ECOMORAL AESTHETICS AT MATHURA'S VISHRAM GHAT

Three Ways of Seeing a River

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Describing "a certain wonderful sunset" on the Mississippi, Mark Twain wrote in his memoir of his days as a steamboat pilot:

> A broad expanse of the river was turned to blood; in the middle distance the red hue brightened into gold, through which a solitary log came floating, black and conspicuous; in one place a long, slanting mark lay sparkling upon the water […].[1]

Growing up as a child by the Mississippi, Twain had, indeed, been deeply influenced by the visceral physicality of the river. Yet, the same river, once the author learnt to navigate its currents, became a mere mode of transport.

> Now when I had mastered the language of this water and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river as familiarly as I knew the letters of the alphabet, I had made a valuable acquisition. But I had lost something, too. I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived.[2]

For Twain, then, mastering the language of the river necessarily led to an irrecoverable experiential loss. But notably, this loss too was a perceptual one, one that was worked out at the level of seeing.

> Then, if that sunset scene had been repeated, I should have looked upon it without rapture and should have commented upon it inwardly after this fashion: "This sun means that we are going to have wind tomorrow; that floating log means that the river is rising […]".[3]

Loss notwithstanding, Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* offers a way of seeing the river whereby flowing water can simultaneously become an aesthetic field and a nautical system. It is this act of seeing that serves as the fulcrum of this essay.

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Far from the muddy waters of the Mississippi, the river Yamuna, the daughter of the solar god Surya, flows 1,376 kilometres from the glacial formations of the Himalaya to its confluence with the Ganga and the fabled Sarasvati in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh. As the river meanders through the north Indian plain, it passes the Vishram Ghat in Mathura, the principal ghat in Braj, the epicentre of Krishna worship in India (figure 1).[4] In Vaishnava philosophical texts, the Yamuna, however, has a specific significance that underscores the moral and aesthetic affect of seeing the river as it surges through the pilgrimage centre of Braj.[5] In Braj, Yamuna is the sensual drops of sweat that emerge during Krishna's lovemaking with his devotees—ecstatic love in liquid form. The *Yamunastakam*, a 16th-century hymn praising the river, thus concludes by stating: "Through you all spiritual powers are attained and Krishna is delighted. You completely transform the nature of your devotees."[6] Consequently, the act of ritually seeing the river as it flows past Vishram Ghat was considered meritorious for pilgrims visiting Braj. Focusing on the ecomoral aesthetics of seeing the Yamuna from Vishram Ghat, this essay engages with the technological, the socio-political, the environmental and the artistic as a layered system of hydroaesthetics in early modern and colonial South Asia. Highlighting three ways of seeing the Yamuna, the essay then aims to open up new arenas of an ecological art history that pay close attention to the reciprocal relationship between art and architectural practices and the natural environment.

Sati Burj, Beholding the River

Given the powerful symbolism of the river Yamuna as the daughter of Surya, the Vishram Ghat in Mathura was a centre of solar worship prior to the 13th century.[7] Post-16th-century Vaishnava texts, however, assert that the ghat was the precise spot where Krishna had rested after killing his evil uncle

1 The river Yamuna at Mathura.

2 Upper level, Sati Burj, Mathura, 1570.

Kamsa, the name vishram meaning rest.[8] The 16th century also saw the ghat becoming the locus of a series of large-scale architectural endeavours that made this particular site the pivotal centre in Braj. By the 1530s, a number of structures had been constructed at the ghat by Vaishnava devotees such as the rulers of the kingdom of Amber in contemporary Rajasthan.[9] The only extant structure from this period, however, is the Sati Burj, a 17-metre (55-foot) ceremonial tower erected in 1570 by Bhagwantdas of Amber (r. 1573–89). Constructed in red sandstone, the monumental verticality of the burj would certainly have visually charged the spatial fabric of the ghat (figure 3). At the same time, the tower revealed an attempt to engage with the visual form of the Yamuna, particularly as it could be seen from the ghats of Braj. A door-like opening on the upper level could have thus functioned as a viewing portal to see the Yamuna as it flows past the Vishram Ghat (figure 2). Indeed, Bhagwantdas's predecessor, Ratan Singh (r. 1537–48), had also built a "ten-pillared" palace for royal pilgrimage alongside the ghat.[10] Given the dense urban build-up over time, traces of the palace have entirely disappeared. But, certainly descriptions suggest that the palace provided a suitable viewing gallery for the members of the Amber court.

