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Hoping all of you shall enjoy our endeavors and those of our contributors.

**Editor**





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# Emergence of Varanasi as a Medical Hub since Independence

Rishu Kumar\*  
Dr. Satyapal Yadav\*\*

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## Abstract

*This city was pronounced Kashi in the ancient period, Banaras in the Medieval period, and has been called Varanasi since May 1954. A lot of Books and Articles have described various dimensions and features of this city, like Luminous city, Spiritual city, etc., but one dimension has not gotten attention despite its unique contribution to health and medical care. This article is dedicated to the development of medical facilities in the city and their contribution to India since its Independence.*

*Its antiquity and Diversity give it a unique identity worldwide. Medical knowledge with antiquity and diversity makes this city favorable for the growth of medical Care. This place played a significant role in the development of the oldest medical system, Ayurveda, and it has been the workplace of Sushruta, the father of Surgery. Various medical systems have been developed here in different periods, but modern medical institutes have seen a large amount of growth since Independence.*

*This city is now the backbone of medical care in Puruvanchal, giving medical care to the people of eastern UP, western Bihar and Jharkhand, Northern Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh, along with the people of Nepal. This article is based on findings of the analysis of the medical care in Varanasi historically since Independence. Hon'ble PM Shri Narendra Modi also envisioned this city as a Medical Care Hub in Eastern UP. For this article, a critical analysis of existing primary and secondary sources has been done, along with a survey of prominent medical institutes. This article aims to understand the development trends of medical care and their challenges so that the government and the public can contribute positively to making this city a medical hub not only for Puruvanchal but for the whole world.*

**Key Words:** Medical Hub, Medical Tourism, Indigenous Medical Knowledge, Ayurveda, Homeopathy, Modern Medicine, Hospitals, Sova Rigpa, Panchakarma, Varanasi, Purvanchal, Ashrams, Mathas, Unani Tibb, Integrated Medicine.

## Background

People used to come here for the treatment of various diseases and to get rid of their illnesses from a very early period. Initially, when diseases were considered as the punishment of Nature or effects of evil power then in both cases, this city was considered as the important place for the cure as this city has been the place of various gods, particularly Lord Shiva as well as the home of saints or Bhagats or Vaidyas who used to cure people through mantras and herbs. Temples like Sitala Mata, Zwarharneshwar Mahadev temple, Ganga Bathe, and Aghori centres like Kinaram Baba were just some examples of places that used to be health care centres.

This city has witnessed the evolution of the indigenous medical system of Bharat through different phases. Ayurveda, the oldest medical system in the world, has bloomed in this city where Physicians like Divodas, king of Kashi, and father of surgery, Sushruta, gave the concept of the medical system, which is admired even today in the whole world in the field of medical science. Surgery, like rhinoplasty and Cataracts, was popular in 500 BC when the world struggled to understand the mystery of diseases and the human body.

During the medieval period, the Greco-Arabian medical system came to India, which is also called the Unani medical system. With the settlement of the Muslim population in Banaras, Unani began to be practiced here along with the existing indigenous medical system<sup>1</sup>. However, Varanasi could not become the popular Centre of Unani like Prayagraj and Lucknow of Uttar Pradesh.

The modern period of Benares witnessed the development of various forms of medical systems like Homeopathy and Western Modern medicine. With the beginning of the British administration in Benares, Medical systems like Homeopathy and Western Modern Medicine reached this city.

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<sup>1</sup> Verma R. L., (1970): 'The Growth of Greco-Arabian Medicine in Medieval India', Indian J Hist Sci. Nov. 5(3), 47-63, PMID: 11609622.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the medical system developed at a slow pace but in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several public and private medical institutes were established here, which helped Varanasi to regain its status as a Medical city, as in the ancient period.

Banaras Hindu University was established in 1916, with the faculty of Ayurveda consisting of eight departments: Ayurveda Samhita, Basic Principles, Dravyaguna, Kaya Chikitsa, Prasuti Tantra, Shalya Chikitsa, Rasa Shastra, and Medicinal Chemistry to revive and enrich all eight parts of Ayurveda.<sup>2</sup> The integrated Medical System of Sir Sundar Lal Hospital, BHU is a model for the whole world that sets an example of health care by using Indigenous medical systems like Ayurveda, Yoga, and Siddha along with modern Medicine in one Hospital campus.

Thus, historical legacy, diversity of medical care, like Ayurveda, Naturopathy, Homoeopathy, and Modern Medicine, provided a conducive environment for the emergence of Varanasi as a medical hub during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From 2014, after becoming the constituency of PM Narendra Modi, Varanasi has become a highlighted city not only in Bharat but in the whole world. Several medical institutes have been inaugurated by the Honourable Prime Minister. He has already envisioned “*Varanasi as a health care hub in eastern India*”.

### Emergence as a Medical Hub since Independence

After independence, people were hopeful of getting freedom in every aspect of the system and life. The Indian government started to analyse the existing system in every aspect and began to act. On the eve of Independence in 1946, a committee was constituted to do a comprehensive survey of health structure and facilities in India, which also became popularly known as name of Bhore Committee.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the recommendations and conditions of the Bhore Committee could not be applied and achieved, respectively, but the Indian government is working in that direction to achieve the goal. Similar to other systems like administration, education, and other systems, reforms have been started in the existing medical system. The Indigenous medical system, which had been ignored during the British period, came into the discussion of government policies. Varanasi once again got its previous status as it became a leading city to help Bharat reform its medical system and modify it as per the needs of the environment of Bharat. The name of this city was also changed from Banaras back to Varanasi officially by the state government on May 24, 1954.<sup>4</sup>

A great patriot and visionary person, Bharat Ratna Pt. Madan Mohan Malviya ji had not implanted just one sapling of education in Varanasi as BHU, but it was like a Banyan tree that later developed into a full-branching of all types of Indian Knowledge with Modern education, including medical education. He was the pioneer of the Integrated Medical System in Varanasi for preserving and promoting Ayurveda with the collaboration of the modern medical system. He laid the foundation of the Ayurveda college and Hospital in BHU.<sup>5</sup>

Years later, one more prominent personality came to Varanasi, whose name was K.N. Udupa, who added remarkable development in the field of the medical system. First time, he came to Varanasi as a student at Ayurveda College in BHU in 1936 from Udupi and passed his final AMS examination in 1943.<sup>6</sup> He went out to Mumbai and abroad, like the USA, for further study and training. Till 1959, getting back to BHU as a Professor of Surgery and Principal of the Ayurveda College, he had served in various posts and responsibilities, in which the Udupa committee report of 1959 was a milestone in the revival, development, and mainstreaming of the ISM.<sup>7</sup> He transformed the existing Ayurveda college into a College of Medical Sciences, having ten departments, nine departments for Modern Medicine, and one for Indian Medicine. Due to his productive efforts, the College of Medical Science was upgraded to the

<sup>2</sup> British govt,(1915): ‘The Banaras Hindu University Act NO. XVI of 1915, Url: <https://www.bhu.ac.in/siteattachements>bhu>

<sup>3</sup> Duggal, Ravi,(2001): ‘Evolution of Health policy in India, Cehat, url: <http://www.cehat.org/go/uploads/Publications/a147.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> (2002): ‘Guide to the Records in regional Archives Varanasi, Vol-1, Lucknow, UP state archive. Page no- 13

<sup>5</sup> Chowdhary, Kanchan, Datta, Nilanjan & Nathani, Neeru (2015): ‘Mahamana Malviya Ji :A Great Visionary for Ayurvedic education’, An International Journal of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Vol-6, No-1 ,page no- 204.

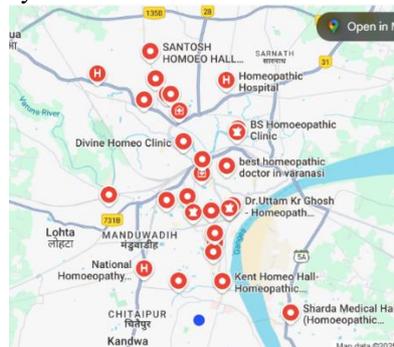
<sup>6</sup> Singh, Ram Harsh,(2010): ‘The life and Times of Professor K. N. Udupa: An Outstanding Alumnus of Banaras Hindu University’, Journal of Ayurveda & Integrative Medicine, Vol-1, Issue-4, Page no- 297.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid p. 298

Institute of Medical Science in 1971.<sup>8</sup> Thus, BHU played a vital role in the revival of Varanasi as a medical city in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Besides BHU, a lot of medical institutes, public as well as private established in Varanasi during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Beyond this, the diversity of this city is a key characteristic that is also reflected in its medical systems. The Government Ayurvedic College and Hospital, established by Padma Vibhushan Pandit Satya Narayan Subhash in 1965, played a significant role in the preservation and promotion of the Ayurveda system of medicine. In 1980-1981, there was one allopathic Aushadhalay and Chikitsalaya, 173 sub-centres, 17 Ayurvedic centres, and 6 Homoeopathic centres.<sup>9</sup> With time, the diversity of medicine has enriched here due to diverse religious and ethnic settlements. For example, the ancient Tibetan medical knowledge 'Sova Rigpa' is being promoted at Sarnath. Kerala's Panchakarma is popular in the OPD of the Ayurveda Hospital of BHU.

Varanasi is known for affordable healthcare due to the large number of government hospitals, which provide health services to its residents as well as people who come here from other regions. For instance, Sir Sundar Lal Hospital (BHU), named after its first Vice Chancellor, Sir Sundar Lal of Banaras Hindu University, affiliated with the Institute of Medical Science, is the largest tertiary referral hospital in eastern UP, expanded from 96 beds in 1926 to 1500 beds by 2017.<sup>10</sup> In addition to this, Pandit Deen Dyal Upadhyay Hospital (District Hospital), Shri Shiv Prasad Gupta Divisional District Hospital, Mata Anand Mai Hospital (District Government Hospital), Lal Bahadur Shastri Hospital, Cantonment General Hospital, etc, are contributing to the medical service of this city. There were 306 sub-centres, 28 primary health centres (6 PHC, 22 APHC), seven Community health centres, and five District hospitals by 2012 as per the National Rural Health Survey.<sup>11</sup>



Location of Homoeopathic Hospitals in Varanasi

Source: Google Maps

Private medical Institutes are the backbone for the medical care services, which are located throughout the city with diversity from super specialty to multi-speciality such as Apex Super Specialty (1960), Kashi Hospital (1990), Heritage Hospital (1994), Popular Hospital (1994), and many more like these have made Varanasi a Medical Hub in eastern Bharat. These Hospitals attract a large number of people for a cure, which leads to the development of favourable ecosystems for clinics and pharmaceutical. Lanka and areas around BHU show the agglomeration of medical facilities and hospitals.

Along with these, Ashrams and Mathas are still providing medical care to a large number of patients who usually come from nearby districts. Aghori Ashram near Malviya Bridge, on the opposite bank of the Ganga River, provides subsidized and free medicine for various diseases like leprosy. Similarly, Gharwa Ghat Ashram can be seen with a flock of people seeking medical and health care assistance. This type of trust and ashrams make this city able to provide healthcare to the weaker section of the society who are unable to afford the cost. Being a religious and pilgrimage site, Funds, Donations, and charity are available for these health centres.

<sup>8</sup> Introduction, Institute of Medical Science, BHU, URL: [https://bhu.ac.in/Site/Page/1\\_4\\_2\\_269\\_Institute-of-Medical-Sciences-Introduction](https://bhu.ac.in/Site/Page/1_4_2_269_Institute-of-Medical-Sciences-Introduction)

<sup>9</sup> Shweta, Dr.,(2018): 'Spatial Distribution of Health Care facilities in Kashi Vidyapeeth Block, Varanasi District', International Journal of Innovative Research and Advanced Studies, 5(12), page no-62.

<sup>10</sup> <https://prognhealth.com/blog/list-of-government-hospitals>

<sup>11</sup> District profile: Varanasi, URL: <https://upnrhm.gov.in/varanasi> >pdf

All the above-mentioned factors have also contributed to the rise of medical tourism in Varanasi. This medical tourism has accelerated further after becoming the constituency of PM Shri Narendra Modi. Namami Gange, Swachhta Abhiyan, Traffic Reform, and the Building of new Hospitals like the Trauma centre and Mahamana Cancer Shatabdi Sansthan have made this city one of the favourable and accessible destinations for Tourism as well as medical tourism from all parts of the country and the world. Diverse forms of medical systems and low cost are the key factors for medical tourism. Slowly, Varanasi is developing into a medical hub in eastern Uttar Pradesh, where several hospitals have established good R&D facilities and patient care services, which are useful for various innovative medical therapies all over the world.<sup>12</sup> Medical tourism from abroad is also showing positive signs in Varanasi. In 2010, several international tourists who visited Varanasi was 4,62,906, which is 12.39 % more than 2009.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the Medical System of Varanasi has not only maintained its survival through the various ages but also adapted itself to needs and adopted from various other medical systems to provide health care services. Today, Varanasi is developing the model of an integrated medical system through Modern Medicine and Ayurveda at the same campus of Banaras Hindu University, which is also considered important by the WHO to provide accessible and universal health care to all humanity irrespective of their gender, region and income.

Despite all these, there are some challenges that act as a hurdle for this city to harness its full potential as a medical hub. Traffic Jam, Low quality medicine, Inadequate medical Infrastructure and over burden of patients in hospitals cause a lot of suffering to the patients. Lack of new research and study in indigenous medical knowledge like Ayurveda, Panchkarma, etc lags them in providing an effective cure. Ashrams and Mathas are declining and becoming extinct due to a lack of support and funding. Availability of Doctors and Staff, along with equipment, is less as compared to required as per the WHO guidelines, particularly in government Hospitals. Expenses out of pocket become a major challenge in Private Hospitals.

All these challenges are barriers in the path of making Varanasi a fully developed medical hub, but the present government is focusing on improving the condition and fostering medical facilities so that this city can provide quality health care with affordability to Purvanchal region which is one of the highest population density regions.

### Conclusion

On analysing the various literature related to the different ages of Varanasi, we find that the medical system of Varanasi has been a significant centre of medical care for people. It was the place from where Ayurveda and ancient Surgery flourished in the different parts of Bharat. During the Medieval period, Unani and Homeopathy enriched the existing medical knowledge and care of the people. In the modern period, this city had to suffer in the initial period, but the establishment of BHU in 1916 with the Ayurveda Faculty brought its reputation for medical education and care back. Since Independence, a lot of private and public hospitals have been established that offer healthcare to a population of more than ten crore in regions such as UP, Bihar, Nepal, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, and Jharkhand. Natural care & Yoga, along with cheap modern medicine, attract people from abroad, and the number of International medical tourists is increasing year by year.

Hence, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Varanasi has been a medical city since ancient times. This city is not only known as Mahashamshan but also as Anandkanan because people used to come for liberation from their sorrows and diseases. Diseases, whether mental or physiological, have been cured by various methods that the medical system has used prominently. As '*Diversity*' and '*Antiquity*' make this city unique, similarly, these two fundamental characteristics make the medical system of this city special and attractive not only to the people of Bharat but to the people of the world. Now, this city has regained its position in the medical field, but despite this, a lot of work needs to be done to promote it as a medical hub not only in eastern Bharat but in the whole world. This distinct characteristic of this city must be studied, explored, and analysed further so that proper steps can be taken to improve its infrastructure and make it accessible to all.

<sup>12</sup> Ansari, Dr. Irfan Ahmed, (2012): 'SWOT Analysis of Medical Tourism in Varanasi', International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, Vol-2, Issue-3, March, ISSN 223157, page no. 218.

<sup>13</sup> Ansari, Dr. Irfan Ahmed, (2012): 'SWOT Analysis of Medical Tourism in Varanasi', International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, Vol-2, Issue-3, March, ISSN 223157

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# Kashi Gyan Parampara: Knowledge System of Banaras and its Impact

Dr. Anita Kumari\*

## Abstract

*Kashi has always been an important centre of knowledge and learning in Indian History. From Ancient period to Modern times, from Sanskrit, Buddhist, Persian, Hindi literature to English and other language centers, from ancient Gurus to modern day Professors, from Hindi patti students to Research scholars of foreign countries, it has remained the most popular and most vibrant centre of learning in India. It was favoured by all religions, all cultures and all countries. According to Buddhist and Jaina literature, Banaras was the most famous centre of Buddhist and Jaina education in India during Mahajanpad period (6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.). It has been a great centre of learning for students of Fine Arts and Performing Arts too.*

*During the medieval period, Kabir and Ravidas were the main torchbearers of knowledge system of Banaras. The advent of Muslim rulers resulted in establishment of institutions teaching Arabic and Persian. During the modern period, the oldest College, the Banaras Sanskrit College was founded by Jonathan Duncan in 1791. After that many Colleges and Universities were established to impart western style education in India. The main subjects of education were history, law, literature, philosophy, astrology, medicine etc.*

**Keywords:** Kashi, Banaras, Education, Learning, Gurukul, Pathshala, Vihara, Female Education, Maktab, Madarsas

## Introduction

According to the official website of Government of Uttar Pradesh, “Varanasi or Banaras (also known as Kashi) is one of the oldest living cities in the world.....”. Mark Twain once wrote, “Banaras is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together.”<sup>1</sup> Varanasi has been a great centre of learning for revolutionary and conflicting ideas. Thinkers, poets and educationists of divergent ideologies have co-existed and flourished here. From 6<sup>th</sup> century BC we find the evidence of Kashi being the seat of Vedic education. Buddha gave his first sermon at Sarnath and Sarnath became a big centre of Buddhist learning. Parsvanath, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Jain Tirthankar belonged to Varanasi and it was also home to Jain monks and Tirthankars coming to Varanasi in search of gyan or knowledge.

## Hindu System of Education

Kashi was a city of Hindu learning through ages. Various Brahman Pandits used to impart knowledge of Hindu Vedic religion and philosophy through different schools of thought. Even today they are considered keepers and interpreters of ancient knowledge and traditions. Diana L Eck refers in her book , ‘Banaras: City Of Light’- the pundits (teachers), pujaris (temple priests), Pandas (pilgrimage priests), mahantas (heads of a large temple complex) and Vyasas (storytellers) as one of her most important source of information.<sup>2</sup>

The subject matter of education varied from Sanskrit, Yoga, spiritualism, philosophy to black magic, death rituals etc. The syllabus included reading of Vedas, learning of rituals and reciting of hymns. Varanasi is mentioned as capital of Kashi in Anguttar Nikaya in the list of Shodasha Mahajanapada (16 Mahajanapadas). Earlier it was inhabited by indigenous people. After the advent of Aryans, it became an important centre of Vedic learning. Ajatsatru, who held influence over Varanasi, was a patron of learning and literature during Mahajanapad age. According to Jatakas, famous Acharyas of Banaras taught three Vedas and eighteen shilpas.<sup>3</sup>

Kashi was never famous for some grand university in ancient period such as Taxila, Nalanda or Vikramshila. It was famous for its Acharyas and their ashramas. There never was a famous school or peeth for education but individual teachers were carrying their sacred duty of teaching their shishyas (pupils). They used to provide their students with food and other necessities of life. Kings and rich persons provided them with grants in cash, kind or land (agrahar or brahmdeya) to carry on the activity of teaching and learning. The list of some of the most famous gurus of Varanasi included Dhanvantari also known as the father of Indian Medicine. He was born here as King of Banaras and he taught Sushrut-Ayurveda (traditional Indian Medical Science). Sushrut came to be known as Father of Indian Surgery in

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India because of his extensive knowledge of surgical process (shalya tantra) mentioned in his book Sushruta Samhita. Sushruta Samhita is one of the most important books written on Indian medical science. It was translated into Arabic as “Kitab Shah Shun al Hindi” and “Kitab I Susurud”. It was also translated in latin and German.<sup>4</sup>

### **Buddhist System of Education**

Sarnath near Banaras was famous for Buddhist learning and philosophy. Buddhist system of education was largely secular and inclusive. It was based on the teachings of Buddha. Buddha himself was a great teacher. During the reign of king Ashoka, Banaras became the most famous centre for Buddhist learning in Eastern India. The Sarnath monastery, with its architectural remains, is a living proof of the splendour of Buddhist learning system. The first Buddhist Samgha was established here. The tradition of monks living together in a Vihara and following religious traditions like meditation started here. The ruins of the Mulgandha Kuti Vihara are supposed to be the place where Buddha spent his first rainy season preaching and meditating. Later Viharas became an important centre of learning and meditation. During medieval period, the Dharma Chakra Jina Vihara was constructed or restored by Kumardevi, wife of Govindchandra.

The main aim of education was the complete physical, mental, moral and psychological development of a person. The main emphasis was on the development of the character of a person. The education was imparted through several methods such as oral teachings, performance of meditations and educational tours to sacred places. It was imparted in the language of the masses. The subjects of education included three Pitakas, grammar, philosophy, literature etc. Buddhist system of education was available to all classes and female education was also popular. On the request of Anand, Buddha allowed admission of around 500 women in Samgha where some arrangement for their education was also made. The purpose of education was the attainment of Nirvana or Salvation.<sup>5</sup>

### **Jaina System of Education**

The Jaina Temple of Parshvanath at Bhelupur, Varanasi was one of the earliest centres of Jaina learning. Jaina system of education focuses on spiritualism; it emphasises on ethical living, spiritual growth and the welfare of all beings. This philosophy underlines principles like non violence, non attachment, truthfulness, non stealing and celibacy. The students were supposed to embody these principles through their attitudes, behaviours and interactions with others and the world around them. The Jaina system of education included processes such as vachana (reading scriptures and texts - agams and other religious writings); prachhana (asking questions); anupreksha (to reflect what was learnt); amhaya (to break complex subjects into smaller parts for thorough and deep understanding); and dharmapalesha (spreading religious teachings from one place to another). Basadis or Jaina temples or monasteries were prominent centres of education. Many famous Jaina monks and scholars belonged to Banaras. Kashi was one of the Saptbhangi or Sapt Puri, seven highly sacred places of Jainism; the other six being Ayodhya, Ujjain, Haridwar, Mathura, Dwaraka and Kanchipuram. Jaina acharyas always used the language of the masses as the medium of instruction. Co education and female education were some other important aspects of Jaina system of education.<sup>6</sup>

### **Education System during Medieval Period**

The period witnessed the growth of the Islamic system of education. Varanasi continued to be an important centre of learning during the medieval period. Some new subjects, languages and learning methods were added to the education system. The Hindu system of education was marked by the development of Vidyapeeths and Pathshalas which were known for specific subject matter such as Vedas, Sahitya, Vyakaran, philosophy nyaya, mimansa, Sankhya, Yoga, etc. There were separate schools for providing education on eighteen art forms also known as sippas.<sup>7</sup>

Al Beruni, an Arab traveller of early 11<sup>th</sup> century named Kashi as the most important centre of education in the whole of North India. He describes how Muslim invasions rounded the seats of Hindu learning in Kashmir and Banaras, places far from Muslim invasions. In 1194, Qutub-ud-din Aibak plundered the city and destroyed many institutions of the Hindu education system.

The Hindu system of education suffered a lot due to such events. Many Brahmin families migrated to South India but Varanasi once again flourished as a center of Sanskrit learning. Kullabhata wrote his commentary on Manusmriti at Varanasi during this period. Darashikoh was a famous patron of the scholars of Varanasi.

### **Bhakti Movement**

Several prominent figures of the Bhakti Movement belonged to Varanasi, such as Kabir and Ravidas. Guru Nanak also visited this place and attempted to spread his teachings here. Bhakti Movement was largely a people's movement in which the classical Sanskrit literature was replaced by new poetic literature composed in the languages of the people. One of the most important teachers of this movement was Ramanand, whose disciples included untouchables, outcastes and downtrodden people. The Bhakti poets contributed to the growth of vernacular languages.

### **Formal Education System**

Maharaja Jai Singh of Amber is credited with the establishment of regular educational institution at Kangan Wali Haveli near Bindu Madhav Temple (1585 A.D.). It provided education to the sons of rich persons only. Several important works of literature were written during this period such as Kashi Khanda, Kashi Rahasya, Kashi Kedar Mahatmya. Jagannath composed "Ganga Lahri" in praise of Ganga. Narayan Bhatta compiled the "Tristhalisetu" on three great pilgrim cities of India. Manuals were written on various topics including birth to cremation rites (pg. 85, Eck).

