powers and being responsible solely before the State Government.

Loraine Kennedy and Ashima Sood (2019) describe the outsourcing of urban management functions to newly established, multi-scalar governance entities, as a key trait of current BJP urban government, although the origins of this trend should be traced back to the first wave of neoliberal decentralization in 1990s India (Kennedy and Sood 2019; Ruparelia 2015; Kennedy 2013). The creation of these institutional arrangements sustains the territorial fragmentation of the urban space, obtained through the use of 'special areas' instruments, as in the case of the old neighborhood in Varanasi (Phelps and Miao 2019; Ayona Datta 2015). The development of special areas, obtained through spatial splintering, corresponds to governmental fragmentation, as the management of these areas is being removed from the purview of municipal authority and outsourced to subnational government agencies (Kennedy and Sood 2019; A. Sood 2015).

By depriving municipalities from full jurisdiction over metropolitan spaces, these instruments substitute elected bodies and introduce forms of corporate urbanism (Kennedy 2013). It has been noted that while the newly created agencies are entrusted full powers over the area under jurisdiction, the controversial socio-economic after-effects of their entrepreneurial – largely speculative – urbanism are left to the (weak) management of municipal bodies (Kennedy 2013). While presented under the label of decentralization, this scalar restructuring remains fictitious, as the new urban corporations are nothing but the territorial arm of state governments at the scale of the urban and metropolitan areas. As summarized by Kennedy and Sood (2019: xx), "in the reordering of jurisdiction that has occurred in the last couple of decades, subnational states have seen their jurisdictions enlarged" while "this has not been the case with local municipal governments (…), because state governments have resisted devolving powers and resources". Nicholas Phelps and Julie Miao have noted that these corporate urban agencies have oftentimes the role of igniting processes of urban speculation

based on land dispossession and inadequate compensation to owners and tenants (Phelps and Miao 2019; Goldman 2011).

State rescaling has been characterized as either formal or "integral", (Brenner et al. 2008). In their perspective, formal scalar restructuring refers to "the changing organization of state territoriality in the modern inter-state system; the evolving role of borders, boundaries, and frontiers; and the changing intra-national geographies of state territorial organization and internal administrative differentiation" (Brenner et al. 2008, 6). While this type of rescaling can be limited to the purpose of improving territorial administration, "integral rescaling" goes further. For Kennedy and Sood, it refers to "the myriad ways in which social and economic activities and relations are re/de-regulated and re-organized in order to achieve state objectives, which may or may not involve territorial re-organization. These strategies have the scope to restructure local economies, by shaping which sectors are promoted, the types of employment created and the sites where firms can locate" (Kennedy e Sood 2019, 132). Extensively used in Indian cities, this type of re-scaling is described as the common denominator of many urban development schemes (Follmann 2015; A. Sood 2015; Shatkin 2011). As in the case of the KVSAD project in Varanasi, this re-scaled corporate urbanism aims at a comprehensive restructuring of the local economy in ways and through instruments that are strongly autocratic. This is achieved spatially through co-opting portions of the urban space, and politically through bypassing democratic, elected institutions, and through appointing more or less ephemeral state instruments acting as private companies – but with the regulatory and fiscal powers of elected bodies.

In one of our interviews, the Chief Executive of the Board addresses the political conjuncture of 2017-2018, with BJP holding both national and state power, as a key factor for the implementation of the project:

> Informant: Over the years, both the UP State and the central level made attempts to clear the area. But nobody was able to take or make a concerted effort about it.
>
> Me: What changed now, with respect to the past, that allowed for such project to be approved?
>
> Informant: When the current BJP government took the lead, and Yogi Adityanath became Chief Minister of UP, decision was taken that we should try and make this project happening. What changed is that we finally had political support at both state and central levels. And when the two levels decided to do it, financing it was not a problem: UP State funded the whole project. (Interview with Board CEO, 10/11/2019)

The role of urban public authorities is not even mentioned, clearly revealing that the decentralization of state governments entails the restraint of the prerogatives of municipalities in spatial restructuring processes.

As a matter of fact, the action of managerial boards established as substitutes of locally elected bodies heads to a progressive reduction of the democratic capacity of local governments (Ren 2020). This entails a restriction of the arena for public participation and dissent that is perceived by locals. When asked about the KVSAD Project, most people agreed that *because* the UP State and national governments want it, nobody can oppose. This perception inhibits forms of protest, as they are considered too weak against the political alignment between the two governments:

> You know, the only way to interfere, or to stop the project, is through a Public Interest Litigation. [He shakes his head and looks down] How can you issue a PIL against UP, and Yogi Adityanath [Chief Minister of UP State]?! You know, he is very close to… Look, this time, I don't have the strength to oppose such project. I am tired. I mean… [lowering his tone of voice] *Prime Minister wants it*!" (emphasis in original, personal conversation with D., local NGO Kautilya Society, 25/08/2019)

The Board is not merely regarded as a new level of authority. In the above excerpt, my informant claims that he must adjust his conduct before a governmental technology that is felt inexorably overarching and undemocratic. Borrowing from Foucault, sociologist Nikolas Rose described a technology of government as "an assemblage of forms of practical knowledge, with modes of perception, practices of calculation, vocabularies, types of authority, forms of judgement, architectural forms, human capacities, non-human objects and devices, inscription techniques and so forth, traversed and transected by aspirations to achieve certain outcomes in terms of the conduct of the governed (which also requires certain forms of conduct on the part of those who would govern)" (N. Rose 1993).

In this lens, the spatial restructuring of state powers and the creation of an intermediate entity between state and urban authorities can be read as a strategic endeavor for shaping the conduct of locals towards the Project. Most locals who have obvious reasons for being against the transformation of the area restrain from taking public stand or even from talking about it precisely because the newly appointed Board introduces a new level of mixed authority, both central and local, distant and near, direct expression of the Indian Prime Minister, the State and the local development authorities.

3.3 A "dream coming true": Narendra Modi inaugurating the Kashi Vishwanath Special Area Development Project

On 7 March 2019, Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi flew to Varanasi for inaugurating the ambitious Kashi Vishwanath Special Area Development Project (hereafter, KVSAD Project). As shown, UP Government had established the Project Board few months before (see this chapter, section 3.2). However, it is only after Modi's inauguration that the project gained national media visibility[36]. The video of the ceremony was broadcasted by the official Prime Minister channel[37].

The ceremony took place in the Kashi Vishwanath Mandir. During the event, Modi was accompanied by the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yodi Adityanath, the Chief Priest of the Temple, pandit Ashok Diwedi and by security bodyguards. Firstly, he paid visit to the chamber of the Shiva *jyotir lingam*. Here, he performed a *puja* – the ceremonial offering. After leaving the chamber, he received a ritual blessing from the priests before laying the foundational stone of the project. Then, he visualized a 3D layout of the project with the architects. Finally, he got on stage to deliver his speech (**Figures 16, 33**).

Modi's speech begins with a religious invocation to Hindu gods: Mahadev and Baba Vishwanath – both names for to Shiva – Maa Annapurna and Maa Ganga. This allowed to position both his discourse and the Project under the auspices of Hindu deities. The first part of the speech reiterates in various forms the notion of "a dream coming true" (see extract below). Addressing the project as a dream allows to present its leader as a dream-fulfiller, as an ambitious maker of the extraordinary, marking a rupture with the past:

> A dream has cherished for a long time, when I was not even in politics. Now the time has come to do something. Yes, something must be done. Maybe Bhole Baba has decided for it [here and everywhere in the text, Bhole Baba is Shiva, author's note]. His sons have talked a lot, have asked to show up and show the

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[36] National newspapers such as The Telegraph and Hindustan Times covered the event (The Telegraph 2019; Hindustan Times 2019).

[37] Here and elsewhere in the section I refer to the video: "PM Modi Lays the Foundation" broadcasted at PMO Youtube Channel 2019, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1UL9TNox-U&t=1405s (PMO official Youtube Channel 2019), accessed 8/03/2021.

> blessings of Baba. So, the dream is starting to become true. And Kashi Vishwanath Dham, in a way, *is the festival of the liberation (mukti) of Bhole Baba*. Our Baba was fighting, stuck in the narrow walls, all around. Now, for the first time, many adjacent buildings were wired (?). As such, Baba will get salvation, but he also will take his devotees with him. (italics addedd, PMO official Youtube Channel, 2019 original in Hindi with English captions)

The sentence in italics introduces a suggestive metaphor which equates the demolition of buildings and the clearance of the area to the liberation of Shiva from the narrow walls and congested lanes. Through the rhetorical artifice associating the demolition of dwellings with spiritual liberation, devout Hindus are encouraged to consider the transformation of their ward as a proof of their faith in Shiva. And, Modi adds, when Shiva will be liberated, the "owners and renters who willingly left their place" will be recompensated by attaining salvation themselves.

This religious metaphor is flanked by a political mention to Gandhi. Modi recalls the visit of Mohandas Gandhi to Varanasi in 1916 (Gandhi 1994). In that occasion, the Mahatma complained of the cramped and unclean conditions of the area surrounding the Temple:

> 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 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? (Gandhi 1994, 132)

By combining religious and secular formulas, Modi merges spiritual liberation with modern cleanliness and development. Also, he is able to present himself as the dream-fulfiller who, after a century, is finally able to respond to Gandhi's plea (I will come back on the discursive mobilization of Gandhi later in this chapter).

The liberation of Shiva also relates to the construction of a wide corridor connecting the Temple to the river. In order to legitimizing the construction of the corridor, Modi mobilizes the image of the reunion of Shiva and Mata – mother – Ganges:

> You are watching here, in the model and the film that have been shown to us, *now Bhole Baba has direct connection to Maa Ganga*. [people in the public clapping hands]. After taking bath in Maa Ganga, you can directly bow at the feeth of Bhole Baba. (italics addedd, PMO official Youtube Channel, 2019 software translation from Hindi)

Also, Modi directly addresses Hindu faith as "extreme" and "strong" as it allows "temples to be protected" (part 3, 08:40; part 4, 04:10). The reference to religious strength and to the need for protecting temples matter because, here as anywhere, Hindu faith might be put at strain by external forces. Enemies exist. Indirectly, the Prime Minister makes reference to the historical wrongs and grievances occurred under Muslim rule (see, in this chapter, section 3.1):

> For how many centuries will this project last? This place has been targeted by enemies. Many times it collapsed. But continuous faith regenerated it and made it live again and again. (italics addedd, PMO official Youtube Channel, 2019 software translation from Hindi)

Every Hindu attending to the ceremony knows who the enemies were/are. Yet, here, as in other public occasions, Modi's discursive islamophobia "is executed subtly" (Waikar 2018). His question – "for how many centuries will this project last?" – deserves attention as the only moment in the speech in which the Prime Minister addresses – albeit indirectly – non-Hindu citizens. As scholars have noted, Modi's intentional indirectness in the use of communal hatred has allowed Hindutva islamophobia to smoothly but permanently permeate into Hindu mainstream public discourse (Waikar 2018; Salam 2018)[38]. As Prashant Waikar has shown by analyzing 35 audio, visual and written documents, a recurrent theme in Modi's speeches is "the characterization of Hinduism as having a taming effect on Islam in India" (Waikar 2018). This expedient is used also in the inaugural speech for the KVSAD Project. Hindu faith is connotated as generative and vigorous enough to protect its temples and to defeat its enemies.

A vocabulary of militarism is used in the speech for characterizing polarized pairs such as allies/enemies, good/evil, strength/weakness, protection/destruction. This military lexicon is consistent with the ways in

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[38] Islamophobia is one core element of Hindutva ideology as it developed from its main thinkers Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (Golwalkar 1939) and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (Savarkar 2016 [1923]). There is ongoing debate on the nature and definition of Hindutva, which gained momentum with the surge and consolidation of BJP political power since the 1990s. Scholars have described it as a manifestation of chauvinistic and parochial nationalism (Jaffrelot 2009; Hansen 1999), as a form of communalism (Thapar et al., 1993; Sarkar, 2002), or as a critique of secularism and an indicator of its crisis (Rajagopalan 2010; Ganguly, 2003; Needham and Rajan, 2007). In basic terms, Hindutva believes in the convergence of *jati*, *pitrabhoo* and *punyabhoo* as fundamental traits for defining a "true" Indian: being of Hindu blood, being born within the boundaries of the Indian territory, and showing devotion for the sacred geography of India and holy Hindu sites. The Kashi Vishwanath Mandir in Varanasi is one of such sites.

which Modi presents himself as a manly, muscular figure, as the stereotype of what a militant Hindu body should be (Kinnvall 2019; Jaffrelot 2015; Srivastava 2015). Gendered identities and the construction of a masculine Hindu man are crucial concerns of Hindutva nationalism since its ignition by its eminent twenty century exponents (Savarkar 2016; Golwalkar 1939). As noted in (Srivastava 2015) and (Jaffrelot 2015), Modi's body language and tone of voice respond to this gendered ideology: his posture and way of speaking, vigorous and virile, intend to communicate the effectiveness of its leadership and to dismiss the "impotence" of previous Indian political leaders (Kinnvall 2019, 296).

In this perspective, Hindutva has been described as an ideology of "muscular nationalism" (S. Banerjee 2016; 2012; Basham and Vaughan-Williams 2013; Harrington 2013), as well as "anxious nationalism", which responds to the fear of ontological insecurity with an increased "sense of emasculation" (Kinnvall 2019, 294). The Muslim other is the direct target of such muscular/militaristic attitude, because it embodies the stereotyped image of the historically virile and aggressive conqueror as well as the contemporary heartless terrorist. As Kinnvall argues, "by perceiving the icon of terrorism in terms of a Muslim man, the discourse on terror plays into the hands of Hindu nationalist forces (…). By viewing terror as originating from the outside – where Muslims are conceived of as unpatriotic and as embodying a latent threat – it simultaneously immunizes [Hindu] Indians from blame." (Kinnvall 2019; Svensson 2009).

The spiritual legitimation of the Project, combined with a militaristic rhetoric, culminates in the speech with the invocation of the birth of a "new social consciousness" (PMO official Youtube Channel 2019). Modi celebrates the temples emerging from demolitions as "liberated" and admonishes on the need to conserve the past and enhance it in the future. He makes direct reference to the discovery of historical facts and archaeological remains as key actions in the construction of a "new identity" (PMO official Youtube Channel 2019) part 4, 05:02). For Modi, the study of old temples and antiquities plays an important role: "BHU people [researchers of Banaras Hindu University] should also search for how old the remains are, how many centuries old the soul of Kashi is" (PMO official Youtube Channel 2019: part 4, 08:45). As I will argue later in this chapter, archaeological research as framed by Hindutva politics is intended as a search *for* antiquity, rather than *of* antiquity, as an enquiry that aims at scientifically sanctioning a specific

who-came-first narrative, a selective history which functions as backbone of the whole nationalistic project[39].

In the speech, Modi repeatedly addresses the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, praising his government, his team and his presence as Chief of State:

> Let me say with pride that the team of workers appointed by Yogi ji is fully working to complete it [the project, author's note]. Because convincing everyone to sold so many properties (…) was a hard work. But, in this condition, this project does not get the slightest color of politics.
>
> This holy work is being done here today. And we have to thank Yogi ji if I have received the cooperation of the state government, and if we might inaugurate this work. I would have done it before. But 3 years of non-cooperation with State government prevented this to happen. But since you, Yogi, have been given the government of Uttar Pradesh, we can work and complete all facilities at ease. (italics addedd, PMO official Youtube Channel, 2019 software translation from Hindi)

Modi appointed Priest Yogi Adityanath as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh after 2017 BJP victory in state elections (M. Safi 2017; michael Safi 2017). The choice for an aggressive Hindu priest, accused of hate speech and religious intolerance revealed that in 2017 Hindutva was still at the core of BJP political agenda, despite the greater emphasis given to economic development in the electoral campaign (Chatterji, Hansen, and Jaffrelot 2019; Jaffrelot 2019; Safi 2017).

Uttar Pradesh, the most populous Indian state, with the Muslim community counting around 20% of the total population, has witnessed recurrent episodes of communal violence after a brutal attack in Muzaffarnagar in 2013 (The Scroll 2016; Mishra et al. 2015; Biswas 2013). A Lok Sabha (Low House of Parliament) report on religious violence between 2010 and 2016, attests that Uttar Pradesh holds the higher share of religious-based violence among all Indian states (Chatterji, Hansen, and Jaffrelot 2019). Aside from rioting, the report mentions recurrent episodes of forced reconversions of Muslims and Christians to Hinduism; frequent patrolling by Hindutva vigilante groups against the slaughtering of cattle – episodes which brought to a mob attack and killing of a Muslim breeder in 2017; and the escalation of hate speech among communities, via religious campaigns and the unsettled Ayodhya temple-mosque dispute. For Ananda Chatterji, Hindutva-driven tensions in Uttar Pradesh have contributed to the disengagement of socio-economically marginalized groups, such as Dalits,

[39] I will dwell further on the use of history and archeology in chapter 4, section 4.1.

Muslims and low-caste women, who come to recognize themselves on the basis of religious and ethnic affiliation, rather than through redistributive and class revendication (Chatterji, Hansen, and Jaffrelot 2019).

Before 2017 elections, BJP had not won in Uttar Pradesh since 1999. The political alignment addressed by Modi in his speech points to the exceptionality of such victory. His sentence – "*I would have done it before*" – reveals precisely the impossibility of implementing the Vishwanath Temple Corridor Project in a different political context. The effects of such political alignment and the governance system established for developing the project will be analysed in the next section.

The speech delivered by Modi for the inauguration of the KVSAD project in Varanasi touches at various constitutive elements of BJP discursive rhetoric: the invocation of divine authority for legitimizing development projects to the eyes of the Hindu community; the erasure of the political presence of non-Hindu communities, which are either excluded or addressed as enemies; a muscular and militaristic vocabulary aiming to communicate effectiveness and vigour; the reference to a new development era; the fortunate political conjuncture which solely would allow for the project to be implemented (Jaffrelot 2019; Rao 2018; Sen 2016). Features of Modi's neoliberal urban agenda also emerge from the reference to international travellers and tourists, which will come and admire "what some of our people have done in the past" and in the rhetoric on modernity as a pathway to "liberation".

3.4 Framing the KVSAD Project: mobilizing gods, gurus and Gandhi.

On November 10th 2019, I met the KVSAD project Chief Executive Officer, Mr. Vishal Singh. Our meeting point was at the Board headquarters, at the Vishwanath Temple entrance on Godowlia Road (**Figure 34**). in the headquarters of the board, located next to the entrance to the Vishwanath Temple on Godowlia Road. After some formalities – I got escorted by a security guard – we headed to the temple, where my informant was asked to perform a ceremony. I was told that I could assist the ritual by sitting next to the priests. I did so and waited for the beginning of the ceremony.

We are sitting on the marble pavement of a rectangular porch located in the northern chamber of the temple. The porch is small and very crowded. Regular pilgrims are allowed to enter, pray and lay their offerings in the small corridor-rooms at the sides of the chamber. Some of them curiously look towards the porch, get closer, then quickly leave and cede way to other pilgrims. When the CEO enters the porch, surrounded by bodyguards and fonctionnaires, he is greeted by gestures of devotion from around 30 priests and a dozen officers – some bowing down, others touching or kissing his feet. Someone brings him a marigold flower and a bowl of orange liquid for the *puja*. After dipping the flower into the liquid, the CEO presses it on the priests' forehead, now couched on the pavement. After the ritual, he sits on his knees at one side of the porch. Other fonctionnaires take position around him. The Chief Priest, Pandit Ashok Dwivedi, takes place next to him. They chat quietly among them and with other officers – as suggested by their outfit. One of them speaks for some minutes and then leaves the floor to the pandit. The CEO is very busy and don't seem to be listening. He is being brought documents to sign, calls to answer and is constantly interrupted by other officers. Ten armed guards surround the porch at distance and maintain order. The whole ceremony lasts for around 40 minutes. (From my field diary, 10/11/2019)

At the end of the ritual, I joined the group of fonctionnaires and returned to the Board headquarters.

The ceremonial introduction of my informant unequivocally highlighted the influence and authority of the CEO. The acts of devotion and reverence that priests and fonctionnaires reserved for him place his figure on more than a merely administrative and political position of authority. The performance of the *puja*, which is usually led by religious figures, elevated my informant from being a public fonctionnaire of an urban planning project to a figure equally embodying political and spiritual authority. The merging of political and spiritual power is in fact a recurrent feature of BJP governmentality. Indeed, many members hold both political and religious positions: Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, as already mentioned, is head of a monastery, while BJP Minister in Modi government Uma Bharti is a *sanyasin*, an ascetic (The Wire 2018; Jaffrelot 2017). Even when political figures do not also hold an official spiritual position, spiritual leaders and gurus are often prominent backbones of their action, making the connection between the spiritual and the political real, whether hidden or publicly displayed (Worth 2018; Jaffrelot 2012). The close relation between the CEO and the temple pandit reveals that the project is more than an urban transformation plan, and that he Board authority is invested by that same religious legitimation that permeated Modi's inaugural speech (section 3.3).

As shown above, the discursive legitimation of the Project articulated by Modi at clear-cut elements that pertain to precise spiritual, nationalistic and neoliberal objectives. This legitimation is reiterated at different scales by competent authorities. When interrogated on the reasons and objectives of the Project, the Board CEO produces a discourse that substantially aligns to Modi's speech, notably borrowing from his focus on development. He mentions the existing lack of infrastructures and facilities in the area, the need for a better pilgrimage experience and the urge for improving accessibility and mobility in the neighborhood (**Figure 35**). Also, he mobilizes historical events. He recalls the famous visit that Gandhi paid to Varanasi in 1916:

> You see, when in 1916 Mahatma Gandhi was visiting Kashi (…) he said that there was a lot of filth around the temple, no basic facilities, that this showed how we treat our deities. And that this uncleanness reflected not only a social etiquette, but also our culture as Hindus. (…) He said there was urgent need of cleaning this area" (interview with Board CEO, 19/11/2019).

As Modi had done before him, the CEO sets a connection with the Mahatma. By coopting Gandhi's words and making them goals of the Project, the Board produces a historical legitimation for its action:

> Today, in 2019, *more than a century after Gandhiji asked for it*, the area between Shri Kashi Vishwanath Mandir and the Ganga has been cleared for a comprehensive redevelopment called Vishwanath Dham. (italics added, KVSAD Project Leaflet).

Mobilizing Gandhi for a development project is not new to local and national politics, particularly in BJP era. The national 'Clean India' campaign, promoted by Modi in 2014, officially bridges the Mahatma's ideals to the "*swachchhata* (cleanliness) of our motherland" encouraging individuals to taking pledge in the campaign[40]. Very recently, the government engaged in a much controversial mobilization of the Mahatma for relating the recently approved Citizenship Amendment Bill to Gandhi's thought (Abi-Habib 2020). More generally, the appropriation of the national icon by the BJP and Modi has been observed as a constant political and ideological trend[41].

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[40] Indian national press such as (Economic Times 2018; Swachh Bharat 2015) covered this issue.

[41] As observed in (Al Jazeera 2019; Tewari 2018; E. Barry 2014).

But Gandhi is also a Hindu figure, and his mention reminds that the Project is also aimed to showcase “our culture as Hindus” (interview with Board CEO, 19/11/2019):

> Me: Could you tell me who wants this project and who benefits from it?
>
> Informant: The whole community of Hindus who have faith in this Shiva *jotyir lingam* and visit the place always realize that it does not have sufficient facilities and amenities to support basic needs of people. So, who wants the project, the answer is people of the Hindu community. (Interview with Board CE, 19/11/2019)

By placing the “Hindu community” as the direct beneficiary of the project, the Board can present itself as translator of Hindus’ needs. However, the abstract reference to the Hindu community as a homogenous and stable group cohesively sharing the same goals – “cleaning” the area – clashes with a more complex and dissonant reality. Local enquiries have shown that many voices have raised both in favor and against the project. Rajendra Tiwari, former Chief Priest of the Vishwanath Mandir, expressed concerns on the demolitions, suggesting that “you could have helped the devotees without ruining the character of Kashi” (The Caravan 2019). He also points to the lack of accountability and democracy in the process: “We are opposing it because there is no transparency (…) The manner in which the temples are being razed to the ground defies all norms of decency. I wonder what sort of Hindus they are. (…) Nothing has been made public. People are threatened with dire consequences and are thrown out of their houses. It pains me to see the way temples are being demolished and idols desecrated.” (The Caravan 2019; Frontline 2018)A local resident of the historic city centre sides with Tripathi when saying openheartedly:

> What shocks me a lot is that this project and the whole idea about it is not at all part of Hindu mindset and philosophy. For Hindu culture, the *making* of something has value, much more than the simple building or object. (…) The community and the history of the place should have much more value than the building itself. *This* is Hindu culture! (Emphasis in original, interview with G., guesthouse owner, 13/11/2019)

Other local spiritual leaders express a similar fierce opposition towards the Project. When interviewed about it, Swami Avimukteshwaranand, head of Sri Vidya Math Hindu school shouted: “Does a Hindu destroy temples? Does a Hindu destroy icons? He [Modi] is not Hindu. He cannot be Hindu!” (Mashal 2019). Here, the debate revolves around the supposed attributes of Hindu identity: does a good Hindu demolish old temples for making space to modern development? And how does a Hindu

relate to issues of democracy, transparency and accountability? Quite evidently, the essentialization of the Hindu community operated by the Chief Executive hardly stands the confrontation with an inevitably pluralized social body.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the urban re-development KVSAD Project in Varanasi (2018-ongoing), exploring its governance structure (section 3.2), and the discursive legitimation that sustains it (sections 3.3, 3.4). It has also developed a short, critical urban exploration of Varanasi, suggesting that the attention of political authorities to the city should be explained with the historical, religious and touristic relevance of the city in the current ideological landscape of *hinduization* of India (section 3.1).

