Decoration and Death
The Sringar of Baba Shamshan Nath
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# Table of contents

1. **Introduction** ................................................................................................................... 1  
   1.2 Purpose .......................................................................................................................... 2  
   1.3 Theory ............................................................................................................................ 2  
   1.4 Previous research .......................................................................................................... 3  
   1.5 Method .......................................................................................................................... 4  
2. **Location** .......................................................................................................................... 10  
   2.2 The Cremation Ground ................................................................................................. 13  
   2.3 City of Shiva .................................................................................................................. 13  
3. **Sringar** ............................................................................................................................ 16  
   3.2 History ............................................................................................................................ 17  
   3.3 Patronage and Sponsorship ............................................................................................ 20  
4. **The sringar of Baba Shamshan Nath** ............................................................................ 24  
   4.1 First day of Sringar ........................................................................................................ 24  
   4.2 Second day of Sringar, in the temple ............................................................................ 33  
   4.3 Third day of Sringar ........................................................................................................ 35  
   4.4 Dance of the ‘Nagar Vadhu’ .......................................................................................... 38  
5. **The Artists** ....................................................................................................................... 40  
   5.1 The artists during the cultural performance ................................................................... 40  
   5.2 The courtesan in Banaras .............................................................................................. 41  
6. **The Aghori** ....................................................................................................................... 46  
   6.2 Presumed relationship between the *aghori* and prostitutes ........................................ 50  
7. **The Media** ....................................................................................................................... 52  
8. **Conclusion** ..................................................................................................................... 56  
   8.2 Suggestions for further research ................................................................................... 57  
9. **References** ....................................................................................................................... 58  
   9.2 Media references ............................................................................................................. 61
1. Introduction.

‘On one side, there are the burning bodies, on the other there is the joy of celebration.’ This phrase caught my attention of the sringar celebration on India’s main cremation ground. For a while I had tried to find out how the courtesan tradition manifested itself today in North India. As in; who was dancing what and for whom? I so stumbled upon youtube clips of the celebration. These videos along with spectacular headlines awoke my curiosity. The way the sringar was presented online was a mix of modern dance culture, old traditions and religious connotations. However, what I encountered in the field was much different to what I had expected. The celebration was more than the vulgar aspects which had been highlighted. While at first glimpse the sringar of Baba Shamshan Nath\(^1\), has the dance performance of sex workers, or nagar vadhus as its main focus, reality proved much different. A sringar is actually a three day event, an annual celebration held in connection to the restoration of a temple. The dance of the nagar vadhus, is just one aspect of it, with other elements including religious processions and rituals, local folk music performances, the distribution of prasad and an elaborate decoration of the temple. In this particular sringar, even an aghori had decided be a part of the celebration, both by public display during the procession but also by holding more secluded rituals parallel to the celebration.

While the term sringar shows up occasionally in the literature, it is mostly in general terms. Nita Kumar describes it mainly from a social context and while Scott L. Marcus has his focus on the musical aspect, he still largely follows Kumars reasoning. These were the only two authors I found who gave any special focus to the sringar celebrations. Neither of them goes into detail and analyses one event in particular. While the sringar of Baba Shamshan Nath followed the structure as described by Kumar, there were many factors that would have been lost if I were to only given an overview of the celebration. By actively following the artists, the patrons, the devotees and the pandit involved in the event I was able to not only see the celebration as a set structure. In addition I gained knowledge of how a sringar can be celebrated and how the people involved in it connect to the larger cultural and political scene in Banaras. The study of one sringar could thus help to fill a gap in our knowledge of annual Hindu celebrations. Most temples in India do have a yearly celebration of some kind, albeit not always referred to as sringar. Here it was the location and the participants who I believe rendered this particular celebration unique.

This study is arranged with a top-down approach, with the purpose of giving the reader an overview of the subject before any subsystems are introduced. The first section addresses the process of field work and methodology. The second part gives an overview of Banaras and the location in which the event takes place. Section three introduces the concept of sringar, while section four gives a detailed description of the celebration. In section five a closer look at the artists performing at the event is given, and section six has the same purpose but for the aghori.

\(^1\) Baba, here meaning father-figure, wiser man, god. Maha means great, grand. Shamshan, from Sanskrit śmāśāna, implies the cremation ground and nath meaning roughly lord. Together Maha Shamshan Nath becomes ‘Great Lord of the cremation ground’ or Lord of the cremation ground of Manikarnika ghat. When my informants speak they use different words but with the same connotation, for example masan nath instead of shamshan nath. Sometimes they will speak of Baba Shamshan Nath, ‘Wise Lord of the cremation ground’ and so on. Often Shiva is referred to simply as Baba. The temple in which the ceremonies took place is named after Maha Shamshan Nath, while the sringar was held for Baba Shamshan Nath.
Subsequently, in section seven the media's role is discussed in relation to the actual event. Finally, section eight will analyse and bring together any conclusion which may be drawn from the study, as well as giving suggestions for further research.

1.2 Purpose.

The aim of this study is to observe and study a religious celebration in Banaras, in terms of its execution and its participating artists and patrons. The focus is on an annual temple festival, the sringar of Baba Shamshan Nath. I will look at how the role of artists and patronage may have changed over time, but also give a detailed description of the actual celebration and the people related to it. This would include, location, artists, sponsors and media attention related to the sringar. While the main purpose is descriptive and narrative, I will also touch on the subject of how a tradition may be created, since this was an integral part of the sringar.

1.3 Theory

Peter Berger’s article *Theory and Ethnography in the Modern Anthropology of India* discusses the changes in anthropological theory from Indian independence until today. In it he argues that theorizing should be held in dialogue with ethnography, hence weight should also be put on ethnographic descriptions. It should not rely too heavily on abstract theories. Should it do so it risks becoming a “self-referential mind game” instead of a gained knowledge of people’s experiences. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz developed ideas of ‘thick description’ the idea of a semiotic interpretation of cultures. In such an interpretation the researcher not only describes what he or she sees and experiences, but interprets the meaning of it. This is done through symbols, such as language and what has been learnt from locals. I have considered this during my fieldwork and so contextualized my observations, put my findings in perspective and to bring forth my informants’ views rather than my own. To a large extent my work will be descriptive.

Nevertheless, relying only on descriptions, may result in knowledge being missed out. The difference between cultures that, despite being a more globalized world, still exists may make it hard for the reader to understand. Richard King argues that while explanations may cause some distortion of the material it is still necessary for understanding the research. I have chosen to have a post-colonial approach to my fieldwork, drawing on works by King, Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak. Said’s Orientalism discusses the dichotomy and power relation between ‘the Orient’ and the West. Where the portrayal of the Orient in anthropology, in narrative or by scholars may be seen as a form of colonialism, in a way even creating the Orient. King puts forth the importance of self-reflexivity and a methodology which does not focus on differences, or the Other. Instead to he believes the researcher should “think beyond traditional intellectual, disciplinary and cultural boundaries. . .” One of the most known scholars of post-colonialism is Spivak. Her work on the subaltern examines closely the prerogative interpretive and the power relations therein.

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2 Berger 2012:326  
3 Geertz 1973  
4 King 1999: 91  
5 Said:1978  
6 King 1999:218
Spivak discusses the different forms of representation, speaking for, as in a political sense, or portraying.\(^7\) My attempt has been to portray my informants, by letting their voices be heard as heterogeneous as they may be.

Here, my primary material consists of observations and human interactions rather than textual sources, where I aimed to have my informants provide the explanations for their actions. The choice of informants is also important, and I have tried to work across the social classes and gender, allowing them to create their own narrative. Still, I cannot detach myself into complete objectivity which manifests itself in the manner in which I interpret the information given to me or the questions I choose to ask. Instead I have attempted to make transparent the process and difficulties I faced during my fieldwork.

### 1.4 Previous research

As one of the oldest cities in the world Banaras has had people coming to study the Vedas or on religious pilgrimages for over 2500 years.\(^8\) For a student of the history of religions, it is a mecca for knowledge of Indian culture. Because of its status, many scholars have taken interest in the city. One of the more famous contemporary writings on the city is Diana Eck’s *Banaras, City of Light* in which she provides extensive background knowledge of the city. Her main sources being both textual tradition and the city itself. Furthermore, Jonathan Parry has carried out extensive ethnographic studies of Banaras and Manikarnika ghat, with a special focus on the rituals and economy regarding death. Peter Manuel did in the early 90’s ethnographic research on Bhojpuri music and North Indian popular music industry. A study conducted mainly by interviews with people in the music business.\(^9\)

Pallabi Chakravorty has studied the change in kathak dance and the women who practice it today.\(^10\) Amelia Maciszewski has conducted research amongst prostitutes and dancers in Banaras.\(^11\) Madhu Trivedi gives an historical overview of the Hindustani tradition of dance.\(^12\) Both Ron Barret and Roxanne Gupta has studied the aghori group of Kina Ram, but with different approaches.\(^13\) The above mentioned literature all offer bits and pieces of knowledge relatable to the *sringar*. However, the most relevant literature was Nita Kumar’s *The Artisans of Banaras*, which I was lucky to obtain by personal contact with the author. While other literature can provide information of different elements of the event, hers is the only book I found which describes the *sringar* celebration in an historic context. Her information is based on her own fieldwork including extensive archival research and interviews. I found there was a huge gap in literature on *sringar*, indeed this term was very rarely mentioned at all. On the other hand, during my time in Banaras I was able to witness several of these celebrations and while discussing the term with my assistants it seemed to be a very common way of celebrating. As annual celebrations in temples are common too, it may simply be that they are referred to in different terms than as *sringars*.

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\(^7\) Spivak 1988:70ff  
\(^8\) Eck 2015:4  
\(^9\) Manuel 1993:xvii  
\(^10\) Chakravorty 2007  
\(^11\) Maciszewski 2007  
\(^12\) Trivedi 2012  
\(^13\) Gupta 1993, Barret 2007
Kumar also justifies the choice of subject for her book as a way of bringing out people’s culture, letting the subaltern be heard and creating a larger picture of lower class culture.\textsuperscript{14} A second author bringing up \textit{sringar} is Scott L. Marcus,\textsuperscript{15} with a focus on the folk-music genre \textit{biraha}. His contribution is largely related to musical history and religious folk music. Any conclusions regarding the social aspects of \textit{sringar} he mainly bases on Kumars previous research. I had troubles relating to previous research, as I continually compared what I saw or heard in the field to what I read of in the literature. While I could recognize certain structures or rituals described I was often confused to what authors would put their focus on and what the people living in the situation acknowledged the most.\textsuperscript{16}

\subsection*{1.5 Method}

The research has been conducted during a three month period in Banaras, Uttar Pradesh, India, spanning between mid-February until mid-May, giving me two months before the event and one month after. To my help I had two assistants, who did not have much experience as translators or research assistants but a good knowledge of the city, different organisations and the Banarsi culture. My own previous training was meagre, I had only made one day visits to temples and read books about different methodical approaches. This project gave me the opportunity to try out the role of ethnographer, while still in the protected role of a university student. To find information of the event and to learn of the artistic traditions in Banaras a variety of methods were used. These were largely based on methods outlined in Charlotte Aull Davies \textit{Reflexive ethnography}\textsuperscript{17} and Martyn Hammersly and Paul Atkinsons \textit{Ethnography: principles in practice}.\textsuperscript{18} I experienced researching my subject as a treasure hunt were I was trying to gather information and find key people. I believe this feeling was enforced by some of the informants being incredibly helpful on the one hand, while on the other hand denying me access to some groups. Albeit sometimes difficult, disappointing and frustrating it has been a journey to experiment with different methods not only get to know my informants, but also see how I myself reacted in certain circumstances, finding my own weakness as a researcher. I will thus keep a self-reflexive approach as to the methods used, and how the people involved in the research had an impact on it. The following section explains the why, how and when of the different methods used.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Kumar 1988:3-4
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Marcus 1989, 1995
  \item \textsuperscript{16} For example, elaborate rendering of the \textit{rudra abhisekha} ritual, compared to devotees barely acknowledging the ritual as it was performed.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} 2008
  \item \textsuperscript{18} 2009
\end{itemize}
1.5.2 Ethics

I have attempted to work in line with the Swedish Research Council’s ethical principles for research. Every interview has started with an introduction of myself, as a student from Stockholm University in Sweden who wants to learn about the sringar, the performing arts or aghori culture with the purpose of writing an essay. Theoretical considerations was not given, partly because I initially did not know what theoretical implications could be made from my findings, but also because I needed to express my intentions in a “language that is meaningful to the participants.” The informants were free to ask any questions about the project, which they often did during the interview. They were also provided with the phone number to me or the assistant present during the interview. As many of my informants was illiterate, and I did not want the interviews to feel too official, consent was always given orally. However, the sringar is an official event which receives quite a bit of media attention. Likewise, the location of the event is important for its context. This means that the identity of some informants cannot be anonymous. Whenever a name is used, this has been approved by that person. More than often they were happy to provide their name as it would serve as publicity for them. While these apply only to a few of the informants, those in higher societal positions, the majority of my informants will remain anonymous by their own desire. Especially for the dancers this was important, which is why any photo of the dance will be of women I did not interview, even though videos and photos of them can be found online. Nevertheless, while interviewing were more straightforward with me openly asking for consent, and providing information, participant observation proved more tricky. Also, the more time I could spend with an informant the more personal the conversation would become. For this reason I explicitly asked if I was allowed to write about what they told me. Here there was a balance of what was said to a friend, and what was said to a researcher. As much of the information I gathered from Manikarnika ghat is obtained in such a way, I have chosen to write about sensitive subjects very generally. Finally, my informants were not always in agreement with each other, or even held any warm feelings between themselves. This, sometimes put me in the crossfire, having my informants share their negative feelings against each other with me. Here I always tried to remain neutral, and I have chosen to include in this essay only what is relevant or what I witnessed with my own eyes. This as not to take anyone’s party, or disrespect my informants.

19 Vetenskapsrådet 2002
20 Aull-Davies 55. One example of this was with my interaction with the aghori, here I worked without a translator and by invitation from another informant. It was this informant who told the aghori about my project in the following, paraphrased words, “she has travelled very far to learn of aghori and to write a book, you remember I say you before” He had explained this to him earlier, thus providing me with the access to their group.
21 See Aull-davies 2008:60
22 I should note here that some of the organisers have had their name and photo in both newspaper, as well as on large bannerrolls hanging all the way down to the burning ghat for weeks before and after the event.
23 See Aull-Davies 2008:56
24 A discussion on similar issues may be found in Hammersly and Atkinson 2007:221ff
1.5.3 On language barriers and translations

Aull Davies stresses the importance of language, but acknowledges at the same time the difficulties faced acquiring proficiency level in a new language.\textsuperscript{25} My much limited skills in Hindi would turn out be a great barrier. However by attempting to learn the language and grasp basic concepts I could create a rapport and deeper connection with my informants. In much of the ethnographic literature I processed the authors have worked thorough translators.\textsuperscript{26} However, while they are sometimes mentioned, the translators were often made invisible in the process and the final polished product would rarely deal with the complications in using an interpreter. Bogusia Temple and Alys Young and Temple and Rosalind Edwards discusses the involvement of a translator, and how their presence could be taken into account in the analysis.\textsuperscript{27} I have therefore chosen to make visible my translators in the written product, as there is no denying that their personas had an effect on the research. The assistants or translators used were male, middle aged and middle class. One being higher up the social scale with higher competence in English, the second being more forward and open minded to my research, but with less experience. At one occasion, a young female university student was used. The relationship formed, or reluctance against such between the assistants and the informants were useful as I could better understand the social stigma associated with some of my informants.\textsuperscript{28} Temple and Edwards argues that the involvement of an interpreter and the analysis as such could enrich qualitative research.\textsuperscript{29} I found the use of translators, albeit being a necessity, fairly hard as it meant giving up some control of the research process. Nothing is value free, and with translators and assistants their values also need to be considered. As for linguistic barriers, my assistants often focused on content, and in obtaining answers to my pre-prepared questions. This leading to meaningful semantics being lost. Aull Davies refers to the combination of participant observation and interviewing as ethnographic interviewing. Here the context of the interview is given more importance.\textsuperscript{30} Hence, by carefully observing what was being said, the body language used and other environmental factors and afterwards discussing the interview with the assistant present I have tried to compensate for what may have been lost in translation.