In 1584, Ralph Fitch was the first English visitor to record his impressions of "Banaras". Fitch came with a letter of introduction from Queen Elizabeth to the great monarchs of India and China. He mentioned the religious nature of the town in it. Some other noteworthy visitors of Banaras were Jean Baptiste Tavernier, Bishop Reginald, Edwin Arnold, etc. Francois Bernier called it "The Oxford and Canterbury of India in one", referring to its pre-eminence as a seat of learning and religious authority.

Diana L. Eck mentions the process of Upanayan Samskara- the initiation ceremony of formal education in a Hindu twice-born (Dwij) family for a male child, which includes taking seven steps in the direction of Banaras. She describes vividly the rituals of some Hindu weddings in which the bridegroom declares his renunciation of the world and goes to Banaras to study the Vedas. This announcement is followed by the pleading, bantering and bargaining through which the bride's family dissuade the young man from his noble goal. Banaras was considered to be the fountainhead of all the wisdom aspired by human beings. (pg. 55, Eck)

The purpose of education was not to flaunt a degree of qualification or to gain higher employment but to attain 'Gyana' through pursuit of wisdom. The basic purpose was to achieve the highest level of knowledge regarding life, birth, rebirth, moksha or salvation, etc. It gave rise to different school of philosophies such as Samkhya, Yoga, Mimansa, Vedanta, Nyaya Vaisheshika and so on. Some other schools of thought included the Jainis, Buddhist and Lokayat sects and their preachers. Kashi became popular for the study of Vedas and came to be known as "Brahmavardhan", referring to the increase of Brahmanism (the place where the wisdom of a Brahmin increases) or 'Kashi', the place where the nature of a Brahman is truly illuminated. (Diana L Eck, pg.59)

Francois Bernier calls Benares the 'Athens of India'. He writes, "The town contains no colleges or regular classes, as in our universities, instead it resembles the schools of the ancients; the masters being dispersed over different parts of the town. In private houses, having four, six or twelve disciples, maximum number being fifteen. It is usual for the pupils to remain 10-12 years under their respective preceptors (Chapter 2, pg.84, Eck).

### **Education System during Modern Period**

According to Abul Fazl, Varanasi had been a seat of learning from time immemorial in Hindustan. The education imparted at Varanasi was more religious than intellectual. With the advent of the East India Company, the education system in India started to change.<sup>8</sup> In 1791, Jonathan Duncan founded the Sanskrit Pathshala. Earlier, Sanskrit texts were collected and Sanskrit Pandits were employed for academic purposes in this institution. In 1898, Annie Besant started a Central Hindu College with the aim to preserve the Hindu philosophical and cultural traditions and also to train students in the modern sciences. The Maharaja of Banaras donated the land for the University. It was established as a secular institution. In 1921, Kashi Vidyapeeth was established in response to Gandhiji's call for the Non-Cooperation Movement.

### **Impact of the knowledge system of Banaras**

All these institutions and the changing dimensions of the economy as well as the employment scenario led to the redefining of the concept of knowledge. The inhabitants of this spiritual capital of India became aware of the importance of the western system of education. It resulted in growing awareness of importance of traditional education with modern modifications.

From 1890 to 1920, several Anglo-Vernacular schools, Christian schools and private schools largely based on the British Educational model, came to be set up in Banaras; Anglo-Bengali School, 1896, Bengali Tola School, 1898, Central Hindu School 1904, DAV School 1900, Gujarat Vidyamandir, 1906, Saraswati Vidyalaya, 1917. Female educational institutions also sprang up such as Rameshwari Goel, 1939, Arya Mahila 1933, Bipan Bihari, 1922, Durga Charan, 1918, Sarojini Vidya Kendra, Central Hindu School, 1964, Gopi Radha 1963, Vasant Kanya School 1954, Nandlal Bajoria, 1955 are some examples.<sup>9</sup>

Female education was largely ignored during the ancient and the medieval period. From the ancient period, the duty of women was to do household chores, get married according to their parents' choice of groom and raise children. In the medieval period, the same pattern continued and widows and women abandoned by their families were sent to live a life of isolation, begging and charity. During the modern period, the progress of women's education was still minimal. Nita Kumar in her article, Widows, Education and Social Change in Twentieth Century Banaras, discusses in detail the story of women who despite being widows, set up educational institutions in Banaras, such as Sarojini Devi Bhattacharya, Satyavati Devi, Leela Sharma (unmarried), Vidya Bai, Gayatri Devi among more. The widows pursuing education were supposed to be idealistic in their conduct, following a vegetarian diet, leading a plain and simple life wearing coarse sarees, sleeping on the floor and strictly adhering to austerities. According to one study, in Banaras the number of girl students crossed the 1000 mark in 1924 and the 2000 mark in 1932. (Nita Kumar, pg WS-19) Women were considered to be repositories of the best elements of the old culture. We can see a clear-cut divide in the male-female education ratio. Men were exposed to education, Vedic/Arabic as well as Western. Women were left to maintain the conservative socio-cultural lifestyle. The rise of the middle class accompanied with the ideology of nationalism paved the way for female education in Banaras.

#### **Changes in teaching methods and medium of instruction**

The medium of instruction changed from the traditional Sanskrit and Urdu to Hindi and English. Some institutions were established specifically for Muslim women such as the Zeenatul Islamia School was created to impart both Dini or moral and the duniyawi or worldly knowledge. The Banaras Hindu University was established with the purpose of integrating Indian values with Western educational framework. It also played an important role in the Indian National Freedom Movement. BHU not only provided only world class education to male students but also had a dedicated college for Women with hostel (Mahila Mahavidyala- MMV), which was set up in 1929. Pt. Madan Mohan Malaviya was a strong supporter of female education.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1950-51 batch, only 43 women were enrolled in the university courses. According to the 2011 census, only 67% women and 84% men are literate in Banaras. It means 33% of the female population there was illiterate in Banaras.<sup>11</sup> This depicts a dismal picture of female education in Banaras which is considered to be the city of learning.

#### **Important Scholars and Institutions of Banaras:-**

Apart from gurukuls, Vidyapeeths, Maktab, Vihara and Madarsas, some academicians individually wielded great influence.

**Patanjali**- He was a great grammarian of second century B.C. who wrote the book Mahabhashya. He also authored Yoga Sutra (a treatise on yoga).

**Shankaracharya**-He is credited with the revival of Hinduism in Northern India (8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. He established four peeths, namely, Puri, Sringeri, Dwarka and Badri to propagate Hindu learning.

**Ramanuja** in the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. had widespread influence in Banaras because of Ramananda.

**Lakshmidhara** who was the Chief Minister of Govindchandra, wrote the book 'Kriyakalpataru' at Banaras.

**Kabir** the Banarsi Bhakti poet whose followers are known as Kabirpanthi is also an important figure here. His works include banis, dohas, Sakhis and so on. He opposed religious malpractices.

**Ravidas** was also a famous Bhakti poet who belonged to an untouchable caste. His poems are included in Adi Granth which is the sacred book of Sikhism. His temples are built at several places.

**Ramananda** was a prominent thinker of the Advaita philosophy. He was the founder of the Ramanandi Sampradaya and Kabir was one of his disciples.

**Vaman Pandit** was a notable sixteenth century scholar who pursued his studies in Banaras for twelve long years. He went on to become a popular Marathi scholar and poet later.

**Sarva Vidya ki Rajdhani,**

The traditional systems of education among Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists were largely religious and literary in character. The Macaulay's 1835 Minute on Education stated the objective of the British Government as, "The promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India". It changed the whole scenario of traditional teaching methods there. Several universities were established to impart knowledge through new modes. The Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies established in 1967 at Sarnath is an example of new development. Banaras Hindu University has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Jain Education Institutes Support, a not-for-profit Trust in New Delhi. As part of the MOU, BHU will receive a donation of Rs. 1.05 crores to set up the Bhagwan Shreyasnath Jain Study Fund. Kashi is increasingly becoming the epitome of Sarva Vidya ki Rajdhani for all types of religion, languages and cultures in the modern period as well.

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# Banarasi Brocade: A Cultural Heritage

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## Abstract

*Banaras (Varanasi or Kashi) stands as a city with an unbroken cultural tradition, enduring through centuries of political and social shifts. Often recognized as the cultural capital of India, Banaras has not only been a significant spiritual and cultural hub but has also maintained a rich heritage in textile craftsmanship. Among its most distinguished contributions is the Banarasi brocade, a textile art form rooted in antiquity and celebrated for its intricacy and elegance all over the world. This brocade, crafted with elaborate warp and weft threads of varied colours and materials, remains an iconic symbol of Indian artistry. Flourishing since the Vedic era and reaching its zenith during the Mughal period, Banarasi brocade weaving has persisted through the ages, continually adapting yet preserving its authenticity. Today, the brocade industry in Banaras serves as both a cultural legacy and a thriving economic sector, producing textiles cherished in India and across the world. This paper will study the journey of Banarasi brocade, exploring its historical significance, technical artistry, and evolution through the centuries. It will also focus on its evolution in the British era.*

**Keywords:** Brocade, Weaving, Culture, Textile, Warp, Weft.

## Introduction

India has been celebrated since antiquity for its exquisite textile traditions, with Banarasi brocades standing out as one of the most iconic and culturally rich examples. Originating in the ancient city of Varanasi (formerly Banaras), these brocades are renowned for their intricate craftsmanship, characterized by vibrant colours, Persian-inspired floral and foliate motifs, and a luxurious interplay of gold and silver threads. The allure of Banarasi brocade lies not only in its aesthetic appeal but also in the centuries-old weaving techniques that have been meticulously preserved and passed down through generations. Traditionally, artisans employed pure gold and silver threads, producing fabrics of exceptional quality that resisted tarnish and retained their lustre for centuries. The later incorporation of silk enhanced the visual depth and body of the textile, creating a richly textured fabric admired worldwide.

The distinct weaving technique that defines Banarasi brocade involves interlacing warp and weft threads of varied colours, often combining different materials. This complex process results in a densely woven silk fabric adorned with patterns in metallic threads, embodying both artistic sophistication and cultural symbolism. The motifs seen in Banarasi brocade, such as delicate flowers, vines, and arabesques, bear the influence of Persian art, introduced during the Mughal period, yet are deeply rooted in Indian cultural aesthetics. These designs are not only decorative but carry symbolic significance, reflecting the spiritual and cultural heritage of Varanasi, a city long associated with art, religion, and philosophy.



**Image- Handloom Haat, New Delhi (Self clicked).**

Despite the passing of time and the advent of modern technology, the art of Banarasi brocade weaving has endured, adapting while remaining true to its historical origins. Today, Varanasi continues to be a vital centre for this craft, producing brocades that blend historical techniques with contemporary designs. This research paper aims to explore the symbolism embedded within Banarasi brocade, examining how these designs serve as a cultural language that communicates aspects of identity, heritage,

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and artistry unique to Indian textiles. By delving into the motifs, techniques, and historical context of Banarasi brocade, this study seeks to illuminate the enduring significance of this art form within both the local and global cultural landscape.

### Origin of Banarasi Brocade

Brocade is a decorative fabric characterized by intricate woven patterns that are separate from the cloth's structural foundation. This effect is achieved by incorporating additional pattern weft or extra warp threads, similar to techniques used in lamps. The term "brocade" comes from a root meaning "to prick," alluding to its needlework-like appearance. Thus, brocade weaving is often described as "embroidery weaving" or "loom embroidery." While brocade can technically be made from any fiber, such as wool, linen, or cotton, the term typically refers to fabrics with elaborate designs, especially those featuring gold or silver patterns. The brocade technique involves adding one or more supplementary wefts to create intricate patterns over a foundation weft. Unlike tapestry weaving, which lacks a continuous base thread, brocade includes a primary weft thread that spans from selvedge to selvedge, creating a stable foundation for the added pattern wefts. In Varanasi, one distinctive brocade technique known as meenakari (similar to enamelwork) employs silk for the background and zari threads to form detailed patterns. Another method, known as urtu, combines multiple styles of binding within a single design, allowing for complex and layered motifs.

Varanasi has a long-standing tradition of weaving specialized brocades for export to regions in West and Southeast Asia, contributing significantly to the richness and diversity of its textile offerings. These brocades are often identified by evocative and poetic names that reflect their aesthetic qualities, such as Chand Tara (moon and stars), Dhupchhaon (sunshine and shade), Mazchar (ripples of silver), Morgala (peacock's neck), and Bulbul Chashm (nightingale's eyes).<sup>2</sup> As a major center for brocade weaving, Varanasi has maintained its cultural and economic importance across India.

The weaving tradition, which traces its origins back to the Vedic period and reached its height under the Mughal patronage, highlights the central role of textile production in the lives of the people of Varanasi. In fact, weaving became the predominant occupation in the region. From the perspective of historical development, the textile industry in Varanasi finds mention in sources ranging from the Rig Vedic literature to accounts of post-independence India, underscoring its enduring presence and significance in the region's socio-economic and cultural landscape.



Image- Brocade Saree at Crafts Museum, New Delhi. (Self-Clicked)

### Symbolism in Banarasi Brocade

Banarasi brocades reflect a deep cultural heritage, with designs and styles that embody symbolic meanings tied to various aesthetic and cultural values. Traditional Banarasi brocades can be classified into three main types: Zari Brocades, Amru Brocades, and Abrawans, each representing distinct symbolic qualities and materials that have resonated through centuries of craftsmanship. Zari Brocades, for example, are renowned for their opulent use of gold and silver threads, or zari, symbolizing wealth, prosperity, and celebration. The heavy brocade kimkhab is particularly notable, with over half its surface adorned in intricate zari work that leaves minimal silk exposed. Once widely popular for fabric yardage in the 18th and 19th centuries, kimkhab remains a staple in bridal wear, signifying opulence, and enduring tradition. In contrast, lighter gilt brocades like bafta and pot-than reveal a greater proportion of the silk base, allowing for a more delicate shimmer, balancing elegance with restraint.

Amru Brocades, on the other hand, achieve their intricate patterns using supplementary silk wefts rather than metallic threads, emphasizing the beauty and refinement of silk alone. Among Amru brocades,

the tanchoi is a distinctive style noted for its richly patterned fabric that has no visible loose threads on the reverse side. The unused threads are cleverly woven into the foundation, creating a satin-like ground where intricate motifs repeat in a mesmerizing rhythm. The introduction of tanchoi weaving to India in the late 19th century is attributed to three Parsi brothers named Chhoi, who brought the technique from China to Surat, Gujarat, enriching Indian weaving traditions with this unique blend of silk and cultural exchange.

Abrawans, the other brocade style, feature a sheer, delicate quality achieved through a transparent muslin silk or organza base. Their ethereal, translucent appearance symbolizes lightness, elegance, and spirituality, making them ideal for ceremonial and formal occasions. With varying degrees of zari and silk patterning, Abrawans can create either a subtle, shimmering effect or a more pronounced metallic sheen, depending on the amount of zari used. Abrawans may fall within the Zari or Amru categories, highlighting the versatility and layered meaning of Banarasi brocade's rich visual language. Banarasi brocades are far more than ornamental fabrics; they are imbued with cultural and symbolic significance, crafted to convey values of prosperity, heritage, and artistry. The unique qualities of each brocade type continue to inspire and connect generations, reflecting a timeless aesthetic that symbolizes the cultural essence of Banaras.

### Research Questions

1. What is the historical origin of Banarasi Brocade?
2. How socio-political changes influenced it?
3. Cultural symbolism embedded within Banarasi Brocade?

### Evolution through different dynasties

#### Ancient India

Since the Rig Vedic period, various textiles have been documented, among which 'Hiranya' (literally 'cloth of gold') stands out as a significant type. This luxurious textile, associated with gods in Vedic literature who wore it during grand events and stately journeys, is often considered an early form of what we now recognize as zari or kimkhab brocade. Additionally, references to embroidery can be found in Vedic texts, highlighting an ancient appreciation for ornate fabric decoration.<sup>3</sup>

The Jataka tales and early Pali texts serve as primary sources for understanding the textile history of this era, offering insights into the activities of weavers, known as tantuvidyas, and their guilds, as well as details on their weaving techniques. Varanasi (Banaras) emerged as a major textile center early on, supported by the surrounding cotton-growing regions. This access to raw materials likely spurred the development of a robust textile industry in the city, which was an important provincial capital, and at times, the seat of an independent state. Known as "Kasi" in early Pali literature, Varanasi gained renown for textiles such as Kasikuttama and Kasiya, celebrated for their fine quality and distinctive craftsmanship. The Majjhima Nikaya<sup>4</sup> even mentions Varaseyyaka, a textile noted for its delicate texture, while the Kasika Suchivastra is thought to refer to some form of early embroidery work.

Kasi maintained its status as a regional capital and textile hub under the Nanda, Maurya, and Sunga dynasties, underscoring an unbroken tradition in textile production during these illustrious periods. The second-century BCE scholar Patanjali also commented on the Kasika textiles of the Sunga period, noting that Kasi's fabrics were more costly and perhaps superior in quality compared to those from other centers like Mathura. The city's prominence in textile production is further affirmed by Buddhist Sanskrit texts from the same period, such as the Divyavadana, which references fabrics identified as Kasika Vastra and Kasi Kasikamsu<sup>5</sup>. These mentions confirm Varanasi's enduring reputation as a center for exceptional textile craftsmanship, illustrating its lasting impact on the cultural and economic landscape of ancient India.<sup>6</sup> The weaving industry in Banaras has ancient roots, with references in Sanskrit, Buddhist, and Jain literature identifying Kashi as a significant center for weaving and textile trade. Several types of fabrics mentioned in these sources, such as Varanaseyyaka, Kasikuttam, Kasikamsu, and Kasika, are associated with Kashi's textile heritage. In the late 8th century, Damodar Gupta's Kuttanimattam describes a lower garment adorned with gold thread from Banaras, highlighting the region's historical reputation for luxurious, decorative textiles.

#### Mughal Period

Historical accounts indicate that Varanasi's weaving industry reached its zenith during the Mughal period, largely due to the patronage of emperors like Akbar. From Akbar's reign onward, uninterrupted records of zari work and brocade production can be found, often depicted in Mughal and Rajasthani

paintings.<sup>7</sup> Notably, the sixteenth century marked a significant shift in design, as traditional motifs were replaced by newly adapted styles reflecting Indian tastes, with a strong emphasis on floral patterns. Animal and bird motifs, popular in earlier periods, were largely abandoned, and Persian influences became prominent due to the involvement of Persian artists like Ghias Naqshaband, who contributed greatly to Akbar's royal atelier.

European travelers who visited India during the Mughal era also provided insights into Varanasi's thriving textile industry. Ralph Fitch, an English traveler in the late 16th century, described Varanasi as a flourishing hub of cotton textile production, known for manufacturing turbans favored by the Mughals.<sup>8</sup> These turbans, often crafted with zari, were indicative of the silk industry's vibrancy. Another traveler, Peter Mundy, noted a silk canopy hanging in the Viswanath temple in 1632, possibly a product of Varanasi's zari craftsmanship. Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, who visited in 1665, observed a bustling caravanserai in Varanasi where weavers sold their textiles directly to customers, bypassing middlemen—a sign of the city's economic prosperity.

Tavernier also described quality seals on cotton and silk textiles, and severe penalties for merchants who failed to uphold these standards. During Shah Jahan's reign, Varanasi remained celebrated for producing cummerbunds, turbans, and women's garments, particularly odhinis and dupattas. The esteemed Italian traveler Niccolao Manucci, in his 17th-century travel book *Storia do Mogor*<sup>9</sup>, recorded that Varanasi exported high-quality gold and silver zari textiles worldwide. Other sources from this period, such as the *Khulasat-ut-Tawarikh* (1720), mention notable fabrics from Varanasi like Jhuna and Mihrgula, although these types are not elaborated upon in the text.

Varanasi's textile industry was well-regarded not only within India but also internationally. As noted by Peter Mundy, local merchants sourced turbans and short silk cloths known as alachali from Varanasi, famous for its quality. The demand for Varanasi silk grew significantly in the 17th century as India's trade relationships with European countries expanded. Textiles from Varanasi were exported to Turkey, Persia, Khurasan, Northern Africa, and Britain. In fact, silk fabrics from Varanasi were highly valued as diplomatic gifts. In 1633–34, Emperor Shah Jahan included Varanasi's finest fabrics among his gifts to Shah Safi of Iran, underscoring their status and quality. Under Aurangzeb, Varanasi retained its reputation as a leading center for gold and silver textiles, which were distributed across the Mughal Empire and exported to distant markets. Manucci remarked on the high demand for these fabrics, noting the saying, *Thora khana, Banaras mein rehna*<sup>10</sup> ("Little to eat, but live in Banaras"), reflecting the city's enduring allure despite modest means. Varanasi's thriving textile industry thus continued to flourish throughout the Mughal era, securing its place as a center of artistic and commercial excellence.



**Image- Kinkhab Saree, Banaras (19th century), (Self-Clicked).**

### **Post Mughal period**

The historical records following the Mughal period provide a clearer picture of the silk and brocade industry in Banaras, largely due to accounts by British travelers and official documents from colonial India. British descriptions offer insights into both the textile practices and the socio-economic significance of the Banaras silk industry in the 19th century. One of the earliest comprehensive accounts came from George Viscount Valentia, who, during a durbar in Banaras, observed local textile traders displaying finely crafted zari and brocades. Valentia noted the intricacy and expense of these fabrics, highlighting that they were typically reserved for special occasions. His remarks emphasized the

economic reliance of Banaras on its textile trade, especially brocades and zari, which were in demand both locally and for export to Europe.<sup>11</sup>



**Image- Brocade Silk and Zari (20th century), (Self-clicked).**

Shortly after, Mr. Dweance, the then collector of Banaras, provided census data that included detailed information about local artisans. His report specifically referenced Muslim weavers, including carpet weavers and Rajput Muslim weavers, who produced various types of zari and brocades. The census recorded about 580 households engaged in this craft, suggesting a robust community of skilled artisans.<sup>12</sup> The British Bishop Reginald Heber also described Banaras as home to a diverse textile industry, producing fine silk, cotton, and woollen goods, likely including zari and brocades. In 1847, Mrs. Colin Mackenzie documented an Indian prince wearing "wide trousers of cloth of gold<sup>13</sup>" or brocade, further illustrating the popularity of these opulent textiles among Banaras's elite. Her descriptions, along with preserved textile examples, underscore the cultural prominence of zari and brocade among the gentry.<sup>14</sup>

Significant evidence regarding the industry's importance comes from government documents<sup>15</sup>. The 1922 gazetteer mentions that textile production was one of the largest employment sectors in Banaras, with over 13,000<sup>16</sup> individuals working within the city and another 10,000 in surrounding areas. It further provides details on the types of textiles produced, including silk fabrics, tie-and-dye work, embroidery, and the use of gold and silver threads.<sup>17</sup>

The 1965 gazetteer reaffirms the significance of silk textiles in Banaras, describing items such as dupattas, scarves, saris, silk dhotis (pitamber), and brocades with various designs. The document also addresses the sources of raw materials—silk, gold and silver threads, and cotton yarn—used in production, underscoring the city's sustained status as a hub for high-quality textiles in post-independence India. These post-Mughal records collectively underscore the continued influence of Banaras as a center for brocade production, reflecting both its historical legacy and its adaptability through changing periods. The accounts from travelers, officials, and government records reveal not only the refinement and skill inherent in Banaras's brocade industry but also its critical role in the local economy and cultural fabric of the region.

### **Conclusion**

Historical records trace Banarasi brocade's evolution from the Mughal era's luxurious court wear to its continued adaptation under British influence and its relevance in global markets today. The industry not only sustains local artisans and preserves traditional weaving techniques but also embodies India's rich cultural identity, making its preservation critical for future generations. Furthermore, Banarasi brocade, an exquisite manifestation of Kashi's rich cultural heritage, encapsulates the essence of *Kashi Vaibhav*. This centuries-old craft, deeply intertwined with the city's spiritual and cultural ethos, continues to thrive, reflecting the enduring allure of Varanasi as a revered center of Indian heritage. The intricate motifs and patterns, inspired by nature, mythology, and Persian influences, symbolize a harmonious blend of diverse cultural elements. The timeless beauty of Banarasi brocade not only sustains local artisanship but also fosters a profound sense of pride and identity among the people of Kashi. As a cultural emblem of unparalleled significance, Banarasi brocade remains a testament to the opulence of Indian craftsmanship and the enduring legacy of the sacred city, weaving the very fabric of Indian heritage.