By scrutinizing Varanasi/Mumbai as an opposing discursive pair, the analysis revealed that middle sized Indian cities, once left at the periphery of Indian (post)millennial visionary urbanisms, are now increasingly participating to the geographies of aestheticization and slum-clearance re-development shaping most of Indian megalopolis (section 3.1). While this chapter does not linger on the spatial and socio-economic transformation of the area – which will be analysed in the next chapter – it shows that the establishment of a new State-appointed office, with full authority over the project zone, responds to a fictitious scalar restructuring of powers (section 3.2). This restructuring allows corporate-like ephemeral bodies such as the KVSAD Project Board to muscularly bypass locally elected democratic institutions for imposing State-based development plans (section 3.2).

Although this picture corresponds to widely explored forms of neoliberal urbanism in BJP era (Bobbio 2012; Björkman 2015; Follmann 2015), some specificities emerge from analyzing these processes in Varanasi. Firstly, in this case, the governmental and public discourse around urban transformation makes extensive use of historical and religious narratives (sections 3.3, 3.4). Secondly, this discourse develops by materializing these narratives into the urban fabric (sections 3.3, 3.4). For example, sacred beliefs connected to the gods Shiva and Ganga are mobilized to transform geographical layouts (section 3.3). Also, historical facts and discourses related to Gandhi's visit to the city are coopted for legitimizing the polishing of an urban neighborhood (section 3.4).

The discursive, identity-based, governmental strategy allows to present urban re-development plans not in opposition to the conservative and spiritual character of the city, but rather as instruments to support this singled, uncontested character.

As it will be clearer in the next chapter, this process can be framed as a *neoliberal reactionary urbanism*, fundamentally sustained by – and sustaining – a single-discourse, single-man, muscular leadership, resonating globally in similarly autocratic contexts (Zencirci 2014; Karaman 2013; Michelutti et al. 2019; Michelutti 2017). The next chapter will unpack the specificities of this type of urbanism, by exploring the spatial, social and economic transformations it ignites.

Figure 16 The KSVAD Project development from 3D layout. From KVSAD Official Booklet.

Figure 17 The urban area targeted by the KVSAD Project before demolitions. From KVSAD Official Booklet.

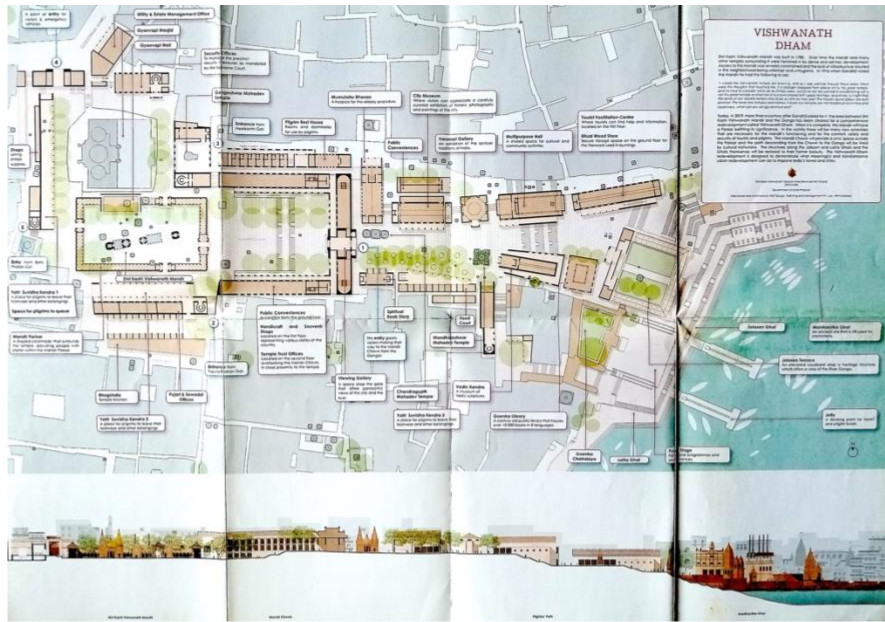

Figure 18 The leaflet of the Project containing details on the new buildings and facilities. From KVSAD Official Booklet.

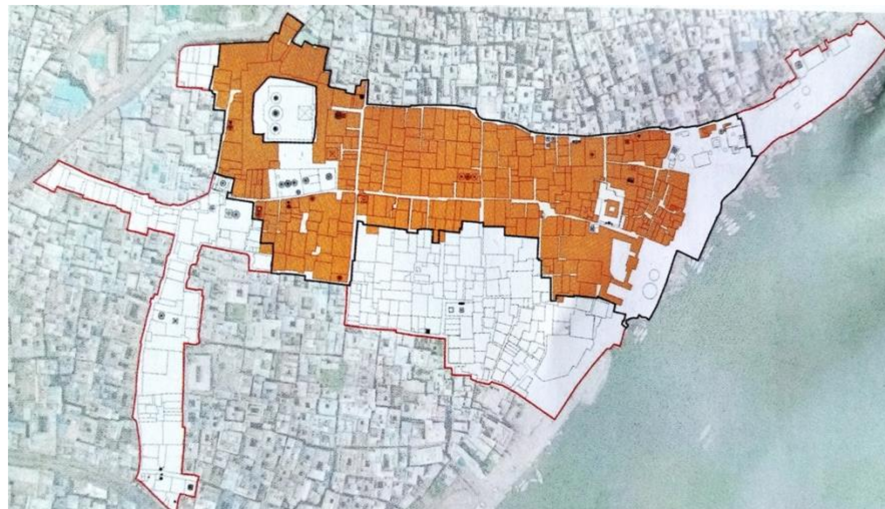

Figure 19 The two-phased implementation of the Project. In red the first demolition phase and in white the proposed expansion of the Project. From KVSAD Official Booklet.

Figure 20 People at Assi Ghat in front of Vaatika Pizzeria green terrace. From Google Images.

Figure 21 Varanasi stretching on the Ganges western riverside (the ghats area) and the sandy riverbed on the eastern side. Author's elaboration from Google Maps.

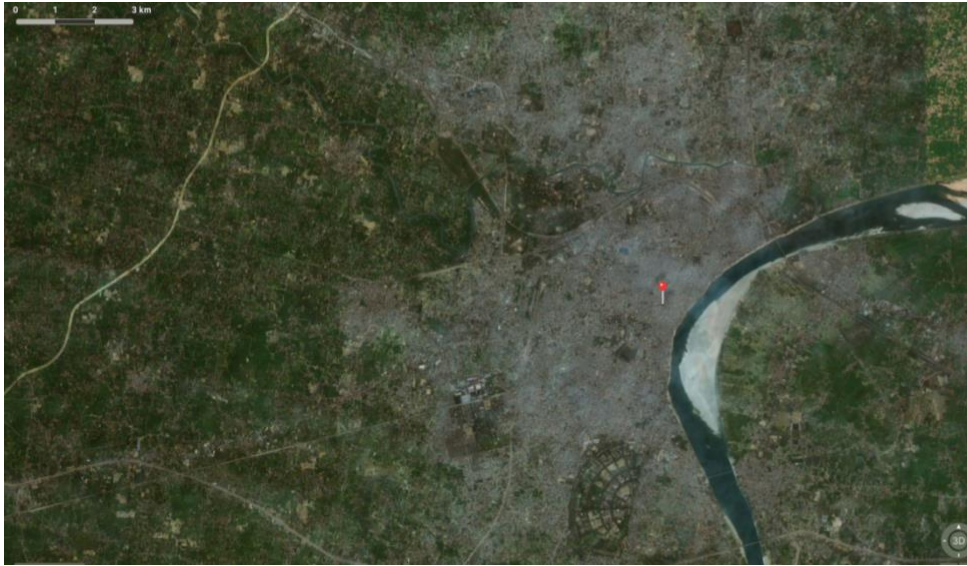

Figure 22 Varanasi urban agglomeration with the historic city on the western riverside and Banaras Hindu University campus at the southern periphery. Author's elaboration from Google Maps.

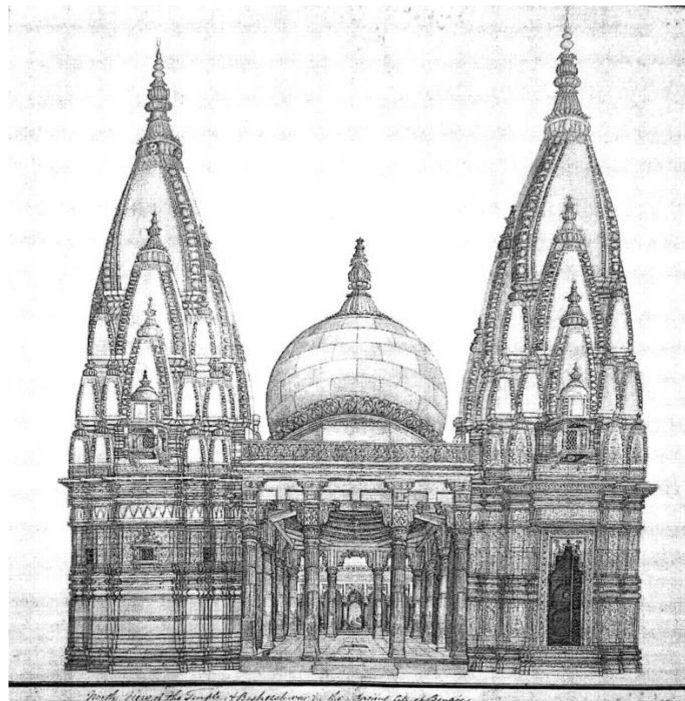

Figure 23 Elevation of the Kashi Vishwanath Temple, ca. 1819, by anonymous artist. From Desai 2017.

Figure 24 Rooftop view, Vishwanath Temple, 1905. Photo by Madho Prasad, British Library Board. From Desai 2017.

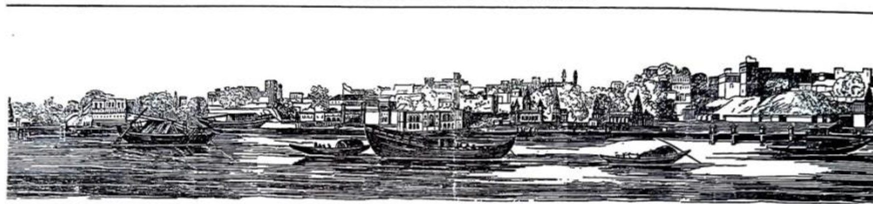

Figure 25 Detail of the panorama of Varanasi between Dashashwamedh Ghat to Bonshala Ghat (above) and Naya Ghat to Raj Mandir Ghat (below) displayed at the Great Globe at Leicester Square in London in the 1860s. Source: Joachim Bautze. From Gaenszle and Gengnagel 2006.

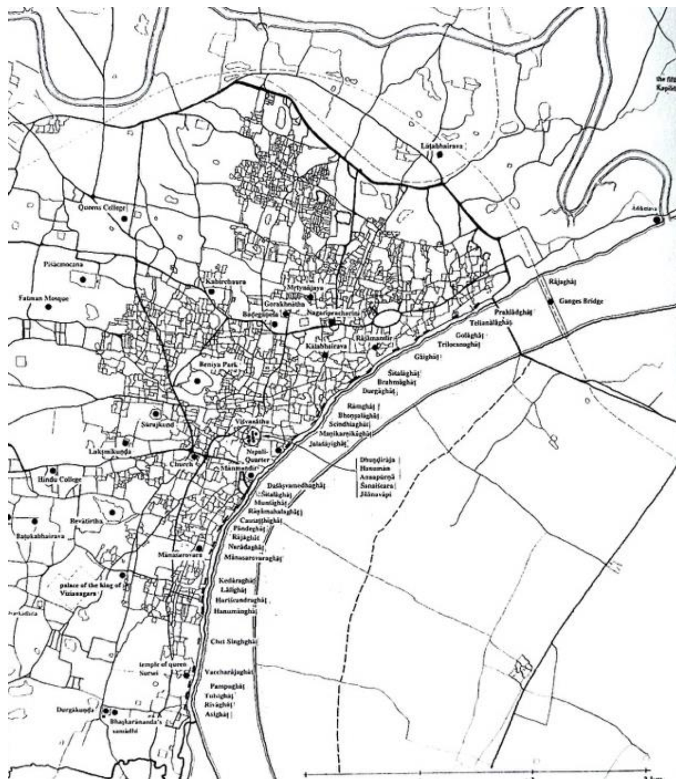

Figure 26 Indication of the 33 ghats along the Ganges. From Gaenszle and Gengnagel 2006.

Figure 27 The City of Banaras, 1822, by James Prinsep. British Library Board. From Desai 2017.

Figure 28 The only picture of Varanasi included in the HRIDAY Scheme Report, showing the Ganga Aarti ritual on the ghats. From HRIDAY Report.

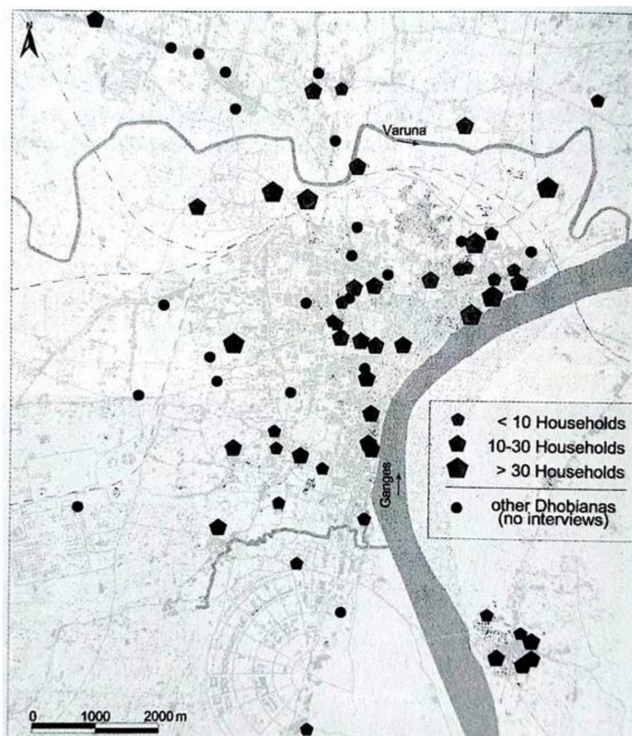

Figure 29 The various mohallas categorized for number of households. From Mohanty 1993.

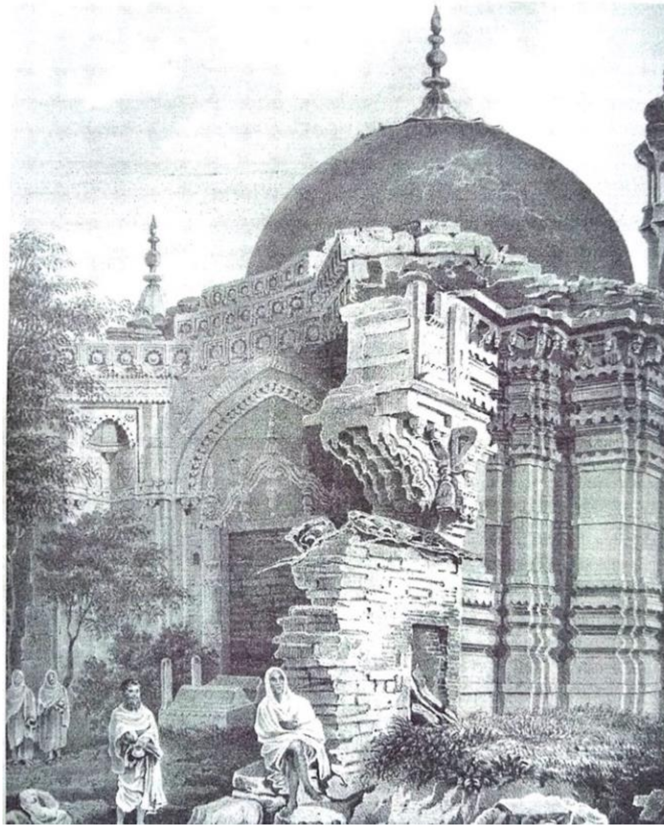

Figure 30 The Vishwanath Temple in ruins, with the imposing Gyan Vapi Mosque on the background, from Benares Illustrated by James Prinsep. From Desai 2017.

Figure 31 The Lal Bahadur Shastri Airport in the north western periphery of Varanasi. Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 32 The new road to the Airport. Author's elaboration.

Figure 33 Narendra Modi in Varanasi inaugurating the KVSAD Project. From Twitter/@PIBIndia

Figure 33 Godowlia Road with pilgrims queuing in the middle of the street for entering the Vishwanath Temple. Author's picture.

Figure 34 The flower market near Godowlia Road. Author's picture.

Chapter 4 Demolishing, displacing. Unpacking BJP's neoliberal reactionary urbanism

Introduction

This chapter unravels the components of what I defined in the previous section BJP's neoliberal reactionary urbanism. It does so by investigating how the discursive legitimation of the KVSAD Project is translated into the actual Project implementation.

The analysis relies on an ethnographically dense, 6 months fieldwork period which allowed to explore and to follow the first phases of the Project. These phases can be overall summarized by two words: *demolition* and *displacement*. The chapter is indeed constructed around these two issues, investigated as both instruments and objectives of the KVSAD Project authority. While interpreted as fundamentally intertwined, these two processes are also addressed separately: indeed, the first three sections deal more extensively with demolitions and spatial restructuring, while the last three dress a sociological account of processes of urban displacement through voices and stories of local residents.

The chapter is also about technologies of implementation, of "making things work", of translating an urban project into actual practice. The protagonist of this *making* is the Chief Executive Officer of the KVSAD

Project Board, whose words will be frequently addressed for tracing the Project chronology, as well as the official version of the Board on various issues. In his words, governance instruments, methods of implementation and bureaucratic procedures are key concerns, usually overcome or solved in surprisingly quick, uncontested ways. Interviews with him evidence the pressure of the governmental machine for having the Project *done*, positioning its function and role as a figure that "cannot fail", entrusted with full powers, himself embodiment of the Project.

Cross-cutting to the chapter is the (ab)use of urban histories, memories and materialities. The discovery of religious ruins legitimizes demolitions, and through them, the Project (section 4.1). Narratives of historical precedence legitimize the misrecognition of contemporary spaces and practices (section 4.2), thus dismissing – and erasing – the value of socio-economic life in the neighborhood (section 4.3). With the machine of development working at full pace, the inhabitants recede, momentarily living the interstices, the leftovers, the undemolished (sections 4.4 to 4.6). Waiting their turn for leaving.

4.1 Coopting ruins: the merging of neoliberalism and history

In November 2018, works for demolishing the area targeted by the Project begun, and Indian national media started to cover the transformation of the neighbourhood[42]. After few months, a new urban landscape emerged. The dense, congested fabric that stretched towards the riverside ceded to a wide, approximately 400m long area, studded with heaps of rubble (**Figures 36, 37**).

Very soon at this stage workers found seemingly ancient religious structures emerging from demolitions. Towards the end of March 2019, 33 structures were discovered, a number which raised at 51 at the end of the first demolition phase (Srivathsan 2019) (**Figure 38**). When asked on the procedure for treating newly found historic structures, the Board reported:

[42] Detailed press surveys on the subject have been, among others, (The Caravan 2019; The Wire 2019a; Times of India 2018b). English language media covered extensively the development of the Project. I could not conduct a comparative analysis with Hindi or local language media, which would be indeed an interesting investigation.

We had a discussion with Honorable Chief Minister about number of temples coming up and the fact that they seemed to be very old. Then we started saying that we have to preserve these temples, and we should try and find out that what the age of these temples was. (…) One method was to involve ASI [Archaeological Survey of India] to go to the temples, look at the sculptures, stones, type of carving, and compare with other temples, which have recorded history across the country, and come up with what would be the nearabout age of the temples. (Interview with Board CEO, 10/11/2019)

The way in which the "discussion" was carried out suggests either the absence of standardized procedures for the treatment of historic urban fabric, or the Board's dismissal of such procedures. The Board mentions involving the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), Indian national authority for the treatment of individual monumental complexes (Chadha 2010; Chakrabarti 1988; 1982). Yet, the promptness described by the CEO in halting demolition works and in engaging ASI is challenged by other accounts. Some locals claim that works were not stopped at all, and continued at full pace no matter the absence of preservation procedures and archaeologists on the ground:

I knew that area before the demolitions, because of my work, and I have been there constantly before and during. Bulldozers were demolishing everything and when old temples were discovered, these have been either demolished, damaged or roughly saved. We cannot know how many they just destroyed, maybe accidentally. But even those which were saved bear traces of destructions. (…) When you find some historical remains, what do you normally do? You stop the works, call for archaeological surveys take everything with the maximum care. Right? Here look what they did! (…) They clearly cared *only* about demolishing. (Emphasis in original, interview with S., tourist guide, 25/08/2019)

The damages caused to religious structures are very visible to anyone wondering in the area (**Figure 39**). However, because the structures were not visible before, and in the absence of historical investigation, it is now nearly impossible to determine their exact conservation status before demolitions took place[43]. When asked to share data on the religious buildings saved from destruction, the Board provided me a short, 31-pages booklet mentioning 30 temples, curated by the Vishwanath Temple Trust (Vishwanath Temple Trust

[43] According to my informants from local NGO Kautilya Society, the practice of constructing houses adjacently to old or newly constructed small temples was common in Varanasi between 15th to 19th centuries. In such way, house-temple complexes emerged, with families becoming caretakers of the temple. A typical saying in Varanasi goes: *Kashi ke liye kaha jata tha ki pata nahi ghar mein mandir hai ya mandir mein ghar* ("It was said about Kashi, that one does not know whether there are temples inside homes or homes inside temples").

2019)[44]. Most temples mentioned in the booklet bear no picture, nor historical information[45]. Below the temples' names, the booklet reports that:

> This temple became visible and now available for your visit and *darshan* ["spiritual seeing" of the deity, author's note] after the removal of Residential/Commercial structures" (Vishwanath Temple Trust 2019).

The sentence is followed by the number of the building, and by the phrase: "We seek your blessings" (Vishwanath Temple Trust 2019). The prompt availability of temples for secular use (*visit*) and religious practice (*darshan*) reveals the substantial inexistence of conservation and restoration procedures, which would imply the isolation of temples to the public, for the study of their structural vulnerabilities and the status of carved decoration. Rather, in the attempt of securing support by local devotees, the Board rushes for aligning the newly found structures in a discourse centered on religious and tourism related practice. This allows to highlight the probity of demolitions, which unveiled such a rich religious landscape. Of course, little did it matter whether the houses constructed within and/or above religious complexes were destroyed by the Project, or whether the caretaking of temples was being lost with the displacement of local families.

The *revelation* of supposedly ancient temples had another, far reaching role, transcending the mere legitimation of demolitions. The alleged antiquity of the temples was used by the Board for engaging with the religious history of the neighborhood, an history studded with destructions and reconstructions, the formers attributed to Muslim rulers, the latter to Hindu leaders and to the patronage of pious elite families (as detailed in chapter 3, section 3.1). Supporting a "Hindus-came-first" narrative typically employed in Hindutva nationalism, the Board strategically showcased ruins as the material evidence of a millennial Hindu presence in the area[46]. For example, the booklet presents one temple as being built by King Chandra Gupta (first half of the IVth century, CE). Another temple is described as "more than 500 years old" (Vishwanath Temple Trust 2019, 6). The official discourse

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[44] I asked the KVSAD Board for a full documentation of the religious structures emerging from the demolitions, but they have been quite obscure on this point and after months, I did not receive it. Hence, I must suppose that either it is strictly confidential – but no official reason for this was given – or they do not hold it.

[45] As for the Shri Adivishveshwar Mahadev Temple, Shri Gangeshwar Mahadev Temple, Shri Jauvinayak Temple, and the Shri Amriteshwar Mahadev Temple.

[46] Debate over the rightness of the official historical information given by the KVSAD Project Board is recorded in national newspapers such as (The Caravan 2019; The Wire 2019a; Times of India 2018b).

centered on authenticity and antiqueness easily spread among locals. When asked about the demolitions, many of them, replicated such a narrative: “These [temples] were hidden earlier. But, now look at them. They are spectacular. The say this art is thousands of years old!” told me a local trader[47].

However, dissonant voices emerged among historians and experts. Professor Maruti Nandan Tiwari, at Banaras Hindu University, refuses the possibility that buildings in the area could be older than 400-450 years. As he explained to a local journalist, “ancient Kashi [Varanasi] settlement was not here. It was north of the current settlement in Raj Ghat”, information shared by professor Diana Eck in Harvard University (The Wire 2019a; Eck 2013). The analysis of historical events, matched with archaeological surveys of other temples in the area, suggest that almost all of them date back to the late 18th or early 19th centuries, with few exceptions possibly belonging to the first Hindu reconstruction wave after Mughal ruler Aurangzeb in the 17th century (The Wire 2019a; Eck 2013). Nevertheless, behind the words “ancient”, “millennial” and “oldest”, local authorities, residents and tourist guides have easily absorbed the suggestive narrative that now gives temples a millennial legitimation to stand in place.

All these elements suggest that local history and archaeology are fundamentally instrumental to the objectives of the Project: clearing the historic city centre of its centuries old socio-economic fabric, and reclaiming it for, simultaneously, Hindu religious practice and modernizing urban visions.