The role of the ocular in engendering spatial perception was fundamental to the tower's iconographic programme. One enters the Sati Burj through a doorway flanked by yantras or talismanic diagrams carved in stone. Frequently depicted on temple walls, magico-ritualistic yantras are characteristically used as visual aids for meditation or considered to possess astrological and magical benefits. On the right side of the gateway is the panchakona yantra, the five-pointed star symbolizing the five material elements (mahabhuta) of ether, air, fire, water and earth (figure 4). At the heart of the diagram is a schematic lotus representing the pilgrimage centre of Braj. According to Vaishnava literature, Krishna and his consort Radha occupy the epicentre of the lotus and devotees use illustrations of this celestial landscape as a device for concentration during meditative practices.[11] Thus, the depictions of such ritualized diagrams on architectural surfaces in Braj certainly would not be out of place. Framed by a miniature gateway and two elephants, the yantra as an apotropaic schema was, unquestionably, intended to be perceived ritualistically.

At the same time, the austere pillars and geometric decorative motifs, the projecting eaves, and the limited use of anthropomorphic imagery suggest that the Sati Burj was designed using architectural typologies popularized by the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605) at his capital of Fatehpur Sikri concurrently being constructed around 60 kilometres south of Mathura (figure 5).[12] Certainly, the use of red sandstone, the stone being employed to build Akbar's fort-palaces, within the soteriological space of 16th-century Braj suggests that practices of imagining the pilgrimage centre involved seeing space not only through a metaphysical order

3 Sati Burj, Mathura, 1570.

4 Detail of yantra, Sati Burj, Mathura, 1570.

5 Diwan-i Khass (private audience hall), Fatehpur Sikri, c. 1571.

but also as construed through contemporaneous expressions of political power. The homology between the Mughal capital of Fatehpur Sikri and the Sati Burj in Mathura persists throughout the tower's architectural programme, emphasizing Bhagwantdas's attempt to incorporate a Mughal architectural language within the sacred riverfront of Vaishnava Braj.

Indeed, Akbar had used a Rajput-style viewing window, a jharoka, in his palace complex in Fatehpur Sikri. The imperial jharoka, the public viewing window in the Daftar Khana (records office) from where the emperor ceremonially presented himself to his subjects, was likewise constructed in the early 1570s. Scholars suggest that Akbar had derived this custom of displaying the imperial body from Hindu liturgical practices that prescribed the act of seeing the divine body, that is ritually looking (darshan) at the icon in a temple, as a form of gaining merit.[13] While in the Mughal context Akbar can be seen as adopting the ocular-centric practices intrinsic to Hindu liturgy to enunciate the idealized sovereign body, the use of the architectural device at the Vishram Ghat presents a wholly different sensibility of vision and the darshanic gaze. For unlike the imperial jharoka in Fatehpur Sikri from where Akbar presented himself to be gazed upon, the positioning of the jharoka on the upper level of the Sati Burj suggests that this structure functioned as an optical apparatus to behold the Yamuna flowing past the ghat. Located almost 50 feet (15 metres) above ground level, the Sati Burj's jharoka could not have served as a framing device to gaze upon the members of the Amber court from the streets of Mathura. Instead, it provided an unhindered view of flowing water, underscoring the role of beholding the Yamuna as fundamental to pilgrimage practices at the ghat.

This ocular emphasis in architecture found reflection in contemporaneous liturgical texts. The c. 1541 *Haribhaktivilasa*, an authoritative source for ritualistic practices, thus describes the function of the river Yamuna in Braj: "The river Sarasvati purifies one after three days. The river Narmada purifies one after seven weeks. The Ganga purifies one immediately. Yamuna purifies one who beholds it."[14] While immersing oneself in rivers such as the Ganga allowed the devotee to purify herself/himself, the act of absorbing the goddess Yamuna's theophanic presence through ritualistic beholding, that is taking darshan of the river as it flows through Braj, was adequate for attaining purity. Even as established pre-16th-century sacramental norms mandated haptic and gustatory absorption—that is, bathing at pilgrimage sites (snana) or drinking the water with which the feet of an icon or of a venerated personality are washed (charanamrita)—as primary forms of ritual engagement with sacred water, the 1541 text clearly demarcated a hierarchy of sacred rivers centred on the privileging of seeing sacrosanct water. Given that foundational Vaishnava texts such as the *Haribhaktivilasa* were being composed in Braj in the 16th century, one could then link the vision of the river Yamuna in text and architecture in decisive ways. The privileging of vision, that is beholding the Yamuna, in the 1541 *Haribhaktivilasa* and the 1570 Sati Burj, was thus not fortuitous.

