

# From topophilia to despair : Kashinath Singh's Banaras trilogy

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## From Topophilia to Despair. Kashinath Singh's Banaras Trilogy

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**Abstract:** Kashinath Singh's three Banaras-novels are interesting examples of the continuing occupation of a contemporary author with urban space and its social life. Beyond Banaras<sup>1</sup> as a physical location, the three novels emulate deeper and more symbolic layers of meaning of a cityscape with its fascinating complexity of social, cultural and religious relations between tradition and modernity. Kashinath Singh's Banaras trilogy also represents the changing perspective of its author on his surroundings over the course of his lifetime. While the plot of *Apnā morcā* unfolds in the culture of political debate during the 1960s and early 1970s in the university milieu, *Kāśī kā assī* can be read as a kind of documentation on the author's vivid relationship with a traditional quarter of the town and its lifestyle. *Rehan par Ragghū*, the third novel, somehow continues the sense of loss that is already present in the nostalgic mood of *Kāśī kā assī*. It deals with the growing disillusionment of the elder generation with contemporary society, its self-focused individualism and social modernity as such. The novel is about the betrayed hopes of a father in his children, the opening rift between generations and the general decline of values. The change of the central location of the plots in the three novels from the university quarter and from a traditional environment in the old town towards the "new colonies" also marks a shift from progressivism towards existentialism, and from topophilia to despair.

**Keywords:** Banaras, *Banārsīpan*, topophilia, Kashinath Singh, *sthānīyatā*

The imaginary of the old town of Banaras is a major pull factor for traditional Hindu religious pilgrims as well as a major tourist attraction for foreign and Indian tourists. From the tourist's as well as from the pilgrim's perspectives, the imaginary of Banaras is by and large defined by the old town, the Ghats and the temples along the Ganges river, and perhaps Ramnagar Fort on the opposite

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<sup>1</sup> I use "Banaras" in this article. The English spelling "Benares" is still used occasionally. The official name of the town is "Varanasi" (Hindi: Vārāṇasī).

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shore. Literary fiction on Banaras as well as journalistic writing draw both extensively on this rather limited and stereotypical image of Hindu Banaras, reconciling contradictions in a master narrative of Banaras as a center of Hindu identity and a cosmos of meanings that mysteriously makes up a conclusive whole.<sup>2</sup>

Old Banaras as a center of Hindu pilgrimage suits the orientalist clichés of the “holy city” and its folklore very well, perhaps more than any other metropolitan city in South Asia. Its traditional name “city of light” (i. e. Kāśī), which Diana Eck uses in the title of her classical book on Banaras, is a reference to the city’s shivaitic identity, a feature that is exploited on a large scale by the modern tourism industry. The focus on the old town ignores the fact that the so-called “new colonies” – i. e. the new quarters that are continually being constructed following the ongoing urban population growth – cover much more space than the old town.

The perspective of authors from Banaras on “their” Banaras, i. e. the “indigenous” perspective, is different from that of its visitors, particularly from its Western admirers, be they long time or short stay visitors. *Topophilia*, the love for the place,<sup>3</sup> is a complex phenomenon, which mostly has to do with the dynamics of interaction of inside and outside perspectives. The relation of an inhabitant of a town to his or her cityscape is a result of the dynamics of complex communicative and mimetic processes.

Is *topophilia* a general feature of literature on Banaras as well as literature from Banaras? The eulogia of Banaras and the enchanting, but also somehow ridiculous *Banārsīs* (inhabitants of Banaras) and their mostly beloved *Banārsīpan* (Banaras-hood) is a common trope of the Banaras narrative per se. Singh (2004), who has been active as a cultural geographer of his town throughout his academic life, has put bits and pieces of fictional accounts of Banaras together in his book on the literary images of the city, drawing a huge canvas of *topophilia*, marking a kind of uninterrupted time line from the reverential accounts in Sanskrit religious literature to Hindi and English literature of post-colonial India.

This article explores three novels on Banaras of the well-known contemporary Hindi author Kashinath Singh (Hindi: Kāśīnāth Simh,<sup>4</sup> born 1937). The three novels, written in different phases of his life, are quite specific in their individual

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<sup>2</sup> Compare the contributions on Banaras in Keul 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Tuan 1974; compare Singh 2004: 142ff.

<sup>4</sup> I follow the Latin anglicized spelling of the names of some famous authors and place names (i. e. without diacritics), as far as these names are established in their anglicized versions.

perspective on Banaras and also represent different narratives and different forms of reflexivity.

## 1 Kashinath Singh

Kashinath Singh was born in the village of Jiyanpur in the Bhojpuri-speaking countryside of Eastern Uttar Pradesh, not far from Banaras, but moved to the urban center of Banaras as a student after finishing his matric exam, i. e. 10th standard, following his elder brother in 1953. From then on, he has been living in a traditional quarter of the town for most of his life until old age. He did his MA at the Benares Hindu University (BHU) in 1959, and obtained his PhD in 1963, both in Hindi, where he became lecturer two years later, and later became professor and head of the department. He moved to his son's house in one of the fast-growing new colonies in recent years after his retirement as professor of Hindi and head of the Hindi department at Banaras Hindu University in 1997. Kashinath Singh has received several awards for Hindi literature during his career, including the *Śarad Joṣī Sammān* and *Sāhitya bhūṣaṇ*. For the third Banaras novel, *Rehan par Ragghū* (2008), the author was honoured with the probably most prestigious literature award in India, the Sahitya Akademi Award for Hindi novels in 2011.

