

“Walking the Path of Gods”: A South African’s Visit to Hindu Sacred Sites in India

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ABSTRACT This auto-ethnographic account, based on the author’s pilgrimage through India in 2010, analyses four sacred sites in Hindu mythology viz. Hampi, Puttaparthi, Belur Math and Varanasi. These sites are analysed in terms of how they attract pilgrims and tourists and why they are considered pilgrimage sites. Aspects of the visit discussed in this article include the food and culture at these sacred sites, the mode of transport used to travel throughout India, and the role of tourism in the development of these sites and the cities in which they are located. The theoretical framework draws from Durkheim’s theories of religion and in particular his distinction between the sacred and the profane, the effervescence and collective consciousness of the site. Sacred spaces emanate an energy that is unique compared with the profane sights of everyday life and everyday existence. Visit to these sacred sites provided an ‘authentic’ spiritual focal point, a gateway from daily material existence into the spiritual realm, and a means to connect better with Hindu beliefs, mythologies, and legends. The pilgrimage strengthened the author’s own identity construction as a Hindu and as an individual.

INTRODUCTION

The article is an auto-ethnographic account of the religious significance of four sacred sites in India, Hampi, Puttaparthi, Belur Math and Varanasi¹, which the author visited during April 2010. The primary reason for choosing these sites was that, as a Hindu, they have great religious and spiritual meaning that the researcher wanted to explore. An element of cultural and religious curiosity also motivated the researcher to visit these sites.

Hampi is a stone town and UNESCO heritage site located in the state of Karnataka in South India. Its relevance to Hindu philosophy and mythology lies within the Hindu scripture of the Ramayana and is further linked to Hindu gods such as Lord Hanuman, Lord Rama and Lord Shiva. Puttaparthi is located in the state of Andhra Pradesh in South India and is most revered for being the hometown of the charismatic saint Sri Satya Sai Baba (www.Sathyasai.org). Babas Ashram is in Puttaparthi in the south of India. Puttaparthi also has a university and a hospital. Belur Math is located in Kolkata in the state of West Bengal in the eastern part of India and is the international headquarters of the Ramakrishna Math and mission worldwide, which was founded by the charismatic Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). Devotees of the Ramakrishna Centres visit this site as part of their ritual pilgrimage. The site lies along the banks of the holy Ganges River. Varanasi is lo-

cated in the state of Uttar Pradesh in the north of India. It is one of the holiest cities in Hindu mythology and is also regarded as one of the most important sites for Hindu pilgrims and religious tourists. Varanasi is also situated on the banks of the holy Ganges River and is linked to the Hindu lord Shiva and the Hindu life cycle of the *Purushuttaras* (Fruits of Life). The element of *Moksha* (liberation in death) is of great significance to the pilgrims who visit this site (Eck 1982).

METHODOLOGY

This study is ethnographic, based on observations and field notes taken whilst visiting the sites. One of the characteristics of ethnography is that it involves highly personalised accounts where authors draw on their own experiences to extend understanding of a particular discipline or culture. Such evocative writing practices have been labelled “auto-ethnography” (Reed-Danahay 1997 in Holt 2003). A literature review of the sites was also conducted in order to establish their history and significance in Hindu philosophy and religion. The author participated in the most important rituals and practices associated with these sites. At Hampi, I visited the Malyavantha Hill which, Hindus believe, was the abode of Lord Rama and his brother Lakshmana during the monsoon seasons whilst they searched for mother Sita in the epic tale of the Ramayana (www.hampi.in). I also

paid homage to the Anjeneya Hill which Hindus regard as the mythological birthplace of Lord Hanuman (www.hampi.in). During my visit to Puttaparthi, I attended the ceremonial ritual of the Sai Baba *Darshan*², and attended the Sri Ramakrishna *aarati*³ and the Dakshineswar Kali Temple, where Sri Ramakrishna was a local priest, during my visit to Belur Math. Sites associated with the holy trinity of the Ramakrishna order, which are Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda, were also visited. This was an important aspect of the pilgrimage to Belur Math. These sites include Jayarambati, Kamarpukur, Cossipore Gardens, the Baranagor Math and Golpark where the Swami Vivekananda Museum is housed. During my visit to Varanasi, I visited the Kashi Vishwanath Shiva temple and attended the evening *Ganga aarati*. I also visited the Manikarnika funeral *ghat* and the temples of the Buddha at Saranat⁴.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS AND SACRED SITES IN INDIA