1.5.4 Interviews.

Much of the information I gathered was through informal or semi-structured interviews. Some of my informers would have a university education, others would be illiterate. The one thing they all had in common was their friendliness and kindness. Wherever I went I was well received, being offered chai, cold drinks or food. Interviews were conducted mainly in the informants’ houses, but also at my house or even in a crowded hotel room at 4 a.m. While I tried my best to speak to as many women as possible, I became very well aware of the male interpretive prerogative.

\textsuperscript{25} \cite{AullDavies2008:87-88}
\textsuperscript{26} For example, Barret 2007, Parry, 1004
\textsuperscript{27} Temple and Young 2004, Temple and Edwards 2002
\textsuperscript{28} For example, the assistant who was higher up the social scale initially refused to come to the areas were the women I wished to interview lived.
\textsuperscript{29} Temple and Edwards 2002
\textsuperscript{30} Aull Davies 2008:122 ff
In the beginning of my fieldwork I was nearly always referred to an older man who supposedly held much knowledge of the topic. Neither can one get away from that the place, Manikarnika Ghat is a male dominated area. While I met with about fourteen women, interviews were held with only eight of them. The reasons being either that one woman would take the lead, thus speaking for her friends, or there being a man in the same room who would answer the questions instead of the interviewee, or finally because of language barriers. Often these interviews would produce shorter answers and a less rich material. Here the fault is mine; I had organised a female translator, but because of the difficulties in planning and organising interviews she came with me only once. Only with two women I managed to meet with for a second interview. All women were artists, varying from classical dancers, bhojpuri singers to dancers as they call themselves, or nagar vadhu as the media calls them. On the male side I would have interviewed around 13 men, and had interactions with many more. There were more variation on the male side, from leaders of NGO organisations, Babas, drum boys, the organisers of the event, devotees of both Shiva and an aghori baba, one man from the Kina Ram Ashram, and one performer. Much of the time I spent in the temple or on the ghat meaning that the everyday interaction and observations were mostly with men. My aim in choice of informants has been, in correspondence with Aull Davies; to find different views and interpretations, instead of a generalized 'truth.'

I entered the field, with the naïve assumption that I would somehow be able to schedule and conduct the interviews in private, with my notebook, translator and recorder. Instead I always had to make a decision, and tread with care as to whether I should use these tools. All in all, this resulted in many variations in the quality of the interviews. At the more formal end of the scale, the interview was conducted alone with one assistant, recorded then translated with the second assistant. At the middle were interviews held with one assistant translating and me taking notes often with the informants’ family, friends or other informants in the same room. This was the most common form of interview for the dancers, as I only gained access to their community at the end of my fieldwork. I was at this point most grateful I was able to meet them. At the most informal end of the scale were unstructured interviews were no notes could be taken at all, mainly with the aghori and his followers. Taking notes here would have made my informants reluctant to talk. These very informal interviews which more bordered on participant observation were conducted without a translator. Language shortages and the high consumption of ganja by my informants thus made some of the material inadequate. Neither did my informants always wish to repeat what they said or clarify. The structure of interviewing also represent a falling social scale. With the formal end being more educated informants, familiar with research while at least some of the informants on the informal end were illiterate. It was not always the more formal interviews that produced the best or most interesting knowledge. Instead having several informal interviews, taking the time to know the informants, observing and letting them tell me their story often proved more fruitful. Former research assistant Raknesh Pathak makes a point that “The opinions of local people who may actually be more knowledgeable about a certain topic, but who do not fit into the Western image of reliability, are disregarded.”

31 Aull Davies 2008:109
32 Pathak. (unknown) I met Pathak in Banaras and he told me about his work as a research assistant, when I was there he was currently working for the discovery channel covering religious events.
Some of my informants may easily have been dismissed as crazy or unreliable but I often found them to have the strongest attachment to Shiva or the divine and thus carried with them a different kind of knowledge than I would find in any academic book on the subject. Furthermore, Hammersley and Atkinson\(^{33}\) writes that having previously been part of participant observation, less effort is needed when creating rapport with an informant before an interview. Had I not met the interviewee before, first impression and presentation were more important. My personal preference was to meet with my informants several times, having an initial interview with a translator, then observing or simply spending time with the informant on my own, followed by a second interview. This approach gave me a chance to see variations in their answers but also to formulate different questions as a rapport was built. In all instances, the second interview would be much more fruitful, elaborate and personal. Unfortunately, sometimes I would only have one chance for an interview and could thus not gain the confidence more elaborate answers would demand.

1.5.5 Participant observations and self-reflexivity.

Observing, participating and sharing moments of my informants lives was important to better understand the context of the *sringar* celebration and the people involved in it. Apart from observing the three day event I spent much time in the temple, taking part in its everyday routine. I joined my informants for family celebrations in their home, stayed with them on a plastic cover on the other side of Ganga, shared *prasad* or just took time discussing life on the burning ghats. I also took the opportunity to follow my informants to other celebrations they performed in, and to other events referred to as *sringar*. This helped me put in perspective what I witnessed during the event, following Aull Davies advice that the more methods used, the better the validity of the research.\(^{34}\) Participating in the public events or ceremonies, my presence would not have had any more impact than an ordinary observer.\(^{35}\) The smaller the group or happening the more my persona would have influenced the results. Nevertheless, by analysing the dichotomy of how I was treated compared to other members of a group I could gain useful insights which would have been looked over if I had been a man.

By spending time in the temple and on the burning ghat I gained substance as a person and was seen as trustworthy enough to be granted access to *aghori* group. In that group, people were deferred from calling me mam, the *thum* construction was used when addressing me and I was often greeted as Bom Kali. As for the group of artists, my access was mainly granted by a senior male singer who proved to be an invaluable gatekeeper. By his grace I could meet with the female dancers in the comfort of their own homes, away from the medias attention.

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\(^{33}\) Hammersley, Martyn & Atkinson, Paul 2007:109  
\(^{34}\) Aull Davies 2008:96  
\(^{35}\) See Aull Davies 2008:83-84
1.5.6 Media

The *sringar* of *Baba Shamshan Nath* receives its fair share of media attention. By comparing what is written in media to my observations and interviews I aim to discern more of the purpose of the event. The main reason for using such unreliable articles is to see how the celebration is portrayed to the public, and how this effects the general perception of the *sringar*. Media renders it quite exotic and highlights the more striking features of the event. While some articles have been translated from Hindi, most are in English. Here the focus are on which features are prominent, which vocabulary is used, and who is chosen to speak. As there are numerous smaller accounts of the event to be found online, more or less trustworthy I have chosen to focus on the following journals:

*Dainik Jagran*, the most sold newspaper in Varanasi, *Times of India*, *Indian Express*, *Hindustani Times*, *One India*, and *India today*. While the first newspaper was obtained and translated by my assistant during the time of the event the others are online sources. I have searched in their digital archives for the following words: Nagar Vadhu, Mehfil, Manikarnika Ghat, Dance program, Maha Shamshan Nath, ritual dance, salvation, Sringar. Videoclips of the celebration were also used from the following channels: *News24*, *Live VNS* and *Wild Films India*.

To complement my ethnographic findings some archival work was carried out. As an attitude change towards dancing girls seem to have taken place in the 50’s, my translators helped me find a few articles from the paper *Aaj* which could confirm my informants’ renderings. However searching the archives through the days of *Chaitra Navrati* in the 50-60s to find articles of the *sringar* proved unfruitful, as we failed to find any renderings of it. One possible reason that I could not find any articles may be that the *sringar* was much smaller than it is now, and thus did not render the same attention. Because of that my focus has instead been directed to more recent media articles.

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36 *Chaitra* is the first month of the Hindu calendar, corresponding roughly to March-April in the English one. *Navratri*, is the festival of the goddess, (mainly Durga) a nine day festival normally taking place in the month of *Chaitra*, hence *Chaitra Navratri*. This festival is also celebrated in the autumn, around September-October. While the *sringar* did not seem to be intertwined with the goddess festivities, the time of *Chaitra* is considered auspicious.
2. Location

To better understand the contexts of the Bahá'í Shamshan sringar, knowledge of location is important. Banaras is one of the oldest cities in the world, and has been a centre of culture for over 2500 years.\(^\text{37}\) Manikarnika ghat, were the sringar takes place is in itself considered very auspicious and bears a lot of history. Perceptions and values related to the celebration may best be understood by knowledge of its spatial properties. I will focus here on the renderings of Eck on Banaras, Parry on the cremation ghat and Rana P.B Singh on sacred spaces. Furthermore, accounts from my informants will reflect their own thoughts and relation to the location.

Banaras is known for being the most famous tirtha in India. A tirtha could roughly be referred to with our western vocabulary as a sacred place. Banaras being the main tirtha, a city on its own but also incorporating all seven cities which stand out as tirthas.\(^\text{38}\) While all cities may bestow liberation, it is also said that death in any of the other cities, would result in rebirth in Banaras. One may look at a tirtha as a crossing place between heaven and earth.\(^\text{39}\) For this reason it is believed that “one’s prayers are more quickly heard, one’s petitions more readily fulfilled and one’s rituals more likely to bring manifold blessings.”\(^\text{40}\) The Skanda Purana refers to the place as “the most excellent Tirtha. . . . It is well-known in all the three worlds. It is capable of uplifting the three worlds.”\(^\text{41}\) Parry’s informant describes a tirtha as a place where you instantly can gain the fruits of your practice.\(^\text{42}\) Some of my informants would use the word tirtha to describe Banaras and Manikarnika ghat, even saying that other tirthas were getting powers\(^\text{43}\) from the cremation ghat.\(^\text{44}\) One explained to me that before, Maha Shamshan was known as Manikarnika tirth. Most of my informants would talk about the power of the area, and the power one gained when spending time there. I was often referred to as being very blessed to be able to come to the ghat every day, meaning that access was not for everyone. At the same time Eck sees the tirtha as a place more accessible to everyone than performing expensive Brahmanical rituals. Neither does a pilgrimage to a tirtha hold any restrictions regarding caste or gender, but may be seen “as a place where one crosses the ordinary boundaries of caste and sex.”\(^\text{45}\)

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\(^{37}\) Eck 2015:4
\(^{38}\) Ayodhya, Mathura, Maya, Kashi (Banaras), Kanchi, Avantika and Dvaraka
\(^{39}\) Eck 2015:34
\(^{40}\) Eck 2015:35
\(^{41}\) Skanda Purana. Book 11. Chapter 84. Verse 85
\(^{42}\) Parry 1994:20
\(^{43}\) Sakti being the word used here
\(^{44}\) Some would say the Manikarnika ghat, including the cremation ground, other would speak of the kund.
\(^{45}\) Eck 1981:368
Manikarnika ghat marked out on a map by Singh.⁴⁶

On Manikarnika ghat lays the Manikarnika kund, a pond or pool filled with water during the wet season with stairs descending into it.⁴⁷ This kund is ladden with mythology and said to be the world first pool and the first tirtha. It is known as the tirtha’s tirtha and to have the most power of them all.⁴⁸ While I only observed activity on a couple of occasion around the kund,⁴⁹ its history is well worth knowing. The most common story as shared by my informants and my assistants is that a mani, a jewel fell from Parvatis earring into the kund giving it the name Manikarnika.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Singh 2002:88
⁴⁷ There are several kunds around Banaras, for example Lolark kund or Krim kund.
⁴⁸ Eck 2015:242ff
⁴⁹ At one occasion rudra abhisheka was perfomed on a goddess birthday, which goddess depending on who I asked, but most being related to/incarnations of Parvati. On this day many families witnessed the ritual and the kund was heavily decorated with flowers and pink and purple balloons. Decorations which, may be referred to as sringar. On a day adjacent to this, people engaged in a mid-day bath in the kund. Eck mentions what I believe is the same or a similar celebration as the sringara of the kund 2015:247
⁵⁰ A more common rendering is that the whole earring fell.
In a story from the *Kashi Khanda*, as rendered by Eck, Vishnu, himself created by Shiva and Shakti dug the well. Shiva, pleased with Vishnus austerities and devotion, happily shook his head and his jewelled earring fell into the well.\textsuperscript{51} The *Siva Purana* also brings up Manikarnika. In that story Shiva creates a great city, but without any attributes. It does, however catches Vishnu’s interest:

Occupying it with a desire for creation and meditation, Vishnu performed penance for a long time. Due to his exertion various currents of water began to flow. The void was pervaded by the water-currents. Nothing else was seen. On seeing it and thinking “What is this wonderful thing in sight” Vishnu shook his head. Then a jewel fell from in front from the ear of the lord. It became the great holy centre named Manikarnika.\textsuperscript{52}

As the well is said to be dug out by Vishnu at the beginning of time, it carries great symbolism of the world’s creation. The cremation pyres burn adjacent to the *kund* which means that the sacredness of the place comes from both the world’s creation and its destruction.\textsuperscript{53} Opposites and dichotomies seem to be an integral part of the city and the ghat. It does not pose any disturbances or contradictions in the minds of my informants, instead it is part of the natural order. It is, after all the city of Shiva. In Matthew Sherring’s accounts he describes the believed powers of the well, where by bathing in it, “There is no sin so heinous or abominable, but, in popular estimation it is here effaced” and that “of all places in Hindostan, this well is held, by many, to be the most, or amongst the most, efficacious way of bestowing salvation.”\textsuperscript{54} Another important myth both Eck and Sherring bring up from the *Kashi Khanda* is when Shiva granted Vishnu boons. The boons chosen are all important to the idea of Banaras. Vishnu asked that all living beings would be liberated in Kashi and that all sacrifices and worship would lead to moksha. Liberation would be given to everyone in the city, without the performance of severe austerities.\textsuperscript{55} Related to Manikarnika *kund* is thus all the elements which make Banaras so precious. In this way mythology and history confirm the importance and auspiciousness of the location, especially in relation to sin. As the *Skanda Purana* reads “This glorious Manikarnika is the Glory of Salvation itself directly.”\textsuperscript{56}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[\textsuperscript{51}] Eck 2015:242-243, the same myth is also found in Sherring 1868:68. Originally from the Kashi Khanda, chapter 26, verses 1-65
\item[\textsuperscript{52}] Siva Purana. Part 3, chapter 22, verses 12-14
\item[\textsuperscript{53}] Eck 2015:238
\item[\textsuperscript{54}] Sherring 1868:67
\item[\textsuperscript{55}] Eck 2015:244, Sherring 1868:68-69, originally from Kashi Khanda, chapter 26, verses 66,67 and 69.
\item[\textsuperscript{56}] Skanda Purana Vol. 11, chapter 84, verse 101
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
2.2 The Cremation Ground

Banaras is also known as the *Maha Shamshana*, the great cremation ground. Compared to other cremation grounds around India, here the grounds are seen as auspicious. Both Manikarnika ghat and Harischandra ghat being located centrally, by the riverside. In the *Skanda Purana* the meaning of the *Shamshana* is explained:

The word Sma means 'dead body'. Sana means 'lying down'. O sage, those who are skilful in the use of words and their meanings explain the derivation of the word Smasana thus. Kasi: is called 'Mahasmasana' because the great Bhûtas (elements) lie down here like corpses. Hence it is a great Smasana (cremation ground).\(^{57}\)

Even though death in Banaras may be auspicious, with bodies being carried through the city a daily sight there were still some polluting factors involved. The people who came with dead bodies were regularly chased out of the temple as they were not clean enough to enter. Only after a purifying bath in Ganga were they welcome. This was the belief of people, rather than that of Shiva, since in his aghori form he would not deny them access.