Kashinath Singh is one of the classical 'four friends' (*cār yār*)<sup>5</sup> and a prominent senior Hindi prose writer of the post-1960 era, even though the number of his publications is smaller in quantity compared to the others in the group. Some of his short stories are being appreciated as being particularly brilliant pieces of modern Hindi fiction. Politically the 'four friends' formed a group that was progressivist without a close association with party politics. Singh's "completely personal narrative language",<sup>6</sup> which grows forward from the optimism of the early independence and even "reaches out to Premchand",<sup>7</sup> as the editor of his collected short stories writes.

Kashinath Singh has been publishing continuously, particularly in the most important literary magazines in the field of Hindi literature like *Hamṣ*, then edited by Rājendra Yādav (Delhi) and *Tadbhav* by Akhileś (Lukhnow), where his short stories and autobiographical pieces were mostly published in recent years

<sup>5</sup> Namely Gyānraṃjan, Ravindra Kāliyā, Dūdhnāth Siṃh and Kāśīnāth Siṃh himself; comp. Ray 2014: 55.

<sup>6</sup> *apnī nītāṃt niji kathābhāṣā*. Vijay Mohan Siṃh, introduction to Singh 2008b: 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Premcaṃd ko chū rahī thīm*, Singh 2009: 7.



before appearing in the form of book. His first collections of short stories were published already in the 1960s (*Sūcnā*, *Sudhīr ghoṣāl*, *Ādmīnāmā*), followed by his first novel, *Apnā morcā*. “Collected short stories” (*saṃkalit kahāniyām*) were published in one volume in 2008 (2nd slightly revised ed. 2009). The title is misleading, since it contains only a selection of short stories and – this is interesting – the fourth part of *Kāśī kā assī*, *Pāṃḍe kaun kumati toheṃ lāgi* (see below) as an independent *kahānī* and the last out of 17 short stories. From the 1980s, Singh also occasionally started to write poetry.

Much of Kashinath Singh’s writing is directly autobiographical (particularly, Singh 2008c), and even in his more fictional texts the autobiographical element is somehow always present. In the beginning of *Kāśī kā assī*, the novel calls itself *saṃsmaraṇ*, the common Hindi term usually reserved for autobiographical memoirs.<sup>8</sup> One of the characteristic elements of Kashinath Singh in both genres are the constant references to readers, mostly as “friends!” (*mitro*) or “brothers!” (*bhāio* or *bhāi logo*), “you worldly minded people” (*he duniyāvālo*) etc. Very common is also a reference to his readers in the imperative: “Listen!” (*suno*). These kind of vocative is typical for the poems composed under the name of Kabir (fifteenth-sixteenth century), an important figure in the *nirguṇ bhakti* tradition of Banaras, often used as a reference by modernist authors.<sup>9</sup> The author has developed this style in short stories of the 1970s and 1980s. Rāy 2014 doesn’t discuss the question of genre, but mentions the constant addressing of the reader and the interventions by the narrator as a peculiar feature of his short stories, which he considers to be more interesting than the content itself.<sup>10</sup>

The localisation of much of his short stories is in the historical Assi quarter of the old town, where he used to live close to Lolark Kund over decades and the social and rhetoric interaction of traditionalism and modernity of strange inhabitants and visitors of Assi. As Vijay Mohan Siṃh observes, even though *sthānīyatā* (a term difficult to translate: “localism”; “being rooted in a certain place”; “local identity”) is very important in his writing, he transcended the limitations of his social group in a much more profound way than the other post-1960 authors.<sup>11</sup> In the introduction to the stage version of *Dekh tamāśā lakṛī kā*, Kashinath Singh speaks sympathetically about the *Banārsīpan* (“the

<sup>8</sup> Singh 2011: 11.

<sup>9</sup> Bhisham Sahni, for example, published a drama on the life and teaching of the historical Kabir in 1981 (*Kabīr khaṛā bajār meṃ*).

<sup>10</sup> *Ye kahāniyām kathya kī dṛṣṭi se utnī mahattvapūrṇ nahīm haiṃ, jitnī saṃracnā kī dṛṣṭi se*. Rāy 2014: 56.

<sup>11</sup> Vijay Mohan Siṃh in: Singh 2009: 11.

air of Banaras”) of Arun Pāṇḍey, who had prepared the manuscript for the stage version.<sup>12</sup>

Kashinath Singh has written two more books that go under the genre of *upanyās* (i. e. novel) in the world of Hindi: *Mahuācarit* (2012) is a story of a middle-class housewife and her frustrating life at home, and *Upsaṃhār* (2014), a modern retelling of the Krishna story. This last novel has led to an aggressive campaign by some Hindu opinions, who disapprove the portrayal of Krishna as a human person with all his weakness, and the extended description of his death in the final part.

## 2 The Banaras-trilogy point of departure: *Apnā morcā*

The plots of Kashinath Singh’s three Banaras novels are located in the author’s own environment. They refer to the author’s perspective, and they reflect the author’s participation in the cityscape he draws. This is true in terms of plot structure as well as narrative style with its meandering between fiction, essay and memoir, particularly in *Kāśī kā assī*.

The localities, the quarters and its inhabitants in the three novels are markedly different. *Apnā morcā* (1972, revised edition 2007) is situated in the township of Lamkā and the Banaras Hindu University (BHU) campus close to it in times of political agitation. *Kāśī kā assī* (2002), as the title says, is situated in the southernmost part of the old town, and *Rehan par Ragghū* (2008) in an unspecified new colony, i. e. outside of the old town. *Apnā morcā* is basically focused on the student agitation in the 1960s and the BHU campus and the world of its hostels. *Kāśī kā assī* consists of the discussions of customers in a tea shop in the traditional quarter of Assī. And *Rehan par Ragghū* has a focal point in a middle-class private home.

