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Title of the Project: Between Projected and Practiced Identities:
Plurality of Spaces and Performances in Banaras
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Summary of the Report

This proposal intended to examine the processes through which a traditional city-space is reconfigured and reproduced as 'sacred space' of a particular type marginalizing multiple spatial practices. This work engaged with the existing 'other' identities based on alternative lived practices in the city of Banaras (Varanasi) and brought them to a larger academic and public discourse. During the course of time we were able to explore how multiple power blocks such as state, religious institutions etc. promote certain identities to market the urban space in one particular way and at best either ignore or downplay contested claims. The common thread in the writing on Banaras has been the cosmological connection to the city and establishment of notion of sacredness for the dominant form of Hindu religion. Alternative identities of Banaras were subdued where several cultural practices like Ravidas Jyanti celebration along with existing material practices, like metal work remain in oblivion (Choudhary and Prakash, 2016). The politics of homogeneous identity formation has also resulted in marginalization of subaltern practices as well as of communities. Further, the idea of confluence is part of a politics rooted in singularity aiming to propagate the dominant tradition. Banaras can be considered the exemplary epitome of this process.

We have analysed multiple identities and practices, which help us to exfoliate the politics of plurality. The work deals with multiple identities within the city and on the basis of our engagement with the communities we are able to bring the component of spatial specificity which usually is claimed as the basis of certain practices. For example, the city celebrates Ravidas Jayanti at two sites, namely birthplace and workplace. Each one has patronage of a particular political party namely Indian National Congress and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The number of devotees and the nature of rituals and performances vary across these two spaces, which motivate further analysis of spatiality and spatial fix of performance and material practices along with identity formation.

The popular subversive performances and material practices of people in the conception of the image of traditional urban space had hardly got deserved attention. While, viewed through the prism of practiced identities, the city of Varanasi emerges as palimpsest, having layers of cultural complexities which are accrued over centuries.

The report has five chapters. The first one deals with context in which marginalization of practices virtually means denial of existence of identities and practices, which at certain point of time were prevailing. This Chapter outlines the backgrounds used to contextualize the study, the rationale of the study.

The second chapter would be devoted to different performance traditions and the constructed and propagated images of Banaras. The city has multiple images and each image contradicts some existing popular notion or narrative about the city. The focus of the chapter is to bring to light the subversive performances and material practices of people in the conception of multiple possible images.

Ravidas is one of the icons of popular subversive performance medium that this present work has focused on. Ravidasia, the people who consider Ravidas as the 'God', belongs to multiple castes (mostly Dalits) and are spread across the country. The third chapter discusses the plausible connections and disconnects in having the identity of the city linked to this performance. The chapter engages with the politics of the ruling party in assigning relative importance to the sites linked to work and birth of Ravidas, a theme so far has never been examined. The present chapter is based on the contemporary political praxis and identity formation.

Kabir is another icon who hails from the city and has challenged the Brahminical order of the religion in the 18th century. His followers claim a different religion, while the certain caste within Hindu fold continued practicing Kabir and kept the ethos of Kabir alive through performance. The Fourth Chapter deals with the complexities that exist amongst the followers in terms of caste, religion and denouncement of ritualistic tradition. The relative importance of Kabir with that of Ravidas is the key component that situates politics of performance while discussing Kabir in Banaras.

The last chapter discusses why certain performances and spaces become more important than others when it comes to defining the traditional urban space? The dominant image of Banaras not only undermines the material and cultural articulations of various communities but also undermines the existing plural identities. The processes of identification are marked by claims and counter claims of communities, propagation and marginalization of practices at multiple levels and heterotypic character of cityscape of Banaras.

Specific Significance:

The popular subversive performances and material practices of people in the conception of the image of traditional urban space have hardly got deserved attention. It is important to investigate what Banaras would look like once it is viewed through the prism of practiced identity. The work furthers investigate why certain performances and spaces become more important than others when it comes to defining the traditional urban space? The dominant image of Banaras not only undermines the material and cultural articulations of various communities but also undermines the existing plural identities. The work helps to bring unexplored insights of traditional cities and the politics of identification. The study contributes in recuperating the urban space beyond projected hegemonic identity. It would help larger academia to develop a methodology and a more nuanced understanding of a traditional city and other such spaces at large in South Asia.