Bir Singh's Torana, Framing the River

The increasing popularity of Vaishnavism in the 16th and 17th centuries led to an exponential intensification of architectural patronage at Vishram Ghat. The most prominent construction in the 17th century was a tulabhara torana, a ceremonial archway used as a weighing scale, built by Bir Singh Dev (r. 1605–27), the ruler of the central Indian kingdom of Orchha (figure 6). The ruler had sponsored the torana when he weighed himself and donated his weight in gold at the ghat during a pilgrimage to Mathura in 1614. This was a significant gesture. As Dirk Kolff notes: "For centuries, the Orchha family would cherish the fact that the balance prepared

6 Tulabhara torana, Vishram Ghat, Mathura, 1614.

to weigh the great king was still kept at Mathura on the Vishrant Ghat, dedicated to Krishna. His munificent gifts were mentioned in *sanads* [deeds] held by priests at the place."[15] Only a few metres away from the Sati Burj, Bir Singh's torana mirrored the gateways that framed the yantras on the 1570 tower.

At the same time, the torana functioned as a ceremonial threshold linking the liminal space between land and flowing water. From the 6th century onwards, the Sanskrit word torana had been frequently used in architectural treatises to indicate movement or "rushing forth".[16] Indeed, to forge forward, the etymon of the word torana suggests, requires a spatial configuring of a rite of passage through architecture. In this particular instance, the torana, however, also functioned as a device of enframement. Unlike the viewing portal of the Sati Burj, the flowing Yamuna could be ritually viewed through the torana, while the river concurrently framed the architectural device. As an optical arrangement, then, Bir Singh's torana brought together ritualized bodily movement and an optical order. Operative here was a possible mode of seeing where the view of water was framed by the archway, and the water, in turn, framed architecture, conjoining the frame and the object through a theological schema.

While architectural treatises categorize the myriad forms of toranas on the basis of placement, function and embellishment, the tulabhara torana was specifically used as a balance for weighing gold, grains and other precious commodities that were then ceremonially distributed. According to texts such as the *Samarangana Sutradhara*, the freestanding tulabhara torana was thus a symbol of a monarch's royal benevolence.[17] The richly carved ornamental brackets of the torana emerge from the mouth of makaras or mythic acquatic creatures to form a triangular arc. Known as the ilika torana, a torana that emulates the gait of a caterpillar, these architectural devices were commonly used in post-11th-century western Indian temple entrances to mark the threshold demarcating the sacred from the non-sacred. At the same time, the ilika torana was frequently used as architectural decoration, the most prominent of such usage being on the façade of the Gwalior fort, built c. 1500 by the Tomara ruler Man Singh (r. 1486–1516), an edifice that had also been influential in the design of the Sati Burj in Mathura (figure 7). While it would be difficult to ascertain the precise architectural genealogies of Bir Singh's torana, the deployment of this particular architectural device at Vishram Ghat was certainly consistent with Bir Singh's cultural cosmopolitanism.

Court poetry too was marshalled by Bir Singh to further concretize a relationship between his capital in Orchha and the pilgrimage centre of Braj. In a chronicle composed for Bir Singh's accession in 1605, the court poet Keshavdas Mishra celebrated the river Betwa's beauty as it passed through Orchha and flowed into the Yamuna. Using the topography of north-central India to create a connected geography of piety, Mishra's eulogy was both evocative and explicit:

7 Façade, Man Mandir, Gwalior, c. 1500.

> The minds of kings are charmed and captivated at its [the Betwa's] mere sight. When the dark waters of the Betwa brighten up, then this looks like the Yamuna […]. This Betwa is an ally of Yamuna, just like Ganga is an ally of Yamuna and this Betwa has, like the Ganga, huge waves and hence she is as beautiful and glorious as the Ganga.[18]