Sacred sites, whether they are religious sites or national icons, are becoming more popular tourist destinations. People are expressing their religious freedom and engaging in religious and cultural curiosity (Vukonik in Timothy and Olsen 2006). Sacred religious sites are visited by pilgrims and tourists alike. Within the rapidly growing field of religious tourism there exists a 'blurring line' between the pilgrim and the tourist. According to Turner and Turner (1978:20), "a tourist is half a pilgrim if a pilgrim is half a tourist". Religious tourism is not a new phenomenon and pilgrimage has been part of the world's major religions such as Christianity, Hinduism and Islam virtually from the time that these religions were established. Religious tourism as a discipline, however, is a relatively new field of inquiry but one that has grown more popular over the past 15 years (Timothy and Olsen 2006). Pilgrimage, according to Singh, is "regarded as a spiritual journey or a spiritual quest – a guiding force a guiding force unifying divinity and humanity; it is a search for wholeness – one that lies within the act of the journey and encompasses sacred place, sacred time, sacred meanings, sacred rituals, and embodies both symbolic and tangible psyche elements in an attempt to realize humankind's

identity in the cosmos" (Singh 221 in Timothy and Olsen 2006).

Pilgrimage and sacred sites are the heart of the religious identity of all of the world's major religions. Although most Hindu organisations, such as the Divine Life Society, Ramakrishna Centre, and Sai Baba organisation, have ashrams and sub-centres in South Africa, the heart of these tendencies lie within their headquarters in India. Many South African devotees travel to India to visit the sites of their spiritual leaders and pay homage to them, whilst also uncovering more about their own personal religious identities through these journeys. The demise of apartheid in 1994, globalisation, the opening of borders, cheaper airfares, and improved services for tourists have led to increased tourism from South Africa to India in recent years. According to India Tourism statistics, 55,688 South Africans visited India in 2010 (www.tourism.gov.in). This is a marked increase from previous years – the statistics show that the number of South Africans visiting India in 2002 and 2003 were 18,238 23,878 respectively. This reflects a 30.9 percent annual increase (torc.linkbc.ca/torc/downs1/india%202003%20stats.pdf).

The theoretical grounding for this article draws on sociologist Emile Durkheim's theory of religion (Durkheim 1926), which is illuminating in understanding the nature of religion and society. Durkheim described religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim 1926: 47). Based on Durkheim's theories, the most important concepts relating to this study include the "sacred and the profane", religion as collective consciousness, and the notion of effervescence (Durkheim 1926) According to Durkheim, the sacred and the profane represent a dichotomy and are separate from and opposite to each other, existing in different domains. The sacred, according to Durkheim, is *par excellence*, that which is close to God, whilst the profane represents the normalities of human activity and everyday existence, that which is not sacred as the sacred cannot be touched by the profane (Durkheim 1926: 40). In this regard sacred spaces emanate a power and energy that is different and unique compared with the

profane sights of everyday life and existence. Ritual, for Durkheim, represents religion in practice and from this emanates the concepts of the collective power of religion, and the collective consciousness and thought of the people. Effervescence, almost a sense of delirium in Durkheim's (1926: 226) theory, is a kind of energy that is created through ritual and space. The notions of effervescence and collective energy and consciousness are explored in this article at each of the four sites.

