

Article



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Invisible Neighbors: Metaphysical Members of Society in Vārāṇasī, India

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Abstract | The city of Vārāṇasī, north India, buzzes with networks. Arguably the oldest inhabited city in the world and Hinduism's most sacred pilgrimage destination, contemporary social networks (?) are interwoven with historical and religious narrative. In fact, in this densely populated and ancient space it is imperative not only to know one's extended family, one's community, and one's history, but also the history of the city more broadly, the stories that are mapped onto it, and all the neighbors — both visible and invisible — one might encounter or call upon within the city's sacred territory. This essay explores the role of invisible or metaphysical neighbors who are understood to inhabit Vārāṇasī, and who are regularly engaged by the city's residents. While some were residents who became transhistorical, and others have descended from myth to dwell in the sacred city, the ability to live well and flourish in Vārāṇasī relies upon participation in social networks that extend to members beyond the contemporary and the mundane.

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Man is by nature a social animal...Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god.

- Aristotle, *Politics*¹

Since we're together, we might as well say: Would you be mine, could you be mine, won't you be my neighbor?

- Fred Rogers

Aristotle's words illustrate the long-standing recognition of the importance of socialization to human experience. They also reflect the impression that friendship is a human phenomenon, not something of either beasts or gods, the proliferation of 'unexpected friends' calendars and websites documenting inter-species an-

imal affinities notwithstanding. I doubt positing general contemporary relevance of this assertion would be controversial: humans are indeed social creatures, and our physical and emotional flourishing is grounded in no small way in our networks of 'friends,' which can be conceived broadly as comprising family members, pillars of our communities, partners, coworkers, buddies, and neighbors.² This essay presents a different understanding of the range of potential members of these friend-networks, taking as a case study the social topography of Vārāṇasī, a predominantly Hindu sacred city in north India. There, supra-historical and metaphysical persons are actively and effectively included within these networks. Their exclusion would constitute a rift, an error, and an impediment to the overall flourishing and wellbeing of the residents of this city and similar understandings of society and sociability. Though terms that translate to *deity* can be

applied to all the characters considered here, they are not of a kind, and do not necessarily share attributes Abrahamic, monotheistic influences lead us to expect of a God.³ I will therefore refer to these characters categorically as *invisible neighbors*.⁴

An Indian Social Context

Studies suggest that we have a fundamental, biological, human capacity and need for socialization.⁵ As with much of the human condition, how this plays out is affected by context. While socialization is important for everyone's survival and happiness, it might be particularly crucial in the remarkably intense social landscape of India. In order to discuss the lionized importance of social activity in India and contextualize the recognition of invisible neighbors in these Indian tableaux, we can identify three aspects which distinguish social worlds in Northern India from what we might generally expect in Euro-American contexts: size, immediacy, and inclusion.

Firstly, in the city of Vārāṇasī, it is common to live near your extended family, in an area where your family's social ties stretch back many generations. This populous and multi-generational imbrication leads to extensive and detailed social networks, a fact that is reflected in Hindi vocabulary: there are specific terms for maternal and paternal grandparents (maternal grandmother is *nānī*, paternal grandmother is *dādī*), and for in-laws depending on whom they married and what connections link you to them in your own family (father's elder brother's wife is *tāī*, father's younger brother's wife is *cācī*). Members of the wider community are also specifically identified and placed, with familial terms such as Auntie and Uncle indicating ties that are all but integrated into the filial taxonomy.

Secondly, this extensive network is immediately noticeable and often immediately referenced. Even if you don't know the specific relationship between two people, seeing them together will tell you a lot: hierarchies are overt and obvious, and regularly enacted. It's also common to discuss social connections at length when meeting someone in an effort to place their social map in relation to one's own.

— *Where do you live? With whom do you study?
Whom are you off to visit right now?*

These questions can lead to a connective “hit” —

— *Oh, you live in that galī in that neighborhood?*

My electrician is the brother of the vegetable vendor at the corner near your house, next to the Hanumān temple. You know them both? Ah!

We have now truly made one another's acquaintance.

