

Introduction

From the earliest renditions of the *Ramayana*, boatmen have occupied a special place in the traditional moral universe of India. Murals depicting the legendary story of the boatman, Khevat, ferrying Prince Rama, and his pious wife Sita across the Ganga, can be seen all over Banaras, while historical, literary and travel narratives are replete with accounts of encounters with boatmen. The following excerpt from Pankaj Mishra's (1999, 26) acclaimed novel *The Romantics* is a particularly good example of literary fascination with boatmen:

Miss West had her own favorite boatman: his name was Ramchand and he came running up the steps as soon as she and I appeared on the ghats that evening. He was a strikingly handsome man with beautifully sculpted muscles on his lean, chocolate-brown body, most of which was bare, his only item of clothing being a dhoti, which he wore like a G-string, tightly wound around his hips and buttocks. He held his palms together before Miss West; he bowed his head; he looked eager to serve.

As the subject of Miss West's orientalist gaze, Ramchand is at once exotic, erotic and subservient. Such indulgence, however, is quickly dispelled in the following paragraph:

She brought an un-Indian naturalness to her exchange with the boatman, and watching her I felt a trifle awkward. Although I spoke the same language as Ramchand and lived in the same country, the scope for conversation between us was limited. Countless inhibitions of caste and class stood in our way; the only common vocabulary between us was of the service he offered.

For all the predictability of a benign orientalism which mars Miss West's view of Ramchand, she brings a certain informality to her encounter with him, something impossible for the narrator who is steeped in the socio-economic hierarchies which underpin everyday interactions among Indians. For him, the boatman belongs to the low caste occupational group known as the Mallah/Nishad, located near the bottom of the social hierarchy. Miss West's approach to the boatman, however, is unmediated by such conditioning.

While the passage registers a vivid sense of the boatman's physical presence, it offers little insight into the daily struggles which characterize the lives of the boatmen as a group. In this book my concern is to render visible the lives, narratives and practices of the boatmen who have been traditionally marginalized by authoritative descriptions of social life. Through a focus on the social and physical

space that boatmen inhabit and constitute as part of the broader river economy of Banaras, I seek to examine the way boatmen consciously attempt to subvert, challenge and oppose structures of domination in everyday life. Everyday life in this case must be conceived as a contested and negotiated arena, where experience, meaning, agency and resistance are expressed and perceived in multiple and often contradictory ways. This is precisely what makes Miss West's encounter with the boatman radically different from that of the middle class Indian. Alternatively, this may be the reason why Ramchand, the boatman, is polite and subservient: a culturally appropriate strategy of engagement with ones' patron (Appadurai 1990). If such a reading raises questions of performance, it must also raise the prospect of different audiences and internal dynamics among boatmen themselves. Accordingly, Ramchand's running up the ghat to greet Miss West, may be read as an assertive act; a clear signal to other competing boatmen around the ghat, that Miss West is his 'known' passenger, and therefore off-limits to them. Of course, it is difficult and perhaps presumptive, to attempt to gain access to Ramchand's mind; nonetheless, my point is that everyday life cannot be simply understood as transparent terrain, where meanings are easily available for scrutiny (Highmore 2002). What this further implies is that any investigation of everyday life must take into account both micro and macro perspectives. In other words, a framework that is sensitive to both the micro-analysis of the boatmen's lives, emphasizing experience, agency and resistance is needed, as well as the broader structures, institutions and discourses of domination (alluded to by the middle class Indian in Mishra's novel) that boatmen are subjected to and constrained by in their everyday life, for example, state policies, caste ideology, occupational opportunities and market economy.

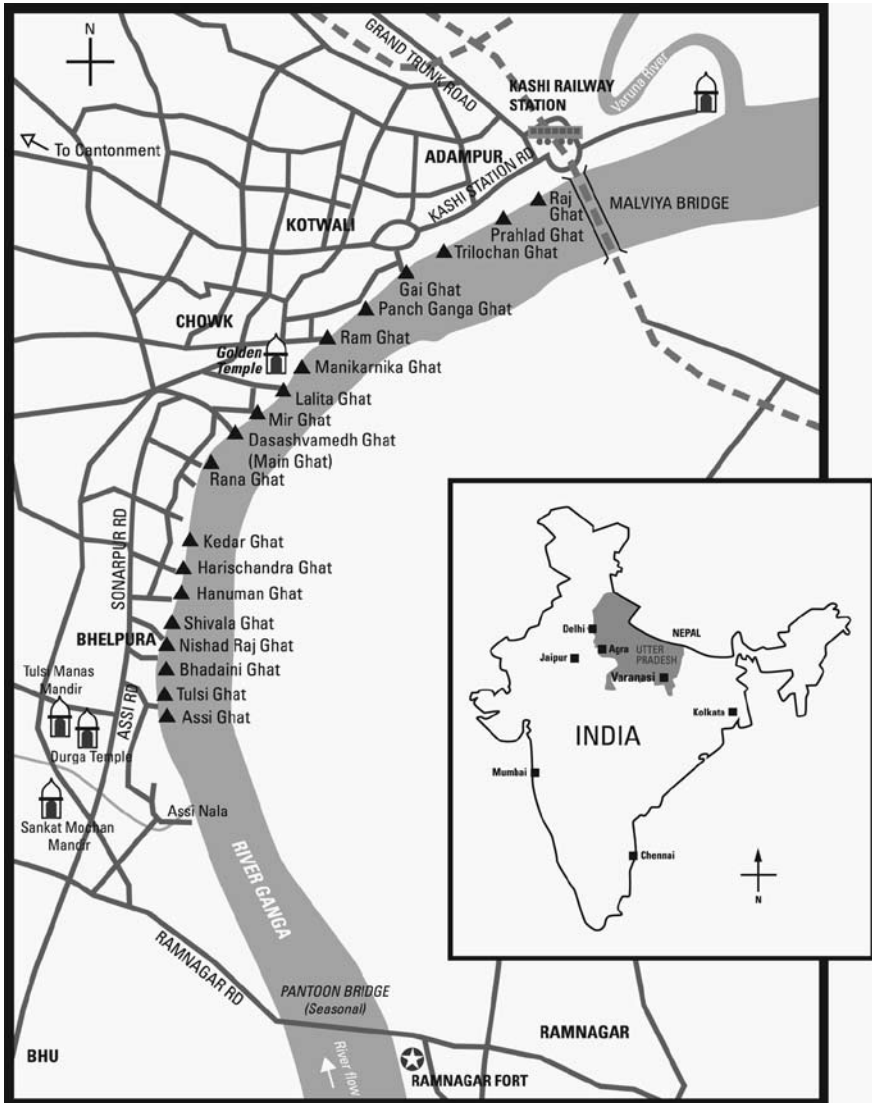
In this study I attempt to provide a multilayered understanding of how such processes of domination and subordination operate and the implications they have for the construction of a boatman identity, the exercise of agency and resistance practices. I do so from a number of perspectives. One perspective investigates the authoritative gaze to which boatmen are subjected by the state – a much more portentous one than that of the romanticizing gaze often reflected in tourist sensibilities. Another perspective analyses the dynamics involved in the formation of the community and its identity through its interactions and encounters with state and non-state actors and institutions. The third perspective looks at the interaction between boatmen and foreign visitors to the city. These perspectives, informed and bound together by theoretical understandings, such as the interplay between (notions of) tradition and modernity and domination and subordination, everyday resistance, moral economy and subalternity, constitute the substance of this book.