The ideological and governmental abuse of history is not new to Indian urbanisms (Johnson-Roehr 2008; Ratnagar 2004), or to other contexts where archaeology plays a crucial role in local and national politics (Dumper 2019; Bar and Cohen-Hattab 2017; Lynn Meskell 1998; KOHL 1995). In their account on the relations between archaeologists, religious authorities and politicians in the Western Wall area, Jerusalem, Doron Bar and Kobi Cohen-Hattab insist on the complexity of such relations, where “a mix of roles and functions (…) distorted the official missions of the entities operating there” (Bar and Cohen-Hattab 2017, 410). In their analysis on Jerusalem, Bar and Cohen-Hattab observe that “archaeologists engaged not only in science, but also in shaping Jewish-Israeli consciousness and identity, [while] the Ministry of Religions filled not only an administrative-religious role, but also engaged in “archaeology” and in uncovering the past” (Bar and Cohen-Hattab 2017, 410).

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[47] Similar comments are reported in (The Wire 2019a).

This echoes with the much debated intertwinement of archaeological research, religious ideology and national politics in the Indian city of Ayodhya (Ratnagar, 2004; The Hindu, 2019; and on recent facts The New York Times, 2019b; The Wire, 2020; The Hindu, 2020). Recent KVSAD Project in Varanasi seems to share a similar vision. Thus, by discretionary safeguarding selected religious ruins and eliminating urban civic components, the transformation of the neighbourhood needs to pass from annihilating the secularity of the place and by eradicating the *mixité* of everyday life.

4.2 Materialities of misrecognition. Framing the Temple-Mosque complex

As evidenced in the previous section, selected religious structures were saved from demolitions with the aim of integrating them in the landscape of spiritual spaces and practices connected to the Hindu Vishwanath Temple. Other historical buildings such as the Goenka Library and the terraced fort on Jalasen Ghat were also being preserved (**Figures 40, 41**). Indeed, as they all pertain to the history of Hindu patronage in the city, these edifices easily fit the transformation of the area as a hub of Hindu spiritual practice.

However, another structure, way more massive and intrusive, has been preserved, despite its dissonant position within the newly emerging landscape: the Gyan Vapi Mosque (see chapter 3, section 3.1). Indeed, the official Project plan sets one of the main entrances to the complex just above the mosque (**Figure 19**). Also, it locates the Management and Security Offices of the Vishwanath Temple authority just next to the Islamic structure. On its eastern side, the mosque will be flanked by the newly found Gangeshwar Mahadev Temple, while on the South it will overlook the ruins of the Gyan Vapi well and the Vishwanath Temple. On its western edge, the mosque will be flanked by an edifice for the deposit of pilgrims' belongings, as well as by a smaller entrance.

This short spatial description based on the actual Project plan shows that the Project did not design any new facility or space for the users of the mosque. Also, it emphasises that the mosque will be literally surrounded by facilities devoted to Hindu pilgrimage. Hence, one may question the extension and location of the Project, which, if designed differently, would have insisted only on the areas already targeted by Hindu pilgrimage thus

excluding the mosque from its perimeter. I addressed this issue with the Board CEO:

> Me: It seems to me that suddenly the Gyan Vapi mosque becomes a sort of intruder in an area essentially devoted to Hindu religious practice. What is your opinion on this?
>
> Informant: Yes, it can look like this. But, it must be said, that we are not in any way trying to disturb that *structure*. I'm saying the *structure*, I not calling it a mosque, I am not calling it a temple. Reason being, if I say that it's a mosque, I'm creating a rift, if I call it temple, then also I'm creating a rift! [very emphatically, increasing tone of voice] And this structure… now it has faith of people from a particular religion, yes… but they are also *equally Indians*. (Emphasis added, interview with Board CEO, 19/11/2019)

Although my informant underlines the fact that the *structure* will not be "disturbed", he confirms that, in some ways, it becomes an unwanted piece of the project. The neutral use of the word *structure*, which clearly deprives the building of its historical and contemporary attributes – that of *being a mosque* – is revealing about the rationale and the strategy of the Board and deserves further contextualization.

As shown in chapter 3, the complex of the Gyan Vapi Mosque and the Vishwanath Temple has a long, contested history of demolition and reconstruction. As previously noted, the narration of the destruction of the Vishwanath Temple is widely told in Varanasi as one of the many acts of disrespect and devastation by Muslim rulers against Hindu heritage (section 3.1). Although the temple and the mosque currently hold their own, distinctive locations since centuries, the scale and iconicity of the Gyan Vapi Mosque keeps disturbing the sentiments of radical Hindus, who reclaim the ground where the Islamic structure stands as originally connected to the Hindu cult of Shiva (section 3.1) (**Figure 42**).

When the CEO of the KVSAD Project refers to the mosque as an undefined *structure*, he clearly denies recognizing what the building has become over more than three centuries. By refusing to acknowledge the historical legitimacy of the mosque, the CEO is also refusing the multilayered and multiethnic urban history of Varanasi, reinforcing a polarizing narrative where Islamic rule has marked a dark epoch, while the previous and later re-appropriation of the city by Hindu (and colonial) rulers feature as golden eras.

However, in his discourse, my informant does not reclaim the site of the *structure* as a sacred site for the Hindus: quite the contrary. Indeed, he emphatically states that the building will not be targeted. As I will show in the next sections, though, this stance cannot be interpreted as an attempt for

smoothening tensions between religious communities. On the contrary, it is consistent with the broader nationalist strategy of BJP in urban contexts.

The reshaping of urban public spaces consistently with Hindutva ideology is a process widely attested in Indian cities since the late '90s (Rajagopalan 2010; Jaffrelot 2009; Hansen 1999; Heath 1999; Shah 1996). Among the many instruments used by ideologues and politicians to strengthen Hindutva take[48], official governmental strategies also pass from urban planning and design interventions in public spaces. As Renu Desai and Mrinalini Rajagopalan have shown in their accounts on Ahmedabad and Delhi, local authorities have actively engaged in the production of "communalized cities" (R. Desai 2010) by the means of what has been called a "post-secular urbanism" (Rajagopalan 2010). This usually entails urban design operations which aim at better positioning the city in Hindutva legitimized iconography and history. This is achieved, for example, through the insertion of iconic monuments or memorial sites dedicated to mythical Hindu warriors which often have little or no historical connection to places founded by Mughal dynasties (as in Agra and in Delhi). Or, through the financing of archaeological missions tailored to the discovery of a forgotten Hindu past (as in Delhi and in Ayodhya). Most blatantly, Hindutva-driven urbanisms ignited cases of re-appropriation of non-Hindu structures for reclaiming desecrated, originally Hindu sites (Rajagopalan 2010; Oza 2007). In yet other occasions, they legitimized processes of unequal citizenships, spatially segregating non-Hindu ethnical minorities – mostly Muslims – through violent acts of cleansing and rioting (Susewind 2017; De 2016; Bobbio 2015; Oza 2007).

In the historic city centre of Varanasi, BJP urban planning aims to a material and symbolic re-appropriation of the spaces where the possibility of a purified Hindu history is fractured by dissonant historical and contemporary elements. This re-appropriation is achieved via two, intertwined processes. By seizing the Gyan Vapi Mosque *within* the Project targeted area, the

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[48] Hindutva as ideological movement counts on various collective institutions and affiliations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Bajrang Dal, and the Shiv Sena. Narendra Modi himself was a member of the RSS in his childhood. Thanks to its vast territorial take, this organizations manage to spread Hindutva as an ideology that combines "cultural nationalism and political strategies aiming at flagrant social dominance by the upper castes, rapid economic development, cultural conservatism, intensified misogyny, and a firm grip on the instruments of state power" (Chatterji, Hansen, and Jaffrelot 2019) is the most comprehensive recent study on the subject).

KVSAD Board resurrect narratives of Islamic desecration, engaging material histories in an overt act of retaliation. In parallel, but more discretely, it supports the leading religious authority, the Kashi Vishwanath Mandir Trust, in a judicial trial pleading for the removal of the mosque and the repossession of the land (The News 2019; Hindustan Times 2017).

Knowing that, the words of the Project CEO on the absence of land claims for the Gyan Vapi mosque cannot be taken seriously. If it is true that, as he said, "you don't really need to create much ground for another Ayodhya to happen" because "Ayodhya can happen anywhere", yet the Temple project does not seem to head for the appeasement of Hindu-Muslim relations in the city. Rather, by leveraging on the symbolic and affective meanings embodied in the historic city centre, the project speaks exclusively to Hindu radicalized revendications, revealing the political misrecognition of Islamic legacy and the impossibility of an appeased historical perspective on the urban heritage of Varanasi.

4.3 (In)visibility and social clearance: towards new economies of order

As mentioned in the last chapter, the Project implementation entailed the demolition of around 300 residential and commercial properties and the consequent displacement of more than 600 families. The number of formal shops and other commercial facilities ceased is attested between 60 to 65[49]. This number accounts for what have been described by the Board CEO as "economically viable activities" (interview with Board CEO, 19/11/2019). To that, one should add the undefined numbers of the informal economy.

The real estate of the neighborhood has never been object of detailed studies[50]. Hence, one can draw a picture of it only through aggregating data resulting from interviews. Most properties were originally constructed in the 19th-20th centuries. Continuous adaptations, restorations and reconstructions, and mushrooming encroachments resulted in a congested built fabric in much need of rehabilitation. According to the Project CEO, local owners

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[49] These numbers result from comparing data emerging from interviews with Board members, from conversations with displaced residents and double-checking them with press surveys.

[50] Nor the board nor the VDA provided me consistent documentation on the property values in the area. The data used here have been collected through interviews and conversations with locals.

complained about low rents and squatting. The CEO explained that the current landlord law hinders owners in their attempts to increase the rents. Because “owners were not getting the money they expected or wanted from renting the property, they wanted to sell. But tenants were not willing to locate.” (Interview with Board CEO, 19/11/2019). Informal dwelling and squatting were attested around 10% of total housing units. Additionally, around 10% of total building units was held by local *shebaits* (caretakers) which could not sell and were not able to retrace the actual owners.

The process for purchasing properties lasted around one year. KVSAD Board claims that tracking down all owners resulted a major complexity was tracking down all owners. Yet, once owners were found and contacted by Varanasi Development Authority and the Project Board, obtaining their consent for selling proved rather easy: while “initially there was a lot of protest by local dwellers, owners did not protest at all. As I said, they were willing to sell. We offered them a good price, and they sold.” (Interview with Board CEO, 19/11/2019). Many owners confirmed that the Board offered them more than the market value:

> My house was worth 60 lakhs. But for the market prices, nobody would give me such amount. I would get 10-15 lakhs maximum. The Trust came and paid 69 lakhs. More than the property value! I tell you, everybody received 2 or 3 times the market value of their houses. This is how they convinced everybody to sell! People didn’t want to. But they had to. You can’t fight the government… (personal conversation with N., ex-owner, 16/11/2019)

The successful strategy of the Board consisted in polarizing tenants and owners, by convincing owners that, by selling to the State, they would make the most profitable investment, given the real market value of their properties. Once owners realized the deal, and the voice spread, it took only a few months to purchase the totality of units.

After purchasing properties, the KVSAD Board had to face the displacement of residents and the loss of economic activities. It dismissed the option of relocating people into vacant housing units: “The Board is not really that type of authority that can manage and maintain housing units. Also, the timing for the construction of new buildings would be too long. Hence, we opted for compensation.” (Interview with Board CEO, 19/11/2019). Compensation mechanisms were put in place for supporting families in their relocation and for indemnifying businessmen for the loss of their activities. The Board claims that compensation rate was fixed at 1 to 10 lakh rupees per household depending on size of building unit, on location, on socio-economic status and other criteria. However, local residents lamented that while

compensation rates reflected the size of residential or commercial units, they did take into account the profitability and the overall revenue generated by local commerces. When I pointed to the CEO the discontent of local shopkeepers for the low compensation rates, he replied irritated:

> Some are not even having a place, they just hang something on the wall, at a standing place! So if I need to take that wall down, the measurement of the shop will show that there's not even a one square foot area. How can you pay them a bigger compensation against nothing?! *They were just street vendors*. Right? Still, we gave them 1 lakh rupees. *We are being very human*, and we do something that hasn't happened anywhere in the history in India or anywhere else in the world: compensating them even if they are illegal occupants. (Italics added. Interview with Board CEO, 19/11/2019)

Although my informant mentions illegal occupants, not all the shopkeepers complaining about compensations belong to the informal sector. In any case, the discourse reveals that indemnities have essentially been fixed through the measurement of area units, rather than through a combination of mixed socio-economic criteria.

The reply of the Board is also interesting since it markedly devalues street vending and the informal sector in general – which is yet a majoritarian component of the neighbourhood economy – by condemning street vendors for being so ("*they were just street vendors*"). Hence, it reveals that authorities do not see displacement as an equally disruptive moment for all residents, but as a differentiated process in which informal residents are less entitled to claim for the right to housing and livelihood. It follows that compensating informal dwellers for being evicted can be explained solely as an act of "humanity", a discourse which gives moral connotations to the action of the board ("*we are being very human*") (**Figures 43, 44**).

The removal of informal dwellers is consistent with the development of new economies of *order* in the Project zone. New employment opportunities are said to stem from the re-ordering and the re-structuring of the area. The CEO guarantees that infrastructure for a total of 40 new shops will be provided. However, he does not explain who and according to which criteria will be running these shops. Former shopkeepers maintain that the Board did not make any agreement with them about relocating inside the Project area (as I will show in detail in section 4.4.1). The reorganization of the neighborhood economy passes also from the regularization of pickpockets and muggers. In a quite obscure passage, my informant targets these categories as follows:

> Those who are moving around and trying to snatch money from people, by touting and harassing them, we have brought also them into an organized sector. Now we have opened bank accounts for all of them: the amount of money that they will get for every single individual that they are squatting or following to the temple will go directly into the account. (interview with Board CEO, 19/11/2019)

In the new spatial economies of order, snatchers and outcasts will be tolerated on the condition that they emerge from their socio-economic invisibility and they become an “organized sector”. Providing them bank accounts allows to track their activities by monitoring their income flows. The elaboration of this mechanism suggests the limitedness of the project in addressing issues of socio-economic marginality, which are targeted only through the logics of disciplinary control and by imposing the new boundaries of what can be visible and in which ways. Order and control are sustained also by the use of computational rationalities, which are described as effective tools for regulating unbiased and equal business opportunities:

> We implemented a system which will allow to manage tourist visits. A random algorithm will be locating a tourist to a priest. Everyone will be getting a first come first served service. Nobody is getting all the people and nobody's getting none of them. (Interview with Board CEO, 19/11/2019)

The automated allocation of clients to priests is likely to bring abrupt change to traditional business patterns, altering the existing competition mechanisms now largely based on unwritten socio-spatial allegiances.

Overall, the CEO makes no secret of the largely “intrusive” character of the project:

> I have never hidden the fact that this project is *intrusive* in nature. I'm not saying it will not affect the economy: it will. But it is changing the economy, it is not destroying it. (…) From these dwelling units, you will see, we will not only provide new shops: we will provide museums, we will have theaters, we will have guesthouses, we will have various other offices, emporiums… All this means employment. So, the economy will change, but will change for the best, it will go to… *a higher level*. The livelihood of dwellers here wasn’t really good. I am sure it will get better. (Emphasis in original, interview with Board CEO, 19/11/2019)

Scrutinizing this “intrusiveness” reveals at least three levels of analysis. The first one relates to the eviction process, with the social and spatial consequences of the material and immaterial destruction of homes and of processes of home making (Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard, and Lees 2020; Baker 2020; Ayona Datta 2012). The government responded to such consequences with the limited and reductive measure of financial compensation. Confronted to the absence of more effective tools for the new making of their livelihoods,

ex-residents mostly responded by leaning on family relations and friendship connections[51]. This echoes what urban geographer Ayona Datta suggests on the relevance of domesticity and family among Delhi squatters: "domesticity became central to the way that squatters constructed a gendered urban citizenship and belonging through conviviality. The home and patriarchal family thus also became ways to conceive of alternative forms of home and legitimacy in the city" (Ayona Datta 2012, 150).

The second, intertwined level pertains to the transformation – and in many cases to the loss – of economic activities. For many, this loss is connected to the destruction of homes, as properties were used for both purposes. Thus, the new Project equates *à la fois* the dispossession of homes and the loss of jobs. The transformation entailed the decline of socio-economic relations among local traders, who were forced to think of new business opportunities closer to their new – often provisional – residences, mostly located in the suburbs. This form of displacement positions them within processes of mass suburbanization widely attested in contemporary studies on Southern urbanisms (Simone 2018; Keil 2017).

Lastly, the socio-economic and spatial restructuring of the KVSAD Project heads towards what I have called new "economies of order", as they underpin on rationalities of control and discipline aimed at regulating informality and clearing slums. And at granting locals a life that supposedly runs… *"on a higher level"*.

4.4 "If everybody leaves, you also leave…"

In early November 2019 I got in touch with some ex property owners and former residents of the neighbourhood[52]. My key contact was L., a 36 years old man with wife and three children. Before the KVSAD Project, Lalit and his family were living in their family house in Lahori Tola, an area now largely demolished (**Figure 45**). When his house was demolished, Lalit had

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[51] The importance of family and kin connections for envisioning the socio-economic life plans of displaced dwellers emerged throughout all conversations with locals. Invariably, familial ties and the possibility to rely on someone were framed as crucial factors for not ending up living in the streets.

[52] I wish to thank my contacts at Kautliya Society for introducing me to 9 ex residents of the area (all ex property owners). For collecting their feelings and discourses I met repeatedly with them in three different moments: at a tea stall out of the neighborhood (with all 9 informants), on Godowlia Road next to the Vishwanath Temple entrance (with L. and his friend), and lastly in the neighborhood for a walking interview (only with L.).

no other option than leaving the historic city centre and go and stay temporarily to some relatives' in Varanasi western outskirts:

> If everybody leaves, you also leave. What should we do? That was my house since many generations. My father and grandfather and grand grandfather used to own that property. When my father died, my sister and I got the property. Now, the government forced us to sell. They paid good money, yes… But we didn't want to sell." (personal conversation with L., 16/11/2019)

As both owner and resident, L. had every lane of the neighborhood at his fingertips. He also seemed well informed about the new Project. Thus, I proposed him to be my guide for exploring the area, and for scouting shopkeepers, ex property owners and dwellers that might have something to say on the Project. We arranged for the day after and met on Godowlia Road at 2 pm.

The undemolished blocks between Vishwanath Gali, Tripura Bhairwi and the riverside were congested and animated as usual, although the looming ghost of demolitions materialized here and there in massive heaps of rubble. In undemolished areas, tenants and owners are carrying on with their everyday lives. While walking, I asked L. what his acquaintances thought about the compensation system adopted by the Board (section 4.3).

> Me: Do you know if also tenants received compensation? Are they happy with that?
>
> Informant: Yes, 2 lakhs per family. [Makes annoyed gesture] This is nothing for the people that lost their shops and businesses. You see these shopkeepers, they are renters… usually you find the shop at the ground floor and the home at the upper floor. Now, they will leave of course. The owners sold the properties. Result is, they [the renters] will lose their place and the shop. (…) But if I have a business, how can you compensate me with 2 lakhs? I lost my activity!" (personal conversation with L., 17/11/2019)

Many, in Lahori Tola, addressed the precarious condition of renters as a key concern. Although the Project CEO firmly claimed that the area is "not such a central economic hub in the city" (interview with Board CEO, 19/11/2019), the density of commercial activities in the neighborhood can hardly be contested. Assessing the economic value of such businesses, though, is problematic. The Board claimed to have measured each area unit and given compensation accordingly. But as L. says, not everyone was satisfied with the system.

Walking in the area we met some shopkeepers with whom L. chatted informally in Hindi. One of them sold religious items. When we mentioned the KVSAD Project he made some annoyed gestures and refused to talk. Few

meters away, we tried with a second shopkeeper: he also preferred not to talk. Later, L. translated their comments to me: “They say that they are being *highlighted*. The Board knows who they are. So they are… they are being checked out. This is why they don’t want to talk.” (personal conversation with L., 17/11/2019) The fact that tenants’ behaviors are being watched out resonates with the scattered episodes of protest mentioned by the CEO at the initial stages of the Project. Protest and resistance stopped early, though. Residents held that police showed up repeatedly and put down any revolt (group conversations with residents, field notes, 16/11/2019). Provided that, according to official data, the Project will create around 40 new commercial facilities, many shopkeepers now prefer to be quiet, and look forward to a profitable relocation within the newly built area.

The third shopkeeper we addressed eventually agreed to talk and invited us to sit. His room was small. His business was sewing, washing and ironing *sarees*. He offered us some *chai* while L. introduced me in Hindi. Then, he talked directly to me in English:

> Shopkeeper: I had a big shop in the area. They already demolished it. It’s gone.
> Me: Can you tell us how did it happen exactly?
> Shopkeeper: They arrived with no notice. They said we will demolish, you will have to go. Later on, you will have another place for your shop.”
> Me: Who came?
> Shopkeeper: The Temple authority.
> Me: Did they give you any compensation?
> Shopkeeper: No compensation. Just leave!
> Me: Did you sign some paper or did they provide you with documents about the new place for your shop within the project area?
> Shopkeeper. No ma’am. No documents. I did not sign anything. No paper. You know what I think? People can tell many things. But if you don’t write down.. how can I know? I always say: paper remains, words go. And you see, we also go. Everybody is leaving… this is no place for us anymore. (Personal conversation with shopkeeper, 17/11/2019)

If one relates this dialogue to similar stories shared by other residents, at least two recurrent elements seem to emerge. Firstly, their accounts reveal that the Project has been implemented in highly autocratic ways. The fact that tenants have not been notified, as well as the absence of negotiation and consultation between the Project Board and local residents are two examples in point. Indeed, my analysis of the provisions contained in the Board Act highlighted the exclusivity and autonomy of the new authority over the targeted area (chapter 3, section 3.2). As a consequence, locals express distrust for public authorities, feeling impotent and alienated about their

position in the now disrupted community. The above conversation with one shopkeeper reveals disillusion about the Project and about his future in the neighborhood. His final words – *this is no place for us anymore* – enfolds all the dramatic experience of the eviction, with the spatial erasure of professional and social ties. At the same time, the promise of inclusion, one day soon, within the modern spaces of the new area, is felt as a phony, empty rhetoric aimed solely at preventing potential protests (**Figures 46, 47**).

4.5 "Who will take care of it?"

The square of Brhamnal Chowk with its vegetable market is another area deeply affected by the transformations (**Figures 48, 49**). Although this area will not be demolished, the displacement of almost all local families will inevitably determine the closure of the market. In November 2019, the number of clients had already decreased to the point that many vendors did not find profitable to sell in the market anymore:

> They [other vendors] have already gone, 'cause few clients come. You can see that many stands are empty. All the area around us has been demolished, nobody comes to the market anymore! (market seller 1, personal conversation, translated from Hindi by L., 17/11/2019)

> More and more, we sellers will have to leave. There is no business here anymore. I don't know where I will go, ma'am. I don't have another place. (market seller 2, personal conversation, translated from Hindi by L., 17/11/2019)

The progressive abandonment of the market will transform the area from dynamic hub of commerce and social encounter to an interstitial, transitional space located between the massive Temple-Mosque complex and the highly crowded cremation *ghats* on the riverside. In the near future, it is likely to become a commercial zone providing tourism and pilgrimage services, consistently with the targets of the Project.

One can interpret the closure of the marketplace as a significant step towards the destruction of the social infrastructure that underpinned community life in the neighborhood. For Alan Latham and Jack Layton, the concept of social infrastructure refers to "the networks of spaces, facilities, institutions, and groups that create affordances for social connection" (Latham and Layton 2019). Being the material and immaterial space for community interaction, businesses opportunities and practices of care, the vegetable market of Brhamnal Chowk is certainly one of those networks.

Latham and Layton also point that while “what counts as social infrastructure has other primary functions other than to promote sociality (…), facilitating sociality is an essential component of how they manage to provide their primary function” (Latham and Layton 2019; Klinenberg 2018).

The need for sociality in the provision of services is a key aspect in the concept of social infrastructure. The marketplace is not merely the space where to buy goods; it is the place where social interaction encourages the purchase and the sale of products (Mele, Ng, and Chim 2014; Watson 2009). In such a way, the material provision of goods and services and the principles of urban sociality and publicness are entangled, which creates a “sense of trust” among the urban community (Latham and Layton 2019; Amin 2006)(Latham and Layton 2019; Amin 2006). This trust is multiple and multidirectional: it is in the maintenance of sanctioned social norms and habits; it is in the use and care of the public space; and it often characterizes business patterns and relations between users and providers. In this view, sense of trust clearly resonates with the moral attributes of civic culture, through the unfolding of routine-based patterns of “togetherness” (Latham and Layton 2019; Amin 2008).

The progressive dismantlement of arenas of social encounter and business exchange in the Lahori Tola neighborhood is paralleled, as mentioned in section 4.4, by a sense of distrust and disillusionment towards urban transformations, which are (rightly) felt as top-down and undemocratic. If the market of Brhamnal Chowk and the commercial *galis* of Lahori Tola once constituted, together with its residents, the social infrastructure of the neighborhood – which meant that people “had a place” there –, the KVSAD Project erases this paradigm introducing devices and facilities planned exclusively for the reproduction of pilgrimage and tourism-based revenues.

While most people I talked to in the area are resigned to pack and leave, few episodes of resistance deserve attention, as they point to an alternative, dissonant way to react to processes of authoritarian urbanism. Walking through the demolished neighborhood, my attention goes towards a big peepul tree growing within a small temple (**Figures 50, 51**). The booklet that the Board provided me states that this temple will be preserved (Vishwanath Temple Trust 2019 also see section 4.1). L. and I walked to the threshold. To my surprise, we spotted a man, dressed in the traditional Brahmin outfit – bare-chested, with a cloth around his waist. The man greeted us. After briefly chatting with L., he referred to me in Hindi:

> I have been caretaker of this temple for all my life. My house was just here [he points to an empty ground, some hundreds meters away]. They demolished my house! Now I rent a room over there. During the day I come to the temple, and take

care of it. I do the cleaning, the offerings, I do rituals. (Personal conversation with temple caretaker, translated from Hindi by L., 17/11/2019)

The endurance of the caretaker strongly underpins on the attachment to his spiritual role and function. Curiously, he did not seem to care much about his demolished house. Instead, he firmly refused the idea of leaving the temple and stop taking care of it.

