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Ayodhya 2.0 in Banaras? Judicial discourses and rituals of place in the making of Hindu majoritarianism

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Abstract: Indian news channels and headlines meticulously cover ongoing legal suits seeking the “restitution” of the Gyanvapi mosque in Banaras (Varanasi) to Hindus, with the site dubbed ‘Ayodhya 2.0’ by several commentators. The recent construction of the monumental Kashi Vishvanath Corridor next to the contested Gyanvapi mosque and the 2019 Supreme Court verdict in favour of a grand Ram temple in Ayodhya seem to be the main developments prompting an escalation towards Ayodhya 2.0. This article, however, complicates the above reading by showing that the current “unmaking” of Gyanvapi as mosque does not result straightforwardly and solely from these recent judicial and spatial developments. By combining analysis of legal proceedings with a longitudinal ethnography of the site, I unpack the longstanding cross-fertilisation of judicial discourses and rituals of place in representations of the site and point to the progressive co-option of both spheres in the pursuit of Hindu majoritarian claims. The article expands scholarship on the subtle but relentless entrenchment of Hindu majoritarianism by illuminating ways in which petty disputes, situated understandings of place and religious practices not necessarily related to, or aligned with, the majoritarian ideology may be co-opted by and finish up nurturing it.

Keywords: Hindu majoritarianism, *mukti*, pilgrimage, juridical discourse, “continued worship”, Gyanvapi mosque, Kashi Vishvanath Corridor.

Introduction: “*rāstā khulā hai*”, or “the path is open”

On a foggy morning at the end of 2019 in pre-pandemic Banaras, or Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh, India), I was walking through what remained of the lanes around the Kashi Vishvanath temple and adjacent Gyanvapi mosque. This area, right at the heart of the historic urban centre and a couple of hundreds meters from the Ganges riverbank, was the site of substantial redevelopment for Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s flagship project, the Kashi Vishvanath Corridor.¹ Notwithstanding Modi’s ruling out the destruction of old structures for urban redevelopment in Banaras and elsewhere,² the Corridor entailed the demolition of around 300 buildings.³ That day in December 2019, in fact, rubble was everywhere.

As I stood in a half-demolished lane and tried to orient myself in the somewhat familiar but newly redefined topography, I could clearly see the minarets and domes of the Gyanvapi *masjid*. The mosque—a longstanding target of Hindu nationalist campaigns for the “liberation” (*mukti*) of supposedly originally Hindu places of worship—had previously been concealed behind residential buildings. But suddenly it was the most imposing structure in the ruined landscape [Fig.1]. A pilgrim guide, waiting for his group to finish their lunches at the Annapurna Anna Kshetra, came and stood next to me to see what I was looking at. Apparently feeling that the seismic scenario needed some

¹ The Kashi Vishvanath Corridor was inaugurated in December 2021 with a lavish ceremony widely broadcast by media and available on the PM’s official website: <https://www.narendramodi.in/hi/text-to-prime-minister-narendra-modi-s-speech-at-inauguration-of-kashi-vishwanath-dham-in-varanasi-uttar-pradesh-558897> (accessed 14 Jan. 2022).

² *The Times of India*, 18 Dec. 2021 [<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pm-tod-phod-no-way-to-meet-modern-needs/articleshow/88349183.cms>, accessed 20 Jan 2022].

³ The majority of demolitions took place between 2017 and 2019 and included residential buildings, shops in a lively bazar, the historic Carmichael Library, religious structures and shelters for ascetics and elders, as well as many wayside shrines. For more on the Corridor see Lazzaretti 2021a and 2021d.

sort of caption, he told me that everything was being removed for the Corridor. “*Sab jāegā* (everything will go)”. Then, pointing at the Gyanvapi mosque, “*vah bhī jāegī ... rāstā khulā hai*” (that too will go... the path is open).

While the random and brief interaction with the pilgrim guide continues to chill me as I write, the scenario he projected for the Gyanvapi mosque has since become increasingly realistic. In the overtly polarised political climate in Modi’s India, and more specifically in Uttar Pradesh,⁴ Gyanvapi seems seriously under threat. Not only is the previously semi-hidden mosque now in plain sight, provoking talk in Banaras itself about Ayodhya 2.0,⁵ but in the wake of the 2019 Supreme Court decision in favour of the construction of a grand Ram temple in Ayodhya,⁶ the temple-mosque compound in Banaras has attracted even more attention as the next item on a Hindu nationalist agenda. Campaigns to “liberate” Kashi Vishvanath have been reinvigorated,⁷ as have legal actions. First, in 2019, a suit originally filed in 1991 by a few local people seeking the evacuation of the Gyanvapi mosque by Muslims was reopened and several new

⁴ India’s most populous state, in which Banaras is located, has emerged in the last decade as the main laboratory for the normalisation of violence against Muslims and other minorities under the rule of Hindutva champion Yogi Adityanath (Pai and Kumar 2018; Bouillier 2020; Jaffreot 2021).

⁵ As far as I know, the first to use the expression Ayodhya 2.0 was Abhishek Srivastava in “Is BJP planning an Ayodhya 2.0 in Varanasi?”, *National Herald*, 24 Mar. 2018 [<https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/news/is-the-bjp-planning-an-ayodha-2-in-varanasi-ghyanvapi-masjid-stands-in-way-of-connecting-kashi-vishwanath-with-ganga-ghats>], accessed 11 Jan. 2022].

⁶ The judgement was pronounced on 9 November 2019 by Justice Ranjan Gogol, Sa Bobde, Ashok Bhushan, Dy Chandrachud, Sa Nazeer and is known as *M Siddiq (D) Thr Lrs v. Mahant Suresh Das & Ors*.

⁷ For an example of recent “liberation” campaigns see *Hindustan*, 21 Feb 2020 [<https://www.livehindustan.com/uttar-pradesh/varanasi/story-declaration-of-kashi-vishwanath-ghyanvapi-liberation-movement-in-varanasi-from-assi-ghat-3040736.html>], accessed 8 Feb 2022].

petitions, backed by Hindu nationalist organisations, were subsequently filed asking for the “restitution” of the mosque to Hindus.⁸

As I finalise this article (September 2022), the Varanasi District Court has just upheld the maintainability of a suit backed by Hindu outfits seeking perennial access to pray in the Gyanvapi mosque.⁹ Concomitantly, the leaking of details from a controversial May 2022 photographic and video survey of the compound has led to an escalation of claims and counter claims about possession and rights to worship at the Gyanvapi mosque. Online Hindutva squads, meanwhile, are storming social media with memes that unequivocally incite violence against this and other mosques and Muslims themselves.¹⁰

While documenting these ongoing developments is beyond the scope of this article, there is little doubt that the pilgrim guide’s confident prediction in 2019 is closer to fulfilment thanks to above recent judicial and spatial developments. My longitudinal research in Banaras suggests, however, that the ongoing “unmaking” of Gyanvapi as mosque needs to be looked at from a broader perspective, and taking into account the longstanding micro-politics of the temple-mosque compound. Rather than focusing just on the recent judicial and spatial developments, this article unpacks the cross-fertilisation of judicial discourses and rituals of place underpinning representations of

⁸ See, for instance, *Scroll.in*, 26 May 2022 [<https://scroll.in/article/1024769/behind-gyanvapi-women-petitioners-a-network-of-men-who-have-long-fought-for-hindutva-causes>, accessed 30 May 2022].