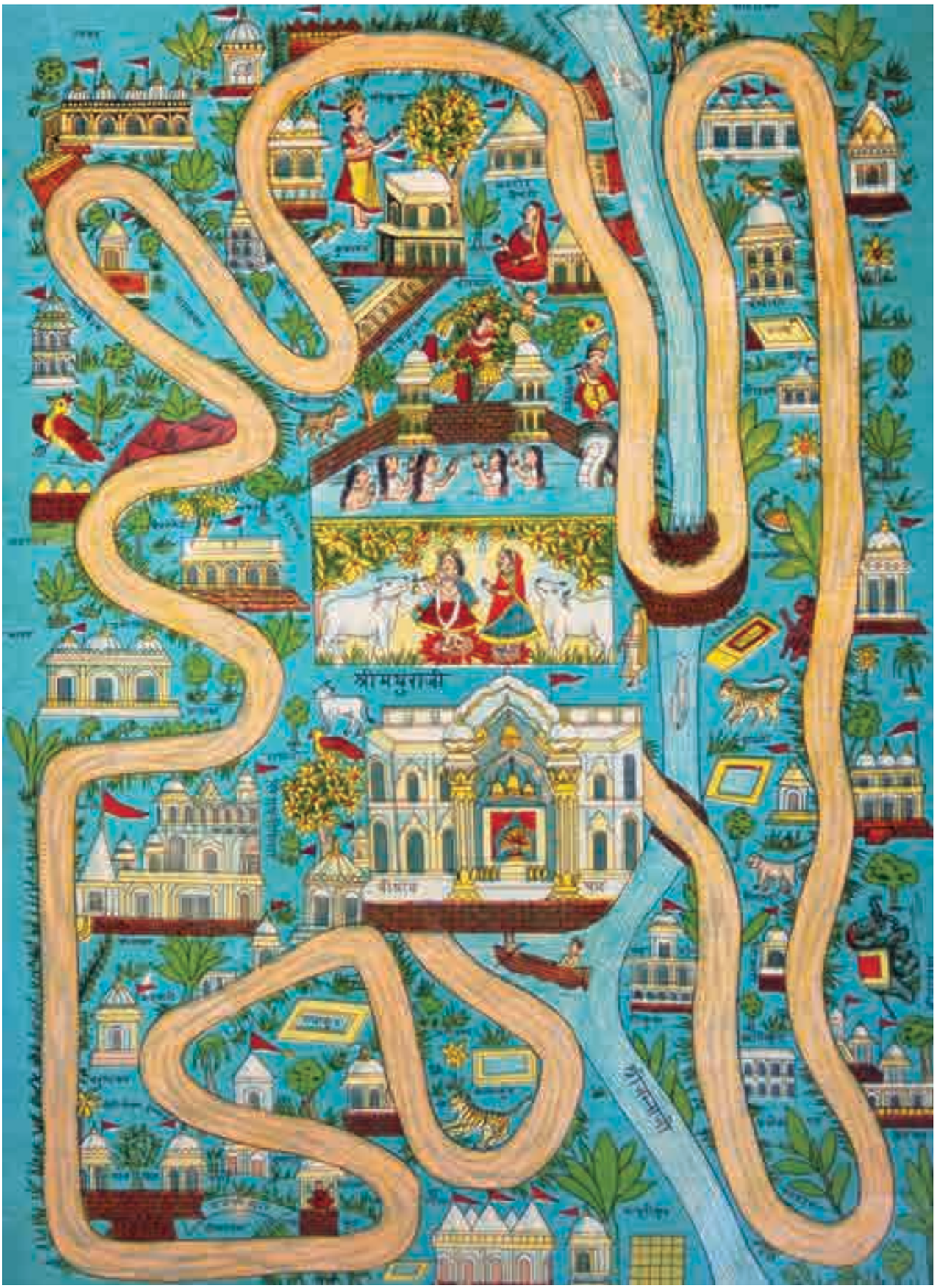
What emerges from this poetic chronicle is a cartography of connected rivers, each embedded within particularized local narratives yet inherently linked through the flow of water from one river system into another. The Betwa flows into the Yamuna. The Yamuna meets the Ganga. In the process, flowing water connects Orchha to Braj and beyond.

At the same time, the emphasis on the physical form of the Betwa as a river that captivates the "minds of kings" by "mere sight" brings to the forefront the role of the ocular in producing an imaginative geography that, in turn, enabled a political praxis. Mishra thus produced a constitutive relationship between geopolitics and vision through underscoring the act of seeing the turbulent waters of the dark Betwa. Seeing the river became pivotal in producing a connected geography that was grounded in comprehending the aesthetics of the natural environment. In effect, both architecture and literary cultures were mobilized by Bir Singh Dev to collocate Vaishnava Braj and his own kingdom in central India.