Autobiographic references are clearly visible in all the plots. The all-knowing narrator in *Apnā morcā* is professor in the BHU Hindi department, clearly a kind of alter ego of the author. He is an engaged reporter of a student demonstration and the ensuing cycle of violence between students and the police<sup>13</sup> at Benares Hindu University from about 1967 onwards, which Rana Singh sees as a

<sup>12</sup> Singh 2008a.

<sup>13</sup> Compare Singh 2004: 284ff.

“source material for the interpretation of the students’ culture in Varanasi during the late 1960s”.<sup>14</sup> ‘Our front’ is a joint political uprising of students and teachers alike.<sup>15</sup>

Kashinath Singh ends the novel with a highly idealistic and programmatic statement on his writing as being equivalent to police rifles in this fight against the ruling class and their emblematic English language: “‘Sure, you have a rifle ...’, I smile and take out a white piece of paper from my pocket, ‘my front is this. This piece of paper ...’”<sup>16</sup> This statement can also be interpreted as the author’s position on the naxalite movement, which is part of the intellectual world that Kashinath describes in his early novel. The student demonstration that is at the centre of the novel goes back to real events of the 1960s student mobilization. It is a demonstration against the dominance of English as a symbol of a yet uncomplete decolonization. The students march on the street demanding the replacement of English by India’s constitutional official language Hindi in the educational system. English is – according to the novel – a “foreign language” (*videśī bhāṣā*) symbolizing “foreign rulership” (*videśī hukūmat*).<sup>17</sup>

English is perceived as the language of social mobility and social domination and is the object of a vehement protest of the students against the elite:

Our and their language are just different. They don’t understand us. They just don’t match us anywhere whatsoever – not in clothes, nor in lifestyle, nor in characters, nor in food or drinking manners. Our language is our field, our effort, our earned income, and their language is simply delight and luxury. Our language is just a toy for them, some entertainment ...<sup>18</sup>

In other words, “language” is a marker of a social reality: the difference between Hindi and English in India is more social than linguistic.

The backside cover of the original edition introduces Kashinath Singh as a *yuvā kathākār* (young storyteller) – even though the author was well beyond 30 when he started writing *Apnā morcā*. This is not uncommon in the world of Hindi literature though: the generation turnover is slow, and junior authors have to accommodate and resist senior authors’ domination in the literary field. The

<sup>14</sup> Singh 2004: 285.

<sup>15</sup> Singh 2007: 89, 128.

<sup>16</sup> *Yah zarūr hai ki tumhāre pās rāiphal hai lekin ... ” maiṃmuskurātā hūṃ aur apnī jeb se ek korā pannā nikāltā hūṃ, ”merā morcā yah hai. ...* Singh 2007: 128.

<sup>17</sup> Singh 2007: 52.

<sup>18</sup> *Hamārī aur unkī bhāṣā alag hai. Ve hamēṃ nahīṃ samajhte. Kahīṃ se bhī hamse mel nahīṃ khāte – na kapṛoṃ meṃ, na rahan-sahan meṃ, na taur-tarīkoṃ meṃ, na khān-pān meṃ. Hamārī bhāṣā hamāre khet haiṃ, hamṃ, hamī bhāṣā unke lie khilvār hai, manoraṃjan hai ...* Singh 2007: 60.

plot of *Apnā morcā* with its revolutionary zeal and its romantic enthusiasm on writing as a form of political activism is probably an indicator for young and engaged authorship. It is the political fiction of the young Kashinath Singh, who saw himself as an activist-writer and an advocate of a socialist version of Indian politics.

Let me add here that Kashinath Singh is the younger brother of the famous literary critic in the world of Hindi literature, Namvar Singh (Nāmvar Siṃh 1926–2019). The elder brother plays a very important role in his life, as the autobiography (Singh 2008c) reports. They both share a rural background. The parents at Jīyanpur village in UP actually had three boys. The middle one took over the farm, while the eldest and the youngest turned to the world of Hindi literature, the one as literary critic, the other more so rather as author of fiction. Both became famous professors of Hindi. Kashinath and Namvar have always been on good terms with each other, personally and to some extent also politically. The elder, however, was a lifelong staunch Marxist, and, particularly among the predominantly rather conservative citizens of Benares, hated for his deviation into left wing politics.

The perception as ‘Namvar’s brother’ has followed Kashinath Singh his entire life, and the association with his brother including the allegation of being patronized by him may have harmed his career. Even though Kashinath Singh was much less politically engaged, both in his writing and as a citizen, the brothers never fought about political issues or for any other reason. However, in his autobiographical writing, Kashinath considers it a special and courageous deed that the Sanskrit- and Pali-philologist Karuṇāpati Tripāṭhī at Benares Hindu University had accepted him as his PhD student: “When the whole town declared me untouchable because I was ‘Namvar’s brother’ [who was ostracized as being Marxist], he accepted me, even though people were against it.”<sup>19</sup>

The PhD thesis, submitted in 1963, had been the final step of a successful academic education that started from the intermediary and undergraduate level in BHU, while Kashinath Singh used to live together with his brother in very simple conditions in one household. Unlike his brother, who later left BHU and took up positions in different places in UP, Rajasthan and finally at JNU in Delhi, Kāśīnāth stayed back, became lecturer (1965) and later professor of Hindi literature at BHU and never showed any ambition to continue his academic career anywhere else.

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<sup>19</sup> *Jab pūre nagar ne ‘Nāmvar kā bhāī’ hone ke kāraṇ mujhe achūt ghoṣit kar diyā thā to logon ke virodh ke bāvjud unhone apnāyā thā.* (Haṃs 11/1993: 18, Singh 2008c: 18 [sic]).