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# Traditions, Deprivations and Life in Widow Ashrams: A Study of the Bengali Hindu Widows in Varanasi

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## Abstract:

Varanasi is called the city of the widows with a sizeable section of the Bengali Hindu widow community residing there. The paper aims to look at the restrictive customs and traditions of the Hindu Bengali widows in India since colonial times, their depiction in literary novels and in cinema and recalls the important social reforms aimed at protection of rights of widows. The paper reviews the present conditions of widow ashrams in Varanasi and the significant role community and civil society organization play in the betterment of socio-economic conditions of the widows in Indian society. The paper concludes with policy recommendation for widow centric welfare initiatives that needs to be undertaken by government, NGOs and civil society members. The findings are based on the study of texts, films and personal interviews of widows, officials and members from various community organizations who are working for the welfare of the widows.

**Key words:** Hindu widows, deprivations, widow ashrams, community initiatives, Varanasi

## Introduction

Varanasi, situated on the bank of the river Ganges in the Uttar Pradesh region of northern India, is one of the world's oldest inhabited cities and is referred to as "the Spiritual Heart of India". Beyond its spiritual value as a pilgrimage site for the Hindus, the city is known worldwide as the "City of Temples", a place of knowledge, learning, philosophy and a hub of Indian arts, music and culture. The city is also known as 'Kasi', taken from the Sanskrit word 'Kas' which means 'to shine' thereby lending the name, "the city of lights". Kashi has been a center of Hindu renaissance but is also inhabited by a neglected, humiliated and exploited community of women who have been forgotten by everyone- the widows. As large number of widows are willingly or forcefully abandoned in Varanasi by their family members, it has also been the "City of Widows" (Ghosh 2000). For ages, especially upper caste Hindu Bengali widows have believed that anyone who is fortunate enough to breathe their last in Varanasi, will find salvation or *moksha* and be free from the cycle of reincarnation as the sacred water of Mother *Ganges* have the power to cleanse all the sins of the humanity. The lives of widows in the ashrams and in the narrow lanes of the city, is testament to their worsening conditions in India who have not only been rejected by their family members but are largely overlooked by policymakers. Women centric legislation and schemes have received attention but welfare policies specifically aimed for socio-economic development of Hindu widows have been missing in the mainstream agenda and parliamentary discussions of the Indian policymakers. In India, widowhood has been associated with long-standing social stigma and constrictive traditions, from ancient practices like Sati to various discriminatory norms practised even today, not only in villages but in urban areas. The paper aims to look at the cruel, renunciatory and discriminatory practices against the Hindu widows and their deplorable plight, its portrayal in few literary works and cinema, the importance of social reforms movement and the historic legislative acts aimed at improving the legal rights of Bengali Hindu widows in India. The article also reviews the conditions in the widow ashrams in Varanasi, emphasizes the importance of community initiatives with a special focus on the work done by *Sulabh International*, and recommends policy measures by governments, private organizations and civil society members to improve the living conditions of Hindu widows in India. It is noted that better awareness and education should be provided to the widows and their family members to create a more developed, balanced and equitable society for all besides creating economic opportunities through vocational training and skill development programmes for the widows that would prevent them from working as domestic help to sustain themselves and being prevented from exploitation in various forms.

The research paper studies texts, documents, literary works and films besides collecting primary data through personal interviews of Hindu widows living in widow ashrams, official authorities managing these ashrams and members of the social organizations working for the welfare of the widows in Varanasi. The interviews were conducted both over phone and through physical visits to widow ashrams in Varanasi in September- October 2024.

## *Life of Hindu Widows: Traditions, Customs and Deprivations*

A woman who has lost her husband by death is called a widow. Widows in India face a myriad of socio-economic, cultural and psychological deprivations. They not only lose their husbands but their basic freedoms, both economic or personal and their natural human desires, including food habits and sexual lives would be

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regulated and suppressed. There are various social taboos when it comes to perceptions about widows in Hindu society and prejudices about widow remarriage. People see them as a curse, and they were held responsible for the death of their husband due to their past improbity. The widows were considered to be 'inauspicious', 'unlucky', even to the extent that seeing her face in the morning or before any good act is seen as a bad omen. They are not permitted to attend any auspicious functions, perform religious rituals, or participate in festive and social occasions such as marriages or to even welcome her own daughter-in-law. Widow remarriage is not very common and people who marry widows are considered to be of inferior status. Despite concerted efforts made by the Arya Samaj in the field there has not been perceptible progress, although widow remarriages are prevalent among lower caste groups. Targeted murder, rape, prostitution, forced marriage, property theft, social exclusion as well as physical and social abuse are the common experiences that the widowed women face in India. Constitutional provisions in India ensure equal rights to all women but due to orthodox mindset and regressive societal practices, widows in India are facing socioeconomic inequalities in different forms. Upper caste Hindu Bengali widows were subjected to various societal restrictions including wearing a white saree and not being permitted to wear colourful sarees, bindis and earrings, had to follow a strict vegetarian diet on a regular basis, rice could be consumed only once in a day, were forced to follow stringent fasting rituals and on certain days cooked food was not allowed. Being labelled as "husband eaters", they were no longer allowed to consume fish or meat, lentils, onions and garlis in order to suppress their sexuality. These ingredients will increase the body heat and sexual appetite, which had to be governed and silenced. Widows were often found to be eating alone isolated from the rest of the family members. This resulted in malnutrition so that they would die early rather than being dependent on the in-laws. However, the widows with their resilience, traditions, love and creativity came up with mouth-watering recipes with vibrant colours and charming aromas using these limited ingredients which showed history, tradition, creativity, innovation, adaptability, empowerment and invincible spirit of Bengali Hindu widows (Pandey 2023). In Hindu society, women were allowed to live in their husbands' households and cared for until the husband was alive. After their husbands passed away widows were viewed as parasites and given worse treatment than low-wage labourers by the family members. In Bankimchandra's literary novel *Krishnakanter Will* and Rabindranath Tagore's *Choker Bali*, it was showed that 90% of nineteenth-century prostitutes were widows who had to choose this path for their sustenance after being forced out of their husband's homes and socially excluded.

### *The Hindu Bengali Widows and Historic Legislations*

Raja Rammohan Roy, a social reformist founded Brahma Samaj in 1828 and led the movement for the abolition of Sati practice. With the support given by the then Governor-General of British India, [Lord William Bentinck he was successful in getting the Sati Abolition Act](#) passed in 1829. Raja Rammohan Roy was also against polygamy which was a regular practice among the higher caste Hindu men and had also campaigned against the distress of the widows. [Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar](#), a Sanskrit scholar and social reformer was the main patron who advocated for widow remarriage and through his constant efforts the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act was passed in 1856, which was another major landmark of social reform legislation (Sen, 2002, Riddick 2006, Lucy 2008). There was a huge opposition to remarriage from the orthodox Hindu groups even for the child and adolescent widows. Vidyasagar with his immense knowledge of Sanskrit searched exhaustively different ancient Hindu scriptures and genuine Hindu texts (i.e. Dharma sastras) to support his arguments in favour of widow remarriage. He cited a few verses that advocate widow remarriage from the *Parasara Smriti* which was written by the sage and philosopher *Parashara*. The verse he cited is:

*Naṣṭe mr̥te praprajite klibeca patite patau*

*Pañcasvāpatsu nārīnām patiranyo vidhīyate (Parāśara smṛti 4-30)*

The verse according to *Parashara* means, as [Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar established, that the widow under any of these five calamities is left with three options to choose from: remarriage, celibacy, and performing Sahagamana](#), if she is faced with loss of her husband who had either gone abroad, or has died, or has turned into a Sanyasi, or is an impotent or on his sinful degradation. [Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar argued that as the third option has been banned through legislative enactments and second option was difficult to practise in Kali yuga, the only viable option left was widow remarriage. With the help of these Acts, widows had started to hope to live a life free](#) from persecution, maltreatment, sufferings and deprivation which were very much common in the Bengali Hindu Society. Both the orthodox groups in Hindu society and the lower castes, who were typically permitted to remarry, opposed the reform of widows' remarriage because they wanted to emulate the high caste customs, where the prohibition on widow remarriage was a major compulsion, in order to attain a higher social status (Atwal, 2022). Still today widows in certain traditional patriarchal Hindu Bengali families are denied even their basic human rights, including the ability to choose their own food and attire. The Bengali Hindu society has not able to get rid of superstitious beliefs and orthodox mindset which leads to discriminations and unequal treatment based on gender. The Hindu Bengali widows are being

discriminated by their own family, relatives, friends and their in-law's family, as a result of ingrained and deep-rooted social prejudices and biases, often depriving them from property inheritance and maintenance rights. Widow remarriage has not yet been able to relieve widows from injustice and hardship. Due to a lack of progressive thinking, even in these days, gender inequity affects many so-called educated and enlightened Bengali traditional families (Ghosh 2022). The Hindu widow's right to property was also enlarged by Hindu Succession Act, 1956. It brought about certain changes, the most important of which was the giving of equal rights to sons and daughters in their parent's property and the abolition of limited life estate for widows. The Supreme Court in *Raghubir Singh and others v. Gulab Singh and others* (AIR 1998 SC 2401) gave the judgement that if a Hindu widow is in possession of the property of her husband, she has a right to receive maintenance from it, and is entitled to retain the possession of that property in lieu of her right to maintenance. Several studies have shown the connection between women's workforce participation, marriage practices and life decisions in West Bengal from colonial to modern times (Chakravarty and Chakravarty 2023) establishing the fact that despite economic independence and increased (yet insufficient) economic opportunities for women, these have failed to eradicate the ingrained societal standards that perceive widowed women from a certain prejudicial lens. Scholars have also explored the tension between nationalism and reformism which may have resulted from a growing patriarchal concern with widow survival, marriage, remarriage, and sexuality (Chakraborty 2022).

#### ***Bengali Hindu Widows in Cinema: Literary Adaptations and the 'City of Widows'***

*Chokher Bali*, a Rabindra Nath Tagore's fiction narrates the conditions of Bengali Hindu widows in the colonial Bengal. It narrates about the emotions, basic concepts and rituals of the widowhood in colonial Indian society which have been portrayed on the celluloid that depicts the hardships and suffering of Hindu widows in Varanasi. In *Chokher Bali*, Binodini is portrayed as an Indianized young widow who loses her husband soon after their marriage, who is very conscious of her own beauty and charm, is exposed to western ideology as she is convent educated and quite aware of her rights, contemporary events happening in the society and the nationalist movements underway against the British colonialism. She rebels against the age-old practices of the institution of widowhood and also disagrees to obey the code of conduct for widows. Resultantly, Binodini faces a difficult life with other widows in the village and is brought in the city to live in a landlord's house where she befriends the landlord's wife. In contrast to Binodini's personality, the local landlord, Mahendra's wife, Ashalata is a mere simple, innocent, unsuspecting, compliant Bengali woman who believes all the misfortune happened to Binodini because of her learning of English. Being envious of Mahendra's affection for Ashalata, Binodini successfully uses her personality, charm and beauty to seduce Mahendra and his friend Bihari. But, nothing changes in Binodini's life as she realizes that Mahendra's love is nothing more than adoration and therefore is forced to leave for Varanasi. Though being Western educated, Behari also refused to marry Binodini despite her repeated appeals as marrying a widow, will degrade his position in the Hindu society. Rituparno Ghosh, a famous postcolonial Bengali filmmaker wonderfully portrayed the repression of her desire for sexuality in the movie "*Chokher Bali*"(2003) where Binodini is shown to secretly consume a foreign made chocolate which is strictly prohibited for a Hindu Bengali widow and later burns the wrapper of the chocolate in the fire. The burning of wrapper of the chocolate is the symbol of Binodini's oppressed sexuality which she was denied after her husband's premature death. Socio-economic factor also plays a deciding role in the life of a dependent, marginalized woman as a widow. If the widow is the patriarch in a rich family and has property of her own, she can exercise power and influence decision making within the family but is still restricted by the social traditions as evident in the character of 'Rajlakshmi'-the mother of Mahendra. The film also depicts that in spite of nationalist and liberationist ideology the widows are compelled to lead a life of sufferings and austerity as the superstitions are deep rooted in the minds of people of the society.

#### ***Widow Ashrams in Varanasi: Key Observations and Discussion***

When widows are forced out of their husband's home they often take shelter in various widow ashrams or are left to resort to begging in the streets as their own families refuse to take care of them. Widow houses or widow ashrams are mostly run by different non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and few are maintained through government support which give shelter to these orphaned and excluded women. Widow ashrams provide shelter, food, clothing, medical assistance and sometimes employment to these women. There are seven widow ashrams nowadays including one government which is currently managed by the Department of Women Welfare of Government of Uttar Pradesh in Varanasi. Sunita Verma, from Sulabh International, an organization which works for the welfare of the widows said in the personal interview that a wealthy pilgrim on his visit to Kashi and discovering the tragic situation and socio-economic deprivation of the widows, decided to fund and establish a ashram which was later handed over to the government and this ashram is the only government controlled widow ashram in Uttar Pradesh. She mentioned that the widows earlier received Rs. 550 per month from the government but this financial support has been stopped and now they only receive food,

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shelter and medical checkups. Through personal interviews with two widows living in the government supported ashram and the officer-in-charge of the ashram, this was further confirmed that no government funds have been received in the past three months. The ashram is also facing infrastructural issues as the building is not in good condition, even though the rooms are spacious and has a garden which is not well maintained. The widows are surviving from the donations made by the local donors.

Asha Bhawan is another 40 years old ashram in Varanasi, where the number of widows residing in the ashram has declined to 15 and there are no Bengali Hindu widow living there at the moment. The ashram is also facing financial crisis and requires government and community support.

Another important ashram is Mata Anandmayi Ashram, where contact could not be established through the specified number provided in their website. The phone number was not operational. Upon contacting their office in Kolkata (Agarpara, North 24 Parganas), it was informed by the office manager that there are 18-20 widows who do participate in religious ceremonies and other related works in the ashram. But when enquired about the details of the widows and contact number of any person at Mata Anandmayi ashram of Varanasi, the office members avoided sharing any information. Upon paying a physical visit to the ashram it was informed that it is a 'Kanya ashram' and not a widow ashram, which is a religious school for young girls. The members of this organisation were very noncooperative specially in respect to sharing information about the widows inhabiting there. This was really puzzling as similar experience regarding Mata Anandamoyi Ashram was reported by Irine in 2009, a student of the University of Venice who visited the ashram to study the plight of widows in Varanasi with an emphasis on issue of prostitution among them, focusing on the crimes and abuses committed against the residents of widow ashram (Pragyabodh, 2009).

In a personal interview with Mr. Rahul Mishra of Empower Foundation, Varanasi who works in collaboration with Loomba Foundation, that also works for the protection of the widows gave an idea of the present scenario of the widow ashrams in Varanasi. He informed that in the famous Birla Ashram, the number of widows has declined from 30 to only two widows. This is a clear indication of the neglect and negative attitude towards the widows. The dwindling of number of widows in these ashrams is because the owners and the managers of these ashrams have lost their sympathy for these widows and wants to make these ashrams into business ventures. As the ashrams are located near the different ghats and river Ganges, the ashram spaces are put on rent for the tourists and pilgrims to earn money (Chaudhary and Sharma, 2022). The widows instead are seen to be working as domestic workers in several houses of Bengali tola for their survival or they roam about around temples to get 'bhog prasad' to maintain their livelihood. Lack of attention from the government necessitates the role of the civil society and community initiatives to improve the living conditions of widows in Varanasi. As the number of ashrams are declining day by day, the helpless, frustrated and exploited widows now prefer Vrindavan and Haridwar as an alternative place.

### ***Community Initiatives: Looking at the Work of Sulabh International***

Sulabh International Social Service Organization, founded by Dr. Bindeswar Pathak in 1970, is a non-profit organization with branches in various cities is deeply committed to transforming the lives of widows in Vrindavan and Varanasi and aims to restore their dignity, improve their quality of life, and empower them to rebuild their futures with confidence and hope. They promote sanitation, social reforms and education in India, and have focused on giving financial support through a monthly stipend to widows. The volunteers engage with widows through personal interactions, offering emotional and social support through activities like singing, dancing, and sharing stories which foster a strong sense of community and belonging. They also undertake healthcare initiatives by organizing regular health camps to provide essential medical care to widows. Additionally, Sulabh has made ambulances available in both cities, allowing widows' access to critical healthcare services within and outside the city. They have also created educational and vocational training opportunities through literacy programme which enhances their self-worth. Various kinds of skill training such as stitching, incense stick and candle making, garland crafting not only empower widows with economic independence but help them to move away from street begging and creates a sense of financial security in them. They hold general consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

### ***Policy Recommendations***

There is need to raise awareness about of women's rights, equality and justice. Women need to learn about their fundamental rights so that they can raise their voice against discrimination and fight for gender equality which requires access to educational opportunities and facilities for women including skill development, vocational training and computer training programmes that would facilitate economic empowerment of widows.

- Financial support has to be given by government institutions for improving the conditions of the widow ashrams and ensuring unhindered supply of good quality food, shelter and healthcare services for widows.

- Social Security schemes, financial schemes and quality healthcare services keeping in mind specific health and nutritional requirement should be provided for widows through government initiatives and relief schemes.
- Societal perspectives have to undergo change, particularly the mindset of the family members accompanied with comprehensive social and policy reforms. Family support is critical and social media campaigns are necessary to propagate such ideas.
- Social and policy reforms should include bringing about a bill for the welfare and protection of widows that take care of their basic rights and needs necessary to have a dignified life. This is an issue where the volunteers of Sulabh International are working towards by engaging with the Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi's office to bring about legislative changes (Sinha, 2015).

### Conclusion

The study brings to the forth the restrictive societal perspectives and practices towards Hindu Bengali widows and reviews the role of social reforms in protection of the rights of widows in Indian society, despite of which the widows continue to live in suffering and poor conditions lacking financial security and social support. The study further analyzes the various forms of deprivation a widow had to endure through their portrayal in literary and cinematic works. Finally, the article looks at the present status of widow ashrams in Varanasi and the work done by community organizations such as Sulabh International for the social and economic betterment of Hindu widows. The article recommends policy measures that would necessitate policy reforms, change in societal attitude and raising awareness and promoting about women's rights, including the rights of the widows.

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# **The Educational Philosophy of Mahamana Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya and the establishment of Banaras Hindu University**

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*“An Expression of Love and Gratitude, I appeal to every student and professional of the Banaras Hindu University to contribute something to the alma mater this second day.”*

**M.M. Malviya  
Vice Chancellor**

Courtesy: Marc Muller Maretstra Be 45, 21073 Hamburg Germany.

Mahamana Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya was a Pioneer Indian educationist and his dedication and eminence are historically embedded in the first day of twentieth century Bharat. Madan Mohan Malviya's educational Philosophy emphasized the integration of traditional Indian knowledge with the modern education character building, moral values and equal access to education for all. He said education is necessary for the growth of all economic activities in all branches of national production such as agriculture, small industries, manufacturing, science and technology, and commerce.

### **His Educational view:**

Coming from a family of scholars, Malviya ji had a lifelong interest in education, for him this was no subject of greater importance for the welfare of the people than education. According to him, education is the basic building block in the creation of an inclusive, equitable and diverse knowledge society. Indeed this is the particular ture in today's world where knowledge is gradually emerging as a primary production resource. He gave special importance to primary education. For this reason, Malaviya ji pleaded in the case of compulsory universal and free elementary that education should be accessible to all regardless of the social economic, The education should be a tool for social reform and that it should be used to eradicate social evils like casteism, communalism, regionalism and discrimination.

### **Mahamana Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya's vision on women education:**

Right from its inception in 1916, the BHU has been striving towards women's education. Its visionary founder, Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya foresaw the immense significance of women's education, and its critical role. Women would have to play in the development of the country. Malviya Ji was worried about the social and administrative indifference towards women's education in contemporary society. He always tried to ensure that women receive primary and higher education with the aim of promoting girls' education. In his convocation address delivered on 14 December 1929, Mahamana announced the establishment of the Women's College of the BHU. The cause of women's education was particularly dear to Mahamana's heart. Overall, Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya's educational philosophy, emphasized the importance of education in creating responsible, compassionate, and wise individuals who could contribute positively to the society.

### **Emplacement and foundation of Banaras Hindu University (B.H.U.) Varanasi : -**

Malviya Ji was thoughtful from the beginning. His interest in the education of his educational philosophy was not the result of any contemporary event but the result of his great devotion towards Indian culture. In his mind the seriousness towards education and the ideas related to the re-implementation of the ancient Indian Education system had erupted in his academic life itself. When he was studying at Muir Central College Prayag (1880-84 AD) a question repeatedly crossed his mind: why do Indian students have to go abroad for studies? Serving the moral decline of the students he also had a pulling in his mind that why not open new Ashrams on the pattern of ancient Ashrams. Apart from this, another incident in the life of Malviya Ji forced him to think about the education system of India. When he was a teacher in a government high school, the lack of religious elements in the carnot education system used to sting him like a colic.

### **Circumstances and background of establishment of Hindu University:**

The contribution made by Malviya ji in the field of education is unique and unmatched. It is difficult to keep anyone equal to him from that particular period till the present. From his student life, he used to dream of such a university, in which such students can get higher education, for whom it is impossible to study abroad. The dream he had seen during his student days came true in the form of Kashi Hindu University. In fact, Kashi Hindu University was a center of education, training given in accordance

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with Indian culture and more than that national awakening. It was the true culmination of the dream that Malviya ji had seen for the universal progress of the nation. Here it would be better to consider Kashi Hindu University as a success of Malviya ji's educational nationalist thinking. Malviya ji's conscience was shaken by the idea since childhood that for the past one millennium, India has been facing the horrors of degradation and inhuman atrocities of Muslim invaders. This situation had become more frightening after the arrival of the British. Especially in those circumstances, where on the one hand the education system propounded by Macaulay in 1836 AD, through which efforts were being made to add salt to the very ancient roots of Indian culture, on the other hand, after the revolution of 1857 AD, the growing fanaticism of the Muslims and as a result of anti-national activities, the destruction of Indian culture was seen to be certain. In the midst of this type of toxic atmosphere and anti-Hindu i.e. anti-national activities, Malviya ji had the determination for the upliftment of India and the upliftment of Hindu society. The concrete form of his determination and global aspirations for the upliftment of Indian culture is still present in the form of Kashi Hindu University.

Malviya ji considered religion, society, culture and education as the path to the renewal of Indian culture. He was of the opinion that the disregard for our basic religious beliefs, traditions, religious culture and modern knowledge and science and the subsequent following of Western and Muslim culture has led to the pitiable plight of the Hindu society and India. He held the ignorance of Hindus and their disinterest towards Indian culture responsible for this. Due to this darkness of ignorance and education everywhere in India and for national awakening, Malviya ji had established Kashi Hindu University.

He wanted to make such a system of high-level education, where the character of the Indian youth is built, the feeling of patriotism and service to the country is inculcated in them and their loyalty towards the Indian culture increases. The first draft of Kashi Hindu University was proposed by Malviya ji in 1905 AD. Looking at this format it is clear that he was first of all troubled by the economic condition of the country. On the one hand, before him was the bright past of India, and on the other hand, the plundered present Hindu society, which had been continuously oppressed and exploited for several hundred years, its condition had become even more dilapidated. Malviya ji seriously considered this deplorable condition of the Hindu community. While justifying the university, Malviya ji has highlighted the increasing poverty and ignorance of India and compared India with European countries. According to him, at that time the average income of the countrymen was continuously declining. At that time the number of Hindus and Muslims in the whole of India was in the ratio 5/6 and 1/6. The average daily income of each Hindu was one anna, which was 1/20th of the average per capita daily income of England. Apart from this, India's educational level was also below average. While on one hand the number of illiterate people in Britain was 5 percent and in Germany it was 1 percent, on the other hand in India 94 percent people were illiterate. Throughout India, a large section of the Hindu society belonged to farmers and laborers, who's clearly visible bare skeleton, sunken eyes, naked body, untidy houses, were direct indicators that defied any statistics.