Additionally, in a context where infrastructure is often obscured or absent, getting things done is largely a matter of whom you know. Filing official paperwork, finding an apartment, or even booking a ride to the airport can all be a matter of reaching out for information and availability through your evident, analog network. Cumulatively, these two aspects show that functioning and flourishing in Vārāṇasī requires familiarity and active engagement with an extensive and detailed social network.

The third distinguishing aspect is less immediately observable in Euro-American social contexts: the presence of supernatural or metaphysical persons in one's social network. These invisible neighbors are not all of a kind, and an investigation of a few types, and their presence in Vārāṇasī, will allow us to think with specificity about the social role of these characters.

Knowing your Neighbors

I've lived in Vārāṇasī for about two and a half years. Each time I return, I live in the same area, and am able to maintain and expand my social networks. It didn't take long for me to realize that I depended on my friends to navigate the city and conduct my research. In order to participate in and benefit from local society, I needed to know far more than just my immediate neighbors. For example, I soon learned where the chief priest of Saṅkaṭ Mocan, one of the city's most visited temples, lived. I learned that his family's holdings included most of Tulsī Ghāt,⁶ even the massive clean Gaṅgā⁷ project complex. I learned who had married into the family, and how these spouses were connected to other families and places. But I also learned about Tulsīdās, after whom Tulsī Ghāt is named.

Tulsīdās is an historical figure (c.1543-1623), and is best known for his poetic masterwork the Rāmcarit-mānas: a vernacular retelling of the Rāmāyaṇa, the epic account of the life and exploits of the God-king Rāma. Incorporating locally resonant themes such as

tolerance of diversity into a masterpiece of high literature composed in Avadhī, a vernacular dialect of Hindi, Tulsīdās is a local hero whose biography has developed its own mythos. It is said that he used to leave his home in what is now Tulsī Ghāt and exit the city to defecate, not wanting to foul the sacred territory. One day, while off in the forest, he encountered Hanumān, the monkey-king who is both the example of a perfectly devoted servant of God, and one of the main characters in the Rāmāyaṇa. Following this encounter, the story goes, a temple to Hanumān was constructed on the site. It has grown over time, and stands to this day as Saṅkaṭ Mocan — the temple presided over by this priestly family that resides at Tulsī Ghāt.

Awareness of this complex allowed me to situate myself respectively, and thereby to expand and better engage local social networks. Nevertheless, as intricate as this example might be, I don't really know the family in question all that well: I have met a few of them, know others who are close with them, and know where they live. I do have a relationship, however, with Tulsī Ghāt; the contested, redrawn southern border of the sacred city that Tulsīdās would cross on his constitutionals (my house was by some measures inside, by some outside); Saṅkaṭ Mocan temple;⁸ and, most importantly for the purposes of this essay, with Tulsīdās⁹ and Hanumān. These spaces, narratives, and presences all allowed me to relate to and engage social networks — even if the initial social players in question were invisible neighbors. Innumerable stories are similarly stretched across the physical and social frame of Vārāṇasī, explaining and locating invisible neighbors, who in turn define and connect the city's regions and occupying populations. Some background on the history and importance of Vārāṇasī will help us proceed.

Vārāṇasī, also called Banāras or Kāśī, is likely the oldest continually inhabited city in the world. Situated on the west bank of the Gaṅgā, the city proper is described by the Varuṇā river in the north, and the Asī river in the south, Varuṇā and Asī giving us the name Vārāṇasī. Excavation of a settlement near the confluence of the Varuṇā and Gaṅgā at the northern edge of the city yielded evidence of a settlement dating to the middle of the third millennium BC. References to a region known as Kāśī date back to the middle of the second millennium BC, and the Buddha gave his first teaching in Sārṇāth, now all but a suburb of Vārāṇasī,

in the middle of the first millennium BC. Already an established center for trade, the city's religious significance also began to grow. The Purāṇas, accounts of the Gods, were composed and compiled from just before the start of the first millennium AD to its end. Many of these stories are set in Vārāṇasī, and depict heroes or deities visiting or residing there. Eventually, an entire portion of the Skanda Purāṇa, called the Kāśī Khaṇḍa (c.13th cent.) was amended in part to catalog many of the stories that had come to be associated with the city. Though nominally a Śaiva city — the city's most famous and important temple being dedicated to Śiva — I cannot think of any transregional deity¹⁰ who does not have a noticeable presence in Vārāṇasī. As stories were mapped onto this sacred space, more and more characters were recognized as present. Durgā, for example, protects much of the southern part of the city. Other areas are the purview of Viṣṇu, or Saṅkaṭā Devī, or Rāma. Over time, the city has become densely populated with deities and other supernatural characters: invisible neighbors who are specifically emplaced, socially accessible, and capable of both defining boundaries and creating connections in the city.