FOOD AND CULTURAL NORMS AT THE SACRED SITES

At all four sites the food and diet were predominantly vegetarian. The only ashram that served fish and eggs was that at Belur Math. This is due to the fact that in Bengali culture fish and eggs are not considered non-vegetarian food. In contrast, Hindus in South African Hindu regard eggs and fish to be non-vegetarian. The other three ashrams served purely vegetarian food which was wholesome and simple rather than elaborate. This included such items as *dhal*, rice, chapattis, vegetable curries and fresh fruit. The diet tied in with the philosophical aspect of *sattvik* food, often consumed for spiritual practices, which is associated with the cleansing and preservation of a healthy and clear mind, which is in turn required to perform religious and spiritual acts (www.nithyayoga.org). The food served at each site differed according to the region or space that one decided to partake of a meal in. For example at Hampi, *sambhar* was part of all local meals whilst in North India *dhal* was part of most meals served. Meals were also a part of the ritual practices associated with staying at an ashram and great pride was displayed by site officials in ensuring that guests were efficiently taken care of.

At all four sites great emphasis was placed on discipline and respecting space and the body. Norms governing behaviour at ashrams and temples included dressing in attire which fully covered the body and, for women, sometimes even covering the head with a scarf. This was not imposed on visitors but rather viewed as being respectful, especially during ritual prayers and services. Other norms include not partaking in activities that led to the intoxication of the mind, such as indulging in alcohol or drugs. Practices associated with staying at an ashram

included waking up very early each morning and partaking in all rituals of prayer and meals according to clearly stipulated times. Foreign guests had to conform to the same regulations as locals when visiting sacred sites. Staying at the ashrams is arguably the least expensive mode of accommodation in India, with the cost nominal or sometimes even free. As a devotee of the Ramakrishna mission, I did not have to pay any set costs at the ashram in Belur Math or Varansi but at the ashram in Puttaparthi, I paid a minimal amount of around 80 rps a night. This barely covers the costs of meals. At Puttaparthi, I paid a minimal meal allowance of around 50 rps per meal at the foreign canteen and around 30 rps at the Indian canteen. The culture of staying at an ashram carries with it an expectation that guests would provide monetary donations, at their discretion, for the maintenance and governance of the sites and the public service work carried out by the organisation.

The author stayed at the ashrams in Puttaparthi and Belur Math, and the Ramakrishna Mission Hospital in Varanasi. The Sai Baba Ashram has no governing procedure and allowed me to stay even though I was not a Sai Baba devotee. The governance of the Ramakrishna ashrams were different as only devotees of the centre could reside there, and then only with a letter of recommendation from the president swami of the sub-ashram in South Africa. The ashram at Puttaparthi and Belur Math had separate quarters for foreign and local guests. As a South African I chose to reside in the foreign guest house due to my fondness for 'western' amenities, especially bathroom and lavatory facilities. The area for local guests had floor lavatories and bucket stand up baths which I am not accustomed to. At the ashram at Puttaparthi I stayed in the female quarters and encountered two interesting women from Mauritius. One was middle-aged and the other was elderly. We engaged in conversations about religion, Hinduism, being Indian and life in general. The quarters were not very busy as it was during the summer season and not many South African devotees were at the ashram. At the ashram at Belur Math, I stayed at the foreign guest house, where males and females stayed together. I had my own room as the ashram was not very busy with foreigners due to the summer season. There were two long term guests, both Ramakrishna devotees.. One was a young

gentleman from Japan and the other an older lady from England. We befriended one another almost immediately, and even ventured on a few spiritual outings together. I also befriended an Indian family who had moved to the ashram in Australia. However, they chose to stay in the Indian guest house rather than the foreign guest house. Whilst at the ashram in Belur, I also encountered a local Duran family, whom I knew in South Africa, at the foreign guest house, and we spoke about home in Durban and travelling. It felt as if part of 'home' was with me in India.