⁹ For a recapitulation of the events see *The Wire*, 24 May 2022 [<https://thewire.in/law/gyanvapi-case-varanasi-district-court-to-hear-mosque-committees-plea-on-may-26>, accessed 11 Jan. 2022]; a report of the recent decision is found in *The Hindu*, 12 September 2022 [<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/gyanvapi-case-varanasi-court-mosque-plea-maintainability-hearing-continue/article65882098.ece>, accessed 22 September 2022].

¹⁰ See, for instance, *Boom*, 26 May 2022 [https://www.boomlive.in/decode/impact/gyanvapi-mosque-alt-right-trads-edgelords-troll-meme-violence-extreme-18016?fbclid=IwAR0YHM5CQOqPvymffAxOLzZZ3VNje5xQ86Po9_UhDTheJ6H8tsFsGW1FtaQ, accessed 30 May 2022].

Gyanvapi over time, and the progressive co-option of both spheres in the pursuit of Hindu majoritarian claims. In particular, I show that certain understandings and practices around Gyanvapi that are now co-opted to sustain majoritarian claims and dispossess Muslims, originated and progressively crystallised during colonial times. These, I argue, were nested in situated (often individual rather than communal) struggles for property and ritual authority rather than in Hindu-Muslim rivalry. However, the unfolding of these struggles—discursively in legal proceedings and materially in space—happened to pave the way for the ongoing unmaking of Gyanvapi as mosque by providing fertile ground on which petitioners backed by Hindu nationalist organisations build claims of exclusive possession. This article thus expands scholarship on Hindu majoritarianism by showing that ordinary disputes and religious practices that are not necessarily explicitly aligned with Hindutva’s socio-political project (if not totally unrelated to it) might finish up—often unintentionally—*enabling* it.

Methodologically, I combine an analysis of legal proceedings with material collected during anthropological research in the neighbourhood around the Kashi Vishvanath temple and Gyanvapi mosque compound, during research periods of three to five months each year between 2013 and 2020.¹¹ My field research featured extensive observations of everyday life, embodied spatial experience in the neighbourhood and engagement with pilgrim experts, residents, religious authorities, frequenters of both temple and mosque, shopkeepers and low ranking police, as well as the collection of visual and digital sources. I particularly draw on material generously made available to me by the late Kedarnath Vyas, and the recollections that several members of his family

¹¹ Research with human participants was conducted in accordance with international ethics guidelines.

shared with me during repeated ethnographic encounters over the past decade.¹² As detailed below, members of the Vyas family were for two centuries (until very recently) key actors as Brahman ritual specialists at, and in control of, the *maidān* (open space) that separates the Kashi Vishvanath temple and the Gyanvapi mosque. In that time they were involved extensively in civil litigation. They embodied (and provided me with a privileged position from which to investigate) the cross-fertilisation of affective understandings of deities and rituals of place on the one hand, and judicial discourses on the other.

Before zooming back into the site, the following section frames my contribution within scholarship on Hindu majoritarianism.

Hindu majoritarianism within and beyond the institutions

The last couple of decades have seen a marked increase in studies of the majoritarian ideology of Hindutva and the impact it has on Indian society and the diasporas. This is perhaps a result of the unprecedented success of Hindu nationalist political parties and the landslide victories of the BJP and Narendra Modi at the general elections in 2014 and 2019.

¹² I first met Kedarnath Vyas (whose name I had already encountered in publications and talks by other scholars) in 2012 during my PhD research, when he was already in his eighties. In the following years we had many assiduous encounters during my research stays and we became close. Until his death in January 2020 I was often included in family occasions and consulted during difficult times. I recall some of our encounters and conversations and detail the ritual role and social positioning of the family in Lazzaretti 2019 and 2021a. Because the Vyas are public figures in Banaras and their names appear in the proceedings discussed below I do not anonymise them or use pseudonyms.

Alongside well-established lines of inquiry that investigate the Hindu nationalist “long march through the institutions”¹³ (Hansen 1999; Ludden 2005; Anand 2011) and the ways in which Hindutva functions and transforms state and society (Jaffrelot 2017; Chatterji, Hansen and Jaffrelot 2019; Nilsen, Nielsen and Vaidya 2019; Jaffrelot 2021), increased attention has been given to more subtle, diffuse, and “soft” forms of Hindutva. Understanding how the majoritarian ideology works, through various realms of society and culture and, in so doing, transforms them and itself, has become an urgent endeavour.

Berti, Jaoul and Kanugo (2011) propose work on the “cultural entrenchment” of Hindutva. This allows us to move beyond the notion of mobilisation, which is widely used in works where Hindutva is identified and dealt with as “the *first agent* in cultural transformations” (Ibid. 2). Building on reflections around the “banalisation” of nationalism (Billig 1995), their contributions shed light on Hindutva’s mediations of, and convergences with, realms, actors and agendas that are not explicitly associated with it, and even ones that attempt to counter it (Michelutti 2011). A similar line of inquiry, focusing on the ever-changing and specifically “idiosyncratic expressions of Hindu nationalism that operate outside of the institutional and ideological framework of the Sangh Parivar” (Anderson 2015, 47), has led to the concept of “neo-Hindutva” (Anderson and Longkumer 2018). This builds on the idea that Hindutva increasingly works as a “diffuse logic” (Reddy 2011, 421) and can operate in forms that are nebulous and not necessarily explicitly linked to mainstream organisations (Anderson and Longkumer 2018, 373).

¹³A famous Gramscian expression that describes how a society could be subverted without recourse to arms. It has been applied widely to Hindutva, most notably in the work of Aijaz Ahmad. See for example this essay: [<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3144-india-liberal-democracy-and-the-extreme-right>, accessed 6 June 2022].