Śiva and Transregional Deities

Stories construct space, and directly influence emplaced social networks. Beyond being embedded in the fabric of territory and thereby lacing it with significance, these narrativized invisible neighbors are directly engaged by residents. When a friend was unexpectedly hospitalized, his wife made and repeated appeals to Śiva, which I'd never heard her do before. Knowing Śiva doesn't have a unique or even overt connection to medicine or wellness, he's not one of her preferred deities, he's not particularly associated with her neighborhood or family, and is not even particularly well known to generally help things turn out for the better, I asked why she was focusing on him when making these requests. She explained unhesitatingly that she reached out to Śiva because we were in his city.¹¹ Despite the infrequency of regular interaction with Śiva and the technicality that we were beyond the city's pale, my friend's wife was taking steps to engage Śiva directly. Though he is not the only deity in the city, the narratives mapped onto the sacred space make it clear that he is in charge, and is therefore both an authority, and a hub connecting territories and narrative traditions. Addressing Śiva asserts one's relationship with Vārāṇasī's civic and su-

pernatural societies, which can be accessed in a social mode of neighborliness. A sense of security and the promise of support leading to future happiness can be gained by accessing both.

The previous example demonstrates appeal to a generally local and generally authoritative member of social and metaphysical systems in Vārāṇasī. There are, however, other kinds of localization and specialization. Another friend of mine, a musician, one day appealed to Durgā when speaking of a neighborhood problem and his hope for its expedient resolution. As a musician, he was professionally a devotee of Sarasvatī, who is associated with artistic and literary endeavors. Personally, he has a soft spot for Gaṇeśa, enjoying his character, his form, his efficacy, and especially the fact that he is also a drummer. Why, then, did he address Durgā rather than his professional or personal deity?¹² Either could certainly have provided for him. My friend replied that he'd addressed Durgā because hers was the nearest major kuṇḍ¹³ and temple. Certainly there were smaller public shrines and temples that were closer by: but Durgā Kuṇḍ tapped into a system of regional governance by specific deities. The other invisible neighbors in the area were active, but Durgā was in charge. Just as knowing the family that owns much of Tulsī Ghāt and their connection to other places and stories informs and integrates social networks, awareness of local networks of invisible neighbors allowed my friend to identify and engage the appropriate deity. Addressing another would have been socially, and in that sense ritually, inappropriate. These hierarchies are not codified, and as in the example of addressing Śiva from outside the technical city limits, the justifications for a sort of social engagement at times even contradict codified details. Just as most social networks aren't recorded or universally accessed, so too is the understanding of a metaphysical social set subtle and communally developed by those engaged in the process of society making.

Knowing and activating your social network includes knowing who's influential in the city, and who's influential in your neighborhood. This can be a blend of association and affinity: you can have a relationship with Śiva because you're associated with his city as a resident; you can have an affinity for Durgā because you live in her neighborhood. Positive social connections contribute to happiness, and proper engagement with local deities reinforces and affirms participation in a society comprising human and invisible members.

There's another level of these sorts of connections. While Śiva and Durgā are both believed to be present in their mūrtis¹⁴ and accessible through their emplacement in territory, they are still understood to be, at least in some aspects, extra-terrestrial. I mean this not in the sense of some Spielbergian kneeless alien, but in the sense that they are not entirely nor only on nor of this earth. They also appear across a wide range of space, and are therefore transregional. There are, however, deities believed to never leave Earth, or a particular territory: at once divine and terrestrial. These can be divided into two types: local deities, and immortals.

