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Published online: 22 Jul 2021.

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New monuments for the new India: heritage-making in a 'timeless city'

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ABSTRACT

The ambitious Kashi Vishvanath Corridor in Varanasi (India) was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in March 2019. Set to turn the site into a 'world-class' pilgrimage destination, the project entails the construction of a monumental path that connects the Ganges river to the city's main Hindu temple. In the middle of the area under 'beautification', stands the Gyanvapi mosque – a longstanding target of Hindu nationalist campaigns to 'liberate' supposedly originally Hindu places of worship from Muslim presence. By combining ethnographic material collected through longitudinal research with a critical analysis of local Hindi newspapers, I trace the genesis of the Corridor as a 'heritage project'. I suggest that, through it, a new heritage regime is being put forward to suit, and provide evidence for, current Hindu nationalist projections of India as a Hindu nation. However, I also argue that this regime is not just the result of a top-down agenda, but originates from a counter-intuitive process: bottom-up mobilisations of heritage by residents (who were eventually evicted) seem to have informed, if not provoked, subsequent official narratives and the branding of the Corridor as heritage.

Introduction

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Banaras (Varanasi) on 8 March 2019 to lay the foundation stone of one of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government's most ambitious and controversial urban development projects. A city of about 1.2 million people located on the banks of the Ganges river in the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP), Banaras has long been imagined as 'sitting outside of mortal time, and as a seemingly unique urban site with a particular ("Hindu") religious character' (Dodson 2012, 1). Most likely owing to its symbolic capital as a 'Hindu city', it was chosen as Modi's own constituency for the 2014 election and since then, according to the section of the PM's website about it, 'the glorious, ancient city of Varanasi has taken great strides in development'.[1]

On that day, Modi inaugurated the Kashi Vishvanath Corridor, an area of about 50,000 square metres around the Kashi Vishvanath temple (KVT), the main Hindu temple in Banaras and a most notable pan Indian pilgrimage destination. Generously funded by both state and central governments, the Corridor replaces an almost entirely Hindu neighbourhood[2] of bustling narrow *gali*s (lanes), cramped shops and tiny wayside shrines with a monumental access path that will ultimately connect the KVT to the riverfront. It will also feature museums, exhibitions halls, Vedic centres and performance stages, and is framed as a flagship project of the *vikas atra*, or development journey that the city is undertaking under Modi's rule.[3]

Just fifty metres from the KVT, and within the Corridor area, stands the Gyanvapi mosque, a royal Mughal structure used by Sunni Muslims for prayers. Temple and mosque are in a shared compound and, owing to their controversial history and proximity,[4] the site is the focus of campaigns for the *mukti,* or liberation, of allegedly usurped Hindu places of worship. These campaigns are informed by the ideology of Hindutva[5] and build on readings of history in which Muslims (whether Mughal emperors or contemporary Indian citizens) are seen as foreign invaders, desecrators of Hindu temples and ultimately a threat to the nation. Apart from contributing to the polarisation of India's diverse society along religious lines, liberation campaigns have also had serious repercussions for its vast and heterogeneous historic and architectural legacy: a clear demonstration of what *mukti* means in this framework was provided when a saffron-clad mob – chanting slogans against 'Muslim invaders' and using hands, hammers, pickaxes, ropes and dynamite – dismantled the sixteenth-century Babri mosque in Ayodhya in December 1992 as a group of Hindu nationalist leaders looked on and incited them.[6]

But the Babri mosque was just one of the many sites targeted for liberation: historic mosques and national monuments alike are potentially awaiting liberation and, as is well known, even the most renowned Indian World Heritage Site, the Taj Mahal, has been claimed to be an ancient Shiva temple that needs to be liberated.[7] As pointed out by renowned historian Romila Thapar, the dispute around the Babri mosque in Ayodhya 'created a precedent in the court of law that land can be claimed by declaring it to be the birthplace of a divine or semi-divine being worshipped by a group that defines itself as a community'.[8] In Banaras, the Gyanvapi mosque was identified already in the 1980s as the next place to be liberated from the Muslim presence. Calls for its liberation were reinvigorated, however, and legal action to remove it restarted after the 2019 Supreme Court decision in favour of the construction of a Ram temple on the site of the demolished Babri mosque in Ayodhya.[9] Thus, when at the inauguration of the Corridor, Modi spoke about the project as being to some extent the *mukti* of Lord Vishvanath,[10] many felt that the use of the word was no accident and threats to the mosque from an unstated Hindu nationalist agenda became more real.[11]

In this article, however, my purpose is to show that the Kashi Vishvanath Corridor project is more than just a potential 'Ayodhya 2.0′. I suggest that the Corridor puts forward, and experiments with, a new heritage regime that revolves around the metaphor of *mukti* and its layered meanings: in line with the project of creating a Hindu *rashtra*, or nation, this new heritage regime seems to be attempting if not to liberate the country from, at least to domesticate and provide suitable alternatives to, the existing monumental heritage – heritage that, as discussed below, inevitably recalls India's heterogeneous and ethno-religiously diverse past.