### 3 *Kāśī kā assī*

The title and the novel *Kāśī kā assī* (“The Assi quarter of Banaras”) is centered on the traditional quarter of Assi in Banaras at the Southernmost edge of the old town, next to Godhaulia. The content of this “novel”, however, cannot be summarized, since there is no traditional story, nor any development of characters or a temporal sequence. There is neither a narrative frame, nor a linear plot or a sequence of events as the kernel of the narration. The whole novel circulates around the conversations between customers of a famous existing tea house in Godhaulia, *Pappū kī dukān*.

One individual traditional quarter of Banaras – one reading of the novel is that of a fictionalized social study – namely, of the people of Assi. The quarter is in itself as complex as the famous Sanskrit grammar written by Pāṇini perhaps in the second century BC, as Kashinath Singh lets one of his characters explain:

Assi is the ‘*Aṣṭādhyāyī*’ [Sanskrit grammar of Pāṇini] and Banaras is its ‘*Bhāṣya*’ [commentary]! Since the last 30 to 35 years, Americans, crazy with capitalism, come here and want the world to become its ‘*ṭīkā*’ [sub-commentary] ... but would ever any change happen just because you want it to?<sup>20</sup>

The reference to Pāṇini’s *Aṣṭādhyāyī* is a hint towards the holy language of Brahmanic Hinduism, i. e. to the conservative world of learning (and the pretension of Brahmanic learning in general). On the other hand, it refers to the extreme complexity of rules encoded in the brief and mysterious *sūtras* and a complex system of cross-references throughout the text, made intelligible with the help of commentaries and sub-commentaries. In this way, Assi is the core text, the rest of the town and the rest of the world is the commentary, meant to explain the core and existing only in relation to a traditional quarter of Banaras.

First, the trope is metaphoric: the grammar of Assi works like a fixed network of grammatical rules encoded in short textual sequences and their inherent cross-references between them. In other words, a universe of cross-references as the basis for the construction of meaning. The world around can explain it, comment on it, but any interaction would be a relationship of the centre to its periphery. The idea of “glocalised” Kāśī being the center of the world is a well-known belief statement of traditional Hindu religious texts in Sanskrit, and the *Kāśī māhātmya* (“praise of Banaras”) in particular,<sup>21</sup> but

<sup>20</sup> *Assī ‘aṣṭādhyāyī’ hai aur banāras uskā ‘bhāṣya’!* Pichle tīs-paiṃtīs varṣom se ‘pūmjīvād’ ke pagle amrīkī yahām āte haiṃ aur cāhte haiṃ ki duniyā iskī ‘ṭīkā’ ho jāe ... magar cāhne se kyā hotā hai?, Singh 2002: 12. I have gone into the meaning of this trope in Wessler 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Smith 2014.



Kashinath Singh uses it in another context to explain forms of interaction between certain Western visitors and the inhabitants of Banaras. The basic pun is that “America” turns into the imagined periphery as a whole of Banaras.

At the same time, the introduction of the book programmatically turns away from the author towards the reader. It explains that “simple people and simple readers are precisely the fertile soil that gives birth to this novel”.<sup>22</sup> This statement contradicts the geographical focus that is the perceived centre of gravity of this novel.

*Upanyās* (‘novel’) and the English term ‘novel’ are rather flexible terms. A fictional or even semi-fictional text can easily go as a novel in the book market. In line with the cosmic and allegorical dimension of the “grammar”, the 172 printed pages with their complex setup of narrations in *Kāśī kā assī* could be argued to somehow fall into the category of a modern literary epic text. Kashinath Singh may see himself more as a chronicler than as an author in the introduction – the chronicler of stray conversations between customers in Pappū’s tea shop. Discussions (*bahasem*) never stop in the shop, day and night, while people – the “natives of the quarter” (*muhalle ke ādivāsī*) keep coming and going. These “discussions” Kashinath Singh further declares, form the narrative substance of his book.

The narrative operates with the perception that the text emanates almost on its own from the people that turn up in the tea stall. The real inhabitants of Assī – i. e. the characters of the book – contain “novels about novels, and stories about stories”.<sup>23</sup> Their communication reveals the complexity of the quarter, of the town of Banaras and beyond – a web of texts and communications, or, in other words, a universe of intertextuality. Over and over again the narrative is accompanied by vocatives addressing the reader in the style of the traditional oral story-teller. The individual author of the many narratives that flow together in *Kāśī kā assī* disappears behind his documentation of these communications.

*Apnā morcā* consists of a linear time-frame, with only occasional bits and pieces of the narration in perfect tense, but most of it in a narrative present. Kashinath Singh developed a radically different narrative technique in his mature years, particularly during the 1990s, crossing the lines between the autobiographical, reporting and essay writing. The five parts of *Kāśī kā assī* first appeared under the genre *saṃsmaraṇ* (“memories”) in the literary magazine *Haṃs*, and were only later put together into a conclusive novel text (i. e. *upanyās*). The narration unfolds in a kind of open space between fiction and

<sup>22</sup> *Ām jan aur ām pāṭhak hī is upanyās ke janm kī jamīn rahe haiṃ*. Singh 2011: 7.