Bīr and Devī: Local Deities

There is a clear and noted difference between the ways Viṣṇu and Śiva, two Gods with widespread recognition and communities of worship spanning South and Southeast Asia, enter the world. When Viṣṇu arrives in human form, it is as humans usually do: he is born, has a childhood, eventually resolves the issue that warranted his incarnation, and then returns to his place beyond the world. Śiva, however, jumps in and out of history: he appears episodically as an ascetic or a beggar, or as a neighbor's son. He only temporarily plays one of these roles, his particular essence retracting once his purpose is fulfilled. In both cases, however, these Gods enter the world from somewhere else - heaven or Mount Kailāśa, for example - and exit once they have fulfilled their purpose. Even in cosmological and theological models where Viṣṇu or Śiva is omnipresent, or understood as the underlying essence of existence, there is still something other-where about them, meaning that there is at least a sense that they are somewhere else beside or beyond earth.

This is not true of all Hindu deities. Local deities are unique to a certain territory in which they are enduringly and uniformly present. Often, these deities are discovered: individuals recognize a presence in a tree or a well or a pond or a termite mound, identify it, and begin to venerate it. Traffic eventually increases, and some of these sites are developed with the construction of shrines and temples, and sometimes the installation of mūrtis. It is very common for these deities to be *protectrices*: female guardians and caretakers. Sometimes these local deities are associated with a transregional deity. For example, a shrine near my house was dedicated to a Goddess residing in a tree, and though she was most commonly referred to as

“the Goddess,” she was also sometimes said to be an instance of Durgā. These discovered, local deities are generally understood to be coeval with the territory: they have been there at least since there were people there, if not since that terra came into existence.

There are also deities who have a moment of historical advent. Bīr Bābās are plentiful in Vārāṇasī, and a good example of this type. They appear in shrines as lacquered cones, as stones with copper or bronze mustachioed masks, or even as empty structures bearing only a label to let visitors know that there is an invisible Bīr inside. The term Bīr comes from a vernacularization of the Sanskrit word *vīra*, meaning hero. Bābā is a term of endearment for an older male community member.¹⁵ Sādhus are generically referred to as Bābā. In keeping with this title, Bīr Bābās are members of the community (Bābās) who met untimely ends, either defending the community or their honor (*vīra*), or through a freak accident. They are understood not to leave the place of their death, but to remain there, restless and sometimes troublesome, though always placatable and ultimately protective. They are deities, and are worshipped as such. Their connection to the place of their demise results in their ability to regulate the entry and egress of supernatural powers and persons, keeping demons and evil influences at bay. For this reason, they are often associated with the borders between neighborhoods, crossroads, and bridges: they can literally be gatekeepers. Like local deities, Bīr Bābās define territorial, and thereby communal, lines. Beyond shaping and being accessible to social groups, Bīr Bābās blur the distinction between human and supernatural social agents: Bīrs were human members of a community, and now function as invisible members. This clearly indicates that the notion of the social can extend beyond the immediately, humanly present, and further that these structures of function and understanding are both linked and similar.

Bīr Bābās are often found alongside trees or near wells. Though they are sometimes thought to inhabit trees themselves, the fact that they were once human makes this fairly uncommon, except in cases of arboreal demise.¹⁶ It is common, however, for Bīr Bābās to be paired with Devīs living in these nearby trees or wells. These Goddesses are not historical persons, and are often local. They are typically believed to eradicate disease, whether or not they are explicitly associated with Śītālā Devī, the Goddess of smallpox and pestilence in general. These Goddesses and their protection

tend to be more commonly affirmed than Bīr Bābās. Though they are often known generically as “Goddess,” they are reached out to and addressed. When speaking with one of my mentors about disease in nearby slums, she mentioned the protective presence of Devī in a tree on the road, saying that she would take care of those issues. A Bīr Bābā and a Devī can together ensure the material and metaphysical safety and health — and thereby happiness — of the specific social network in their territories.

I have described the importance of knowing major figures in one’s social landscape. This includes both deities and historical, mythologized figures. In this instance, we have a mythologized figure who is emphatically a deity, as well as a deity who is intensely local. These examples challenge many Euro-American notions of what a God is: namely omnipresent, and in at least some aspects impersonal. Here we have examples of deities who are historically and spatially interwoven with contemporary human communities. By defining and organizing these communities, these Gods catalyze further social connection and organization. They are prominent members of social networks, and inherently linked with the ability of a community to experience happiness and flourish.