> Informant: I will stay. Yes ma'am, I am not going anywhere. I tell you, this government is like Hitler!
>
> Me: You mean it is not democratic?
>
> Informant: No, it's not. Not at all. And violent… and crazy! I have come to this temple for all my life. I am the one who takes care of it. They can destroy everything, but I am not going anywhere. Who will take care of it? Who will do the *pujas* here? (Personal conversation with temple caretaker, translated from Hindi by L., 17/11/2019)

In his words, the Brahmin caretaker underlines two relevant issues: firstly, the temple needs to be taken care of, and, secondly, the people in the neighborhood need him to perform rituals. His words highlight the role that informal dwellers and squatters have in practices of urban care and repair, as studies on urban squatters as re-makers of the city suggest (Vasudevan 2017). But they also point to practices of the urban where a politics of refusal does not necessarily generate a vocabulary of organized resistance for political determination (Simone 2018, 125). The lucid intervention of the caretaker talks about community, and the elements of that social infrastructure that make urban life meaningful. Yet, this same rationality cannot be adopted by an urbanism which understands urban planning as spatial and social disruption. In this picture, the displacement of the caretaker, with the consequent death of his social role, become marginal sacrifices on the way of development.

4.6 "Once in the mosque, once in the temple…"

Few meters away from the temple and its caretaker we bumped into an old childhood friend of L.. He told that the remains of his demolished house were not far, so we followed him amid the rubble to go and see them. When we got to the site, he pointed to an undemolished building: "This wall separated our house from that one still in place. They will demolish that one also. Here you see [pointing to the ground] the last remains of my house."

(personal conversation with ex-owner, 17/11/2019) (**Figure 52**). He later chatted with L. for some minutes, pointing to various spots (Fig. walls of undemolished houses). Later, L. summarized me their talk as follows:

> There was a *chowk* [square] here. Yes, ma'am, there was some space, between the mosque and the temple, and we used to come here all the time. *All the time*, we were playing here. There was a ground and we used to play cricket. Every day, at least two or three hours, playing there. You know, on Friday the Muslims do their prayer, at noon. And sometimes the ball was jumping over the wall of the mosque. And we were like…! [he makes gestures and laughs]. And other times, it jumped on the temple compound. So, like this…. once in the mosque, once in the temple. (Emphasis in original, personal conversation with L., field notes 17/11/2019)

Then he stayed quiet for a few seconds. This account of his life seemed significant to him, so I encouraged him to speak:

> Me: How many were you? Did you have also Muslim friends?"
>
> Respondent: Maybe 15 or 20. Oh yes, Muslims also. We were all playing there. Together. Yes because, you know, *we don't want to have bad relationship with them, or conflict. They make the design and we sell.* Now with the project, everything is gone. Already in the 90s, when the military cantonment was settled, we could not play there anymore. But still the *chowk* was there. Now, it will be destroyed. (Italics added, personal conversation with L., field notes, 17/11/2019)

His sentence about design and trade refers to the centuries-old leading economic sector of the city: the manufacture and commerce of textiles (Kumar 2016; Kumar 1988). Traditionally, weavers belonged to the Muslim community, while traders were Hindus. A narrative of communal peace relying on this division of labor is often evoked by locals, who, as in the case of L., seem to suggest that economic interdependency has warded off religious and ethnic conflict in the city (Williams 2015; 2007; Varshney 2008). In *Everyday Peace: Politics, Citizenship and Muslim Lives in India*, Philippa Williams challenges the normative construction of Hindu-Muslim relation as inexorably violent through a 14-months qualitative and archival field study in Varanasi. Her book explores the textile sector and the professional and personal relations that emerge between Muslims and Hindus.

In Williams' account, the existence of an industry-based *bhai-bhai* – brotherhood – between Muslims and Hindus is discursively mobilized by locals for both normalizing economic relations and externalizing acts and agents of violence. However, as Williams suggests, the "brotherhood" between Hindu traders and Muslim manufacturers is fundamentally based on unequal opportunities, competition and conflict. As such, it represents "an imagined geography of peace, whilst simultaneously constituting the realm

of the political and the real possibility of transformation into enmity" (Williams 2015, 142; 2007; Kapila 2010). Such transformation is daily avoided by two elements: the common day-to-day rush for money, which makes peace and positive interaction profitable for both communities; and the settled normalization of the Muslim as stereotyped and marginalized other, a vision largely employed in many urban contexts in India (Chatterjee 2017).

The studies by Philippa Williams and my qualitative data based on interviews and conversations with locals show the fundamental role of the local economy in maintaining stable power relations and in discouraging religious or ethnic tensions. As Williams argues, in Varanasi, "the circulation of economic capital is (…) integral to the possibility, as well as the necessity, of everyday peace being sustained within the silk industry" (Williams 2015, 139). L.'s very pragmatic sentence – *"we don't want to have bad relationship with them,* (…) *they make the design and we sell"* – suggests that communal tolerance and inclusion are driven by the urban economy.

However, the stability of economic and status relations in the textile industry strongly underpins on inequality and disparity. The profitability of the weaving sector has always been lower than that of retailing (Kumar 2016; Williams 2015). Also, Muslims encounter complex financial obstacles for making their way in retailing, hence remaining long confined to a low-waged and physically demanding job, often victim of exploitation from the part of traders. This evidences the weight that patterns of unequal citizenship have in the structuring of urban economies. At the same time, Varanasi textile products have gained centuries-old reputation for best quality fabric and manufacturing in India, which grants the community of Muslim weavers a social and professional recognition hardly attested in other contexts.

While the conditions for communal harmony are largely imposed by the organization of labour in the textile industry, it would be wrong to underestimate the role of urban public space in maintaining and orientating peace. While many areas of the historic city centre are lived gregariously through informal practices of segregation – notably on the *ghats*, which are felt as an "a place of the Hindus" (interview with local trader, field notes, 11/08/2019) – there exists some kind of interstitial places, where coexistence is possible. The *chowk* between the Vishwanath temple and the Gyan Vapi mosque, where boys used to play cricket, was one of those places. Its ethnical and religious neutrality provided a space for encounter other than and parallel to that of intercommunal business transaction. From this perspective, L.'s remembrance of the ball jumping "once in the mosque, once in the temple", becomes thus a powerful account of the intimate possibilities of peace offered by everyday life in urban public spaces.

Conclusion

The chapter aimed at discussing the main features of what I called BJP's *neoliberal reactionary urbanism*. The first part of the chapter focused on how processes of cooptation, both material and discursive, have translated into technocracies of demolition, selective preservation and seizure of urban spaces. Section 4.1 suggested that the KVSAD Project authority utilized temples and ruins emerging from demolitions as instruments to the ideological legitimation of the Project. Notably, the discovery of religious structures has been related to the *liberation* of Hindu faith evoked by Narendra Modi in its inaugural speech (chapter 3, section 3.3). In such way, the reasons for modernization and development are being intertwined to the strengthening of religious practice. On a similar note, section 4.2 analysed the seizure of the Gyan Vapi Mosque within the Project area as the initial stage of a formal process of dispossession aimed at erasing all urban materialities that are contentious to BJP process of *hinduization* of India.

Section 4.3 investigated the rationality of KVSAD Broad, focusing on how the Project implementation is pursued and told. It showed that the Board CEO advocates "change" and "novelty" as inherently positive formulas, as possibilities to bring the economy *to a higher level*. Development itself is touted as unmissable, as "something that is already here, a force unleashed at some point in the past that is now unfolding according to its own internal laws in a sort of manifest destiny that cannot possibly be stopped by any present intervention" (Björkman 2015, 95).

This seemingly unescapable, neoliberal, reactionary re-structuring process unleashes what has been theorized in chapter 1 as the *neoliberal heritage paradigm* (chapter 1, section 1.1). Local material and spatial inheritances – the forms that the historic city centre has come to have, which locals relate to, negotiate and adapt in the contemporary – are touted as «assets» for development, with the KVSAD authority fundamentally treating them as private ownership. One should recall on this point the Constitution Act of the Board mentioned in chapter 3, which states that Board is entitled to access (Art. 10), acquire (Art. 6) and confiscate buildings and lands within the targeted perimeter via "mutual negotiations, purchase, donation, transfer, lease, rent or otherwise" (Art. 6 mentioned in chapter 3, section 3.2).

The KVSAD Project is indeed a process of dispossession that touches at various elements. It is surely a land dispossession, no matter whether

owners agreed to sold properties or received compensation because, as it emerges from conversations with locals, they had no other choice: *we did not want to sell,* stated one owner after selling; *if everybody leaves, you also leave*, argued another one. This suggests that the Board strategically acquired not only the land, but the people: L. indirectly claimed that when admitting that *we were offered 3 times the actual property value!*.

But, if processes of displacement are enactments of biopolitical governmentality (as in Baker 2020; Wang 2020; Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard, e Lees 2020; Frazier 2019), land dispossession is only one side of the story. When evicted, residents of Dashashwamedh, Lahori and Garhwaasi Tola neighborhoods are being simultaneously dispossessed of their subjectivities, their material belongings and their memories. More importantly, they are being deprived of the *possibilities* to envision their future by relating it with past and present materialities. These materialities are not only distanced, because of displacement, but erased, because of demolition or closure (the private properties, the cricket ground, the vegetable market, etc.).

Thinking such processes through the lens of inheritance, as conceptualized in chapter 1, allows to highlight the fundamental distance between treating urban spaces as properties at-disposal and holding them in custody for present and future generations. In this respect, the framework of inheritance suggests that forms of belonging and care are put at the core of urban planning and management processes, instead of being dismissed as obstacles to development. This informs dispossession struggles as practices that do not simply aim at re-appropriation, which as Butler and Athanasiou claim, is a term that "re-establishes possession and property as the primary prerogatives of self-authoring personhood" (Butler e Athanasiou 2013, 6 and chapter 1, sections 1.4, 1.5).

The endurance of the temple caretaker mentioned in section 4.5 is an example in point. His refusal to leave the temple with no one taking care of it is not an individual way to stick his body and presence to something he owned. His resistance points to urbanisms of continuity, of responsibility, of custody. His way of *conserving* is an intimate, radical form of caring, that points to urbanisms alternative to the neoliberal transformation-through-erasure. However, his battle is lived as an individual struggle: the communities of Dashashwamedh, Lahori and Garhwaasi Tola do not exist anymore.

Figure 35 The corridor area created by the KVSAD Project by demolishing the existing fabric, November 2019. Author's picture.

Figure 36 The same area flanked by religious structures discovered after demolitions, November 2019. Author's picture.

Figure 37 Another area cleared by the demolitions, with the temples on the right and the debris of demolished houses on the left, November 2019. Author's picture.

Figure 38 The same area, stretching towards the river, with temples saved from demolitions yet damaged, November 2019. Author's picture.

Figure 39 The Goenka Library, external view. Author's picture.

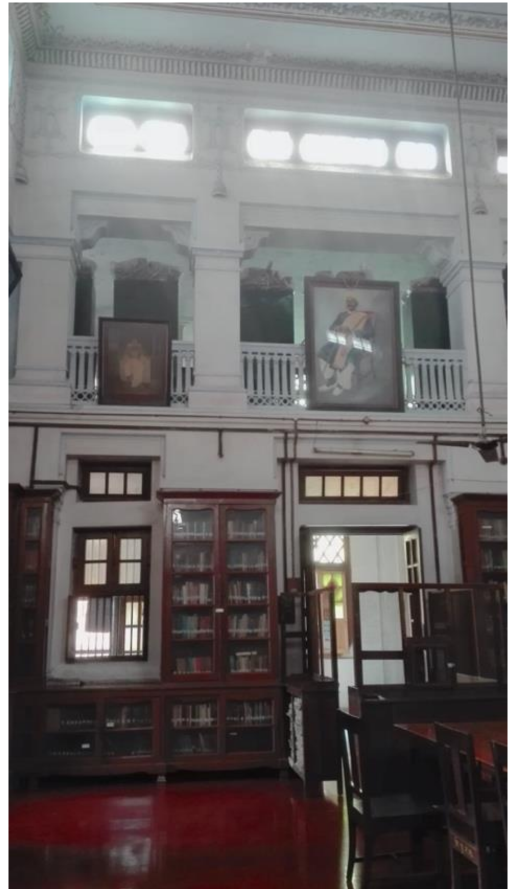

Figure 40 Main hall of the Goenka Library. Author's picture.

Figure 41 The demolished area stretching towards the Gyan Vapi Mosque compound, which is now more visible, November 2019. Author's picture.

Figure 42 Street vendors and market sellers in the area targeted by the KVSAD Project. Author's picture.

Figure 43 Street vendors and market sellers in the area targeted by the KVSAD Project. Author's picture.

Figure 44 The area were L. and his family lived, now largely demolished, November 2019. Author's picture.

Figure 45 A local business owner that will be displaced by the KVSAD Project. Author’s picture.

Figure 46 Another commerce targeted by the demolitions. Author’s picture.

Figure 47 The vegetable market at Lahory Tola, with few sellers remaining. Author's picture.

Figure 48 At the centre the sellers at the vegetable market of Lahori Tola, on the left the emptied structure on the covered market.

Figure 49 The entrance to the small temple with the peepul tree on the left. Author's picture.

Figure 50 The peepul tree and the temple. Author's picture.

Figure 51 At the centre, the remaining wall of my acquaintance's house, November 2019. Author's picture.

Chapter 5 Improvised ethno-entrepreneurialism or, heritage re-possessed?

> What, in the realm of the identity economy, counts as capital, what as labor? (…) Vendors of ethnic authenticity, however bound they may be to the market, are *not* an alienated proletariat, in thrall to the fetish of their own estranged essence. Nor have they simply become fetishes themselves. (…) There is at work here a process of "simultaneous self-distancing and self-recognition". (J. L. Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, 25)

Introduction

The last chapters have shown that, in Varanasi, national and local Indian governmental authorities increasingly adopt a heritage-centred vocabulary for legitimizing urban change. I suggested that this use is both discursive and material, as it underpins on the mobilization of historical and cultural narratives, and on the co-optation – and consequent transformation – of material spaces and artifacts.

In this chapter, my aim is to relate these processes of co-optation with the spontaneous and largely improvised engagement of local dwellers with the discourses and materialities of the historic city centre. The chapter asks: how do locals play a role in the making of the historic city centre of Varanasi as cultural heritage, and how does this role dialogue with the governmental

official narration? Also, it aims to unpack the ways in which local inhabitants engage with the spaces of the historic city centre for carving out socio-economic viability. In this respect, it dwells on processes of appropriation and re-possession. It asks if and how the appropriation of histories and spaces of the city empowers locals in envisioning and *making* a city of their own.

The chapter is the result of field observation and ethnographic enquiry and lingers on stories of selected social groups inhabiting the historic city centre: tourist guides (section 5.2), *ghats* informal dwellers (section 5.3) and long-term Western migrants (section 5.4). Of course, this is by no means intended as a comprehensive analysis and future studies on local historic city centre dwellers will be needed to better complement these results.

The theoretical perspective of the chapter largely draws from Jean and John Comaroff's concept of *ethno-entrepreneurialism* (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009) and makes it dialogue with urban southern worlds through the lens of *improvisation*, as recently suggested by urban scholar AbdouMaliq Simone (Simone 2018; Müller and Trubina 2020) (section 5.1). This theoretical lens is then grounded in the context of Indian urban informality.

Against this backdrop, the chapter suggests that relations between urban dwellers and their material and discursive inheritances often take the form of what can be called an *improvised ethno-entrepreneurialism*. This process allows them to merge individual identities and urban spaces, personal memories and collective histories in a commodifying narration that is essentially targeted to attract national and international tourism.

5.1 Improvised ethno-entrepreneurs: anthropologies of Indian urban worlds

Arguing that, in the neoliberal global enterprise, citizens are called to act as entrepreneurs is now well established (Rossi and Wang 2020; Phelps and Miao 2019; Törnberg and Chiappini 2019; McNeill 2017; Freeman 2015; D. Harvey 1989)[53]. In the last decades, anthropologists Jean and John

[53] As Donald McNeill argues, "we are now at a point where the entrepreneurial city, which Harvey (1989) saw as the assumption of market-oriented language, strategies and targets, meets the city of entrepreneurs" (McNeill 2017: 233 referring to Harvey 1989b). The literature on citizens as entrepreneurs is abundant, and this is not the place for a comprehensive review. For the relevance it has for my analysis I mention here recent (Rossi

Comaroff intriguingly investigated how the explosion of the culture and knowledge economy also ignited forms of *self*-entrepreneurialism. According to them, this process is reshaping the ways in which identities are lived, performed and marketed at the global stage. In their book *Ethnicity, Inc.* (2009), they develop the concept of *ethno-commodity* as the product of "the process of cultural commodification and the incorporation of identity in which it is imbricated" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 20). This is for example the case of copyrighted products and modes of production, of ethnic based theme parks, of national branding campaigns and the like.

Far from being simply the stuff of self-conscious or collective existential struggles – as in the Hegelian strand of critical theory – identity, they argue, increasingly holds economic value. Ethnicities and identities are globally commodified, incorporated, priced. However, they are a strange kind of commodity, which seems to resist classical economic rationality because "its 'raw material' is not depleted by mass circulation" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 20). Ethno-commodities do not lose their market value when the demand increases. Quite contrarily, they suggest, "mass circulation reaffirms ethnicity (…) and, with it, the status of the embodied subject as a source and means of identity" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009:20).

Simultaneously unique and reproduced, authentic and fake, ethno-commodities are *empirically* embedded in contexts and practices. This reflects capitalism as a concrete enactment, reproducing through real "industrie". In this sense, the two anthropologists maintain that:

> Capitalism, however ethereal it might appear to have become, remains a grounded social formation, one that is given manifest shape by the practices of living beings, one whose history is not overdetermined from the first." (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 23)

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and Wang 2020) which explores the trajectories of contemporary forms of "informal, improvised entrepreneurship". For the two authors, the emergence of digital technologies, and particularly the post 2008-2009 tech boom enabled "an increasingly impoverished middle class to engage with entrepreneurship in accidental, improvised ways that resemble the survival strategies of the urban poor in the South." (Rossi and Wang 2020: 484). This echoes anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff's "theory from the South", which stems from observing that "non solo le classi lavoratrici dell'Euro-America (…) sono situate sempre più spesso ai suoi margini meridionali ma, e si tratta di un punto critico, il capitale del Sud globale sostenta, e possiede anche, molte delle aziende di punta dell'Euro-America" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2015 [2012]; also see Mbembe 2017). This chapter engages with these perspectives, exploring how identity and culture are being incorporated into improvised, informal urban entrepreneurial strategies.

This point suggests that living beings are full agents of capitalism, instead of being its estranged victims. Also, it intertwines the concept of identity-as-practiced with that of capitalism as a social formation.

By suggesting that identities are "concrete abstractions", variously deployed by human beings in their everyday efforts to inhabit the world, we can dismiss their more sublimated dimensions of identity. Indeed, investigating identities as *used* and *practiced* in neoliberal economies is the perspective adopted by this thesis.

In *Ethnicity, Inc.*, Jean and John Comaroff set their empirical analysis in legal technologies of patenting, copyrighting and in the making of ethnic corporations. In their selected case studies, they extensively examine the legalization of cultural heritage through intellectual property instruments, and the alleged entitlement of (mostly Indigenous) groups to benefit from their commodified cultural resources.[54]

However, as introduced in chapter 1, and as explored empirically in chapter 3 and 4, the absence of legal property ownership titles does not prevent proprietary relationality to inform urban practice and planning. In his studies on urban gentrification in Salvador de Bahia, anthropologist John Collins characterizes gentrification as a relation where personhood and property are mutually imbricated (Collins 2018; 2015). Talking of people's urban lives as "vital properties", he suggests looking at property as "a semiotic ideology, as a key moralizing idiom through which people compose themselves and their worlds" (Collins 2018, 870). In this sense, he argues, property should not be strictly encapsulated into titles of ownership. For the most, he claims, it unfolds as a *possessive individualism*, in which selves "are considered to be properties that hold and are held" (Collins 2018:880). His analysis ultimately explores the ways in which relations of possession affect and define the very possibilities of being a human, or a citizen.

Urban dwellers in Varanasi are quite aware of the economic potentials that lie in intertwining their individual identities to the marketable cultural

[54] In a relevant passage they argue: "the marketing of heritage-as-possession, sometimes with an anthropological assistance, has clearly been spurred on by the worldwide recognition of cultural entitlement, of the "inherent" right of indigenous peoples to profit from the fruits of their vernacular ways and means; there even exists a scholarly serial whose name, *International Journal of Cultural Property*, bears tacit testimony to the fact" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 32). However, the two anthropologists do not engage with the contestations brought by various Indigenous groups to the global system of cultural entitlements and to the use of the notion "property". I analyse this issue in chapter 1, section 1.3.

features of the city. In “historic cities” [55], the official heritage narrative grants locals possibilities to become entrepreneurs of their own identities, for the simple fact that they live and embody Varanasi’s cultural attributes. As we will see throughout the chapter, by aligning their identities to the cultural and social expectations of visitors, many locals create economic value through practices of urban ethno-entrepreneurialism. However, differently from the formalized, legal property instruments employed by Indigenous groups in the global ethnic industry, the ethno-entrepreneurial processes that I detected in Varanasi are mostly improvised, informal and unregulated responses to adverse socio-economic conditions.

Urban scholar AbdouMaliq Simone convincingly examines the *improvised* character of urban dwelling among poor and marginal groups in urban Southern worlds (Simone 2018; 2010).

In *Improvised Lives*, the lives of the title are stories of socio-economic endurance and constantly negotiated *making* that surge from conditions of extreme variability, precariousness, vulnerability. “Improvised lives” emerge from urban contexts that are internally broken so that, as Simone puts it, they have become “uninhabitable”[56]. This is how cities in the global South enact their own *southerness*, understood as “something closer to science fiction, something made up as it goes along” (Simone 2018: 12).

As a space of permanent transit, vagueness, recuperation, the urban South is lived through strategies of improvisation. These coalescence into what Simone describes through the word *districting*:

> [Districting] is a process that aims less to make a particular place inhabitable than it does to enable residents to spiral in and out, propel themselves into the larger urban surrounds and then bear back down again into the familiar places now

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[55] The term *historic city centre* is used here differently from the rest of the thesis, where it is employed formally as a spatial definition that encapsulates the most ancient urban settlement on the Ganges river. Differently, here, I suggest that the term also holds as a social construct, developed as alternative to the “modern city”, as the city that changes and adapts to progress and development. All cities, of course, are historical. Yet, “historic cities” are discursively created to place history – and usually a specific time of their history – as key feature of their identity. For this understanding I borrow from (Lamprakos 2014; 2016).

[56] Lack of adequate infrastructure, isolation from public services, construction booms coupled to increased impoverishment, a general perception of abandonment and the impossibility for upgrading socio-economic status usually connotate these worlds. These conditions foreground the emergence of “uncanny alliances”, of obscure and unintelligible operations between bodies and materials, so that *the uninhabitable* also becomes “a method, not one necessarily chosen by residents, but rather something converted into a method from the shards of broken lives and broken infrastructure that make up a district’s heritage” (Simone 2018:10).

rendered unfamiliar. It is the creation of a rhythm of itineraries that are themselves uninhabitable. (Simone 2018: 5)

However, these rhythms are both expansive and constrained. Residents constantly experience the limitedness of their scope of manoeuvrability. The precarious stability of improvised itineraries hinders possibilities of substantial transformation towards more just socio-economic conditions. For Simone, this translates in a shared feeling of being trapped, of longing for something far and different, and a sentiment which maturates between high adaptability and frustration for real change:

> There is clearly an overabundance of sentiment among residents of these working-class districts for a different kind of life, characterized by both greater consumption and less arduous working conditions. Perhaps more important is their desire for exposure and access to a wider set of experiences. (Simone 2018: 109)

In these neighbourhoods, change usually materializes in the built environment, in the verticalization of dwelling. However, this macro-scale change does not reflect into the precarious stability of everyday life, in its unintelligibility and solidity. When it happens, "change for many residents means working longer hours, taking on more debt, living at a far remove from the city (…) and having to do all this largely as individuals responsible for themselves" (Simone 2018: 111). In many instances, change is not even easy to imagine or to grasp, as the different and the distant overlap in such ways that they exclude the very preconditions for transformation *here* and *now*. As a result, the very idea of change becomes itself unintelligible and precarious, both shunned and longed for.

In Indian urban worlds, improvisation and informality are deeply intertwined. The current exclusive politics of economic and infrastructural development leaves many strata of society in interstitial spaces where deprival and social stigma intertwine to urban informality as a space of possibilities (Roy 2018; 2011b; 2009; Ayona Datta 2016). In her recent thesis on urban practices of home making in the streets of Mumbai, Paroj Banerjee points to persistence and perseverance as key affective means through which urban informal dwellers resist and sustain their precarious livelihoods in the streets (Banerjee 2018). Survival strategies based on improvisation and adaptation to ever declining life conditions mould perseverance as a form of never-ending endurance against oblivion and extinction. Such forms of urbanity complement and sustain the glittery, mall-driven urbanisms upon which the rebranding of India as a "shining" nation is achieved (Kaur 2020; 2012). Under the shining surface of national branding campaigns, though,

Indian urban worlds are mostly improvised, informal entities, where even the ubiquitous presence of auto-rickshaws responds to improvised entrepreneurial strategies for slow-paced and affordable mobility needs (Kaur 2020).