Scholars have written extensively about the formation and transformation of heritage discourses in the Indian subcontinent during colonial and post-colonial times. This vast scholarship established the deeply entrenched nature of disciplines such as archaeology and history in colonial regimes of knowledge and power (for instance, Ray 2012, Guha 2015), and detailed ways in which the imaginers and builders of the postcolonial Indian nation experimented with and reconfigured such disciplines in order to craft narratives that would suit their visions of the newly independent India (for instance, Chatterjee 1993; Guha-Takurta 2004; Ahmed 2015). Present-day Hindu nationalist forces continue to mobilise and reconfigure disciplines such as archaeology and history in promoting their notions of heritage (Chadha 2011; Sarkar 2019; Etter 2020; Truschke 2020).

As recently detailed by Meskell (2020) and Lefèvre (2020), however, the Modi government has developed some of these established patterns of heritage-making into specific strategies to deal with the vast and heterogeneous national heritage. The adoption of corporate sponsorship for some monuments, the downplaying of non-Hindu heritage by state tourism departments and, more importantly for our current concerns, the promotion of what Lefèvre calls 'new exorbitant heritage creations' and 'Disney-like heritage architecture' (Lefèvre 2020, 2 and 13) are key features of current Hindu nationalist politics of heritage highlighted to date. The case of the Corridor that I discuss in this article, then, can be seen as a novel expression, and perhaps culmination of, such a new heritage regime. As shown below, the Corridor combines a range of previously established and more recent

features of heritage-making as both a nationalist and neoliberal endeavour. More prominently, though, it promotes a new kind of monument that provides evidence for, and commemorates, the struggle for a new India as a Hindu *rashtra*. The new heritage regime put forward by the Corridor (and by other similar endeavours), then, moves beyond the management of the past to become more future-oriented.

The longitudinal study of heritage-making that I offer here, however, does not only insert itself into ongoing discussions around recent Hindu nationalist politics of heritage, but contributes to global scholarship on urban regeneration and participatory heritage. Moving beyond a simplistic conception of heritage-making as just a binary competition between state authorities and local actors, I address the Corridor not just as the result of a top-down Hindu nationalist heritage agenda, but posit that it emerges from several sets of situated conditions – many of which have to do with longstanding discursive representations of, and spatial transformations at, the temple-mosque compound.[12] While an exploration of long-term trajectories is beyond the scope of this article, I discuss here the somewhat counter-intuitive roles played by actors apparently opposed to the Corridor (such as local residents) in its recent making as heritage.

Before I turn to that, I unpack the official narrative about the Corridor as a triumph of liberators versus encroachers, as sanctioned by the PM during his speech at the inauguration. It is a narrative that resonates with those crafted in cases of urban regeneration and heritage preservation in other parts of the world.[13]

Liberators and encroachers

If we leave aside for a moment the Hindu nationalist agenda, the Corridor appears to be similar to the kind of urban regeneration that brings together, as Herzfeld puts it, 'demands of neoliberal economic policy and a conservation regime that attends to monumental buildings but ignores lived spaces' (Herzfeld 2017). Consider, for instance, Modi's use of the symbolically charged term *mukti*. Notwithstanding the nod to liberation campaigns that target the Gyanvapi mosque, the word was also used to describe and welcome the spatial transformations prompted by the Corridor: a congested neighbourhood had at last been 'liberated' and turned into a wide open space in which, Modi said, Lord Vishvanath would be able to breathe again. This praise of the new spatial setting immediately reminds us of global instances of 'spatial cleansing' – a term that describes the process through which historic neighbourhoods and populated urban areas are turned into empty and imposing spaces of 'monumental vacuity' that become symbols of progress, cleanliness and civilisation (Herzfeld 2006). Modi also said that 40 temples – described as *mulyavanetihasik purataviya*, or valuable historical antiquities – had been 'found' (he used the Hindi verb *milna*) during demolitions for the Corridor. These temples had been liberated, after previously being 'encroached', as he put it, by people who had built houses around them.

The narrative of liberators versus encroachers and the patronising stance of the PM towards the residents will sound familiar to scholars of urban heritage and are nothing new in India, where the term 'encroachment' has a long judicial history associated with illegal housing and occupation of public land (Ghertner 2015). The term, however, also appears more recently in contexts of heritage preservation in India and elsewhere and seems increasingly to be utilised in opposition to heritage and its advocates (Shepherd 2012; Nakamura 2014; Bloch 2016). The displacement of local communities is a recognised part of neoliberal heritage-led regeneration (Herzfeld 2003, 2010; Dines 2012; Collins 2015; De Cesari and Dimova 2019; Meskell 2019), and is often justified through the reactivation of the colonial trope of the 'uncaring native' (De Cesari and Herzfeld 2015, 176), with local residents seen as 'unsuitable stewards' (Panetta 2019, 6) of their own heritage or ultimately 'inimical to culture' (Nakamura 2014, 273).