<sup>23</sup> *Upanyās kā upanyās aur kathāem kī kathāem*. Singh 2011: 7.

rapportage switching from the authorial into the essayistic, as already in some parts of *Apnā morcā*.<sup>24</sup>

Kashinath Singh's observation of the public in Assi is a panoptical of the social diversity that Banaras consists of – from the proverbial simple “man from the street” to “artists, illustrators, journalists, leaders and citizens”.<sup>25</sup> The caste system, however, is more or less a non-issue. For once, this diversity appears to be contained in a conclusive whole termed *Banārsīpan*, even though it is more the quarter (*muhallā*) than the town as the next bigger unit that is in the center of *Kāśī kā assī*. The empirical author, in his unique style between documentary and fiction, is critical observer, sympathiser and somehow participant at the same time – a distinctive style that in Hindi literature is related to the term *āṃcaliktā* (regionalism) and Phaṇīśvar Nāth Reṇu's novel *Mailā āṃcal* (1954) in particular. Kashinath Singh's prose is in a way itself emanating from and transcending the quarter. His plot sets off from the close-knit social fabric of Assi and its obscurantism, its self-centeredness and exposure to globalization, its traditionalism and rapid change – in short: its shortcomings and its human depths as well.

#### 4 *Rehan par Ragghū*

The third novel of the Banaras-trilogy, *Rehan par Ragghū* (“Raghunāth on Mortgage”), was first published in the literary journal *Tadbhav* 16 in July 2007 and in 2008 appeared as a book by Rajkamal Prakashan.

The novel focuses on one central character, Raghunāth, who lives with his wife Śīlā, his eldest son Saṃjay, his younger son Dhanamjay and his daughter Sarlā in one of the colonies in Banaras (i. e. outside of the old town). Raghunāth is the first in the village Pahāṛpur close to Banaras who has gone through college education and manages to get a teaching job at his college, but at the same time keeps his small ancestral farm. He somehow combines a traditional rural way of life with his “white collar job” throughout his life, but the contradictions between the traditional and the modern parts of his identity turn into open conflict in his old age.

The novel starts with Raghunāth at the age of 71, when he finally has to accept that he cannot maintain the farm any longer because of his age. At the same time, living alone with his wife in the village turns out to be more and more problematic. The parents have spent a lot of money and effort for their

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<sup>24</sup> Singh 2007: particularly 66 and 70.

<sup>25</sup> Singh 2011: 20.



children's education, but as a result of this very education, life in the village is no longer an option for them. Raghunāth ends up living alone with his elderly wife – two bright sons have managed to establish themselves away from home.<sup>26</sup> Rather than being proud of this success, he perceives himself as a “father without offspring” (*niḥsantān pitā*).<sup>27</sup> At the same time, he has to face a lack of support and even open opposition in the village. His enemies try to get hold of his land, which he has to defend with all of his remaining power. This makes him more and more worried about the future of his ancestral property.

The narrative then goes back into the past, when Raghunāth's son Saṃjay starts a love affair with the daughter of the college principle, Sonal. Saṃjay approaches his father seeking his support for the desire to marry his beloved. Raghunāth refuses to discuss the proposal and declares that he wants to marry his daughter off before marrying off Saṃjay. At the same time Sonal's father, defeated by his daughter, overcoming his initial resistance, starts to agree to the marriage. He speaks to Saṃjay, who has to declare his father was “a man of old ways of thinking”,<sup>28</sup> marking the mental rift between his father and himself. Seeing no chance to get his father's support, he kind of declares Raghunāth a hopeless case. He himself tries to explain the proposed marriage to be a social achievement, because the girl has a higher caste status, and beyond that, she is the daughter of the college principle.

The basic point is that Raghunāth is uncomfortable with the idea that his son should marry a girl of his own choice. Saṃjay, however, resists the pressure and conducts a civil marriage with Sonal without his father's consent. Thereafter, Raghunāth declares his son “dead” to him.<sup>29</sup> Saṃjay, however, continues his professional career with great success. He becomes a software engineer and is offered a grant to go to the US for further studies, which he accepts.

Raghunāth had to mortgage the agricultural land he has inherited in order to finance the education of his children. Dhanamjay visits Saṃjay after his marriage and before he leaves India, even though his father tries to prevent him from doing so. He returns with a briefcase, which turns out to contain 460.000 rupees in cash. Instantly, this gesture makes him happy and to some extent reconciles Raghunāth with his son, but he cannot avoid to start mistrusting Dhanamjay. He suspects that the briefcase must have contained the amount

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<sup>26</sup> *Do do muṣṭamḍ beṭe aur donom pardeś*, Singh 2010: 82.

<sup>27</sup> Singh 2010: 89.

<sup>28</sup> *Purāne khayāloṃ ke ādmī hai*, Singh 2010: 22.

<sup>29</sup> Singh 2010: 24.

of half a million, and that Dhanamjay might have taken 40.000 from the total sum for himself before handing the rest over to his father.

Dhanamjay cannot wipe out his father's suspicion, and immediately starts to complain that he was always suffering from parental neglect. Beyond that, he starts to demand his share in the form of a motorcycle and similar consumer items from the amount handed over by his successful brother. Being angry with his father, he punishes him by reporting the affair of his sister Sarlā with a certain Kauśik. Raghunāth had been actively searching for a groom for his daughter for some time, but Sarlā, to the disgust of her father, is not ready to marry one of the boys suggested by Raghunāth. The split between the father and his children becomes obvious.

At the same time, the college principal pressurizes Raghunāth to apply for voluntary retirement, indicating that he would like to replace him with a younger teacher. He stops going to the college altogether. The only person that continually supports and consoles Raghunāth is his wife Śilā.<sup>30</sup> Beyond that, he is respected particularly by students from socially deprived backgrounds,<sup>31</sup> since he helps them to get fee reductions. He is the only teacher to welcome the implementation of the Mandal Commission's suggestions on reservations for "Other Backward Classes" (OBC) and does not condemn a strike of the landless workers. Because of this, nobody wants to establish social contacts with him in the village any longer, particularly after the love marriage of his eldest son and the continuing marriage refusals of his daughter. Personally, Raghunāth is concerned about the murder of Chabbū Pahlvān during the strike – obviously as an act of revenge by the mighty in the village.