If we connect the dots between informal urbanisms and ethno-entrepreneurial strategies in Indian historically and culturally-dense city centres, we find out that official heritage narratives and materialities also serve the broader and amorphous life survival strategies of Varanasi locals.

In the next sections, I will show that, by leveraging on their identities, on their being *Banarsis* (from Varanasi), on their spatial engagement with the historic city centre, local residents construct marketable narratives for tourists and pilgrims, while re-making urban histories and forms. In doing so, they constantly negotiate and recreate their urban inheritances.

5.2 Failed businessmen, reinvented: storytelling Varanasi

I firstly met A. in early February 2019, few days after my arrival in Varanasi. The weather was chilly, and the air dry and polluted. We were in the middle of the winter season, when flocks of domestic and international tourists crowd the historic city centre and the riverside. As a Western scholar doing my research in the city, I also considered myself as a tourist, albeit of particular kind. Hence, I decided that my first contact with the historic city centre would be mediated by local guides. I picked the local tour agency *Varanasi Walks!*, as suggested by my guidebook, and contacted them on social media. The next day, I met with my tour guide in front of a renowned café near Godowlia Road.

A. joined *Varanasi Walks!* in 2012, at the age of 24, after a BA in Economics at Banaras Hindu University. The choice of becoming tour guide was not planned, nor coherent with his studies. Later, in one of our encounters, he described it as an improvised decision emerged from personal difficulties and other professional attempts:

> I got my BA in Business. Then tried for an MA but couldn't get admitted […]. Then, I thought I could be a businessman. Can you believe that?! Well, it was a long time ago. Turns out I wasn't very good at that [laughs]. I tried with a friend from college, we set up a company, a small one, you know. I don't even remember. In short, I was not good. We run out of money [laughs louder]. At that time, I had family issues also. My father died, so I needed to stay with *mumma*, and take care of

her. […] And then, it was I think 2011, or 2012, a friend told me about this tour agency, that was run by foreigners. I got interested. And so I met with J., we talked.. He was looking for some Indian guys also, not only Westerners. So I said, *why not*, and I joined. (Emphasis added, personal conversation with A. from my diary notes, 2/2/2019)

As a jobless, "failed" businessman, with personal issues to take care of, he did not hesitate much, and casually accepted to become tour guide in a company owned by a "Westerner". After knowing him better I realized that the extemporaneity emerging from this early description is one trait of his personality. A. is very keen at replying *"why not"* to the many opportunities the day brings to him, no matter how planned or suitable to plans they might be. Although he takes his job very seriously, he does not exclude the unforeseen, the unexpected, and the necessity to adapt and reinvent himself. In one of our talks, for example, we addressed the issue of his professional identity:

Me: [laughing] Always about this *Varanasi Walks*! Now tell me… What you would you do if, lets' say, you cannot work for the agency anymore?

A.: Me?! Listen to me. I can do *whatever* these arms are able to do! Look… You see that guy? [He points to a thin, tall man, dressed in rag clothes, pushing a cycle-rickshaw] I will drive a rickshaw!

Me: Wouldn't you prefer to leave Varanasi, and perhaps go to Delhi, or Mumbai, for finding a good job with your degree...?

A.: [becoming serious, but gently] I can do whatever but that. Never, *ever*, leaving Varanasi.

(emphasis in original, personal conversation with A., 7/11/2019)

I found this capacity to think of oneself as the result of improvised tactics and relations in many occasions and with many acquaintances in Varanasi. Residents in the historic city centre seems to easily navigate between different types of jobs, whether in retailing, manual labor, or private mobility, while also experiencing considerable periods of joblessness (S. Kumar 2015; Raman 2013). This echoes what AbdouMaliq Simone observed as key feature of *southern* living: a peculiar way of dwelling in which people "position themselves as parts of multiple streams, chains of passing things along, as evidenced in the confidence they display about how it doesn't matter if their particular livelihood doesn't work out in its present form. For, they are capable of doing something else" (Simone 2018: 88).

As I detected in multiple situations, that "*something else*" is not necessarily alternative or subsequent to the present job or current day routine: from the newly-made acquaintance that brings me around the city during working hours, to improvised local "guides" who just want to hang around,

to the innumerable extra-work tasks and relations that require a constant "stopping over", the ability to devote oneself to activities "other" than official work seems deeply embedded in the making of daily life, as a relevant if not predominant beside-activity of the quotidian.

In dissonance with the temporariness and improvisation of such a living, A. firmly maintains that he simply cannot leave Varanasi. It took weeks of wandering around the city with him to understand the meaning and reasons for such a resolute statement.

Guides at *Varanasi Walks!* offer tourists various tour packages. One can normally choose among ten walking tours in the historic city centre and three boat rides on the Ganges, taking off from early morning to sunset[57]. Tourists that visit the city for the first time are usually advised to take the "City of Light" or the "Northern Bazaars and Hidden Alleys" tours, as they bring to discover "the hustle and bustle of traditional neighbourhood life" and the "historic temples and classical mosques, searching out the original foundations of the city"[58]. A. is very good at engaging with almost all conversation issues emerging from our tour visits, whether it is the nationally-renown textile industry, Hindu-Muslim relations in the city, the sacred urban geography, Hindu myths and spirituality or current Indian politics. At the same time, he is very greed to see and know as much as possible about life outside Varanasi, and outside India. He has a deep curiosity for Europe and North America, and discreetly tries to grasp any feeling, sensation, insight, connected to life in these countries. After knowing him better, he confessed me:

> Now I will tell you. My secret dream is going to London. I always wanted to go. I wanted to study there. You know, my brother lives there with his family. What you say is true, yes, I am fascinated by Europe and by your country. I wish I could go there, even only for a weekend! [laughs] But you know, I cannot picture myself in some other place. I am *fully Banarsis*… and this city, the city of salvation, the city of Shiva, is a microcosm: being here is like being everywhere else at the same time! (Emphasis in original, phone conversation with A., 7/05/2019)

A. belongs to the Hindu community of Nepali origin, and is a Brahmin by caste, which, to his eyes, inseparably links his identity to the spiritual tradition of Shivaism. In this excerpt, as in other occasions, Amrit conflates the narrative employed in his job with tourists (*the city of Shiva and salvation*)

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[57] This information is taken from *Varanasi Walks!* website at https://www.varanasiwalks.com/. Accessed 30/03/2020).

[58] "Walks and Boats" section, at *Varanasi Walks!* website at https://www.varanasiwalks.com/. Accessed 30/03/2020).

with his own personal understanding. The rhetoric of the microcosm – that will be addressed in chapter 6 – is used and translated here as argumentation to the fact that not being able to move and travel is not a real limitation, as Varanasi encompasses the whole world.

This evidently collides with the sentence where he openly expresses his *secret* desire for going to London ("*I always wanted to go*"). The city then becomes simultaneously the chosen place and the place of constraint, where thinking to move and leave can only but be a secreted dream. The socio-economic impossibility to leave Varanasi for visiting "*even only for a weekend*" the long sought European cities allows to preserve a cherished as much as remote aspiration that draws from past life projects (studying in London, doing an MA) and nurtures his daily routine and future visions.

For six months a year, the period in which tourists are in town, A. devotes thoroughly to being what he describes as a *storyteller*. His body and mind are fully immersed in the spaces and times of the city. He goes on tour all days, more times a day. He walks for dozen kilometres each day. When he gets home, he falls asleep exhausted. But when he is on tour, he seems never tired. "The city lives in the words of those who choose to be its bespoken" he tells me quite ceremoniously (personal conversation with A., field notes, 7/02/2019). "Centuries ago, this city was full of storytellers. This is what I am now, and I am glad if I can be the humblest storyteller that ever existed!" (personal conversation with A., field notes, 7/02/2019). By making the city "live" through his words, A. finds his own, provisional space, in its identification with the city itself. All along the tour, he unravels a discourse in which personal stories and sensations are intertwined to historical narratives and urban myths. Hence, for example, the dynamics of the alleged peaceful coexistence of Hindus and Muslims in the city – a discourse that has been analysed in chapter 4, section 4.4 – directly reflects in the ways in which he manages his own relations with Muslims:

> I have a good relationship with them [Muslims], why shouldn't I? I have no problems talking to them. I know these craftsmen and I stop for chatting sometimes. (Personal conversation with A., 2/2/2019)

He admitted having no Muslim friends, but that, although Hindus and Muslims are "too different on every aspect of life" (personal conversation with A., field notes, 2/2/2019), he respects and lives peacefully with them. I observed that here, as in other occasions, A. avoided producing histories which would collide with the picture of the city as a "peaceful microcosm" and that, consistently, he used personal histories to show and convince that the city is *really* so.

In other occasions, his talks play subtly with time and history, appropriating facts and myths, and re-arranging them for creating what he figures to be a more seducing narration for the visitor. This is the case of the famous Ganga Aarti performances on the *ghats*, which he describes as the "traditional invocation to Mother Ganges" (personal conversation with A., 2/2/2019), while it is in fact a recently institutionalized religious production enjoyed more by tourists and visitors than by local dwellers (Zara 2015; Gaenszle and Gengnagel 2008) (**Figures 28, 53**). Also, his claim of being "*fully Banarsis*" – fully belonging to Varanasi – leverages on tourists' eagerness for ethnic authenticity, fashioning his own presence and self as a product of the tourist visit. Similarly, his Hindu ethnicity, his Nepali provenance, his high caste origins, the past and present facts of his life are aptly incorporated here and there in his speeches, complementing the historical and spatial descriptions of the city centre. As a result, the city – his *own* city – really "lives" through his words.

By carving out his own viable space in the urban heritage economy, A., the "failed businessman" and now storyteller, appropriates and transforms the city, re-possessing historical spaces and narratives day by day. His work is a generative one, progressing through seduction, as a "hit-or-miss type of power, where the possibility of refusal is built in" and which acts upon subjects who "have the ability to opt out" (Allen 2011a, 31; 2011b). In this perspective, while remaining at the margins of the neoliberal enterprise, tour guides' popular economies can be seen as "terrains of struggle where 'neoliberal reason' is appropriated, ruined, transformed and relaunched by those who are supposed to be its victims" (Veronica Gago 2018, 2; Verónica Gago 2017).

As in the Argentinian marketplace studied by Verónica Gago, and in the practices of "districting" analyzed by AbdouMaliq Simone in Asian marginal urbanities (Simone 2018; chapter 5, section 5.2), the popular economy of tour-guiding in Varanasi represents an urbanism from below, often informal, which gathers young male unemployed who failed to pursue a more remunerating and stable waged job. By playing with spaces and memories, both intimate and public, they find profit in marketing their identity – fixed through ethnic, geographical, cultural lines – embedding it to the spatial experiences sought for by visitors. However, such a living turns out to be fragile, constantly in the making, spatially improvised, requiring high adaptability, long working hours, and dependency on an environment which may abruptly change – as it happened during and after the spread of Covid-19 pandemic in India, which left A. and all his colleagues with no tourists and no income (The Hindu 2020a; The Print 2020).

5.3 Violent heritages: the *ghats* and the outcaste

On a late afternoon in August, S.P. welcomed me in the tiny hall of the hostel where she works as a cleaning lady. The hostel is located in the neighbourhood of Bengali Tola, which is experiencing rapid touristification, due to its closeness to some famous and spectacular *ghats* (**Figures 54, 55**). Brij Rama Palace, the most luxurious hotel in town stands close by, on Darbhanga *ghat*. The hostel where S.P. works is one of the many cheap solutions for backpack travellers. It employs 4 workers: S.P. and her brother for the cleaning services, a cook and a secretary. S.P. was very happy that she could practice her English with me. She offered some *chai* and started talking about her life:

> My family and I come from Bihar. I think I was seven or eight… When we came here, we lived in *ghats*. Not many years, three I think. And then, you know, cycle stands? There is a cycle stand on the road, and we lived there. They give you ticket and you can use cycle stand.. you know? […] No, we didn't pay. We lived there on the street for I think seven, eight years. After, some government official made offer, my mom talked with them, she filled a form and we find a home. This was around ten years ago. (video interview with S.P., 6/08/2019)

S.P. belongs to the Dalit immigrant community of Varanasi. Together with her family, she left the rural villages of Bihar in order to find jobs in rapidly urbanizing UP. Labor migration from Bihar is attested as a constant trend in the history of north Indian internal mobility since the second half of the nineteen century (Amrita Datta 2016a; 2016b). In the last decades, the trend shifted from predominantly short term, seasonal, rural-rural agricultural migration, to more long-term rural-urban flows. In cities, upcoming migrants take part to a labour market highly characterized by informality and by the absence of social protection. For Amrita Datta, it is the informal urban economy which "not only drives but also *defines* the nature of migration from rural Bihar" (Amrita Datta 2016b, 408; 2016a).

The mobility history of S.P. and her family suggest exactly this same pattern, where urban immigration intersects with homelessness and job precariousness, highlighting that socio-economic marginality and vulnerability are prices that low class and low caste migrant workers pay for boosting the urban economy in Indian cities. The personal mobility history of S.P. as a young adult (27-28 years old) also shows that she could not benefit

from formal education and suggests that she has been exposed to child labor during all the period (A. K. Roy, Singh, and Roy 2015). Indeed, as our conversation proceeds, I find out that she worked all along her young life. While living on the *ghats*, for example, she was selling tourist and religious items to visitors and pilgrims.

> At 5 o'clock morning time I go to Manikarnika and Harischandra *ghats*. Because many tourists come at that time. So, I wake up and walk to Manikarnika, Harischandra, or Dashashwamedh ghats, and I sell postcards, colors, *bhindi*… Sometimes I took 500 rupees, sometimes no business. But I did not like it. […] There are so many people selling there. Too many people selling. And sometimes people were yelling me and shouting "this is my guest, why you sell to him? Please don't sell here. Go there." I was feeling very bad. (Video interview with S.P., 6/08/2019)

As many Dalit immigrants, S.P. and her family improvised informal shelter on the *ghats*. Selling tourist items was one of the several informal activities that S.P. undertook for raising money for the family. On the *ghats*, her family arranged shelter in the area between Rajendra Prasad and Dashashwamedh *ghats* (**Figures 56, 57**). They were equipped with blankets, plastic tarps for rain, a little stove and basic kitchen utensils (Video interview with S., 6/08/2019). The mobility of her job intersected with the spaces of her personal and intimate life, which was constantly "on stage", visible to everybody, as she recalled later in our interview.

Her struggle for carving out a viable space amongst vendors' allegiances accounts for the varied trajectories ignited by urban tourism economy, where sreet vendors grab spatial sections of the *ghats* for securing their profit. Children like S.P., who cannot rival with them, find interstitial spaces, picking up the crumbs, the missed opportunities. Their young bodies become thus instrumental to becoming visible for seizing the attention of tourists. Hence, S.P. dresses and decorates her body with colours, *bhindi* and other ornaments, performing the 'poor Indian child' widely evoked in books and visual products about Indian cities (Chakravorty 2014; Dogra 2013).

The *ghats* of Varanasi are a place of passing-by, of wandering and waiting for the business opportunity to come, a place of watching and being watched. This aspect of "gazing around" happens through "multiple, situated gazes, where different gazing subjects negotiate different visions, meanings and practices and co-construct, both visually and physically, the tourist space" (Zara 2015, 27). In this sense, the *ghats* can be conceptualized as a theatre-stage where multiple and contrasting acts are performed and made visible. Unwanted visibility is addressed by S.P. as the most disturbing

feature of her life on the *ghats*[59]. At various instances, she connects the act of being seen and watched to gender-related unsafety and fear:

> I felt so bad there. Because many people come and see. So I was eating, or sleeping, and people always there, seeing me and watching. Not good. You know, many boys pass there and watch… for girls it was not safe, the ghats. Even now, I don't go alone. (Video interview with S.P, 6/08/2019)

For S.P. and her family visibility is connected to higher vulnerability rather than to better commercial opportunities, as it is instead the case for most (male) locals spending their daytime of the *ghats* (boatmen, tour guides, priests, *babas*, chai trucks sellers, etc.). In this life account, the historic city centre emerges as the space of female insecurity and fragility, where spatial practices of seeing become violent, and daily life is lived on stage as a forced performance. S.P.'s life account also challenges mainstream understandings of the cultural and spiritual practices on the riverside. When I asked her if she performs rituals and ceremonies associated to the Ganges, she seemed uncertain, and then replied: "Yes, yes, I took shower in Ganga. For toilet we went to one place, where you pay and use. And for shower, with my mom and sisters, we washed in Ganga." While the Ganges is normatively associated to the sacredness of spiritual ablutions and rituals (Eck 2013; Kraft 2007; Singh, Dar, and Rana 2001), S.P. insists here on the more banal, functional use of the river as it is practiced everyday by the poor, the homeless, and the workers –hotel launderers washing blankets in the river, boatmen repairing their wooden scow, etc. (**Figures 58, 59, 60**). Here again, her perspective reverses the monumentality usually associated to the *ghats*, playing official cultural narratives as a farce which has little meaning for those who live at the margins of caste/class acceptance and belonging.

Around ten years ago, S.P.'s family took part in a government scheme which provided homeless dwellers shelter in various areas of the city (Video interview with S., 6/08/2019). The family was allocated a one room apartment in a block on Sri Tripura Bhairavi Road, Lahori Tola district, in the historic city centre. This tiny room, with no windows nor electricity, and open washroom shared with other three families, became home for S.P. and her now expanded family – wives and children arrived alongside S.P.'s brothers.

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[59] A similar sense of discomfort and privacy violation is experienced by tourists. Western women in particular complain about a sense of insecurity arising from locals' constant stares, which are especially intrusive on the ghats where "you cannot escape them (Korpela 2009; Zara 2015). When you are there, you are visible to everybody" (personal conversation with local American resident, 12/08/2019). I did myself some practice for resisting my initial discomfort and accepting such violent visibility.

While living here, S.P. found her current job as cleaning girl in a hostel which would keep her for the future. However, this almost stable situation is now coming to an abrupt end. S.P.'s tiny apartment is located in the area targeted by the KVSAD Project (chapters 3 and 4). Therefore, the building will be demolished soon.

> So, they [the KVSAD project authority] came and said we have to leave. They will demolish the house. […] For now, I can stay here. Because job is here, I work for hostel, so I need to stay here. Then, I don't know. We will go somewhere far I think, near Sarnath... you know? Some families went there, so maybe we will go. (Video interview with S.P., 6/08/2019)

In this now provisional situation, S.P. does not know whether she will be able to keep working for the hostel in the future, due to the high transportation costs for connecting the northern periphery to the historic city centre. The idea of leaving the historic neighborhoods makes her sad, although she recognizes that her family might find a larger shelter in the urban outskirts. Hence, after inhabiting the historic city centre for more than 20 years, constantly struggling to improvise new homes, jobs and lives, the girl is now forced to migrate again.

The deprived urbanity experienced by S.P. during her life on the *ghats* shows that marginality and violence do not lie "out" of the official heritage place, nor they are excluded by official cultural narratives which attract global visitors. As studies on slum tourism demonstrate, the presence of the poor and the spatialization of their identities are factors which transform areas of urban poverty into tourist destinations (Frenzel 2019; 2012; Diekmann and Hannam 2012; Steinbrink 2012). Debate has flourished on whether slum-touring contributes to an aestheticization and depoliticization of poverty, or whether its substantial political and moral ethos ignites forms of local emancipation and empowerment (Nisbett 2017; Dovey and King 2012; Frenzel 2012). Yet, differently from "slumming" practices, tourists on the *ghats* of Varanasi face poverty here and there, where it happens, instead of searching for it in selected areas. As such, the presence of low caste, outcaste and homeless dwellers loses visibility and strength, becoming just one component of a heritagescape in which Brahamanical spirituality and past royalty – materialized by the temples and palaces – flank with poverty and vulnerability – epitomized by dirt, chaos, intoxication and illness.

As the episodes of S.P's life show, the poor and the marginalized try to carve out a socio-economic space in the interstices of the heritage economy, that of local guides, cheap guesthouses and luxury hotels, spectacular performances and decaying architecture. However, even when

they are able to capitalize the leftovers of such economy, this does not substantially alter their socio-economic condition as, differently from higher caste/class locals, they cannot benefit from an ethno-entrepreneurialism which would insists on an already ill-treated identity. Therefore, their ability to re-possess spatial histories and memories in order to play with them in transformative ways is highly limited.

5.4 Global dwellers: Orientalism, incorporated

Varanasi is, since centuries, a city of mobilities. Pilgrims and tourists flock the city centre, from Assi *ghat* at the southern edge, to the Vishwanath Temple at the north. Tourism and pilgrimage mobility is deeply affected by the tropical climate of the region. It is higher during the winter, dry season, going from end of October to the monsoon heats of mid-April, and diminishes abruptly during the summer season. The rainy season, corresponding to summer in the global North, is usually a lull moment for arrivals, as the *ghats* are inundated by frequent floods and air moisture in the historic city centre is unbearable. Seasonality shapes the tourism economy: local providers maximize their incomes in the winter season for bearing the months of cold streak. During summertime, foreign migrants living in the city return to home countries for some months. During my first stay in the city, it was not easy to discern short-term tourists and long-term migrants, as it seems that both live – and avoid – the same urban areas. However, after acquaintances draw my attention on the phenomenon of Western migration to India and Varanasi, I decided to unpack the numbers and the relevance of this community in the city.

According to my informants, in 2019, the group of "Westerners" living in Varanasi counted up to 400 individuals. Recent studies attest their number at around 200-300 (Korpela 2017), which suggests an increase in the last years, although exact quantification cannot be made. As ethnographic enquiries by sociologist Mari Korpela and my own field research show, these migrants mostly come from European and North American countries, and their stay in India is regulated by 6- or 12-months tourist, student or business visas. The appellation *Westerners* is commonly adopted by local Indians and the community itself. As Korpela suggests, this evidences that individual national belongings tend to blur when confronted to Indian otherness (Korpela 2019; 2019; 2017; 2010; 2009).

In Varanasi, Westerners usually dwell in the historic city centre, or very nearby. For many of them, daily life consists of cultural and spiritual activities such as yoga, meditation, music, language courses and, more rarely, volunteering. Some of them have jobs in the tourism sector (Korpela 2019; 2019; 2017; 2010; 2009). The term "lifestyle migration" has been used for describing this North-South migratory process (Benson and O'Reilly 2018; 2009; Benson and Osbaldiston 2016; Korpela 2014). The term emphasizes the objective of mobility: the search for a way of living alternative to that of home countries. In this sense, "lifestyle migration" was initially defined broadly as "the spatial mobility of relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that are meaningful because, for various reasons, they offer the potential of a better quality of life" (Benson and O'Reilly 2009, 2). Recently, there has been a shift from this empirically informed, emic definition (Korpela 2017) to a deeper socio-economic investigation of the role of lifestyle in migration (Benson e O'Reilly 2016), and on the implications that transnational North-South migration flows have in global urban capitalism (Hayes 2018).

In their words, Western migrants set their new lives in Varanasi for escaping the busyness of the daily hustle-bustle, the high cost of living and the cold climate in their countries of origin. They describe their routine in Varanasi as centered on self-reflexivity, informal relations, and slow-paced living aimed at discovering Indian culture (Korpela 2009, 2017, 2019a). However, if one looks closer at their everyday routines, these descriptions do not match convincingly their daily lives. Most of the Westerners that I met work in the city as small entrepreneurs, and commonly complain about the stress suffered from traffic congestion, bureaucracy, and frequent cheating by locals. Some of them maintain that they came to Varanasi as they had "nothing to stay for" in their home countries, revealing difficult familial histories and the need for radical change as strategy to overcome social vulnerability or loss (personal conversation with J., 52 years old, American, 10/08/2019).

Whether the reasons for leaving, the choice of Varanasi as the place to reinvent one's life is not casual. As Indologist Diana Eck influentially argued, "western visitors often find the city the most strikingly foreign of India's cities" (Eck 2013:19). This happens, at least partially, because "Banaras has become a symbol of traditional Hindu India" (Eck 2013:19). With its spiritual traditions and mythical histories, the historic city centre of Varanasi materializes the orientalist imaginary which drives Westerners searching for a different life. The aesthetics of the city centre epitomizes

Westerners' nostalgic quest for antiqueness and authenticity[60]. Thus, tourists and Western migrants in Varanasi contribute to the construction and negotiation of contemporary forms of orientalism, which conflate in nationalist branding projects such as *Incredible India!* campaigns (Blaney and Shah 2018; Korpela 2017; Geary 2013; Kerrigan, Shivanandan, and Hede 2012) (**Figure 61**).

Westerners' orientalist imaginary constructs, both discursively and materially, the historic city centre as a place purged of political contestation, cultural difference and socio-spatial inequality. Their knowledge and experience of the urban heritage appears limited to mainstreamed representations of Hinduism. For example, they do not engage with histories and spaces connected to Muslim culture, which they interpret in purely negative terms:

> You know, politicians […] use religion to polarize people. Congress has been using it, with its policies in favor of the Muslims; BJP is doing it with the Hindus. But we can say one thing: in Varanasi, Muslims have never really acknowledged the destructions they made to the city during the Mughal period and, even before, with the Turks invasions [during 13th -14th centuries]. Rather, it is like they are proud of them. This is something that can only create tension in the city. (personal conversation with Spanish woman, met in local café, 8/11/2019)

> Mughals destroyed so many temples and religious structures! The Golden Temple was destroyed by Aurangzeb, and then rebuilt… you know, later on. Those rajas have been very important for the city, they reconstructed many buildings. (personal conversation with J., 52 years old, American, 10/08/2019)

> Speaker 1: Indian society has regressed after and because of centuries of Muslim domination, particularly for what concerns women's rights. Now the roots for this are very deeply grounded in the soil.
> Speaker 2: Yes, true. Now, it has become very difficult to eradicate them. (informal group meeting, 8/11/2019)

As these excerpts highlight, Western migrants seem to support the political and cultural spread of Hindutva as an ideology that sees India as

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[60] In their discourses, Westerners usually equate antiqueness to authenticity, while characterizing modernity as corrupted and degraded. Korpela shows how Western migrants criticize the contemporary urban development of Varanasi and generally contest urban change in the city: " [For them] Varanasi thus becomes defined as an ancient natural city which is in danger of being destroyed by modernisation. When the lifestyle migrants define the city as a Hindu place, they essentialise both the city and the religion." (Korpela 2017:159) These orientalist imaginaries intersect the Western modern idea of "historic city" mentioned earlier in the chapter (see section 5.1 and Lamprakos 2014).

monolithically belonging to (one strand of) Hinduism, influentially bringing these ideas in their globalized life mobilities.