In the current article I am informed by, and wish to extend, these lines of inquiry by nuancing the simplistic reading of Hindu majoritarianism as solely the result of an intentional and top-down agenda through paying closer attention to its everyday functioning (see also Govindrajan, Joshi and Rizvi 2021). In particular, I look at ways in which situated and often individual struggles around places of worship and rituals of place may finish up informing, perhaps unintentionally and in paradoxical ways, Hindu majoritarian projects. Many of the contributions referred to so far highlighted how the majoritarian ideology profoundly affects local religious and political cultures and changes the ways ordinary people worship and relate to their deities and places of worship; however, the case of Gyanvapi shows that the reverse is also true. Local religious practices, situated understandings of place and petty disputes around religious authority and places of worship also constitute nourishment for the majoritarian ideology.

We will see that many negotiations providing fertile ground for the ‘unmaking’ of Gyanvapi as mosque unfolded spatially and in the courts concomitantly. A bridge needs to be built, then between an investigation of the everyday and subtle logics of Hindutva and research on the institutional making of Hindu majoritarianism within judicial activities and discourses, particularly those about places of worship and beliefs. As pointed out in the introduction to this special issue, studies of the relationship between courts of law and religion (particularly Hinduism), extensively detail the ways in which religious practices are shaped, if not constructed, by judicial discourses. Perhaps not surprisingly then, the courts have been shown to be increasingly involved in the production of Hindu majoritarianism (Jaffrelot 2017; Saxena 2018; Kapur 2019). Research on religion, the courts and the diffuse mechanisms of Hindu majoritarianism

clearly points to the courts’ “far-reaching impact on rituals and on religious specialists” (Berti, Tarabout and Voix 2016, xv). On the other hand, it also highlights the role of the judiciary in redeeming Hindutva, while paving the way for its political success as a unique and viable “secular” project on the other (Saxena 2018; Kapur 2019 and in this issue).

But less has been said about ways in which everyday understandings of places of worship and localised struggles over ritual authority finish up informing the reasoning of the courts, while possibly being co-opted in the pursuit of Hindu majoritarian projects. In light of the 2019 Supreme Court Ayodhya verdict, in which documentary evidence of “continued worship” was crucial in the adjudication of land possession at the disputed site,¹⁴ such an investigation seems to be more urgent than ever. How do religious practices around places of worship become reified and accepted as legal evidence that supports “continued worship”? What local struggles lie behind the negotiation and promotion of certain religious practices? How do these situated struggles and negotiations happen to pave the way to Hindu majoritarian projects? These are all questions that I address while dealing with the case of Gyanvapi.

The temple-mosque compound: one narrative, many disputes

I noted above that the Gyanvapi mosque is a longstanding target of Hindu nationalist “liberation” campaigns. In this section I point to the progressive crystallisation of a narrative that frames Kashi Vishvanath as the target of repeated desecrations by Muslim rulers and thus the stage for communal clashes between Hindus and Muslims. I then

¹⁴ See Srikantan (2017) for an in depth discussion of the shifts in the legal history of the Ayodhya dispute preceding the 2019 verdict and particularly for identifying the convergence of religious rights/worship/access with claims to property.

read through the legal history of the temple-mosque compound, showing how layers of disputes—between individuals, rather than supposedly unified religious communities—have characterised this space for centuries, but progressively became diluted by that narrative. These disputes, I show, often revolved around acts of worship, deities and rituals. Although perhaps only loosely interwoven with Hindu majoritarian agendas, or entirely unrelated to them, I argue that these disputes finish up providing a fertile ground on which to build claims of possession through worship.

An official narrative

The Ramjanmabhumi movement gave the Kashi Vishvanath temple and Gyanvapi mosque compound national visibility by projecting it as one of several sites to be reclaimed by Hindus in order to redeem alleged historical injuries performed by Muslim rulers.¹⁵ Three decades after the demolition of the Babri mosque a narrative of repeated temple desecrations connected to the deity Vishvanath has become mainstream and presents itself as the official historical truth.

Consider, for instance, the poster placed to cover up half-demolished buildings during the visit of PM Modi for the laying of the foundation of the Kashi Vishvanath Corridor in March 2019 [Fig. 2]. It reproduces an image, originally lithographed by James Prinsep, then Assay Mint Master in Banaras, in 1831.¹⁶ This depicts the ruins of a structure integrated into what, at that time, had already been a mosque for almost two centuries, together with a dome and a minaret. The artist, though, titled his work

¹⁵ As is well known, Hindu nationalist activists explicitly nominated the site in Banaras as a next target for “liberation”, together with the Keshavdev temple and Shahi Idgah complex in Mathura (also in UP). On the latter, see Tackes in this issue. On the mobilisation of discourses of historical injury and the politics of fear that project the Hindu majority and nation as continuously under attack see Udayakumar 2005 and Anand 2011.

¹⁶ The lithograph is part of Prinsep’s famous collection of drawings of Banaras (Prinsep 1831).

“Temple of Visheshwur”, capturing in a powerful visual, and at the same time endorsing, Hindu claims over the site of the Gyanvapi mosque. The 2019 poster also includes a caption stating that the “KVT temple has been rebuilt thrice”—a statement that projects hypotheses about the early history of the site as the official and unquestionable truth.¹⁷

Leaving aside hypotheses about the early history of Vishvanath, claims for the “liberation” of Gyanvapi build primarily on the fact that the mosque was apparently built on the same site and with some of the material of a previous Mughal-sponsored Vishvanath temple—probably shortly after the latter was dismantled on the orders of Aurangzeb in 1669.¹⁸ Indeed, portions of a previous structure, now integrated onto the back wall of the mosque (the subject of Prinsep’s depiction), are still visible today.

Gyanvapi is arguably a striking case of the reuse of religious sites—a practice that scholars such as Richard Eaton, Finbarr Barry Flood, Alka Patel and Tamara Sears have noted has been widely used as a political and symbolic strategy by kings and sovereigns in South Asia (as elsewhere). Colonial accounts, however, promoted perceptions of the mosque as an eyesore,¹⁹ necessarily eliciting outrage, victimhood and anger among Hindus—all affective responses that are time and again used by Hindu nationalist forces, such as in the use of images of Gyanvapi in which the ruins are

¹⁷ On the early history of Banaras and hypotheses about an early Vishvanath temple see Bakker and Isaacson 2004; and for a different hypothesis see Smith 2007.

¹⁸ On the Mughal Vishvanath temple see Motichandra (1985, 168), Asher (1992, 254); and Desai (2017, 31–7, and 31–44). The dismantling of a Vishvanath temple in 1669 by Aurangzeb is one of the few (but still very poorly) documented demolitions perpetrated by him: the record of an order by the emperor to destroy the Vishvanath temple is found in a sentence in the *Maasir-i-Alamgiri* (Khan 1986, 55).