Narratives of Place

As a city Banaras has been the subject of much foreign rumination, both in and outside the academic world. From colonial descriptions of the city, portraying it

as a 'living museum', to the more recent studies which have examined Banaras as a paradigmatic pilgrimage centre (Eck 1983), the city remains one of the most seductive destinations for anthropologists and tourists alike. Among the many anthropological studies on Banaras one finds an impressive array of topics, ranging from craftsmanship (Kumar 1988); the death industry and what constitutes a 'good death' in the holy city (Parry 1994; Justice 1997), issues of environmental, moral and physical degradation (Alley 2002; Cohen 1997), masculinity (for example, expressed through wrestling) and womanhood, examined through the prism of ritual practices (Alter 1992; Pintchman 2005). All of these studies have engaged, to some degree, with issues that are central to area studies pertaining to India, such as the dominant values of purity and pollution, the ideology of caste, and more broadly, the study of religion. Moreover, the fact that the meta-narrative of *hierarchy* (Appadurai 1988) hovers above such studies, does not diminish the rich insights which they generate about the complexities of caste, religious ideology and the way in which cultural practices and meanings are implicated within power relations and in the construction of identity, both for the individual and at the level of community (local, regional and national). Likewise, this book and its examination of the Banaras boatmen – a low caste, territorially bound community – draws much of its currency from these debates, which I hope will further contribute to anthropological knowledge and enhance our understanding of the multifarious factors that militate against the myth of any singular dominant principle of hierarchy ordering South Asia society (cf. Parish 1997). Set against this context, boatmen certainly matter and it is surprising that no study has yet focussed on this community, which as we shall see, has been central to the physical and social construction of Banaras, in terms of its trade, pilgrimage and tourist economy.

While certain identifiable intellectual concerns have preoccupied anthropological research on Banaras, and on India more broadly; many anthropologists like to point out (with some justification) that it is the fieldsite and unanticipated encounters and incidents during the course of fieldwork that ultimately dictate what one should study. However, as Gupta and Ferguson (1997, 11) persuasively argue, what is deemed a 'good fieldsite', and 'proper fieldwork' is also defined by a 'crosshatched intersection of visa and clearance procedures, the interests of funding agencies, and intellectual debates within the discipline and its subfields'. Indeed, as a passport carrying Israeli, barred from travelling to Muslim countries in this region, such incidental geopolitical considerations played a part my 'choice' of area of research. I find this worthwhile mentioning right at the outset of this study, not simply as a narrative device, but rather to alert the reader to how my research on Banaras and its boatmen is shot through with political histories, national experiences and disciplinary considerations. These factors have shaped my subject position as an author, as well as the methods I employed in the field, the knowledge I gathered, and ultimately, the way I chose to interpret and represent Banaras and its boatmen.



Map 0.1 Map of Banaras and the River Ganges (with India insert)

My engagement with the boatmen is therefore not wholly coincidental and, moreover, my examination of issues to do with ideologies of caste, structures of domination and everyday acts of resistance are informed by debates that ‘matter to the discipline’ and the my area of study (India), at least as much as they matter to the people I have worked with. Indeed, as Malkki (1997) argues, anthropology has developed very sophisticated methodological mechanisms to examine such issues,

which animate current debates, particularly as they operate within the durable, day-to-day structures of the social and cultural life of bounded communities. Nevertheless, Malkki is also careful to point out that by ‘choosing’ such areas of investigation, anthropologists necessarily exclude other, equally valid and important forms of knowledge, phenomena and communities, which may seem difficult to capture through traditional/authoritative fieldwork methodology. The point is that boatmen are no more ‘Indian’ than those migrant labourers in other parts of India. An ethnographic study of factory workers in India’s largest still-plant located in Bhilai is as insightful as the one conducted in ‘village India’ for understanding the cultural meanings and moral evaluations of the discourse of corruption in India (see Gupta 1995; Parry 2000). Moreover, the fact that boatmen are a territorially bound community, celebrating their belonging to Banaras from time immemorial, must be treated with a degree of historical scepticism, for as recent studies of precolonial India have shown, mobility has long been a strategy of survival, and at times, of resistance, even amongst artisans in their quest for stable and secure livelihoods (Haynes & Roy 1999). In addition, as I argue in Chapter 1, it was under the colonial government that mobile groups, such as boatmen, were progressively incarcerated in, or confined to, specific locations. To this effect then, the very palatability of communities to the anthropological gaze must be subject to close questioning and form part of the narrative of any anthropological study. While the primary concern of this study is to examine the cultural practices of boatmen and their interactions with their immediate social environment within a specific, concrete place; it also seeks to shed light on some of the wider historical and social forces that have produced and reproduced Banaras as a sacred place, in which for many observers, boatmen and their vocation seem almost as eternal as the city itself.