When I entered the area for the first time I was quickly approached by various self-proclaimed guides who told of the fire here that never stops. Depending on who you speak to, the fire has been from the beginning of time, thousands of years or simply always. A bit above the cremation ground is a small pyre which I understood to be the original fire. Later on my informants would also tell me that this fire never has stopped. That it is a miracle, no matter how heavy the rain will fall the fire works like “a cream” and will never be stopped, but only get stronger. The same informant also stated that no natural disasters\(^{58}\) occurred here. Furthermore, wood from the cremation pyres were brought into the *Maha Shamshan* temple, there it was used for *yagna*, fire sacrifice, cooking of *prasad*, purification and cleaning. The ashes were both ingested and painted on one’s forehead. Most commonly with the three stripes of Shiva. The aghori I met would bring logs over to the other side of Ganga for his rituals. The daily use of both the cremation ashes and water from Ganga, also ingested and used for purification, showed how closely intertwined beliefs were into the site. By drinking small amount of Ganga and tasting the ashes I was also told that I gained power from Shiva.

2.3 City of Shiva

Banaras is known as the city of Shiva. One of the organisers told me that whoever comes to this town, he comes to Lord Shiva as this is his city, and it sits on his trident. Seemingly located beyond earth, Wilbert Gesler and Margaret Pierce offers interpretations of his trident as representing either the three hills on which Banaras is situated or as the three worlds, the netherworld, earth, and heaven. The conclusion being that it transcends everything else.\(^{59}\) Being in Banaras, especially by spending time on the cremation ghat, one quickly realizes how strong Shiva’s presence is, and how important he is to the people on the ghat. Shiva on the cremation ghat is there in the form of the aghor, the ascetic who has renounced family life and now dwells on the cremation ground. This in contrast to another aspect of Shiva, were he is the loving husband to Parvati. However, even if he is worshipped in his aghor form, Parvati still remains

\(^{57}\) Skanda Purana Vol. 10, chapter 30, verse 103-104

\(^{58}\) Here earthquakes

\(^{59}\) Gesler and Pierce 2000:225
present as an image in the temple, but also in the way my informants speak of them together, as a married couple. While these roles may contradict each other, the holiness of Shiva seems to go beyond and traditional and conventional values.60

If death in Banaras is liberation, it is very much because of Shiva. When a person dies Shiva whispers the tarak mantra in his or her ear. It may be likened to the way a guru conveys wisdom to his disciple.61 As Shiva gives the mantra, it is also said that all the “fruits of past actions are destroyed.”62 Meaning that all sin, all bad deeds go away. As Parry puts it “as a single match burns ten thousand kilograms of cotton.”63 In one version rendered to me, Shiva takes the dying persons head onto his lap, and thereafter whispers the tarak mantra. At the same time, the Goddess Parvati fans him with her Sari. The same treatment a child would have, when coming to his mother and fathers house. In this way Lord Shiva gives the tarak mantra to the dead bodies so that they can obtain moksha. There is of course the inevitable question of what moksha would imply. Parry sees it as becoming free from, or freedom from, the more salient question being from what exactly. Many versions occur, one commonly held is freedom from the cycle of rebirth. Others see it as the souls gets integrated with the universal spirit in the same way as water mixes with water, or as coming to heaven.64 The Skanda Purana reads:

The other holy spots of salvation make Kāśī accessible. If one does not get released . . . even after reaching Kāśī, he cannot get salvation even if he visits millions of other holy spots.65

These beliefs are thus integral to understand how and why the media, the organisers and some of the leading dancer claim that they perform on the cremation ground for a better life next life.

Rana P.B Singh has written extensively about geography, sacred spaces and Banaras. I will not go into detail in his in-depth analysis of cosmology and geography but rather profit from his knowledge of space to confirm and understand the sacrality of Banaras and Manikarnika ghat. As for Singh:

The idea of sacrality is one of the earliest forms of perceived realities when human beings attempted to understand the power and spirit of place and to satisfy his quest in search of his embeddedness with the Nature.66

Here, place is used to see how religion or sacrality may begin. A place might carry a particular meaning or importance. By these special attributes one would draw inferences, allocating a spiritual belief upon the place. While he deals mostly with sacred geography I find his ideas of the spatial and social construct quite interesting.67 In short, it is humans, who by their beliefs project such faith unto different sites. The sacredness of a location is thus not only the location in itself but rather how it is perceived by the living.

60 Eck 2015:98
61 Eck 2015:331
62 Gutschow 1994:198
63 Parry 1994:22
64 Parry 1994:26
65 Skanda Purana. Vol. 10 Chapter 6 Verse 71
66 Singh 2010:3
67 See Singh 2010:8ff
From the experience I gathered in Banaras, its auspiciousness and status came from three main factors, its location, geography and its long history. However, this all came to life by its inhabitants. In the city nearly every conversation or encounter, the music played and its festivities breathed Shiva, Ganga and Banaras. Thus I never once doubted the presence of Shiva in the city, who came alive by the city’s population and its pilgrims.

Singh refers to this as a dimension of consciousness, where “various myths, folk believes and rituals that make the consciousness always alive, active and expanding.”68 On another note, it should be added that Banaras and Manikarnika ghat are not always favoured for cremation. Often the proximity of another pilgrimage site will be the deciding factor of where a body is cremated or where the ashes are spread.69

![Shiva statue](image)

Shiva gives the tarak mantra. From the temple of Maha Shamshan Nath. Photo: Julia Ask

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68 Singh 2010:9
69 Srivastava and Srivastava 1997:829
3. Sringar

This section will explain what a *sringar* is and give a swift description for the *Baba Shamshan Nath sringar*. It will also focus on the patronage and perceived history of the event.

The word *sringar* hold a variety of meanings, such as adornment, make-up or sexual passion. Kumar writes the word simply as decoration.\(^{70}\) While Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty reads the Sanskrit word as *srngara*, being the erotic mode.\(^{71}\) In the everyday language of my informants and assistants *sringar* is a special occasion for decoration and celebration. It is used not just for the occasion itself, but also to describe decoration. While this word has been difficult to find in terms of being a celebration I never found anyone who did not know what it was, instead it was treated like something common. It may be its sheer commonness that have led it to go unnoticed in previous scholarly work, or if it is because it’s contemporary low status. What makes a *sringar* special is, in this case, its different parts, such as the variety of entertainment and participants. Kumar offers a compatible description to what a *sringar* in terms of a celebration is. According to her, this form of celebration is held on an annual anniversary for a Hindu deity, a similar occasion for muslim shrines being an *urs*. A *sringar* would, or still do, consist of the cleaning and decoration of the deities in a temple. Often there is special *prasad* and *darshan* on the day of the *sringar*. In some *sringars* musical programmes may be held, varying between *bhajan* or *kirtans*, devotional music and speeches. A prevalent element is also courtesans performing.\(^{72}\) The most common lay-out is a three to four day event with different musical types, such as *qawwali*, followed by *biraha* and then an orchestra playing film music on the last day.\(^{73}\) The more generous the patronage the more elaborate a *sringar* would be. In the *sringar* of *Maha Shamshan Nath*, all these elements were present, as well as the involvement of the *aghori*. As the performance of courtesans seem to have declined nearly to extinction it was a delight to be able to observe a modern remnant of an ancient tradition. Marcus, who has studied *biraha*, a folk music genre from the Bhojpur region argues for the prevalence of this genre in *sringars*. He sees *biraha* as “the dominant form of entertainment at Banarsi shringars.”\(^{74}\)

The *Maha Shamshan sringar* was held for three days during the *Navaratri* in the month of *Chaitra*. This is said to be an auspicious time were *Baba*\(^{75}\) fulfills everyone’s wishes and desires. It is held annually on the fifth, sixth and seventh day of *Navratri* or as they are called *Panchami*, *Shashti* and *Saptami*. On the first day the ritual *rudra abhiseka* was held in the temple. There was also a night procession with palanquins of deities being carried to the temple. On the second day a *bhandara*, was held during midday were cooked food was distributed. In the night time a cultural program with folksongs was performed on stage. The third and last day received more attention with a dance performance by what is promoted to be the *nagar vadhu*.

\(^{70}\) Kumar 1988:141  
\(^{71}\) Doniger O’Flaherty 1969:320. In this instance about poetry.  
\(^{72}\) Kumar 1988:141  
\(^{73}\) Kumar 1988:152 In the section on music and courtesan I will go into more detail on the different musical forms. See also Marcus 1989:103, albeit his focus lays more on the folk musical aspect than the social.  
\(^{74}\) Marcus 1989:104  
\(^{75}\) The epitet ‘*Baba*’ is used quite loosely, it may mean Shiva, *Mahadev* or physical persons such as a *pandit*, a renouncer, an ascetic or an *aghori*. The general idea being someone higher up or older.
In addition to these events which were announced in writing on the temple wall a parallel *bhandara* was given in the evening for all three days. The *aghori* who took part in the procession held private rituals on the other side of Ganga but also spent time on the adjacent ghat were he gave out blessings. All elements of the event will be dealt with separately and in detail in the subsequent sections.

### 3.2 History

There are different versions to how and why the *sringar* started. Most media reports that it started with the renovation of the *Maha Shamshan* temple. This should have been done by Raja Man Singh, who at the same time renovated the Man Singh observatory at Man Mandir ghat. In some instances it is Raja Jai Singh who conducts the renovation. Accordingly the program would have started hundreds of years ago, the most common date given by my informants is around 400 years. These are accounts given by the organisers of the program, in reality it was Sawai Jai Singh II who built the observatory in the 18th century. While I struggled to find any relations between Sawai Jai Singh and the program, I found one Raja who at least had a relation to the performing arts. Raja Man Singh Tomar (1486-1516) was a large patron of the arts and standardized a form the classical music genre *dhrupad*. He is also known for holding a multitude of musical talents at his court. I could not, however find any links between him and the cremation ground or the temple. As I am not concerned here about what may be the historical truth, one may still be able to see the Raja as a suitable figure to give depth and history to the event. It may be an instance of an *invented tradition*, where a newer practice is made as to follow traditional or symbolic rules in accordance with already accepted rules, often then linked to a historic past as to confirm its continuity. Furthermore, the legitimacy acquired by history may serve to establish a group’s bond, by binding the members’ actions together in an historical context. At the *Baba Shamshan sringar*, history could thus serve to validate holding the *sringar* in its current form.

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76 Times of India 2015-03-28
77 Which Raja Man Singh is rarely specified.
78 Trivedi 2012:29-30.
79 Trivedi 2012:152
80 Hobsbawn and Ranger 2014:1
81 Hobsbawn and Ranger 2014:12
Nevertheless, the story of how it came into being as rendered by one of the main organisers Gulshan Kapoor, goes as follows:

Raja Man Singh built a place for worship and learning and renovated the Man Mandir ghat, building the observatory there. At the same time he renovated the temple of Samshan Nath. And after giving a good look at the temple he organised one worship. During that time there were big musicians to whom he gave an invitation. As he wished to have a music concert here after the worship. On that time casteism and untouchability was common. It was a big matter then. None of the musician he invited came there. But there is a place called Dalmandi, a place in Kashi, were the nagar vadhus lived. On that time the [veshya] prostitutes where not there. And they were performing the dance programs at the houses of kings and rich people. When the nagar vadhus found out none of the musicians were coming they sent a message to the Raja that even if Maha Shamshan Nath is not our deity we will come and perform for him by our own desire.

This both serves to legitimize the presence of the nagar vadhu at the ghat and how untouchability and related norms does not exist in presence of Shiva the aghori. The president of the temple organisation, Chenu Prasad Gupta told me the following story;

Raja Man Singh saw how sad the people are at the cremation ground, how their tears are falling down in such an unhappy place. The Raja then asks why they do not make a dance program, as Shiva has the tandava dance. By initiating a musical program on the cremation ground, joy was brought to the sad place.

While Raja Man Singh figures in this story too, it is the joy and happiness which are in focus. It should be noted here that the person who gave me this story was a large organiser of the event, and wished himself to bring joy and entertainment to people. One of the performers also confirmed to me that if any renovations had taken place in a temple, there should be a program accordingly.

I made many attempts to discover exactly how old the tradition is, resulting in many different answers. It might not be necessary to try to figure out specific dates and times, but rather focus on the fact that the tradition might have changed over time. For instance, as Kumar notices;

The sringar, a three night affair with hundreds attending, has been “going on” for only eight years. In fact it is not as if the sringar began eight years ago, but rather that before it consisted of flowers, puja and Prasad and was unremarkable in sound and sight

The evolvement of the celebration thus affects the perception of its history. Other factors may be the ‘agenda’ of the informant giving the account. The general tendency was for people involved and positive to the program to enhance its ancientness while its adversaries would argue for it being a recent invention. What does seem to be consistent is that earlier, the dancers used to perform only inside the temple. Today, a large stage is built up on the ghat as the event has increased in size. It is thus logistics which has changed some of its execution.

82 Kumar 1988:142
Undated photo of dancer tying the bells to her feet in the Maha Shanshan temple. Courtesy of CPG.

Kumar has collected enough information to make a systematic table of all the sringars in Banaras during the 20th century. There veshyas83 was part of the sringar at Manikarnika from 1909-1929.84 However, after 1950 she finds no mention of any courtesan performing in a temple.85 While her book covers the time 1880-1986, Parry conducted his fieldwork from 1976-1992. With my estimates he may have been present at the sringar in 1983 and 1992. The celebration does make way into his book, as a short notice during his discussion of the relationship between the prostitute and the aghori. He writes;

the prostitutes of the city does not only visit the burning ghats to worship Shiva there in his form as Lord of the Cremation Ground, but are invited to dance in his honour at his temple’s annual festival at Manikarnika ghat86.

Parry does not mention any other performances nor does he reflect on whether or not the dancers actually are prostitutes or simply artists. Nevertheless, his purpose is to establish a connection with the aghor, not with the event itself. What it does do is give us a hint of a timeline. All information added up the sringar is anchored, mainly by hearsay or rumours around four hundred years ago. The dance program inside, be it classical dance or by the courtesans is about 40-50 years old, while the larger, modern form with a built up stage and a three day celebration been taking place for around 15 years.