¹⁹ For instance, a 1911 guidebook of the city describes the mosque as such: “Higher up in the raised platform, we shall observe a large mosque, presenting in glaring characters, the extent of mis-chief wantonly committed by that most bigoted hater of Hinduism, the despotic Aurangazeb” (Muthiah et al. 1911: 105-6).

iconised and described as indisputable “evidence” of the wrongdoings of Muslims.²⁰ On the other hand, as an explicit target of destruction since the Ramjanmabhumi movement, the mosque is also deeply affective for local Muslims: as I discuss elsewhere, its controversial history exposes them continually to hurtful claims about its origins and to threats of its destruction, which they have to navigate among growing feelings of insecurity (Lazzaretti 2021b).

Gyanvapi as mosque and the new Vishvanath temple

Notwithstanding popular interpretations and official “histories”, documentary evidence about the actual construction date and sponsor of the Gyanvapi mosque is lacking. According to stylistic analysis, though, it was built sometime in the second half of the 17th century (Asher 1992, 254). Presumably, it was then used by Muslims for *namāz*, but we know that in the following century several competing Hindu patrons attempted to have it demolished to rebuild the Vishvanath temple (Desai 2017, 58 and 81-83). It is likely that some sort of temple was built, because in 1752 the *kāzī* (judge of Muslim canon law) of Banaras led sections of local Muslims to demolish a “Vishweshwar Mahadeva temple”, possibly in an attempt to reestablish the eroding political power of the Mughal (Bayly 1985, 197; cf. Srivastava 1939, 30). Demands from Hindu patrons must have further intensified after this episode, and eventually, around 1777, a portion of land almost adjacent to the mosque was granted for the construction of a “new” Vishvanath temple (Gutschow 2006).

²⁰ A general search on the main social media of #Gyanvapi #Gyanvapimosque gives a clear idea about how normalised the mainstream narrative is and how visuals are selectively deployed to sustain it.

Early legal history and the Gyanvapi *maidān*

The construction of this new temple—the existing Kashi Vishvanath, recently monumentalised by the Corridor—prompted negotiations about the use of the area between mosque and temple by individuals of both religious communities. I now turn to unpack these multiple disputes.

The maidān: from neutral ground to Hindu pilgrimage arena

Early legal and documentary evidence about the area illustrates that most negotiations were about control of the Gyanvapi *maidān*. This is a wide open space to the south of the Gyanvapi *masjid* that, after 1777—with the construction of the new Kashi Vishvanath—became a buffer space between the mosque and the new temple.

Colonial accounts about the site begin with the famous 1809 Banaras riots which, as reported in the 1909 Banaras' *Gazetteer* (Nevill 1909: 207-209), were sparked precisely by efforts to build a structure on the “neutral ground” between the temple and the mosque.²¹ According to the reconstruction of the events in a 1937 suit discussed below, several shops located in the *maidān* and belonging to Muslims were at that time burned down and their owners slaughtered. Local Muslims were then apparently temporarily prevented from accessing the compound before access to the mosque was “re-established”, making it clear that the mosque had been used actively for *namāz* before the 1809 riots.²²

²¹ For an in-depth discussion of the 1809 riots and its colonial and scholarly interpretations see Pinch 2012. The author, however, does not discuss the report in Nevill's gazetteer and the supposed connections with disputes around the temple-mosque compound.

²² *Din Mohammad and Others vs. the Secretary of State for India Council through the District Magistrate and Collector Benares*, CWP no. 62 of 1936 in the Court of Additional Civil Judge of Benares, and appeal no. 466 of 1937 in the High Court of Judicature at Allahabad, p. 156-158.

It is necessary to note that the *maidān* is not entirely empty ground but hosts the Jnanavapi, or Well of Knowledge—that gives its name to the whole area, including the compound and the mosque itself. As discussed elsewhere (Lazzaretti 2021c), a couple of decades after the 1809 riots the transition of the *maidān* from neutral ground to Hindu pilgrimage arena was sanctioned by the construction of a monumental pavilion at the well (Medhasananda 2002, 437). Its monumentalisation resulted from the productive alignments of colonial sanitation policies with Hindu attempts to consolidate pilgrimage traditions (Lazzaretti 2017). At the same time, the transformation of the *maidān* must have prompted further negotiations of rights of possession, which had already begun with the construction and likely growing popularity of the new Vishvanath temple. The judges in the 1936/7 suit reflect:

Had the Government not taken possession of the site of the demolished shops, then there is no reason why they should have paid any compensation to the Moslems which the latter are regularly getting. The same land seems to have been subsequently granted to the Hindus, as in 1828 a “mandap” was constructed by Jaiji Bai [...].²³

The transition, however, likely owed much to the active engagement of the Vyas family, whose crucial bonding with the area, and its laborious crafting through both judicial and spatial practices became progressively clear to me through ethnographic work with the family.

The bound folder: an ethnographic interlude

The cross-fertilisation of judicial activity and rituals of place and, later their co-option in Hindu majoritarian projects, had been under my nose for some time during research

²³ *Din Mohammad*, p. 158.

around the Kashi Vishvanath temple and Gyanvapi mosque compound between 2013 and 2020. When I initially came to this area in 2013 it was to investigate the evolution of pilgrimage traditions in the contemporary city. The main person I engaged with at that time was Kedarnath Vyas, author of several pilgrim guides and then head of the family of Brahman rituals specialists in charge of the Gyanvapi *maidān*. When I first stepped into his house in the *maidān*, Kedarnath presented himself as representative of the authentic tradition of urban pilgrimage. He pointed to his role as head of the family in charge of the ritual commencement and conclusion (*samkalp*) of journeys to sequences of temples in Banaras, and importantly he highlighted that this took place at the Jnanavapi pavilion. There, the Vyas had established their *gaddī*, a regal stone seat where a member of the family would sit and guide pilgrims in the ritual performance.

As evident from ways in which the family framed their role in the city's multifarious Brahmanic landscape, their special (somewhat provisional and always under threat) ritual status was derived by the proximity of the family house—located strategically adjacent to the *maidān*—to Jnanavapi. When talking to me, for instance, Kedarnath Vyas used to distance himself from the group of local Brahman families of ritual specialists who call themselves *tīrthapurohit* (“sons of the *tīrtha*”) and sub-categories of Brahmans and workers of the sacred, such as the *pandas*, who have a rather poor reputation (Parry 1994). On the contrary, Vyas described his family interchangeably as landlords (using both the English word and the Hindi terms *zamindār* and *mālik*), or as *adhikarīs* (officials) of Jnanavapi. Clearly, then, the Vyas' status was shaped by their capacity of keeping hold of this important site and ritual activities there have been for several generations an important source of income for the family.