Hanumān and Bhairava

The second type of ever-present deity is the *cirañjivīs*, or immortals, who either originated on earth and remain, or who came to earth and never departed. One of the traditional set of eight is Hanumān, the monkey-God who featured in my Tulsī example. Hanumān is also a community protector, and his temples, like Bīr shrines, are very common at crossings and entrances to neighborhoods. It is said that he is waiting for the return of Rāma, so he can fulfill his true nature as Rāma’s perfect devotee. The fact that he is himself a God does not confound this devotional nature, but it can ease identification of humans with the God: they revere him, but they also want to be like him. They want to be perfectly loved and perfectly loving in their relationship with the divine. Hanumān is, then, a community role model.

Hanumān is believed to be present throughout a given territory, ever watching and alert. One of my mentors told me that if you want Hanumān to be happy and for things to go well for you, you need only say, “May you meet Rām[a]!”¹⁷ aloud. Hanumān will always hear

you, be overjoyed by your well-wishes, and continue his supportive work with renewed vigor. Recognition of Hanumān's presence and importance is reflected in the striking number of small Hanumān shrines throughout Vārāṇasī. After Śiva liṅgas¹⁸ I would wager Hanumān mūrtis are the most numerous. They may also reflect social shift: most of the Hanumān shrines are newer, well maintained and appointed, easily visible and recognized. Even Śaiva ascetics, who typically don't overlap extensively with devotees of Rāma (who is a form of Viṣṇu) and his devotee Hanumān, will often proclaim association with the monkey-God. His social network seems to be growing. Hanumān can offer comfort as a protective presence, but he can also connect communities to one another: though they are each protected by their own instance of Hanumān, he is ultimately unified, and easily recognized when encountered in a neighboring community. The noted trend in temple construction suggests that while there is not a degradation of the affirmation of internal coherence within a particular community, regularizing familiar affinities to deities can facilitate greater inter-communal connectivity.

Bīr Bābās and Hanumāns can often be found together, and they're frequently joined by a third deity: Bhairava. Bhairava is also known to protect territory, especially that of Vārāṇasī. It is common to find a small Bīr shrine next to a larger and more elaborate Bhairava shrine next to a yet larger Hanumān shrine or temple. This suggests that while they perform similar roles, Bīrs are linked with earlier, more local traditions, Bhairava with later and more extensive traditions, and Hanumān with the most recent and most popular corpus of devotees and advocates. Delhi-based ABP News posted a Hindi language clip on Facebook that yielded a wonderful example of engaging and affirming invisible neighbors.¹⁹ Along with human interest pieces, political commentary, celebrity news, and a fashion section that seems to be shots from neck to navel of most of their models, they also have a segment investigating whether viral posts are real or not. The viral post in question was a photo of the Chief Superintendent's seat at the Kotvālī Police Headquarters in Vārāṇasī occupied by a photo of Kāl Bhairava,²⁰ with the Chief Superintendent sitting alongside. The photo was accompanied by a caption asserting that Bhairava was officially running this central police headquarters.

Bhairava is a terrifying manifestation of Śiva. Erupt-

ing in a moment of rage, he cuts off one of Brahmā's five heads, is resultantly exiled, and receives liberation from the burden of his actions upon reaching Vārāṇasī. He remains in the city, acting as kotvāl, or constable. Exemplifying and now in charge of protecting the redemptive sacred territory, he is one of the city's most important deities: all pilgrims are supposed to visit him and ask his permission before engaging the holy city and its many sites. He is believed to be present in this city: in particular, Kāl Bhairava, whose main temple is adjacent to this police headquarters.²¹ New officers go to visit him after swearing in, regardless of their religious affiliation. When asked about the photo of this nearby mūrti placed in a position of prominence, the Chief Superintendent replied that Kāl Bhairava was the kotvāl of Vārāṇasī, and it was he who truly maintained order and kept people safe. After all, the police headquarters in question is named for him: Kotvālī. It only made sense, then, that his photo, and thus effectively Bhairava himself, take this seat. It was not a shrine nor temple; it wasn't discovered and it didn't appear; it was placed, and demonstrates the importance of being aware of and engaging such metaphysical persons — invisible neighbors — in these social contexts.