Encounters with Banaras and the Boatmen

Between 1992 and 2007 I visited Banaras several times in different capacities. Initially as a young ‘traveller’ fresh out of my Israeli (compulsory) military service, thereafter as a tour-guide and finally as an anthropologist in November 2001. Although it felt strange to visit Varanasi, or Banaras as the city is popularly called, wearing the anthropologist’s hat, neither India, nor Banaras were unfamiliar terrain for me.¹ I had been to the city less than one year before (January/February 2001),

1 The popular names of the city are Varanasi and Banaras. The first derives from the geographical space marking the boundaries of the city between the Varuna River, which joins the Ganga to the north and the Assi River, nowadays more of a *nala* (drain), to the south. While Varanasi is the official name of the city, the name Banaras (a historical corruption of the Pali version ‘Banarasi’) continues to be a popularly used name in every day life (Eck 1983, 26). During Muslim and British rule the city was known as Benares. To avoid confusion, I use the names according to the historical period. That is, the name

when, as part of a preliminary research trip, I combined a visit to the Kumbh Mela in Allahabad with a month's stay in Banaras.² It was on that trip that I decided to research the boatmen of the city. Banaras was extremely busy in the post-Kumbh period, with multitudes of pilgrims and tourists arriving in the city from Allahabad. Pilgrims came to pay their respects to the visiting Sadhus (holy men) camping on the ghats (landing steps leading to the river). Within this flood of people the boatmen were a conspicuous feature on the riverscape, ferrying passengers back and forth throughout the day. I began to develop an interest in the boatmen and their livelihood, and upon returning to Australia searched for literature on this group of people. To my surprise, I found that, despite Banaras being one of the most researched cities in India (after the major port cities and Delhi), very little had been written on the boatman community. The only information about the boatmen I found was in colonial archives, where the boatmen are documented under the broader category of the Mallah or Nishad caste.³

Searching through photos my wife and I had taken on our trips to India, we found several that we had taken on a boat in Banaras. As I began telling people about my project, it seemed that anyone who had been to the city had enjoyed a boat ride and had a story to tell. Such stories further stimulated my interest in the boatmen, particularly their encounters with tourists.

Arriving in Banaras later that year to begin fieldwork, I chose Assi ghat at the southern edge of the city to begin my research. This was done for mainly practical reasons related to my initial research question: What does it mean to be a boatman in Banaras? My question therefore restricted the study to the geographical location in which the boatmen work: the riverscape of Banaras.⁴ However, this spatial definition was too broad for my research capacity. Banaras is located on

Benares is mainly used in the first chapter, which examines the Mallahs under colonial rule, while Varanasi and Banaras are used interchangeably throughout the book, according to who uses the name and in what context. It is worth noting another well known name for the city, Kashi (the luminous), which is found in the traditional literature (*mahatmya*). For a detailed examination of the city's names, see Eck (1983).

2 The Kumbh Mela is the largest religious gathering in India, occurring every three years, where pilgrims gather near the confluence of sacred rivers to perform ritual ablutions (*snan*).

3 Later in my research I came across one published article specifically focussing on the Mallahs (as a caste) in the Census, see Tiwary (2001). As for material on the boatmen of Varanasi, Katz (1993) looks at the role the boatmen of Assi ghat play in the overall social structure of the Assi neighbourhood and local rituals. Vidyarthi et al. (1979) offer a structural-functionalist account of the boatmen as part of the ritual ecology of Banaras, while Parry's (1994) incisive ethnographic study, *Death in Banaras*, provides some useful details on the role of boatmen in the death industry of Banaras.

4 By riverscape I mean the environment encompassing the ghats on the city side, the river and the other (eastern) side of the river. Along with the physical characteristics of the riverscape, I am also concerned with the social, cultural, economic and symbolic aspects within this space.

the western banks of the River Ganga.⁵ There are about 80 ghats along a seven kilometre stretch of river. There are roughly 2000 boatmen and, according to my count, 800 boats in Banaras (the majority being rowboats, with 80 motorboats and 20 houseboats). This meant further limiting my initial investigation to a smaller space and fewer people.

Assi ghat is considered one of the major ghats in the city both on account of its religious importance and physical location. The ghat proved to be a good choice; it was close to where I lived; it was easily accessible by road and had about 40 boatmen plying their trade at any given time, a number that allowed me to get to know most of them personally and learn about their work and lives. I decided to first familiarize myself with this ghat and its boatman community and later venture to other ghats to compare and contrast my findings. I stayed for a period of one year over two visits between 2001 and 2003, and returned for additional shorter periods in 2005 and 2006. During this time I observed and participated in a variety of community events, as well as boating trips with pilgrims and tourists. Most of my initial conversations and interviews were informally conducted around the tea stalls dotting the ghats. In addition, I spoke with various ghat functionaries including priests (*pandas*), washermen (*dhobis*), buffalo herders (*Yadavs*) and local shopkeepers. I soon discovered that one of the best places for me to conduct in-depth interviews with individual boatmen was, in fact, on their boats, where they seemed freer of the pressures of the ghat environment. In addition, I collected oral histories and written documentation, such as press releases, lawsuits and archival material from the colonial period. My close association with the boatmen meant I did not have much contact with local police officers or other state officials whose relationships with the boatmen were generally quite tense, hence the story told here is one that emerges mostly from the boatmen's perspective as I understood it.