When I approached the area a decade ago, however, the *maidān* (and consequently the Vyas family) had lost some of its centrality for several reasons: the presence of security forces, for instance, substantially increased in Gyanvapi after the destruction of the Babri mosque and made it difficult for pilgrims to access the well and perform the prescribed rituals with members of the family. This led to a reconfiguration of pilgrimage practices that seriously impacted the Vyas family (Lazzaretti 2019). However, recent struggles to maintain their status can be seen as just a variation of a history of continuous attempts to control the *maidān* and reinforce its boundaries against the threat of other religious authorities active in the compound.

Kedarnath Vyas spoke repeatedly about the many *mukadmās*, or court cases, that his grandfather, brothers and he himself had fought over time to secure control over that very strategic area and the deities located therein. As I detail elsewhere, although these struggles were at times framed by Vyas as against the neighbouring Muslims and the mosque, they were also aimed at securing status and fixing boundaries against other Hindu religious authorities in the area (Lazzaretti 2021a). His preoccupations with court cases intensified in following years as the family's position became increasingly precarious when rumours spread about an expansion of the Kashi Vishvanath temple domain and a take-over of the *maidān* by the government-led trust in charge of the temple. With the coming to power of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh in 2017, the rumours manifested as a tangible project for the creation of the Kashi Vishvanath Corridor. The family was then increasingly pressured to sell their house and was eventually evicted in summer 2017 when demolitions began.²⁴

²⁴ More on the background and initial phases of the implementation of the Corridor and protest against it by residents can be found in Lazzaretti 2021a.

It was at the acme of this struggle over the family status that, one day, I was given access to the bound folder mentioned in the title of this section. It is tempting to describe the moment in which I first leafed through and touched the deteriorated bluish folder—bound together by Baijnath Vyas (Kedarnath’s grandfather) as its colophon made clear—as one of those “revelatory moments” in anthropological fieldwork.²⁵ However, my handling of the bound folder was not such a moment, as I am still dealing not only with its extremely rich and valuable content, but also with ways in which this apparently initially insignificant (to my eyes) set of papers, was treated over time by my interlocutors.

The bound folder collects the records of proceeding of the 1936/37 suit with a series of appendixes documenting previous disputes around the compound. In those pages, we encounter some Vyas as “priests”, “*pandas*” or “owners” of the Gyanvapi well²⁶ and see them filing applications in order to secure centimetres of space around their house for the construction of a staircase; to register the location and names of some deities located in the area; or to testify about the performance of a certain rituals of place, promoting the worship of deities and pilgrimage practices in the area.

An 1854 application by a Joke Beas (Vyas), for instance, is telling of both the involvement of the Vyas family in the multiple negotiations around the maidān and their crucial role in the crystallisation of what I describe below as an augmented Hindu

²⁵ As Trigger, Forsey and Meurk (2012) show, these moments during fieldwork have been treated by much anthropology (à la Geertz, for instance) as exemplary events that foreground crucial discoveries and lead the researcher to a deep understanding of the specific issue, or society, she is dealing with (Cf. Kapferer 2010). However, as the discipline of anthropology evolved and became more reflective about its methods and forms of knowledge production (Lumsden 2019), debates about surprise and revelatory moments became more nuanced, taking into account, for instance, the discomfort in those moments, and the ways in which their narrations in a post-fieldwork situation act upon them and shape them retroactively as memorable, or exemplary, and producers of knowledge.

²⁶ For instance in *Din Mohammad*, p. 159, 161-162, 189 and 197.

landscape there. The application was made in response to a complaint placed by a Faqirullah, *mujāvar* or care-taker of the Gyanvapi mosque, about the placing of a new idol at the gate of the Gyanvapi mosque by another individual, Brij Pal Das. The *mujāvar* words are reported as such:

It is submitted that orders have repeatedly been passed by this court to the effect that no idol was to be placed inside the compound of the Gyanbafi mosque. Even in your time, the Hindus had intended to place an idol under the ‘pipal’ tree, but you restrained them from doing this new act. Some idols cut and broken are lying there. No idol in place thereof was kept there. The Hindus, out of high-handedness, are doing things which are innovations and on account of this there is a danger of breach of peace.²⁷

The court reportedly made an inspection after the application and “held that the Muslims were in possession towards the north and that the place was not meant for the placing of Hindu idols” and passed orders to “remove the idols places [...] or throw the same (the idols) into the Ganges.”²⁸ The Vyas—described as “Panda of the Tirth of Gyanbafi” who “has, for long, been getting the worship of the idols there solemnised by the pilgrims, etc., and that he has been earning his livelihood by means of the charities and gift offered to the said idols”—responded by filing a new application. It states that the idols had always been there and even “Aurangzeb did not remove the said idols” when the Vishvanath temple was dismantled and so they should remain.²⁹

Members of the family and their various helpers and fixers spoke to me about the bound folder as crucial evidence of the Vyas’ right of possession of the *maidān*. However, because it does *not* contain, or at least not at first glance, any of the *zarūrī*

²⁷ Exhibit Z. No. 113-C in *Din Mohammad*, p. 209).

²⁸ Exhibit CC. No. 113 in *Din Mohammad*, p. 211.

²⁹ Ibid.

kāgaz (important papers) that Vyas referred to in our conversations about the history of the family and his authority over the *maidān*, I was initially unable to see how they could deem the bound folder as evidence. I had anticipated coming across land titles, but there was nothing of sort. What I found instead were plenty of details of the family's involvement in the *maidān* and its making into a Hindu landscape. I realised that these details precisely constitute in their eyes evidence of their role and connection with Gyanvapi when Kedarnath Vyas explained to me how he genuinely and humbly felt he embodied Gyanvapi (Lazzaretti 2019). The bound folder testifies to the Vyas family long-standing struggle for the convergence of divine space with ritual authority and possession for centuries.

More importantly to our concerns, it shows how they used the courts and spatial negotiations to promote this very convergence and that the establishment of the authority of the Vyas' in the *maidān*, occurred through, and favoured, the progressive crystallisation of an augmented Hindu landscape around the mosque.

Possession through worship?

Before zooming in to the augmented Hindu landscape to unpack its progressive crystallisation and discuss how it provides fertile ground for advancing contemporary claims of Hindutva outfits for exclusive possession, let us look more closely at how the temple-mosque compound was pictured in the 1936-1937 suit.