83 Could be translated as prostitute. The dancers performing today were sometime referred to as veshyas, albeit not by their own accord.
84 Kumar 1988:148
85 Kumar 1988:143
86 Parry 1994:256
That date is confirmed by a demand of approval sent in 2003 to the police, asking for permission to hold the event, just as during previous years. Whether it is genuinely an old custom, which has simply been obliviated and recuperated over time, or if is a new celebration using history to legitimize a quite unorthodox event is however, uncertain. I have also heard a story in which the event stopped during a few years and as a result people stopped coming with dead bodies to the cremation ghat. A second story tells of how local people started dying at the cessation of the event. Both stories serving to confirm the need for such an event, and the horrors which may follow at the termination of such. Generally speaking of urs and sringars, Nita Kumar show that the current form of sringars only dates back to around 55-60 years. With the original annual celebration gradually increasing in size for the past 80 years.  

3.3 Patronage and Sponsorship

The patronage and sponsorship of a sringar is quite interesting. I will here put in comparison my experience with Kumars. One of the main ideas of her work is that while a celebration such as a sringar may always have a variation in structure and executions the main change she has observed is that of its social organisation. Here it is the organisers, performers and attendants of such events which influence its status. During her studies, Kumar noticed that the amount of sringars seem to be increasing, mainly because of changes in patronage. For the Baba Shamshan sringar there were a few main sponsors and organisers, who also were responsible for the temple. While these contributed most and also handled the budget and donations for the event, sponsorship could be assumed by anyone. As a sringar is a religious event, it is not difficult to find the necessary funds. There was a fairly active search for sponsorship, as the more money brought in, the larger an celebration could be held. With the rise of modern technology one of the organizer even wished to set up a website for the celebration to which people all over the world could donate. One informant told me that the money given to the temple was mostly used for the event, very little was left for the pandit to use for prasad or for renovations. A man from the second organising committee, who held the three day bhandara and the procession told me he did not accept donations in the form of money, but rather lentils, oil, vegetables; useful goods for the cause. Money was quite a hot topic, the people who were high on the social scale were sometimes considered greedy, and suspected of holding the event for their own pleasure. On the other hand, the people living in the temple, or outside society, for example as renouncers, would withdraw from everything related to money. At the same time, it was a necessity for them to be able to feed themselves, others and to afford rituals and pilgrimages. It is hard to establish a clear change in patronage for the Baba Shamshan sringar, but was it indeed started by a Raja one could argue that is has gone from a royal patronage to a celebration by the people.

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87 Kumar 1989:164-165. I have taken into account that Nita Kumars information as of today, is roughly 30 years old.
88 Kumar 1988:125
89 Kumar 1988:142
90 Marcus 1989:105
91 I will have a further discussion about this in the section on aghori.
Kumar concluded her section on *shringars* by the following words:

The decline of old-style *shringars* patronized by the elite, and their replacements by people’s celebrations based on voluntary donations testifies to the growth of “lower-class” identity and culture. The fact that change takes the form of the development of such celebrations rather than of commercial entertainment is a very important comment on the strength and tradition of indigenous popular culture.\(^\text{92}\)

During the event more well-known characters from the police force and local politicians were present, albeit the participants and artists were mainly from the lower-classes. In general, the area of Manikarnika ghat does not attract people from the higher castes and classes. When I interacted with people away from the ghat, or in higher social classes I was often discouraged from having the *shringar* as a subject. The place and the people around it, I was told, were full of lies and the event was only for their own pleasure. Some ventilating their opinions on Facebook saying that Banaras should be ashamed. In Kumar’s opinion “there is no educated, well-off person . . .who would acknowledge enjoying the music and all night festivity of the *shringar* . . .”\(^\text{93}\) Marcus, albeit influenced by her, writes that;

Shringars, with but a few exceptions, have been left to the domain of the lower classes. With the withdrawal of the upper classes from the audiences, if not the financial support, of shringars, these festivities became an important symbol of lower-class identity and a major forum for lower class culture.\(^\text{94}\)

As most temples, the temple of *Maha Shamshan Nath* has its own organisation. It is this organisation which promotes the events and collects sponsors for it. The funds for the event will be collected in three different ways. First, directly from the temple, this being the offerings devotees gives during the year. This collect was quite controversial, as the pandit working there is supposed to live off these donations, and spend some of it for the maintenance of the temple. In his opinion, too much was spent on the *shringar* and not enough on the upkeep. Secondly, donations may be given directly to the organisers of the event. This part mainly came from local people contributing a small part. However, one of the reasons the organisers were happy about the publicity of the event was that it would attract more sponsors, and they were hoping for foreign investors. Finally, the temple organisation and their families make donations themselves, and they also serve to gain from the *shringar* as it is a chance for them to promote themselves.

President of the temple organisation, Chenu Prasad Gupta has inherited this title. According to him, his family has been the head of the temple for generations. He is also the oldest member of the committee. Both of his grown sons are involved in the family business and the organisation. They live close to the burning ghat and run several businesses, at least two different silk shops, one hotel but also sell firewood for the cremation of bodies. All the men in the family are well versed in English, and especially his sons have quite a modern approach to life.

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\(^{92}\) Kumar 1989:164

\(^{93}\) Kumar 1989:165

\(^{94}\) Marcus 1989:106-107
The person who figures in most newspaper articles, and together with Chenu Prasad Gupta is the main outward face of the event is Gulshan Kapoor. While he has only been involved in the temple committee for a few years, he has already made efforts for the temple. For example, by initiating the special holi with ashes from the cremation ground. He is a politician and leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party. He refers to himself as a simple social activist. While figuring on banderols and in articles and clips of the event, he does not promote the event on his private facebook. There he seem to prefer highlighting his political career and piousness by mainly posting pictures from political and religious happenings. While Kumar and Marcus both argue that the sringar is an event for the lower classes, the presence and involvement of a political leader and relatively wealthy businessmen would contradict that. The precept adhered to at this sringar seemed to be inclusion for all.
Banderol advertising the celebration with special attention given to its sponsors. Photo: Julia Ask

Poster announcing the procession with the aghori. Photo: Julia Ask
4. The sringar of Baba Shamshan Nath.

In the following sections I will go through all elements from the *Shree Shree 1008 Baba Shamshan Nath Sringar*, trying to bring forth such a comprehensive picture of the celebration as possible. As there were many different components I have chosen to structure the sections by first introducing the temple activities during each day, followed by presentation of the different aspects of the celebrations. A diverse range of subjects will be dealt with, which may make these sections more open than structured. Nevertheless, this is the *sringar* of *Baba Shamshan Nath*. There was no clean order, no clear cut theories that can comprise what took place so I have simply tried to create order in the turmoils.

4.1 First day of Sringar.

In the early afternoon, Bollywood music is already pumping from the loudspeakers as I arrive at the ghat. Young kids who reside in the area are exited and dancing around. The atmosphere is set for the upcoming festivities. In the temple, the mood is high, but the tempo the usual, Indian mellow as it is cleaned and prepared. The inner temple gets covered in flower garlands, and spotlights in different colours. *Sringar* in the meaning of decoration is not an exaggeration. As for the cleaning, the whole inside of the temple gets rinsed by buckets and buckets of Ganga *jal*, as well as the deities who get the sacred water poured over them. The different items which will be used the upcoming days, such as brass pots from which Ganga *jal* will be poured, or the skulls used for decoration are all cleaned accordingly, mainly with ashes from the cremation ground. As for the *dhuni*, it gets a new, fresh layer of cow-dung to keep its form. There is no new people helping out with the preparations, but the usual crew of devotees and worshippers, a mix between younger and older men.

The pandit attached to the temple has been installed quite recently, only around a year ago. He originated from the Kina Ram ashram, but it is not because of his affiliation with them that he was employed, instead it was by recommendation. As previously mentioned, the pandit lives of the *prasad* and donations made to the temple, not on a salary. While he is expected to hold *arti* twice daily and look after the temple his earnings are meagre. He eats from the temple, a basic vegetarian diet and sleeps outside on the ghat. As a person I experienced him quite decent as he had to keep order in the temple with its peculiar devotees attracted by the liminality of Shiva as an *aghori*. One of the reasons he had to look after the devotees was most likely the *prasad* which often came in form of alcohol or *bhang*. While he let the devotees have their freedom, he still had to uphold rules in the temple so that any intake of such *prasad* was done outside and the purpose of visits to the temple was the divine. Much off my discussions with him revolved around how he wanted it to be and the lack of rules in the temple today. One subject he held close to heart was how the donations made the temple should be spent. He believed too much went into the *sringar* celebration and should instead be used for restoration of the building and *prasad* for its visitors.

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95 In this temple, the *dhuni* was a rectangular shape made out of cow-dung which contained sacred fire, here burning logs from the cremation ground. The *dhuni* which the *aghori* kept was triangular but made up from the same elements.
4.1.2 Rudra Abhiseka

One of the features of the first day of *srngar* was the *rudra abhisheka*, a form of *puja* for the *lingam* of Shiva. The ritual *abhisheka* is said to have been performed in India since time immemorial. The *abhisheka* for a deity has as main feature; the showering, bathing and/or anointment of the deity worshipped. Similar features, and sometimes even referred to by term *ahisheka* may be found in many different religions, such as Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity and Islam.

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96 Niemi n.d
97 Ferro Luzzi 1981:710
98 Jain 1997:68, *abhisheka* for a person can be for instance, at the inauguration of a king.
99 Jain 1997:62. I assume here it is the sprinkling of water which serves as the common denominator.
Gabriella Ferro Luzzi argues in her article on *abhisheka* that it can best be understood as a polythetic concept. It has many elements, but none which is irreplaceable. She sees the *abhisheka* as undefinable, something that can only be described. However one chooses to define such a ritual, my purpose is here to describe it such as it was in the *Maha Shamshan* temple, and how people around reacted to it. While the *puja* can be done for any deity, it has its greatest emphasis when Shiva is worshipped in his *lingam* form. It is also to the *lingam* of Shiva that this *rudra abhisheka* was executed. The name and deity Rudra originates in ancient Vedic tradition and later have developed into the modern figure of Shiva. During the *puja* a vedic chanting takes place, the hymn is taken from the *Yajurveda* and lists 100 different names and aspects of Rudra. Abhisheka in North and South India differ, while in the South it is mainly performed by Brahmin *pandits* it may be performed by a lay person in the North. The reason for this being, according to Ferro Luzzi, a lesser fear of pollution. Normally it is the sponsor of the ritual who performs the *puja*. The *pandit* at *Maha Shamshan* told me that while the performer of the ritual could be from any caste, from Brahmin to low-caste there should always be a *pandit* present. Neither can a person perform the *puja* if he is already engaged in another ritual. During this occasion five white clad *pandits* took part in the ceremony, taking turns chanting the vedic hymn.

### 4.1.2.2 Rudra Abhisheka at the Maha Shamshan Temple

The *abhisheka* started around 18.00, before the daily *artī*. One man clad in white takes out the items used in the ritual on a tray. The items include honey, camphor, sugar, *prasad* sugar, red vermillion, pink powder, spices such as clove and cardamom, incense and orange threads that are wrapped around a ball. Furthermore, microphones are put up, large trays of sweets are placed before the *lingam*, and mats laid out where the *pandits* will sit. When all is prepared the ritual starts. The ritual does not itself initiate a large reaction from the regulars in the temple, instead they continue with their other preparations. The few onlookers there do sit down during the ceremony but others just enter, takes photos, blessings or talks on the phone. Some of the organisers come in half way through. The general perception I get is that while there is a ritual ongoing, the movements of the temple remain constant. As for the ceremony, one of the organisers performs the *puja*, while five *pandits* chant in the background. Sometimes the chanting will be in unison, sometimes only by one of them. According to my notes, taken during a fairly busy time in the temple, the ceremony goes as follows:

- **Ganga jal** is dripped onto the *lingam* from a pan leaf. Curd is applied to the *lingam*. More water dripped on. One white string is put around the deity, followed by a red and yellow one. Sugar, flowers, leaves, spices and flowers are offered. Flowers are placed out around the *lingam*. Incense, then camphor is waved around it. More flowers are placed out, one by one. A large basket filled with various fruits is offered. The performer waves his arms, hands crossed around, then sprinkle more water.
He then holds out his left hand before he circles it around the back of his head and puts it there before bringing both hands together in front of himself. A *shringi* made from brass is then used to pour Ganga *jal* over the *lingam*. This element is the longest in the puja. More Ganga *jal* is then poured from a brass pot, and repeated again. The executor puts one hand on his heart, then touches his forehead followed by the back of his head. He then crosses his arms in front of his body, then puts his hand together in a prayer. He offers more flowers, sweets and coins. The chanting stops. Now the same music that is used during *arti* comes on, and the people who were sitting down stand up. A small camphor lantern on a tray is waved in front of the *lingam*, the same tray is then passed around the crowd who will give a small amount of money and take blessing from the camphor flame. The music stops and the chanting continues and so without any further warning the ceremony is over and *prasad*, in form of fruit is handed out.\(^{106}\) The ceremony itself was not given much attention. When I asked around about the *rudra abhisheka*, it did not arouse much interest. Instead I was often referred to hand-books on how to perform it, or online youtube clips. Some informants would simply call it normal vedic puja.\(^{107}\) Ferro-Luzzi has observed 50 something different materials used in *abhisheka*. While a large variety of material was used in the above mentioned, I do not trust my eyesight to see exactly what was used, as I noted some substances in the preparation which I did not see in the puja and vice versa. Overall, the main element is water, especially pure water such as Ganga *jal*. As for the other element, there was none that distinguished itself from any other Hindu ritual or worship. Once the ritual is over and the *prasad* taken away the inner temple is once more decorated and prepared for the evening’s daily *arti*.

\(^{106}\) The large trays of sweets were not given out as *prasad* in the temple, but taken home by the organisers to their families. I observed this several times, many offerings were put out before *arti* or another ritual than brought back with by the person bringing them.

\(^{107}\) My informants would use this term as a contrast to *ahor* or tantric puja. Albeit puja itself is in fact not vedic. The term ‘vedic puja’ is simply used to mean traditional, normal, or non-exotic.
Ganga jal is poured from the shringi onto the lingam of Shiva. Photo: Julia Ask
4.1.3 The night procession.

As the night procession took place at the same time as the rudra abhiseka I could not observe both. Here ph.D. Candidate Kristian Niemi, along with my assistants filmed and observed the procession for me. Alongside with them, a discussion was held and we watched the clips together so I would get such a comprehensive picture as possible of the procession. Later on during my fieldwork I would spend a lot of time with members of the Kashi Vishvanath damaru salbar, the troop of drummers who helped organise the procession, and follow them as they performed on different festivities in Banaras. This following section will discuss the meaning of a Hindu procession in its celebratory context, give an outline of the procession and finally give some background to the procession and the damaru troop.