Given the theological, political and cultural importance of Vishram Ghat, one sees continued patronage at the site well into the 18th and the 19th centuries. Augmenting Bir Singh Dev's architectural programme, the founder of the city of Jaipur, Jai Singh II (r. 1699–1743) of Amber, built a temple at the ghat in 1732. The monarch had, in fact, visited Braj earlier in 1727, when he had offered his weight in gold at the ghat.[19] Jai Singh, one assumes, would have used Bir Singh's 1614 torana to ritually weigh himself, emphasizing the sustained importance of this particular edifice.

The 19th century continued to see construction at Vishram Ghat, including the

8 "Hindu Pilgrims Bathing in the Sacred River of Jumna, Muttra, India", by B.W. Kilburn, 1899. Stereoview. Collection of author.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building of a number of temples and subsidiary toranas. The Maharaja of Benares, for instance, performed the tulabhara ceremony in 1889 at the ghat. Augmenting the existing architectural programme, the monarch sponsored a new torana to commemorate his act of royal benevolence.[20] The emergence of a distinctive ecomoral aesthetics of seeing flowing water thus carefully interwove Vaishnava theology, political governance and an aesthetic of the natural environment.

Vishram Ghat, Seeing from the River

Having seen an album of photographs of the sacred sites in Braj, George N. Curzon, the Viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905, decided to visit Vishram Ghat in 1899 to personally observe the "picturesque" beauty of a Hindu pilgrimage town.[21] Indeed, by the late 19th century, the ghat had become the locus of a new form of tourism, with colonial guidebooks suggesting a detour to the ghat for European tourists visiting Agra from Delhi. Repeatedly reproduced in colonial travel posters, stereoviews and postcards, the view of Vishram Ghat with its domes, graceful red-sandstone architecture and teeming pilgrims now became synonymous with the picturesque aesthetic that European tourists sought in India (figure 8). A c. 1930 lithograph by the Bombay-based Bolton Fine Art Litho Press thus includes the depiction of a topi-wearing European tourist taking a pleasure ride in the Yamuna (labelled Shrijamnaji) near the ghat (figure 9). It is no coincidence that the sahib is depicted with the famed ghat in the background. The 1924 edition of John Murray's legendary *A Handbook for Travellers in India, Burma, and Ceylon* informed readers: "The Arati ceremony, or worship of the sacred river, takes place about dusk at the Bishrant [Vishram] Ghat, when cows, monkeys and turtles are fed. The most convenient way of seeing the ceremony is to take a boat."[22] Reversing earlier optical sensibilities, it was the ghat that now became the object of the gaze, and the Yamuna, ecstatic love in liquid form, became the viewing field from which seductive fantasies of India and Hinduism could be observed (figure 10). This Orientalist mise-en-scène brings into focus the relationship between colonial tourism and new ways of engaging the natural environment that emerged in the late 19th century.

Under British governance, colonial photography as a prescriptive technology

9 Brij Kshetra, by Bolton Fine Art Litho Press, Tardeo, Bombay, c. 1930. Chromolithograph. Collection of author.

10 "The Bathing Ghat, Muttra [Mathura]", published for the Great Indian Peninsula Railway, c. 1890. Picture postcard. Collection of author.

11 Chunni Lall & Co., Muttra [Mathura], "The Visránt Ghát, Mathurá". Autotype photograph published in Growse, *Mathurá: A District Memoir*, 1874. Artwork in public domain.

of knowing the colony had significantly reshaped the ways in which the pilgrimage site was henceforth seen. Central to this new anthropological perception was Frederic S. Growse's 1874 *Mathurá: A District Memoir*, a colonial gazetteer key both for subsequent scholarship on Braj and for administrators and district authorities who used the volume until as late as the 1960s.[23] Growse, the Magistrate of the Mathura District in the 1870s, had abundantly utilized photographs by Chunni Lall, a Mathura-based commercial studio, in his *Memoir* to visually underscore his familiarity with the pilgrimage centre (figure 11). Growse had, however, guided the photographer, carefully framing views to his liking. Functioning well within the genre of colonial photography, the views of Vishram Ghat commissioned by Growse presented a purportedly objective view of the architecture and pilgrims. Significantly, the photograph included in Growse's *Memoir* was taken from a boat at a distance from the Ghat, transforming it into a space clearly seen, and thus surveyed, by the British Empire. This new practice of seeing as surveying, one could then argue, created an optical arena that concurrently mapped riparian architecture, the natural environment and the colonized subject through the impulses of modern governance and imperial power.