The 1936-1937 suit

A group of Muslims filed a suit in response to an episode that occurred during the Alvida prayers in 1935: due to lack of space inside the mosque, Muslims began praying outside, apparently partially obstructing public paths. A dispute with the police

took place and a few people were arrested.³⁰ The administration then asked the Anjuman Intazamia Masajid, or AIM (the local committee that had emerged as official manager of the mosque), to make sure that prayers at Gyanvapi would not obstruct public space in the future. The plaintiffs moved the court claiming that the mosque and surrounding area were Sunni *waqf* and Muslims had the right to pray not only in the mosque, but also on the surrounding space. The suit was filed against the secretary of state for India in Council through the District Magistrate and Collector of Benares and, more importantly, against the AIM itself, whose authority was at that time challenged by the plaintiffs. It thus immediately complicates the official narrative of the temple-mosque compound as a site of conflict between “Hindus” and “Moslems” by revealing the existence of individual, rather than communal disputes.

In looking at the proceedings it also emerges that religious practices and rituals of place were fundamental to possession of land: many of the claims over property are put forward by asserting the presence of religious objects, such as deities, graves and even trees in various corners of the compound. The 1937 judgement (confirmed in 1942 by the Allahabad High Court)³¹ itself sanctioned the bond between worship and property by establishing that only the mosque and its courtyard were Sunni *waqf*, and thus accessible to Muslims for prayers. But it prohibits them from offering *namāz* in the *maidān*—indicating most likely that this was then an unregulated and shared ground.³² Kedarnath Vyas described the judgement as a victory of his ancestors that excluded Muslims from the *maidān*. I read the victory as less about the exclusion of Muslims

³⁰ ‘Muslim trouble in Benares’, *The Times of India*, 20 Dec. 1935.

³¹ A.I.R. (29) 1942 Allahabad 353.

³² *Din Mohammad*, p. 143-175.

than about securing the interests of the family in the *maidān*. That would be part of a pattern that included as well several documented instances of collaboration or agreement between the Vyas and the management of the mosque to secure control of portions of the compound and resist the expansion of the Kashi Vishvanath temple. One instance of this will be mentioned below.

Although approached as in need of regulation, possession and worship in the compound as a whole were seen in the 1937 judgement as shared, and that is why the negotiation of boundaries therein was crucial. Importantly, exclusive possession by one religious community was *not seen as* an option. Indeed the judges observed:

The only reasonable interpretation seems to be that inside the compound the parties shall observe their religion at their respective places. If the latter means that each party has the right to observe his religion at each place in the compound, then the Hindus too might claim that once there being a temple of theirs they should be allowed to do worship in the mosque. *This contention has no force.*³³

A shift in the legal discourse: building towards claims of exclusive possession

Today, almost a century after the 1937 judgement, what had been defined therein as a “contention with no force” has become the main argument of plaintiffs backed by Hindu nationalist forces who wish to claim possession of the compound. As noted above, legal action for the “liberation” of Kashi Vishvanath has recently been revitalised: a suit originally filed in 1991 (at the acme of the Ramjanmabhumi movement) was amended and re-opened in 2019 at a fast track court in Banaras.³⁴ The 2019 suit amends the 1991 one and introduces original elements, but the main arguments remain the same: that the

³³ *Din Mohammad*, p. 174, my emphasis.

³⁴ *Ancient Idol of Swambhu* [sic.] *Lord Vishweshwar & others versus Anjuman Instezamia Masjid & another*, Suit No. 610 of 1991, In the Court of Civil Judge (Sr. Div.8/Fast Track, 2019.

entire precinct of Gyanvapi is, and has always been, a Hindu place of worship, used for the worship of several visible and invisible deities and performance of a *parikramā* (ritual circumambulation of a sacred centre). Consequently, they argue, the site is in exclusive possession of the deity Vishvanath, the plaintiffs and Hindus in general.³⁵

Like the Ayodhya legal dispute, in which the placing of idols inside the Babri mosque in 1949 by Hindutva activists (immediately propagandised as a miraculous manifestation of Ram) led to a property claim by some Hindus, if not the “religion” itself (Srikantan 2017), in the 1991 Banaras suit the presence of deities in the temple-mosque compound and the alleged continued worship of those deities is the basis of a claim to possession of the entire compound by Hindus.

A shift is seen also in the fact that Gyanvapi—which was referred to as “mosque” in the 1936-1937 proceedings—is now called “alleged mosque”, or “disputed structure” and is described by the plaintiffs as “illegal” and “unlawful”, as are the prayers therein performed.³⁶ The argument advanced in the 1991 suit disregards the fact that the Gyanvapi mosque—unlike the Babri mosque—has been in continuous use since at least the 18th century, possibly with a short interruption during the 1809 Banaras riots.

But what prompted this shift in the legal discourse? It seems that little occurred in the courts regarding the site between the 1937 judgement and the 1991 suit: the only record worth mentioning is that on 5 July 1954 the Vyas family and the Anjuman Intazamia Masajid signed an agreement, indicating that disputes in the compound were linked to individual interests rather than purely communal ones. To maintain balances,

³⁵ *Ancient Idol*, p. 3.

³⁶ *Ancient Idol*, p. 10.

the two authorities agreed that “no new construction can take place within the compound without the consent of all parties and the Government”.³⁷

In the absence of actions in the judicial realm between the 1930s and 1990s (if not for the above attempt to maintain the status quo), I suggest that there were two seeds for the 1991 shift in the legal discourse. The first can be found in wider political transformations—particularly the expansion of the Ramjanmabhumi movement, the consequent increased attention to contested places of worship and the parliamentary debate and then the passing of the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act in 1991. This Act seeks to maintain the status quo of places of worship *as it existed at the time of Independence* (15 August 1947), with the exclusion of state-protected monuments under the 1958 Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act and the Ram Janmabhoomi–Babri Masjid disputed site.³⁸ Indeed, the 1991 Banaras suit looks to have been filed with the Places of Worship Act in mind, inasmuch as it stresses the alleged ancient Hindu origins of Gyanvapi and continuous Hindu worship there, thus framing the mosque as a pre-independence Hindu place of worship. This argument has been maintained in current suits and leaders of the Vishva Hindu Parishad have recently stated that Gyanvapi was always a Hindu temple, so opening it to Hindus would not be a conversion and the Places of Worship Act would not apply.³⁹

³⁷ *Jitendra Nath Vyas and Another vs Union of India and Others*, CWP no. 1365 of 2018, p. 22.

³⁸ The Act was passed in 1991 under then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao at the peak of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement and, perhaps ironically, just before the destruction of the Babri mosque. The text is available here: <https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/A1991-42.pdf> [accessed 31 May 2022].

³⁹ *The Wire*, 18 May 2022 [<https://thewire.in/communalism/places-of-worship-act-does-not-apply-says-vhp-claims-gyanvapi-mosque-has-always-been-temple>, accessed 31 May 2022]; and *Outlook*, 29 Apr. 2022 [<https://www.outlookindia.com/national/gyanvapi-mosque-near-kashi-vishwanath-temple-not-a-waqf-property-counsel-for-temple-news-193896>, accessed 31 May 2022].