While planning Hindu University, Pt. Malviya ji was taking the above mentioned economic condition of the country seriously. According to him, one of the main reasons for the country's poverty was the destruction of local industries. Expensive governance system, neglect of Indians in high positions of job profession, more restoration and biased attitude of British and European people, excessive expenditure on army, excess of rent, non-promotion of industrial development etc. are also other reasons. It is known from this early document of 1905 AD that the people of the country are trapped in poverty, they can get rid of it only when science is used in their interest. This type of useful theoretical and practical science can be used to the maximum extent only when Indians acquire it in their own country. Apart from this, he considers it essential to revive the old domestic industries along with the widespread of scientific and technical education in the country. He gave a prominent place to this type of education in the education plans of Kashi Hindu University.

In the context of the spread of the British education system in India, historian Dr. Soran Singh has written that "The spread of British power in modern history is a miracle. The art of this miracle was developed by the British. A handful of Englishmen were able to control the vast Indian. They could not rule the empire on their own and they needed Indians for this work. He wanted to rule India through Indian employees. He observed that due to the loss of ethnic self-respect and consciousness due to oppression by foreign invasions, there is no dearth of such people in the country who are ready to sell themselves for their livelihood and personal interests. They wanted to use such persons for British rule.

Such people could be fully useful only if they were completely separated from their ethnic tradition and culture and had a vested interest in the new system of governance. This was possible to happen by changing the curriculum and lifestyle. In the reports regarding the spread of education in India during the reign of Lord William Bentinck, it has been said that the aim of this education was to create such persons who would be Indian in appearance but in manners, dress, Be English in faith and belief. The characteristics of this education system were its medium language and curriculum."

It is also worth considering here that Lord Macaulay started English education in 1835 AD. This new education system, influenced by western culture, created such an environment, as a result of which the Indian, especially the Hindu society, started following it blindly. Due to the spread and influence of this western education system, schools and colleges started opening everywhere. Under the inspiration of the British, universities were established in Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Allahabad (Prayag). While on the one hand people came out of these universities covered in English from head to toe, on the other hand people also emerged who started understanding the ins and outs of politics and started trying to get a place in the government. The result was that during his reign, Lord Curzon set up an inquiry committee on Indian universities and all the universities were taken over by the government. Malviya ji had experienced the shortcomings and ill effects of the education system based on the western way of life and controlled by the government.

It would also be appropriate to mention here that in the history of modern India, the period from 1905 AD to 1947 AD was, on the one hand, the period of the peak of the national movement and on the other hand, it was the period of religious frenzy and rebellion arising from Muslim fundamentalism. In the 1860s, the Muslim community under the leadership of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan started dreaming of establishing its sovereignty over India. After the partition of Bengal in 1905 AD, in the period till 1947 AD, there was no place left in the land of India, be it Kanpur or Bengal, Multan, South India (Moplah), Saharanpur etc.

It was only after the great war of 1857 that it began to be anticipated that the British would not be able to stay in India for long. For this, Syed Ahmed Khan adopted two paths: first, Muslims should win the trust of the British, second, Muslims should leave madrasa studies and start modern studies. To fulfill these objectives, Syed not only distanced Muslims from Indian tradition but also said that Hindus and Muslims are two different communities and he also started propounding the theory of Muslim nation on the basis of religious fanaticism. Syed even said that it is our utmost wish that the British rule should not only last for a long time but also be immortal and eternal. Syed described India's victory as a historical necessity. In a speech given in Meerut in 1888, Syed said, "Imagine if the British leave India with their cannons and other superior weapons, then in such a situation who will be the ruler of India? In such a situation, is it possible that two nations, Hindu and will Muslims be able to sit on the same throne with the same power? Certainly not. It will be necessary that one community conquers the other community and destroys it. The hope that both will remain equal is an impossible and unimaginable aspiration. Along with this we also have to remember that although Muslims are less in number than Hindus. Besides, there is a shortage of people with English education among them, yet it should not be thought that they (Muslims) are insignificant or weak. They are probably capable of maintaining their status on their own. If this does not happen, then our Muslim brothers, Pathan brothers will attack like locusts from the hills and valleys of Afghanistan and shed rivers of blood from the Western Frontier Province to Bengal. And it will all depend on Allah's will as to who will emerge victorious after the British leave. But unless one community conquers another and makes it submit, peace cannot be established on this land. This conclusion of mine is completely based on proven facts and evidence which no one can deny. He believed that the presence of non-Muslim children leads to a lack of sense of nationalism among Muslim children. He clearly said that we cannot build a community by educating our children in such institutions. Certainly, it is the result of these thoughts that Anglo Mohammedan College later became Aligarh Muslim University in 1919 AD. From the beginning, all the professors in the said Muslim College were appointed by the British, who provided education to the Muslim youth from wealthy homes along with the two-nation theory. The British also used to teach the lesson of patriotism. The dialogues of their code and split policy education were like this. 'Muslim youth! Don't you know that people of Hindu religion remember God by facing east, but this is not the case in Muslim culture. You worship God facing west. There is nothing in common between the Hindus and Muslims of India in their culture, civilization, worship, food habits, lifestyle etc. Then how can the country be shared, that is why

the Muslims of India need a separate nation, which is your basic right to achieve.

Thus, it can be said that this was the real form of Aligarh Muslim University in which the two-nation theory was being taught to Muslims. It would not be inappropriate to present here a new example of this English devotional text. Ultimately, it is clear that Muslim College later became Aligarh Muslim University where voices of opposition to Indianism and nationalism were being raised. In which an army of such Jihadis was being prepared, whose objective was to establish a Muslim state in India and more than this, to destroy and corrupt the Hindu society and give it an Islamic form.

From the analysis of the works done by Malviya ji, it automatically emerges that he was struggling for the upliftment of education from the very beginning of his public life. As a result of the work done by him for the benefit of the students, he established Hindu hostel and 'Bharti Bhawan' library in Prayag (Allahabad) with his public cooperation. His first attempt was to establish Hindu University in Allahabad. Prayag University was established in 1887 AD. Due to the increasing presence of students here, students were facing the problem of accommodation. Malviya ji understood the plight of Hindu students and soon decided to build a hostel at a place which was near the college. The entire province welcomed this resolution of Malviya ji. Rich and respected gentlemen started helping in this work. Without going into details here, it would suffice to say that in 1901 AD, the foundation stone of a hostel with two hundred rooms was laid. This hostel, which was completed in 1903 AD, was inaugurated by Governor McDonald himself. It was named MacDonal Hindu Boarding House after him. Later a hundred more rooms were added to it. After the death of Malviya ji, in 1949 AD, Allahabad University and the state government renamed it 'Madan Mohan Malviya University College'. In fact, this was the first work done by Malviya ji through alms i.e. public cooperation. Apart from this, he established the Rishikul Brahmacharya Ashram College on 65 acres of land in Haridwar in 1908 AD for the purpose of upliftment of Sanskrit and Sanatan Dharma and was also the chairman of its education committee for the next ten years. He played an important role in the establishment of Jaibharat Sadhu College in Haridwar in 1909 AD. Contributed to the establishment of Seva Samiti Vidyamandir in Allahabad and inaugurated it himself. Thus, even before the establishment of Hindu University, Malviya ji had created the Purva Peethika to fulfill his grand objective. Malviya ji's self-confidence became stronger due to the establishment and cooperation of these various institutions and their success. He was able to make his dream a reality.

It is also pertinent to mention here that the beginning of the 20th century was the era of national education in India. The need of the National Institute of Education was continuously being felt by the contemporary intellectual leaders and social reformers. In this sequence, Munshi Madholal, a nobleman of Banaras had donated three lakh rupees for a national school, In the south Sarvashri Tilak Deshmukh Vaidya and Bijapur had established 'Samarth Vidyalaya'. Many people were giving their services for national education. Many people had agreed to serve in the National School to be established in Banaras. But who knew that such a big creation is hidden in that small seed, Mrs. Annie Besant established the Central Hindu College located in Banaras in 1889, The college also made arrangements for moral and religious education in accordance with Hindu religion. The objective of this college was to prepare a generation of youth who would raise the name of India on the world stage. Thus, it is clear that some efforts were going on all over India to implement the education system based on national values. Due to which a positive atmosphere was created in support of national education in the entire nation. In fact, the plan of Kashi Hindu University was not just the establishment of a new educational institution. Malviya ji wanted to do an innovative experiment of national awakening through this university. The contemporary circumstances and the deteriorating condition of the Hindu society inspired Malviya ji to establish an educational institution whose form was completely based on Indian values. Due to these circumstances, Malviya ji resolved to establish Kashi Hindu University.

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# Therianthropomorphic Figures in Varanasi: An Exploration of Mythological and Symbolic Significance

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## Abstract:

*Kāśi, a city rooted in religion, culture and mythology, hosts a range of characters and figures from ancient texts like Vedas, Purāṇas and Epics. The present study explores and accounts for a particular category of composite figures i.e. the therianthropomorphic forms from the holy city of Varanasi. The term 'therianthropic' refers to figures displaying a combination of both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic features. The paper primarily seeks to document and explain some of the important depictions and images of therianthropomorphic figurines present in Varanasi. The purpose of creation of such mythical figures mostly seems to be religious while other minor images could have been evolved for decorative purpose or just as a continuation of an imaginary fantasy. Besides, it seems that these figures also hold some amount of symbolic significance that was with time ignored for their literal and religious meanings. The work examines and brings to light their symbolism along with the representation and cultural connotation of therianthropomorphic figures found in Varanasi.*

**Keywords:** Therianthropomorphism, Varanasi, Hindu Mythology, Purāṇas, Cultural Significance, Symbolic meaning, Composite deities, Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata

## Introduction

The city of *Kāśi* situated on the banks of Ganga is among the most sacred places of the world. It is the most ancient city and has always been known for its religious and spiritual significance. The place finds its first mention in the oldest text of *Ṛgveda* itself. The city is mentioned as 'Kāśi' in *Ṛgveda* while it is also referred by other popular names in ancient texts such as *Ānaṃdkānana*, *Rudravāsa*, *Kāśika*, *Mahāśmaśāna*, *Avimukta Kāśi*, etc. The place finds several mentions in almost all kinds of ancient texts including *Atharva Veda*, *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, *Baudhayāna Sūtra*, *Bṛhadaranyaka Upaniṣad*, the epics of *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* and *Purāṇas*. There is a famous quote of Mark Twain about Varanasi that says, "Benaras is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together."

The 'city of Light' famous for providing salvation to those who dies in its sacred soil also serves as a hub for several cultural, spiritual and religious activities. There are plenty of archaeological sites, temples, marvel architectures and museums in Varanasi. Nonetheless to say that it boasts a commendable number of imageries and religious figures as well. There are numerous spots providing huge evidence for ancient images, antiquities, sculptural panels and mythical figures scattered all over the city. Many of these renowned figurines belong to a category of composite images known as 'Therianthropomorphic Figures'. It abounds ample of these figures that embody both the human and animal attributes. The study presents an overview of the representation, symbolism and cultural significance of these figures in Varanasi's temple images, sculptural carvings and artistic traditions.

## Therianthropomorphic Figures

As suggested earlier, the Therianthropomorphic figures denote the mythological characters that have the features of both man and animals in their iconography. These figures include the popular gods like *Gaṇeśa*, *Narsmīha*, *Varāha*, *Hanumāna*, *Garuṇa*, *Vṛṣabh*, *Hayagrīva* etc. and some anonymous mythical images such as sphinx-like figures, winged male and female figures, figures of *nāga-maithuna* and other serpent goddesses, etc. that are unidentified. The range of figures also includes a class of demonic mythological characters such as *Mahiśāsura*, *Narakāsura* and *Hiranyākṣa*. Apart from these widely available famous figurines, there is also abundant of some other therianthropomorphic images in Varanasi. These miscellaneous figures too have been taken into account briefly in the paper. Most of these figures were largely labeled as demonic and monstrous by the colonial interpreters during the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Jose, 1999). With the awaken interest of people and researchers in recent centuries, the things have improved but there is still a strong need to explore and unravel more and more of the imageries, metaphors and symbolism available in our texts. The paper intends to contribute a little towards the understanding of some of such figurines in Indian religion and mythology.

## Collection of Data and methodology

These varieties of unique, rare and astounding Therianthropomorphic figures have their origin mostly in *Purāṇas* and thus they are taken as the primary source for tracing the iconography of deities.

The principal source for the collection of data and images are museums and temples. The sculptures of therianthropomorphic figures in the museum of Bharat Kala Bhawan has been referred to and discussed briefly.

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While the images of the sculptural carvings from the temples of Sumeru Devi (popularly called Durgā temple) at Ramnagar, Raghurajeshvara Temple and Lakshmi-Narayana Temple at Bhonsla Ghat, Shiva Temple at Saraigovardhan, Rudreshvara Temple at Bansphatak are mostly taken from the site of Jñāna-Pravāh. Some other important images are also collected from Sarnath Archaeological Museum, temple of Piśāchmochan at Chetganj, Kardameśvar temple at Kandwa and Hanuman temple Rajmandir.

For the sake of convenience the research is limited to the figures of deities, demigods and major incarnations and some unidentified mythical images. These images are divided into three broad categories. The first one of which includes the figures of the cult gods and demigods with independent identity, the second category includes the incarnations or forms of chief deities and the last group take accounts of the figures of some lesser important forms which are though rarely mentioned and available but still throws important light on the significance of such Puranic characters. The discourses and analysis are based on the visual analysis of the images and the information provided by the priest, pilgrims and tourists at different temples in a personal communication with them.

(i) **Images of theriomorphic gods and demigods in Varanasi**

**Gaṇeśa:-** Gaṇeśa is one of the most important Hindu God who has been identified as the 'Prathampūjya' or the one who deserved to be worshipped in the beginning of all the auspicious works, as per the ancient religious sources. The son of Śiva and Pārvaṭī, he is touted as the 'remover of obstacles' by the Purāṇas. There are several legends reciting the story of his birth. The most popular being the one that says, Once Pārvaṭī, the wife of Mahādeva Śiva, in order to remove her loneliness and have a trustable companion, created a child out of the dirt of her body. She ordered him not to allow anybody enter till she finishes her bath. It is just after Pārvaṭī went inside that Śiva comes and following a terrible argument and miscommunication, he beheads the child Gaṇeśa. After realizing his mistake and following the wish of Pārvaṭī, he resuscitates him by fixing an elephant head on his body instead. The story shows that any creature in the world is not higher or better than other one and all of them have their own importance. Secondly, the moral of the story is not to let yourself blinded by your ego and disregard others. Lastly, it also stresses the importance of communication.

**Iconography**

Gaṇeśa is generally shown as elephant-headed, pot-bellied, single-tusked, usually two or four handed, but sometimes also represented with eight or ten hands; carrying axe, goad, lotus, pot of sweets, etc., and accompanied by his mount 'Moosakraj' by his side.

**Symbology**

Gaṇapati has the head of an elephant that symbolizes the wisdom and sagacity (Moor, 1976, p. 95). One of the interpretations says that, he is the one who is guarding the entrance to place where the *Kuṇḍalinī* sleeps. Elephant does not know its own power; this reminds humans of their dormant stage of *Kuṇḍalinī*. The first step in spiritual progress is the awareness that self is bigger and is beyond our mind, body and soul. This is why Gaṇapati is worshipped the first and foremost. This also denotes that how approaching Gaṇeśa as the first of the seven chakras i.e. *Mūlādhār Cakra*, we can reach to the topmost *Cakra* known as *Sahasrāra* i.e. the seventh and highest of the seven chakras, represented by Śiva. Daniélou (1991) mentions that, "In the macrocosm this coiled energy, when it begins to move and manifests itself, gives birth to the universe. When it coils round the supreme Śiva, the universe goes to sleep."

The other popular interpretation says that it was the way of Purāṇa writers to show the *Upnayan Saṃskāra* of Gaṇeśa. The upnayan, meaning 'the new eye', one of the 16 Saṃskāras mentioned in Brahmanical texts involves the sending of a child to a new life by his parents thus entrusting him with new responsibility and hence providing him the second birth. Observing closely, we see what Śiva did with Ganesha is at some point metaphorically similar to this process. He cuts the head i.e. the ties of his child with his previous life and provides him with a new life, new enlightenment and new responsibilities. This is symbolized by the elephant head that makes him *Gajānana* and later on the *Gaṇapati* i.e. the leader of the *Gaṇas*. His feminine companions *Siddhi* and *Buddhi* also symbolize the intellect and wisdom, thus indicating the enlightened vision.

**Material evidences in Varanasi**

There are several evidences of Gaṇeśa image at Varanasi throwing light on the evolution of his iconography. Some of the interesting ones are:-

- Nṛtyagaṇpati, 8th cent. CE, Bharat Kala Bhawan - Varanasi
- Nṛtya Gaṇpati belonging to Pratihara School, 9th cent. CE from Bharat Kala Bhawan
- Pancha- vināyaka, Lakshmi- kunda, Varanasi, c. 900 CE

Depicted on the first tier of a miniature stone Śikhara, with an elephant head at the extreme right end.

- Gaṇeśa with two heads, Surya- kunda (Misir Pokhra), Varanasi

It belongs to medieval period; the image of Ganesha is four-armed, with both the trunks coiled in opposite direction of each other. He is seated in Padmāsana.

- Gaṇpati with three heads, Piśachamochana area, Varanasi. 13th- 14th cent. CE

The figure of Ganesha appears seated in Lalitāsana. He holds *Abhaya Mudrā*, *Paraṣu* and *Mūlaka* in three hands while the normal left is placed on thigh. The middle trunk hangs down while side ones are turned in opposite directions (Joshi & Srivastava, 2012).

- Durga Temple, Ramnagar
- Gaṇeśa, 600-699 CE, Sarnath, Varanasi (Fig.1)
- Raghurajeshvara Temple, Bhonsla Ghat (Fig.2)
- Lakshmi-Narayana Temple, Bhonsla Ghat (Fig.3)
- Shiva Temple, Saraigovardhan (Fig.4)
- Rudreshvara Temple, Bansphatak (Fig.5)
- Dhundi- Vināyak Shrine near Visvanath gali ((Fig.6)

There is a four- armed figure of Gaṇeśa appears near Dhundi- Vināyaka, carrying Ankuśa and a serpent in extra hands. He is almost standing with widespread legs, central trunk is hanging enface turned towards right, others are lateral to right and left. This image is locally known as YakshaVinayaka (Joshi & Srivastava, 2012).

**Hanumān:** - He is another widely popular and significant figure from Hindu mythology who has a therianthropomorphic iconography. A character originally from Rāmāyaṇa, he is also acknowledged sometimes as the incarnation of Lord Śiva and sometimes as a part of 11<sup>th</sup> *Rudra* (Śiva Purāṇa, 3.20). In the epic, he is presented as the son of monkey couple Keśarī and Anjanā, born through a divine intervention of Vāyu and as an ardent devotee and associate of Lord Rāma. With time, Hanumān has attained the status of an independent cult deity who is largely followed and worshipped by the people. He is mostly seen as an epitome of pure devotion and an embodiment of might and prowess. Apart from Rāmāyaṇa, he has also got several mentions in different Purāṇas and the epic of Mahābhārata. He is a monkey-faced God, generally known as *Vānara*. *Śiva Purāṇa* (2.1.4.15-16) states that he owes his birth in a Vānara clan due to the curse of Sage Nārada on Viṣṇu. Similarly, several other myths and legends are also cited as a backstory and cause for his Vānara identity and iconography.

#### Iconography

Hanumān is shown with a monkey face, usually in red colored cloths, two-handed with one hand carrying his weapon *gadā* and an erect tail. His iconography mostly includes him carrying a mountain full of numerous magical medicinal herbs, one of them being the *Sanjīvani* itself. Sometimes he is shown tearing his chest that contains an image of Lord Rāma and his consort Sītā. He is also represented sometimes in his *Pañcamukhi* form having five different heads. The central one is his real monkey- face while the rest four has the faces of a horse, an eagle, a lion and a boar respectively. He is represented with ten hands in this form, one of which is raised in *abhaya mudrā* while the rest hands carries different arms including the club, sword, shield, *ankuśa*, noose, trident, etc.

#### Symbology

Moor (1976) opines that the animal figures in the iconography of Pañcamukhi Hanumān represent his own character that consist of courage and ferocity, the strength, the energy and the celerity that are respectively symbolized by the faces of lion, boar, horse and bird. He also mentions that these figures are an allude to other incarnations of Viṣṇu, namely, Narsimha, Varāha, Hayagrīva and Garuḍa. All of which have a therianthropomorphic iconography. Brown (2007) mentions about the interpretation of Blavatsky in her work that says Hanumān represents a ‘retrogressive evolution’ from human to ape.

#### Material evidences in Varanasi

- Durga Temple, Ramnagar (Fig.7)
- Raghurajeshvara Temple, Bhonsla Ghat (Fig.8)
- Lakshmi-Narayana Temple, Bhonsla Ghat (Fig.9)
- Shiva Temple, Saraigovardhan (Fig.10)

**Garuḍa:** - A significant figure from Purāṇa, Garuḍa is treated as the mount of Lord Viṣṇu. He is represented as eagle- headed with the body of a human. Rao (1985) mentions that image of Garuḍa should be of emerald color with roundish eyes, four arms, a pair of lustrous wings and a flabby belly. Two of his hands are generally joined in veneration. When he is made as Viṣṇu’s mount in his sculpture, he should have two arms holding an umbrella and a pot of ambrosia in them. We find his image in Varanasi at following places:-

- Garuḍa in the fragment of Vaiṣṇavī image, 9th cent. CE, Bharat Kala Bhawan
- Durga Temple, Ramnagar (Fig.11)
- Raghurajeshvara Temple, Bhonsla Ghat (Fig.12)

**Nandi:** - Another prominent figure from Hindu mythology is the bull *Nandi*. He serves as a mount of Śiva who is often shown in the sculptures seated over him. Though mostly sculpted as a bull, he sometimes also appears as half-bull and half-man figure.

**(ii) Images of Forms and Incarnations of Principal Deities**

**Varāha:** - The earliest mention of the form comes from the texts of *Śatapatha- Brāhmaṇa* (14.1.2.11) and *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* (10.1.8) followed by the epics of Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata. All of these texts ascribe Brahmā and not Viṣṇu as the uplifter of the earth. However, it seems that they consider Brahmā identical with Viṣṇu (Gupte, 1972). In the popular evolutionary theory of Avatāras, Varāha is said to be the first land animal incarnation (Singh, 2024, p. 50). On the other hand, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (3.13.18) mentions that he emerged from the nostril of Brahma when the earth was submerged deep into the ocean, the region popularly known as *Rasātala* in Purāṇas. In other versions, the incarnation is described to have happened when the atrocities of the demon named Hiraṇyākṣa (said to be of same boar-face at times) increased on the earth. Hiraṇyākṣa captured and took her to Rasātala where Viṣṇu assuming the form of boar rescued her from him. Varāha killed Hiraṇyākṣa and brought earth safely back to its position. Most part of the story seems to be a part of symbolism and rather conveys a deeper message.

**Iconography**

Varāha is mostly represented with a snout nose, two or four handed, and raising the earth on his tusk. He is depicted both in zoomorphic and theriomorphic forms. Demon Hiraṇyākṣa is also shown sometimes crumbled under his feet. Varāha images are mostly of three types:-

1. Bhū Varāha: - A four-handed Varāha shown rescuing Bhūdevi on his tusk
2. Yajña Varāha: - Four-handed Varāha shown seated with Sridevi on his right and Bhūdevi on the left
3. Pralaya Varāha: - He is also four- armed and shown seated with Bhūdevi on a *Simhāsana*

**Symbolism**

Throughout the Purāṇas, Varāha is explicitly stated to be the embodiment of yajña (Vedic sacrifice) and particularly as the upholder of the Earth. His feet represent the Vedas (scriptures), his tusks represent sacrificial stakes, his teeth the offerings, his mouth is the altar and tongue is the sacrificial fire.