However, my field experience in Varanasi shows that these migrants play roles other than simply replicating orientalism. Those who have been living and studying in India for longtime autonomously navigate urban dynamics, managing to carve out (oftentimes temporary) positions in the city as urban entrepreneurs. As the table below suggests, their businesses are mostly connected to the tourism sector (as shown in the Table below). Tourists come to Varanasi for visiting the historic city centre, undertaking spiritual activities, for tasting Indian food and, occasionally, for donating to charitable institutions and volunteering in local NGOs. Western entrepreneurs offer all these services, sometimes behind the faces of locally hired Indian employees (as in *Varanasi Walks!*). Other times, they are fully visible, working with and before curious tourists who are fascinated by their life choices, their look, their clothes and their histories (as in *Indoverse*). Accurately, they provide costumers – and local friends – their “westernized” versions of Indian food, which not only moderates spiciness and proposes “good coffee”, but also combines attention to sustainable food and package, organic agriculture and fair trade (as in the cases of *Open Hand Café*, *Brown Bread Bakery*, *Vegan & Raw* and *Learn for Life Shop*). This is often paralleled by an ethics for diversity and non-discrimination against race, ethnicity, gender, caste or class, as stated in *Indoverse* website:

> As our name suggests, we proudly stand by the principles of diversity. We do not discriminate regarding race, religion or gender (…). We endeavor to choose the most ecologically sound and sustainable methods for our tours: we suggest walking tours over vehicles, we employ e-rickshaws over CNG tuk-tuks, trains over flights, and we encourage our boatmen collaborators to invest in electric motors over petrol ones. (Our Mission, *Indoverse*, https://indoverse.com/about-us/, accessed 22/10/2020)

These businesses are all located in key tourist areas, such as Bengali Tola, Shivala and Assi *ghat* (**Figures 62, 63, 64**). The concentration of more of such businesses in the same areas produces spaces of alterity in respect to the more traditional geography of Varanasi old lanes, packed with informal vending stalls, craft parlors and local guesthouses. This spatial alterity also maintains precise socio-economic boundaries: prices in locals owned by Westerners are not affordable to local salaries; social practices and relations are ostensibly nonlocal, as the habit of smoking, which, for Indian locals, is more of a house custom.

In his studies on lifestyle migration and transnational gentrification in Latin America, Matthew Hayes analyses the disruptive change that lifestyle

migration brings to urban environments where Western migrants seek to reproduce “leisure-oriented urban lifestyles” (Hayes 2020, 2; 2018). These lifestyles are usually set in idealized nostalgic city centres, where newly arrived high or middle-class dwellers gradually replace lower income economies of informal vendors and retailers, reinforcing patterns of transnational gentrification (Hayes 2020). Also in Varanasi, lifestyle migration causes appreciation of local property values at the expenses of low-class dwellers, reinforcing disparities based on colonial accumulation and racial regimes.

Varanasi Westerners engage in the ethnic enterprise by playing on the cultural fluidity granted by their transnational mobility. They customize their constantly renewed identities as hybrids of neoliberal individualism, freedom-oriented lifestyle, environmentalist ethics, new age spirituality and mainstream Indian culture. This allows them to capitalize on their socio-economic privilege, inhabiting, appropriating and narrating the historic city centre in fundamentally conservative ways. Thus, they play multiple roles in the city, simultaneously maintaining it as a traditional heritage to cherish, aligning it to globalizing tourism targets and influencing urban change and dispossession through their transnational capital mobility.

Businesses owned by foreign migrants in Varanasi. Author’s elaboration (data updated to Oct. 2020)[61].

Registered company name	Agency name	Typology of activity	Location	Target
Varanasi Walking Tours	Varanasi Walks!	Tour provider	Assi ghat *Fig. 64, 66	Local foreigners and tourists
	Dark Lotus Yoga	Yoga and meditation classes	Assi ghat *Fig. 64, 66	Local foreigners and tourists
Indoverse Experiences and Tours Pvt.	Indoverse	Tour and cultural experiences provider	Assi ghat *Fig. 64, 66	Local foreigners and tourists
Learn for Life Empowerment Project	Badi Asha school project	Education Social empowerment	Aurangabad *Fig. 64	Uneducated local children from 6 to 14
	Learn for Life Shop1	Clothes shop	Bengali Tola *Fig. 64, 65	Local foreigners and tourists

[61] This mapping is of course partial and reflects the possibilities of relation and encounter that I had with Western business owners. Thus, the actual number of businesses in the areas mentioned in higher than waht presented in the above table.

	Learn for Life Shop2	Clothes shop	Shivala near Tulsi ghat *Fig. 64, 66	Local foreigners and tourists
	Brown Bread Bakery	Food and beverage	Bengali Tola *Fig. 64, 65	Local foreigners and tourists
	Tailoring Project	Sustainable development Women empowerment	*not in Varanasi*	Local Indian women
	Vegan and Raw	Food and Beverage	Shivala, near Tulsi ghat *Fig. 64, 66	Local foreigners and tourists
Mona Lisa Café	Mona Lisa Café	Food and beverage	Bengali Tola *Fig. 64, 65	Local foreigners and tourists
German Bakery	German Bakery	Food and beverage	Bengali Tola * Fig. 64, 65	Local foreigners and tourists
Open Hand Shop and Café	Open Hand Shop and Café	Food and beverage	Assi ghat *Fig. 64, 66	Local foreigners and tourists

Conclusion

Nationally and internationally regarded as the spiritual capital of India, with tourism flows overtaking those of the Taj Mahal in Agra, Varanasi relies more and more on the tourism and pilgrimage economy. For many locals, engaging in the tourism industry is an informal, improvised strategy for overcoming periods of financial instability and joblessness. Apart from guesthouse and restaurant owners, locals' participation in the tourism sector is largely informal, fluctuating according to climate seasonality and other factors.

When engaging tourists in their economic activities, locals are aware of the orientalist gaze that lingers upon them, and aptly adjust to tourists' experiential expectations (as developed at length in Zara 2012). Non-Indian locals, mostly Western migrants dwelling half a year in Varanasi, hold a privileged position in this economy: being both Westerners and *Banarsis*, their multicultural identities and global connectivity attract short term tourists, foreign scholars and international NGOs, thus competing with the more constrained entrepreneurial strategies of Indian locals.

In this context, the chapter explored the material and discursive making of the historic centre of Varanasi through the lens of an improvised urban entrepreneurialism. Drawing from anthropological insights on ethno-entrepreneurialism and studies of Indian and Southern urbanisms, the ethnographic enquiry revealed that individual identities are being commodified alongside urban forms and histories.

Section 5.2 investigated the life of a local tour guide, showing how he embeds personal histories and mainstream urban narratives in a single discourse. It highlighted that this discursive endeavor also translates into actual choices, constraints and possibilities, thus playing a crucial role in the making of his everyday life and in envisioning his future.

Similarly, section 5.3 traced the life trajectories of a poor, low caste girl, living as homeless dweller on the *ghats*. It discussed how the ethnic enterprise requires individuals to constantly perform their selves. Also, it showed that with limited scope of maneuverability, and insisting on an already ill-treated identity, S.P.'s self-entrepreneurial performances do not substantially alter her socio-economic status and self-worth.

Contrarily, section 5.4 looked at the self-entrepreneurial strategies of Western migrants. Because of their wealth, education and global connectivity Western migrants are very able to play with cultural local products and reinvent, retell them in global narratives. In their hands, Indian food becomes organic, the production and selling of textiles sustainable, the workplace gender neutral, Hindu spirituality caste-free and accessible to all. In their seized portions of the historic city centre, transformed into hybrid, simultaneously post-colonial and de-colonial spaces, they capitalize on their newly made identities ahead of curious tourists (as in Törnberg e Chiappini 2019).

While "the real opportunities for an improvised entrepreneurialism have become largely illusory" in cities of the global North (Rossi and Wang 2020: 485), Varanasi, as other Southern cities, consolidates self-entrepreneurialism as a key survival strategy based on precariousness, indebtedness, lack of security and informality. This type of urban ethno-entrepreneurialism seems to contribute to the dismantlement of class identities, encouraging the commodification of people's lives through ethnic, religious or caste lines.

Cultural narratives and heritages play an interesting role in the development of these entrepreneurial endeavours. The appropriation of culturally dense and historically significant spaces, together with the embodiment of cultural/historical attributes into the bodies and lives of individuals proves successful in constructing the city and its residents as an

ethno-commodity that visitors can buy and experience. For some locals, the impossibility to leave for different and more aspirational futures translates into an even more firmly grounded *Banarsis* identity. As such, improvised urban ethno-entrepreneurialism rely on strategies of re-possession and appropriation of the materialities and histories of the city, that align individual bodies to mainstream cultural narratives. However, this appropriation is fragmented, individualized and does not re-discuss existing lines of inequality. Rather, it seems to mostly sustain them.

Figure 52 Tourists and pilgrims enjoying the Ganga Aarti ceremony on the ghats. Author's picture.

Figure 53 The lane of Bengali Tola where many tourist guesthouses are located. Author's picture.

Figure 54 The view on the historic city centre that can be enjoyed by a backpackers' hostel in Bengali Tola. Author's picture.

Figure 55 The palatial structure of the Archeological Survey of India on Man Mandir Ghat. Author's picture.

Figure 56 Homeless dwellers, pilgrims and beggars on the ghats, waiting for tourist coming to view the Ganga Aarti ceremony. Author's picture.

Figure 57 Boatmen working, repairing their boats on the ghats during the dry winter season, February 2019. Author's picture.

Figure 58 Hotels launders washing blankets in the Ganges, February 2019. Author's picture.

Figure 59 The ghats between Assi and Manikarnika, February 2019. Author's picture.

Figure 60 The ghats at sunset, with the Alamgir Mosque in the background, February 2019. Author's picture.

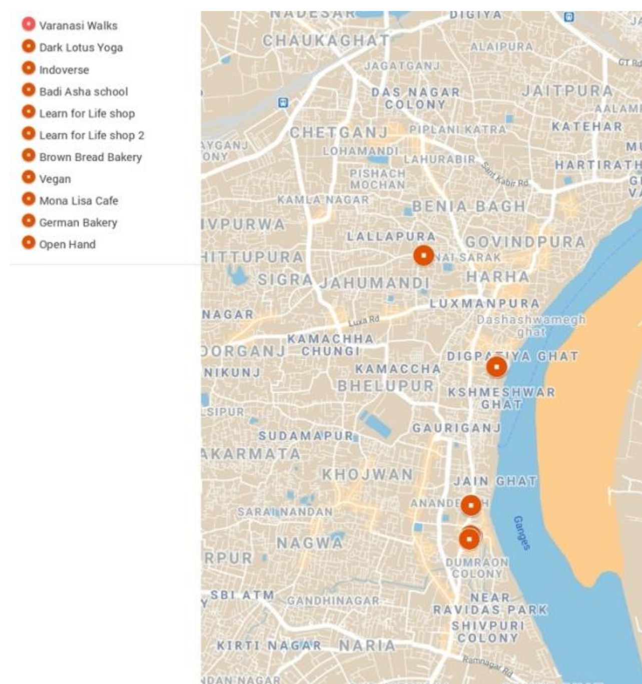

Figure 61 The businesses of Westerners in Varanasi. Only one is located out of the historic city centre, in Lallapura neighborhood. Author's elaboration.

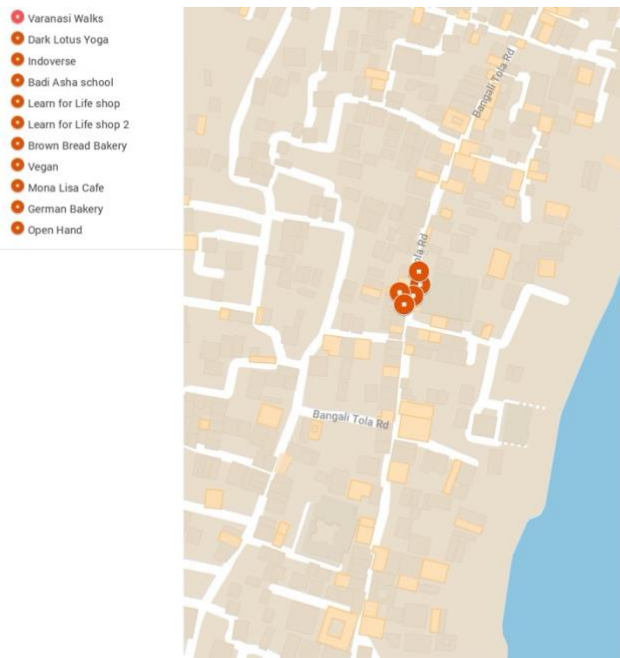

Figure 62 The businesses owned by Westerners in Bengali Tola neighborhood. Author's elaboration.

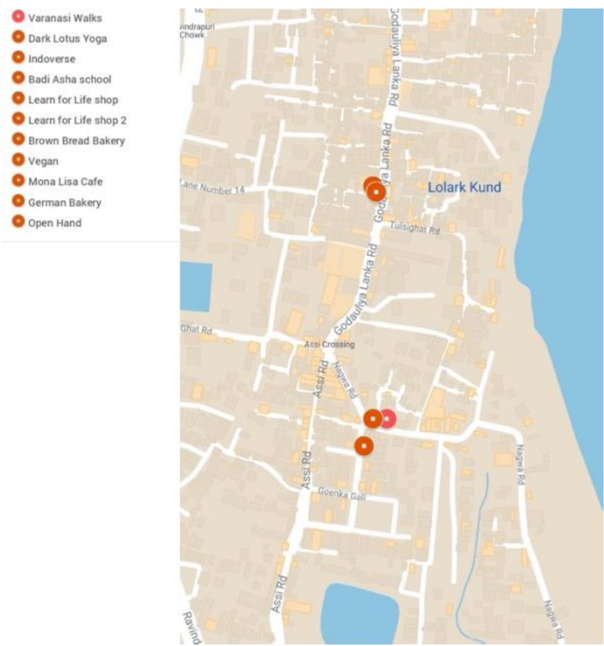

Figure 63 The businesses owned by Westerners in Shivala and Assi neighborhoods. Author's elaboration.

Chapter 6
Inheriting as taking care of the city. The making of a civic heritage expertise

Introduction

After examining how technologies of government (chapters 3 and 4) and improvised tactics of urban entrepreneurialism (chapter 5) make discursive and material use of urban histories and forms, this final chapter explores a third typology of practices related to heritage, one that generally fits into those movements of insurgent urban activism that have been investigated in chapter 1, section 1.2.

My intention here is to unveil the potentially emancipatory characters of urban heritage activism in a) creating urban expertise, b) challenging existing policies and normativities and, c) pluralizing ways of envisioning urban change and development.

For investigating these issues, the chapter retraces the heritage-centred action of a cultural NGO based in Varanasi, named Kautilya Society, between 2001 and 2018.

Section 6.1 introduces the causes that pushed Kautilya Society to actively engage in mapping and preserving the historic city centre of Varanasi – with a key focus to the area of the *ghats*. It insists on the crucial and unprecedented connection that the NGO established between urban heritage

protection and Indian constitutional rights and duties, which seems to advocate for embryonal forms of heritage justice.

Section 6.2 provides information about the NGO and its members, drawing a composite and complex picture of the goals, strategies and modus operandi of the organization. This is achieved mostly by mobilizing representations and discourses of the members themselves. By specifically targeting the action area of urban heritage conservation and awareness, this section suggests that Kautilya Society developed a specific urban expertise which allows it to fit in the "disaggregated modes of governance" (De Cesari 2019, 21) of cultural heritage in India.

Section 6.3 retraces the elaboration of a draft candidature for Varanasi *Ghats* as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, while section 6.4 develops the lawsuit filed by Kautilya Society against Varanasi Development Authority. These two sections reflect on the agency of the NGO. They reveal that, in both cases, Kautilya Society arguably aimed at challenging the disruptive urbanism of local authorities, which conceive development as demolition and erasure (as explored in chapters 3 and 4). To these top-down forms of urban development, the organization opposes a vocabulary where heritage conservation is understood as a humbler taking care of the existing city.

Finally, section 6.5 analyses the public discourse emerging alongside the "heritage crusade" of Kautilya Society, exploring the local press and the opinions of local residents. Against the backdrop of a seeming failure of KS' action, I will explore the hostile climate and the isolation suffered from the NGO, questioning the role of civil society for advancing democracy in reactionary urban societies.

6.1 Citizens' rights and heritage values: intersecting urban conservation with constitutional law

In the late 1990s, the royal family Bahadur of Darbhanga, of the State of Bihar (North India), sold the two-centuries old Darbhanga Palace (on Darbhanga *ghat*) to Brij Hotels Group[62]. The Group transformed the palace into a luxury *heritage hotel*, named Brij Rama Palace (Singh 2011; Singh, Dar, and Rana 2001).

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[62] Information retrieved from official Brij Hotel Group website at https://brijhotels.com/palace/brijrama. Accessed 02/04/2021

Local cultural NGO Kautilya Society (hereafter, KS) recalls this event as a public scandal that triggered the launch of a campaign for the conservation of historic buildings in the city. Kautilya Society blamed local authorities, in particular Varanasi Development Authority (hereafter, VDA) for allowing alterations to the structure[63]. The NGO invoked the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act (1958), which prohibits constructions within a radius of 300 m from a monument failing under the Archaeological Survey of India (hereafter, ASI) protection scheme (1958 Act, ASI)[64]. As the Ganges riverfront in Varanasi holds three of such protected monuments, KS regarded alterations to Darbhanga Palace as illegal and urged VDA to seal the building. Instead, VDA authorized new constructions. Thus, the historical 10-rooms palatial structure was converted into a 40-rooms luxury hotel with lavish 19th style decoration (**Figures 65, 66, 67**).

The failure to protect Darbhanga Palace persuaded KS to strengthen and extend its struggle, targeting the 8 km long *ghats* of Varanasi as a heritage area to be protected. Initially, the NGO prepared a candidature for the *ghats* as a UNESCO World Heritage site (early 2000s). Since 2008, however, local authorities' lack of compliance with regulations urged the organization to also file a petition in Public Interest Litigation (hereafter, PIL) (interview with KS President, 30/11/2018).

PIL is a legal instrument that enables civil society to sue public authorities for the unfulfillment of public duties with respect to constitutional rights[65]. It has been consistently used in India for environmental and human rights disputes. For human rights law scholar Surya Deva, PIL has been a crucial ally for pursuing justice in Indian society, as it "facilitates an effective realization of collective, diffused rights for which individual litigation is neither practicable nor an efficient method" (Deva 2009). Constitutionalist Anuj Bhuwania describes PIL as a jurisdiction which "extends what some

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[63] Development Authorities are public bodies in charge of urban development for medium and large Indian cities. In Uttar Pradesh, the state of Varanasi, they were created under provisions of the UP Urban Planning and Development Act (1973). These authorities are appointed by State governments. Mark W. Frazier recently addressed them as "parastatal or publicly managed corporations" (Frazier 2019). Unlike Municipal Corporations, which are in charge of basic infrastructure and public facilities, Development Authorities regulate building development mainly through the delivery of construction permits. On Indian urban development corporations see also: Kennedy and Sood 2019, Sood 2015 and this thesis, chapter 5.2.

[64] The Act has been amended during the second BJP government (2014-2019). The new provisions reduce the protection area from 300 m to 100 m. (Times of India 2018a).

[65] For a detailed analysis of the historical emergence of PIL in India, its constitutional roots and evolution till present day, see (Bhuwania 2017, 16–44).

judges are empowered to do in a specific capacity provided or interpreted in the law" (Bhuwania 2017, 16). This, according to Bhuwania and other scholars, makes Indian high and supreme courts among the most powerful judicial institutions in the world (Bhuwania 2017; Cunningham 2003). PILs had strong influence on the evolution of Indian environmental jurisprudence and governance, particularly since the early '80s (Sivaramakrishnan 2011). It also crucially advanced the enforcement of gender justice and human rights (A. M. Sood 2008).

KS used PIL with reference to the Directive Principles of State Policy, Part IV of the Constitution of India:

> It shall be the obligation of the State to protect every monument or place or object of artistic or historic interest, declared (…) to be of national importance, from spoliation, disfigurement, destruction, removal, disposal or export, as the case may be." (Part IV, art. 49, Constitution of India)

The duty to protect heritage and culture is also mentioned in the Fundamental Rights and Duties Sections of the Indian Constitution. Part IVa recites:

> It shall be the duty of every citizen of India – (f) to value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture" (Fundamental Duties, Part IVa, Constitution of India).

Invocating article 49 in PIL was a novelty for Indian jurisprudence. Indeed, KS recalls that before them no one had actually used a PIL for advocating cultural heritage justice.

In India, the principles for cultural heritage conservation developed under British colonial administration, and were institutionalized with the establishment of the ASI in the late 19th century (Sengupta 2013; Johnson-Roehr 2008; Lahiri 2000). While ASI schemes target individual monuments and monumental complexes, KS eventually attempted to expand the principles of heritage conservation to a large and fragmented urban area. In such manner, it engaged in a process that has been globally conceptualized as "historic urban preservation" or "urban conservation" (Cody and Siravo 2019; Zhang 2019; Rojas 2014). Urban political scientist Yue Zhang recently defined urban preservation as "the act or process of maintaining the physical form and original fabric of a building, site, or urban area", pointing to the expansive effect of urban preservation policies, which do not simply focus on "saving" individual buildings or places, but have "a significant impact on the character of (…) urban development and the quality of life for citizens"

(Zhang, 2019; on urban preservation also see Pereira Roders, 2019; Pendlebury, 2013).

KS engagement in and against existing urban policies passed from the mobilization of a heritage-centered vocabulary. This mobilization unfolded at various scales. First, KS retrieved legal principles and instruments from Indian jurisprudence that connect heritage values to citizens' rights. Secondly, it entrenched its action into progressive, globalizing principles, looking at international organizations and paradigms for strengthening its action. Thirdly, the NGO performed its alterity towards urban development authorities by opposing their conduct and developmentalist vocabulary with a terminology centred on 'heritage', 'conservation' and 'custody'. Lastly, in order to achieve its objectives, KS built up and secured a status of expert on the urban fabric of Varanasi historic city centre.

As I will show in the next sections, at the crossroad of these complex and entrenched positionings, KS elaborated a lexicon of heritage-making that fundamentally relies on the idea of taking care of the city. In this perspective, care is conceptualized as a moral imperative to save from loss and destruction that can be cultivated through education and awareness.

6.2 Building expertise: framing Kautilya Society

The official NGO website states that KS was founded in 1998 in Varanasi as a non-profit and non-governmental organization. Its aims are:

> To promote dialogue and partnerships between people and cultures across the world, to support development initiatives based on stakeholder participation and on the protection of local cultures and resources. (KS website, http://www.kautilyasociety.com/blog/about-us/, accessed 30/04/2020)

From their website one learns that KS is a multicultural organization aimed at promoting cultural diversity, tourism sustainability and urban heritage conservation. When I first met the NGO members, in February 2019, they highlighted six areas of intervention: hospitality and tourism, research, intercultural dialogue, heritage protection, education for development. Members addressed heritage protection as key action at the city level. In this respect, the organization is involved in two interconnected projects: the candidature for the *ghats* of Varanasi as a UNESCO World Heritage site, and the PIL against VDA at Allahabad High Court.

KS funds its activities with the profits of guesthouse owned by the founder and president of the NGO[66]. Both the NGO offices and the guesthouse are located in a historic building in the ward of Bengali Tola, a bustling alley near the riverfront (**Figures 68, 69**). The almost persistent arrival of foreign tourists, professionals and scholars sustains a multicultural atmosphere that is highly appreciated by the members of the NGO. However, while they showcase the place as a hub of intercultural dialogue, I noticed that such exchange mainly happens between visitors themselves rather than among visitors and the members of the organization, which are often absent in moments of interaction.

In our first interview, the president emphatically presented the guesthouse and the organization as a place for "learning and sharing between different cultures" (interview with KS president, 30/11/2018). This feature directly stems out of personal character and experience of the president (and founder):

> I have a Bachelor's in Economics a Master's in Philosophy. Then I did a PhD in Development Studies. (…) My passion has always been humanitarian work; working for civil society and especially in the field of women's rights and human rights and the implementation of legislations. So the role of civil society in, let's say, supporting a more participated form of development (…) I've actually worked across many different countries (…). I did my initial activities of civil society capacity building in NGOs from India, but then I moved out and worked in countries like Afghanistan and Syria, Lebanon, Tajikistan, Jordan, Africa, West Africa, and now in Iran. (interview with KS president, 30/11/2018)

This short portrait presents a woman that belongs to the Indian highly educated and progressive elite, whose personal experience abroad influenced the foundation of KS as a liberal, dynamic organization. This emerges also when she recalls her family background, with relatives engaged in the struggle for the independence of India. In her words, their example taught her "the value of living in a democratic country" […] and "the need for justice, peace and the rights of people" (interview with KS president, 30/11/2018).