Conclusions and Analysis

This special issue, with its collection of reflections on the diverse ways humans can be happy and flourish, is designed to help people in Euro-American contexts identify and reevaluate their presumptions regarding human happiness and flourishing. Certainly, no Euro-American account of human flourishing would completely omit social connections as crucial to happiness and wellbeing. The differences in Vārāṇasī are the rate and type of connection, and in particular the persons included: neighbors who help us recognize that there are different types of social agent, and different ways of knowing. Many Americans might have a relationship, even a sort of social connection, with historical but now larger-than-life characters. Take Abraham Lincoln, for example. Though you might not expect him to be able to hear you and respond, being a fully functional American might involve knowing and relating to this or similar characters and what they represents. I'd also like to suggest that the case of Vārāṇasī might help us better understand saints as they are understood in Catholic and Orthodox contexts: like the Bīrs and Abraham Lincoln, they were historical. They are perhaps transcendent or even omnipresent, but

there is an emphasis on the fact that they are there-with-you. They can hear you, and act on your behalf. Perhaps not exactly neighbors, they are nevertheless invisible companions and mentors contributing to growth and happiness.

It's important to acknowledge these potential similarities, but also to emphasize the presence of great diversity in these contexts. Though some Muslims might visit Bhairava shrines, and there are Muslim counterparts to the Bīr Bābās, they do not necessarily see them as part of their social landscape in the same way a Hindu does. Indeed, not all Hindus regard these neighbors in the same way, even if they are members of the same religious or regional community. As Diane Coccari notes in her wonderful study of the Bīr Bābās of Vārāṇasī, many of her informants sarcastically remarked that all you have to do to become a Bīr Bābā is fall out of a tree.²² Similarly, the comments under ABP News' posted video about Bhairava were filled with critiques and chastisement in both Hindi and English about how backward such beliefs are, and how they had no place in a modern, rational India.²³ Despite this incredulity, people will still likely know the location of Bīr shrines and Bhairava temples, and stories associated with them. The online criticisms were sprinkled with vernacularized yet traditional Sanskrit praises.

When I first started looking for Bīr shrines I soon found that almost anyone I asked — child or adult — could point me in the direction of one nearby. Some were obscured in niches or behind cloth; some I just hadn't read or examined carefully. I had a similar experience when looking for instances of Bhairava: even if not overt, people knew how to peel back an initial, urban veneer to reveal these networks, regardless of their literal belief concerning potential inhabitants. Shrines were meticulously maintained: fresh paint, clean surroundings, and offerings of cloth and flowers replaced regularly indicate there are plenty of visible neighbors keeping them happy, and keeping social network of invisible neighbors active and connected to that of everyday humans. Regardless of whether one's belief perspective interprets the happiness these invisible neighbors engender as a gift bestowed by these invisible neighbors, or a byproduct of the social organization and access they effect, they fall within the category of social agents bettering human experience.

I'd like to conclude with a word of caution, and a suggestion for further reflection. Regardless of the empirical reality of invisible neighbors, it should be clear that the recognition of their presence and efficacy is not a mistake, a misunderstanding, nor a lack of cognitive or intellectual development. Religious Studies in the Euro-American academy has a history of equating what might be called the enchantment of territory with evolutionary primitivism, and has located such traditions in the past (that is to say, before the Enlightenment) or "over there" (in some corner of the world the corrective effect of the Enlightenment didn't reach).²⁴ This is also not a case of the non-distinction of the natural and the supernatural, as Durkheim has argued is the case in his objects of study:²⁵ though both visible and invisible neighbors are effective social agents, they are recognized as distinct and different. No one mistakes a supra-historical neighborhood hero for the milkman, nor vice versa. From my perspective as an embedded observer, the only mistake would be to refuse to recognize or to discount the importance and effective presence of these invisible neighbors.