Transportation

The main modes of transportation chosen by the author were trains and overnight busses, as these were deemed to provide a more culturally enriching experience compared with hiring a private taxi or travelling by aeroplane. Travelling in trains and busses was a means to gain a more 'authentic' Indian experience although the notion of authenticity is widely debated by scholars and travellers. They provided an opportunity to interact with many interesting people whilst also getting a glimpse of the countryside. Train journeys can be very difficult as the third class coaches are almost always overbooked with many passengers forced to stand. This would have been a problem as the journeys were extremely long. As a compromise, I chose trains that were air-conditioned and either two or three tier, as these were more comfortable. Bus journeys were also long. For example, the journey by train from Goa to Hospet and from there to Hampi in the overnight bus took 14 hours. The journeys from Goa to Bangalore (overnight bus) and from Bangalore to Puttaparthi (local bus) took around 20 hours, inclusive of transit. On the return to Goa, I used the local seated train from Puttaparthi to Bangalore. The journey from New Delhi to Kolkata was an overnight trip which took approximately 17 hours. Travelling on the *Howrah Rajdhani Express* was a wonderful experience, as the train was well maintained, with excellent food and amenities. The journey from Kolkata to Varanasi was also an overnight journey and took approximately 15 hours. The sleeper bunks and air-conditioning made the journey manageable as I was travelling in the heart of the Indian summer heat in the months of April and May.

The journeys by train were interesting and set the pulse racing. There was vibrancy in the

air as most people who travelled on these trains seemed to have great tales to reminisce about and were involved in what appeared to be animated conversations. I met foreigners who were travelling through India; one who stands out was a young English gentleman who was teaching English in Kolkata and who decided to travel to Varanasi to learn more about Indian culture. I also met Indian families who were travelling for religious or family visits. One of the most interesting people I met was a Bangladeshi Rock singer, who spoke to me continuously on the journey from Delhi to Kolkata about life and music and his notion of spirituality. It was extremely amusing and interesting at the same time. One of the things that also stood out was the local *chai wallas* (tea and coffee sellers) who walked up and down the aisle shouting "*chai coffee, chai coffee*". They also sold *samosas*, hot fried potato snacks, and biscuits. The train exposed the class structure of contemporary Indian society. Affluent middle and upper class citizens sat in the air-conditioned compartments whilst the masses of the people travelled in the non-air-conditioned, sleeper classes which were overcrowded and extremely uncomfortable.

Tourism and Development

Improved and cheaper transportation, especially the development of the railway system within India, and more affordable airfares from abroad, has led to the development of a mass tourism industry, both local and global. There has been a large influx of pilgrims and tourists over the past decade to these sites. Hampi is a small town but caters for a large local and foreign market. It has a busy central bazaar, numerous small guest houses, and 'trendy' restaurants which cater for all kinds of food tastes. The foreign market has had a large influence on the structural appearance of Hampi; the narrow streets are crowded with small market stalls and there is even a little 'cosy' German bakery at the heart of the town. The most exclusive restaurant is situated on a hilltop which overlooks the Hanuman Mountains and town's natural beauty. The restaurant called, the *Mango Tree*, serves both local and foreign cuisine. The town is dominated by tourism and every corner buzzes with locals who have turned tour guides and are constantly touting for business while *tuck tucks* try to attract potential tourists to go with

them on tours of the town and temples. The larger accommodation facilities and hotels are located outside of Hampi in the town of Hospet and many tourists travel between towns for shopping and sightseeing.

Puttaparthi, though very small, caters for a large local and foreign tourist trade. It has different types of accommodation, including guest houses for locals and foreigners at the ashram, apartments for long term guests, who are mainly foreigners, and smaller inns and guest houses which cater mainly for local guests and passers-by. Tourism plays a large part in the town's economy as the entire town is centred around the heart of the Guru Sri Satya Sai Baba and the millions of guests who pass through every year. The town has a buzzing market street with shops stocking gifts, souvenirs, jewellery and religious items. The ashram also has a large shopping mall where shoppers can obtain all kinds of items including clothing, bedding, shoes and gifts. The heart of the town is religious but the influence of consumerism and the need to cater for foreign tourists is evident in the presence of delightful restaurants and coffee shops which come alive with devotees and religious tourists greeting one another with the traditional "Om Sai Ram". These coffee shops are trendy and one can get cappuccinos and lattes as well as foreign bread and food such as pizza and cheese. They are similar to those found in malls in South Africa or any other western country.