Conversation from the local people, priests and other enthusiast in the field of Symbology revealed their different perception on metaphorical representation of the story. One of the interpretations holds that Hiraṇyākṣa represents the *Tamogūṇa* binding to *Samsara* i.e. the world. The tamogūṇā has submerged the consciousness represented through earth in the cesspool. Hence to rescue it the guard has come down taking a form, most suitable for a wide expanse of water such as ocean of Samsara i.e. in the form of Varāha to take the divinity with him after ending the Tāmsic element. Varāhī is the feminine personification of the same guard.

**Material Evidence from Varanasi**

- Varāhī image, Gupta period, Bharat Kala Bhawan
- Varāha image, 8th cent. CE - Bharat Kala Bhawan
- Varāha, 10th cent. CE - Bharat Kala Bhawan
- Durga Temple, Ramnagar

In one image, (Fig.13), shown holding earth on his tusk with four hands and the demon crumbled under his seat. In the other image, shown with boar face and four hands holding śaṅkha, chakra, gadā and Padma (Fig.14)

- Lakshmi-Narayana Temple, Bhonsla Ghat (Fig.15)
- Rudreshvara Temple, Bansphatak (Fig.16)
- Kardameśvar Temple, Varanasi (Fig.17)

There is a panel of five incarnations of Vishnu in Kradameśvara Temple, where we can spot the Varāha avatār too, raising the earth on his tusk on the bottom left corner.

**Narsimha:** - The man-lion incarnation of Viṣṇu, Narsimha is the foremost example of composite figures in Brahmanism. He represents the transitional phase of humans of becoming a man from an animal or a beast like creature (Dasa, 2022).

In mythology, he is said to have incarnated during an argument between the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu and his son Prahlāda. While Hiraṇyakaśipu was a staunch enemy of Viṣṇu, his son Prahlāda turned out to be his great devotee. Thus, Hiraṇyakaśipu tried various means to kill Prahlāda who was but saved by the grace of Viṣṇu every time. He finally indulges into an argument with him in his court regarding the omnipresence of his Lord. On asking whether his lord resides in the pillar of his court too and getting a reply in positive from Prahlāda, Hiraṇyakaśipu ties him with the pillar and tries to prove otherwise by striking the column. Just then Narsimha appears from it and after a great fight, kills the demon tearing him up with his nails.

Now the story of Hiranyakaśipu also states that he had a boon from Brahmā of not to be killed in day or night, from either a man or an animal, from either a weapon or a missile, either inside his palace or outside, by either a god or a demon, from wet or dry material and either on earth or in sky (Bhāgavata Purāṇa, 7.3.35-37). On the other hand *Vāyu Purāṇa* and *Kūrma Purāṇa* offers a slightly different boon granted to him (Wilkins, 2003, p. 122). Thus taking care of all the conditions of Hiranyakaśipu's boon and ensuring the end of the life of the demon as well, Viṣṇu incarnates as Narsimha, kills him during twilight, from his own claws by keeping him on his lap. In this way Viṣṇu did not even surpass the words of Brahmā and also managed to accomplish his task of dispatching Hiranyakaśipu to the abode of *Yama*.

### Iconography

Presented with a lion head and the body of a man, he usually have two or four arms with Hiranyakaśipu on his lap and two of his arms are shown tearing the belly of the demon apart through his nails. There are mainly three kinds of Narsimha image:-

1. Girijā/Kēvala Narsimha: - seated on a lotus pedestal and bearing a *Yōga-paṭṭa*
2. Yanaka Narsimha: - shown riding on an eagle or on Ādiśeṣa
3. Sthauṇa Narsimha: - shown seated on Simhāsana & the demon placed on his thigh

### Symbology

The wicked king of the story was named Hiranyakaśipu which means 'clothed in gold'. He is symbolic of the radical ego which manifests as narcissism. He was married to Kayādhu (Bhāgavata Purāṇa, 6.18.12) which means 'the Shaking Body' and his son was Prahlāda which means the 'delightful'.

Hiranyakaśipu declared himself the deity and demanded that everyone should worship him alone. Prahlāda refused to worship his father being the principle of 'Ānanda' or spiritual delight.

So the narcissistic ego thinks it is invincible and torments others demanding that they acknowledge, validate and worship him. Those that comply with the narcissistic supply are rewarded and those that don't are punished.

This ego must be cut down through the transcending of the pairs of opposites - in order to liberate the essential spiritual joy which the narcissistic ego suppresses. So Narsimha represents the higher witnessing self that develops insight and understanding and overcomes narcissism. The psychic battle is intense but the outcome is the liberation of delight and joy.

Another interpretation says that Hiranyakaśipu is the consciousness caught in ignorance. His wife (mind) is protected by the Guru (Nārada) from Indra representing *indriya vāsanā*. Similarly their 4<sup>th</sup> child who is Prahlāda (Ahaṁkāra, the 4th among antah karaṇa— part of mind, represented by Prahlāda) is directed towards the all-pervading consciousness (Viṣṇu).

The jeeva bhava (limited consciousness) wants to bring the Ahaṁkāra towards bodily identification. But the Ahaṁkāra is trying to connect with absolute reality against all odds. In the climax, the jīva bhāva (or Nara bhāva) is completely annihilated (like a lion) by the universal consciousness (Narsimha).

It is not restricted to male gender. Hence the feminine equivalent is Narsimhi or simhāsaneśvarī (simha āsana īśvarī — who eats or removes (asana) your ignorance like a lion and not someone sitting on a lion's seat). Thus, the incarnation of Narsimha also puts to an end the dualities proposed by Hiranyakaśipu in want of immortality.

### Material Evidence in Varanasi

- Narsingh, Gupta, 6th cent. CE - Bharat Kala Bhawan, Vns.
- Narsimha, 10th cent. CE Pala period - Bharat Kala Bhawan, Vns.
- Lakṣmī- Narsimha, Hanuman temple Rajmandir, Varanasi, c. 12th cent. Pala period

Seated in *Padmāsana*, four- armed, holds *Ankuśa* in extra upraised right hand, a miniature extra raised left hand, normal hands are in *Varad* pose and placed on his thighs (Joshi & Srivastava, 2012, p. 116). Goddess Lakṣmī also shown on his lap embracing her lord with right hand and carrying a lotus in left one. The pedestal shows two lions seated back to back with a figure of Garuda in between. (Fig.18)

- Durga Temple, Ramnagar

Seated with demon in his lap and Narsimha tearing open his belly with his sharp nails; the figure is broken and the form of the demon is not clearly visible, but the ferocious face of Narsimha and his posture is clearly identifiable. (Fig.19)

- Kardameśvar Temple (Fig.17)

There is a panel of five incarnations of Viṣṇu in Kradameśvara Temple, where we can spot the Narsimha avatār too; he is shown killing the demon with his claws on the bottom right corner.

- Rudreshvara Temple, Bansphatak (Fig.20)

**Viśvarūpa of Kṛṣṇa:** - The cosmic form of Kṛṣṇa, the 8th and the most supreme incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu, shown to Arjuna in the field of Kurukṣetra in order to dispel his illusion. There are very much limited

depictions of Viśvarūpa in Varanasi. In the form, Kṛṣṇa is represented with multiple faces including those of animals and birds. The image of Viśvarūpa has four faces and twenty arms, one pair of hands should be held in *patāk-hasta* mudra and other right and corresponding left in *yogamudrā* pose. The other right hands should hold *hala*, *śaṅkha*, *vajra*, *aṅkuśa*, *bāṇa*, *chakra*, a *lime fruit* and *carada* pose while in the left hands, *daṇḍa*, *pāśa*, *gadā*, *khadga*, *padma*, *śriṅga*, *musala* and *akshamālā* should be held (Rao, 1985, p. 258). Some of the notable images of Viśvarūpa from Varanasi are:-

- Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu- Kushana pd. – Mathura, housed in Bharat Kala Bhawan
- Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu in Durga Temple, Ramnagar (Fig.21)
- Viśvarūpa of Viṣṇu, Kardameśvar Temple, Varanasi (Fig.22)

SINGH, R. P. B., & Jaiswal, S. (2018) refers to the image as “the ‘Vishva Purusha’, the supreme overseer of the cosmos represented by the images of divinities all around Him” in their article.

**Matsya:** - First of the ten principal incarnations of Lord Viṣṇu in the form of an organism living in water. In this form he is sometimes represented entirely as a fish and other times with half-fish and half-human body. This therianthropomorphic representation of fish incarnation can be seen at:-

- Kardameśvar Temple, in the sculptural panel of five *avatārs* of Viṣṇu (Fig.17)
- Durga Temple, Ramnagar (Fig.23)
- Lakshmi-Narayana Temple, Bhonsla Ghat (Fig.24)
- Raghurajeshvara Temple, Bhonsla Ghat (Fig.25)
- Rudreshvara Temple, Bansphatak (Fig.26)

### (iii) Miscellaneous Figures

- A Winged female figure decorated as a *Putli* in Amethi Temple located at Manikarnika Ghat. (Fig.27)
- There are also some other images with snouted nose, lion face and beaked mouth found in Durga Temple, Ramnagar. These images though clearly therianthropomorphic are difficult to be identified and hence cannot be categorized to any particular class of such images (Fig. 28, 29).

These sculptures though unidentifiable and having no scriptural basis are still noteworthy. As Banerjea (1941) mentions that though there are a plethora of texts available to us but they still forms only a limited portion of our actual ancient texts. So it's possible that the description, iconography and symbolism of such figures have lost with time but they once had a similar status as other major therianthropomorphic figurines have now.

### Conclusion

A close look at such type of figures tells us that they are not as much unrealistic or fancy as they are generally considered. There is just a need to have a better understanding of such unusual images and attempt to unravel the mystery they have been holding since so long.

This unfolding of mysteries and bringing of real meaning to the forefront is rather important for a city like Varanasi where the tradition, culture and religious imageries hold such great importance in people's life. Varanasi has always been known for its spiritual power and religious diversity. Even then there does not seem to be required attention paid in the field of therianthropomorphic images. Many of the figures are unnoticed and had not been as much focused as they must have been. The Sumeru temple, the Rudreshwar temple Bansphatak, Laxmi- Narayan temple and Raghurajeshwar temple at Bhonsla Ghat have the depiction of a number of therianthropomorphic images and other Puranic scenes, events and mythological figures. Though most of them were identifiable, there were some images in the sculptural panels that were confusing and can be a good piece of study to understand the art, architecture, religious and cultural inclination that such temples and its builders had.

The city of Varanasi has provided an ample of important images in the related area and has facilitated the study in identification, interpretation and documentation of therianthropomorphic images. There is a need to conduct researches in this field to bring such more untouched parameters of symbology involved in our ancient texts to the front and give our country and people an entirely new perspective of looking at their art and literary images.

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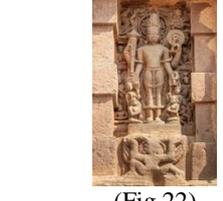
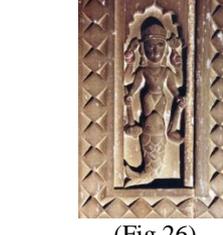
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**Figures**

 <p>(Fig.1) Sarnath Archaeological Museum</p>	 <p>(Fig.2) Raghurajeshvara Temple Bhonsla Ghat</p>	 <p>(Fig.3) Lakshmi-Narayana Temple Bhonsla Ghat</p>	 <p>(Fig.4) Shiva Temple Saraigovardhan</p>
 <p>(Fig.5) Rudreshvara Temple, Bansphatak</p>	 <p>(Fig.6) Dhundi- Vinayak Shrine near Viswanath gali</p>	 <p>(Fig.7) Durgā temple Ramnagar</p>	 <p>(Fig.8) Raghurajeshvara Temple, Bhonsla Ghat</p>
 <p>(Fig.9) Lakshmi-Narayana Temple, Bhonsla Ghat</p>	 <p>(Fig.10) Shiva Temple,</p>	 <p>(Fig.11) Durga temple Ramnagar</p>	 <p>(Fig.12) Raghurajeshvara Temple, Bhonsla Ghat</p>

 <p>(Fig.13) Durga Temple, Ramnagar</p>	<p>Saraigovardhan</p>  <p>(Fig.14) Durga Temple, Ramnagar</p>	 <p>(Fig.15) Lakshmi-Narayana Temple, Bhonsla Ghat</p>	 <p>(Fig.16) Rudreshvara Temple, Bansphatak</p>
 <p>(Fig.17) The Five Avataras of Vishnu (Photograph by Rana P.B. Singh, 2017)</p>	 <p>(Fig.18) Lakshmi- Narsimha, Hanuman temple Rajmandir</p>	 <p>(Fig.19) Durga Temple, Ramnagar</p>	 <p>(Fig.20) Rudreshvara Temple Bansphatak</p>
 <p>(Fig.21) Durga Temple, Ramnagar</p>	 <p>(Fig.22) Kardamesvar Temple, Varanasi (Photograph by Rana P.B. Singh, 2017)</p>	 <p>(Fig.23) Durga Temple, Ramnagar</p>	 <p>(Fig.24) Lakshmi- Narayana Temple, Bhonsla Ghat</p>
 <p>(Fig.25) Raghurajeshvara Temple, Bhonsla Ghat</p>	 <p>(Fig.26) Rudreshvara Temple, Bansphatak</p>	 <p>(Fig.27) Winged female figure, Amethi Temple Manikarnika Ghat</p>	
 <p>(Fig.28)</p>	 <p>(Fig.29)</p>	<p>Unidentified figures from Durga temple, Ramnagar</p>	

## Kashi: From the Center of Politics to the Center of Culture (6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE to 6<sup>th</sup> Century CE)

Kritika Yadav\*

### Abstract:

*Kashi (modern-day Varanasi) underwent a remarkable transformation from a dominant political center to a cultural and religious hub during the period spanning the 6th century BCE to the 6th century CE. Initially established as one of the sixteen Mahajanapadas (great kingdoms) of ancient India, the city's strategic location along the Ganges River made it a crucial center of political power in the eastern Gangetic plain. This study examines the gradual evolution of Kashi from its political prominence to its emergence as an unparalleled cultural center. During the 6th century BCE, the city's significance was further enhanced by its proximity to Sarnath, where Buddha delivered his first sermon, marking it as a crucial site in Buddhist history. The subsequent centuries witnessed Kashi's transformation into a major Hindu pilgrimage center, characterized by the establishment of numerous temples, ghats, and religious institutions. The city evolved into a premier center of learning, attracting scholars from across the subcontinent who contributed to the development of various schools of philosophy, Sanskrit studies, and classical arts. Simultaneously, Kashi maintained its economic vitality through flourishing trade, particularly in textiles, especially fine silks and brocades. The main objective of this research paper is to study how multifaceted transformation has established the enduring heritage of Kashi as one of the most important cultural and spiritual centers of India.*

**Keywords:** Kashi, Political, Religion, Culture, History.

Varanasi, historically known as Kashi, is a prominent center of India's cultural and religious history. Due to its religious and cultural significance, it is often referred to by various epithets such as 'The City of Temples,' 'The City of Lights,' 'The Religious Capital of India,' 'The City of Lord Shiva,' and 'The City of Knowledge.' Located on the western banks of the Ganges River in Uttar Pradesh, it is considered one of the most important pilgrimage sites in Hinduism. The concept of purity and impurity in its religious practices can be viewed from a dynamic perspective. This city, renowned for its deep religious and spiritual significance, is famous not only in India but across the world. In addition to its religious and cultural history, Varanasi has a rich political past, with texts like the Mahabharata and Brahman Puranas mentioning it as a powerful state. The transformation of Kashi from a powerful state to a religious and cultural center has been shaped by several historical and geographical factors, with significant changes occurring in governance, technology, knowledge, and culture over time. While the city's history has evolved, it can be firmly said that the cultural essence established in ancient times has largely remained intact despite these changes. This research paper describes the journey of Kashi's development from a political center to a cultural hub, covering the period from the 6th century BCE to the 6th century CE.

Due to the lack of archaeological excavations, it is difficult to definitively state the history of Kashi before the arrival of the Vedic Aryans. Kashi's physical antecedents go back to Vedas as river Varanavati (Varuna) has been mentioned in Atharvaveda.<sup>1</sup> According to popular tradition regarding Kashi and its surrounding areas, Banaras and Ghazipur were predominantly inhabited by non-Aryan tribes like the Bhara and Sura.<sup>2</sup> Even today, there is a significant population of these tribes in Banaras. Masondiha in Ghazipur, Bairat in the Varanasi district, and near Mirzapur, tools from the Stone Age have been found at the lowest levels, which are probably symbolic of these primitive tribes.<sup>3</sup> Various Sanskrit texts mention Kashi in the middle Ganga valley as an Aryan settlement. These texts include the *Yajurveda*, *Jabalopanishad*, *Shankh Smriti*, *Parashar Smriti*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Shiv Purana*, *Ling Purana*, *Naradiya Purana*, *Matsya Purana*, *Saur Purana*, *Bhavishya Purana*, and most importantly, the *Skanda Purana*, which contains the Kashi-Khand in its fourth section. Skanda Purana's Kasikhanda points that Kashi is the ultimate place of origins, a place created by Shiva when there was neither the sphere of the earth nor the creation of water.<sup>4</sup> The mention of Kashi in these various texts suggests that it has been an important city since ancient times.<sup>5</sup> According to the *Shatapatha Brahmana*, the event of the Aryan

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migration into eastern India likely occurred when Vedic civilization spread in Uttar Pradesh, initiated by Videha Madhava and his priest Gautama Raahugana, who moved from the banks of the Saraswati River.<sup>6</sup> In the early Aryan period, some tribal regional states emerged, including important ones like Magadh, Kashi, and Vatsa.<sup>7</sup> Based on the Puranas, F Eden Pargiter has provided a genealogy of the Kashi dynasty, which lists 72 rulers. The dynasty is said to have begun with King Manu. The seventh ruler in this lineage was King Kashi, who is credited with naming the city after himself.<sup>8</sup> From Pali literature, it is known that a few centuries before the birth of Buddha, the Brahmadata dynasty ruled Kashi.<sup>9</sup>

Buddhist and Jain literary evidence sheds light on the ancient political landscape of India, mentioning that Magadh, Kashi, Koshal, Vatsa, and Northern Panchal were the main Janapadas in the Ganga valley. These were part of the 16 Mahajanapadas, with Kashi included among them.<sup>10</sup> According to the *Matsya Purana*<sup>11</sup>, one hundred kings of the Brahmadata dynasty ruled Kashi. The strength of the Kashi Mahajanapada is also evident from the fact that other powerful Mahajanapadas, like Magadh, Koshal, Vatsa, and Avanti, were influenced by Kashi's political power, leading to competitive and sometimes conflictual relationships. The *Jatakas* reveal that during the Mahajanapada era, Kashi and Koshal were in constant conflict. This ongoing struggle led to the gradual weakening of Kashi. By the beginning of the 6th century BCE, Kashi was absorbed into the Koshal Janapada, with credit for this conquest going to King Kansa of Koshal, as indicated by his title 'Varanasingho' (Conqueror of Varanasi).<sup>12</sup>

By the beginning of the 6th century BCE, the Kashi Mahajanapada had lost its independent existence. During this time, the Magadh Mahajanapada emerged as a powerful center and rapidly expanded its boundaries. Magadh launched attacks not only on Kashi but also on other Mahajanapadas. Eventually, Kashi came under its control. In the third phase of the 6th century BCE, King Bimbisar of Magadh married to the daughter of the Koshal king and sister of King Prasenjit. On the occasion of this marriage, King Mahakoshal gifted the village of Kashi, which had an annual income of one lakh rupees, to the bride. However, when Prince Ajatashatru killed his father Bimbisar, King Prasenjit of Koshal became enraged and stopped providing the income from Kashi village. This led to a conflict between the two; after being defeated by Ajatashatru three times, Prasenjit finally defeated him on the fourth attempt and captured him. However, after some time, Prasenjit released Ajatashatru, and his daughter Vajira was married to him. As part of the marriage, the village of Kashi was once again given as a marriage gift. By now, Kashi was no longer a political center; it had become a part of the Magadh Mahajanapada. From this time onward, Kashi's significance as a political hub declined, though its religious and cultural development continued uninterrupted.<sup>13</sup>

In ancient times, Kashi was a hub of numerous religious and philosophical activities, witnessing the flourishing and development of various traditions. Among these, several streams of religious practices, including Vedic rituals and ceremonies, are noteworthy. There is ample evidence of the coexistence of both Vedic and non-Vedic traditions. The study of the development of religious institutions like temples and their detailed descriptions in literature reflect the receptivity of Kashi for people across different spheres of life. Various types of temples existed in Kashi, particularly those dedicated to Lord Shiva, Vishnu, and other deities. Ashrams and Mathas (monastic centers) served as focal points for religious and philosophical discussions on various topics.

In Hindu Puranas, Kashi has been regarded as a prominent center of Shaivism since ancient times. However, it is difficult to assert this with certainty, as archaeological evidence confirming Kashi's status as a significant Shaivite center before the Gupta period is still lacking. According to Vedic and Buddhist literature, the importance of Kashi (Varanasi) lay more in its commercial and cultural aspects rather than religious significance.<sup>14</sup> The *Kashi-Khanda* (Chapter 62) and other Puranas narrate the story of King Divodasa, which hints at a tendency in both the king and his subjects to prevent the entry of Vedic religion into Kashi. In the *Mahabharata*, references to Kashi as a Shaivite pilgrimage site are limited to the *Aranyak Parva*. Buddhist and Jain texts contain minimal references to the worship of Shiva in Kashi, instead highlighting the prevalence of worship dedicated to Nagas (serpents) and Yakshas (nature spirits). It is possible that Shiva held a place among these Yakshas, as Buddhist literature like the *Mahamayuri*<sup>15</sup> refers to the chief Yaksha of Banaras as Mahakal, which is one of Shiva's forms. The tradition of Yaksha worship in Banaras dates back to ancient times, and evidence of this practice continues to exist even today. The *Matsya Purana* (Chapter 180) narrates the tale of Yaksha Harikesh, providing further insights into the tradition of Yaksha worship in Kashi.