Though there are many local and comparative conclusions to be drawn regarding the phenomena and networks here described, a brief gesture to sociological theory can inform further reflection. Mark Granovetter's work regarding "weak" and "strong" social ties exposes an apparent paradox: intuitively, a person with only a series of weak social ties might presumably feel alienated or adrift, but in fact such ties are crucial to the formation of new connections and aid integration into communities. Conversely, strong connections, thought to be the skeleton supporting local cohesion, can lead to rift or fragmentation.²⁶ It is therefore important to have both. Applied to the case of Vārāṇasī, belief in a Bīr Bābā can be a strong connection that leads to local cohesion at the risk of general fragmentation, but recognition and non-literal belief is a sort of weak connection that fosters and reaffirms local belonging and emplacement. On the other hand, the importance of Hanumān all over Vārāṇasī, and Bhairava with the city in general, can lead to the formation of strong ties that cut across localized community boundaries. Conversely, recognition of a transregional deity one doesn't have a particular relationship with can be a sort of trans-local weak tie, providing the potential for further integration. The fact that invisible neighbors can function as strong and weak ties at local and translocal levels —

just as different humans do — supports the argument for their inclusion in the functional social landscape.²⁷ By participating in and facilitating social experiences, and by shaping communities and their interrelation-ality, invisible neighbors contribute directly to human happiness and indirectly to conditions conducive to human flourishing.

Vārāṇasī is known for its complexity, diversity, and density. Its myriad, interwoven dynamics are unen-compassable. After living there for a time, I found myself processing experiences and expressing re-sponses differently. The city itself became an interloc-utor: I could easily look back on a day and sum up my experiences by thinking that I'd argued with her, and to some extent reconciled. For me, Vārāṇasī is in a sense an invisible neighbor: a way to organize and engage immense sets of information. Despite the risk of reductivism latent in this observation — that these phenomena are cognitive phantoms onto which we project identity — Vārāṇasī is no less real, fulfilling, or happiness-inducing a friend.

Endnotes

[1] In this passage, the word *social* can also be trans-lated *political*. Isaac Loos, in 1897, explains that what Aristotle means by political we might more accurately gloss as social. Isaac Loos, "The Political Philosophy of Aristotle," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 10 (1897): 1–21, 3.

[2] For studies related to the fundamental social-ness of human beings, see: Matthew D. Lieberman, *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2013); Joanne Powell, Pe-nelope Lewis, Robin Dunbar, Marta García-Fiñana, and Neil Roberts, "Orbital Prefrontal Cortex Vol-ume Correlates with Social Cognitive Competence." *Neuropsychologia* 48, no. 12 (October 1, 2010); Robin Dunbar, "Neocortex Size as a Constraint on Group Size in Primates." *Journal of Human Evolution* 22, no. 6 (June 1, 1992).

[3] There is, of course, great diversity of the under-standing of the nature of God across and even within Abrahamic traditions. These are broad strokes to note context and lay a foundation for eventual comparison.

[4] Though I did not have Pascal Boyer's use of the term *invisible* in mind when I came up with this topic

and label, I did read his *Religion Explained* some four years ago. As I worked back through it, I didn't find an instance where he mentions invisible neighbors, or exactly the kind of phenomena I'm addressing here. Nevertheless, it's possible that I was inspired by some inarticulate memory of Boyer's work to use this ter-minology.

[5] See: Matthew D. Lieberman, *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect* (New York: Crown Pub-lishers, 2013); Joanne Powell, Penelope Lewis, Rob-in Dunbar, Marta García-Fiñana, and Neil Roberts, "Orbital Prefrontal Cortex Volume Correlates with Social Cognitive Competence." *Neuropsychologia* 48, no. 12 (October 1, 2010); Robin Dunbar, "Neocor-tex Size as a Constraint on Group Size in Primates." *Journal of Human Evolution* 22, no. 6 (June 1, 1992).

[6] Ghāṭs are massive stone stairways descending into the Gaṅgā (Ganges river). They take their names from local landmarks, historical events, or stories set in them, and these names extend to the neighbor-hoods immediately abutting these stairways.

[7] It should be noted that the Gaṅgā is also a person, recognized as a Goddess. An extension of the Milky Way, she descends to earth through Śiva's hair, and is understood to be crucial to if not foremost in imbuing Vārāṇasī with sacred power. She is, however, more a visible neighbor than an invisible one, and doing her presence justice is beyond the scope of this essay.