Belur Math is primarily an ashram and the activities around the space are spiritually based. The ashram caters for both local and foreign guests and most meals are catered for at the ashram itself. There is a busy book shop which is full of religious pilgrims and tourists. The streets around the ashram have a predominantly religious feel, but there are a few *chai* and *chaat* (snack) stalls and very popular ice-cream stalls cool guests in the summer heat. The tourist feel is not as strong as at other sites. However, the ashram is filled daily with religious pilgrims, tourists and spiritual seekers. Outside the ashram are *tuck tucks* and buses that take guests to the city centre of Belur, which is a small town with many small local shops that carry different types of gifts and merchandise. Transport can also be easily obtained to the much larger city of Kolkata, and other spiritual places. The ashram also has a driver and transport facilities

which take guests to places such as Jayarambathi and Kamarpukur, which are important sites associated with the life histories of Sri Sarada Devi and Sri Ramakrishna.

Varanasi is also a busy town but different from the other sites in that it is openly developed for the tourist market. It has an 'undeveloped' feel; some foreigners I met described its centre as 'unkempt', but I found it to have a natural charm and beauty. It was buzzing with thousands of pilgrims and tourists during the time that I was there. The town's busy markets are always filled with curious shoppers and the main street of the Dashashvamedh *ghat* resembles a busy fair. Items that can be purchased at these fairs range from spiritual souvenirs, to food and snacks, clothing, religious items, music DVDs and gifts. It was less developed than a first world market fair as most of the stalls were simple. Traders bargained and there were no cash registers or computers but in my opinion, the system worked well and I do not foresee it changing drastically in the next decade or so. The system fits into the energy of the space. The accommodation includes a wide range of ashrams, guest houses, inns, and B &Bs (bed and breakfasts). Recent developments include the building of five star luxury hotels around the town centre, perhaps the first sign that Varanasi cannot resist the allure of 'development'. The hotel that stood out was the luxury 'Taj' hotel, an international, Indian owned luxury brand, both in India and globally. These hotels stick out like a sore thumb given the old feel of the town. The streets are noisy, with the sounds of people and *tuck tucks* and vehicles that seem to be perpetually hooting. Thousands of pilgrims and tourists visit the temples and *ghats* of the holy river Ganges and the entire entourage gathers at the banks of the Dashashvamedh *ghat* at the ritual of the evening Ganga *aarati*. Local business entrepreneurs include boatmen who take tourists across the river, children selling lamps and flowers during the ritual ceremony, and priests who perform prayers and rituals for religious pilgrims and tourists. Tourism ultimately, has played a major role in shaping and developing each of these sites.

Religious Significance of the Sites: Rituals, Effervescence and Collective Consciousness

Hampi is a significant religious space in view of its mythological relationship with the 'Kish-

kinda' (4th) chapter of the Ramayana which unfolds in Hampi. These spaces can still be visited by pilgrims and tourists as the scene and characters of the scriptures, including Lord Hanuman, Lord Rama, Lakshmana, Vali and Sugreeva, can be found in the geographical structures of Hampi (www.hampi.in). My journey to Hampi was both fascinating and spiritually enlightening. On entering Hampi, I was struck by the massive stone ruins which surround the town and create an energy of 'difference' and a feeling that something special awaits visitors. Hampi possesses a serenity and spiritual energy that adds to its sacredness and non-profaneness, even though the town itself is trendy and caters for consumers. Throughout my travels, I found myself caught in the dichotomy of pilgrim and tourist. 'Religious traveler' would best describe the realm that I fell into. I originally ventured into Hampi as a tourist but at times felt very much like a pilgrim, especially when I visited the Malyavantha Hill where, according to scripture, Lord Rama resided with his brother Lakshmana. I felt the strong presence in the effervescent energy of the hill of Lord Rama, Hanuman and Lakshmana amidst the mountain and was overwhelmed emotionally as I tried to relive the scene from the epic Ramayana as it would have been during the monsoon season. The collective consciousness of the space was further enlightened by the presence of monks who were reading the Ramayana in the temple of the hill. At other times during my visit to Hampi, however, I felt very much a tourist, caught in the gaze of curiosity and amazement, passing through the busy bazaar (seeking small gifts for family), or reminiscing on the open rocky mountain top of Shivas playground, which is mythologically the meditation ground of the Hindu Lord Shiva. Sitting at the *Mango Tree*, a popular and trendy restaurant in Hampi, with my tour guide-friend, I relished in the natural beauty and splendour of the surrounding rivers and mountains. The Anjeneya Hill or Hanuman Mountains is a sight of wonder that permeates through the gaze of the town. Due to the extreme summer heat, I was unable to climb to the top of the mountain, but I did get close enough to gaze at it and get a 'feel' of the mountain whose effervescence permeated through the town and seemed to protect it with its spiritual energy. Despite the glitz and glamour of tourist related development, my over-