Two weeks into my research on Assi ghat I established a daily routine. Waking at dawn, I would walk down to the ghat for a cup (or more precisely several cups) of strong, sweet tea (*chai*), to observe and chat with the boatmen I had met. I would then return to my guest house for breakfast, practice Hindi, and write my field notes, which at that point mainly consisted of observations. At around four in the afternoon as the heat began to wane, I would return to the ghat for more observations and cups of tea.

Mornings and evenings are the most active times on the ghats. During the months of October and November, Assi ghat booms with ritual activities associated with the sacred month of Kartik.⁶ At the break of dawn local women arrive at the ghat with baskets containing various ritual items. They sit in circles and perform a series of rituals, which involves fashioning idols out of Ganga *mitti* (sacred Ganga

5 The anglicized name for Ganga – the River Ganges – is primarily employed in the book when examining the context of British rule. Otherwise, I mostly use the name Ganga, as the river is popularly known.

6 On the festivities involved in the month of Kartik, see Pintchman (2005).

clay), gossiping and singing devotional songs. Alongside these women are the regulars; local residents who come to the ghat daily to practice ritual ablutions. Foreign tourists also visit the ghats in these early morning hours, drinking tea, and taking boat rides to view the majestic vista of the riverscape as it unfolds at sunrise. The evenings are more serene. Locals and tourists generally come to escape the heat and pollution of the city and relax in the spacious and pleasant ghat environment. Not surprisingly therefore, I found that the mornings and evenings were the peak times during which the boatmen busily scouted for potential passengers (*savaris*).

During my first two weeks in the field I occupied myself by observing and writing down the various activities on the ghat in my little notebook. Many of the boatmen took a keen interest in my research and offered to help. They alerted me to the fact that their boats bore the marks of the auspicious season; a time when most boatmen repaint and perform *puja* (worship) for their boats. I began to 'participate' as well as observe, by helping a young boatman named Amit, who later became a key informant, to paint his boat. Thus, my first two weeks in the field were marked by unperturbed observations and a little participation. At the beginning of the third week, however, I made my first dreadful mistake, which ultimately proved to be one of the most meaningful moments of my research.⁷

The incident occurred during the festival of Diwali (15 November, 2001). In the evening the ghat was particularly hectic with people arriving to celebrate the festival. The explosions of fire crackers and small bombs added to the electric atmosphere. As I sat on the steps drinking tea at Lakshmi's small chai stall, Amit arrived, greeting me in the traditional way: 'Diwali mubarak ho' (Diwali greetings), to which I replied in kind. We went down to the water's edge to avoid the noise, and as we were talking a group of foreign tourists approached us. One of them, who must have heard me speaking Hindi and assumed I knew a little more than the average tourist, asked me if I could recommend a big boat for him and his group of friends. I immediately suggested they hire Amit's boat, adding that he was a very knowledgeable guide as well. What I failed to notice, however, was that some members of the group were already negotiating a price with another boatman called Jagdish. I immediately knew that I had overstepped some line. A fierce argument developed between the two boatmen and eventually the tourists left on Amit's boat. Jagdish then turned to me with his green eyes blazing, 'Assi, you should not have done this, these people were mine! And you just gave them to Amit'. Holding my two hands together in a *namaste* gesture, I apologized, trying to explain my ignorance. Jagdish stared at me irately and walked away. That night I could not sleep, rehearsing the unfortunate incident in my mind and thinking of the grave consequences this could have on my future research and relationships with the boatmen. The following day I felt very anxious about appearing on the

7 Such mistakes are, of course, a common feature of most ethnographic research. Still, knowing this does not in anyway diminish the emotional angst the follows. On productive, but anxiety ridden mistakes during fieldwork, see for example, Gold (1988).

ghat. When I did eventually go there in the evening, however, nothing seemed to have changed, and even Jagdish greeted me with a *namaste* as if nothing had happened.

A Productive Mistake

There are a number of things to be said about this incident, but I shall limit myself here to reflecting on how this incident signalled my 'entry into the field'. At the immediate level, the incident affected my own conduct on the ghat. I was careful thereafter not to involve myself in any tourist-boatman transactions. 'My mistake' offered me a first glimpse into the complex ghat dynamics of the boatmen's livelihood. I became aware that there was a subtle, yet significant socio-economic system operating on the ghat, and a precarious one too, since even a minor and 'ignorant' intrusion like mine could lead to an explosive and contentious outcome. Moreover, I soon discovered that competition, occasionally resulting in violent disputes over passengers, is common among the boatmen of Assi ghat, an issue I explore in Chapter 3.

More generally, this incident also marked a shift in my own status and identity – from tourist to anthropologist-cum-tourist. Upon reflection, it seems all the more obvious to me that the boatmen understood better than I did the ramifications of my long term presence on their livelihoods. They knew that if I intended to stay for an extended period on the ghat I must learn the rules of conduct, and one rule was clear: do not interfere in the work system. My ignorance signalled a turning point, because, as was indicated by the boatmen, I no longer had the 'privileges' of a fleeting tourist. Rather I had to learn their system and act within it – a mark of inclusion.

Such considerations were not only significant in relation to my conduct in the field, but also in relation to my methodology and the trajectory of my overall research interests. It raised important issues concerning social research in general and what Giddens (1984, 284–285) calls the principle of the 'double hermeneutic', that is, the two frameworks of meaning that are involved in any empirical inquiry into what it means to be an 'other'. The first relates to the study of 'phenomena which are already constituted as meaningful' by the actors themselves. In other words, this incident marked my 'entry into the field' in the sense that it was at this point that I began 'to know what actors already know, and have to know, to "go on" with their daily activities in social life' (Giddens 1984, 284). In order to move forward in my endeavour I had to learn about the boatmen's work system, how it operates in their everyday lives, and what meanings they ascribe to their occupation. This generated further questions regarding the broader work system that operates across the riverfront and how it structures the social and economic interactions amongst boatmen within specific ghats and across the riverfront.