KS attempts to translate these concerns into practical areas of intervention mostly at the local level, but with an eye to the international context. In terms of heritage protection, the founder frequently underlines the collective significance of the cultural heritage of Varanasi. When I asked what was the value and meaning of this heritage for her, she revealed that she had not grown up in Varanasi. She arrived in the city in her adulthood, after

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[66] The guesthouse is called Ram Bhawan and is located in Bengali Tola, near Munshi *ghat*: http://www.kautilyasociety.com/blog/rambhawan/. Accessed 02/04/2021).

a long period of personal and professional experience abroad. With her husband, they made plans to come back to India, and the choice of Varanasi was mostly guided by personal and evocative impressions:

> [Varanasi] is a special city and somehow a *microcosm* of India. So coming back from outside India (…) it's nice to come back to your country in where the country is *really* represented or expresses itself in terms of its culture and social dynamics. (emphasis in original, interview with KS president, 30/11/2018)

In her words, the city materializes the extraordinary socio-cultural diversity of India. However, as I will show in section 6.5, the fact that she is not a *Banarsis* by origin will play an important role in the construction of a public discourse centred on the otherness and "foreignness" of the NGO.

Developing local awareness on heritage conservation is a key priority for KS. The organization constituted a dedicated group called the Varanasi Heritage Foundation. Members usually frame the topic as such:

> Member: So, the work we do here is about *educating* people to conserve their heritage. Because you know, lots of people, they just think about money. They are not sensible towards such things."
>
> Me: You mean they don't care about their old buildings, temples…?
>
> Member: They just don't care about conserving them *in the proper way*. They do not see the city as an historically layered whole. This whole should be taken care of, preserved, for preserving what we are and for envisioning *a future* for Banaras. Future is not all about demolishing and reconstructing. (emphasis in original, interview with M., 22/08/2019)

Another member highlighted as key problem the fact that local owners extensively alter or destroy their properties for making space to new constructions. M. considers this attitude of locals as "primitive" and uninformed (interview with M., 22/08/2019). They explained the absence of conservative ethics with a lack of awareness due to the limited education of locals. Quite evidently, this discourse sets a dichotomy between the uninformed locals, who *are not sensible towards such things*, and the aware and educated members of KS, whose action is imbued with ethical undertones. Also, the reiteration of the terms "care" and "taking care" to oppose "destruction" suggests that, for KS, framing heritage is about developing an ethics of custody and cherishing for the city, one that contrasts the urban imperatives of a pure *homo œconomicus* who *just think about money* and maximizes individual interests. In the perspective of KS, care for the city and urban preservation intersect, as they both strive for safeguarding the existing socio-economic fabric, shunning the demolitions entailed by local urban restructuring projects.

As confirmed by members, the action of KS is partially inspired by the city of Ahmedabad (State of Gujarat), inscribed as first Indian World Heritage city in 2017, after a long candidature process led by architects at CEPT University, Ahmedabad[67]. The NGO regarded the inscription of Ahmedabad a "highly successful example of good practice we should learn from" (interview with D., 04/02/2019). Although this and other embryonic cases of urban preservation in India must have influenced the NGO, interviews with members reveal the influence of European planning paradigms and practices:

> I have spent 4 or 5 years in Europe, and Italy in particular with my [Italian] husband. Here I got exposed to the different kinds of preserving one's own heritage and the importance of doing it. So, when I came back to India people didn't even know what it meant to do urban heritage conservation. […] People knew that the city was unique and all, and that tourists were coming because the city was special, but they didn't really understand how the architecture is also a big part of that. (interview with KS president, 30/11/2018)

The exposure to Italian conservation and planning approaches convinced KS to try and translate them in Varanasi. However, in early 2000s India, where *"people didn't even know what it meant to do urban heritage conservation",* KS confronted to a void of knowledge, expertise and authority for the treatment of historic urban fabric. In this context, it operated as actor of an embryonic and granular field of intervention, echoing what heritage anthropologist Chiara De Cesari termed "disaggregated modes of governance" (De Cesari 2019, 21).

As in the urban contexts of Palestine where De Cesari conducted her field study, cultural heritage governance in India is a granular field, where the reach of state actors is limited to the colonially made, archaeological remains targeted by ASI and by few schemes of the Ministry of Culture (De Cesari 2019; 2010). In this sense, KS's attempt to expand the scope of the heritage terminology is also a civic action aimed at challenging existing normativities. This is pursued against the backdrop of neoliberal forms of spatial planning that are lived as discriminatory and violent, as "the combination of relentless speculation and socio-spatial reorganization with a rapid diminution of state and municipal responsibility for social services" (De Cesari and Herzfeld 2015, 172).

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[67] It is the WH Dossier for Ahmedabad as a World Heritage City, AMC and CEPT 2016, available at https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1551/documents/. Accessed 23/04/2021.

6.3 Seeking for global recognition: the proposal for Varanasi *Ghats* as a UNESCO World Heritage site

In the early 2000s, KS promoted a discussion table with public authorities and local academia for proposing the *Ghats* of Varanasi as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The proposal aimed at enforcing the preservation of the urban fabric and at developing cultural awareness among locals. Initially, VDA endorsed and collaborated to the candidature. Local researchers from Banaras Hindu University were also involved: cultural geographer R.P.B. Singh, an expert of the sacred geography of the city, contributed with his papers and his scientific support to the development of the candidature (Singh 2017; 2011; Singh, Dar, and Rana 2001). The outcome of this work is the draft "Proposing Varanasi as Heritage City for Inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List" (Kautilya Society et al. 2001).

The document is 13 pages long. The first section describes the cultural attributes of the historic city centre, insisting on the exceptionality of its multicultural atmosphere.

> Varanasi has never been included in the list [UNESCO World Heritage List] even though it is the *most* unique city in India and the *most* ancient continuously living city in the world.
>
> Varanasi is a living *symbolization* and a living expression of Indian culture and traditions in all its religious rituals, in its multi-ethnic artistic traditions, in its architectural treasures, in its life-expressions, in its particular relationship with life and death (…) and in its multi-ethnic population.
>
> This living cultural heritage of the city combined with its extensive built heritage and its *unique* natural landscape is an *inimitable* asset for India and for the world. Varanasi is internationally recognized as *the only* city of its kind in the world (…). (Kautilya Society et al. 2001).

In the text, the universal significance of Varanasi lays in its antiquity (the *most ancient*), diversity (see the reiteration of the prefix *multi-)* and uniqueness (*unique*, *only* and *inimitable*). The use of such lexicon is not peculiar to this draft. Celebratory style is common in UNESCO World Heritage candidatures, as they are supposed to sustain exceptional criteria, at the expenses of more everyday and banal attributes (Labadi 2013; Cleere 2011; Pocock 1997). In this case, exceptionality is constructed around the theme of the *microcosm*:

> *Varanasi – the Mini India*
>
> People from all parts of India, speaking different languages and dialects and carrying their own traits, taboos and traditions have settled in this city (…). This

synthesis of diversity in regional identity, language and tradition converges to form the personality of an all-India city, Banaras. (…) Mythology says that even those who came to disturb the city ended up settling here and became an integral part of its culture.

The city possesses a strong force of spiritual magnetism, the special power that always enhances the sensitivity to the "crossings" from this world to the world beyond, where humanity meets divinity.

The city of Varanasi, considered the microcosm of Hindu pilgrimage, visited by thousands of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain pilgrims and foreign visitors each day and known the world over as the "sacred city" (…) besides being an indelible part of our heritage, (…) constitute an immense resource for tourism. (all excerpts, Proposing Varanasi 2001). (Italics added, Kautilya Society et al., 2001: 2)

The spiritual importance of the city is reiterated also elsewhere in the text. Sometimes spirituality is associated to Hindu culture, other times it is presented as an ethnically shared feature. Crucially, Varanasi is described as a *sacred city*, a portrait that substantially aligns the proposal to global imaginaries[68]. In this sense, the draft reveals the choice of KS to position the city in an identifiable clear-cut imaginary, which can resonate globally and intercept the potentials of tourism development.

The second part summarizes the rationale and reasons for the proposal. It elaborates over the precarious conditions of the historic city centre and the threats to its built fabric:

In order to absorb population growth in the old city centre, new buildings are being constructed, either by demolishing old structures or by building on them. (…) Many of these are beginning to be utilised as hospitality or other new tourist structures that seldom respect the religious exigencies of the city or the urban carrying capacity of a congested city centre. (Kautilya Society et al., 2001: 2)

In this part, KS highlight development pressures as threats to both the built environment and the existing socio-economic fabric of the old city. Its worries anticipate the extensive demolitions and alterations that will transform the historic city centre less than two decades later by the KVSAD Project (chapters 3 and 4). The organization also points to the lack of knowledge and awareness about the city history as a crucial issue:

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[68] This imaginary has globally exported Varanasi as the place of inter-faith spirituality, producing a narrative of inter class/caste hospitality for anybody in search of mystic enlightenment (National Geographic 2016; Lonely Planet 2013; Smithsonian Magazine 2009) and for a discussion of Varanasi as sacred city, see chapter 3, section 3.1).

> The intervention of the city administration can be effective (…) only when it is supported by detailed visual and descriptive documentation of the city and sustained by adequate citizen awareness on these issues. Much of the loss (…) can, in fact, be attributed to lack of information on the structures and their significance. (Kautilya Society et al. 2001, 4)

Finally, the document details the formal proposal to UNESCO, referring to six inscription criteria as per the guidelines of the World Heritage Convention (Unesco 2019), describing selected religious structures, and recommending administrative action by public local and state authorities.

Despite the candidature carefully touched at core elements of UNESCO guidelines and inscription criteria, KS rapidly realized that this proposal "from below" would encounter complex obstacles. Indeed, while the local Divisional Commissioner originally supported the proposal, it later refrained from carrying on the action.

> We involved UNESCO Delhi, but what they said was that firstly we had to make the legislation implemented at the local and state level. (…) Unless you have the implementation of heritage related legislation, particularly the Amendment of Town Planning Act and by-laws, we can do nothing, they said. The draft dossier was aborted by UNESCO in Paris, because they asked for more work at the local level. (Interview with KS president, 30/11/2018)

UNESCO Delhi acknowledged that enforcement of UP State legislation on urban preservation was weak and uneffective, and that the absence of engagement of local authorities to conserve the urban fabric constituted a major impediment to the pursuit of the project at the level of UNESCO. KS thus realized that while "UNESCO can bring the issue to an international platform, which may be good to push the governments to act", when there is no will from locals "it does not even make sense to get to Unesco" (interview with KS president, 30/11/2018). At this stage, the organization concluded that for achieving both goals – the enactment of conservation standards and the inscription of Varanasi Ghats as a World Heritage site – they should firstly engage a judicial litigation with local authorities: hence, in June 2005, the president of the organization filed a PIL against VDA at Allahabad High Court.

6.4 "Heritage is not all romance". Kautilya Society against Varanasi Development Authority

From 2000 to 2005, KS documented alterations and demolitions of buildings in the historic centre. The evidence collected was included in the PIL petition that was filed to the Allahabad High Court[69].

In the period 2005-2008, the organization raised several pleas against unauthorized structures being built in the targeted area, but consistent results did not follow.

In 2008, the new Chief Officer of VDA committed to respond to Kautilya's pleas. VDA filed to court an affidavit mentioning 59 illegal properties and declaring that it would prosecute property owners[70]. Shortly after though, the UP State appointed the Chief Officer to another department: "this woman was appointed to somewhere else, of course, you know, they change constantly, every year, even every 6 months, it depends on how they behave and if they have good lobbies or not." (Virtual interview with KS president, 30/11/2018). Several conversations raised the issue of public officials being reappointed as a recurrent problem that impacted the length and the results of the trial. One member claims that it is common feature of Indian urban administration: "the more serious and accountable one is, the sooner one will be reassigned to some other office. This way they make sure that things do not change, and that you don't step on the wrong toes!" (Interview with S., KS, 20/08/2019).

In 2011, the Court reassembled for assessing the status of the properties mentioned in the 2008 list. KS filed a supplementary affidavit claiming that the illegal constructions were still going on, and emphasizing that "said constructions are not only in violation of the guidelines set out by ASI, but also affect the ancient and cultural heritage of the banks of river Ganga" (Doc. A, 2011/2/24 2011, 5). For the first time, the term cultural heritage was used and recorded in the documents of the trial. From its perspective, VDA responded that some unauthorized constructions had already been demolished and others had been sealed (Doc. A 2011/2/24: 6). KS contested this position as false. In order to verify the different allegations, the Court appointed an independent Commissioner. According to Kautilya,

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[69] This section retraces the history of the Public Interest Litigation that confronted Kautilya Society to Varanasi Development Authority (PIL No. 31229 of 2005). The documentation has recently being made available by the NGO on its official website: http://www.kautilyasociety.com/blog/our-projects/protecting-our-herita/varanasi/protecting-the-ganga-ghats-public-interest-litigation-filed-against-varanasi-development-authority/orders-of-the-high-court-of-allahabad/. My intention in analysing this process is not to dress an exhaustive picture of the trial, while rather to look at how the heritage vocabulary mobilised by KS was used in the documentation and appropriated by both the judges and VDA.

[70] The full list of illegal properties is mentioned in Doc. A, 2011/2/24.

the report claimed that "only 30% of the illegal structures has been torn down, while a good 70% remains largely in place. And even among that 30%, many buildings seem to have been only whitewashed…" (Doc. A, 2011/2/24, confronted with interview with D., KS, 04/02/2019).

The Court summoned again a year later, in July 2012. At that time, KS openly expressed concerns for VDA not being "serious in taking action against the unauthorized constructions" (Doc. B 2012/7/27 2012, 1). Also, the bench significantly revised existing regulations, making them stricter than ever before:

> The constructions on the banks of river Ganga are rapidly increasing, threatening the very existence of the river and causing unabated pollution. We are of the considered opinion that there should be immediate restriction on construction at both the banks of river Ganga at Varanasi. *There shall be no construction within the 200 m area from the highest flood level* at both banks of the river Ganga at Varanasi. (Emphasis added, Doc. B 2012/7/27: 2)

Using the highest flood level as a new criterion, the targeted area enlarged significantly. The massive Varanasi flood of 1978 was used as a benchmark. KS surveyed the area and realized that the zone enlarged significantly: "You know what happened? In that way half of Banaras fell under this law. Half Banaras!" (Interview with D. 04/02/2019)[71]. However, enlarging the perimeter of the newly made "heritage zone" triggered an increase in the value of buildings in the historic city centre: while before 2012 it was estimated at 10,000 rupees per floor, after the regulation it increased to 50,000 rupees per floor (Interview with D. 04/02/2019).

One year later, the Bench directly addressed the inconsistency of VDA's allegations:

> We are dismay to note that the committee [officials from VDA] has not done its job (…). The casual manner in which the authorized constructions are being ignored *is nothing but an act to protect the illegal constructions.* (…) Our view is that Varanasi Development Authority, its Vice Chairman and other authorities are not discharging their duties and not carrying out the object and purpose for which the UP Urban Planning and Development Act (1973) has been enacted. (Doc. C 2013/3/14 2013, 3)

The Bench arguably accused VDA to "protect illegal constructions", requesting VDA to invest more time and resources in the implementation of the regulations.

[71] Here and everywhere, when talking about Varanasi, my informants refer to the area of the historic city centre.

Concurrently, the Bench deliberated on the case of the Ganga Mahal palace, which was dilapidated and in urgent need of repair (Doc. C 2013/3/14: 5). The Bench resolved that before allowing construction activities, VDA should set restoration standards and guidelines. Underpinning this resolution was the necessity to differentiating actual cases of restoration from cases where illegal reconstructions would be pursued in the guise of restoration works. The Court also introduced a day-to-day monitoring mechanism for verifying the compliance of building activities with regulations (Doc. C 2013/3/14: 6). As a result, construction plans for the Ganga Mahal palace were halted [72]. In the same hearing, VDA disclosed "difficulties" in demolishing sealed buildings. At this point of my interviews with members of KS, I could clearly feel their annoyance in recalling the "total absence of transparency and accountability of VDA", which they ultimately regarded as "completely corrupted" (interview with D., 04/02/2019).

The hearing of April 2016 deliberated on two intertwined issues: (i) the enactment of restoration byelaws in the heritage zone, (ii) the establishment of a Committee of experts aimed at regulating building development in the heritage zone (Doc. D 2016/4/28, 2016: 1–3; 5–11). These new provisions seemed to act as crucial instruments of a full-fledged mechanism for protecting the historic centre. The provisions set technical criteria which recall international standards for the conservation of historic buildings:

> Byelaw 3.1.10 has provided a complete mechanism to ensure that no fresh construction is raised in a manner that would either alter the exterior portion of an existing building or result in an alteration of the footprint, ground coverage area, floor area ratio or height of the building. (…)
>
> The amended byelaws also include (…) that there would be no change of use of the existing structure and there would be no discharge of sewage into the river (…). (Doc. D 2016/4/28, 2016: 5–11)

This time, the regulations literally addressed the "heritage value" of the *ghats*, marking a terminology change in the documentation of the trial. For example, the newly established Committee is set in order to: "preserve and restore the intrinsic character and heritage importance of Varanasi Ganga Ghats" (Doc. D 2016/4/28, 2016: 7); also, the core objective of the Committee is to "formulating a perspective plan for preserving the intrinsic character and heritage importance of Varanasi" (Doc. D 2016/4/28: 6). Indeed, the

[72] Construction works were allowed in more recent years, and they have not been investigated in this research. In 2018, the two main floors of the Ganga Mahal Palace were lent to a clothes firm, which restored it and opened a *sarees* shop.

documents directly recognize the collective and historical value of the *ghats*, advocating for a – vague – assessment of their "heritage value" (Doc. D 2016/4/28: 6).

The Committee was made of selected public officers among which the Chairman of VDA, a nominee from UP State government, the Varanasi Municipal Commissioner, and one District Magistrate (Doc. D 2016/4/28: 7). In our interviews, KS disclosed scepticism over this new entity:

> Yes, they made this *new* Committee. But there is nothing new in it! [laughs] You know who is in it? The chair of VDA, the vice chairman of the Municipal Commissioner... We, of course, are not there. And they are passing all proposals; nobody is objecting building requests. Since the Committee was established, they can do what they want! Also the Temple Project passed from there, and since it passed there, nobody can object[73]. (emphasis in original, interview with D. 04/02/2019)

KS understood the establishment of the Committee as a farce, upstaging collusion between VDA, UP State and the new Bench of judges appointed in 2016. The absence of non-governmental advocacy was, according to my informants, a deliberate choice towards total unaccountability. Similarly, the insertion of a heritage-centred lexicon is regarded as a mockery, a façade aimed at concealing the urban development strategies of the Committee.

Since the 2016 hearing, KS unequivocally realized the impossibility of obtaining congruous results to its pleas. The process for demolishing illegal buildings and enforcing regulations progressed slowly and was repeatedly obstructed. On the legislative side, the organization obtained some results. Firstly, the new regulations for the heritage zone were stricter than ever before (byelaw 3.1.10 of 2016, mentioned in Doc. D 2016/4/28). Also, the extension of the zone perimeter was another substantial achievement. However, the establishment of the new Committee holding full powers over the area looked more of a checkmate, undermining previous efforts. "We keep waiting. Waiting and waiting till things slowly move on. End of 2018 they [VDA] should have filed the new report, but still no report. Still waiting." (interview with D. 04/02/2019). The temporality of the process, its slowness, lack of transparency, and the reappointment of public officers imposed a nervous inquietude and disillusionment to the members of the NGO. Recurrently, the situation produced fears for being in real danger both personally and

[73] My informant refers to the Kashi Vishwanath Special Area Development Project, launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2018, which I analysed extensively in chapters 3 and 4.

professionally: “Heritage is not all romance, you know. All along the process, bad things happened to us. We have been harassed, I personally received threats to death.” (interview with KS president, 30/11/2018).

Arguably, the process had enormous resonance in the city, with KS visibly entering the urban political arena and the public discourse. Far from remaining confined within the judicial walls of the High Court, the litigation became matter of debate for locals, polarizing the residents living in the historic city centre. As a result, when I first arrived in Varanasi, in February 2019, harshly anyone from the *ghats* and the historic neighbourhoods was unaware of the name “Kautilya Society” and of the trial that opposed the small, local NGO to local urban authorities.

6.5 Assembling the public discourse. Otherness and political alignment for a “personal crusade”?

Since autumn 2012, local and national newspapers started to cover the events revolving around the trial, informing the emergence of a public discourse about KS, VDA and their litigation. In this section I will firstly review selected articles from the national newspaper *Times of India*, section of Varanasi, for exploring the ways in which the trial and its two main actors have been presented by the press[74]. Secondly, I will relate the press discourse to the voices of locals, investigating them through interviews and informal conversations.

Times of India’s first article on KS’s PIL dates to October 2012[75]. When interviewed, the Vice Chairman of VDA stated that the agency was monitoring at close the demolition of illegal buildings and that “the progress in the work was satisfactory” (Times of India 2012). The article presents VDA as meticulous in the application of the High Court orders, and flexible

[74] *Times of India* has been selected as it is the only Indian journal in English language that followed uninterruptedly the events linked to the heritage PIL in Varanasi. This media analysis suffers from the absence of Hindi language media sources, as only English sources have been surveyed and read. A second difficulty was the impossibility to retrieve articles earlier than 10 years, due, supposedly, to the limitedness of online archival material. Hence, this reconstruction of the public discourse about trial and work of the NGO is necessarily partial. Yet, my aim here is not to present a full account of the discourse as presented by media, but rather to draw a composite narration of both official and unofficial local discourses.

[75] I could not retrieve earlier articles (2008-2012) from *Times of India* website.

with those owners who showed to be "taking the orders seriously" (Times of India, 2012). Overall, the text praises VDA:

> Not only the agency [VDA] but even the district administration and the police showed promptness this time. (…) The officials made it very clear that any bid to stop the drive for the compliance of HC order would be dealt strictly.
>
> The strict attitude adopted by the government machinery made the building owners realize that they have no option other than demolishing the illegal portions of their buildings. On the assurance given by most of these building owners of demolishing (…) voluntarily, the VDA on October 10 gave them two days' time for the same. (both excerpts from Times of India, 2012)

The description dashes significantly with data emerging from the official documents analysed in section 6.4, where VDA is reproved for the inconsistency of its claims. The aim of the newspaper seems thus to showcase VDA as a competent and scrupulous office. This also emerges from the fact that the text emphasizes oral statements rather than pursuing actual field verifications. From this early press, KS is briefly mentioned as promoter of the PIL, but it does not emerge as a relevant actor in the process. Its contestations to VDA's allegations are not recorded. Instead, the text carefully highlights the discontent of traders, local residents and politicians, who protested at least twice against the demolition order, compelling VDA to postpone its execution (Times of India, 2012).

While more recent press articles seem to impartially stick to the description of Court resolutions on the basis of official documentation (Times of India 2015; 2014c; 2014a; 2014b), an article from 2013 presents the facts relating to a First Information Report (hereafter, FIR) lodged by VDA against KS (Times of India 2013a). According to the article, officers from VDA raided the NGO headquarters. The officers found cement bags, stone plates and other construction material. They reported that, over the inspection, "it came to light that the building owner had planned to construct an extra floor in the existing building without seeking permission from the VDA" (Times of India 2013a). A police order was filed against the owner of the building – also president of the NGO – and its caretaker. In the article, facts are reconstructed through the words of VDA officers. No site investigation was pursued for interrogating KS, nor for allowing it to share its own side of the story. However, the NGO's website reconstructs KS's version:

> On 8th June 2013, a battalion of 5 VDA officers (…) forced their way into the official premises of the Kautilya Society, in the absence of the building owner and without consigning (…) any written documentation about who they were, what was the objective of their request to visit the building, and what was the authority

they had in doing that. The VDA "assault unit" forced their way in by harassing the hesitant staff, which had orders not to let anyone, who is not a member of the Society, enter in the building (…). VDA's raiding platoon of five men called for the support of the police force to overcome the bold resistance of one managing committee member, one lady cook and one lady manager. (…) The VDA officers entered the building (…) they found only some cement bags and some piled Chunar stones. (…) And that seemed to be enough to prove that the Kautilya Society had wrong intentions to build an unauthorized floor! (Kautilya Society website, accessed 13/03/2020)

The choice of words "battalion", "assault unit" and "raiding platoon" for describing VDA officers is revealing the aggressivity and arrogance attributed to the authority and it reveals the extreme polarization of the two players, confronted as in a warfare. KS interpreted VDA's unauthorized action as an act of harassment for persuading the NGO to withdraw the PIL: "that the VDA harasses the Kautilya Society is not a novelty, since they are under trial by the Allahabad High Court as part of a PIL lodged by the Kautilya Society against it" states the NGO website[76]. KS claimed that other forms of harassment were pursued against members:

> Police came to my house, they sealed my café, my hotel, they harassed me. Now, I cannot make a handshake with the government. (personal conversation with D., 04/02/2019)

> I was harassed, there were court cased against me. The Kautilya Society registration was cancelled by local authorities, all this just for harassing me for the work I was doing. And you know, most of this rich powerful people (80%) are hoteliers, having their premises on the *ghats*. I was harassed and threatened to death. (Virtual interview with KS president, 30/11/2018)

I could not clarify whether the harassment came only from VDA or also from local hoteliers having their businesses on the *ghats*. Nonetheless, this account echoes the malcontent of traders, local residents and politicians protesting against demolition orders. All I will show later in the section, the facts suggest that the conflictual nature of KS's heritage-making fundamentally translated in the isolation of the NGO from the local context.

Few months after VDA's raid to KS premises, a second offensive against the NGO took place. A new FIR was filed for violations to the Sarais Act[77]. Allegations were made about the foreign composition of the NGO – 4 Italians out of 9 members –, the suspect of illegitimate foreign donations, of

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[76] Kautilya Society Blog, accessed 13/03/2020.