Efforts to complicate official narratives, in which government officials, urban authorities and a variety of 'experts' are presented as liberators of heritage while residents feature as encroachers, are found widely in the above-mentioned literature. However, there seems to be a tendency to

reproduce 'unnecessary reductionist dichotomies between bad heritage (by state and capital) and good heritage (by civic committees, protest movements and evicted residents)' (De Cesari and Herzfeld 2015, 172). In addition, the power of states and conservation agencies to define heritage continues to be the starting point for most academic enquiries. As spelled out in the introduction to a recent volume on heritage movements in Asia, despite a novel interest in social movements and heritage activism, 'the field seems to be dominated by a focus on (first) the perspective and actions of the state or large heritage institutions and (then) the reactions, or the extent and qualities of participation by other groups' (Mozaffari and Jones 2020, 57). This means that appropriation, adaptation and transformation of heritage idioms are framed as *reactions* to official heritage policies.[14]

In this article I move beyond this paradigm to contribute to recent debates about 'participation' in heritage-making (Mozaffari and Jones 2020; De Cesari 2020), and document bottom-up, if fragmented, mobilisations of heritage that *are not* solely reactions to state or international heritage policies. I do so by discussing material collected during ethnographic research conducted in the neighbourhood around the KVT compound every year between 2013 and 2020 for periods of 3 to 5 months. The research included extensive observation of everyday life, embodied spatial experience and engagement with residents, shopkeepers, religious authorities and frequenters of both temple and mosque, as well as low-ranking police. In tracing the discursive and material genesis of the Corridor as a heritage project and in order to show that evicted residents and protest movements participated, perhaps unwittingly but from the very early phases, in heritage-making, I also rely on a critical analysis of local Hindi newspapers.[15] Before I zoom into the area under investigation, let me say something about Banaras and its complex relationship with heritage.

From the 'idea of Banaras' to Modi's 'heritage city'

Perhaps unlike any other South Asian city, Banaras is preceded and often trapped by its aura of being 'the oldest continuously inhabited city' on earth, 'older than history' and 'quintessentially Indian' (more often 'Hindu'). Whether in Sanskrit eulogistic texts, modern pilgrimage pamphlets in vernacular languages, visual depictions and colonial reports or in contemporary guides, travel blogs and coffee-table books, an overwhelming cultural production portrays the city as unique but universal, timeless but ancient.

The amount of scholarship about the city is also overwhelming: compared with other similar sized Indian cities Banaras has been over-studied, particularly with respect to its (Hindu) religious significance. In the introduction to a volume that explicitly calls for critical reflections about a persistent mainstream 'idea of Banaras' as a Hindu city, Dodson (2012) observes that some of this scholarship ends up nurturing an ahistorical and abstract imaginary through enduring 'discursive (and methodological) patterns, not least in the sorts of assumptions made about the "character" of Banaras' (Dodson 2012, 9). Examining ways in which a mainstream idea of Banaras came about through the cross-fertilisation of orientalist imaginings, colonial practices and local elitist projects of revitalisation of 'Hindu traditions' has in fact been a crucial agenda for scholars of the city for some time (Freitag 1989; Dalmia 1997; Dodson 2012; Desai 2012, 2017); it is timely, however, to push these critical reflections further and explore ways in which the idea of Banaras continues to play a role in the making of future Banaras.

The imaginary attached to the city is, in fact, not frozen in time but continues to evolve, as the idea of the city as a pre-eminent pilgrimage centre and representative of Indian culture, is continuously mobilised and transformed, last but not least by Hindu nationalist forces. Since the 2014 national election campaign and Modi's choice of Banaras as his constituency, discourses of 'smart city-ness' informed by the sort of 'world-class aesthetic' (Ghertner 2015) that had already driven exponential urban development in Indian metropolitan cities prior to 2010 have become pervasive in Banaras as well (Williams 2021). There, they clash with poor urban infrastructure, while also become embedded in existing imaginaries of the 'timeless city'. Against the futuristic

backdrop of world-class-ness, the qualities of timelessness, eternity, antiquity and sacredness seem to have new powers of seduction.

Notions of heritage play a crucial role in bridging global aspirations and the 'quintessentialist' imaginary linked to the city: increasingly in the last decade or so, Banaras has been dubbed in government narratives as the 'the heart of India civilisation' and 'the heritage city', which is on 'a glorious development journey', or *vikas yatra* – as stated on the Prime Minister's website.[16] The relationship between Banaras and heritage is, however, complex to say the least. Indeed, we could call the 'timeless city' a heritage paradox: first, although it has been recognised as a 'city of music' in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, Banaras has never made it onto the World Heritage List – much to the frustration of those local intellectuals, scholars and NGOs involved in longstanding campaigns to propose the old city and the riverfront (Singh 2010). Second, despite claims of antiquity, the material fabric of Banaras is quite recent: notable palaces along the riverfront and other historic buildings are predominantly the result of an 18th and 19th century 'architectural resurrection' (Desai 2017; see also Gutschow 2006) and, overall, there are few 'protected monuments'.[17]

Third, and importantly, the city ferments with what we may call vernacular forms of heritage: orientalist ideas of the city as unique and timeless have been co-produced over time by a variety of local actors (Desai 2017; Lazzaretti 2019) and are still mobilised and adapted by contemporary Banarasi people to explain the uniqueness of their city. The same sort of imaginary also nurtures the ever mushrooming number of festivals, ceremonies and ritual performances that take place mostly along the riverfront, and target both domestic Hindu crowds and international tourists. Whether completely new or textually sanctioned and revitalised, these can be seen as part of the 'performative' heritage of Banaras (Zara 2016, 120).

Heritage in Banaras, then, is much more malleable than monumental heritage, and we will see that this makes the city fertile ground for the formation of a new heritage regime. Let us now zoom again into the Corridor neighbourhood to look at how notions of heritage circulate and transform there over time.