Figure Acknowledgements

All illustrations courtesy the author, unless otherwise mentioned.

Notes

1 Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1901, p. 70. The passage was later republished as Mark Twain, "Two Ways of Seeing a River", in Randall E. Decker, ed., *Patterns of Exposition*, Boston: Little Brown, 1978, pp. 70–73. The title of my essay is borrowed from Twain.

2 Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, p. 70.

3 Ibid., p. 71.

4 Typically, a ghat is a platform with a flight of steps that provides access to a waterbody. Often, ghats, especially at pilgrimage sites, are used for ritualized bathing. More frequently, however, they are built to provide access to water for domestic use. See Julia

A.B. Hegewald, *Water Architecture in South Asia: A Study of Types, Developments and Meanings*, Leiden: Brill, 2002.

5 Although the Sanskrit term *vraja,* literally an enclosure of herdsmen, was frequently used in scriptural sources to refer to the mythic space where Krishna had spent his youth, modern Braj as a geographic space was invented only in the 16th century when reformers such as Chaitanya and Vallabhacharya arrived there to reclaim the purported sacred sites associated with Krishna's life. See Alan W. Entwistle, *Braj: Centre of Krishna Pilgrimage*, Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1987.

6 David L. Haberman, *River of Love in an Age of Pollution: The Yamuna River in Northern India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006, p. 107.

7 The *Mathurāmāhātmya* refers to a sculpture of Surya being worshipped on the banks of the Yamuna in the vicinity of Vishram Ghat. *Mathurāmāhātmya*, trans. Bhumipata Dasa, Vrindavan: Rasbihari Lal & Sons, not dated.

8 Entwistle, *Braj*, p. 311.

9 Asim K. Roy, *History of the Jaipur City*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1978, p. 227.

10 Ibid.

11 For recent representations, see Tony K. Stewart, "Replicating Vaiṣṇava Worlds: Organizing Devotional Space through the Architectonics of the Maṇḍala", *South Asian History and Culture*, Vol. 2, no. 2 (April 2011), pp. 300–36.

12 The construction of the Sati Burj and the Mughal capital of Fatehpur Sikri commenced in 1570 and 1571 respectively, making the two architectural projects contemporaneous.

13 Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot, *India before Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

14 *Haribhaktivilāsa*, Vol. II, Vrindavan: Rasbihari Lal & Sons, 2006, p. 328.

15 Dirk H.A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput & Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450–1850*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 130.

16 Parul P. Dhar, *The Toraṇa in Indian and Southeast Asian Architecture*, New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2010.

17 *Samarāṅgana Sutradhāra of Bhojadeva*, trans. Sudarshan K. Sharma, New Delhi: Parimal Publications, 2007.

18 Keshavdas Mishra, *Veersinhdev Carit*, trans. Keerti Ramachandra, Allahabad: Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, 1996. Cited in Edward L. Rothfarb, *Orchha and Beyond: Design at the Court of Raja Bir Singh Dev Bundela*, Mumbai: Marg, 2012, p. 41.

19 Entwistle, *Braj*, p. 190.

20 The construction by the Maharaja of Benares is recorded in an inscription at the ghat.

21 George N. Curzon, "Address from the Brindaban Municipality", in George N. Curzon, *Speeches by Lord Curzon of Kedleston*, Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1901, p. 166.

22 John Murray, *A Handbook for Travellers in India, Burma, and Ceylon including all British India, the Portuguese and French Possessions, and the Protected Native States*, London: John Murray, 1924, p. 227.

23 Frederic S. Growse, *Mathurā: A District Memoir*, Allahabad: North-Western Provinces and Oudh Government Press, 1874. In the 1960s, district authorities still referred to Growse's text while resolving legal suits regarding property ownership. For instance, see "Payment of a sum of Rs. 2 per month to Gokul Prasad on account of the rent of Jugal Kishore temple", National Archives of India, New Delhi, Education, Health, and Land Department, Education Branch, Proceedings No. 153–154 (B), October 1929.