

# Bénarès comme lieu de mémoire

## 20<sup>ème</sup> Journée du CEIAS

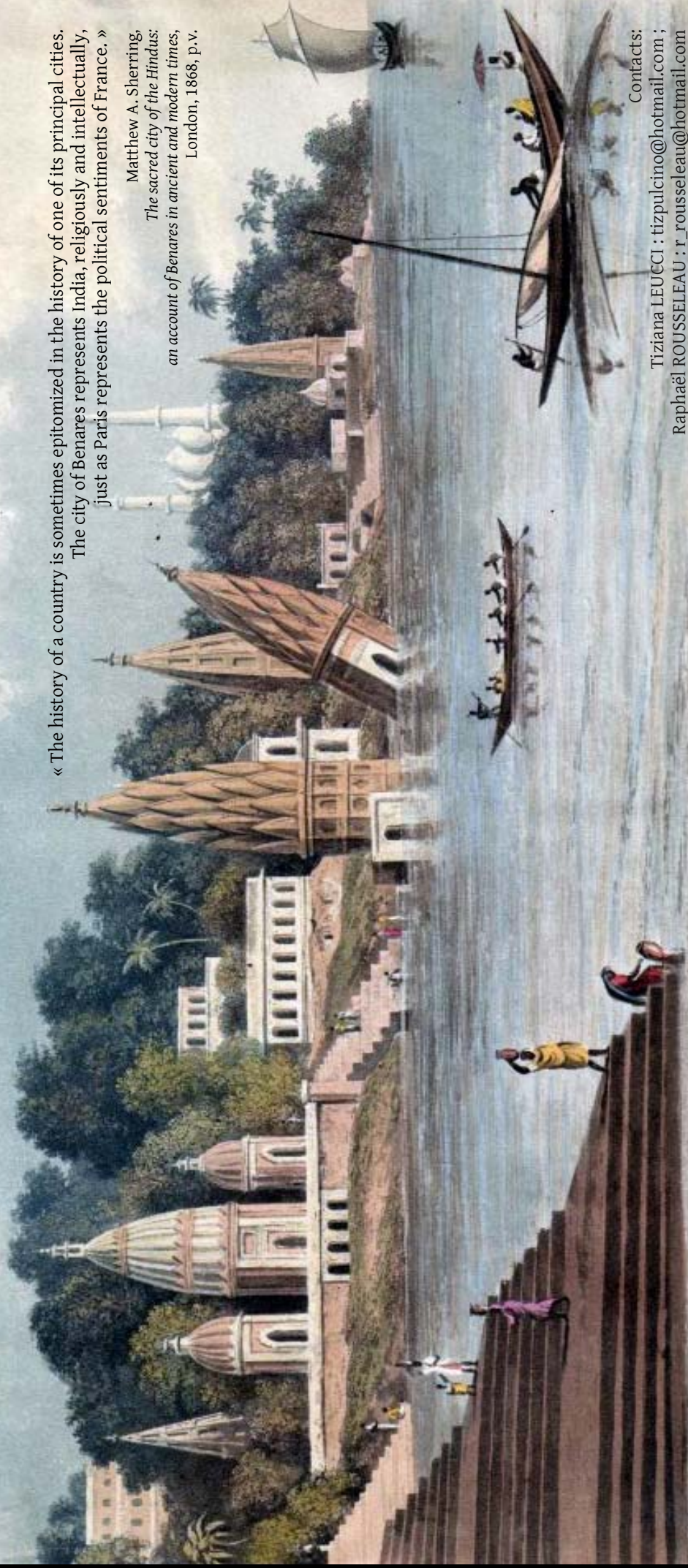
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Salles 638-640 190, avenue de France 75013 Paris

Coordination : Tiziana Leucci (CNRS, CEIAS) & Raphaël Rousseleau (Université de Lausanne, CEIAS)

« The history of a country is sometimes epitomized in the history of one of its principal cities. The city of Benares represents India, religiously and intellectually, just as Paris represents the political sentiments of France. »

Matthew A. Sherring,  
*The sacred city of the Hindus:  
an account of Benares in ancient and modern times,*  
London, 1868, p.v.