The second framework of meaning according to Giddens' principle of the double hermeneutic concerns the 'second order' sociological concepts employed by the researcher to understand and interpret the research results (Giddens 1984, 284). As

this incident alerted me to the fierce competition amongst boatmen over resources (passengers), and the difficulties they face in their attempts to maintain and protect their livelihood in the rapidly changing environment of the riverscape, I looked to broad theoretical discussions on power relations, dominance, and the 'relations of actions and structure' (Giddens 1984, 283) as useful interpretive frameworks for conceptualizing my research project.⁸ More specifically, the anthropological history of India by Bernard Cohn (1998 [1987]), the scholarship of the Subaltern Studies School, and James Scott's (1985; 1990) ethnographic history detailing everyday forms of resistance have been sources of inspiration for me. The relevant aspects of these theoretical frameworks are elaborated on throughout this book. Here, I shall limit myself to a few general remarks in relation to their views of power and resistance and my own theoretical orientations.

Theoretical Orientations

Anthropological studies of Hindu civilization have drawn considerably upon research done in the early 1950s on village India, the primary aim of which was to analyze and explain the process of social change in Indian society. The two most influential theories which emerged from this fertile period were M.N. Srinivas' concept of Sanskritization and Redfield's model of Great and Little Traditions, which posited the existence of an overarching Sanskritic tradition associated with certain pan-Indian beliefs, practices, myths, deities and pilgrimage centres. Both theories have been widely criticized,⁹ not least because empirically it is difficult to determine what constitutes a 'great tradition' (Fuller 1992, 25–27). Nonetheless, as I show in this study, pan-Hindu beliefs, symbols and myths continue to figure on a discursive level. They play a prominent part within the indigenous framework where local actors employ such symbols and myths to assert their rights in everyday practice, creatively resisting domination and subordination. In the cases I present, the boatmen refer to such pan-Hindu texts and myths as a source of authority for their claim to respectable social status as well as to challenge ideological domination and, more importantly, to affirm their legitimacy to conduct rituals

8 Giddens' (1984) theory of 'structuration' is an important attempt to bridge the structure/agency divide. Similarly, Bourdieu (1982) offered an equally influential model that emphasized conceptions of praxis as central to our understanding of cultural change and the interplay between individual and collective. Others, like Barth (1969), proposed a way around the structure/agency impasse by suggesting a generative approach to account for social change, which is sensitive to how traditions (ideas, events, rituals) work as a process of communicative creativity.

9 The concept of Sanskritization has been subject to much debate. For our purpose it is worth mentioning Hardiman's (1984) criticism of the concept, in which he points out that low castes' selective appropriation of higher caste values, symbols and modes of behaviour must be contextualized within a historical framework acknowledging the dynamic nature of the caste system, which is always informed by power relations.

in the sacred space of the ghats, often considered the exclusive jurisdiction of Brahmin priests (see Chapter 4).¹⁰

Nevertheless, the strategy of looking at peasant life and the local arena as an entry point into understanding Indian society has remained. In the early 1980s the Subaltern Studies project was launched and peasant society continued to be the focus of inquiry.¹¹ This time, however, the idea of writing history from below provided both a framework and motivating force for re-examining the ‘inadequacy of elitist historiography’ (Guha 1982, 2). The examination of the ‘privileged discourse’ produced in the authoritative accounts of the elites or the experts (e.g., colonial anthropologist or nationalist historian) was counterbalanced by the close attention given to the popular ‘archive’ (Pandey 2000, 284). Thus, the researcher could reveal not only the power relations embedded in the interaction between colonizer/colonized, dominant/dominated, but also the ‘presence of other pasts’ (Pandey 2000, 282). These alternative pasts or fragmented histories were often identified by members of the Subaltern Studies School in multiple sites, institutions and activities not readily observed in homogenizing historical narratives.

According to Partha Chatterjee (1993, 171), this critical reading of historical records offered access into the ways in which power and knowledge was exerted over the oppressed, as well as insight into the subaltern consciousness. The aim was to uncover the voice of the subalterns as ‘the people on their own, that is, independently of the elite to the making and development of this [Indian] nationalism’ (Guha 1982, 2). To do so, the Subaltern Studies project highlighted conflict and subaltern ‘resistance to elite domination’ (Guha, 5). The project sought a careful de-construction of the elite grand narratives that was attentive to oral histories, myths, rumours and ritual practices; which it conceived as spaces where the subaltern voice could be heard and recognized, independent of elite domination.¹² Thus, the Subaltern Studies project focused on the experience, consciousness and historical agency of marginalized people at the grassroots of society.

However, the obsessive emphasis of the project on conflict, power relations and a separate subaltern sphere has not escaped criticism.¹³ Indeed it has been suggested that some members of the Subaltern Studies collective were given to a dichotomous view of subaltern/elite relations, bordering on the essentialist and

10 Redfield’s model came under scrutiny from various scholars across different disciplines. It seems that the model was especially problematic for anthropologists, as it was said to reduce local practices to the determination of the static, text based, authoritative Great Tradition. See, for example, Lukens-Bull (1999) and van der Veer (1988).

11 The Subaltern Studies project is a complex and varied one. In this book I am mainly concerned with the early volumes of the project, which were almost entirely dedicated to examining peasant struggles and resistance.