Processions are a common element in the streets of Banaras. These vary from seasonal celebration of certain deities to marriage processions. These processions can include everything from palanquins carrying newly-wed couples to horses and elephants, depending on its budget. As for the ones I witnessed, they all had in common loud music, dance and a festive atmosphere. Were they not for marriage, the majority of the crowd and onlookers were young men. The procession held for Baba Shamshan nath was for the purpose of joy, celebrating a happy occasion. Knut Jacobsen argues that such processions should be analysed as a celebration, an event which brings people and the community together. It is a way in which a group may draw public attention to themselves, and get recognition or even prestige. Much attention was given to the sponsors and organisers of the procession by large banderols carrying their names and photographs, displaying a pride to participate in the celebration. On the other hand, while the procession and celebration was a joyous event for the people involved, it was highly criticized and sometimes even looked down upon. Sometimes organisers would connect the event to other sringsars which would follow later on, but the committees from the other temples would refuse to be affiliated with the Shamshan Nath.

4.1.3.2 Description of Procession

In a courtyard close to the Maha Mrityunjaya temple people are gathering up before the procession. The deities who will be carried on the palanquins are adorned with flowers garlands, ornaments, powders and more. Offerings are given accordingly. For instance to the Bhairavs, 108 fried dalbbara made out of lentils are hung as a garlands and 108 lemons are offered. Another common offering is money. The leader of the damaru group and main organiser for the procession handles the decorations and also performs a short arti for the deities before the procession starts. This is done, by routine, with the waving of incense and camphor in front of the deity, here to the sound of the damaru drums. It ends as everyone throws their hands up in the air, in the celebratory ‘Har Har Mahadev.’ The people closest to the deities and most active are the followers of the aghori Manikanandan and the baba himself. These are a mix of his Tamil followers and local young men who are a part of the damaru troop.

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108 Jacobsen 2008:217, 4ff
Around eight o’clock the procession starts to move. The head organiser leads the procession towards Manikarnika ghat, he carries with him the naga of Shiva in form of a cane. Music streams out of the speakers, cameras are flashing, and the sound of the damaru echos in the narrow streets. The first ‘attraction,’ as I would like to call it is aghori Manikandan who sits high on a neon lit carriage drawn by two white horses. For the occasion the Baba is dressed only in a red cloth over his essentials. The rest of his body is covered in white ashes. His lips are painted red, his facial hair highlighted black. On his neck hangs a garland of human skulls coloured in red, in his hand the trident of Shiva. Beside the carriage walks one of his followers carrying half a skull filled with ashes. From this he smears the three stripes of Shiva to devotees asking for his blessing. Behind him follows a second horse drawn carriage mounted by a sword-swallow and children. More deities follow in the procession as children dressed up as popular gods such as Ganesha, Vishnu and Kal Bhairav. As the procession continues the festive mood is lit with hijiras dancing to live drums. By the end of the procession four deities and Sai Baba come, all carried on their own palanquin. The deities seem to be different versions of bhairav, and when asking about them I got various answers, such as Assh Bhairav, Bhoot Bhairav, Masan Bhairav and Naga Baba. All deities, horses and more were heavily decorated with flowers and garlands. The image later referred to as Masan Bhairav even had a cluster of black balloons with skulls attached to him.

109 All his followers dress in red. Aghori Manikandans main deity is aghori Kali, who is red, not black as my previous knowledge of her would say.
When the procession arrives at the ghat, the deities are brought into the temple. They are placed so as to face the lingam of Shiva in the inner temple. As they are carried inside, the damaru drums are beaten intensely along with the bells of the temple and people are shouting ‘har har Mahadev.’ As I have heard and read extensively about darshan I asked if this was a way for the deities to take darshan from each other, or if the application of eyes to the deities and skulls in the temple was for this purpose. Furthermore, Leslie Orr writes how deities being carried out in the public would give darshan to its participants and onlookers, making the deity accessible to all. This was however denied, the pandit referred it simply as interaction, neither did I ever hear anyone mention the term darshan. On the other hand, by decorating the deities, parading them and so on one facilitates visual access to the deity. When my informants use words such as interaction it may have the same meaning as darshan, when one sees and is seen by the divine. Moving on, outside the temple, the group of hijiras are dancing directly under the eternal fire. They are surrounded by men, who are pushing towards them and showering them with money. The hijiras seem to be accepted and appreciated. It is hot, it is loud and it is colourful. All in the most sacred place in the most sacred city of all.

While the main attraction of the procession seems to have been the aghori, I believe the drummers should be given some attention, not only because their group organised the procession and had a close relation to the aghori, but also for the importance of sound. Ann David views the sound in a procession as factor which creates sacred space in opposition to secular or profane space. While I agree with her in the context of her research, which is in the diaspora it cannot be directly applicable to Banaras, as the whole city already may be considered sacred. Instead, here sound only makes the distinction of something special happening, and announces the arrival of the procession. The main sound in the procession was the rhythmical drumming of the damaru. I was told that each sound made with the damaru was a mantra from Shiva. In fact, all mantras dedicated to Shiva had come through the damaru. One belief is that the world is conceived in sound, such as in the syllable aum and the sound coming from the damaru brings the universe to life. David so writes that “sound is not only considered to a powerful force, it is thought to be of God, and to be able to communicate directly with God.” In Shaivism and tantrism, the damaru is indeed used for communication with the higher world.

The troop of drummers I met performed on sringars and artis, solely for religious events. The group has formed progressively for the last eleven years, gaining more participants.

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100 Not Sai Baba, he was too big.
110 Orr 2004:440
111 For more about darshan see Eck 1996
112 This may be because of the place and occasion. I have previously been told several by different people that the hijiras more often are paid to go away.
113 David 2012:457-458
114 David 2012:460
115 David 2012:460
116 David 2012:460
117 Britannica Online 2019 “Ceremonial Object”
and opportunities to play as they got more well-known. They would perform in temples such as the Durga temple, different Shiva temples and during occasions such as the Ram Lila. I followed them to a *sringar* in the Shitala temple. It was both similar but also much different to *Maha Shamshan*. There were decorations, fruits, folk music and a procession with the drummers, even sharing some of the performing artists. The main difference being that nearly all participants and members of the crowd were women, and the atmosphere albeit festive a bit more family friendly.

4.1.5 *Bhandara* program.

During a festival or a special religious gathering devotees may prepare large amounts of food, as *prasad*. This food is then distributed to the devotees and whoever is hungry. At the ghat two *bhandaras* were held. One was organised by the temple committee and held at lunchtime on the second day. That one I am told, feeds around 200 people. About ten years ago, the *damaru* troop started a second *bhandara* which is held in the evening during all three days. The food prepared in the *bhandara* has been given as donations. People will help by purchasing vegetables, oil, lentils etc. The lead person for the *damaru* troop makes it very clear that no money is taken directly for their own purposes but will go for maintenance and salaries.\textsuperscript{118} Before the food is distributed to the people, a plate is put into Ganga together with a short prayer. So, the meal is shared with the holy river and thus turned into *prasad*. Adjacent to the *bhandara* *Baba* Manikandan had made out his spot, at the same place were *Baba* Kina Ram is said to have meditated. On the first day he was dressed up for the procession, but during the rest of his time there he seems much more casual, his hair tied back in a bun and wearing a simple red cloth. It is only possible to see that he is special by the way he is treated by the people around him. Just sitting next to him seem to be a great honour and I am invited to do so. He is much younger than I would have imagined an *aghori*, as *aghoris* are normally recognized as fearful older men, covered in dirt and spending their time on the cremation ground. Here, I am face to face with a man my own age, with kind eyes and a smartphone who sits and smokes ganja out of a human bone on the cremation ground. Here it seems to be the most natural thing in the world. The more I will get to know the *aghori* and his followers I learn that feeding people is one of the most important things for them. When I talk to his followers and himself, the act of cooking and distributing food is spoken of in a way a person would talk about his dreams for the future. While food is a large part of Indian culture and Hinduism I felt that the very act of being able to give food to others was both a sign of success and respect. Van der Veer writes that a *bhandara* “often [is] sponsored by wealthy laymen who derive spiritual merit from this feeding of sadhus.”\textsuperscript{119} It can however, be held by either a layman or a sadhu, or as in this case both of them together.

\textsuperscript{118} For example, the women preparing the food are paid on a daily basis, and come from the organisers catering company. As for in the temple, the pujari does not get a salary but lives of small amount of donations made to the temple, used for food, Prasad etc. The main idea is, that no one takes money from Shiva.

\textsuperscript{119} Van der Veer 1988:124
33

The aghori sitting on the ghat while prasad is being prepared. Photo: Julia Ask.

4.2 Second day of Sringar, in the temple

For the second day of sringar, the temple is even more decorated than before. The inner sanctum has been framed in with styrofoam. The man who did this came in and asked to do it himself. The pandit accepts people who wants to help cleaning, preparing and decorate but tells them, maybe Baba (Shiva) will bless you for this maybe not. The pandit of the temple is not in high spirits today. While some men helped him prepare the temple, many only appear after it is finished. For the people who come every day, or have the temple as their regular place of worship he expects them to help out on a day like this. He says many only come in here to ‘take name and fame.’ I understand his point, as many people, especially during these three days only come in quickly, pay a rushed respect to the deities and then take selfies with them. Often they may come in with prasad, offer it to the gods but leave with it. Meaning nothing is left for the temple. There is a fair deal of personal disturbances between the people involved in the taking care of the temple and their roles. While this is not often dealt with in scholarly literature I can tell this does affect the rituals. Today the arti is rushed and takes only twenty minutes instead of the usual hour. I am given two reasons for this, one being that the sponsor of the arti wants to have it done before the musical program starts, the other that the devotees are in a hurry to feast on the prasad of whisky and bhang.

Even if the arti is rushed, it still contains the four main elements; the incense, the ghee lamp, the camphor and Ganga jal, all which are waved in front of the deities. Finally the
arti should have prasad. When arti is shortened, it is done by omitting some deities, moving faster, and cutting short the song sung at the end. Three to four different mantras are spoken during arti. The ritual itself is quite common, and there are many books which give instructions on how it should be performed. While it is quite a simple ritual, it is part of the everyday routine at the temple and should always be done twice daily.

4.2.2 Cultural program and folk songs.

Today’s program on stage was announced as Sanskritic Karyakram and Lok Geet, in other words, cultural program and folk songs. Folk songs in this context is popular folk music, which while often sung in Bhojpuri also may be mixed with Hindi, as they were here. The temple president told me as many people migrate to work in Banaras, holding musical performances in Bhojpuri is very appreciated as it is many workers’ mother tongue, Banaras being the epicentre of the Bhojpuri speaking region of Uttar Pradesh.

The artists performing during this day consists of two female and one male bhojpuri singers, and two female and one hijira dancers. As for the musicians playing instruments in the background they are all male. While the singers perform to live music, the dancers do it to pre-recorded music. There is also a difference in the music, when the singers start the program, the atmosphere is family friendly. However, as the night continues and the dancers enter the stage the setting is, albeit controlled much more male dominated and rougher. Henry explains that there are two different ways in which one can describe Lok Geet, one being as folk music. In this sense it is seasonal songs or ritual songs transmitted by women orally, but may also include more specialist genres. The second definition he refers to as folkish, where folk music is influenced or combined with popular music from movies or TV-shows. I personally have a lack of knowledge of the music and lyrics, and therefore have to rely on my informants who refers to the music as bhojpuri folk, or filmi songs. For example, a popular and common music genre in Banaras is biraha, a genre which has become integrated with other genres and melodies creating a composite genre which Marcus explains is often referred to in common mouth as lok geet, as “folk music.” Traditional music is mixed up with newer tunes creating this genre. As for the singers they will often introduce their songs as bhajans, devotional songs. They will be about Baba (Shiva), Kali, Shitala and may be sung by request of the audience. In my interview with one of the singers she told me that there is nothing specific with Bhojpuri. However people usually want to hear songs of their local and regional culture since they always remember the songs related to it. During the show, people regularly donate money, which is recognized by the host. The number is always uneven such as 101 or 501 rupees. Early during the show the donor is thanked by name, but later, as the dancers perform, the money is snatched, showered over them or simply given. This reward is referred to as an inam and serves as a token of appreciation for the performance.

There are many interruptions by the artists to express their gratitude for being invited to perform at the Shamshan Nath, were they personally thank the organisers and wishes their families well. The audience is very much part of the artists’ act. Marcus, who has studied

120 Henry 1988:221
121 Henry 1988:219
122 Henry 2006:7ff
123 Marcus 1989:100
124 Marcus 1995:171
folk music and its developments writes on the subject of traditional live performances and audience interaction that;

. . . the temple sringar festival are part of larger events and processes that confirm one’s sense of belonging to a specific community. The music and the event often serve to uphold traditional values and customs. Personal contacts with the performers, fellow singers, or audience members reaffirms aspects of social ties, obligations and hierarchies. By words of encouragement, applause, spontaneous monetary remuneration, and even by their mere presence, those in attendance participate directly in a complex performance feedback system125

During the night I could observe not only the monetary transactions but moreover the hierarchy and social links which were displayed during the show. Regularly names were dropped, not only to thank the sponsors of the event but also to mention people from higher positions that were in the crowd. These include, a municipal counsellor, a former member of parliament for the Congress Party, the city president of congress, the city president of Samaj Badi Party and the chief of police. These are referred to as guests of honour, but as an outsider it is hard not to see the mentioning of such names as a way to give weight and legitimacy for the celebration. Technically, the presence of such people would also distance the event from being purely lower-class, as people from higher classes would not regularly frequent the cremation ghat.

4.3 Third day of Sringar

As I arrive for the last day of sringar a young man and a regular visitor of the temple has already started his decorations of the lingam. The rest of the temple remains decorated as it has been during the previous days. Flowers are, however brought in fresh every day. The young man is building up the lingam into a figure of Bhairav. For this he uses around one kilo of bhang to create height and a face. It is then painted silver with detailed facial features. The lingam gets a plastic moustache, and a collar made out of different fruits. The now built up statue gets dressed in a wig with a half-moon and wrapped in a leopard cloth and flowers. The artist tells me that the image came to him in a dream.

Arti is performed thrice this evening, the first two times by an older man and not the pandit. The first arti is done like normal, albeit a bit quick. Around the time arti is finished the musicians arrive at the temple. There are three performers who come into the temple, plus a group playing instruments. Pappu, Nitu and her daughter Anjana, the same three dancers/singers whose interviews later will circulate in the media. The dancers ties the bells around their feet and give a quick performance in the temple, Nitu and Anjana dancing while Pappu, who later will become my gatekeeper sings. The prasad has been quite meagre before, but tonight a plethora of whisky, wine, fruit and sweets are brought into the temple. The temple quickly gets crowded, mainly by the organisers, media and regular devotees.

There are a fair bit of reporters there from different journals, all taking photos and asking the question “why do you come here to dance.” For an outsider it all seems quite unorganised and messy, as the performers then are rushed out of the temple to go on stage. Later on the temple will be visited by a few of the younger dancers, but not all dancers go inside the temple.

125 Marcus 1995:173
This is an argument brought forward by the critics of this celebration, who believe that the girls never go inside, but are just on the stage taking money. One counter response to this accusation is that girls who are on their period are not allowed to enter the temple, as it is considered to be polluting.