Heritage at the core of Banaras

In late 2017 and early 2018 I engaged with the predominantly Hindu residents and shopkeepers of the Corridor neighbourhood as a protest movement emerged. Their objections to the project were couched in notions of heritage (*dharohar*). Many said that the rush to development since Modi's victory disregarded the heritage of the city and that Banaras was being turned into another Kyoto – a city with which a partnership agreement had been signed in 2014.[18]

A few hours after Modi's inauguration speech in March 2019, I walked to the site of the event. Several buildings were still standing because some residents continued to resist pressure from government officials to sell. These remaining structures were covered by white cloth – as if they were intruders, out of place and not to be seen – and large signs were placed on them to welcome the Prime Minister [see Figure 1]. On that day, my interlocutors were not impressed by the strident ostentation of the decorations and welcoming signs, nor by the fact that the project they opposed was apparently about to materialise. All talk after the ceremony, however, revolved around the question of encroachment raised in Modi's speech. The 'official' narrative of liberators versus encroachers, eventually sanctioned and communicated by him to the nation as truth, leaped out at them from the rubble of their houses and shops: all now labelled, along with the rest of the material fabric and the lives they had lived therein, as 'encroachment'.

To understand better how troubling and at times paradoxical the narrative of liberators versus encroachers sounded to my interlocutors, we have to take a step back in time to look at the genesis of the Corridor and early mobilisations of heritage in the neighbourhood.

Figure 1. The area on the inauguration day, 8 March 2019. Picture by author.

The KVT as national heritage? First instances of a powerful idea

Rumours about a government plan for the expansion (*vistarikaran*) of the KVT had circulated in the area since at least 1983, when the Kashi Vishvanath Temple Trust (KVTT) – a government body controlled by the UP Department of Religious Affairs – was established by act of Parliament to take over the management of the temple.[19] Some desultory expansion did take place over the years: between 2007 and 2010, for instance, the KVTT annexed two smaller temples located in the vicinity of the KVT and the area underwent a controversial renovation.[20]

Then, in 2013 and 2014, when I began frequenting the area, two buildings on the eastern side of the temple-mosque compound were acquired and partially demolished by the KVTT. These had particular significance because they were adjacent to the house of the ritual specialists in charge of the space between temple and mosque – the Vyas family.

Over the years, the KVTT management had been described to me by several interlocutors as disrespectful of the history and ritual traditions of the temple. In 2016, however, I came across a campaign to have the KVT declared to be 'national heritage' as a way of 'protecting' it from its managers. This campaign was launched by Shatarudra Prakash, a senior leader of the Samajwadi Party (at that time in power in UP), who had already in 2014 addressed such a request to the newly elected Prime Minister Modi.[21] As Prakash explained, the declaration of the KVT as a national heritage would lead to the abolition of the KVTT and put the temple under the 'expert protection' of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI); this, he believed, would ensure the preservation of the temple and put an end to what he claimed was mismanagement and *illegal* encroachment by the KVTT.[22] Prakash's appeal to heritage did not have any effect at that time.

Apart from the acquisition of a few temples and buildings as mentioned above, expansion of the KVT domain had not amounted to much by the time the BJP came to power in UP in March 2017. Then, however, the expansion plans took a novel and ambitious direction, being framed within Modi's stellar development agenda for his constituency and as a priority of the new UP Chief Minister – the controversial monk and champion of Hindutva, Yogi Adityanath.[23] The extent of the area to be acquired around the KVT began to be reported almost daily in the local newspapers, often in contradictory terms,[24] and even the name of the project kept changing[25] –

all this added to the confusion among residents created by longstanding rumours about a temple expansion. An analysis of press reports from this initial period sheds light, however, on keywords associated with it: *vistarikaran*, or expansion; *adhigrahan*, or acquisition; *sundarikaran*, or beautification; and increasingly *vikas*, or development.[26] There is no sign of the project being framed in terms of heritage.

Heritage against expansion and development

By that time, I had become close to the ageing Kedarnath Vyas. who was then the head of the family of ritual specialists mentioned above. I observed his anxiety about the precarious status of his house and his family's role in the area. The struggle of the Vyas family to remain an independent ritual authority had lasted for years, but in summer 2017 the Vyas house was finally demolished in what was a landmark in the implementation of the Corridor (Lazzaretti 2021a).

Then, in December 2017, protests erupted in the neighbourhood as a few previously acquired houses and shops were torn down, initially apparently without notice.[27] As noted above, residents and shopkeepers perceived the Corridor in this phase as, above all, a development project detrimental to the city's soul. By early 2018, protests had intensified and some participants were threatening to self-immolate.[28] The Dharohar Bachao Sangharsh Samiti (Save Heritage Struggle Committee or DBSS) was formed. According to its first leader, senior journalist and well-known BJP supporter Padampati Sharma, the DBBS had the objective of 'saving Banaras' heritage'. *Vikas*, or development, Sharma and many others said repeatedly during DBSS meetings, should not be an excuse for *vinas*, or destruction, of the city's heritage. And heritage was for them found, not just in the KVT, but in the material fabric of their neighbourhood, their ancestral houses and the tiny wayside shrines – a fabric that I have argued emplaced specific ways of living and socialising, and with which they cultivated affective relationships (Lazzaretti 2021a).[29]

A turning point in the making of the Corridor as a heritage project was the appointment of Vishal Singh, already secretary of the Varanasi Development Authority, as new Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the KVTT and main official in charge of the implementation of the Corridor.[30] Singh immediately met the leaders of the DBSS. During an informal meeting in February 2018, he reassured them by saying that only 'encroachment' in the lanes would be removed and that 'no house or temple will be demolished'.[31] Leaders of the DBSS, as Sharma recounted to me, explained to Singh their concerns for landmarks and historic sites, including several temples mentioned in the *Kashikhanda* – a notable Sanskrit glorification of the city, often referred to by contemporary ritual specialists.[32] Singh's attitude seemed to signal an opening towards residents, and this brought some of my shopkeeper interlocutors to discuss how they could clear and reinstate the few inches of public space in front of their shops that was occupied by their merchandise: they were favourable to the removal of that kind of encroachment.