During Buddha's time, serpent worship was prevalent in Banaras. The citizens of Varanasi worshipped them using milk, rice, fish, meat, and liquor. During the Mahajanapada period, occult practices and rituals like spells, charms, and exorcisms were highly popular, and people placed great faith in such practices. Astrology, known as *Shakuna Vidya*, held a prominent position, while the common people worshiped spirits, ghosts, nature spirits (Yakshas), snakes, and trees, reflecting a primal stage of religious belief. The arrival of Aryan religion led to significant changes in religious practices and beliefs, which gave rise to an increase in intellectual awareness among some individuals. This intellectual growth led to the emergence of a new philosophy, known as the ideology of the Upanishadic period. By the Mahajanapada era, this new philosophy and its teachings were further developed and are prominently observed in Jain and Buddhist doctrines.<sup>16</sup> Jainism also had a profound connection with Kashi. The seventh Tirthankara, Suparshvanath, was born in Kashi, and in the 8th century BCE, the twenty-third Tirthankara, Parshvanath, was also born here, highlighting the significant influence of Jainism in Kashi.<sup>17</sup> Lord Buddha's association with Varanasi, specifically with Isipattana (Sarnath), is well-known; it was here that he delivered his first sermon, known as the "*Dharmachakrapravartana*". Buddhist texts also reveal that Buddha stayed in Sarnath multiple times and gave numerous teachings there.<sup>18</sup> King Ajatashatru of Magadha, a contemporary of Buddha, was a supporter of Buddhism and organized the First Buddhist Council during his reign, where Buddhist scriptures were compiled.<sup>19</sup>

During the Mahajanapada period, the largest center of education was Takshashila. After Takshashila, Banaras (Kashi) became renowned as an educational hub. It seems that the credit for developing Banaras as a center of learning goes to graduates of Takshashila who, after completing their education, started their own teaching work in Banaras. The *Guttala Jataka* mentions that during the Mahajanapada era, Banaras was a center for the study of music. There was even a time when musical competitions involving the playing of the veena (a traditional string instrument) were held here. According to the *Mahabharata*, Kashi was a center for both religion and education. The rulers of this region were dedicated to religious practices, and many religious debates and philosophical discussions took place here. Panini's *Ashadhyayi* also references Kashi as a center of education and culture, attracting scholars who came to study and conduct research. Banaras has long been famous for its enthusiasm for festivals, a tradition that continues to this day. The famous saying about Banaras is "eight times, nine festivals." During the Mahajanapada period, several festivals were celebrated in Banaras. Diwali was celebrated with great zeal. Another prominent festival was *Chhatra-Mangal Divas*, when the city would be lavishly decorated, and the king's procession would be carried out. Later, the king would arrive at an elaborately adorned palace, sit on a throne decorated with a clean canopy, and gaze upon the people in attendance. Banaras also celebrated *Madirotsava* (a festival involving drink) with great fanfare, referred to as Surakshan. It also appears that the tradition of celebrating birthdays was prevalent in Banaras.<sup>20</sup>

The *Jatakas* and Buddhist literature reveal that Banaras was renowned not only for its religious and cultural significance but also for its flourishing trade. References to 'Kashika Vastra' (textiles of Kashi) are abundant throughout Buddhist texts. The fabrics produced in Kashi were referred to as 'Kashikuttam' or, in some instances, 'Kashiya'. One notable mention of Banaras's fine textiles is found in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, where the commentator notes that Buddha's mortal remains were wrapped in a fabric made in Banaras, so finely woven that it did not absorb oil. Banarasi fabrics were known for their exceptional fineness and softness. Banaras was also a hub for the trade of fragrant substances; the *Jatakas* mention 'Kashika Chandan' (sandalwood from Kashi). Additionally, the city had a bustling ivory market, with artisans in the 'Dantakaravithi' (Ivory Carvers' Lane) crafting ivory bangles. Banaras was an active center for horse trading as well. Furthermore, the *Jatakas* contain numerous stories about merchants (Sarthavahas), and they also highlight the prominence of skilled carpenters known for their exceptional craftsmanship.<sup>21</sup>

According to the Puranas, the Shishunaga dynasty controlled almost the entire northern Indian region, excluding Punjab. During the reign of King Kalashoka of this dynasty, the Second Buddhist Council was held in Vaishali.<sup>22</sup> Little is known about the state of Banaras during the Nanda period, but since the Nandas were not followers of Vedic religion as they brought the trophies or statue of the first Jina from Kalinga and installed it in Magadh<sup>23</sup> which indicates their devotion to Jainism, Vedic practices were still promoted and taking place in the city.<sup>24</sup> In 321 BCE, Chandragupta Maurya founded the Mauryan Empire in northern India. A follower of Jainism, Chandragupta organized the First Jain Council

in Pataliputra under the presidency of Sthulabhadra.<sup>25</sup> After Chandragupta, Emperor Ashoka emerged as the most illustrious ruler of the Mauryan dynasty. He adopted Buddhism and actively promoted it. Evidence from Sarnath indicates that during Ashoka's reign, Buddhism flourished in the region. Ashoka established monasteries for monks and nuns and built the Dharmarajika Stupa.<sup>26</sup> An inscription on a pillar at Sarnath contains Ashoka's decree, which mandates expulsion from the Sangha as a punishment for those inciting disputes within the monastic community. According to the Gargi Samhita, Ashoka also convened the Third Buddhist Council. Following the Mauryas, Banaras's condition under the Shunga dynasty is less clear. Buddhist literature portrays Pushyamitra Shunga as a staunch opponent of Buddhism, and this period saw a revival of Brahmanical religion.<sup>27</sup>

During the Kushan period (1st to 3rd century CE), Buddhism dominated Banaras. Statues found in Sarnath and Rajghat indicate significant Buddhist development during the reign of Kanishka. In 81 CE, a Bodhisattva statue was possibly brought from Mathura and installed in Sarnath by Bhikshus, boosting Buddhist influence.<sup>28</sup> Coins from Rajghat bearing inscriptions like "*Bhagavato Sitas*" and "*Budhamya*" further confirm the presence of Buddhism.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, artifacts such as the depiction of Balrama or Nagas and the portrayal of Yakshas on Kushan-era pillars suggest that the tradition of Yaksha worship persisted in Banaras.<sup>30</sup> The *Matsya Purana* indicates that following the resurgence of Shaivism, Yakshas were integrated as Shiva's attendants.<sup>31</sup> Kashi became one of the earliest and most prominent centers of Shaivism. Since Shaivism was primarily ascetic in nature, early on, it lacked organized monastic structures or significant artistic representations, resulting in limited material evidence.<sup>32</sup> However, Kushan coins depict Shiva with symbols like the trident, seated on Nandi, alongside Devi Uma, and in various anthropomorphic forms (two-armed, four-armed, and three-faced), suggesting the widespread practice of Shaiva worship, including its influence in the Kashi region.<sup>33</sup>

It is indisputable that during the Gupta period, Shaivism and Vaishnavism reached their peak development. Studies of the Puranas suggest that Kashi may have played a major role in this flourishing of Shaivism. According to the *Agni Purana*, the region came to be known as '*Avimukta Kshetra*' because Lord Shiva vowed never to leave it.<sup>34</sup> The *Matsya Purana* also mentions the temple of 'Devadeva Avimukta' in the Gupta period.<sup>35</sup> It is believed that the original construction of the Vishwanath Temple may have taken place around 490 CE.<sup>36</sup> With the restoration of Shaivism during the Gupta period, several Shivalingas were established in Kashi, including prominent ones like Harishchandra, Amritkeshwar, Jaleshwar, Shriparvatmahalaya, Krimichandeshwar, Kedareswar, and Avimukteshwar.<sup>37</sup> The reverence for Kashi's sanctity had become firmly established during the Gupta era. According to the *Agni Purana*, acts such as bathing, chanting, sacrificial offerings, dying, worship, shraddha (ancestor rites), charity, and residing in Kashi were believed to bring liberation.<sup>38</sup> During the reign of Kumaragupta, Kashi also became a major center for the worship of Kartikeya. Coins found at Rajghat depict a dancing peacock, symbolizing Kartikeya, and inscriptions on coins bearing names like Shashthimitra, Suvishakhadatta, Vishakhadatta, and Guhaditya suggest the popularity of Kartikeya worship. Shashthi is said to be the wife of Kartikeya, and her worship was also prevalent in the Gupta period. The importance of Vaishnavism during the Gupta era is evident from Gupta coins inscribed with the title "Param Bhagavata" (supreme devotee of Vishnu). Vaishnavism was the state religion of the Guptas, and coins featuring the 'Garudadhvaja' (Garuda emblem) also support this. One coin even depicts a Vishnu temple from the Gupta period, suggesting that temple construction had already begun during this time.<sup>39</sup> Sarnath, which had been a sacred Buddhist pilgrimage site since Ashoka's time, continued to be significant, with an increase in Bodhisattva worship as indicated by Buddhist statues found there. During Kumaragupta's rule, Jainism also saw significant growth, as evidenced by inscriptions from his period. Although both Buddhism and Jainism developed during the Gupta period, Shaivism and Vaishnavism remained the primary religions of the era.<sup>40</sup>

In the fifth century, the traveler Fa-Hien mentioned that there were thirty monasteries and approximately thirty thousand Buddhist monks in this city, as well as nearly one hundred Hindu temples and ten thousand priests. Their chief deity was Maheshwar, whose tall copper statue was worshipped.<sup>41</sup> Accounts of travels also indicate that Brahmins, Jains, and Buddhist scholars lived here harmoniously for the purpose of acquiring education. Varanasi, since ancient times, had been established as the foremost pilgrimage site for Brahmanical religion and was considered the most prominent of the seven sacred cities. In mythological tales, it was referred to as "Mokshadaini" (the giver of salvation).<sup>42</sup> Even after the Gupta period, Varanasi retained its religious and cultural significance. Bhairav-Shiva is mentioned in the

grants of the Vakatakas. It is said that they organized ten Ashwamedh sacrifices at Dashashwamedh Ghat and concluded with a purifying anointment using the waters of the Ganga.<sup>43</sup> The inscription discovered at Rajghat in Gupta-era script, bearing the seal of "Banarasy-Adhishtan-Adhikaranasya," is significant as it is the seal of the Varanasi municipal administration.<sup>44</sup> Varanasi, which had been a political entity of the Mahajanapada before the Buddha's time, had from the Vedic period itself been a prominent center for religious, cultural, and educational activities in India. By the sixth century, politically, it was merely an administrative unit; however, its identity and fame had remained entirely that of a religious city and pilgrimage site, a status that has remained firmly in place from ancient times to the present.

Thus, the period from the 6th century BCE to the 6th century CE was a significant time in the historical development of Kashi. During the Mahajanapada era, it had a prosperous political history; however, Kashi's connections with religion, education, and trade date back to ancient times. Due to these connections, it became a symbol of a culture that embodies the full philosophy of Indianness. Various geographical, political, and commercial factors contributed to the religious and cultural development of Kashi. Its geographical location made it famous as a commercial center since ancient times. These commercial activities also contributed to the growth of religion and culture here. Even after losing its political significance, religious and cultural activities continued to thrive under royal patronage during various periods like the Maurya, Kushan, and Gupta eras. Before the time of Buddha, this place had already been a major center for Hindu philosophy and education. Buddha gave his first sermon here, and as the birthplace of Tirthankara Parsvanatha, Jains also claim this city as their own. However, Brahmanical religion had a special dominance here, as the connection between Kashi and Shaivism, particularly with Lord Shiva, has been strong since ancient times. It is believed to be the dwelling place of Lord Shiva and a city that grants salvation. Thus, this city became a confluence of various religions and cultures, making it a sacred pilgrimage site for people from all corners of India. The monasteries, gurukuls, and centers of learning here not only became centers of religious education but also evolved as places where diverse streams of philosophy and knowledge were exchanged. Over time, while Kashi's political significance may have diminished, its cultural and religious importance has kept it alive through the ages. In this way, Kashi emerged as a unique cultural center, renowned worldwide for its spiritual heritage.

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# Digital Media as a 'Tool' for the Preservation of Knowledge System of Kashi

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## Abstract:

*Kashi, also known as Varanasi, situated on the banks of the river Ganges, is one of the oldest living cities in the world. The city is significantly considered to be a center of culture, religion, and knowledge. Kashi is also known as the 'City of Learning'. The knowledge system of Kashi is deeply rooted in its traditions, touching every aspect of knowledge, from Vedic knowledge to Gurukuls, from religious practices to its art, culture, pilgrimage, etc. The knowledge system of Kashi reflects a blend of academic, artistic, and spiritual traditions, making it a unique center of learning. In recent years, digital media has become one of the greatest tools through which knowledge can not only be shared, but it can also be preserved. In this paper, "Digital Media as a Tool for Knowledge System of Kashi" has been studied. Qualitative and quantitative approaches has been used for the methodology. Content analysis is preferred for data analysis. This paper focuses on covering as many digital media platforms as it could for understanding how digital media as a tool is being able to contribute to sharing and preserving the knowledge system of Kashi.*

**Keywords:** Digital Media, Knowledge System, Kashi, Preservation, Kashi, Technology, ICT education, information, tool.

## Introduction:

In today's landscape of information and communication technology (ICT), 'digital media' as a part of ICT has emerged as an important tool for enhancing the lifestyle of today's generation in every way possible, including business, healthcare, e-commerce, hotels, etc. Knowledge system is one of the aspects of one's daily life that is boosting with the help of digital media. According to the Global Education Monitoring report of UNESCO, "Globally, the percentage of internet users rose from 16% in 2005 to 66% in 2022". "About 50% of the world's lower secondary schools were connected to the internet for pedagogical purposes in 2022." Kashi, also known as Varanasi, situated at the banks of the Ganges in the Uttar Pradesh state of India, which has always been known to be a significant centre of traditional knowledge and learning, is also preserving and disseminating its knowledge systems through digital media. This study is focused on finding out how various digital media platforms, such as various online websites, online educational resources, and digital archives, are reshaping the ways in which knowledge systems of Kashi are shared and preserved. Hence, the topic titled "Digital Media as a 'Tool' for Knowledge System of Kashi" has been selected for the study.

Digital media comes in various forms and types. However, the basic five types of digital media are given as follows:

1. Audio: Invented in 1857 by French inventor Edouard-Léon Scott de Martinville. Earlier, audio was restricted to radio and sound recordings, but now audio has made a powerful comeback with the rise of 'podcast'.
2. Video: With the use of a single-lens camera, 'Louis Le Prince' made the first-ever motion video in 1888. Thomas Edison invented the kinetograph, the first movie camera, in 1891. New technologies have enhanced the quality and quantity of online streaming videos.
3. Text: Texts such as blogs, e-newspapers, e-books, and online websites are some examples of text as a significant form of digital media. Texts are the highly available form of digital media available on and off the internet. Texts are the first form of digital media that was made available or visible on the internet.
4. Images and Graphics: Invented in the form of photography by a French inventor 'Nicéphore Niépce' in 1822. Nicéphore Nuépce developed a kind of technique called heliography, which he used to create the world's oldest surviving photograph, View from the Window at Le Gras (1827). With the evolution of images and graphics, high-technology graphics and images are now available for the users as a form of digital media.
5. Mixed Media: Mixed media contains all sorts of digital media. For example, a film will be presented in the form of video; it will also have audio; many films do support subtitles, which

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again is a form of digital media; and some animated or action films do have images and graphics as well. Hence, when all or some of the forms of digital media are put together or merged on one platform, it is known as mixed media.

#### Literature Review:

1. A, N. N., B, N. a. M., & Muthmainah, N. H. N. (2023). Analysed the knowledge management in today's digital age, this study concluded that there is a plethora of information and rapid sharing in today's digital age; effective and efficient knowledge management is necessary for the success of organisations. This research paper explored various sides of knowledge management with the help of bibliometric analysis. The findings reveal that knowledge management systems are the most important element for an organisation's or company's success. The paper suggests that as the digital landscape continues to evolve, organisations must harness the potential of knowledge management systems.
2. Das, A. (2020) The study concluded that while digital media offers many significant benefits for every individual, it also poses some very serious challenges for the users, like online manipulation, plagiarism, and digital media addiction. It is necessary for the users to recognise and understand the impact of digital media and use it responsibly. The paper suggests to the users that instead of trying to impress others online, one must focus on using these digital media tools to create a positive change in society.
3. Singh, Prof. B., Paul, Prof. M., BMM Department, Prahladrai Dalmia, Mrs. Vishranti Raut, Deka, Lad, Sandra Okyeadie Mensah, Zahid Amin, Amankwaa, Hashem1, & Waqas Tariq1. (2019). Studied the impact of digital media on education, the study reveals that digital media has a vital influence over one's day-to-day lives. Students do use digital platforms for varied reasons, such as searching and sharing information, watching tutorials, etc. Students use digital platforms such as edx.org, academicearth.org, archive.org, howcast.com, etc., for acquiring knowledge and information. Hence, the researcher in this paper accepts their null hypothesis that the digital media does influence the education system.

#### Objective:

To find out whether digital media as a tool is effectively preserving the knowledge system of Kashi.

#### Hypothesis:

Digital media as a tool is effectively preserving the knowledge system of Kashi.

#### Methodology:

In this study, the researcher has used qualitative methodology. Content analysis has been used for the study.

#### Sampling:

Purposive sampling has been used for this study.

#### Sample:

03 online websites have been taken for the study.

#### Results:

In this research, a few online websites (available as of 2024) have been considered for the study/analysis of digital media as a tool for preserving knowledge systems of Kashi. Online websites are given as follows:

1. **Kashi Official web portal: Explore Comprehensive Information (<https://kashi.gov.in/>)** This web portal is managed by the authorities of Kashi. This digital platform provides information about various activities related to the Kashi. This portal shares varied information about Kashi. The web portal can be read in two languages, that is, English and Hindi. The website contains many facts about Varanasi, such as its weather, the culture of Varanasi, including its heritage, dance, and music, and Varanasi crafts. The website also shares information about the top attractions of Varanasi, which are Shri Kashi Vishwanath, Assi Ghat, Manikarnika Ghat, Namoo Ghat, and Shri Durga Temple. The portal of 'kashi.gov.in' also provides details about things to do in Varanasi, such as boating river cruises at Ganga, local markets, ghat walks, and Subah-e-banaras, and it also has information about the street food of Varanasi, which is very popular in the city. The website also contains information about the upcoming events in Varanasi. The website has the option to explore Varanasi by a theme that has 5 subcategories, which are city

life, spirituality, sports, music, and education. As mentioned earlier, in the sense of a knowledge system, the web portal has a theme of education, in which the web portal mentions much information regarding the knowledge system of Kashi. Some of the important points are given below: Varanasi is a centre of ancient wisdom and modern science, attracting many thousands of students globally. Kashi is recognised as the capital of Sarvavidya, the knowledge of all sciences. Historical Contributions: Vedas: The city is the cradle of the four Vedas of Hinduism, which were composed between 1000 and 500 BC. Important figures are situated in Kashi, such as Adi Shankaracharya, who promoted Vedic culture, and Mahatma Gautam Buddha, who delivered his first sermon in Sarnath. Many educational institutions are also mentioned in the portal, such as Banaras Sanskrit College (1791), which later became Sampurnanand Sanskrit University (1974). Banaras Hindu University (1916), which is the largest residential university in Asia. Other notable institutions include Uday Pratap Mahavidyalaya (1909) and Mahatma Gandhi. Kashi Vidyapeeth Many other institutions that were founded before the independence of India are mentioned in the portal, which is given as follows: Banaras Sanskrit College (1791); Banaras Hindu University (1916); Central Hindu Boys' School (1898). Kashi Vidyapeeth (founded during the freedom movement) Cultural teachings of Kashi are mentioned in the digital portal of Kashi.gov.in. Concepts like "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" and "Ahimsa Paramo Dharma" are mentioned on the website. Varanasi continues to be a vibrant centre for learning and cultural exchange, blending ancient traditions with contemporary education. The mobile application "Kashi Darshan" of this web portal is also available on the Google Play Store and on the Apple Store.

2. **Kashi Initiative (<https://www.kashiinitiative.org/education>):** The Kashi Initiative is an online website focused on the enhancement of life in rural areas and sustainable practices. It highlights various projects and programs aimed at environmental conservation and community empowerment. It aims at various programs and events related to environmental conservation, community empowerment, and sustainable development. The initiative focuses on the collaboration with local stakeholders to create a great impact through education, resource management, and community engagement. The first Kashi School is being constructed in an underdeveloped and rural area across the Ganga from Varanasi's central city. This location provides Kashi School access to the most at-risk children in the district. Kashi Initiative provides a holistic educational experience focused on the children and their development. The initiative focuses on nurturing children in an environment of empathy, compassion, and justice and on promoting critical thinking about complex global issues that lead to social change.

Kashi Initiative's aims are given as follows:

- Teach children to live in harmony with others and communicate across differences for the common good.
- Foster mindfulness through reflection about how one's actions impact others, communities, and the environment.
- Encourage a spirit of ethical entrepreneurship and innovation.
- In conjunction with these tasks, Kashi School will bring children together in safe, protected spaces where they can build sustainable futures.

**3. Sanely written <https://sanelywritten.com/2024/06/16/kashi-the-well-of-knowledge/>** The blog is written in three parts. The text had a deep analysis of the history of Kashi: A well of knowledge. Some important highlights of the text are given below:

In his book "The Sacred City of Hindus: An Account of Benares in Ancient and Modern Times," Matthew Atmore Sheering highlights Varanasi's historical significance as one of the earliest towns in human civilisation. Derived from the Sanskrit word "kash," meaning "to shine," the name Kashi aptly captures the allure of the city, particularly when viewed at dawn across the Ganga river. "Kashi ke kankar kankar me Shankar hai" refers to the fact that Lord Shiva is present in each and every stone of Kashi. The blog says that "There are numerous Shiva lingas in Kashi, and each one has a distinct legend. According to Lord Shiva, the Ganges River is home to 600 million Siddhas. The scripture also lists fourteen of Kashi's most important lingas, such as Omkareshwara and Vishweshwara (Vishwanatha), the main Jyotirlinga known as the "lord of the universe." As the most important linga, Vishweshwara is said to be

free from “sparsh dosha,” which permits unhindered devotion. The blog’s next section discusses the invasion of Sindh in depth.”

The blog’s next portion discusses the conquest of Sindh, describing “a millennium characterised by bloodshed, temple destruction, and Hindu conversion by pressure.” The well-known looting of the temple of Somnath sheds light on the actual character of these acts, which run counter to assertions by some Marxist historians that Ghazni freed lower-caste people from Brahmin domination. The blog also looks at Akbar’s rule and makes reference to Joseph Princep in this sense. It also discusses the historical disputes in Kashi between Muslims and Hindus, especially those involving the Gyan Vapi Mosque. Property rights lawsuits have become more intense, particularly since 1854, when a number of court decisions brought attention to the continuous fight over land ownership. Tensions increased even further after 1925, especially with regard to access to prayer.

#### Conclusion:

The study concludes that the knowledge system of Kashi in all three digital websites had different ways of preserving the knowledge system of Kashi. The first website, which was the “official website of Kashi,” had information about every aspect of Kashi district. Particularly, when it comes to education or knowledge system, it gave a detailed overview of the past, present, and future of Kashi. The official website or web portal of Kashi also provides mobile applications that promote digital media literacy and enhance digital technology. If anyone wants to visit Kashi and they want to know about Kashi’s upcoming events, they can definitely search and go to Kashi’s official website or download the mobile application from the Google Play Store or Apple Store and can understand and read various information and accordingly schedule or plan their visit to Kashi. The education part of the website had a deeply analysed knowledge system of Kashi; it highlighted the important events that were not only related to the education system, or knowledge system of Kashi, but were also related to the historical background of India. They were portals that used simple and subtle language for the text or information provided on the website, which led to easy understanding by the layman. The official website of Kashi is definitely preserving the knowledge system of Kashi. The second online website that was studied in this paper was ‘Kashi Initiative,’ and the website promotes social welfare and educational welfare for the students and children of Kashi, especially in the rural areas of the district. The third website studied in this paper was a blog, which had 13-minute reading material titled “Kashi: the Well of Knowledge.” The blog provided a deep analysis of the history and the origin of Kashi; it also provided information about the invasions that had happened in Kashi, their downfall, and the present scenario of Kashi, and a beautiful detailed knowledge of everything related to Kashi. Especially when it comes to knowledge. This particular blog was completely dedicated to Kashi and beautifully described “Kashi: A Well of Knowledge.” After studying all three of these online websites, it is concluded that the digital preservation of the knowledge system of Kashi is definitely there and is deeply discussed on various other websites as well. For further studies, it is recommended that other websites, blogs, or other digital media platforms and electronic media platforms also be considered for the study.

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# Kashi's Sacred Aura: A Journey through History, Faith, and Feminine Power

Anam Jabeen\*

## Abstract

*Kashi, also known as Varanasi or Benares, stands as one of the most revered cities in the world. Often referred to as the "City of Light" or the "Spiritual Capital of India," Kashi's importance stretches back thousands of years, and its allure continues to draw pilgrims, seekers, and travellers from across the globe. The city is revered for its deep historical roots, religious significance, and spiritual aura, making it an essential part of India's cultural and metaphysical landscape. To understand the essence of Kashi, one must delve into the city's rich history, explore its profound religious traditions, and appreciate its unmatched spiritual resonance. Women's roles in its historical, cultural, and social progress have been substantial yet underrepresented. This article explores the contributions of women in the development of Kashi, emphasizing their involvement in religious, educational, social, and political movements. Furthermore, it discusses the significance of Kashi for women, both historically and in contemporary times, focusing on its spiritual relevance, opportunities for empowerment, and social reforms.*

**Key words-** Women of Kashi, Spirituality, Economic empowerment, Exploration.

## Introduction

Kashi, often called the "city of light," or "city of good death" has been a major center for religious, spiritual and cultural activities for over three thousand years. The city holds profound significance in Hinduism, serving as a pilgrimage site and a place for spiritual liberation i.e. *moksha*. Despite its religious male-dominated historical narratives, women have played a vital role in shaping the social, cultural, and spiritual ethos of the city. The historical contributions of women in Kashi's progress and emancipation span education, religion, arts, and social fields.