The second arti is done after the senior dancers have performed in the temple. In a later interview with the pandit he tells me this is mostly done for media purposes, so was the choice of the executor of arti, a man who enjoyed the attention of the crowd. A less judgemental explanation for the second arti may be that a great amount of prasad arrived after the first one, which would demand a second puja. The temple remains a busy place during the remainder of the night. One of the regular devotees has had a high intake on bhang and whisky and now sits by the inner temple, he receives donations and prasad as he gives out blessings to the visitors, smearing their forehead with ashes. While to an outsider he might look like a madman people will come to him, grateful to receive blessing for both them and their children. He refers to himself as poora bhakt and has often told me of the powers one gets from spending time and helping out in this temple. This is a common belief by the devotees who frequent the temple. Whether the reverence given to him is purely contextual during this short period or more personal towards him I do not know. No matter, the activity in the temple is high, and varies between people who genuinely come to take blessings and others who only come to take selfies with the decorated lingam. Around 1 a.m a third arti, performed by the pandit is executed. Now they take their time, calmly completing all elements of the puja.

126 For him, this meant that he was a true devotee.
The lingam turned into Kal Bhairav. Photo: Kristian Niemi.

Tying the bells inside the temple. Photo Kristian Niemi
4.3.2 A short comment on Bhang

It is not a coincidence that the consumption of bhang is so prominent in the temple. Shiva is also known as the lord of Bhang. The stereotypical aghori is often pictured as a terrifying figure who dwells in the cremation ground and consumes human flesh, alcohol and ganja.\(^\text{127}\) Many men referring to themselves as aghori could be seen on the ghats in Banaras smoking ganja with western tourists. I was frequently told these were not real aghors, in possession of any special powers, but rather people who used the name ‘aghor’ as a way to justify their lifestyle.\(^\text{128}\) The consumption of intoxicants can sometimes become a problem. For example, the aghori sect of Kina Ram frequently used intoxicants during rituals, but changed their ways as many devotees seemed more interested in consuming the prasad than being devotees. Today their practice has gone from handling untouchable substances to untouchable people.\(^\text{129}\) At Manikarnika I also observed differences between the devotees, especially during the sringer where many appeared to have come for the sole purpose of the prasad. The regular pandit also expressed his concerns with his apprentice, as he thought him and the younger devotees spent too much time smoking ganja. The consumption of ganja at Manikarnika and by the aghori and his devotees was ingested by smoking it. The smoking itself was social, with the joint being passed around the devotees. As the joint is passed around, the person smoking will lift it to his forehead and speak a formula.\(^\text{130}\) Here the phrase was often ‘Bum Kali.’ While in the temple, a clay pipe or a standard joint was mostly used, the aghori preferred to smoke it from a human bone, or once to his great amusement a vegetable. While smoking from a clay pipe is referred to as chillum, and the act of passing it around as chillum smoking, the joint was used in the same fashion.

4.4 Dance of the ‘Nagar Vadhu’

The last day of sringer contained none of the ceremonies or political play from the day before. It was largely comprised of a dance show performed to a pre-recorded sound system, albeit for some songs there were live musicians and singers. My first impression is that is seems terrible unorganised, the sound system often malfunctions and the dancers do not seem to follow any sort of choreography. The girls come from different areas, some local, some from bigger cities\(^\text{131}\) which may explain why they seem awkward performing together. While they are dressed in sarees, the fabric is attached a bit lower than common, exposing more skin. The dance itself is not explicit, but should not be labelled as classic or even professional which may be another reason the program has a bad reputation among other artists in Banaras. One of the leaders in the show is my gatekeeper, Pappu, a middle aged married man who albeit his status as a householder keeps his hair long, wears make-up and a salwar kameez. He is by no means a hijira or a cross-dresser but keeps a more feminine appearance for the sake of his profession.

\(^\text{127}\) Barret 2008:4, Gupta 1993:1ff
\(^\text{128}\) The name ‘aghor’ was used quite loosely, once i was invited to visit an aghor puja. However, the only difference was that vodka was used to wash the deity with instead of water.
\(^\text{129}\) Barret. 2008:4, 90, 149 ff. His work on aghor medicine discusses how the sect has changed their non-aversion from pollution substances such as alcohol or meat to ‘polluted’ people such as those suffering from leprosy.
\(^\text{130}\) Godlaski 2012:1069
\(^\text{131}\) According to the organisers, Mumbai, Calcutta. I never met any of the outside dancer except for a couple of girls who went to the temple in between performances, they, however only spoke Bhojpuri.
He has been coming here for 19 years and is the person who invited the local girls to participate in the program and he works as a middle-man between the temple organisation and the dancers. Nitu and her daughter Anjana also play prominent roles in the celebration and have performed on the ghat for several years. The most common story that is told behind their performances is that:

by dancing on the night of Chaitra Navratri, one’s prayers are heard. The girls coming to dance they pray to baba that to be called a mother or sister in their next life, not as in this when they are called veshya.

In an interview for News 24 Anjana says that she comes to pray to Baba Masan Nath to have a better life next life. It should be noted here that all information on this form of salvation comes from a very limited source. Either from the temple organisers or from the senior performers. It should also be noted that there is a personal gain in such a story, as it serves to legitimize a show which otherwise is frowned upon. Financially, there would be benefits to all who reinforces such as story as the more sponsors and audience that come, there more money pours in. While officially the girls are referred to as nagar vadhus, or sex workers, creating an air of the cremation ground being a lieu for some exotic salvation, none of the girls of which I met confirmed they were in this profession. Rather they worked as dancers on different festivals, marriages etc. It is thus difficult to discern were the truth lies. My interaction with the women was not long enough for me to obtain any deeper knowledge, but I had to make do with whichever way they chose to represent themselves to me. As for the dance working as a way to improve their rebirth, the most common answer the girls gave to me was that whenever there was a festival, they would get call, go there to dance and then get paid. Nothing more complicated than that. While at Manikarnika ghat the basic pay was lower, the money donated directly to them from the crowd was quite high. One girl did however acknowledge that dance could be seen as a form of worship and that they took blessings from Shamshan Nath when they were there.

Young women dancing in front of the media. Photo: Kristian Niemi.

132 Paraphrased from head of temple.
133 News24 2016-04-14
134 The word “Masan” and Shamshan” were often used interchangeably among my informants.
5. The Artists

In this section I will introduce the artists performing during the second and third day of the *sringar*. These vary between professional singers of local folk music to young women who despite lack of such an education have made dancing their livelihood.

5.1 The artists during the cultural performance.

Some of the artists performing during the cultural program are fairly well-known. I met with two of the female singers, the first woman has studied music at the BHU. She does not live in Banaras anymore, but comes by invitation. While she gets a small amount of money to come, she also values the ‘blessings from god’ one gets from performing here. She tells me this program differs from others, not just because of its location on the cremation ghat, but normally there is only singing and no dancing. The second singer is a mature woman who learned the musical profession from her mother in law, who was a professional singer for 25-30 years, and from watching Hindi films. While she specializes in Bhojpuri, she also performs Hindi film songs and has performed on the soundtrack of a couple of movies. She also sings songs of women’s empowerment. Her message being that men should also be given the fire test like Sita. She tells me how she decided to become a singer is quite interesting. Her stepmother murdered her father, but her mother managed to escape. As her mother had to raise her daughter herself she struggled immensely financially and the singer spent her childhood in misery. Now, by becoming a singer she can not only support herself, but also earned fame and a good reputation. Now she is married to a Muslim man and has adopted Islam as her religion. While her story is quite unique, I found that many of the women I spoke with worked with music and entertainment because it made them more financially independent.

Furthermore, I engaged several times with a female professional dancer, who had performed at the ghat on previous years. She was also a BHU graduate and very well versed in classical dance. Today, she still performs in temples, and even gets invited to perform abroad. Her main income is however from giving private lessons in *kathak* and other classical dances. When she performs in a temple, or during a festival she does not believe that she should get paid as it is in a religious setting. While the cremation ground was not a common place for her to perform, she said that after she had been at the *sringar* of Baba Shamshaa Nath it changed her view of the place, so she went back to visit the temple. When she was told it was inappropriate for a woman to go there, she stopped and has now developed an adverse attitude towards the celebration. She feels that the dancing has become much more vulgar since when she performed and has no longer any warmer feelings towards the organisers of the event. As a person she was very forward with her opinions on moral as she believes it is the duty of the middle-class to uphold traditional values.

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135 Sita goes into the fire to prove her fidelity and the fire refuses to burn her.
136 I will later learn that one of the dancers performing on the third day is married to this man’s brother. Also she has converted to Islam.
On the second day of *sringar* I managed to meet with two dancers after the event, in the early morning hours. While they were working as Bhojpuri dancers, the music for their performance was pre-recorded and much more towards the popular, filmi genre, often in Hindi. One of the girls, a Muslim girl performed more in the style of Hindi Bollywood songs and alluded to the courtesan image as she danced. Songs such as *Tawaif kahan kisi se mohabbat karti hai*,\(^{137}\) from the 90’s movie *Amiri Garibi* or *Chaap tilak sab cheeni re* from *Main Tulsi Tere Aangan Ki*.\(^{138}\) She slowly seduced her audience, which showered her with money and fake jewellery. The second girl performed to more upbeat Bhojpuri music, with some provocative moves. My interview with her was quite obstructed as we could not get any peace for ourselves. The son of one of the organisers insisted on answering the questions in her place. Thus, we chose to communicate amongst ourselves by her showing pictures of her life on her phone. She, her husband and her sister all work with Bhojpuri music. She shows me a music video in which she dances alongside her husband. This is one example of how marriage often occur within the profession, and it is often carried down in generations. As she shows me pictures of her life I also see that she is quite a modern girl, who dresses in western clothes but also observes traditions such as Holi with her family. Albeit quite young she has two sons in which she shows great pride. My meeting with these two dancers is quite typical for how I experience my fieldwork. Here, the men physically take the interpretative prerogative and chose to speak for the women. I also saw another side of the *sringar* as the female performers were expected to entertain the organisers privately after the event.

5.2 The courtesan in Banaras

The fate of the courtesan in India is a well-research subject and their diaspora from the temples and royal saloons has fascinated many. Sufficient to say here is that the traditional courtesan was brought up into the profession and subsequently drilled in its arts; such as painting, music, dance and manners.\(^{139}\) During the medieval period the courtesan held a high status as her knowledge was vast in the science of love and arts, having a vital part in the urban cultural life.\(^{140}\) As for in Banaras, the courtesan culture flourished. Eck describes the Banaras courtesans as having held fame for their beauty and arts for thousands of years. This she bases on old tales, Sanskrit literature and dramas such as the *Kuttanimata*.\(^{141}\) Furthermore, as the culture in the city evolved into the eighteenth century and forward, *tawaiifs* or courtesans from especially the Dalmandi area would have a large part in the development of music and dance which made Banaras a centre for music.\(^{142}\) Swami Medhasananda does not glorify the courtesans or *tawaiifs* but acknowledges that there were different classes of *tawaiifs*, from high to low caste Hindus, with different means of supporting themselves. Some relying on one patron, some living of their music and some from prostitution. Nevertheless, he acknowledges their impact to the musical scene of Banaras.\(^{143}\)

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\(^{137}\) Roughly translated to “Where does the courtesan sleep with who” 

\(^{138}\) *Main Tulsi tere Aangan Ki*, related to the courtesan tradition as the plot includes the mistress of a married man killing herself so he can be solely with his wife.

\(^{139}\) Trivedi 2012:133ff

\(^{140}\) Trivedi 2012:130

\(^{141}\) Eck 1983:307

\(^{142}\) Medhasananda 2002:663

\(^{143}\) Medhasananda 2002:668
If we move even further along the timeline, there is a specific event that took place in Banaras which would have a great impact on the courtesans’ situation in the city. In the 1950’s prostitution in Banaras became banned under law.144 Newspaper clippings describe the procedure under which this new law was executed. Measures were taken for the young girls, supposedly for their benefit. They were lodged in shelter homes, educated in other professions or reunited with their families.145 Not all working girls were banned, if a woman worked as a singer or dancer she could send in an application to prove that her profession was not in prostitution and so become exempt from the new law.146 Most of the professional women belonged to an institute for music and dance named Daya Shankar. While they were exempt from the law, they still met resistance to whether or not they should be allowed to continue their profession. As voices were raised questioning if all of their income truly came from the arts.147 The cleaning out of Dalmandi and other similar areas seems to have been done rapidly, under a three day period. The articles contradict themselves to whether the women were forced to move from their homes or allowed to stay under the condition that they did not continue their profession. One article also describes the fear in the prostitutes’ eyes and speaks of a better society without them.148 I can but speculate to the actual circumstances in which the women were banished from their homes. While these newspaper clips focus on prostitution, Kumar writes that “after the 1950s we have no mention of any courtesan ever performing in a temple.”149 By one informant I was also told that the performance of courtesans at Krim Kund stopped just a few years later.150 One has to tread very carefully in labelling the women by their profession. However I do believe that after the raid in Dalmandi there has been a gap in these kind of performances up till this day. The evidence of an interruption of dance performance in its aftermath may be both because there was a link between prostitution and the performing arts, but also because of the social stigma that would have been attached to any woman in the profession of dancing at this time.

5.3.2 The tradition today.

Pappu tells me that there has been a change in the education of the dancers. In the old days there used to be a proper education before a dancer was allowed to ‘tie the bells’ on her feet and perform on stage. This education could either be done by a professional dance instructor or handed down within the family. Today he says, there are different demands both from the audience and because of time restraints. Before, songs were learned and memorized, today they come pre-recorded. The artists thus rarely learn how to sing but starts dancing directly. The younger girls I talked too had either learnt how to dance by watching and mimicking Bollywood movies, or from their mothers. Some of the older women had taken lesson from mainly male teachers when they were younger.