12 See, for example, Arnold (1984); Hardiman (1982); Pandey (1983).

13 The debate around these issues has been well drawn out in the recent publication of two edited books: see N. Chaturvedi (2000, ed.) and Ludden (2002, ed.).

ahistorical (Gupta 1985; O'Hanlon 2002). For example, in his engaging analysis of the Santal rebellion of 1855, project founder Ranajit Guha (1983) argues that both colonial and nationalist historiography explain subaltern insurgency in a way that 'amounts to an act of appropriation which excludes the rebel as the conscious subject of his own history and incorporates the latter as only a contingent element in another history with another subject' (Guha 1983, 23). He then goes on to argue that such misleading accounts served to conceal what was the actual essence of subaltern mentality – its religiosity. By uncovering religion as the true and authentic characteristic of the peasant consciousness and resistance, Guha is able to fulfil his stated aim and invest the subaltern with an agency of his own, rather than simply accept elite discourse, which he suggests, represented the rebels as either irrational fanatics or mere passive followers of a secularized leadership (Guha 1983, 24–37). In trying to redress the balance and give voice to underprivileged and hitherto voiceless groups, however, and by declaring religion as the underlying meaning behind subaltern political will, Guha himself reproduces an essentialized or 'ethicized', to use Gupta's (1985: 9–10) term, view of peasant society. Representing elite historiography as biased and contrived implies that the popular domain is the sole repository of what is authentic and original (see also Hansen 1997). In fact, subaltern narratives and identities are equally mediated and constructed; all we can do is attempt to bring to light such constructions and uncover the meanings behind the everyday practices and beliefs of the subordinated groups in society.¹⁴

In a similar vein, Dipesh Chakrabarty's (1983) discussion of the conditions of Calcutta jute mill workers – while it clearly illuminated the mechanisms and techniques of power and domination exercised by Bengali managerial elites and the colonial state over Calcutta's migrant ex-peasant work force – lacks an equally sophisticated examination of the peasant workers' culture, religious practices and actions. Instead, Chakrabarty briefly tells the reader that the working class was characterized by 'a pre-capitalist culture with a strong emphasis on religion, community, kinship, language and other primordial loyalties' (1983, 208). This uncritical characterization of subaltern culture as based on fixed categories (such as 'community' or 'religion') seems to overlook the possibility of heterogeneity, change and conflict within the subaltern group itself (O'Hanlon 2002, 164–166). Moreover, by simply abstracting the category of subaltern from the complexity of social relations, we are once again restricted by the limitations of structural dichotomies,¹⁵ as peasant cultural identity remains distinct and timeless. In fact, 'primordial' bonds and other cultural systems are never static; rather they

14 This was later recognized by members of the Subaltern Studies group itself; see, for example, Pandey (2000).

15 As Copper (2002, 258) argues an analysis that relies on dichotomies, such as elite/subaltern colonizer/colonized, may ultimately limit 'the search for precise ways in which power is deployed and ways in which power is engaged, contested, deflected and appropriated'.

are informed by dynamic social processes, generated both within and outside communities.¹⁶

Foregrounding agency and resistance of subordinate groups is also a central concern in the influential work of James Scott. Like the cultural historians of the Subaltern Studies project, Scott too is sensitive to the socially constructed nature of archival material, and pays close attention to the culturally specific structures of expectations underpinning relations of domination.¹⁷ While Scott's initial investigation of *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* sought to emphasize the cultural or subjective dimension of peasant rebellions, in his subsequent work, *Weapons of the Weak*, he shifts his attention to what he deems are much more prevalent, but less evident forms of protest employed by subordinated groups. In this fascinating ethnographic study of a Malaysian village, Scott expands our definition of resistance beyond large scale, public and organized acts of resistance, by focusing his analytical lens on the level of everyday life, where he identifies the continuous, covert, undeclared struggle of the poor against various (material and symbolic) forms of domination exercised by the rich. Scott reveals an arsenal of 'unconventional' weapons of the weak, which he argues, 'serves as the means by which subordinates manifest their class interests' (Scott 1989, 5). These mostly individual strategies of resistance include acts such as arson, foot dragging, false compliance, minor sabotage, chicanery, petty pilferage and many more. Scott is thus able to illuminate the subversive discourse and practice of subordinate groups, which despite their apparent compliance, rarely buy into or internalize the norms and definitions imposed by elite ideology:

By reference to the culture that peasant fashion from their experience – their “offstage” comments and conversations, their proverbs, folksongs, and history, legends, jokes, language ritual and religion – it should be possible to determine to what degree, and in what ways, peasant actually accept the social order propagated by the elites' (Scott 1985, 41).¹⁸

Scott couches his argument in performative terms (i.e., of on/offstage) which neatly delineate the coherent discourses and practices of rich and poor respectively. Accordingly, the 'offstage' is a guarded, autonomous arena of the poor, where one

16 However, some members of the Subaltern Studies collective have shown a greater appreciation of these issues, see, for example, Amin (1984); Arnold (1984); Pandey (1984).

17 For Scott, if one is to understand the nature of popular rebellion, it is imperative to gain an appreciation of the 'emic' perspective of peasants, so that his main concern becomes one of identifying a peasant moral economy, based on 'their notion of economic injustice and their working definition of exploitation' (1976, 2).

18 It is in this context that the notion of 'little traditions' is revived, but this time rather than an adulterated version of the normative tradition; it is conceived as the 'offstage', where dissident culture and subversive activities are found.

can identify a vibrant culture of resistance to the routine oppression of the rich and dominant.

Scott's stress on the everyday life of subordinate people provides excellent insights into the behavior and subjectivity of subordinate groups, and allows him to pinpoint the weaknesses of more formal Marxist analysis. Nonetheless, his own critique of Gramsci's notion of hegemony is not immune from some of the same failings. As Mitchell (1990) points out, Scott's emphasis on the consensual effects of hegemony, where the ideological position of the dominant classes produces harmony and unanimity, is itself reductive, leading Scott to celebrate 'everyday resistance' as an oppositional and autonomous force undermining prevailing ideologies. Gramsci's formulation of hegemony, however, is a more complex and nuanced one, as Williams (1986) carefully observes. Hegemony does not simply mean the subordinate classes imbibing the ideas, values and beliefs propagated by the elites by means of manipulation and indoctrination. Rather, as Williams recovers it, hegemony is 'a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living... It is lived systems of meaning and values – constitutive and constituting... continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all of its own... it is never either total or exclusive' (1986, 110–113). This is very much in line with Foucault's (1998, 94–96) concept of power, as outside the prerogative of any one group, mechanism or institution, generating a plurality of resistances, which 'includes the dominant *and* the dominated within its circuits' (Hall 2001, 239).