[8] It is clear that place, narrative, identity, and soci-ety are mutually constructed in Vārāṇasī. Focusing on social players requires leaving other aspects underad-dressed.

[9] Though Tulsīdās is considered a saint, and not a deity, he maintains a social impression and is there-fore an invisible neighbor.

[10] Some Hindu deities are specific to a particular place. Others, such as Śiva and Rāma, appear in places spanning what is now Pakistan to Thailand, Cambo-dia, and Vietnam. Śiva, Sarasvatī, and Gaṇeśa pop up in esoteric Buddhist contexts in Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan. The latter are transregional deities, and they will be more extensively addressed in what follows.

[11] Interestingly, we were not technically in his city: we were south of the original course of the Asī riv-

er (Vārāṇasī's southern border) and the hospital my friend was taken to was south of the new, redirected course of the river which (allegedly) extended the city limits by a few blocks.

[12] *iṣṭadeva* - desire-deity or God of one's personal preference.

[13] A kuṇḍ is a sacred body of water, usually associated with a temple. Kuṇḍs usually originate as natural bodies of water and typically predate associated temples. The area in question is called Durgā tank, not Durgā temple, reflecting this primacy.

[14] A material presence of the God, which can be anionic or representational.

[15] Though I have never encountered an origin story or name of a female Bīr Bābā, I have seen a typical conical form of a Bīr with exaggerated eyelashes and lips in an obvious indication of femininity.

[16] Falling to one's death from a tree is a surprisingly common way to become a Bīr Bābā. See "The Bīr Bābās of Banāras: An Analysis of a Folk Deity in North Indian Hinduism" (doctoral thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1986), introduction.

[17] Spoken Hindi drops the terminal schwas from Sanskrit words: Rāma becomes Rām.

[18] Aniconic representations of Śiva.

[19] https://www.facebook.com/abpnews/videos/2172469976103578/?hc_ref=ARTfD-pjV3LuK7r2SWgJ7kfVa72-BNI-JXC7o3DQ_eUPK1xpcL5rh5iSz1gFwtXLW-OVU&pnref=story

[20] Bhairava has many forms, each with different attributes. Kāl Bhairava is one of the most widely recognized, theologized, and worshipped.

[21] It was common for me to ask interlocutors to list members of important sets. Often, they would remember the number of units in a set - eight Bhairavas, 36 tattvas, seven dwarves - and work to fill it in with information that made sense. When I asked about the cirañjivīs, everyone knew there were eight, and many could recite a verse listing them. Others would know important ones — Hanumān, for example — but

then fill in with others they thought might reasonably be on the list. If an individual didn't recite the codified verse, they almost always inserted Bhairava into the list. Though he's not a cirañjivī, the fact that he is widely understood to be imminently present makes his inclusion completely sensible.

[22] Coccari, 18.

[23] Though the desire to assert an identity compatible with a Euro-American, post-Enlightenment empiricism cannot be divorced from colonial influence and the reciprocal rebranding of Indian traditions around the turn of the 20th century, to reduce it to such an encounter of civilization is also misleading. There have been rationalist/materialist voices in India for centuries, if not millennia, and the contemporary push for what is seen as modernization and progress is now very much an indigenous Indian attitude.

[24] For the evolutionary model of religion tending toward Christian monotheism, see Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom* (New York: Holt, 1889). For the replacement of chronological and evolutionary metaphors with geographical ones, see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

[25] Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated by Karen E. Fields. New York: Free Press, 1995, c. 1.

[26] Mark S. Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): 1378.

[27] It is also interesting to note that instances of Bhairava worship in Vārāṇasī point not only to other phenomena in that city: it is common for people to conflate images of what is probably the most famous Bhairava image in India — that of Kāl Bhairava near the police headquarters in Vārāṇasī — and the second most famous — a spherical stone Bhairava in Ujjain who gained national recognition for slurping whiskey out of a saucer. The ABP News clip kept flipping back and forth between the two very distinct mūrtis. Even the Kāl Bhairava temple in Vārāṇasī has images of Bhairava in Ujjain; and vice versa. In this way, the networks engaged span not only the city, but the Hindu sacred geography of South Asia.