"City of Benares," Aquatint by Thomas Sutherland after Charles Rammus Forrest, from 'A Picturesque Tour along the River Ganges and Jumna', 1824

Contacts:  
Tiziana LEUCCI : tizpulcino@hotmail.com ;  
Raphaël ROUSSELEAU : r\_rousseleau@hotmail.com

# Bénarès comme *lieu de mémoire*

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« The history of a country is sometimes epitomized in the history of one of its principal cities. The city of Benares represents India, religiously and intellectually, just as Paris represents the political sentiments of France. »

Matthew A. Sherring,  
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Bénarès, Kasi ou Varanasi, est sans doute la ville indienne la plus célèbre, considérée comme emblématique de « l'Inde éternelle » rythmée par le flot du Gange. La mobilisation actuelle autour du fleuve en témoigne notamment. Nous proposons de revenir sur la genèse de cet imaginaire, de la ville de pèlerinage à la perception hindoue actuelle, et des récits de voyage et pièces de théâtre au discours touristique. Il s'agira de montrer que *l'esprit du lieu* tient aussi aux fameux *lieux de mémoire* (Pierre Nora), c'est-à-dire aux monuments et espaces retenus comme significatifs par les 'cadres sociaux' de la mémoire. Dans une perspective similaire, Michael S. Dodson a ainsi montré qu'une certaine « idea of Banaras » devait davantage à la modernité qu'on ne l'imagine souvent. Pour cette raison, la journée débutera avec lui et se concentrera sur l'histoire coloniale, avant d'aborder l'ethnographie plus contemporaine.

Nous reviendrons sur la focalisation européenne sur cette ville non seulement « sainte » de l'hindouisme, mais située aussi sur la principale voie de commerce fluviale, et accueillant de nombreux pandits ainsi que de célèbres musiciens et artisans. On abordera la construction d'une mémoire locale insistant sur une continuité spirituelle et artistique hindoue, mais mettant aussi d'autres apports entre parenthèses. L'un des buts de cette journée sera ainsi de montrer que Bénarès offre certes comme un résumé de l'histoire du pays, mais une histoire aussi mouvementée que le cours du Gange sous la surface.

*Benares, Banaras, Kasi or Varanasi, is probably the most famous Indian city, seen as a symbol of “eternal India,” and living in synchronicity with the flow of the Ganges River. We would like to retrace here the genesis of this imaginary, from the pilgrimage city to the current Hindu perception, and from travel narratives and theater plays to the tourism discourses. Our aim is to show that the ‘spirit of the place’ is linked to its most celebrated ‘spaces of memory’ (Pierre Nora’s ‘Lieux de mémoire’), i.e. the monuments and spaces consecrated as significant by the “social frames” of memory. Along similar lines, Michael S. Dodson has shown that a certain “idea of Banaras” owes more to modernity than we often imagine. For this reason, he will deliver the inaugural lecture, followed by other scholars’ presentations dealing with colonial history through to contemporary ethnography.*

*We will focus on the European descriptions of this city, perceived not just as a “holy” Hindu pilgrimage place, but also as a crucial commercial town sited along the main fluvial route, and home to numerous pandits as well as to famous musicians and artisans. We will take a look at the construction of a ‘local memory’, which insists on a ‘Hindu’ spiritual and artistic continuity, thereby bracketing other cultural contributions. One of the aims of this workshop will also be to show that Banaras does indeed offer a kind of emblematic ‘summary’ of the history of the country, but it is a history as tumultuous and turbid as the currents below the Ganges’ surface.*

## **ABSTRACTS**

*Michael S. DODSON (Indiana University, Bloomington, USA)*

*Banaras as Modern Times: Governance and Urban Identity at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*

The city of Banaras at the onset of the twentieth century was the product of essentially modern phenomena, rendering it not a city of ancient traditions as most often believed but a paradigmatically contemporary place. Banaras as "city" - as it was built and lived and fought over and experienced - was re-crafted at this critical juncture in its history through new forms of unequal governance, bureaucracy and legislation, municipal politics, transnational economics and local regimes of taxation, as well as colonial and nationalist ideologies. This is a view of Banaras's evolution that doesn't eschew the importance of religion but renders it firmly within the structures of the modern colonial state. This paper examines one

such example in support of this interpretation: an attempt in the early 1920s to place the Arhai Kangura mosque under a legal and bureaucratic regime of state-sponsored architectural conservation and the local articulations of the mosque's identity and neighborhood importance that this attempt elicited.

*Claude MARKOVITS (CNRS, CEIAS, Paris)*

***Benares 1781 : How the British Raj almost came to a Premature End***

In this paper, I shall revisit a famous episode in British Indian history that took place in Benares in the summer of 1781, when the Governor-General Warren Hastings had a narrow escape from death at the hands of the maharajah of Benares Cheyt Singh. On the basis of Hastings' own account, as well as Macaulay's celebrated essay on Warren Hastings, and a recently published history of the Benares dynasty, I shall attempt to bring out some of the salient features of the event and of the conflicting interpretations that still attach to it. It is hoped that it will help replace the history of Benares within a wider context.