Having become an elderly man, Raghunāth understands that "a 'respectable' person means a useless man".<sup>32</sup> Being "good" (*bhale*)<sup>33</sup> means "timid", a "learned person" (*vidhvān*) is a "stupid fellow" (*mūrkh*) and when somebody is called "honoured" (*sammānit*), it means "pitiable" (*dayānīy*). Finally, his enemies are after his land titles, and nobody helps him defending the ancestral property. In this situation he turns to Sonal, the abandoned wife of his son Saṃjay, who appears to have married another woman in the US, leaving his former wife Sonal alone. Sonal lives in *Aśok vihār*, one of the new colonies in Banaras – the "new Banaras" (*naṃyā Banāras*),<sup>34</sup> the "colonies" (*kāloniyām*) with

<sup>30</sup> Particularly Singh 2010: 55.

<sup>31</sup> Singh 2010: 62ff.

<sup>32</sup> 'ṣarīf' *insān kā matlab hai nirarthak ādmī*, Singh 2010: 86.

<sup>33</sup> Singh 2010: 86.

<sup>34</sup> Singh 2010: 103.

their perceived modern ways of living compared to the “quarters” (*muhalle*) of the old town – a “horror film” (*‘horar’ film*)<sup>35</sup> for Raghunāth.

Since Sonal suggests that Raghunāth and Śilā should shift to the city and live with her, and since they feel physically threatened in the village, Raghunāth and his wife finally leave the village and settle in Sonal’s house in the “new Banaras”. They feel a bit displaced, however. Beyond the unaccustomed life in the city, they feel uncomfortable to accept the friendly suggestion of the formerly unwanted and now abandoned spouse of their eldest son.<sup>36</sup> Sonal, however, is their only refuge. In an act of desperation, Raghunāth calls his sons Saṃjay and Dhanamjay on the phone,<sup>37</sup> trying in vain to convince Saṃjay to return to his wife and Dhanamjay to return to the village. His efforts to appeal to his sons are in vain however, since they live in completely different worlds. They are completely insensitive to Raghunāth’s argument that the ancestral property is threatened and that he is not ready to sell it, since it is “something that belongs to the ancestors” (*purakhom kī cīz hai*) and therefore not on disposal.<sup>38</sup>

At the same time, he has to fight administrative hurdles in order to get his pension – a fight that needs a lot of perseverance.<sup>39</sup> In his desperate situation, Raghunāth finds his mental stability in his memory of an early love affair and at the same time remembers his early hopes of having children to rely upon in old age.<sup>40</sup> His world, symbolically speaking, is a world in which the green colour (i. e. the optimism of the spring) has gone.<sup>41</sup>

At the final part of the novel, Raghunāth is visited by two mafia thugs, sent by his enemy in the village, who have order to pressurize him to sign a contract on the sale of his ancestral land. He however suggests the two to abduct him and demand ransom from his children. After some hesitation, the mafia thugs agree and bargain out the conditions. The novel ends with the three leaving the house – the abduction is set in scene. The reader is left to contemplate whether Raghunāth’s sons will be ready to pay the ransom amount of 200.000 rupees or not for the release of their father.

Raghunāth, the central character of the novel, embodies the rift between the conservative and the enlightened. He sticks to traditional values, particularly in respect to matters relating to the family. At the same time, he is clearly devoted

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35 Singh 2010: 109.

36 Singh 2010: 118.

37 Singh 2010: 142ff.

38 Singh 2010: 143.

39 Singh 2010: 146.

40 Singh 2010: 148ff.

41 *Isī duniyā meṃ kabhī harā raṃṅ bhī hotā thā bhāī, vah kahām gayā?*, Singh 2010: 153.

to modern education and career planning for his own sons, even though he does not calculate the almost unavoidable estrangement of the sons from their father and his traditional life. He even cares for the formal education for his daughter – he wanted to see her doing a “job” (*naukarī*)<sup>42</sup> or possibly only to improve her lot in the marriage market. He does not want her to be independent, of course, but he is after all ready to accept her continuing refusal of marriage proposals. Being fully committed to see his children graduate, he is ready to mortgage his beloved ancestral land.<sup>43</sup> However, this education leads necessarily to the rift between the father and his sons that is the cause of his suffering. The conflict between the generations erupts over marriage issues.

In the end, Raghunāth gets lost completely. He cannot live in the village and maintain his ancestral property any longer. He finds out that he is no longer in a position to understand the values and motives of his own children. His own sons are physically and communicatively out of reach. His insistence on the ancestral land irrespective of the question who might be interested in its cultivation and maintenance, his insistence on a ‘proper’ marriage and on the traditional sense of honesty leads into a clash of values without solution. His life planning turns out a miscalculation – finally, he finds himself and his identity to be on mortgage. The suggestion to the mafia thugs to abduct him is the final showdown in a clash between traditionalism and modernity, values and money, feudalism and capitalism, between the old generation and the new.

Besides, the focus of the town of Banaras is the Banaras of the new colonies. The old imaginary of Banaras and its quarters, which figures so prominently particularly in *Kāśī kā assī*, is completely absent in *Rehan par Ragghū*.

## 5 *Sthānīyatā*

Kashinath Singh on Banaras: “Finally, take it as having happened by force or by choice, I have selected this town for my living! A town of an unending humming of praise to the Lord! A town of Sufi-singing and all kinds of struggling and noise! A town, in which a loin-cloth may be laid out on one shoulder or used to bind a turban. A town, in which people meet in front of the *paan* shops from morning to evening to talk and laugh. A town of swear words over swear words, ritual washing places, of the rich, of the slogans in praise of Shiva and hand clapping.

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<sup>42</sup> Singh 2010: 18.