144 Aaj 28 October 1958
145 Aaj 6 July 1958
146 Aaj 28 October 1958
147 Aaj 31 October 1958
148 Aaj 31 October 1958
149 Kumar 143
150 See chapter on prostitute and aghori, In Pathak and Humes article from 1993, there were still very popular gawai performances at Krim Kund during the time of Lolark Chath. However they do not mention from which social group these performers come.
Pappu describes the situation:

After the daughters have gotten a proper kathak education they perform on stage. Their guru is watching every move so that no mistakes are made. The dancer needs to work with the live musicians. It has to be performed properly. Today the Guru is cassettes, no tabla, no singing.151

Manuel explains in his article on Indian popular music how the courtesans’ repertoire has changed, from more classical genres into film music being the prevailing type today:

The growth of bourgeois fine-arts patronage, the semi-classical thumri and ghazal moved from the courtesan salon to the public concert-hall, and the tawa’ifs who were still able to support themselves by singing have been obliged to cater to the tastes of their new patrons, who are primarily of lower-middle class rather than elite backgrounds. Hence, courtesans now seldom perform thumri, but rather pop ghazal and other film songs, generally in a pre-composed fashion with tabla and harmonium accompaniment.152

According to him, it was the change in patronage, and in the audience which has pushed more towards filmi, popular dance. Deepak Raja has a similar opinion, but relating to classical music were he argues that the quality of classical music has diminished as it was previously protected under a knowledgeable elite, who knew and demanded quality. Increased accessibility to classical music has moved its quality control to a more unknowing majority.153 He also argues for the previous permanency a patronage demanded, were artist-patronage relations were built for longer, in contrast to more recent concert sponsorship which is regulated as per contract or event.154 Chakravorty, who has studied the change in kathak dance and its form during the modern and global innovation writes that:

The unprecedented reach of the global market, the spread of mass media and technological innovations during the last decade have accelerated the hybridization of cultural forms with tremendous force. As a result, the classical or traditional forms are now in turbulence. The emphasis on ‘production values’ has blurred the line between culture and commodity. At the same time many critics believe that the easy accessibility of classical forms due to democratization has promoted mediocrity rather than artistic excellence.155

The art of classical dance has moved from being protected under royal patronage to being under sponsorship, be it corporate156 or by laymen as on this occasion. Bollywood movies have also served as an inspiration and innovation to classical dance, which is referred to as filmi dance.157

151 Paraphrase from Pappu
152 Manuel 1988:170-171
153 Raja 2005:10
154 Raja 2005:45
155 Chakravorty 2008:172
156 Chakravorty 2008:76,94
157 Chakravorty 2008:79
It seems that ready accessibility to movies and popular music has influenced the performing arts to be more like themselves, easily accessible and quickly consumed. The arts somewhat adapting to a faster society.\textsuperscript{158} In an interview with Ajeet Singh, director for Guria\textsuperscript{159} he tells me that the dance tradition has diminished, and now there is more sex work. Before women used to come to the courtesans to learn good manners and customs. Only in the last ten years the dance has died out as many prominent performers retired or passed away. Before he used to organise performances for the sex workers where they could perform, but now he struggles to find suitable dancers. Maciszewski has studied the Guria organisation and the arts and coined the term ‘festivalization’ for these organised \textit{mahotsav}. The reason behind such programs was to raise awareness among the public that the arts still existed, albeit in a less specialized form\textsuperscript{160} but also to prove that these women were more than just sex workers.\textsuperscript{161} From the literature it is also hard to draw any conclusion as to who was a sex worker, a courtesan or a just a performer of the arts. Many names are mentioned, such as \textit{tawaiif}, \textit{nagar vadhu} and \textit{veshya}. The first epithet seemingly having a less harsh connotation than the others. I believe the profession of these girls may vary from being purely dancers, with more or less experience and education, to bar dancers or sex workers. Commonly today these all seem to be generalized and put together, along with the opinion that the arts have declined.

When conducting my interviews with the dancers and Pappu we discussed the stigma they feel is attached to their profession. While some of the dancers enjoyed the dancing per se, they were unhappy with how their profession was perceived by society. As we talked about dancing at the cremation ghat as a way have a better rebirth, it was not in terms of being a sex worker, or even about life next life. One women says

\begin{quote}
I want to change, and have change for my family. I prefer to do programs outside of Banaras, as the children grow up people will see us dancing and they will talk. Now my children will grow up in good society, if they grow up in bad society they will spoil their lives. I am the last one, after me my children will get a good education\textsuperscript{162}
\end{quote}

This particular dancer is a widow, who albeit born by a dancer does not enjoy her profession but it is her only means to support her family. Her daughter believes it is not dancing itself that is bad, but people believe so as they ‘have no mind.’ Another young dancer tells me ‘When we go there we worship for \textit{Shamshau} and for a better future, where we do not dance. I do not like dance, I want change.’\textsuperscript{163} Both these women talk about their future here and now, not in their next life, even if changing the path for her daughter may be interpreted as a change for the next generation. Neither do they say they want to get away from prostitution, but rather the stigma attached to their profession as dancers by society. On the other hand, a senior dancer who had performed at the ghat many years ago, told me that she did not ask to be reincarnated into anything else in next life, as she is happy in this life. A young 19 year old shyly admitted that, yes it as fun to perform on the ghat.

\textsuperscript{158} This does not include all classical Indian dance as myriads of schools and education still exist. What I refer to here is rather the change of the women previously referred to as courtesans and todays \textit{nagar vadhu}.
\textsuperscript{159} An NGO working to improve and fight for the right of sex workers
\textsuperscript{160} Maciszewski 2007:122 ff
\textsuperscript{161} Maciszewski 2007:138
\textsuperscript{162} Paraphrase from a senior dancer.
\textsuperscript{163} Paraphrase from a young dancer and mother
Pappu tells me that:

If I am reborn, I would like to be it in the same profession. When people tease me, talk against me or make fun of my profession, only then I am unhappy with it. I was feeling unhappy when I started this profession as people were teasing me . . . Sometimes people touch my feet as a sign of respect, while some people will not accept me.  

During my short period in Banaras, and my experience therefrom I can agree with my informants on the ambivalent feelings towards their profession. One assistant first refused to go out to the areas where they live, because of the locations’ bad status. My other assistant, was very surprised that the women regularly visited temples for worship.  

Whenever I communicated with people engaged in classical dance, or who held a higher education in the performing arts they would speak badly of the dancers whom performed on the third day. Most commonly judging that they danced for money, which a proper artist should never do. Neither did they express any higher feelings to the dance as a form of worship to change their lives. It was seen purely as enjoyment or for money. While the dancers did admit that they did dance for money, we have to consider that it is their profession, the way in which they earn their livelihood and support their families, some of them not having any other choice.

164 Paraphrase
165 Manikarnika ghat is nearly an hour drive from the area we visited, logic does dictate that their regular temple visits would be to those within their neighbourhood.
6. The Aghori

In the following section I will share my experience with the aghori and his community. During the time of the sringar celebration I had very little contact with the aghori, and I was not aware of his presence until the day of the procession. He was not part of the temple program, but rather came with the damaru group with whom he had been coming to the ghat for the last two and a half years. I was however lucky, and the aghori came back to visit Banaras again. By that time I had spent enough time at the ghat for me to be accepted to come to the other side of Ganga at night with his followers and the boys from the damaru group. Aghori Manikandan, as he calls himself has his original temple in Tiruchirapalli, South India. The main deity he worships is aghori Kali, for whom he has put up a small temple at Manikarnika ghat. At the time I was there, it consisted only of a graffiti painting of Kali and a triangle shaped dhuni. At the other side of Ganga, he had found a statue of Ganesh for whom he had prepared a dhuni and a place for offerings, subsequently naming him aghori Raja Ganesh. It was also here that he and his devotees had set up a camp for the nights they stayed and where they performed rituals. While Kali and Ganesh may be seen as specific deities, he always stressed that ‘all are one,’ this one powerful source being referred to as ‘Mahadev.’ I also went to see his main temple in Tiruchirappalli but was only allowed a short visit. While devotees there were very kind and accommodating, my driver was very eager to leave and later told me that in the area he had his temple, many girls had disappeared. This attitude was quite common towards me during the time I spent with the aghori. I was always being very well treated, but I also had to be protected. While the time I could spend with the aghori was limited, I was still able to gain some insight in how a modern aghori can work, knowledge of which I feel there is a lack of. My previous knowledge of the aghori was that of an obscure figure who dwelled at the cremation ground, completely detached from the rest of the world and often engaging in secret, horrifying rituals\(^\text{166}\) or that of the Kina Ram aghori sect who recently has become more mainstream and engaged in social and hospital work.\(^\text{167}\) Aghori Manikandan on the other hand, was nearly all of this, and more. He engaged in unorthodox rituals, he helped his followers to a better life and he provided ritual services for people in need. However, he was neither obscure nor anonymous but used modern tools to promote himself. He has both a webpage where he puts up photos of his life and a youtube channel where one can see clips of rituals.\(^\text{168}\) He did, however keep control over whatever information he gave out, and only gave interviews if he felt good about that person’s intentions. I believe one reason he chose to appear in public was financial, something one rarely reads about in the literature on aghori. Pilgrim journeys, food and living were all expenses that have to be taken into account.\(^\text{169}\) Even though he joked about having to pay much less for the hotel room he used during the hot daytime hours because he was an aghori. While he, as an aghori lives outside the household system he still relates to it and uses it for reference. For instance, I as a woman could not witness any aghori rituals, which he explained neither could his mother or his sister.

\(^{166}\) See Parry 1994, Øestigaard 2004

\(^{167}\) See Barret 2008, Strøm 2006, Gupta 1993

\(^{168}\) Aghori Manikandan 2019, Aghori Guru Manikandan, 2019

\(^{169}\) As I previously mentioned, giving food was important to this group and they were proud to be able to hold Bhandaras.
When discussing marriage, he told me that I should find a husband, as even Kali has a partner. Furthermore, he was very concerned about the appearance of a woman in the company of him and his followers. While he invited me to a pilgrimage to Ujjain, he struggled immensely with the decision. During his rituals, Kali told him I should come, but he was himself scared both for my safety among the naked sadhus, but also how people would view a lone woman travelling with a group of men. I found this interesting, as though he had renounced his own role in traditional society, he still acknowledges the rules and constraints of it. Herman Strøm brings up some of the anthropology conducted on the aghori and takes the stand to see the aghori in a social context rather that outside the world.

Returning back to the sringar celebration, on the first day the baba never entered the temple after the procession, instead he and some of his followers left to the other side of Ganga were they performed shav sadhana, a powerful aghori ritual. On the second day of sringar, however he stayed on the ghat and gave out blessings in order to energize people asking for his help into having a better future and for overcoming any kind of diseases. As for the aghori, I was myself never allowed to observe such rituals, and they never showed me the photos from that night themselves as they were afraid I would get scared. I did however, managed to see visual proofs of his rituals from a stray devotee’s cell phone. As I did not manage to gain any other first-hand experience from these rituals I will have to write quite generally of such, drawing on other anthropological works such as Barret and Parry, but also by oral information given to me. My informants refer to these rituals simply as ‘dead body puja,’ or aghori Kali puja, otherwise the practise of meditating sitting upon a corpse is commonly known as shav sadhana. While Barret doubts the practise of such rituals today, partly because it logistically would be very difficult I saw photographic evidence of aghori Manikandan meditating on a corpse. I am told that these rituals are very uncommon nowadays, as if any mistakes are made during such a ritual it may result in mental illness. This had indeed already happened to one of his followers, who was thereafter looked after by the rest of the devotees. Because of the danger of such rituals, the aghori who has the capacity to perform them is highly respected.

170 Which, according to him is Kal Bhairav
171 Here the role as a householder and husband. Instead he lives in a social network as a leader with his followers.
172 He was also scared that if people started talking, the police may show up at the other side of Ganga which could be problematic because of the intake of more or less legal intoxicants.
173 Strøm 2006:4-5
174 He never did enter the Maha Shamshan temple at all, even though his Banarsi followers often frequented the lieu.
175 As the aghori’ first language is Tamil, a mix of english, hindi and tamil is often used.
176 2008:157
177 I later found out that upon his mother’s death he performed her death ritual by meditating upon her corpse, this was done in public and went viral. See The Hindu 2018-10-03 and and Sun News 2018-10-02
In another photograph that I was shown, the Baba was sitting by the fire, eating on a human thigh. While Barret writes that whenever flesh was consumed, it would be prepared in small pieces obscuring the origin of the meat\textsuperscript{178} this was very clearly a human leg on which he chewed. The consumption of human meat was discussed quite openly and humorously, with the Baba joking saying he was having ‘dead body biryani’ for dinner. On the last photo I was shown he carried a body towards the fire. The purpose of these rituals are several, firstly by successfully completing and being able to perform them the aghori established himself as authentic. Having that capacity he can discern himself from the multitude of self-acclaimed aghori that are out there. Secondly, the puja is a form of worship for the dead body, a ritual for the deceased. Finally, it helps the aghori accumulate powers, shakti. These powers, I am told he retains in himself and uses only for the welfare of other people. According to his followers, he never misuses them. This statement may be viewed in opposition to the belief in the aghori curse, which should be “particularly terrible and virtually irrevocable.”\textsuperscript{179}

The dead bodies used for rituals are fished out of Ganga, and have to hold a certain quality to be able to be used in a ritual. For example, they may never come from a murdered body.\textsuperscript{180} Once a body was found in the river, but as it had been shot or stabbed in the chest, it was returned to the water. Generally, the aghori followers were quite excited about the dead body puja and always on the lookout for corpses. Before a dead body puja is performed, the ground is prepared, flattened and packed. The aghori draws letters of the Tamil script in the sand. These lines are then filled with water and yellow powder, and along these lines a red powder is dotted out. As I am a woman, these preparations was all I was allowed to witness before I was sent back to the ghat. Furthermore, aghori Manikandan only holds these rituals on the other side of Ganga. While the populated side is much more powerful, it also have a great deal of distractions, making it much more dangerous to perform them there.

While the mystery of these rituals often end up in focus, I believe the aghori had a much more important role than as a ritual specialist. At the time I was there he had around four followers with him from Tiruchirappalli, and around the double from Banaras. The numbers are however floating, as different people would come on different days. His main crew in Banaras consisted of four young men from the damaru group, none of them who was married. He looked after all of his followers with great care and showed much affection and tenderness towards them. While doing so, he also remained very firm and expressed his dislike if the men ever went out of control or risked disturbing any ritual. To my main informant he had given the task to look after his temple in Banaras when he was away, giving him a purpose and responsibility. This man had previously been taking all sorts of drugs, and selling them to tourists or anyone who wanted, even referring to himself as a junkie. Another man was burdened by family troubles and often ended up sleeping ‘everywhere.’ His followers, as I chose to call them, did form a certain social hierarchy, with the aghori being on top. He slept on a bed, while the rest below him on a tarpaulin laid out on the ground. His followers regularly asked him for advice, be it personal or religious and his word was treated as the truth. Within the two groups, the Banaras and the Tamil everyone had their role. The more senior would have more responsibility and look after the younger or the ones who needed more support. For example, one young man who went crazy after a ritual. The daily life was also much less exotic.

\textsuperscript{178} 2008:156
\textsuperscript{179} Parry 1994:259
\textsuperscript{180} See also Barret 2008:156
While ganja was used regularly, I only witnessed a very limited intake of alcohol in relation to a ritual,\(^{181}\) and the food the *aghori* proudly served me, was South Indian vegetarian sambar.

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\(^{181}\) After an offering to Kal bhairav, we all got a small amount of vodka (*prasad*) dripped in our hand to lick up.
6.2 Presumed relationship between the aghori and prostitutes.