Meanwhile, a first drone survey of the area took place and officials began visiting houses to check property ownership documents and compile a register of buildings to be acquired.[33] Fear among residents and shopkeepers increased, as did their angry demands to save the city's heritage.[34] Local politicians from opposition parties and several university student leaders joined DBSS meetings and attempted to use social media to widen the protest beyond the immediate neighbourhood.

Officials made a few tentative attempts at this time to co-opt notions of heritage: talking about the first drone survey, for instance, Singh suggested that it would facilitate the inclusion of the area on the World Heritage List – a statement that came completely out of the blue and remains unsupported by other evidence of government interest in proposing the area for consideration by UNESCO.[35] A more local (if implicit) heritage regime was also invoked when, in what was perhaps a nod to the protestors, Singh explained that the survey had been done in order to identify the temples mentioned in the *Kashikhanda*. At the same time, however, he reiterated that the

neighbourhood and KVT would remain unchanged.[36] The reference to global heritage was soon co-opted by the protesters, who declared that they would go as far as UNESCO to protect the city's heritage.[37]

As buildings began more rapidly to be acquired and demolished, the rubble and detritus remained where they fell and residents lived for months with a half-broken neighbourhood, as many tried to resist pressure to sell their properties. According to protestors, a supposedly 'Hindu *raj*' – as many described the BJP-led state and central governments – was now destroying not only the houses and shops of a Hindu neighbourhood, but also Hindu deities and temples within it (Lazzaretti 2021a).

In April 2018, *swami* Avimuktesvaranand, a well-known ascetic, began a new movement for the protection of these deities and temples. The *swami* visited the remaining, damaged temples in the neighbourhood and engaged with the residents. He also organised protests against Modi and Yogi in other areas of the city.[38] In an attempt to bring together the various streams of the protest movement and articulate shared demands, the DBSS organised a meeting with both the *swami* and Shatarudra Prakash. *Swami* Avimukteshvaranand, however, strongly opposed the idea that temples and deities should be described as 'heritage' – a term he associates with a 'dead' space, rather than with living (*jagrit*) divine abodes,[39] perhaps not surprisingly in light of the attitude of the post-colonial state towards the separation of 'dead' monuments from 'living religious practices' (Ahmed 2015; Taneja 2017). The embryonic alliance subsequently broke down over that issue.

The Corridor as a heritage zone

Quite ironically, as the leaders of the protest were busy arguing about the definition and applicability of heritage, the UP government began rebranding the Corridor using notions and idioms of heritage more systematically. In September 2018, the Shri Kashi Vishwanath Special Area Development Board Act was passed (UP Act no. 31 of 2018) 'to provide for the establishment of Shri Kashi Vishwanath Special Area Development Board to create, formulate, implement, regulate and maintain the Special Area under its jurisdiction for developing and *maintaining the cultural, spiritual, mythological and architectural aesthetics in such area to promote tourism in consonance with the rich cultural heritage thereof*'.[40]

Initially, co-option of heritage on the ground was quite clumsy. In late 2018 and early 2019, the renaming of the Corridor as 'Vishwanath Heritage Zone'[41] materialised in signs placed all over the demolition ground [see Figure 2] . Other boards also appeared next to 'rediscovered temples' that had once been hidden by residential buildings and at so-labelled 'iconic places' [see Figure 3].

As demolition proceeded, these boards were soon also covered themselves with dust and rubble but they marked newly acquired properties and explicitly declared the Corridor's civilising and conservationist mission of liberating heritage from encroachment. Consider, for instance, the message reported in both Hindi and English on the board in Figure 4: 'This temple became visible and now available for your visit and Darshan after the removal of Resident/Commercial structures of the property No. CK 10/27′. Similar wording was found on all such signs, clearly foregrounding the narrative of liberators versus encroachers.

At the same time, the language and key terms used in reports in local newspapers began shifting. Although the project was still intended to enhance pilgrimage experiences and promote the city as world-class, many reports increasingly focused on the 'rediscovered' temples, illustrating their architectural features and attempting to date them, while at the same time reporting official plans for their conservation and management.[42] A printed booklet with a list of 'rediscovered' temples was also produced and circulated by the KVTT. Many residents lamented, though, that the dates and names attributed to temples in the booklet were wrong or invented.[43] However, the idea of the Corridor as a heritage project had now seen the light of day and Modi's inauguration speech

Figure 2. Work in progress and new sign board for the 'heritage zone', February 2019, Picture by author.