## History of Kashi/Varanasi/Banaras

Kashi's origins are shrouded in the mists of time, but its continuous habitation for over 3,000 years makes it one of the oldest cities in the world. Historical references to Kashi can be found in ancient texts such as the *Atharva Veda*, (5.22.4) dating back around 15<sup>th</sup> century BCE, where the Sanskrit word "Kāśī," means "to shine" or "the luminous," has been first used and in this sense, it remained a source of knowledge and spirituality for millennia. It is said that Kashi was established on the banks of the river Ganga as a prominent center of learning, trade, and culture. Throughout history, Kashi has witnessed the rise and fall of empires, invasions, destructions and reconstructions. Despite the turbulence, the city's spiritual worth remained unharmed. Kashi has been a vibrant seat of Hindu philosophy, music, and education. Kashi is also associated with king Kasha, who is believed to have ruled the region in the distant past and given the city its name.

Kashi is also known as Varanasi, located between the Varana River in north and Asi River in South. According to the mythology, these two rivers originated from the feet of God Vishnu, who is believed to have lain at Prayagraj. The Varana River is said to be the "Acceptor" and the Asi River the "Sword". The ancient city of Varanasi was established along the banks of the Varana River, which was also known as Varanavati in early *Puranas*.

Varanasi in Buddhist literature such as *Jatakas*, Kashi is cited as Banaras. British colonizers mispronounced it as Benaras or Bunaras. One theory about the origin of name suggests that "Bana" means "readymade" and "ras" means "juice of life", implying that Banaras is a place where the "Juice of life" is always ready and available.

Ancient scholars, mathematicians, and poets like Tulsidas and Kabir found inspiration in Kashi, and its universities were revered centers of learning, comparable to Athens in ancient Greece. The city has also been a focal point for different cultures, leading to a unique confluence of traditions. Its profound significance, both historically and culturally, is deeply intertwined with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. While the role of male scholars, priests, and ascetics has been widely documented, the contributions of women in shaping Varanasi's spiritual and religious legacy have often been understated.

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### Divine Feminine Essence in Hinduism

Throughout history, the divine feminine has played a key role in various religions across the globe, particularly within the Hindu traditions of *Shakti* and *Saivism*. In Hinduism, women are seen as equal to their counterparts in value. For instance, goddesses like Kali Ma embody powerful dualities of creation, preservation, and destruction. Kali, cherished as the Dark Mother, symbolises both the origin and the end of life, earning respect and admiration for her control over life and death. This veneration of Kali elevates the status of women in these traditions. Another key figure in Hinduism is *Shakti*, as the embodiment of the universe's energy, *Shakti* often manifests to vanquish demonic forces and restore balance. She is worshiped as the Mother Goddess, encompassing all the gods of the Hindu pantheon. Various forms of the Goddess are appreciated, including *Durga*, the fierce warrior; Kali, the Goddess of time, death, and regeneration; *Lalita Tripurasundari*, the supreme lady of all worlds; and *Bhuvaneshwari*, the cosmic Goddess of the universe.

Other manifestations include *Lakshmi*, the Goddess of wealth and prosperity, and *Saraswati*, the Goddess of knowledge, arts, and learning, each representing key aspects of life and existence. The divine feminine in Hinduism thus reflects the profound power and sanctity attributed to women and goddesses, central to the balance and continuity of the cosmos. During the Vedic period (c. 1500–500 BCE), women in Indian society, including in regions like Kashi, enjoyed a relatively elevated status. Kashi, as a central hub for the spread of Hinduism and Vedic knowledge, witnessed the participation of women in intellectual and spiritual practices. According to the Hindu Mythology the princesses Ambika and Ambalika of Kashi were married to Vichitravirya, the ruler of Hastinapur. They became the mothers of Pandu and Dhritarashtra. Bhima, Pandu's son, also married a princess from Kashi named Valandhara, and they had a son named Sarvaga, who later became the ruler of Kashi. Dhritarashtra's eldest son, Duryodhana, married another Kashi princess, Bhanumati. She gave birth to a son, Lakshmana Kumara, and a daughter, Lakshmana.

Kashi is also significant as the location near which Buddha delivered his first sermon in Sarnath. Women played a key role in early Buddhist communities. The Bhikkhuni Sangha (order of Buddhist nuns), established by Buddha at the request of his aunt Mahaprajapati Gautami, flourished in the Kashi region, contributing to the spread of Buddhism. Jainism also saw the involvement of women, with figures such as Mallinath, the 19th Tirthankara, being female. Both these religions, which promoted the ideas of non-violence, renunciation, and spiritual equality, offered avenues for women to step beyond traditional roles and participate in religious life, helping to solidify Kashi's importance as a spiritual center.

### Pioneering Women in the History of Kashi

Ahilyabai Holkar played a key role in restoring Hindu temples, particularly the Kashi Vishwanath Temple in 1777, after it was destroyed by Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. She personally financed its reconstruction near its original site and ensured the temple followed traditional designs and architecture. In addition, she built *ghats* along the Ganga River, including Manikarnika and Dashashwamedh Ghats, and funded the reconstruction of the sacred Manikarnika Kund. Her efforts extended to providing rest houses for pilgrims and supporting religious and charitable activities in Kashi, greatly enhancing the city's spiritual life. She was instrumental in providing resources for rituals, festivals, and ceremonies that enriched the religious life of Kashi. ([www.oplndia.com](http://www.oplndia.com))

The Banaras Gharana, also known as the Kashi Gharana, emerged in the 19th century in Varanasi under the patronage of the royal family of Kashi. It blends elements of Kathak, Bharatanatyam, and Manipuri, and is renowned for its graceful movements, intricate footwork, and emphasis on *abhinaya*, or expressive storytelling. Supported by the royal court, this classical dance form became a vital platform for artists to develop and showcase their talents. Shovana Narayan, a distinguished dancer of the Banaras Gharana, has earned widespread acclaim for her graceful movements, precise footwork, and compelling storytelling on stage. Her mastery of Kathak, combined with her ability to convey deep emotions through dance, has made her a celebrated figure in Indian classical arts. Vidha Lal, an emerging talent from the Banaras Gharana, is known for her inventive choreography and high-energy performances. She has captivated audiences both in India and internationally, earning numerous accolades for her contributions to the evolution of classical dance.

Siddheswari Devi (8 August 1908 – 18 March 1977), affectionately known as Maa, was a renowned Hindustani classical singer from Varanasi, India. She was a key exponent of the Banaras Gharana, a musical tradition that emphasizes the expression of deep emotions through intricate notes and

vocal nuances. While she is celebrated primarily for her mastery of thumri, Siddheswari's vast repertoire extended to various other classical and semi-classical forms, including khayals, dhrupads, *dadras*, *tappas*, *kajris*, *chaitis*, *horis*, and *bhajans*. Her contributions to Indian music continue to inspire generations of artists. Siddheswari Devi is regarded as one of the finest *Thumri* singers of the 20th century. Her peers, including Kesarbai Kerkar, even referred to her as the 'Thumri Queen' in recognition of her exceptional talent.

Another influential female figure that was born on the sacred soil of Varanasi on 8 May 1929, Girija Devi was destined to become one of the eternal voices of Hindustani classical music. Her father, Ramdeo Rai, a *zamindar* and a lover of music, could feel the rhythms of the city pulsating through the Ganges and into their home. It was under his watchful gaze that a young Girija Devi was introduced to the world of melody. At the tender age of five, she began her musical journey, tutored by the illustrious vocalist and *sarangi* player Sarju Prasad Misra. Her early lessons were steeped in the rich traditions of *khyal* and *tappa*, forms that would later become integral to her unique musical signature. Like the city of Kashi itself, where every stone seems to whisper tales of devotion and art, Girija Devi's soul was attuned to the ancient sounds that flowed around her. At just nine, she stepped into the world of cinema, starring in the film *Yaad Rahe*, her voice a preview of the brilliance yet to come. Her musical education expanded under Chand Misra, who opened her heart to a wide range of styles, shaping her into the versatile maestro the world would later revere. ([www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com](http://www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com)) Girija Devi's journey was one of passion, tradition, and innovation. As her voice soared, so did the spirit of Kashi, with its *ghats*, temples, and the flowing Ganges echoing the purity of her notes. She became not just a singer but a custodian of the city's ancient musical heritage, her life a tribute to the timeless traditions of Varanasi, which she carried across the world.

Rani Lakshmi Bai, the fearless queen of Jhansi, remains one of India's most inspiring figures in the fight against British colonial rule. Born as Manikarnika Tambe on November 19, 1828, in the sacred land of Kashi (Varanasi), she embodied the resilience, courage, and undying spirit of India's fight for freedom. Kashi, known for its spiritual energy and ancient wisdom, played a crucial role in shaping her character. From a young age, the city exposed her to the ideas of honor, bravery, and justice that later defined her as the legendary warrior queen. Steeped in the rich cultural heritage of Kashi, Manikarnika absorbed the essence of valiant tales and spiritual teachings, which sowed the seeds of her indomitable resolve. Her upbringing amidst the vibrant *ghats* of Varanasi, a place where gods and mortals converge, nourished her warrior spirit. Her transformation from a young girl in Kashi to the iconic Rani of Jhansi became a testament to her deep-rooted connection with the ethos of her birthplace. Even as she led her army with unparalleled valor during the 1857 uprising, the values she imbibed from Kashi resonated in her leadership. Lakshmi Bai's name is forever etched in the annals of Indian history, and her legacy as a warrior, shaped in the spiritual embrace of Kashi, continues to inspire generations.

Annie Besant (1847–1933) was a British social reformer, women's rights activist, and prominent figure in the Indian independence movement. She is best known for her leadership in the Theosophical Society and her deep connection with Indian culture and spirituality. In Kashi (Varanasi), Besant played a significant role in the educational and social reform landscape. One of her notable contributions was the establishment of the Central Hindu College in Varanasi in 1898, which later became a part of Banaras Hindu University (BHU). Through this institution, Besant aimed to combine modern scientific education with Indian spiritual traditions, promoting a holistic educational system. Her efforts in Kashi helped in spreading awareness about Indian culture, history, and independence. Annie Besant's legacy in Kashi also extends to her work in empowering Indian youth and contributing to the nationalist cause, as she became the first woman president of the Indian National Congress in 1917. Her influence in Kashi symbolized her deep connection with India's spiritual heart while advocating for its political freedom.

#### **Significant Women Shaping the Future of Kashi**

A Times of India report titled "MWCD's Women Achievers from Varanasi" highlights the selection of two women by the Union Ministry of Women and Child Development for a prestigious recognition at the Ceremonial Hall of Rashtrapati Bhavan on January 22. Shruti Nagvanshi was honoured for her work in the 'Access to Justice and Protection of Women's Rights' category, while Nazneen Ansari was acknowledged for her contributions to 'Women in Public Life,' recognition determined through a contest organized by MWCD in partnership with Facebook. These two distinguished women from Kashi, Shruti Nagvanshi, a social activist who founded the Savitri Bai Phule Women Forum, and

Nazneen Ansari from the Muslim Mahila Foundation, have been invited to attend a luncheon at Rashtrapati Bhawan in New Delhi, hosted by President Pranab Mukherjee. Shruuti has been actively advocating for women's rights, standing against violence, and amplifying women's voices. Meanwhile, Nazneen, coming from a humble family of weavers, has been working towards fostering communal harmony in society. (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/varanasi/mcwds-women-achievers-from-varanasi/articleshow/50439175.cms>)

Women participated in religious rituals and held significant roles as seers and philosophers, contributing to the shaping of spiritual and religious life in the city. An article published online by ANI on October 6, 2024, highlighted an event held in Varanasi—Kashi Vaishwik Gaurav Samman 2022—which honoured 18 exceptional women change makers for their outstanding contributions in various fields. The event, jointly organized by Algol Films and Grovox Creations, aimed to recognize women whose work has made significant impacts in their respective domains. The Chief Guest of the event was renowned public figure, Mandakini Jaiswal. Among the honourees were notable women such as: Richa Patel, the first female Loco Pilot from Varanasi (Kashi), Dr. Shepradha Srivastava, whose contributions in the field of saving the girl child were commended, Shivangi Singh, first pilot associated with the Rafale fighter aircraft program, also hailing from Kashi, Manya Singh, who gained prominence as Miss India 2020 runner-up, et.al. These influential women, along with many others, were recognized for their tireless efforts and dedication to their fields, contributing significantly to social causes, empowerment, and the betterment of society. The Kashi Vaishwik Gaurav Samman 2022 event served as a platform to celebrate the excellence of these women and their transformative role in shaping not only local communities but also the nation as well.

Another report titled “Women Are Changing the Holy City” published online delves into the social transformation occurring in Varanasi, focusing on the role of women in reshaping traditionally male-dominated spaces. A number of women are breaking free from the constraints of gender roles and stepping into areas once exclusively assigned to men. While traditionally male priests have dominated the religious institutions in Kashi, there has been a growing presence of female priests in recent years. It is particularly remarkable to note how women are now entering predominantly male sectors, such as conducting cremations—an area historically reserved for men. Jamuna Devi stands out as a notable example of women’s empowerment. As a Hindu woman, she has built a livelihood by performing cremations on the banks of the holy river Ganga. Jamuna Devi is the first woman at the Manikarnika Ghat to take on this responsibility, a role she has held for approximately 30 years. Under her supervision, the cremations are carried out by male workers, highlighting her pioneering role in this deeply traditional practice. Apart from Jamuna Devi this report also talks about several other such prominent figures too one of them is Najma Parveen Bharatwanshi, the national president of the Bharatiya Awami Party, which boasts a membership of 40,000 women from Varanasi. This group was established in January 2013 and represents the growing political influence of women in the region. Banarasi Saree is one of the most renowned assets of Banaras. This report also talks about its weavers, who spin fine threads and play a crucial role in the local economy. This weaving community significantly contributes to Banaras' growth and prosperity. Though traditionally, women were not allowed to work in the Karkhanas (workshops), they support their families by weaving from home. In fact, it is said that women can complete half a Saree in just two hours, earning about ₹8 per Saree. Their contribution is not only boosting household incomes but also supporting the city’s overall economic development.

Kashi is also famous as the "City of Widows" because it has long been a destination for widows seeking solace, especially those who have lost all familial ties and see salvation in death within this sacred place. Many come to Kashi to live out their remaining days in peace, believing that dying here grants them freedom from the cycle of rebirth. Previously, widows endured deplorable conditions, surviving by begging at temples or on the streets. Their livelihood was often reduced to seeking alms for food. However, over the past few years, efforts have been made to improve their situation. Same report also explains changing condition of widows. Now, they are provided with regular meals, including lunch and dinner, giving them some relief from the hardships they used to face. In a positive step towards widow empowerment, various organizations, including Sulabh International, have begun offering a monthly pension of ₹2000 to help these women live with more dignity. Half of this pension is typically kept by the ashrams in exchange for providing essentials like bread and milk, helping widows sustain

themselves with basic necessities. The NGO has also arranged medical facilities and regular health check-ups for them. It is very different thing that widows of Banaras are still yearning for a decent life.

In a different report published online on March 2, 2023 one of the prominent newspapers of the country The Times of India, titled “Kashi Vishwanath Dham Sweatens the Deal for Women Prasad Makers”. This report showcases that since its inauguration in December 2021, the Kashi Vishwanath Temple Corridor Project, initiated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has played a crucial role in revitalizing the local economy. The project has not only improved the spiritual and cultural appeal of Kashi (Varanasi), attracting more devotees and tourists, but has also provided a significant boost to the financial condition of the local population, especially women. A key example of this economic upliftment can be seen in the efforts of a group of women led by Sunita Jaiswal, who belong to a local the Bela Papad Self Help Group. These women, with their entrepreneurial spirit, have established a flourishing business of making *prasad* (religious offerings) for the Kashi Vishwanath Temple. Since 2019, their *prasad*-making enterprise has been a steady source of income, with the group producing and supplying 50 to 60 kilograms of *prasad* every month. This has translated into significant earnings, with the women generating up to Rs 8,000 per month—a substantial sum that has enhanced their financial independence and contributed to their families' well-being ([www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com](http://www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com)).

The economic empowerment of these women through small-scale enterprises highlights a broader trend in the region's growth. The temple project has spurred job creation, tourism, and increased demand for local goods and services, thereby benefiting a wide range of people. Local artisans, shopkeepers, hoteliers, and transport providers have all seen a rise in business opportunities due to the influx of visitors. Overall, the Kashi Vishwanath Temple Corridor Project has proven to be a catalyst for socio-economic development, turning Kashi into a model of spiritual tourism that empowers local communities, fosters entrepreneurship, and drives economic growth. The integration of women into the economic fabric, particularly through self-help groups like the one led by Sunita Jaiswal, further demonstrates how grassroots initiatives can be pivotal in achieving inclusive development.

### Conclusion

Renowned author Mark Twain describes the grandeur of Kashi, “Benares is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together”. Just as the Kaaba holds profound significance for Muslim and Jerusalem for Jews, Kashi is deeply spiritual and sacred pilgrimage site for Hindus.

Women have been, and continue to be, indispensable in shaping Kashi's spiritual and religious heritage. Women from Banaras Gharana, queens like Ahaliyabai Holka, Rani Lakshmi Bai, and other influential women from the contemporary time have been playing their roles as philosophers, spiritual leaders, patrons, ritual participants, and social reformers have been instrumental in maintaining the city's status as a spiritual center. Despite facing societal constraints throughout history, women in Kashi as the several case study mentioned in this paper indicates that they have found ways to assert their social, spiritual, and financial authority, thereby leaving a lasting impact on the religious and cultural landscape of the city. As we continue to recognize and celebrate the spiritual heritage of Varanasi, it is crucial to acknowledge and give due credit to the women whose contributions have helped sustain and shape this sacred city. Their enduring legacy is an integral part of Varanasi's identity as a religious and spiritual beacon, influencing not just the local populace but also countless pilgrims and spiritual seekers from across the globe. In August 2021, five Hindu women filed a petition seeking the right to worship inside the Gyanvapi mosque complex in Varanasi, India, which is adjacent to the Kashi Vishwanath temple. These women — Laxmi Devi, Rakhi Singh, Sita Sahu, Manju Vyas, and Rekha Pathak — requested permission to worship Maa Shringar Gauri and other deities more than once a year, as they had previously been allowed to do so annually under government regulations. The petitioners argue that they had worshipped these deities regularly until 1993, and after that, only once a year due to restrictions. Their plea sparked a legal dispute about whether worship rights should be expanded ([www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com)). Such cases are notable for several reasons. These cases show that women are breaking free from the conventional roles and dare to challenge sensitive areas that are previously reserved only for men. Despite the potential for backlash in a religiously charged environment that always tries to keep women within the limits of their fundamental duties, these women are standing as symbols of faith, determination, hope, and courage.

Kashi remains an eternal symbol of India's religious, spiritual, and historical grandeur. It is a city where time seems to stand still, offering a glimpse into the eternal truths that transcend the limitations of life and death. Its ancient temples, sacred ghats, and the omnipresent Ganga continue to inspire millions, offering them a sanctuary for spiritual reflection and renewal. For Hindus, Buddhists, and spiritual seekers from all traditions, Kashi represents more than just a physical city; it is a gateway to the divine, a place where the infinite meets the finite, and where the soul can finally rest in the knowledge of the eternal. In Kashi, history, religion, and spirituality come together, reminding the world that this sacred land is not only a place of pilgrimage but also a profound journey into the depths of existence itself.

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# Kashi as a Modern Spiritual Sanctuary: Tradition Meets Innovation

Asfia Khatun\*

## Abstract

*This study explores the transformation of Kashi (Varanasi) from a traditional spiritual center to a modern sanctuary, highlighting the intricate interplay between age-old practices and contemporary influences. As Kashi evolves, it retains its historical significance while adapting to the demands of modernization, particularly through the lens of increased tourism and technological advancements. The research investigates how spiritual practices have been influenced by these changes, revealing a dual narrative of adaptation and commodification. It draws insights from diverse stakeholders, including pilgrims, tourists, and local residents, to understand their experiences and perceptions of Kashi as a spiritual destination. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the need for sustainable practices and community engagement to maintain Kashi's spiritual integrity, offering practical recommendations for balancing tradition with innovation. By examining these dynamics, this research underscores Kashi's role as a modern spiritual sanctuary that continues to honor its rich heritage while embracing the possibilities of the contemporary world.*

**Keywords:** Kashi, Varanasi, Spiritual Sanctuary, Modernization, Tradition, Innovation, Spiritual Practices, Pilgrimage.

## 1. Introduction

Kashi, known as Varanasi, been recognized as one of the holiest cities in Hinduism, steeped in rich spiritual heritage and ancient traditions. Over the years, it has evolved significantly, balancing its sacred past with the demands of modernity. Scholars have noted that Kashi serves as a critical site for understanding how spirituality can adapt to contemporary contexts while retaining its core traditions (Sharma, 2015). In the past, Kashi was primarily a pilgrimage destination where devotees sought salvation and enlightenment through rituals and the sacred Ganges River. However, the city has recently witnessed a transformation that intertwines its historical significance with modern innovations, making it a sanctuary that appeals to a broader audience.

The modernization of Kashi has manifested in various forms, including the integration of technology into religious practices. For instance, virtual platforms have emerged that allow devotees to participate in rituals and ceremonies remotely, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when physical attendance was restricted (Desai, 2020). This shift not only exemplified adaptability but also expanded Kashi's reach, allowing spiritual seekers from around the globe to engage with its traditions in new ways. The use of social media has further amplified the city's visibility; enabling narratives of its spiritual significance to resonate with younger generations who may not be physically present (Kumar, 2019). As a result, Kashi has become a nexus where tradition and innovation coexist, providing a unique space for spiritual exploration.

Additionally, the city's architectural landscape reflects this synthesis of the old and the new. The restoration of historical temples and ghats, combined with modern infrastructure development, has attracted tourists and pilgrims alike. This blend of ancient architecture with contemporary amenities highlights Kashi's commitment to preserving its cultural heritage while accommodating the needs of modern visitors (Singh, 2021).

## Background of the Study

Kashi's origins traced back to ancient times, with references in sacred texts such as the Rigveda, which describe its spiritual and cultural importance (Ghosh, 2016). Historically, Kashi perceived as the gateway to salvation, where individuals sought spiritual liberation through pilgrimage and ritual practices. As a result, it became a center for philosophical discourse, religious scholarship, and artistic expression, shaping the spiritual landscape of India (Rai, 2018). This rich historical context provided a foundation for the city's enduring legacy as a spiritual sanctuary.

However, the modern era has brought about profound changes in societal values, technological advancements, and global connectivity, prompting a re-evaluation of traditional practices within Kashi. The city has increasingly faced challenges in maintaining its spiritual essence amidst urbanization and modernization (Sharma, 2020). The influx of tourists and the rise of commercial activities have prompted a shift in focus from traditional religious practices to a more commodified version of spirituality. Scholars have pointed out that this transformation raises questions about the authenticity of spiritual experiences and the preservation of cultural heritage (Banerjee, 2021).

The advent of digital technology has significantly influenced how spirituality is experienced in Kashi. The proliferation of social media and online platforms has provided new avenues for engagement, allowing

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individuals from diverse backgrounds to participate in spiritual practices virtually (Verma & Singh, 2022). This transformation has not only expanded Kashi's reach but also led to the emergence of new forms of worship and community interaction. The integration of technology into traditional practices has created a unique dialogue between the past and present, reflecting a broader trend observed in many spiritual centers worldwide (Kumar, 2019).

### 1.1. The Emergence of the Study

The emergence of this study stems from the growing interest in understanding how ancient spiritual practices and modern innovations coexist in contemporary contexts, particularly in sacred cities like Kashi. As globalization and technological advancements reshape spiritual landscapes, Kashi stands out as a compelling case where traditional values intersect with modern demands. This study, therefore, seeks to illuminate the complexities of Kashi's transformation into a modern spiritual sanctuary, offering insights into the broader implications of tradition and innovation within religious practices today.

### 1.2. The Need and Significance of the Study

This study is essential for understanding how Kashi, a city deeply rooted in ancient spiritual traditions, adapts to the challenges and opportunities presented by modernity. As globalization and technological advancements transform spiritual practices worldwide, exploring Kashi's journey toward becoming a modern spiritual sanctuary highlights the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation. By analyzing Kashi's transformation, the study contributes to broader discussions on cultural preservation, sustainable tourism, and the role of technology in spiritual engagement, ultimately providing valuable lessons for other religious sites navigating similar transitions.