<sup>43</sup> *Āṭh bīghe khet aur ek hal kī khetī! ... Baccom ko paṛhāyā bhī to khet rehan rakh kar aur kālej se lon lekar.* Singh 2010: 21.

A town more beloved than one's life.  
 A town incomparable worldwide.  
 A town – star in one's eyes.  
 A town always enjoying itself.  
 Help- it's my town!"<sup>44</sup>

The small poem included in this part of Kāśīnāth's memories in prose somehow reminds Nazīr Akbarābādī's (1735–1830) famous "secular" poetry, his praise of Agra and its common people in the beginning of the nineteenth century. This seems to be a conscious reference to the Persian-Urdu literary tradition of city eulogy, including the classical lament over the ruined city (*śaharāśob*). In Hindi/Urdu, Nazīr Akbarābādī's *Āgrānāmah* is the classical example of this genre, a poetical love declaration to Agra and its people, their shortcomings notwithstanding. Nazīr became well known among post-independence connoisseurs of Hindi through the play *Āgrā bāzār* by Habib Tanvir, which was first performed on stage in 1954 and evokes the poetry of Nazīr. Habib Tanvir, who stands in the tradition of a kind of Brechtian street theatre, is well known for his brand of folklores combined with Marxism.

The other source of Kashinath Singh's *sthānīyatā* is Phanishvarnath Renu (Phanīśvarnāth Reṇu, 1921–1977) and his so-called *āṃcaliktā*, even though the location of Renu's stories is mostly northern Bihar. *Āṃcaliktā*, usually translated as "regionalism", designates a particular style in Hindi fiction usually centred on weird characters in North Indian villages and small towns, in which Kathryn Hansen has deciphered certain elements of postmodern narrativity.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, Hansen points to the critical content of Renu's fiction, while much of Hindi criticism interprets *āṃcaliktā* in terms of folklorism. Śivkumār Mīśra's argues: "His limitations start from the points, from where he leaves behind the Premchand-tradition and gets encapsulated in the magic of the mannerism of regionalism and turns into a 'regionalist.'"<sup>46</sup>

Like in Premchand's famous last novel *Godān* (1936), the plot in Renu's novel *Mailā āṃcal* (1954) follows up events in the village as well as in the town and the interaction of these parallel worlds: of the town and its imagined modernity, and

<sup>44</sup> Haṃs 9/1993: 19 and Singh 2008c: 22ff.

<sup>45</sup> Hansen 1981.

<sup>46</sup> Mīśra 2009: 118: ... *unkī sīmāeṃ vahāṃ se āraṃbh hote haiṃ jin binduoṃ par premchand-parāṃparā se haṭkar ve āṃcaliktā ke rūpvād ke jādū meṃ baṃdh kar āṃcalik*" ho uṭhte haiṃ. Compare the critical remarks of Hansen 1981 on the interpretation of *āṃcaliktā* as "the description of the region in its manifold aspects, but such a definition says nothing of the structure of this depiction and the ways it differs from conventional novel form". Hansen 1981: 291.



the backwardness of the village. Similarly, it would be a clear misunderstanding to interpret Kashinath Singh and the coming and going of customers in Pappū's tea shop in *Kaśī kā assī* simply as an idyllic space in terms of an epiphany of *Banārsīpan*.

*Assī* is the microscopic image of traditional Banaras as a whole, and Pappū's tea shop is again *Assī* in a nutshell. The most important ingredients of communication here may remind the reader of the chapter "city of the good life" in Diana Eck's *City of Light*. "They call it *mastī* ("joie de vivre"), *mauj* ("delight, festivity"), and *phakkarpan*<sup>47</sup> ("carefreeness"). ... Everyone knows that Banāras is a good place to die. And it is precisely this fact that makes it a good place to live."<sup>48</sup> The spirit of *mastī* is important in Kashinath Singh's novel,<sup>49</sup> including one of its important ingredients, namely *bhaṅg*,<sup>50</sup> but at the same time the world and its problems are very much present in the talks between the customers in the tea shop. Their interactions are full of comments not only on local, but also on national and international politics. "The experts may have explained globalization, liberalization, multinationalism – and many other kinds of – izations in their own way, but Lāṛherām has understood them in his own way."<sup>51</sup> However, even though the interaction between foreigners and Banarsis play an important role in the endless discussions of the tea shop customers, the shop is an exclusive space for original Banarsis, who speak High Hindi mixed with Bhojpuri.

There is a high degree of mockery in the interaction in Pappūs tea shop. People regularly comment on party politics in an ironic way, like: "In which party are you nowadays?" – an ironic hint on constant change of party membership of certain politicians.<sup>52</sup> People actively follow the preparations for elections, and discuss even the more sensitive political issues.<sup>53</sup> Temple and mosque,<sup>54</sup> Hindutva and secularism, the change of parliament members from one party to the other<sup>55</sup> is a constant subject. One of the recurring points of discussion is the

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47 Sic – should be *phakkarpan*.

48 Eck (1982): 304.

49 Comp. Singh 2004: 318.

50 Hashish, for example Singh 2011: 42.

51 '*Globalāiješan*', '*libaralāiješan*', '*maḷḷinešanalāiješan*' – *aur bhī dūsre ḍher sāre 'āiješanoṃ' ko vidvānoṃ ne apne ḍhaṅg se samjhā hogā, lāṛherām ne use apne ḍhaṅg se samjhā*. Singh 2011: 105.