Figure 3. A sign board placed on the way to the cremation ground, February 2019, picture by author.

sanctioned it irrevocably. Press reports about heritage initiatives connected to the Corridor and the revival of 'the old glory of Banaras' began to appear regularly.[44]

In the days following Modi's speech, perhaps as a reaction to the stigma of being called encroachers, some residents came up with other explanations for the previous seclusion of the 'rediscovered' temples. Sharma, for instance, who had abruptly withdrawn from the protest

Figure 4. A sign board placed next to a 'rediscovered temple', February 2019, picture by author.

movement, told me that buildings had been constructed around temples to protect deities from the raids of Muslim invaders. If it wasn't for us, he said repeatedly, Banaras would not be known as the city of temples, but as the city of mosques! Soon, this became a popular narrative among evicted residents and encroachment was thus reappropriated as a kind of heroic gesture, very much in line with mainstream Hindu nationalist narratives about Muslims as temple desecrators.

Discussion: new monuments for the new India

In his work on heritage politics in colonial and postcolonial India, Ahmed (2013) distinguishes historic architecture from monuments, noting that 'the basic function of a monument is to commemorate an idea, event or person' (Ahmed 2013, 72). Importantly, the author points out that monuments are also legal entities and they become so through 'monumentalisation' – a process through which the artistic and historical values of a particular site are identified as commemorative of something that the nation values as worthy of being remembered and transmitted to future generations. However, the history of monuments is neither evolutionary nor linear. By applying Foucault's concept of 'genealogy' to Mughal monuments, Kavuri-Bauer (2011, 5) finds that the 'history of the monument [...] results from the contradictory and contingent rather than the providential'. Monumentalisation, indeed, results from a longer history of practices of representation and contestations of meanings.

I dealt above with the very recent history of representations and contestations around the KVT and its surroundings, showing how an official narrative of the Corridor as the liberation of heritage from encroachment resulted from a layered and counter-intuitive heritage 'game of mutual co-optation' (De Cesari and Herzfeld 2015, 177). A new heritage regime has emerged with the often unwitting participation of residents who mobilised heritage for their own demands well before the authorities rebranded the Corridor as heritage. This regime is attuned with global aesthetics of 'monumental vacuity' (Herzfeld 2006) and aspirations to being 'world-class' (Ghertner 2015) and, although inspired by a mixture of colonial imaginaries about Banaras as the 'timeless city' and 'uncaring natives', it has very little to do with the past, let alone with its conservation.

But what kind of place will the Corridor be when it is finished? While there can be no definitive answer to this question since construction is ongoing, I return now to the idea of 'new monuments' and compare them with already-existing national heritage and its management under the current government.

We have to keep in mind that, quite ironically as pointed out by Lahiri (2012, 295–296), as India and Pakistan 'came to be divided along religious lines, India became the inheritor of a rich Islamic heritage'. Indeed, a large portion of Indian national heritage recalls a heterogeneous, multi-ethnic and multi-religious past that is evidently troubling for Hindu nationalist interpretations of the past and projected future. Although, the Islamic character of architecture sponsored during the Sultanate and Mughal periods has been downplayed through monumentalisation and secularisation (Ahmed 2013; Taneja 2017), tombs, imperial mausoleums and mosques remain unsuitable as representations of the 'new India' envisioned by the current government.

If we follow the above reasoning about monumentalisation, we should also take into account that 'any historical building could be converted into an official National Monument, or alternately, any officially declared National Monument could simply cease to be "a National Monument" at any time' (Ahmed 2013, 72), according to whatever ideas and values a nation wants to commemorate. It is clear that, in the current political climate, there is room for new and more suitable monuments to emerge for the envisioned new India. The desire for new heritage, indeed, is already expressed in the sponsorship of colossal statues of gods and historic figures on which the BJP government has embarked, apparently in order to 'reshape the perception of the past and, in the long run, the writing of history' (Lefèvre 2020, 6). As well, religious 'theme-parks' that nurture middle-class aspirations are not a novelty in neoliberal India (Brosius 2012).

The Corridor too is aligned with the kind of world-class aesthetic outlined above and which lies behind these new heritage creations. I suggest, however, that unlike colossal statues and theme-parks, but in tune with the distinctive features of the monuments discussed above, new monuments such as the Corridor, *commemorate* and in a way *provide evidence for* enduring Hindutva narratives that are foundational for the Hindu *rashtra*. As longstanding targets of liberation campaigns, for instance, both the site of the Corridor and that of the new Ram temple envisioned for Ayodhya continue to nurture politics of fear and fantasies of Hindus as oppressed in their own land (Amin 2002; Udayakumar 2005; Anand 2011). It is not surprising then, that unlike the notable monuments 'adopted' by corporations (Meskell 2020), new heritage creations and new monuments seem to be abundantly funded either through donation campaigns from the public or by the government.[45]

Besides providing possibly disquieting glimpses of the making and functions of new monuments, the case of the Kashi Vishvanath Corridor testifies to the nature of heritage itself. It is chameleon-like, slippery, sometimes paradoxical and can even seem to turn against itself – the residents who first mobilised heritage have now been evicted and are left with having to negotiate their place vis à vis aesthetics of beautification and official definitions of heritage (Cf. Harms 2016; Herzfeld 2017). Subsequent narratives that saw 'hidden' temples as being virtuously protected from Muslim invaders by encroaching residential buildings can be seen as a creative readaptation not only of notions of heritage, but also of encroachment. These attempts could be framed as 'statements by the excluded [. . .] aimed at garnering recognition as legitimate subjects of discourse' such as those of slum dwellers in Delhi (Ghertner 2015, 17), or as a 'strategy of rhetorical resistance to the dominant heritage discourse' such as that enacted by local residents threatened with eviction in Hampi (Bloch 2016, 570). However, I have shown that residents in this case have also informed, if not prompted, those dominant heritage discourses, thus complicating rigid chronologies and binary understandings of heritage-making.