*Tiziana LEUCCI (CNRS, CEIAS, Paris)*

***The river Ganges and the city of Benares in the European Travelers' Accounts, Stage Plays, Operas and Ballets (XVII-XX c.)***

In the past, as well as today, both the river Ganges and the city of Benares have been widely described by the foreign visitors in India, impressed by their sights. Thus, from the XVII century onwards, the European travel accounts inspired quite a number of play writers, artists, stage painters, music and dance composers. After reading the travellers' reports and memories, those authors made the river and the city the ideal places for the plots of their librettos, choreographies, scenographies and music scores. In my presentation I'll select just few examples of such plays, operas and ballets in order to illustrate how the Ganges river and the city of Benares played an important role in the European perception and representation on the stage of Indian rituals and related socio-religious customs. Despite the exaggerations and the distortions that shaped the somehow 'stereotyped' portrayal of both those sites, I'll show how those plays had a deep impact on the spectators' imagination and contributed to the knowledge of India amongst the European audiences of the time.

*Julien JUGAND (CREM, Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense)*

*Performing arts and its memory. Banaras as an idea of Hindustani music*

Albeit seldom studied, Banaras appears as an important and, somehow, peculiar center of Hindustani music in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> c. Under the tutelage of the local Maharaja as well as the merchant and landed elite, the city is then a place of intense artistic refinement and creation, a hub of patronage for North Indian musicians, an important seat of the courtesans' tradition and a place of dialogue between Indo-Persian and local Hindi-Bhojpuri culture. Most musicians and patrons nowadays consider this period as a golden age of Hindustani music in the city and its souvenir is also embedded in the shape of the contemporary musical scene. This paper will first present an overview of this musical world on the verge of deep transformations. It will then deal with its main places, contexts and figures and how, by being remembered today, they shape a complex relation of the city towards its own history and culture.

*Françoise 'Nalini' DELVOYE (EPHE, UMR 7528 Mondes iranien et indien, Paris)*

*The Banaras Dhrupad Mela, an annual music fair held on Mahashivaratri since 1975 : Patrons, actors and ideological symbols between myth and history*

The Dhrupad genre of Hindustani vocal music emerged under aristocratic patronage in Gujarat and Madhyadesh in the late fifteenth century. Five centuries later it enjoyed a particular status in Banaras when a three-night music fair dedicated to that particular genre of art music was created in 1975. The free and open to all festival became a unique cultural event in Kashi, the 'City of Light', held at the particularly auspicious time of Mahashivaratri celebrating Lord Shiva, at Tulsi Ghat, near the spot at which it is believed that the 16<sup>th</sup> century poet Tulsidas wrote his *Ramayana* in Avadhi. In recent years, the elaborate ritual of the opening ceremony of the four-to-five-day Dhrupad festival with the chanting of Vedic hymns and discourses in Sanskrit, has notoriously recreated a mythical history of Dhrupad. Parallel to the revival of Dhrupad in performance, a musicological and textual research programme was conducted at the Musicology Department of the Banaras Hindu University, with the publication of the *Dhrupad Annual*, a scholarly journal released during the festival (1986-1995). On the basis of academic publications, witnesses' accounts and my own observations since 1984, it would be interesting to

study the role of eminent local, national and international figures, and of influential academic, cultural and religious institutions involved in the organization of the Banaras Dhrupad Mela, according to their specific artistic and ideological agendas.

*Mathieu CLAVEYROLAS (CNRS, CEIAS, Paris)*

***'Il n'y a pas de ça chez nous': Bénarès vu d'ailleurs.*** (*'This is not the Way we Do it': Banaras from Overseas*)

In this paper, I will draw both from my experiences as an ethnographer of Hinduism in Banaras and from the comparison with the image carried by Banaras in the non-Indian Hindu world (mostly Mauritius) and in the West, among researchers. Starting from the statement that Banaras stands as a reference for a certain Hindu orthodoxy - and consequently for a certain exemplary indian-ness - I will ask: who, and what Hindus are concerned with this image of Banaras as reference? I will then try and put into perspective such an image with the city's history and ethnography together with the way in which the academic field deals with Banaras. I will successively focus on the case of Mauritius, then on the ethnography of Banaras and, finally, on Western representations.