This is related to what several scholars have identified as the class bias in Scott's analysis of resistance, failing to consider other equally important elements of social identity and inequality, such as gender, age, kinship relations and ethnicity (Ortner 1995; Hart 1991; Tsing 1993). Let me provide a brief example to illustrate the point. The following chapters show that the majority of boatmen are acutely aware of what they perceive as their systematic exploitation by the state, as well as the emerging opportunities and potential threats posed by market economy and outside competition to their livelihood. One of the ways in which boatmen have attempted to cope with such challenges is by formalizing their 'traditional' work system across the riverfront. But while such a strategy seems prudent to some, other members of the boatman community have resisted this standardizing project, that to succeed needs broad community consensus. This, I argue, is due to the implications such a formalization has for kinship ties, territorial boundaries, customary practices, status considerations and power relations within the community itself. My argument, then, is that for the concept of resistance to retain its analytical utility, it is pertinent to recognize that subalterns hold overlapping, and sometimes contradictory identities, anchored in concrete settings, where social actors are simultaneously powerful and powerless; unitary and fragmented (Mittelman & Chin 2005, 23). A close examination of the 'shared tradition' of subordinated groups such as boatmen, based on common values, customs, kinship relations and work practices must not be simply conceived as 'given' structures or institutions that either inhibit or enable resistance. Rather, as

Mitchell (1990) is right to suggest, these are themselves ‘mechanisms of power’ that shape and transform meaning, practices and identities, and should be analyzed as such to reveal ‘the means in which relations of dependence and exploitation disguise themselves’ (1990, 557). Such a perspective must therefore attend to these culturally specific mechanisms of power, which may at once challenge existing authority structures and notions of hierarchy, while reproducing them at the same time. These ambiguities and contradictions cannot be adequately captured within the binary oppositions of onstage/offstage, resistance and domination, but rather necessitate an examination of the dynamic process involved in the production, circulation, negotiation and contestation of meaning in everyday life (Kondo 1990; Reed Danhey 1993).

The Subaltern Studies School method of reading standardized elite historiography ‘against the grain’ provides valuable insights into the subjectivity and agency of the subaltern classes as active participants in South Asian history and society (Raheja & Gold 1994). Likewise, Scott’s work remains highly suggestive because of its potential for unravelling the practices and meanings underpinning the day-to-day struggles of ordinary people, who seek to secure their livelihoods and enhance their social status. Such considerations have informed my own ethnographic study of the boatmen, where their unique position in Banaras’ political and ritual economy exposes them to the forefront of social change and transformation in unpredictable and complicated ways. I argue that in order to fully appreciate the complexities of India’s social structure, we must critically examine subaltern identity, not as a single category of experience, but rather as one that accommodates multiple and sometimes competing facets of identity and difference. Boatmen are exposed to and operate within a wide range of forces and social relationships, in which traditional authority structures and state policies play a significant role. Resistance and non-conformity are best understood as oppositional strategies designed to challenge particular forms of oppression, rather than emerging out of an authentic experience, fixed position or autonomous social site (Gal 1995; Moore 1998).

Boatmen have historically been a marginalized community. They are subalterns in the sense that they have limited access to modern institutions, including education, public services and political representation. They experience domination not only under postcolonial state power, but also under traditional authority and the ideological system of caste. In other words, boatmen are disadvantaged in both ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ terms.

The Day-to-Day Reality of the Boatmen’s Lives

The Boatmen’s marginality also stems from their material conditions. The majority of boatmen experience poverty in their day-to-day lives. A brief sketch of the domestic arrangements of boatmen will illustrate the point. As mentioned, the number of boatmen working regularly on the riverfront is approximately 2000,

with most residing near the ghats on which they work. Nowadays, because of rising rental prices on the riverfront itself, some boatmen are being forced to move further inland. The majority of boatmen live with their extended families and their houses are generally no more than one or two cramped rooms (3 by 3 metres). Due to family size, which is generally too large to be accommodated in such small quarters, many young boatmen choose to sleep on their boats or in neighbourhood temples. It is important to emphasize that the overwhelming majority of boatmen lead a hand-to-mouth existence. This is partly because of the seasonal nature of their work. Apart from those boatmen who work on the central ghats, most boatmen earn very little during the monsoon months, when few tourists or pilgrims visit Banaras. During these difficult months some rely on their savings, while others resort to casual (manual) work to make ends meet.

Most households have only very basic necessities, with no running water and erratic electricity (usually 'stolen', that is, illegally sourced from wealthier neighbours). Their diet is basic, mostly vegetarian with fish served on special occasions. Boatmen generally marry within their own caste (Mallah/Nishad), and while all boatmen belong to the Mallah caste (*jati*), not all Mallahs are boatmen. In fact, the majority of Mallahs in Banaras are engaged in occupations not connected to the river economy. According to boatmen, however, marriage is no longer clan-bound and they marry across these sub groups. As such, their marriage networks are becoming increasingly wider in geographical terms. Whether a prospective wife comes from a boatman family or not, or a different locale or occupational group is unimportant. What matters, as the boatmen and their mothers told me, is that the prospective wife belongs to a 'good' and 'respected' family and is able to provide the dowry required.¹⁹ This is not to say that marriage into a prosperous boatman family from another ghat is not beneficial or desired, but it is infrequent due mainly to practical reasons, such as the boatmen being comparatively few, while the Mallahs overall are numerous and span the entire Uttar Pradesh and Bihar regions.