The second seed for the shift in the legal discourse can be found in micro-politics and the progressive crystallisation of Hindu practices and invisible deities in the *maidān*. Interestingly, the 1991 suit was filed by Somnath Vyas, the elder brother of Kedarnath, as a “next friend”⁴⁰ of Lord Vishvanath.

Somnath would have been in charge, as eldest brother, of the rituals and deities in the *maidān* at that time. There were four brothers, however, and they were reportedly disputatious and competitive. In 1968, their ageing grandfather Baijnath Vyas, had compiled a deed of will in which he stated he would leave after his death “all his movable and immovable properties along with religious rights on such properties” to his four grandsons.⁴¹ Kedarnath’s documents and personal library revealed that the brothers had in fact fought in the courts over issues related to property and ritual authority. As explained by Kedarnath, Somnath even tried to “steal” the authorship of a most notable pilgrim guide compiled by Kedarnath and published in 1987, possibly fearing that the younger brother would take over the role of ritual authority due to his acquired knowledge about pilgrimage traditions. The filing of the 1991 suit by Somnath, then needs to be contextualised not only within the wider political climate of resurgent Hindu nationalism and liberation campaigns, but also within the family’s micro-histories.

I will come back to the question of the intention behind Somnath’s legal action in the concluding section and now turn to unpack the crystallisation of an augmented Hindu landscape in the *maidān* by drawing on my work on pilgrimage and the Vyas family.

⁴⁰ Hindu deities are considered juristic persons under the law of Hindu endowments and they can sue and be sued. They are interpreted as perpetual minors who need to be represented by what in colonial proceedings was often referred to as “*shebait*”, or “next friend”.

⁴¹ The deed of will is found as an appendix in *Jitendra Nath Vyas*, p. 25-30.

An augmented Hindu landscape: Rituals of place, pilgrimage and religious authority

We have seen that claims of exclusive possession in the 1991 suit were based on the presence of Hindu deities in the temple-mosque compound and alleged continuity in the performance of a *parikramā* there. The presence of deities seem to be presented as “objective evidence” in a map of the compound annexed to the 1991 suit.⁴²

But who are these deities and what is the *parikramā*? How do they become crystallised and who promotes them? I now turn to the emergence, promotion and progressive validation of several so-called *lupt* (lost), or *gupt* (secret) deities as locations to be worshipped in the Gyanvapi *maidān*, and further document the crucial role played by members of the Vyas family in the crystallisation of this “augmented” Hindu landscape.

Parikramās and the circumambulation of the mosque

As discussed in detail elsewhere (Lazzaretti 2019), *parikramās* within the territory of Banaras constitute a layered, contested and always updating set of traditions that involves prescriptive spatial texts, maps and practices, as well as several kinds of practitioners, each with an individual approach and agenda.⁴³ The *parikramā* mentioned in the 1991 suit most likely coincides with part of the innermost local urban pilgrimage associated with Banaras, the *antargṛhayātrā*. Its origins and progressive systematisation have been extensively studied by scholars (Bakker 2006; Gutschow 2006). For our purposes, it should be sufficient to say that the *yātrā* is mentioned in the last chapter of

⁴² A comparison of the 1991 map with the one annexed to the 1936-1937 suit reveals that the more recent depiction aimed to fix an augmented Hindu landscape, with a considerably increased number of deities. In addition, the Islamic graves depicted in the 1936-1937 map at the back of the mosque (and mentioned often in those proceedings) have disappeared.

⁴³ On Banaras’ urban pilgrimages see also Desai 2012 and 2017 and Gengnagel 2011.

the 13th-14th *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*—a Sanskrit eulogistic text focused on the Hindu geography of the city and still an authoritative, though at times purely formulaic, framework for promoting contemporary shrines.⁴⁴ It is likely, however, that the sequence of deities was initially more a conceptual network than a physical path walked by pilgrims (Gengnagel 2011; Lazzaretti 2019).

The *antargṛhayātrā* takes Vishvanath as its centre—a centre that, however, is difficult to locate precisely—and consists of a spiral route that circumambulates Vishvanath seven times, beginning from the outermost circuit. Gutschow (2006: 283-338) mapped the various spiral routes and included seventy-seven destinations, according to his performance of the pilgrimage in the 1990s under the guidance of Kedarnath Vyas. Gutschow’s study is an important piece of evidence because it shows that at that time the performance of the *antargṛhayātrā* took as its innermost centre the site that “since the 17th century is occupied by a mosque” (Ibid, 293) and that in other parts of his work he somewhat controversially refers to as the “17th [actually 16th]” or “former Vishvanath temple” (Ibid, 283 and 295).

In recent years the *antargṛhayātrā* has been performed only once a year by the *Śrī Karpātrī Svāmī Smṛti Kāśī Pañcakrośīyātrā* (Lazzaretti 2019). I joined them in 2015 and observed that, as leaders of the association say with pride, the pilgrimage is performed “according to the tradition”—meaning that, despite the difficult security procedures necessary to even gain access to the temple-mosque compound, pilgrims would still gather in the Gyanvapi *maidān* to perform the initial rituals with a member of the Vyas family, and perform part of the final circuits around the mosque or, as they put it, “the original Vishvanath temple”. Indeed, we did circumambulate the Gyanvapi

⁴⁴ On the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* and its contemporary uses see Gengnagel 2005 and Lazzaretti 2019.

mosque, stopping at a series of *lupt* deities, some of which were adjacent to the mosque. These are deities whose physical, iconic manifestations have reportedly been “lost” but that continue to be worshipped in their locations (*sthān kī pūjā*).

Although such pilgrimage practitioners, “experts” in Banaras and lawyers for Lord Vishvanath today claim that the circumambulation of the mosque is an uninterrupted tradition, it appears that the route emerged relatively recently. James Prinsep’s description of the *antargṛhayātrā*, given as an annotation to his 1822 Banaras map, for instance, states explicitly that the centre around which the pilgrims walk is the Gyanvapi well (and not the mosque).⁴⁵

Early legal documents also provide some indications of the unsettled nature of the centre and negotiations around what in some instances is referred to as “the sacred walk of the Hindus”.⁴⁶ For instance, in an 1853 letter from the Provincial Government to the Commissioner, Benares Division, Mr. Courtenay Smith states that “Hindus are unreasonable in claiming less interruption to their walk around Bisheshar than they had experienced before the riots in which they were the perpetrators”.⁴⁷ In other documents, the *parikramā* is referred to as the “sacred walk around Gyanvapi”.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ The full text of the annotation: “The Untr-Grihee Jatra or “Sacred Tour of the Temples within the limits of the abode of Vishweshwur” passes seven times round Gyan Bapee well: a line thus represents the first & exterior Circuit starting from the well to Manikarnika, thence South &c, and ending at Shunkuta Ghat; the Second thus _._._. continues up Lahoree tola, Shukur kund gulee; round again to Kalika gulee; the Third passes through Unn Poorna Visweshwur gulee &c to the Well; and the remaining Four circles are performed round the Well itself.” For a detailed description of Prinsep's map see Gutschow (2006, 297)

⁴⁶ It is not entirely clear whether the walk, or *parikramā* mentioned in legal proceedings, refers to the entire *antargṛhayātrā* or, more likely, to the worship of the several spots located in corners and walls of the mosque where *lupt* deities are believed to dwell, either as part of the final sequences of the *antargṛhayātrā*, or as an independent practice.