Notes

1. https://www.narendramodi.in/kashi-vikas-yatra, accessed 18 May 2021.

2. Inhabitants of the neighbourhood had diverse caste background and included Brahmans, Baniyas, Khatris and families from so-called 'Other Backward Castes'. A few Dalit and other lower caste families also lived in the neighbourhood, in a small *basti* (settlement) next to the cremation ground.

3. A visual overview of the Corridor is found in a video tweeted by Modi on the inauguration day and available at: https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/watch-pm-modis-dream-project-kashi-vishwanath-corridor-plan/videoshow/68381158.cms, accessed 15 March 2020. More initiatives framed within the journey to development for the city are advertised here: https://www.narendramodi.in/kashi-vikas-yatra#VikasYatra. On Modi's journey to become a *vikas purush*, or development man, see Kaur (2015).

4. For a discussion of the controversial history of the two shrines and the available evidence see Lazzaretti 2021b.

5. Hindutva means Hinduness; the term was firstly used by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (1923), in which India was defined as the land of the Hindus and Indian culture identified with 'Hindu values'. The concept and ideology became the core of Hindu nationalism – an umbrella term that includes several militant groups and political forces, including Modi's BJP.

6. The movement for the 'liberation' of the Babri mosque, allegedly located at the birth place of the Hindu god Ram, had been orchestrated since the 1980s by Hindu nationalist forces, including BJP politicians. The demolition of the mosque sparked riots in several South Asian cities, during which some 2000 people were killed, the majority of whom were Muslims.

7. https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/taj-mahal-court-petition-shiva-temple-1029352-2017-08-12, last accessed 15 March 2020.

8. https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/The-verdict-on-Ayodhya-a-historians-perspective/article15523346.ece, accessed 04March 2021.

9. For an extensive report on the so-called Ayodhya verdict see https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/peace-and-justice/article29938535.ece, accessed 17 November 2020. As for Banaras, a 1991 lawsuit asking for the removal of the mosque was reopened in early 2020 and is ongoing: https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/varanasi/kvt-gyanvapi-mosque-dispute-case-next-hearing-on- oct-3/articleshow/78374164.cms, accessed 15 March 2021.

10. The video and transcript of the speech is available at https://www.narendramodi.in/hi/text-of-pm-s-speech-at-kashi-vishwanath-temple-in-varanasi-uttar-pradesh–544171.

11. Some commentators also made the connection: https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/news/is-the-bjp-planning-an-ayodha-2-in- varanasi-gyanvapi-masjid-stands-in-way-of-connecting-kashi-vishwanath-with-ganga-ghats; and http://twocircles.net/ 2018mar03/421341.html, both accessed 5 March 2021.

12. Some of this history is discussed in Lazzaretti 2021a.

13. An overview of studies of heritage in urban regeneration is found in De Cesari and Dimova (2019) and Meskell (2019).

14. An example is the study by Bloch (2016) of the effects of heritagisation on Hampi in South India. There, inhabitants who were depicted as a threat to material heritage and evicted from the UNESCO World Heritage Site later adopted, more or less successfully, the register of heritage imposed on them.

15. Titles in Hindi newspapers are reported in my translation.

16. https://www.narendramodi.in/kashi-vikas-yatra/detail?section=article&page=2.

17. Monuments in India are legal entities, defined by two pieces of legislation: The Ancient Monuments Preservation Act of 1904 and The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act of 1958.

18. https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/5-areas-identified-for-varanasikyoto-deal/article6785713.ece, accessed 2 March 2021.

19. http://updharmarthkarya.in/booking/pdf/1983UP29.pdf, accessed 7 July 2018.

20. https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-kashi-vishwanath-temple-to-be-expanded-1144816, last accessed 14 September 2020; [https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/varanasi/Four-temple-domes-on-Kashi-Vishwanath-Temple-premises-to-get-gold-plating/articleshow/12914448.cms#:~:text=The%20Tarkeshwar%20Mahadev%20and%20Rani,Singh%20of%20Punjab%20in%201835, accessed 14 September 2020]

21. Posters supporting his campaign and showing images of the temple's golden tower appeared in the streets of the city in 2016. Interviews with Prakash are found in: https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/lucknow/sp-leader-writes-to-modi-declare-kashi-vishwanath-national-heritage/; and in the paper local edition of the *Times of India*, 8 February 2015, p. 6.

22. Prakash had also campaigned in 2006 when the KVTT had portions of the temple repainted with a colour that, according to him, spoilt its antiquity and 'heritage look'. See: https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/attempt-to-spoil-heritage-look-of-kashi-temple/story-4ZyBuPASrbZmARDKFgghAO.html, last accessed on 8 February 2021.