The aghori and the girls performing during the sringar never interacted, or had any contact at all to my knowledge. In the literature, on the other hand one may find several instances of the relation between the aghori and the prostitute. She is seen as the consort of the aghori,\textsuperscript{182} and tales tell that the bed of a prostitute is equivalent to that of a cremation ground.\textsuperscript{183} Here they are seen in opposition of the householder and his family, where sex is reproductive and life giving. Intercourse with a prostitute on the other hand, should not result in offspring; this links her to the aghori who has renounced the family life. While I should not assume that the girls performing today were sex workers, as interviews with them said otherwise I can tell that whatever their profession they had no relation to this particular aghori, or any closer personal relation to the cremation ground. Furthermore, I was advised by my gatekeeper for the girls not to spend time with the aghori, or go to the other side of Ganga as this could be dangerous. Many of the women had children or were married, and as their art is a hereditary profession this gives me reason to believe that the link Parry describes between prostitutes and aghoris may be fairly over-interpreted and theorized. Similar critique is voiced by Gupta who believes this could have been softened had he put these exotic practices in a wider sociological context.\textsuperscript{184} For example, when focus is put on theorizing the extreme aspects of an aghori cult, instead of seeing the social work the members of such would take part in. On the other hand, the aghori sect of Kina Ram can be linked to the courtesan tradition in Banaras. Gupta writes that:

\begin{quote}

it was with ironic flair that the Kina Rami reflected the role of Mughal emperors. As half-naked sadhus sitting on thrones, smoking hookahs and drinking alcohol in prodigious quantities while musicians played and dancing girls performed kathak.\textsuperscript{185}

\end{quote}

Gupta also mentions a sringar at the Aughar Nath ka Takiya, where several aghoris are buried. There old-style performances are supposedly held annually in November.\textsuperscript{186} In an interview with a very old Kina Rami, he told me that the tawaiif came to perform by Krim Kund up until around 1962,\textsuperscript{187} during Lolark chath in September. As this time was very auspicious, only a few minutes of dancing would reap the fruits of a full years’ service. Today, the tawaiif no longer come, but there are still performances by local artists. Furthermore, there is another reason to why the tawaiif would have come to the kund to perform.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[182] Parry 1994:264
\item[183] Parry 1994:256
\item[184] Gupta 1993:13
\item[185] Gupta 1993:171
\item[186] Gupta 1993:3
\item[187] I managed to trace that it was during this time large raids were executed towards the dancing girls, in an effort to stop prostitution. According to Gupta 1993:3 this tradition ended in the 1950’s.
\end{footnotes}
Pathak and Humes tell the following folk story:

Once, Baba Kinaram was passing through the lanes of Dalmundi, the “red light” district of Banaras. He was carrying a dead body on his shoulder that was so rotten that its stench could be smelled hundred of meters away. The King of Banaras at that time took offense and ordered his officials to remove the corpse. Furious, Baba Kinaram cursed the King and all the dancers in the area: the king would not sire an heir and the dancers would lose their ability to perform. In order to remove the curse, the dancers began to go to his ashram and perform in his honor.\footnote{Pathak and Humes 1993:239}

The precedent quotation relates the performance of courtesans to the Kina Ram ashram under his patronage and protection, for his blessings, or to soothe a curse. Any mentions of sexuality or obscure rites seem absent.
7. The Media

In this section I will look at how the *Baba Shamshan Nath srīngar* was portrayed in the media. Attempting to find a general consensus to which features of the celebration they chose to highlight. With media, I refer to online newspapers in English, or clips from Youtube of a similar character. Because of my lack of knowledge in Hindi, I only have one local paper magazine to compare with the magazines in English. My primary sources are thus limited, but may give an overview to which features were prioritized. I will also include some of my informants’ views and opinions about the media surveillance.

*Dainik Jagran* is the most widely read newspaper in Uttar Pradesh and included short reports and images from all three days of the srīngar celebration in their Varanasi edition. While their reports included most of the components from the srīngar, their information was clearly relying on information from one side of the organisers. For example, Chenu Prasad Gupta and Gulshan Kapoor were, among the other organisers from the temple committee mentioned by name on all three days. There was no mention of the Kashi Vishwanath Damaru group or of their bhāndara, neither did they mention the aghori. Furthermore, on the day of the procession, *Dainik Jagran* reports that bhajan songs and chanting went on thorough the night, while in reality after the procession was over the only music played was the drumming from the damaru to which the hijiras danced. Likewise, the article claims there were two Rudra Abisheka, with the second being performed when the procession reached the temple, even though this was an arti. The article from the second day was shorter, simply telling of the offerings made for Maha Shamshan and which artists performed. The final article reported the dance of the ‘lady dancers,’ or the nagar vadhu and a short backstory of them dancing for salvation. The *Dainik Jagran* did not mention the word sex worker and did not highlight this feature. Instead focus lay on the contradiction between the sorrow of being on the cremation ground, and the joy the dancers brought. The phrase used to the describe this such as “on one side there were dead bodies being burned, and on the other side, the nagar vadhus were dancing and people they were enjoying life,” were the same phrase my informant used in my interviews. Furthermore, the article mentioned that the arti was done according to tantric traditions, while arti was performed much as it was everyday, only longer and with more offerings of whisky and bhang. Per Ståhlberg has conducted fieldwork at Dainik Jagran in Lucknow. From his work I could recognize a few common elements. As for the information accessible he writes:

> Indian journalists have very little access to open information, and they can rarely demand to see any document. They are always dependent on the goodwill of their sources to hand out information. 

189 Dainik Jagran 13/4, 14/4, 15/4 – 2016
190 Dainik Jagran 13/4 2016
191 Dainik Jagran 13/4 2016
192 Dainik Jagran 13/4 2016
193 Dainik Jagran 14/4 2016, also the article mentioned the temple organisers by name.
194 Dainik Jagran 14/4 2016, Tranlsation by Rajeev Sharma and should be seen more as a paraphrase.
195 Dainik jagran 15/4 2016
196 Ståhlberg 2002:118
This corresponds to the limited group of informants from which these articles would have gathered their story. This celebration, however, is not a high-profile news story but rather a local happening. On the reporting of religious events Ståhlberg ponders;

but for popular, trivial events there was no obvious way to cover them ‘seriously’. Most commonly, the newspaper coverage of religious festivals was reminiscent of stories in primary school textbooks: idealised and stereotyped\textsuperscript{197}

The reports from such a celebration accordingly does not try to challenge or investigate what is true and from whom the information comes, even though one could expect that the mere observations and presence of the reporters could have avoided many of the mistakes that were made. While the articles from one single local newspaper cannot be used to draw any empirical conclusions regarding the local press, in this one case, the paper did not sensationalize the celebration, and largely gave equal interest to the different components of the sringar. As for the Hindi speaking news24, their video report consists of clips from the last day, interviews with Anjana who tells the story of dancing for a better life next life\textsuperscript{198} and Gulshan Kapoor who repeats the story of Man Singh and the dancers who refused to come.\textsuperscript{199} These video clips are largely similar to how the celebration was reported in English speaking media.

I have looked at twelve articles from English speaking online newspapers from 2006-2018. Out of them the only article which mentions all three days, the procession, the rudra abhiseka and the folk artists is the Hindustan Times from 2006.\textsuperscript{200} However, the article does not mention the dance performance.\textsuperscript{201} All other articles have their main focus on the location, the cremation ground and the dance. The celebration is thus described in quite an exotic, eye catching way. The women coming to dance are, without exception described as nagar vadhus or sex workers. In one clip, my male informant Pappu, married and with two children, is described as such.\textsuperscript{202} According to Ståhlberg:

\begin{quote}
Most ‘knowledge’ of society is composed of mediated images. Through the newspaper you ‘learn to know’ society, what it consists of, how it works (and does not work), where power is located and what it means for your own social existence.\textsuperscript{203}
\end{quote}

By referring to these women (and Pappu) as sex workers, the media thus helps in establishing their role in society, effectively placing them on the periphery as such. The junior dancers I spoke to were not interested in talking to the media and preferred to stay out of their view. As for the senior dancers, such as Pappu or Nitu, they often took charge and were interviewed, giving the journalists the answer they were expecting to hear.

They have the similar question every year,\textsuperscript{204} because they do not have anything else to ask from us. And to get distance from them, we say that

\begin{footnotes}
\item[197] Ståhlberg 2002:162
\item[198] I have chosen to use the term ‘next life’ instead of ‘rebirth’ as this is how it was translated to me.
\item[199] News24 2016-04-14
\item[200] Hindustan Times 2006-04-05
\item[201] Hindustan times 2006-04-05
\item[202] Deccan Chronicle 2008-04-12
\item[203] Ståhlberg 2002:9-10
\item[204] “Why do you come here to dance”
\end{footnotes}
we perform here and we just want to have a good life in the future life. But
the reality is, what wish I have, that is in my heart, I am going to the temple
and putting my hands together and put my head down and just tell Baba \(^{205}\)
in a silent way. So how will I share it with them. Because a husband never
tells all about himself to his wife also, there are some secrets which he
never tells her \(^{206}\).

As Pappu describes, the reason they come to dance is private, and so is their
relationship with Baba. While the women might have different reasons for coming, such as
money, prayers or enjoyment there are two versions which have gained most attention in the
media. First it is that they come to dance for the well-being of all, supposedly aiding towards a
more positive view of sex workers. The second reason which is very pronounced is the wish
for a better life next life. That the dance serves as a purificatory and liberating agent that will
help them get rid of their sins and create a better rebirth for their next life. One quote from a
dancer in the *Indian Express* reads

> We come here and pray to the Baba to help us attain blessings for a better
life in our next birth. We pray that our life is better next time and to achieve
this we come here once every year to dance \(^{207}\).

Moreover, I was told that the dancers did not hold any higher regards for the
journalists, as they seemed to come more for their own enjoyment than to report the celebration.
If the reporters got too close, or asked for their phone numbers, the dancers would ask how
much they had been drinking or if they could remember their own house number. Jack Lule
argues that news are received differently by the public who “want compelling dramas. They
want satisfying or stimulating stories that speak to them of history and fate and the fragility of
life.” \(^{208}\) One reason for highlighting the unconventional aspects of the celebrations would so
serve to promote and draw attention to the *sringar* itself. Effectively putting the cremation
ground in the spotlight, not only as a sacred place for the dead, but as a joyous place for the
living.

The background story of how Maharaja Man Singh renovated the temple and how
the *nagar vadhu* offered to perform when no one wanted to is also a common feature in the
articles, all but two features the Raja’s name and states that the program started either in 1585
or 450 years ago. Lule writes that;

> Journalists approach events with stories. They employ common
understandings. They take from shared narratives. They draw upon
traditional story forms. They come to the news story with fundamental and
familiar stories. \(^{209}\)

For him, reporters are very much a part of a story telling tradition were news even
may be seen as myths. In this case, a creation of a myth may even take place, under the disguise
of being ‘news.’ In all articles, except in the Hindustani Times, Gulshan Kapoor is being

\(^{205}\) Baba in this context referring to God (Mahadev).

\(^{206}\) Interview with Pappu, paraphrased. 2016-04-24

\(^{207}\) *Indian Express* 2010-03-27

\(^{208}\) Lule 2005:109

\(^{209}\) Lule 2005:101
interviewed, sometimes alongside an astrologer or another member of the temple committee. This story thus come from only one source, but is spread during several years in different newspapers reinforcing its validity without being particularly questioned. Again, Ståhlberg offers his insights as he observed the close relationship between reporters and, in his case politicians. Their friendly behaviour towards each other often resulted in the lack of challenging or intricate questions. The renderings of the *sringar* celebration in media is, in my experience heavily biased. There has been no attempts to investigate the truth in the information given by the interviews, neither has their observations of the celebration been accurate. Furthermore, many online journals had taken their article directly from the *Times of India*, and the reporter from TOI is always Binay Singh. In no other English article was any other author mentioned. That is not to say that there were no other journalists involved but most seemed to have been for local or Hindi newspapers. As a source of knowledge for the *sringar* itself, any accounts from the media must be seen as inadequate. However, they can serve as a source to how the celebration is presented, which features are mentioned or highlighted and how this may alter the perception and reception of such a celebration.

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210 Ståhlberg 2002:125
8. Conclusion

The sringar of Baba Shamshan Nath gathered a diverse group of performers, sponsors and devotees. In the beginning of my fieldwork I had not expected such a diversity, but it reinforces the idea of Hinduism as multifaceted and hard to define. While everyone agreed on the sacredness of the location for the celebration, their reasons for participating varied greatly. The focus on such a celebration may be on the religious aspects, but my research shows that people were as much driven by financial or personal gains as by devotion. This conflict of interests created fractions between the different groups where the celebration of the temple sometimes felt put aside to personal issues. Furthermore, it reinforced the idea that Hinduism is done, performed and executed rather than believed. The importance is in the act that you make for the deity, not necessarily in your set of mind. This also opens up for more liberal and elaborate celebrations such as the sringar, which would bring both enjoyment to the deity, and to the devotees. However, any historical references or mythology surrounding such an event worked, in my experience to legitimize the festivity socially. Here, claiming that the celebration was for Baba and the temple was not enough, instead a more elaborate tradition was put forth to justify the different elements of the sringar. These presumed or invented historical references were made official by the media who so aided in anchoring the sringar historically. By using this narrative the sringar opened up to become more of a popular celebration which attracted people from various social classes. Its current form also makes it more accessible to the population, both in terms of physical participation but also sponsorship. The presence of the aghori may also be a result of the growth of the celebration. Already having a connection to the ghat he could reaffirm his position and prominence as an aghori by participation in the celebration. While this may sum up my ideas of the celebration in itself, many of the people I met during my fieldwork had dedicated their lives to the god or goddess. In many instances, they told me, it was their belief who kept them sane and alive. As one of the damaru boys told me, ‘what is Banaras about? get high, eat prasad and help people.’

While the previous paragraph might sum up what was learnt during my fieldwork, room should be made to what was not learnt and why. I set out not only to describe but also to represent in the sense of portraying my informants. These proved to be difficult by several reasons, the main being my lack of language skills. Here I either had to make the discourse less personal, working through an interpreter or create a close approach with my informants but using more non-verbal communication. Spivak is one to argue that the woman has even less of a voice than her subaltern male counterpart. One postcolonial approach should then be “by measuring silences, if necessary – into the object of investigation” Here, it was both the difficulty of access and the language barrier which in some way denied them their voice. My gatekeeper Pappu-ji held double roles here. He both represented, as in spoke for, the group of female dancers, but also gave me the opportunity to speak with the women myself. What took away these women’s voice, or at least restrained it, was access. One could say that by denying access one took away the chance for these women to represent and speak for themselves. While the effect of this essay may be minimal, perpetually making access to certain groups of society hard could have larger impact in the way we perceive and hear them.

211 For example, showing each other pictures, using gestures, participating in rituals.
212 1988:82ff
213 Spivak 1988:92
In contrast, it might not only be that access to certain groups are difficult, but that it is much easier to access others. For example, those privileged enough to receive a longer education. Furthermore, consider Said’s discussion of a text as reinforcing reality that “texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe.” While I do not believe one should attribute an exaggerate amount of such power to scholarly work I chose to put forth this idea to be put against that of representation. Had I gained more access especially to the women I met with, this work might have come out much different, with other narrations coming to life and other conclusions being drawn.

### 8.2 Suggestions for further research

While this study has only scratched the surface on the aspects of annual celebrations and arts connected to the temple, it certainly has opened opportunities for further research. Each individual group I have met with would be interesting to follow during a longer period of time. For example, I followed Pappu on several occasions, from privately hosted mehfilis for a child’s birthday to larger occasions, such as when he held a yagna and performed in front of a mostly female audience. By following him and the female dancers to the variety of places where they perform one would gain a much more comprehensive picture of their culture and way of life. Secondly, following the aghori during his pilgrimage journey and to his main temple could make us gain valuable insight in a modern aghori works. Here one could focus not on his rituals, but rather how he positions himself in relation to social media, how his economy functions and how the social structure of his followers are built up. In short; how the aghori shapes himself in relation to the modern world. A final suggestion would be to compare several sringar celebrations to each other, and find out more about their structure and patronage. While Kumar and Marcus often argue for it being a low-class celebration I believe one could find much more diversity by studying how a sringar is held in temples with different socio-economic status.

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214 Said 1978:94
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