⁴⁷ Letter, the Officiating Commissioner, Benares Division to the Secretary to Government, dated 20th December 1853, Exhibit S No. 307-C in *Din Mohammed*, p. 205

⁴⁸ *Din Mohammed*, p. 223-226 and 229-232, Exhibits 4, 41, E, I.

In the 1936-1937 suit the “sacred walk” was apparently considered by Hindu witnesses to be around either the Vishvanath temple (although we can not be certain whether the new Vishvanath temple was meant or the mosque as alleged original temple), or the Gyanvapi well, while Muslim witnesses contended that it was around the Gyanvapi well. As I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Lazzaretti 2021c), there are several reasons for the worship of the Gyanvapi well as a substitute for Vishvanath and, taking into account its promotion by the Vyas as a ritual centre in the 19th and 20th centuries, it may well have been for at least some time the centre for the *antargrhayātrā*.

Lost deities and secret divine places

Visible and *lupt* deities were anchored in the *maidān* through applications to the courts by the Vyas, as noted above, and through the promotion of the worship of specific locations that embody the lost deities (*sthān kī pūjā*). The vernacular textual production for pilgrims was a big part of this and again the Vyas played a crucial role. In particular, the publication of *Pañcakrośātmak jyotirliṅga kāśīmāhātmya* by Kedarnath Vyas in 1987, after what he described to me as an exhausting period of textual and spatial research, represented the acme of the process. The book is a most extensive modern glorification of Banaras as a Hindu sacred centre and a guide for pilgrims, (attempting to) crystallise lists and prescriptions for the performance of 57 urban pilgrimage routes to clusters of deities. Its level of detail and attempt to crystallise rituals of place is evident when comparing, for instance, the ending sequence of the *antargrhayātrā* as given by Vyas with a previous publication, the *Kāśīyātrāprakāś* by Gaurji Dikshit from 1890. While names of deities are followed by indications of their

locations in both publications, the 1890 pilgrim guide is rather vague: for example the deity Mokseshvar is described as being located “to the south-west (*nairṛtā*) of Gyanvapi”. While the earlier pilgrim guide refers to Gyanvapi without mentioning the mosque nor the well, thus leaving it open to interpretation, Vyas’ text adds precise indications of the location and even prescribes ritual practices. In relation to the same deity Mokseshvar, for instance, there is the sentence “*Masjid ke pīche, gupt sthān kī pūjā karen*” (Behind the mosque, let us worship the secret place).

Discussion and concluding thoughts

The progressive crystallisation of divine abodes and rituals of space discussed above should be seen in the light of the broader production of a renewed Hindu landscape in 18th and 19th century Banaras about which many scholars have written (Freitag 1989; Dalmia 1997; Gaenszle & Gengnagel 2006; Dodson 2012; Desai 2012). At that time, negotiations of religious and ritual authority took place of course within the Gyanvapi *maidān* too. The consolidation of local urban pilgrimage in general and, rituals of place therein are deeply interwoven with the history of the Vyas family and their struggles to maintain control of a contested and presumably lucrative ritual space. I have argued that in order to maintain their status as ritual authority, the Vyas relied on the promotion of rituals of place on the one hand, and recourse to the courts on the other to fix in space the several minor deities in the Gyanvapi *maidān* that they supervised. Crystallising a certain tradition of urban pilgrimage—tradition that takes the Gyanvapi well and the *maidān* as core of the performance of any *parikramā* performed in Banaras—clearly signalled the consolidation of their own status as *adhikārīs* of the *maidān*. At the same time, though, their efforts led not only to the establishment of certain

pilgrimage traditions and rituals of place around the Gyanvapi, but also reinforced an understanding of the mosque as “the original Vishvanath temple”.

In their struggles for recognition and, in essence, survival, the Vyas produced a vast amount of textual and performative material about Hindu practices in the compound, as well as legal actions. Not surprisingly, then, when claims of exclusive possession were advanced by Somnath Vyas in 1991 he relied on that very material to inform and provide “evidence” for Hindu claims of “continued worship” and exclusive possession of the compound. Although members of the Vyas family may have been somewhat influenced by Hindu nationalist views following a progressive normalisation of the language of Hindutva (Michelutti 2011), I have shown that they were strongly motivated by issues of local control and status. Even though Somnath reportedly sympathised with the Hindu nationalist agenda for the “liberation” of places of worship (and we have to remember that he was acting at the height of the Ramjanmabhumi movement and his family was attempting to control a next projected ‘liberated’ site), his actions acquire more nuance when seen in the context of the continuous struggles and negotiations in the *maidān* and internal familial competition. Whatever the original intentions of the 1991 suit, and no matter how complex the context in which it emerged, the religious practices presented as evidence and the claims it advanced have now been entirely co-opted by the Hindu majoritarian national agenda.

Paradoxically, the Vyas, who were for so long promoters of the religious practices on which claims of “continued worship” and “exclusive possession” rely, were not able to resist recent developments and have now been left behind and.⁴⁹ At the dawn

⁴⁹ Instances of resistance by the Vyas and other residents of the neighbourhood and potential reasons for their failure have been discussed in Lazzaretti 2021a and 2021b; the Vyas family moved to a rented house not far from the Corridor.

of the implementation of the Corridor in 2017, when the Vyas were evicted, their house and seat of power was demolished. In addition, the 2019 reopening of the 1991 suit has a new plaintiff, lawyer Vijay Shankar Rastogi, the new “next friend” of Lord Vishvanath.

We have seen above an example of the way Hindu majoritarianism moves subtly through, and transforms situated circumstances. At the same time, it nurtures itself in ordinary religious practices, situated understanding of place and petty disputes. Hindu majoritarianism aims here to dispossess Muslims of their place of worship, but in the process it has co-opted, exploited, transformed and finally disposed of Hindu traditions and religious authorities, whose very existence were nested in the micro-politics of the *maidān* and not straightforwardly aligned with Hindutva.

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