23. On Adityanath's political and criminal background, see Bouillier (2020).

24. For example: https://navbharattimes.indiatimes.com/state/uttar-pradesh/allahabad/kashi-vishwanath-temple-matter/articleshow/58766680.cms; https://navbharattimes.indiatimes.com/state/uttar-pradesh/varansi/development-projects-passed-by-temple-council- for-kashi-vishwanath-mandir/articleshow/62225068.cms; https://www.livehindustan.com/uttar-pradesh/varanasi/story-rejuvenation- of-several-roads-on-the-

excavation-of-vishwanath-temple-1706567.html; https://www.livehindustan.com/uttar-pradesh/varanasi/story-700-meter-two-storey-corridor-will-be-built-for-devotees-in-kashi-vishwanath-temple-1749897.html; https://www.amarujala.com/uttar-pradesh/varanasi/preparation-going-fast-for-ganga-darshan-from-kashi-vishwnath-temple, accessed 05 March 2021.

25. Other names included 'Ganga-Darshan Pathway', 'Baba Darbar' and 'Corridor'.
26. For example, see https://navbharattimes.indiatimes.com/state/uttar-pradesh/allahabad/protest-against-extension-of-kashi-vishvanath/articleshow/58,699,649.cms, accessed 2 March 2021.
27. https://www.livehindustan.com/uttar-pradesh/varanasi/story-vishwanath-street-shoppers-take-out-the-procession-1721298.html, accessed 2 March 2021.
28. https://www.livehindustan.com/uttar-pradesh/varanasi/story-vishwanath-temple-shopkeepers-threatened-self-denial-1753838.html, accessed 2 March 2021.
29. A first report about the attitudes of the residents appeared in: 'A blatant attempt to erase the history of Kashi in the name of development beautification', *Sanmarg* [paper edition] 6 February 2018, p. 3.
30. https://www.livehindustan.com/uttar-pradesh/varanasi/story-vda-secretary-also-responsible-for-ceo-of-viswanath-temple-1798761.html, accessed 5 March 2021.
31. https://www.livehindustan.com/uttar-pradesh/varanasi/story-no-plans-to-shake-houses-vishal-singh-1812218.html, accessed 05 March 2021.
32. On the *Kashikhanda* and its contemporary uses, see Gengnagel 2005 and Reference removed for peer-review.
33. https://www.livehindustan.com/uttar-pradesh/varanasi/story-vishwanath-temple-corridor-houses-will-be-drone-survey-1793050.html, accessed 5 March 2021.
34. [https://www.livehindustan.com/uttar-pradesh/varanasi/story-ganga-pathway-protested-1809454.html, accessed 5 March 2021.
35. https://www.livehindustan.com/uttar-pradesh/varanasi/story-vishwanath-temple-corridor-houses-will-be-drone-survey-1793050.html, accessed 5 March 2021.
36. 'Drone survey to protect the existence of the temple', *Sanmarg* [paper edition], 18 February 2018, p. 3.
37. [https://www.patrika.com/varanasi-news/kashi-citizen-will-protest-to-unesco-for-save-banaras-heritage-1-2388254/], accessed 05 March 2021.
38. 'The Mughals demolished temples, now the government is doing it', *Amar Ujala* [paper edition], 4 April 2018, p. 5; 'Nobody becomes Hindu by wearing saffron', *Amar Ujala* [paper edition], 5 April 2018, p. 6; 'The pilgrimage to save Kashi and temples began from Assi sangam', *Amar Ujala* [paper edition], 17 May 2018, p. 9.
39. 'Clash between giants at DBSS meeting', *Amar Ujala* [paper edition], 19 April 2018, p. 6; and 'The giants came to save heritage and sat fighting', *Jagran* [paper edition], 19 April 2018.
40. My emphasis. The Act can be accessed here: https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/12271/1/31of2018.pdf, last accessed, 5 March 2020.
41. 'The name could be Vishvanath Heritage Zone', *Amar Ujala* [paper edition], 6 March 2019, p. 2.
42. For example, [https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/lost-and-found-varanasi-temple-route-gets-longer/articleshow/ 66,836,682.cms], accessed 9 March 2021; 'Temple built during Gupta period uncovered', 'The culture of Banaras will be visible in the Corridor' and 'All deities reverted in one place', *Hindustan* [paper edition] 1 December 2018, p. 6; 'New Shiv ling found in Lahori Tola', *Hindustan* [paper edition], 2 December 2018, p. 3.
43. 'Temples found are not older than Vishvanath', *Amar Ujala* [paper edition] 3 December 2018, p. 2. 'Naming of temples arbitrary', *Amar Ujala* [paper edition] 3 February 2019, p. 2.
44. For example, 'Arrange for worship at the emerged temples in the Corridor', *Amar Ujala* [paper edition] 9 February 2019, p. 2; 'Ancient images of Radha–Krishna found locked inside house, *Amar Ujala* [paper edition] 16 February 2019; 'Kashi's grandeur will increase from the Corridor', *Amar Ujala* [paper edition] 6 March 2019, p. 2. See also: https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/soon-a-virtual-tour-of-60-ancient-kashi-temples-hidden-for-a-long-time/story-HM6xs4DR6LFhadLB7VIFvM.html; and https://www.organiser.org/Encyc/2020/7/29/Revival-of-the-Lost-Glory-.html, accessed 5 March 2021.
45. On donation campaigns for the Ram temple in Ayodhya see: https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/lucknow-news/rs-2-100-crores-raised-for-ram-temple-so-far-trust-101614561980757.html. On the Corridor project government funding see, for instance, https://www.nbmcw.com/news/up-floating-tender-for-750-cr-kashi-corridor.html.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

Funding

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