all experience of Hampi suggests that the energy and spirituality of the town contains a sacred energy and it will remain a very special place for Hindus.

Sathya Sai Baba was born in Puttaparthi on 23 November 1926. It is said that as a child, he demonstrated exemplary qualities of compassion, generosity, and wisdom, which clearly distinguished him from the other children of his village. His charismatic character became evident when, on 29 October 1940, at the age of 14, he declared to his family and the people of his village that he would henceforth be known as Sai Baba and that his mission was to bring about the spiritual regeneration of humanity by demonstrating and teaching the highest principles of truth, righteous conduct, peace, and divine love (Kasturi 1968). Sai Baba's ashram, built by his devotees close to the village where he was born, was inaugurated on 23 November 1950. It is called *Prasanthi Nilayam* (the Abode of Divine Peace) (www.Sathyasai.org). Although Sai Baba is physically no longer in his earthly body as he died on 24 April 2011, his relic remains at the ashram of Prasanthi which has become part of the pilgrimage of Baba's devotees who visit the ashram where the guru lived and prayed to pay their respects to him. During my visit to Prasanthi, I was privileged to physically see Baba whilst he was still alive in earthly body.

Puttaparthi is a very modern, well developed and trendy town that seems to represent the charisma and spiritual energy of Sri Sathya Sai Baba. I ventured into Puttaparthi as a religious traveller, partly as a religious curious and partly as a pilgrim. On the first night I stayed at a local inn next to the ashram as I reached there late at night and the ashram had already closed. The next morning I awoke early and made my way to the ashram where I resided for the next three days. On entering the ashram, I was overwhelmed by the energy that permeated through my being. It was almost like the divine love that Sai Baba often spoke about. Officials were friendly and helpful and treated all guests with respect. Fellow pilgrims / tourists were very curious about my South African descent and accent, as was the case wherever I travelled in India. Locals always seemed curious about foreigners especially those of Indian descent living in the diaspora. Sai Baba devotees from South Africa frequent Prasanthi in large num-

bers and officials spoke very highly of them. They said that South African devotees were very disciplined and spiritually devoted to the ashram and to god.

The ritual of the Baba *Darshan* was the central core of my pilgrimage to Prasanthi. This is where Sai Baba himself would greet devotees and bless them during the evening *satsangh* (service) if he was at Prasanthi. He sometimes travelled out of Prasanthi to the ashram in Ooty, and in later years, as he grew ill, was not in a position to attend the service. Several devotees told me that Baba would randomly pick out devotees during the service and call them to his residence after the prayer to talk to them privately. For Sai Baba devotees, this would be the ultimate salvation and blessing as they would get to meet their guru and spiritual leader. I felt extremely lucky and privileged, and even blessed to have been at the *Darshan* while Sai Baba was alive and when he attended the service. The popular image of Sai Baba raising his right hand to a mass of devotees, who get to see him and receive his blessing, is eternally set in the image of the *Darshan*. The hall was packed with more than a thousand devotees when I attended and the effervescence and collective consciousness of the people and the space was extremely sacred and had a powerful impact on me. The presence of Sai Baba seemed to have a very emotional impact not only on me but on other devotees as well, who seemed overcome by a divine spiritual energy. Many broke into tears at the sight of the saint and raised their hands in worship. That memory will remain indelibly etched in my memory. The visit to the *Darshan* of Sai Baba was without doubt the highlight of my experience as a Hindu tourist / pilgrim to India.

The Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Missionare worldwide, non-political, non-sectarian spiritual organisations which have engaged in various forms of humanitarian, social service activities for more than a century. The organisations were brought into existence by Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886), a 19th century saint from Bengal (Gupta 1942), and his chief disciple, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) (Bahath 1995). Ramakrishna religious philosophy is guided by the practices of Vedanta, an ancient system of thought which was unified and energised by Sri Ramakrishna, and expounded in the modern idiom by Swami Vivekananda and

thus made available internationally to a larger audience without distinctions of nationality or race. One of the principles is that “service to man is worship of god” (www.belurmath.org), hence the very strong emphasis on philanthropic work. As a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, the journey to Belur Math was extremely sacred to me. On entering the premises of Belur Math, I felt the divine energy of the Master and the sacred energy of the space. I stayed at the international guest house for almost two weeks, breaking the trip to make a visit to Varanasi. This was a truly special and enlightening experience. The effervescence and collective consciousness of the space of the ashram and the temples, created by the *swamis* (monks) and devotees created a powerful spiritual energy.

The temple of the ashram was pulsating with visitors and religious pilgrims from all over the world, including foreign and Indian devotees. I felt a sense of peace and tranquillity permeating that space. This was common to the ashrams at Puttaparthi and Varanasi.

The ritual of the evening *aarati* (lamp offering to Sri Ramakrishna) during the evening *satsangh* (service) was filled with divine effervescence and collective consciousness of the people and the space. A unique element of my trip to Belur Math was that not only was the ashram filled with the divine energy of the holy trinity, but even the outward journeys to Jayarambathi (home of Sri Sarada Devi), the Dakshineswar Kali temple (where Sri Ramakrishna resided as a temple priest), Kamarpukur (the birthplace of Sri Ramakrishna), Baranagor Math (where Swami Vivekananda and the apostle swamis of the Ramakrishna order resided), the Cossipore Gardens (where Sri Ramakrishna resided during his ailing days), and Golpark (Swami Vivekananda Museum) were emanated by the same divine effervescence and consciousness of spiritual energy. Staying at the ashram made the journey to Belur Math a sacred journey as residing in an ashram is notably very different from the profane nature of everyday life and space. It was an experience that brought me closer to the heartlands of my faith and reinforced by belief in the Mission. This part of my journey is not one that I will easily forget.

Varanasi or Benares (“City of Light”) is regarded as the holy city in India, much as Mecca is to Muslims and Jerusalem is for the Jews (Eck 1982). Varanasi is one of the oldest cities in

Hindu scriptures and mythology. The city is rooted in the philosophy and religious tradition of Hindus across time and space. It has many names associated with Hindu mythology, one of the most popular being *kashi*, associated with the Hindu Lord Shiva. Geographically, the city is mapped by its temples and the holy river Ganges as well as the *ghats* (stairways to the Ganges River) which are situated on the banks of the river. Religiously and mythologically the city is associated with Hindu history, the Hindu god Shiva, the holy river which is the Ganges (associated with the Hindu goddess Ganga), and the notion of *Moksha* (liberation) in death. The paradox of life and death is explored within the richness of the city itself (Eck 1982). The city is visited by thousands of pilgrims (local and international) and tourists who visit the temples and river *ghats* and participate in rituals such as the evening *Ganga aarati* (offering to the gods by lighting lamps and performing a ritual prayer). I had witnessed this during my visit to Varanasi. Whilst in Varanasi, I attended the ritual of the evening *Ganga aarati*, on the banks of the Ganges River, which was observed by thousands of tourists.

The entire city can be deemed a heritage site, but within the city itself there are several major heritage sites which are visited by pilgrims and tourists alike. These include the Vishwanath Temple (associated with the Shiva Linga); Dashashvamedh *ghat* (site of the *Ganga aarti*); Manikarnika and Harishchanda *ghats* (funeral and burning pyre); *Saranat* (associated with the Buddha); *Vishwanath gali* (lane that leads to the Vishwanath temple selling religious items); Aurazebi Mosque; Ganga Mahal *ghat* (associate with lord Hanuman); Panchaganga *ghat* (associated with five Hindu goddesses) and the Ramnagar Fort (*Eyewitness Travel Guide*, India 2002). Varanasi is a sacred space that is full of the energy of temples and prayer, burning funeral *ghats*, religious pilgrims, and spiritual seekers. The effervescence and collective consciousness of the people and the space creates an atmosphere of sacredness, largely opposing the profanities of everyday life and space. One of the highlights of any visit to Varanasi was the ritual of the evening *Ganga aarati*, a sacred ritual carried out on the banks of the Dashashvamedh *ghat* on the Ganges River. This ritual is also practiced in other pilgrimage sites of the holy Ganges river of Rishikesh and Haridwar. The Ganges River is a core pilgrimage