Education among the older generation is uncommon and most are illiterate. Among the younger boatmen, however, the majority have primary schooling (up to 5th standard) and basic reading and writing skills. Not surprisingly, therefore, the prospect for skilled/qualified employment is slight. Moreover, while many boatmen claim they want their children to be educated and to attain such qualified work (preferably government jobs, which provide pensions and benefits), the socio-economic reality of everyday life, as well as caste discrimination, prevents them from achieving such goals and, perhaps, the general lack of conditioning to gain an education. Boatmen are an underprivileged and subordinate group and as such their structural and material position constrains their lives and shapes their

19 A 'good family' is a somewhat vague definition, but as far as I could gauge it broadly means that the prospective wife's family has a respectable standing in the community, similar socio-economic status and that the woman is well mannered, does not work outside the household, is preferably educated (primary schooling) and fair skinned.

stories/narratives (Pandey 2000, 288). In other words, boatmen do not possess the assets that higher status, educated and credentialed people do, which makes their predicament rather different from that of local middle class elites, for example. For boatmen, their major assets are their expertise and skills as boatmen, in a particular place where these are needed.

This book examines the boatmen's labour patterns and resistance practices as they transpire on the River Ganga. It examines their social conditions and the systematic marginalization and discrimination they experience in their everyday lives. The book does not, however, explore the domestic sphere of the boatmen's lives or the role of women in the community.²⁰ This is because, firstly, as a male I have very little access to female members of the community, and secondly because there are no women who ply boats: boating is a gendered occupation.²¹ Likewise, in this book I am not concerned with issues surrounding masculinity, the body and consumption and how these are related to identity construction (see Alter 1992; Mehta 1997). I am not suggesting that such issues are irrelevant to the study of the boatmen's lives and livelihood. Rather, my own ethnographic study focuses on a specific aspect of the boatmen's lives – their work – and the relationship between occupation and identity. I am interested in the boatman community as it is formed over time in work relations. Because 'work' here is in the public sphere, it directly involves relations with institutions and individuals outside the immediate community. One of the most influential of 'outside' institutions affecting the boatman community has been and is the state.

Contours of the Book

The first two chapters examine the encounter between boatmen and the modern colonial and postcolonial state. Chapter 1 historically contextualizes the boatmen, discussing the construction of the Mallah caste under colonial rule, offering critical insights into the workings of the colonial state and its discursive principles. It discusses the implications of such policies and practices for the historical and social construction of a unified Mallah caste and the possibility of dissent and resistance under such restrictive conditions. Chapter 2 focuses on the encounter between boatmen and the modern Indian state at the local level. It examines the response and reactions of the boatman community to state policies and an

20 On women contesting hegemonic representations and exercising agency within what is largely considered a male dominated environment in North India, see Pintcham (2005); Moore, E (1998); Raheja & Gold (1994). Nita Kumar's (1988) analysis of the world of the artisans of Banaras remains one of the most nuanced interrogations of social categories such as gender, work and popular cultural practice. For a more psychologically oriented analysis of male dominance in Banaras, see Derne (1995).

21 By boating I am referring to an activity that involves the regular use of boats, such as fishing, carrying cargo and sightseeing.

environmental development scheme, known as the Ganga Action Plan, which effectively deprived the boatmen of their traditional rights to fish and cultivate on the riverbeds. The chapter examines the boatman community's interpretation and experience of modernity and the development of a 'marginalized' boatman identity, stressing poverty, oppression, and exclusion.

Chapter 3 describes the fascinating work system used by boatmen along the riverfront of Banaras. It reveals a unique and sophisticated socio-economic system, which enables the boatmen to regulate space, mitigate conflict and retain their monopoly over the boating industry in the city. Operating within a bustling and commercially competitive pilgrimage and tourism environment, this innovative system works as a 'moral economy', providing an economic safety net for boatmen and preventing the modern state, local actors and commercial entrepreneurs from infringing on their livelihood. The critical exploration into the workings of space through social practice in this chapter also reveals tension and competition from within the boatman community itself, highlighting both institutionalized and more diffuse forms of resistance.

Chapter 4 examines the role of boatmen as ritual specialists within the ritual economy of Banaras and their devotional relationship with the River Ganga. It discusses how the boatmen invoke caste identity, myth and other cultural symbols to contest Brahminical authority and assert their rights to conduct rituals and maintain control over sacred space. Chapter 5 looks at the relationship between the boatmen and those with whom they interact in their daily lives: pilgrims, domestic tourists and foreign tourists. I examine how the subaltern boatmen exercise agency within what is essentially an asymmetrical power relation, by deploying a range of innovative and calculated strategies to control and influence tourists and pilgrims arriving at the riverfront. It is on an interpersonal level that the dominant tourist discourse emerging from First World countries is often creatively appropriated, subverted and manipulated by marginal groups, such as the boatmen, to further their own economic and social interests. The existence of uneven power relations does not necessarily entail the subordination and passivity of the subaltern 'other'.

The concluding chapter offers further discussion on resistance, particularly in relation to the question of when and under what circumstances subaltern groups, such as the boatmen, switch between everyday modes of resistance to more overt and systematic confrontation. Throughout the book I argue for the need to leave aside binary assumptions implicit in studies of resistance, in favour of a more nuanced approach which is attentive to the inherent ambiguities and complexities involved in the practice of resistance. Such an approach enables us to emphasize the plural articulation of resistance in 'everyday' life, which may, according to the context, serve to reproduce, sustain, subvert and naturalize religious and cultural ideologies. By drawing on ethnographic material about the boatmen of Banaras, an analysis of the multifaceted nature of subaltern identity serves to highlight the place of appropriation, innovation and accommodation as alternative forms of resistance operating within existing structures of power. Furthermore, it is only

when we consider extraneous forces (e.g., caste uplift movements, globalization) as well as ongoing politics within the subaltern community itself that we can better understand social change and the changing nature of domination in contemporary India. A scrutiny of these changes is essential for our appreciation of the complex dynamics involved in the construction of subaltern communities all over India and their attempt to make meaning and sense of their lives within the constraints of a rapidly changing socio-economic order.