52 Singh 2011: 44.

53 Singh 2011: 72.

54 For example, Singh 2011: 44.

55 "In which party are you nowadays?" – *Kahiye, kis pārṭī meṃ ho ājkal?*, Singh 2011: 44.

traditional poetry contest on Holi (*kavi sammelan*) that the Hindu-nationalist Bhāratīy Jantā Pārṭī (BJP) wants to stop, because it is not in favour of the kind of mockery that is an important ingredient of the event.<sup>56</sup> Holy men are a constant object of mockery, like in the following cryptic Sanskrit couplet line: *ayaṃ mahātmā karpātr daṃḍī, yadā-kadā gacchati dālmaṃḍī* “This great soul Karpātr, the ascetic, sometimes goes to the red light quarter”.<sup>57</sup> Over the whole novel, hints to religious identities occur quite regularly, including the growth of Hindu nationalism and the population of Assi turning from Shaivites into devotees of Ram, who join the voluntary forces for the construction of the contested Rama-temple in Ayodhya.<sup>58</sup> About the same time, the Muslim vegetable seller is the object of a boycott since people suspect he might have something to do with the discovery of animal bones in the otherwise vegetarian quarter.<sup>59</sup>

*Kāśī kā assī*, first published 2002, can be read as a declaration of love for Banaras and the strange human beings that populate it. It consists of fictional as well as non-fictional narrations, loosely connected without a continuing plot. One of the important subjects in Kashinath’s writing altogether is the interaction of the traditional quarter with Western visitors and their preoccupation with Indian culture.

According to a personal communication with Kashinath Singh, the story of the young western woman Kathrine seeking to intrude into the world of traditional Hindu and Sanskrit learning in Banaras<sup>60</sup> is made up of elements of the interaction between foreigners and indigenous people in Banaras, but in itself is fictional and not an account of real characters. However, the story of Lāṛherām and Catherine,<sup>61</sup> who as a couple turn into kind of commercial sellers of Indian (Hindu) wisdom is, according to Kashinath Singh, a fictionalized form of “a real story”. Similarly, the interaction with two people from Sweden in Indian *khādī* dress.<sup>62</sup> Much of the narration is made up of talks between people meeting over cups of tea in the fabulous *Pappū kī dukān* on Assi Road<sup>63</sup> or occasionally “the tea-seller Kedar”,<sup>64</sup> and the author is himself a character in this context.

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56 Singh 2011: 19.

57 Singh 2011: 36.

58 *Assī ke sabhī ‘ādivāsī’ rāmbhakt hog ae aur kārsevā kī taiyārī meṃ lag gae*. Singh 2011: 26.

59 Singh 2011: 48ff.

60 Singh 2011: 111ff.

61 Singh 2011: 104ff.

62 Singh 2011: 77.

63 In some detail for example Singh 2011: 66.

64 *Kedār cāyvālā*, Singh 2011: 16, 39 etc.



## 6 Beyond topophilia

The Banaras trilogy of Kashinath Singh focuses on urban experiences related to the town of Banaras and its complex, and changing, social and psychological layers, confronting and reconciling the traditional and the modern. While *Apnā morcā* is confined much to the students' affairs and the university milieu of BHU, *Kāśī kā assī* can be read as a kind of nostalgic declaration of love for a traditional quarter in Banaras, its ways of living, communication and rhetoric. With its autobiographical references, its constantly appearing vocative to the reader, its ambivalence between reporting and fictional narration and its absence of a plot structure and its temporality, it consists of a complex, meandering narration composed of embedded narratives of the stray people of Assi.

In the third novel, the focus is on the betrayed hopes of a father in his children, the rift between the generations and the general decline of values. This rift, and the pessimistic mood that is so prominent in *Rehan par Ragghū* is not much present in the earlier novels. The first two novels are based on a close identification of the author with the common people. The 'others', particularly in the first novel *Apnā morcā*, are the English-speaking elites. The second novel *Kāśī kā assī* is a kind of nostalgic epiphany of the quarter where the author used to live for decades. This was composed thirty years after the first novel at around the time when he was moving out from the traditional quarter Assī and settle with his family in one of the new colonies. *Rehan par Ragghū*, the third in the trilogy, is a rather pessimistic summing up of life experiences from the perspective of an old man, and probably revealing the author himself to some extent.

*Rehan par Ragghū* marks a shift away from the traditional quarters and BHU to the new Banaras of the ever-expanding colonies and at the same time to moral conflicts that are inherent in social modernisation and upward mobility. Traditional Banaras and the enthusiastic idea of *Banārsīpan* are no longer relevant. Social relationships erode, what was once meaningful loses its relevance and the value system changes completely. Dehejia et al. (2000) marks despair as the "defining emotion of modernity"<sup>65</sup> in general, to be overcome only by postmodernism with its de-centering agenda. To that extent, the narrativity of *Rehan par Ragghū* is much more modern than *Kāśī kā assī*.

The latest novel is a return to the linear narrativity of earliest. Besides, *Rehan par Ragghū* has the most profoundly constructed plot of the three, a classical novel with a clear time structure, flashbacks, and a limited set of characters. *Apnā morcā* is closest to the classical progressivist novel in modern

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<sup>65</sup> Dehejia et al. 2000: 115.

Hindi literature, while *Kāśī kā assī* is a kind of non-linear documentary with a focus on a traditional quarter in Banaras, and with its nostalgic and reconciliatory attitude towards *Banārsīpan* as a narrative trope and as life style.

*Rehan par Ragghū*, however, explores the fundamental challenges of identity in a changing world in contemporary Banaras. The romantic emulation of *sthānīyatā* (“localization”) that particularly *Kāśī kā assī* emulates, is completely gone. The question of meaning, which at least on an explicit level is absent from *Kāśī kā assī*, becomes relevant once again. Raghunāth and his wife end up completely lost and without a space of belonging, and the frustrated sense of belonging is the most significant feature of the third novel.

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