*Raphaël ROUSSELEAU (Université de Lausanne, CEIAS, Paris)*

***Méditation sur le Gange : le fleuve comme métaphore, des sources britanniques à Hermann Hesse*** (*Meditation upon the Ganges : the River as Metaphor from the British Sources to Hermann Hesse*)

In this paper, I intend to analyse the common Western perception of the Ganges as a place of meditation on life as a literary *topos*, constructed mostly at the turn of the XIX-XX<sup>th</sup> centuries. Beginning with famous British sources (Sherring, Havell) reflecting over the ruins as well as on the Buddhist heritage of Benares, I will focus on the description of the Ganges by Hermann Hesse, author of the most famous initiatic novel *Siddhartha*. The novelist presents the river as a natural symbol of a cosmic consciousness, but also of the initiatic process engaged by the protagonist of the story, who met the Buddha but preferred to listen to the river's voice.

*Adrien BOUZARD (Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense)*

***Emergence et Construction d'une nouvelle forme d'identité des bateliers à Varanasi.***

*(Emergence and Construction of a New Form of Boatmen Identity in Varanasi)*

In this presentation, I will focus on the organisation of the boatmen activities and on their direct relation with the management of a highly competitive space. The explosion of the tourism industry in the past two decades in Varanasi has strongly emphasized the internal socio-economic differentiation in the boatmen community. The effects of this are extremely present in different groups of activities. They are the most obvious in passenger transportation, where the relationship with pilgrims and tourists being more direct and regular. I will outline and explain the class distinctions within the main boatmen caste (Nishad/Mallah). At last, I will try to show how a new kind of boatmen figure emerges, both entrepreneur and politician, member of a recently constituted new form of boatmen caste elite.

## PROGRAMME

9h30 | **WELCOME ADDRESS** by Caterina GUENZI (EHESS, CEIAS) for the Direction of the CEIAS

**INTRODUCTION** by the organizers: Tiziana LEUCCI (CNRS, CEIAS) and Raphaël ROUSSELEAU (Université de Lausanne, CEIAS)

**First Session** | Chair: Corinne LEFÈVRE (CNRS, Co-director CEIAS)

10h00 | **KEYNOTE** by Michael S. DODSON (Indiana University, Bloomington)  
*Banaras as Modern Times: Governance and Urban Identity at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*

10h45 | Claude MARKOVITS (CNRS, CEIAS)

*Banaras 1781 : How the British Raj almost came to a Premature End*

**DISCUSSION**

11h30 | Coffee/Tea break

**Second Session** | Chair: Philippe BRUGUIÈRE (Musée Cité de la Musique - La Philharmonique de Paris)

12h00 | Tiziana LEUCCI (CNRS, CEIAS)

*The river Ganges and the city of Benares in the European Travelers' Accounts, Stage Plays, Operas and Ballets (XVII-XX c.)*

12h30 | Julien JUGAND (CREM, Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense)  
*Performing arts and its memory. Banaras as an idea of Hindustani music*

**DISCUSSION**

13h15 | Lunch

**Third Session** | Chair: Caterina GUENZI (EHESS, Co-director CEIAS)

14h30 | Françoise 'Nalini' DELVOYE (EPHE, Mondes iraniens et indien)  
*The Banaras Dhrupad Mela, an annual music fair held on Mahashivaratri since 1975: Patrons, actors and ideological symbols between myth and history*

15h00 | Mathieu CLAVEYROLAS (CNRS, CEIAS)

*'Il n'y a pas de ça chez nous' : Bénarès vu d'ailleurs*  
*'This is not the way we do it': Banaras from overseas*

**DISCUSSION**

15h45 | Coffee/Tea break

**Fourth Session** | Chair: Catherine SERVAN-SCHREIBER (CNRS, CEIAS)

16h15 | Raphaël ROUSSELEAU (Université de Lausanne, CEIAS)

*Méditation sur le Gange : le fleuve comme métaphore, des sources britanniques à Hermann Hesse*  
*Meditation upon the Ganges : the River as Metaphor from the British Sources to Hermann Hesse*

16h45 | Adrien BOUZARD (Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense)

*Emergence et construction d'une nouvelle forme d'identité des bateliers à Varanasi*  
*Emergence and Construction of a New Form of Boatmen Identity in Varanasi*

**DISCUSSION**

17H30 CONCLUSION

COCKTAIL

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centre d'études - Inde / Asie du Sud  
centre for South Asian studies