centre for Hindus worldwide. The ritual attracts thousands of pilgrims and tourists to this sacred site. I witnessed the ritual from a boat on the river, amongst hundreds of other boats. After the ritual I visited the Manikarnika funeral *ghat*. According to Hindu mythology, people who die in Varanasi and are cremated at the *ghat* attain *Moksha* and are liberated by Lord Shiva. The smell of the burning *ghat* and the sight of hundreds of floating dead bodies, along with the energy created by the *ghat*, was a reminder that death is an eminent part of the cycle of life itself. During the *aarati*, the sight of the priests, monks and people praying at the Ganges made Varanasi a special space within Hindu religion. Swamis and monks are key at all Hindu sacred sites. Monks are believed to possess a sacred energy that profane individuals do not possess and their presence adds value to sacred sites (www.writespirit.net). The resulting consciousness of the space and the effervescence created by it impacts even those not spiritually inclined.

Another significant part of my visit to Varanasi was the homage to the Saranat temples of the Buddha where the Buddha, according to religious texts, was 'enlightened' and gave his first public discourse to local monks. Saranat is an hour's drive from Varanasi and a visit there forms part of the religious and pilgrimage journey for many spiritual seekers visiting Varanasi. I ventured into Varanasi as a pilgrim and spiritual seeker but at times also felt very much like a tourist as a result of the busy city life which is geared towards the tourist market.

In comparison, Saranat was very serene and the element of sacred energy remains central to this beautiful space of temples, pilgrims, tourists and the museum of the Buddha. Notwithstanding its commercialisation, Varanasi remains one of the most sacred sites in India for Hindus globally and was definitely the most spiritually enlightening and rewarding experience of my travels to India.

CONCLUSION

Sacred sites, whether they are in reverence to a god, part of a scripture of holy text, a living deity, or an incarnated saint, as in the case of Hampi, Puttaparthi, Belur Math, and Varanasi, have similar purposes and certain commonalities. These sites, together with the spiritual effervescence and collective consciousness of the people, possess a spiritual energy that is differ-

ent and unique in comparison with the profaneness of everyday life and space. From my observations, even people who did not seem to be affected by the effervescence and consciousness of the space which possessed an aura of spiritual enlightenment. Rituals associated with sacred sites included chanting, worship, and prayer and the collective consciousness of this energy of people praying created a feeling of sacredness that seemed to affect both believer and non-believer. Sacred sites are linked to the tales of gods and to visit these places meant, for me as a practicing Hindu, finding an authentic spiritual focal point. They provided a gateway away from my daily material and consumerist levels of existence into the spiritual realm. I very much felt that I was standing on 'holy ground' and my 'soul' felt as if it had been touched by something greater than myself; the visits fulfilled my search for spiritual fulfilment and what may be described as the 'authentic' life of a Hindu. It brought me closer to the philosophy and mythology of my Hindu beliefs and I now seem to connect better to the legends mentioned in scriptures and mythological tales. This has strengthened my own identity construction as a Hindu and as an individual.

NOTES

- ¹ I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the officials of Puttaparthi and the Prasanthi Nilayam Ashram, Belur Math, the Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa, and especially Swami Vimokshananda who assisted with my travel arrangements whilst I was in India.
- ² *Darshan* refers to the blessing of the guru to the disciple.
- ³ *Aarathi* refers to the offering to the gods by lighting lamps and performing a ritual prayer.
- ⁴ Saranat refers to the place where the Buddha was 'enlightened' and gave his first public discourse to local monks.

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