[77] Enacted in 1867, the Act regulates the registration and administration of *sarais*, buildings for shelter and accommodation of travelers: (Indian Kanoon webportal, accessed 04/05/2020)

property transfer violations, and of unlicensed activities being carried out in the NGO guesthouse (Times of India 2013b). KS rejected all accuses and showed proof documentation in a written reply to district authorities. The NGO came to know that the FIR was the result of "many complaints from local people", as one can read from KS website. The journalist included an excerpt of the NGO's public response to the allegations, in which KS explained the accuses as enduring harassment by authorities. The article was dated 14 October 2013.

Six days later, a civic procession against foreign NGOs was organized by the Shiv Sena[78], with participants shouting "*videshee enajeeo vaapas jao Kautilya Society haay haay*" ["foreign NGO step back, bye bye Kautilya Society"] (Dainik Jagran 2013). Foreign NGOs were accused of working illegally, of holding no official permit. The accusations barely concealed the xenophobic nature of the event, which was consistent to Shiv Sena ideology. Also, because many foreigners living in Varanasi run local businesses and NGOs, economic competition may have played a role. It is reasonable to think that the same "traders, local residents and politicians" opposing the demolition orders may have participated to the march.

Few years before, in 2010, the central Indian government had operated a crunch on NGOs foreign funding by amending the 1974 Foreign Contribution Regulatory Act (Lakshmi 2013). Accused of acting against Indian "public interest", the Indian Social Action Forum[79] (INSAF) was not allowed to receive foreign funding anymore. Considering that "nearly 90% of the network funding comes from overseas", the suspension was regarded as a threat to life for many small and medium organizations (Lakshmi 2013). The move was interpreted by many as an act for undermining the right to dissent and opposition to big industrial projects. A climate of hostility and suspiciousness around foreign-funded NGOs was thus fostered and increased during Modi's government, who revoked licenses to NGOs accused of leading anti-national activities (Quartz India 2019; The Economic Times 2019; Doshi 2016). In 2013, KS, as many NGOs operating under the aegis of the INSAF, corresponded to the typology of the "suspected" non-profit organization, who was deemed to act against development and to receive

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[78] Shiv Sena were born in the 1960s in Maharashtra as Hindu nationalist right-wing activists. With the ascent of BJP as dominant Indian political party they aligned to BJP and RSS ideology. Their name means the "Army of Shiva". See (Bedi 2016; Purandare 2013; Vicziany 2002).

[79] INSAF is a network of more than 700 ngos from all over India. Its main activities revolve around environmental justice, human rights, indigenous and tribal people rights. More information on the network official website www.insafindia.com. Accessed 14/03/2020).

consistent financial support from abroad. It is in this general undemocratic and xenophobic climate that the 2013 march against the NGO can be better contextualized.

With local press giving none or little resonance to KS's claims, and in a political context unfavourable to its action, also support from local residents was limited and weak. When asked their opinion about the events, locals hardly talked positively about the NGO. Most of them emphasize (a) the egocentrism of its action, (b) the lack of cooperation and dialogue with other interest groups, (c) the "foreignness" of the organization. While investigating such perceptions, I was surprised to notice that not only people from Varanasi, but also local Westerners – mainly Europeans and North Americans – held such a negative opinion about the NGO:

> You know, it was her [the founder's] personal crusade. She acquired a property there and she did not want new constructions in the area. She took it very personally. (Personal conversation with local guide. 30/08/2019)

> Well, she obviously had an interest there… she made some very big fuss, and ultimately made herself a lot of enemies. For more than ten years she could not really come back to live in Varanasi. Because you know, she is not from here, she's not *local*. (Emphasis in original. Personal conversation with business owner from the U.S. 30/08/2019)

> Few people are opposing the Temple Project. Among them, this NGO, Kautilya, we know it because it made a big fuss about the new constructions. I think this is all a political issue. This association you know, they are communist-biased, there are doing communist-biased studies. So, they oppose the government. (Personal conversation with local journalist. 31/08/2019)

As these excerpts show, locals perceived KS's battle as a fundamentally individual struggle tainted with political, leftist, positioning. None of the people I talked to reflected upon the objectives of KS in terms of care and custody of the city. Instead, as mentioned above, most locals tended to isolate the action of the NGO as a *personal crusade* that caused problems to both the organization itself and the residents. Local residents revealed that most of them distanced from both the trial and the NGO, accusing it of being unrespectful of local socio-economic dynamics, and looking suspiciously at its capacity to halt urban development processes. Thus, KS crucial goal of building up feelings and practices of inheritance within the local community ultimately had a very limited outreach.

Conclusion

The chapter explored the emancipatory potentials of the heritage vocabulary in imagining the city through its past and present narratives and materialities. If one connects this investigation to the ways in which 'heritage' was mobilized in chapter 3 and 4 by governmental authorities, one can appraise the fundamentally political content of this vocabulary, which can be variously employed for legitimizing contrasting visions of the urban.

The chapter retraced the conflictual processes of heritage-making by a local NGO. By opposing the commercialization of the historic city centre for tourism-related purposes – epitomized in the emergence of 'heritage hotels' such as the Brij Rama Palace – the NGO disenfranchised the heritage vocabulary from a tourism-centred lexicon, intertwining it to civil cultural rights (section 6.1).

For around a decade, the NGO mapped and surveyed the built fabric of the historic city centre, supplementing the partial knowledge of local administrators, and playing an epistemological role which can be understood both as an emerging expertise and as a form of "democratic pressure" to the local (underqualified) administration (as for Mumbai water infrastructure in Björkman 2017; Barry 2017). As such, the NGO positioned in the city as urban heritage expert (section 6.2).

Once secured this position, the NGO directly confronted local authorities (section 6.4), while also heading for international recognition and assistance (section 6.3). This *battle* was pursued in a public atmosphere of hostility and marginalization which, as shown in section 6.5, reveals its political and radical contents.

By framing the *ghats* and the historic neighbourhoods as a 'heritage zone', the action of the NGO aimed at triggering an ethics of care for the city's historical and contemporary geographies. In doing so, the NGO merged the vocabularies of heritage and custody/care for countering processes of socio-spatial dispossession and erasure. Two considerations can be made on this issue.

The first one suggests that vocabularies and tactics of care are renovating the lexicon of heritage, pointing to the radical potentials of conservation when understood as cherishing for the spaces and lives of the city. The second one urges investigation on the instruments through which these vocabularies take actual form, whether they be normative (as in section 6.1), regulatory (as in section 6.4), expertise-based (as in section 6.2 and 6.3) or framed through political engagement (as in section 6.5).

Figure 64 The Darbhanga Palace before new constructions (2002). From Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 65 The rear side of Darbhanga Palace once converted into Brij Rama Hotel (2012). Wikimedia Commons.

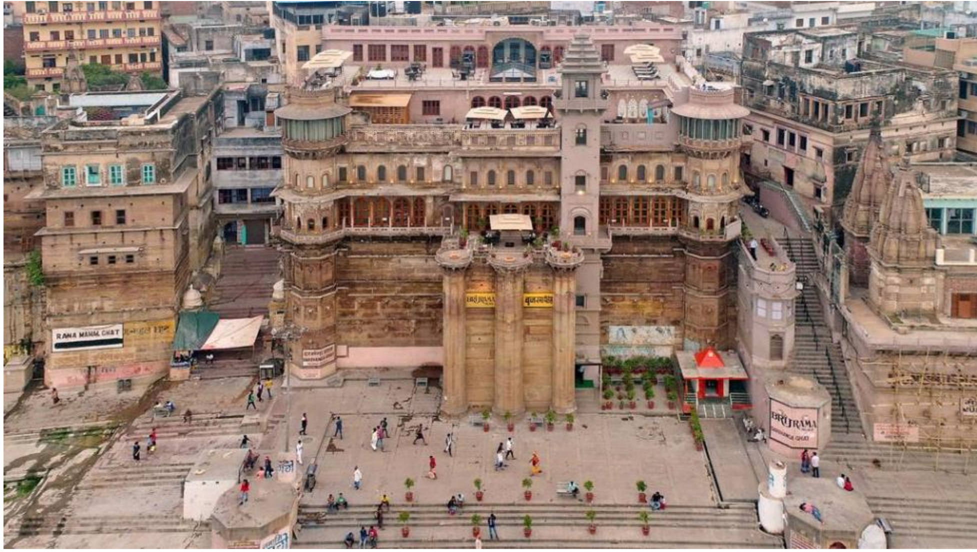

Figure 66 The massive Brij Rama Hotel, aerial view. From Booking.com.

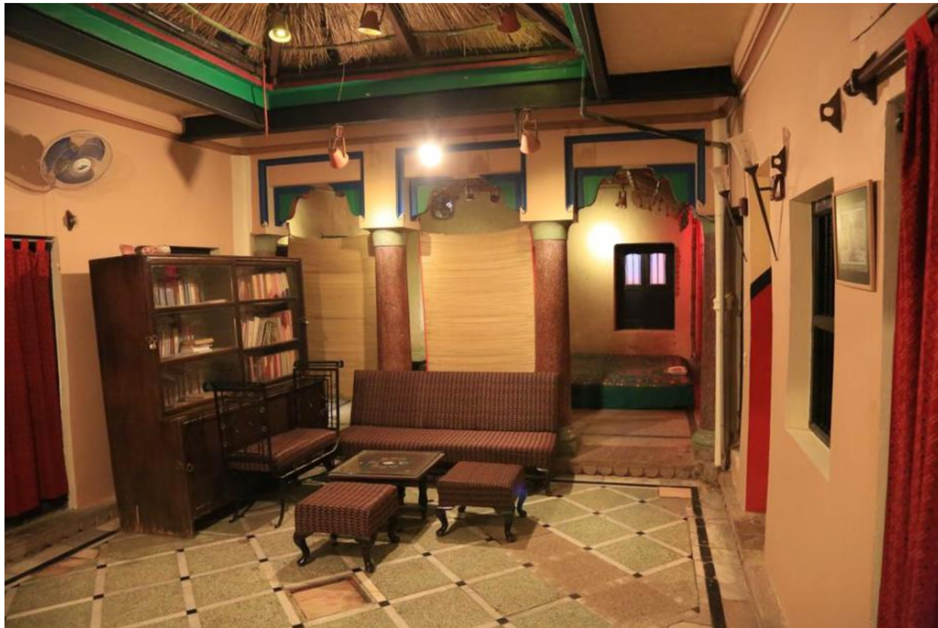

Figure 67 Ram Bhawan Residency ground floor. From Booking.com.

Figure 68 Ram Bhawan Residency, second floor with open courtyard. Author’s photo..

Conclusions

I do not know of anywhere else in history
where a group of people have had to
fight so hard just to be *responsible*.
(Patricia Monture-Angus, *Journeying
Forward*, cited in Nichols 2019)

Encounters: the radical potentials of heritage conservation

The global emergence of movements advocating for the preservation of nature as a shared heritage are informing transformative trajectories in the ways we mobilise the heritage vocabulary at various scales. These movements have pointed at the radical potentials of heritage conservation as a mode of cherishing and caring for the planet. Also, they have highlighted the political pregnancy of this endeavour centred on issues such as recognition and redistribution claims, intra- and intergenerational justice, the rights of Indigenous people and the like.

Both elements – conservation-as-care and the emancipatory endeavour – suggest that conservation can be radical when it is understood as an imperative to be custodians rather than owners of the city and the planet. However, because the notion of custody also entails issues of control and dominance, this trajectory can only be investigated as a political field of ever-lasting power relations and tensions.

This research has interrogated the emergence and the endurance of emancipatory practices around the object ‘heritage’ in urban worlds, asking which are the features of these emancipatory patterns and, conversely, which are the characters of an abusive and exclusionary use of heritage which reinforces the goals of reactionary politics. These issues have been investigated in Varanasi, a medium-sized city in North India, where the current authoritarian political agenda is timidly opposed by fragile and ever-shrinking spaces of democratic resistance.

The tension between the public/private character of heritage has emerged as a red thread of this study. Specifically, the theoretical analysis has tried to explore the relation between *possession-as-ownership* and *possession-as-care* (chapter 1.3 and 1.4). By connecting the analytical and empirical enquiry, the thesis has suggested that the more heritage is normalized and treated as a property, the more it is likely to participate in processes of dispossession. This is consistent with the core features embedded into proprietary relationality: the owner’s right to exploit, to exclude and to alienate. Conversely, the more heritage is mobilized to engage different types of relationality, centred on notions of custody and care for a shared legacy, the more its emancipatory and radical potentials are likely to emerge.

While the notions of care and custody have been analysed by both feminist and Indigenous scholars in their opposition to the logics of capitalist accumulation and dispossession – a lens that is also adopted in this research (chapter 1.5) – the research also introduces the political and epistemic heterogeneity of practices of care. For example, practices of caring for urban spaces and narratives is sometimes directly connected to the demands of urban self-entrepreneurialisms (as in Chapter 5). Thus, the study developed a multifold and complex picture of how the city relates to its past narratives and materialities and vice versa.

In a nutshell, three research trajectories emerge from the empirical analysis and, it is argued, constitute the core ways in which the object heritage is mobilized in contemporary urbanisms: 1) deeply anchored to state politics and ideologies, cultural heritage is first an instrument for legitimizing political and neoliberal restructuring via cultural, religious and historical narratives that speak to people more directly than economic rationalities; 2) in southern cities, where the formal economy grants limited or no life possibilities to urban inhabitants, cultural heritage is reappropriated, reproduced and sold so to fit in and reproduce a tourism-driven economy that fossilizes urban worlds through essentialized, caste- and class- driven cultural narratives; 3) in southern cities, cultural heritage is increasingly appropriated by those who claim for more just cities as an argument for objecting urban

change and restructuring both in terms of alteration to the physical environment and as erasure of the traces of local pasts. In this line, cultural heritage intertwines demands for political participation and for cherishing the city as a public space. In the next paragraphs I will dwell more extensively on these three trajectories, highlighting pathways for future research.

Cities of political ambivalence

Cities offer as extraordinary laboratories for exploring these themes. For Ash Amin, cities are “imperfect machines of coordination poised on the edge of failure, yet able to stave off collapse because of the distributed intelligence built into their provisioning connective infrastructures and their stock of diverse kinds of knowledge, lay and expert” (Amin 2016, 779). One substantial trajectory of this research has been to explore how heritage discourses and materialities take part to the “stock” of knowledges that make the city an engine of “distributed intelligence”. An interesting nexus between urban heritage and processes and practices of urban informality has emerged, particularly in the exploration of how Varanasi local tour guides and riverside dwellers appropriate and reproduce official historical and cultural narratives for selling them to tourists, as an ultimate survival strategy against invisibility and chronic unemployment.

At the same time, as this thesis has hopefully shown, heritage is rarely mobilized at the single scale of the city. Local heritage discourses and materialities usually serve broader ideological agendas and large-scale economic restructuring plans (as in chapter 3 and 4). The KVSAD Project in Varanasi is the symptom of the broader urban re-development strategy that shapes the action of BJP-led state and central governments. In this sense, and similarly to other authoritarian political contexts worldwide, cultural heritage is still firmly an instrument of governmentality in the hands of undemocratic state apparatuses (as in Turkey and Isreal, Ristic and Frank 2019; Rokem and Vaughan 2019; Zencirci 2014; Karaman 2013)

While heritage is an interesting entry point to look at contemporary urban processes, we might question what is specifically ‘urban’ in the ways heritage is lived and engaged with in cities like Varanasi. As it has been relevantly pointed out, cities in late neoliberalism are strongly and increasingly “ambivalent” (Enright and Rossi 2018). Partially, this is because “the twofold accumulation dynamics of late capitalism” is “both annihilating and productive of life and subjectivity” (Enright and Rossi 2018, 10). My

empirical chapters have analysed the multifold, situated effects of accumulation by dispossession in a medium sized Indian city. These effects are described as cooptations, displacements and erasures. However, such effects are also paralleled by collective or individual endurances which produce new or strengthened attachments, belongings, feelings and practices of care which are given economic value, often through ethno-entrepreneurial strategies (as in chapter 5).

As Enright and Rossi highlight, ambivalence also relies in the urban "co-existence of antithetical political phenomena, such as the persistence of progressive movements after 2011 and the recent chauvinist-populist explosion" (Enright and Rossi, 2018; also see Rossi, 2018). The tension between these two fields of the political is particularly explicit in Varanasi, where overt political mobilization mostly sides with revanchist, reactionary and religious-driven agendas, and the space for progressive movements is restrained and extremely polarized.

However, the ethnographic field analysis suggested that we should be able to question this polarized political tension, for finding the "political" where it is, and for what it means to people. As John Comaroff detected in his exploration of South African cities, "ordinary political life has shifted away from conventional structures and processes (…) into various forms of people's movements" (Kaur 2018, 373; also see Comaroff and Comaroff 2015). Many times these movements are not formalized or structured, nor temporally expanded: it might well be that they are not even social constellations, but rather liminal, individual endeavours which translate political practice in "a series of rhythms that enable surprising, frustrating, sometimes confusing, sentiments and practices of residents caring for and enduring with each other" (Simone 2018, 137). In Varanasi, these rhythms of endurance create a confused, non-representational politics, which refuses to take official positioning (e.g. with or against the current government), or for which official politics is not important, as it does not reflect the contents of people's everyday moral choices.

This urban politics, however, is a politics of lacks. It is a politics of improvisation, of vulnerability, where the instruments for participating to Amin's city as a "stock of knowledges" are highly limited. It is a politics where, crucially, evictions, displacements and enclosures are becoming accepted as "a normative practice, as a modality of living indicative of their [people's] worth and eligibility to be part of the city" (Simone 2018, 127). Thus, notwithstanding its enduring moral contents and adaptive capacities, this politics does not seem to head towards more human cities.

Expertise, normativity, and the moral grammar of social life

Chapter 1 introduced the emergence of urban heritage activism as a collective movement which is both localized in its context-related actualization, and global in its ethical and moral contents. Literature analysis on the topic suggested to understand this movement as the engagement of urban actors with socio-cultural claims for recognitional and/or redistributive justice (chapter 1).

This engagement seems to translate into a fragmentation of heritage expertise and governance. In her analysis of Palestinian heritage governance, Chiara De Cesari shows that NGOs – as professionalized social movements – play ambivalent roles, simultaneously separating from and entangling to State apparatuses (De Cesari 2019). In this sense, she claims, "they may be techniques of governmentality and counter-governmentality, spaces for experimentation with an alternative sociopolitics of 'deep democracy' or new instruments of forms of control from afar" (De Cesari 2019, 21).

This thesis explored the agency of local cultural NGO from Varanasi, Kautilya Society (chapter 6). The aim of this analysis was to see whether and how the heritage vocabulary is mobilized in civil struggles against neoliberal urban restructuring processes. Three interconnected themes emerged from the investigation of the decades long action of the NGO: they relate to issues of expertise, normativity and to the moral grammar of social life. I will dwell on each issue separately in the second part of this section.

As detected in chapter 5, Kautilya Society was capable to carve out a position of expert over the historic city centre of Varanasi, specifically in terms of knowledge of the built environment. By surveying and mapping the historic buildings and their present-day alterations, the NGO constructed a stock of knowledge that was inexistent in the city before.

A second type of knowledge, about construction permissions and control over land was then built over the first. This more political bunch of information provided the organization the competence and strength needed to confront local authorities.

Also, the expertise of Kautilya Society highlighted the gap in the knowledge and capacity of local authorities – specifically Varanasi Development Authority – to relate to the city with its historically layered materialities. In other words, the assembled knowledge of the NGO unveiled the governmental processes of erasure as underpinning on a fundamental ignorance of the city socio-material fabric.

This aspect came to the fore immediately after I started my field work in the city. The first VDA official I interviewed was unable to give me even the most basic details over the history of the neighbourhood targeted by the KVSAD Project. When asked on whether they knew something of the buildings they were going to demolish, his reply was that he was unable to retrieve information about the neighbourhood and that, overall, he could only be certain that it was “very old”. As described in chapter 4, section 4.1, this lack of knowledge is shared at various levels of the administration.

The expertise and knowledge gathered by Kautilya Society did make some change in urban and development plans for the city. As the analysis of the trial has shown, the organization framed historic neighbourhoods of Varanasi as a ‘heritage zone’ in urgent need of protection, using a lexicon that was new to public interest litigations in India (chapter 6). Intertwining the vocabulary of heritage and conservation with civil rights granted by constitutional law, the NGO was able to frame its action as much more than a mere battle for the conservation of the built fabric. It suggested that heritage conservation is a civil right and therefore it should be publicly negotiated and discussed.

Also, drawing from international theories and instruments, Kautilya Society realized that heritage and conservation are not only – or not anymore – confined to the technologies that regulate and govern listed monuments or archaeological areas. As we have largely seen, cities or parts of cities are themselves touted as ‘heritage cities’, ‘historic cities’ and the like (the HRIDAY scheme mentioned in chapter 3 is an example in point). Kautilya Society morally opposed the emergence of ‘heritage hotels’ such as the Brij Rama Palace next door, which, it claims, epitomizes the full-fledged commercialization of the historic city centre for tourism-related purposes[80].

The veritable indignation expressed by members of the NGO for such type of urban development can be related to a moral and ethical understanding of the city as an organism that is being deprived of alternative and more meaningful trajectories of change. In this sense, Kautilya Society insists on the role of civil society for guiding more meaningful directions, where care

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[80] The vague of *heritage hotels* is particularly relevant in India, where many palatial structures are being acquired and transformed by hotel chains such as that of the Bri Rama Palace (chapter 6, section 6.1). There exists a specific website that specifies the characters of heritage hotels: “the palatial residences of the erstwhile Indian Maharajas have been transformed into heritage hotels but ooze the same old elegance and luxury. By staying in any of the heritage hotels in India, you can enjoy a pampering treatment like the kings and the queens.” Available at https://www.heritagehotelsofindia.com/. Accessed 18/05/2021).

for the city and heritage conservation intersect, as they both strive for safeguarding the existing socio-economic fabric.

Fertilizing emancipatory urbanisms: inheritance, belonging and care

What exactly is the role of the heritage vocabulary in the struggle of Kautilya Society? Why was it necessary to use it and what were its flaws? I will try to answer these questions by mobilizing what I see as the three emancipatory dimensions of heritage that, to paraphrase from (Harrison and Sterling 2020), we should be able to bring to the future. In doing so, I will also trace the gaps of this study and will point to future research directions.

First, the theoretical and the empirical analysis have shown that heritage convincingly gives voice to relations of appropriation. Knowing that, Kautilya Society's chosen way to relate to the city as a common space, was to frame it in terms of a shared heritage. This thesis has not engaged in a debate on heritage as common(s), but it is clear that these two analytical trajectories intersect in multiple ways. Most authors understand the common as a notion that "is conceived in contrast to the profit-driven arrangements of marketization and privatization which are hegemonic within contemporary neoliberalized societies" (Enright and Rossi 2018, 35). This echoes the features of a renewed vocabulary of heritage that overcomes proprietary relationality and looks at processes of inheritance as pacts of responsibility and custody towards more-than-human legacies. The emphasis on practices of care and custody aiming at disrupting the logics of ownership aligns processes of inheritance to feminist approaches to the common (Federici and Linebaugh 2018).

However, just like the common, and the urban common in particular, processes of inheritance are always at risk of co-optation by the logics of capital accumulation and dispossession. This research trajectory has not been explored by this thesis and shall deserve further investigation. Hopefully, future research in this sense will unpack the relation between heritage theory and practice and the common as both resisting and subsuming capitalist accumulation.

Differently to the notion of common, however, heritage and processes of inheritance reaffirm the centrality of temporality in constructing socio-spatial relations. They suggest that relations of appropriation are formed and negotiated in a constant dialogue with past and present materialities. This

strengthens their relationship to temporal processes of belonging and unbelonging. Yet, their disenfranchisement from vocabularies of ownership and possession destabilizes rigid notions of belonging centred, for example, on indigeneity or ethnicity (as shown in chapter 1).

As pointed out in chapter 1, processes of inheritance should encourage an emancipatory ethics of belonging, or co-belonging, one that "is not just about being and having but also about longing: perhaps longing for a different way to cohabit the political (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 159)". This ethics of co-belonging or global belonging is gaining fortune in ventures concerned with the conservation of the planet and of natural environments. In those frameworks, the heritage vocabulary has informed the moral imperative to being custodians of a shared natural legacy. However, while much attention has focused on the intergenerational contents of such imperative, still little research investigates the nexus between the heritage vocabulary and practices and policies of intragenerational justice and equity.

In cities, belonging is about political contestation and about engaging meaningful socio-economic relationships with spaces, objects and people. Rahel Jaeggi's *Alienation* is a powerful reminder of why engaging meaningful relations is necessary to living unalienated lives (Jaeggi 2014). With its focus on relations of appropriation, as we have seen, the heritage vocabulary can be mobilized for enacting or strengthening connections with past and present materialities. Also, it implicitly suggests that these relations should be cherished, taken care of, and adapted-while-preserved: in this sense, I have talked of the radical potentials of conservation.

However, intersecting vocabularies of care, inheritance, custody and preservation is not sufficient. Further studies should explore the potentials of this cross-fertilization, looking at the instruments through which these vocabularies take actual form, and revealing their ambiguities.

The global spread of Covid-19 pandemic has harshly impacted on urban infrastructures and collective practices, fertilizing sentiments and tactics of solidarity, as well as compromising them and their reach (Ticktin 2021). Issues of more-than-human inheritances and urban care have become all the more relevant, particularly if we reflect on how, in India and as in other countries, neoliberal restructuring processes – such as the KVSAD Project in Varanasi – have continued at full pace, while the socio-economic infrastructure that sustained collective urban life has been severely challenged.

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