### 1.3. The Statement of the Problem

The central problem addressed in this study is the challenge of reconciling Kashi's rich spiritual heritage with the pressures of modernization and globalization, which threaten to alter traditional practices and cultural identity. As Kashi transforms into a modern spiritual sanctuary, it faces significant questions regarding the authenticity of its rituals, the impact of digital technologies on spiritual engagement, and the potential commodification of its sacred spaces. This study seeks to investigate how these factors interact and influence the experiences of pilgrims and tourists, ultimately examining the implications for Kashi's role as a spiritual center in contemporary society. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for preserving the city's cultural essence while allowing for innovation and adaptation in a rapidly changing world.

### 1.4. The Research Questions

RQ<sub>1</sub>: How has Kashi evolved from a traditional spiritual center to a modern sanctuary, and what factors have contributed to this transformation?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: What are the experiences and perceptions of pilgrims, tourists, and local residents regarding Kashi as a modern spiritual sanctuary, and how do these perspectives reflect the interplay between traditional spirituality and contemporary practices in the city?

RQ<sub>3</sub>: What practical recommendations can be made to maintain Kashi's spiritual integrity while embracing modern advancements, ensuring the preservation of its cultural heritage?

### 1.5. The Research Objectives

O<sub>1</sub>: To investigate how Kashi has evolved from a traditional spiritual center to a modern sanctuary.

O<sub>2</sub>: To gather insights from pilgrims, tourists, and local residents on their experiences and perceptions of Kashi as a modern spiritual sanctuary

O<sub>3</sub>: To offer practical recommendations on how to maintain Kashi's spiritual integrity while embracing modern advancements.

## 2. Review of Related Literature

**Addy, A. (2020).** Modernity in The Shadows Of An Ancient Past: Architecture And Religious Nationalism In Banaras (1905-2019). The chronology of the case-studies expresses the evolution from being an indigenous architectural language that incorporates Euro-American modernity to becoming a global spectacle that puts the nation on the world map. In conclusion, the thesis demonstrates conflicting images of the built environment caused by politically construed selective amnesia or, at times, reconstruction of the religious past.

**Dahal, B. P. (2020).** Significance of Hindu Pilgrimage; study of Pashupathinath and Kashi Vishwonath. *Patan Pragna*, 7(1), 43-54. Almost all respondents felt the harmony, cohesion and friendly during the visit though cross-border. All Shiva shrines promote the welfare of animals, human and the world. Harmony, cohesion, solidarity and brotherhood and sisterhood were found good. Any kind of discriminations, differences, inequalities were not found on the basis of caste, class, gender, ethnicity etc

**Singh, R. P. (2017).** Kashi and Cosmos: Sacred Geography of India's Cultural Capital and Envisioning Future. *The Heritage and Culture of Kashi*, 7-54. The riverfronts capes are unique and represented with 84-

ghats, and provoked to be taken as World Heritage Cultural Landscape. The spiritual sense of sacred geometry can furnish background that will help to understand the cosmic geography and heritage ecology of the city.

**Shyju, P. J. (2016).** Kashi, Benaras and Varanasi: A Relook in to the Historicity, Heritage and Preservation Issues. *Tourism Spectrum*, 37. Over a period of time, there is changes taken place and the original structures were damaged or dilapidated, and lack of authenticity which leads a staged authenticity to visitors (Mac Cannell, 1973). The study also focuses on the importance of protecting the tangible and intangible heritage forms of Varanasi.

#### **The Research Gap of the Study**

The existing literature on Kashi (Varanasi) highlights various aspects of its transformation, including architectural evolution, the significance of pilgrimage, sacred geography, and preservation issues. A notable gap in the research lies in the examination of how these diverse dimensions interconnect to shape the contemporary spiritual identity of Kashi as a modern sanctuary. Specifically, there is a need for comprehensive studies that integrate the perspectives of various stakeholders—pilgrims, tourists, and local residents—regarding their experiences and perceptions in the context of modernization and commodification. Addressing this gap can provide a more holistic understanding of Kashi's evolving role as a spiritual destination in the modern era.

#### **The Methodology of the Study**

The methodology of this study employed documentary analysis to explore the transformation of Kashi (Varanasi) as a modern spiritual sanctuary. This qualitative approach involved the systematic examination of various documents, including scholarly articles, historical texts, government reports, and contemporary media sources, to gather insights into Kashi's evolving spiritual landscape. By analyzing these documents, the study aimed to identify key themes related to the interplay of tradition and modernity, the impact of tourism and commercialization, and the perceptions of diverse stakeholders, such as pilgrims, tourists, and local residents.

#### **The Analysis and Interpretation**

##### *Pertaining to Objective 1*

*O1: To investigate how Kashi has evolved from a traditional spiritual center to a modern sanctuary.*

##### **Historical Context of Kashi**



Figure 4.1: Showing the Ghats Along the Ganges



Figure 4.2: Cremation along the Riverbanks

Kashi, referred to as Varanasi, has a storied history as one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world, celebrated for its deep spiritual significance within Hinduism. Historically, it was revered as the city of Lord Shiva, where pilgrims flocked to perform rituals and seek moksha (liberation) (Ghosh, 2016). The city was characterized by its Ghats along the Ganges River, numerous temples, and vibrant cultural traditions that collectively formed the backbone of its identity as a spiritual center. Rituals such as the Ganga Aarti and the practice of cremation along the riverbanks were deeply entrenched in the daily lives of both residents and visitors, underscoring the city's role as a hub for spiritual seekers (Sharma, 2020). This unwavering commitment to tradition sustained Kashi for centuries, with spiritual practices largely remaining unchanged until the late 20th century.

#### **The Influence of Globalization and Urbanization**

In the late 20th century, Kashi began experiencing significant changes due to globalization and urbanization, marking a pivotal shift in its spiritual landscape. As the city attracted a growing number of tourists and pilgrims from around the world, the local economy began to pivot from traditional religious activities to tourism-driven development (Jain, 2021). This influx of visitors necessitated improvements in infrastructure, including transportation, hospitality, and amenities, which in turn altered the fabric of Kashi's spiritual environment.

Kumar (2019) have noted that the adaptation of Kashi's offerings to accommodate modern visitors led to the incorporation of new experiences, such as guided tours and cultural festivals, which sometimes

overshadowed traditional practices. The pressure to cater to a global audience prompted local stakeholders to rethink how spirituality was presented, creating a blend of traditional values and contemporary expectations.

**Technological Advancements in Spiritual Engagement**

The evolution of Kashi was further accelerated by technological advancements that transformed how spirituality was experienced and shared. With the rise of the internet and social media, Kashi's spiritual practices became accessible to a broader audience beyond physical visits. Digital platforms allowed individuals to participate in rituals and events virtually, fostering a global community of devotees (Verma & Singh, 2022). This shift not only expanded Kashi's reach but also introduced new dynamics in spiritual engagement, as many sought to connect with the city through online experiences. However, this integration of technology also sparked discussions regarding the authenticity and depth of these virtual connections.

**Commodification and Cultural Preservation**

The commercialization of spiritual experiences, including ticketed ceremonies and themed festivals, raised questions about the authenticity of the spiritual journey (Kumar, 2019). While these developments attracted a diverse range of visitors, they also prompted debates about the potential dilution of Kashi's cultural identity.

Kashi's evolution from a traditional spiritual center to a modern sanctuary reflects a complex interplay of historical significance, globalization, technological advancements, and cultural preservation efforts. The city has successfully navigated the challenges posed by modernization while striving to maintain its core spiritual identity. As Kashi continues to adapt to contemporary realities, it stands as a testament to the resilience of tradition in the face of change, ensuring its place as a vital spiritual hub for both local and global communities.

***Pertaining to Objective 2***

***O<sub>2</sub>: To gather insights from pilgrims, tourists, and local residents on their experiences and perceptions of Kashi as a modern spiritual sanctuary.***

**Pilgrims' Perspectives**

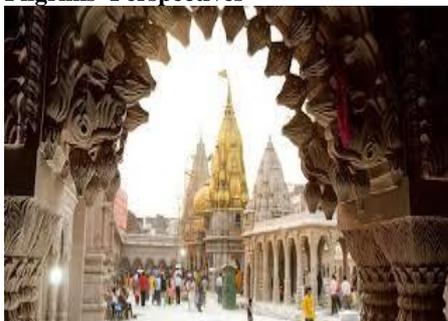


Figure 4.4: The Pilgrims of Kashi



Figure 4.5: Vibrant Spiritual Places

For pilgrims, Kashi represents not just a destination but a transformative journey deeply rooted in faith and spirituality. Rituals such as taking a dip in the Ganges River and participating in the Ganga Aarti are viewed as essential practices that facilitate a connection with the divine (Tripathi, 2020). However, some pilgrims have expressed concern about the commercialization of these spiritual experiences. They noted that the influx of tourists and the commercialization of rituals sometimes detracted from the authenticity of their spiritual encounters, leading to a sense of disconnection from the sacred atmosphere they sought (Sharma, 2021). This perception highlights the challenge of maintaining spiritual integrity in an increasingly modernized context.

**Tourists' Experiences**



Figure 4.6: Tourist Places of Ghats through Modern Amenities



Figure 4.7: Sarnath as Tourist Spot

Tourists visiting Kashi approach the city from a different angle, seeking to immerse themselves in its rich cultural and spiritual heritage. Many tourists have reported experiencing a sense of awe and wonder at the city's historical significance and vibrant spiritual practices (Chatterjee, 2020). They appreciate the opportunity to witness traditional ceremonies and rituals firsthand, contributing to their understanding of Indian spirituality. However, some tourists have also noted that their experiences can feel superficial, particularly when engaging with commodified spiritual offerings tailored for visitors (Bansal, 2021). The contrasting experiences of spiritual depth and commercialized interactions reflect the broader tensions within Kashi's evolving identity as a modern spiritual sanctuary.

#### Local Residents' Insights



Figure 4.8: Local Residents of Kashi



Figure 4.8: The Community Leaders

Local residents of Kashi possess a unique perspective on the city's transformation into a modern spiritual sanctuary. Many residents have witnessed first-hand the changes brought about by increasing tourism and modernization. While some locals have embraced the economic opportunities generated by tourism, others have expressed concerns about the impact on their cultural practices and community life (Jha, 2021). Residents feel a strong connection to their spiritual heritage and worry that commercialization could undermine traditional values and practices (Kumar, 2020). This sentiment is echoed in the experiences of community leaders who strive to balance the benefits of modernization with the need to preserve the city's rich spiritual legacy.

#### *Pertaining to Objective 3*

***O<sub>3</sub>: To offer practical recommendations on how to maintain Kashi's spiritual integrity while embracing modern advancements.***

The following practical recommendations aim to harmonize tradition with modernity, ensuring that Kashi retains its authentic spiritual essence while adapting to contemporary needs.

#### **Promoting Sustainable Tourism Practices**

To balance the influx of tourists with the preservation of Kashi's spiritual identity, sustainable tourism practices should be prioritized. Sustainable tourism emphasizes minimizing the ecological footprint of visitors while promoting cultural preservation (Kumar & Singh, 2020). Implementing guidelines that educate tourists about local customs and sacred practices can foster respect and understanding. Moreover, encouraging eco-friendly practices, such as responsible waste management and minimizing noise pollution, can help maintain the serenity of spiritual sites (Sharma, 2021).

#### **Supporting Local Spiritual Leaders and Communities**

Investing in local spiritual leaders and communities is essential for preserving Kashi's spiritual integrity. Engaging local priests, scholars, and cultural custodians in the decision-making processes related to spiritual tourism can safeguard traditional practices (Bansal, 2021). By providing platforms for these leaders to share their knowledge and teachings, Kashi can reinforce its spiritual foundations. Additionally, offering training programs that equip local residents with skills in cultural heritage management and hospitality can create employment opportunities while empowering the community to maintain its spiritual legacy (Jha, 2020).

#### **Balancing Commercialization and Authenticity**

Local artisans and craftspeople should be encouraged to sell traditional handmade goods that reflect the cultural heritage of Kashi, thus supporting both the economy and the preservation of authenticity. By fostering a marketplace that values cultural integrity, Kashi can become a model for how spiritual spaces can adapt without losing their essence.

### **Enhancing Education and Awareness Programs**

Education plays a crucial role in fostering an appreciation for Kashi's spiritual heritage among both residents and visitors. Implementing educational programs that highlight the historical, cultural, and spiritual significance of Kashi can deepen understanding and respect for its traditions (Chatterjee, 2020). Workshops, guided tours, and interactive exhibits can provide visitors with insights into the rituals and practices that define Kashi's identity. Moreover, incorporating spiritual education into local school curricula can instill a sense of pride and responsibility among younger generations regarding their cultural heritage (Kumar & Singh, 2020).

### **Leveraging Technology for Spiritual Engagement**

Modern advancements in technology can be harnessed to enhance spiritual engagement without compromising traditional practices. Virtual reality (VR) experiences and augmented reality (AR) applications can provide immersive educational tools for both pilgrims and tourists, allowing them to explore Kashi's rich history and spirituality from anywhere in the world (Bansal, 2021). Additionally, developing mobile applications that guide visitors through spiritual practices and rituals can help them navigate the city meaningfully and respectfully. Such initiatives can bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, making spiritual experiences more accessible and engaging.

## **5. The Major Findings of the Study**

The study on the transformation of Kashi (Varanasi) into a modern spiritual sanctuary revealed several significant findings that highlight the interplay between tradition and modernity, as well as the experiences of different stakeholders in this evolving landscape.

### **1. Evolution of Kashi's Spiritual Identity**

The research found that Kashi has undergone a significant transformation from a traditional spiritual center to a modern sanctuary. This evolution is characterized by a blending of historical spiritual practices with contemporary influences. Many traditional rituals, such as the Ganga Aarti and pilgrimages to sacred sites, continue to attract devotees, yet they have adapted to accommodate the growing number of tourists (Bansal, 2021). As a result, Kashi has become a site where ancient customs coexist with modern expressions of spirituality.

### **2. Impact of Modernization on Spiritual Practices**

The study identified that modernization has influenced spiritual practices in Kashi in both positive and negative ways. On one hand, the influx of technology and tourism has provided new platforms for spiritual expression and outreach, enhancing the visibility of Kashi as a spiritual destination (Chatterjee, 2020). On the other hand, there is a concern about the commercialization of spiritual practices, which some local residents and pilgrims feel detracts from the authenticity of their experiences (Sharma, 2021). This duality underscores the need for careful management to preserve spiritual integrity amidst modern advancements.

### **Diverse Perspectives of Stakeholders**

Insights from pilgrims, tourists, and local residents revealed distinct perspectives on Kashi's spiritual landscape. Pilgrims emphasized the importance of authentic spiritual experiences and expressed concerns over the commodification of rituals. Tourists, while appreciating Kashi's rich heritage, often felt their experiences lacked depth due to the commercialization of spiritual offerings. Local residents shared a mixture of pride in their cultural heritage and anxiety over the impact of modernization on their community's traditional values (Jha, 2020). This diversity of opinions highlights the complex dynamics at play in Kashi's evolving identity.

### **Recommendations for Sustainable Practices**

The findings of the study led to practical recommendations aimed at maintaining Kashi's spiritual integrity while embracing modern advancements. These recommendations included promoting sustainable tourism practices, supporting local spiritual leaders, balancing commercialization with authenticity, enhancing education and awareness programs, and leveraging technology for spiritual engagement (Kumar & Singh, 2020). Implementing these strategies is crucial for ensuring that Kashi remains a revered spiritual sanctuary without losing its historical significance.

### **The Role of Community Engagement**

One of the key findings emphasized the importance of community engagement in shaping the future of Kashi. Involving local residents and spiritual leaders in the decision-making processes regarding tourism and cultural preservation was identified as essential for fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility toward Kashi's spiritual legacy (Tripathi, 2019). This collaborative approach can ensure that the benefits of modernization are shared equitably while maintaining the city's rich spiritual identity.

## **6. Conclusion**

The study on the evolution of Kashi (Varanasi) as a modern spiritual sanctuary highlights the intricate relationship between tradition and modernization within the context of spiritual practices. As Kashi transitions from a historical center of spirituality to a contemporary sanctuary, it faces both opportunities and challenges

that necessitate a nuanced understanding of its unique identity. The findings underscore the significant transformation that has occurred, characterized by the blending of ancient customs with modern influences, ultimately reshaping the experiences of pilgrims, tourists, and local residents alike.

The evolution of Kashi's spiritual identity illustrates how ancient rituals, such as the Ganga Aarti, continue to resonate with contemporary audiences. Despite the pressures of modernization, these practices have adapted to accommodate the growing number of visitors seeking spiritual experiences. This adaptability has allowed Kashi to remain relevant in a rapidly changing world. However, the study also reveals that this transformation comes with concerns regarding the commercialization of spiritual practices. Many local residents and pilgrims express unease over the commodification of rituals, which they believe may dilute the authenticity and significance of their spiritual experiences. Therefore, striking a balance between embracing modern advancements and preserving traditional practices emerges as a critical challenge for Kashi.

Moreover, the diverse perspectives of various stakeholders—pilgrims, tourists, and local residents—offer valuable insights into the dynamics shaping Kashi's spiritual landscape. Pilgrims seek authentic spiritual experiences and often find themselves at odds with the commercial aspects of tourism that can overshadow the essence of their rituals. Conversely, tourists appreciate the rich cultural heritage but may lack a deeper understanding of the spiritual significance of their experiences. Local residents, while proud of their heritage, grapple with the changes brought about by modernization and the potential erosion of their traditional values. These differing viewpoints highlight the need for inclusive dialogue and collaboration among all stakeholders to ensure that Kashi's spiritual identity remains intact amid modernization.

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## ‘Sacred Streets and their Inimitable Individuals’: Of Multifaceted Depictions of Kashi in Bengali Vernacular Literature

Debayan Das\*

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### Abstract:

*The historio-mythical city of Kashi has been subject to diverse representations, be it main setting, a locale in narrative or a theme in itself. Vernacular literatures from India have tried to encapsulate Kashi in various types of literary imagination. While early Bengali works mostly try to encapsulate Kashi as a shelter for helpless widows, later works attempt to capture the city in all its vibrancies. Thus, in the works of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay we find widows in the city as reflected in the story Bamuner Meye. As for the later period, one can hark back to the genre of Bengali Detective Fiction and specifically Satyajit Ray's Jay Baba Felunath the story of which is set at the sacred city. In this work we see the city above all individuals and being a character in itself. These literary representations pave towards the rich tapestry of cultural heritage and the cultural shaping of it. Keeping the city of Kashi in its centre, this article focuses on how Bengali Vernacular Literature has tried to depict the city across the ages.*

**Keywords:** Bengali, City Studies, Fiction, Narrative, Vernacular.

The city of Kashi has been subject to literary works for a very long time. Varanasi, renowned as the city of ‘Kashi’ (the Luminous) or ‘Banaras’, is one of the celebrated seven sacred cities of Hinduism alongside being a magnificent representation of India’s spirituo-cultural heritage. Highly respected scholar on Hindu theology and philosophy, Diana Eck cites this city as “the *axis mundi* of the Hindu imagination,” where the divine meets the material, the eternal merges with the transitory (Eck 5). Likewise, historian Kuber Nath Sukul locates the origin of the city in ancient mythologies, observing that its name Kashi is mentioned in Mahabharata in connection with its cosmic significance (Sukul 17). Participating in Ganga *Aarti* (river worship), as well as in cremation ceremonies, which Jonathan Parry claims is “the last act of spiritual surrender,” are considered by many to be the ‘ultimate’ demonstration of devotion towards the city’s ghats, which include Manikarnika and Dashashwamedh (Parry 31). Varanasi, while primarily a spiritual hotspot, is also associated with the silk-weaving industry revived by Nita Kumar which has been in existence since the Mughal period. “Saris from Banaras embody artisanal mastery and cultural pride” (Kumar 89). The city's legacy in terms of scholarship and intellectual fervor is equally profound; it was a center of Sanskrit education along with the Bhakti movement and the birthplace of Kabir and Ravidass, who fought caste discrimination (Lutgendorf 143). Even so, modern issues like environmental degradation of the Ganges, poses a threat to her eco-cultural identity. Kelly D. Alley explains how the pollution of rituals and urban waste has created a “contested symbol of purity and modernity” (Alley 204) while Assa Doron and Robin Jeffrey argue that the Ganges' plight is a microcosm of India's difficulty in conserving traditional heritage and industrial development (Doron and Jeffrey 112). In spite of these challenges, Varanasi stands out as a microcosm of the India's binaries - a city that is ancient yet modern, chaotic yet orderly. As clearly witnessed by Rana P. B. Singh in his study of the city’s heritage, “to walk its ghats is to traverse the layers of time, faith and human aspiration.”(Singh 76). Fictional works be it *The Romantics* by Pankaj Mishra or *River of Gods* by Ian McDonald, all are set in Varanasi and they provide their own unique perspective on the life and times of the city. While these are English works based on Banaras, Vernacular Imagination too has contributed a lot in setting the literary and aesthetic geography of the city. One can refer to *Kashi ka Assi* by Kashinath Singh here. However, Bengali literary scene has focused on the Holy city of Kashi for a long time as well. While in early and medieval Bengali Literature, we do not really find a reference to Varanasi, modern Bengali literature is replete with descriptions of Varanasi. Early Bengali writings on Kashi was however, non fictional in nature, *Kashi Parikrama* (1809) by Raja Joy Narayan Ghoshal and *Tirtha-bhraman* (1915) by Jadunath Sarbadhikari can be cited as examples. Moumie Banerjee notes while the former was written more as a 'travel guide' the latter was conceived as a '*roznamcha* or diary' (Banerjee 971). When it comes to Fiction, however, the first significant writer is, undoubtedly, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay.

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Kashi has been an important locale in Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's writings. In his works however, Kashi has been the refuge of two kinds of people: the *vidhaba* (widow) and the *kulatyagi* (the one who has renounced the kula). One such significant work is the novel *Chandranath*. Sulochana, the main protagonist of the novel leaves for Kashi with her daughter Sarayu with her lover Rakhil Bhattacharya. She is therefore a *Kulatyagi*. However the city comes to her refuge when Rakhil insults her and she takes shelter in the house of a Bengali priest of Kashi, Haridayal. On the other hand we can recount the novel *Pallisamaj* where Bisweswari is seen leaving for Kashi with the protagonist of our story, the widow Rama. Both of them are fed up with life and try to seek refuge in the Holy city. The novel *Bamuner Meye* (1920) features Kalitara, the daughter of a Brahmin leaves her home for Kashi to live life of a hermit with her only son.

Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay too has written about Varanasi in his novel *Aparajito* which forms the second part of his Apu Trilogy. Here the titular Apu's father Harihar settles in Varanasi and earns his livelihood by being a priest. Unfortunately, he catches a fever and does here as well. What we can see in these novels is Kashi being a shelter for the helpless, across class and gender and the deeply embedded religious aura of the city which is a gigantic part of its heritage.

However, the same city has also been the plot of mystery novels. One can cite the work Joy Baba Felunath by Satyajit Ray featuring his sleuth namely Pradosh Mitter also known as Feluda. The setting of the novel is none other than this Holy city.

Detective Fiction based on Varanasi added a realistic dimension to the socio-ideological and religious discourse intrinsic to its being. One has to take Satyajit Ray's *Jay Baba Felunath* for example which was later adapted into a film by him in 1979. In the story Pradosh C Mitter (Feluda) Ray's imaginary sleuth goes to Varanasi to spend Durga Puja along with his cousin Tapeshe (Topshe) and Detective Fiction writer Lal Mohan Ganguly (Jatayu). While the story deals with the theft of a valuable Lord Ganesha idol from the house of Ghoshals, a Bengali family living in Varanasi, the story endows the readers with a picturesque and vibrant conceptualization of the Holy city. This is how the titular Feluda describes the city:

*Tui je neecher dike takiye sudhu ekta rasta dekhchish ta toh noy; tui dekhchish Banaras er rasta. Banaras! Kashi! Varanasi!- chaartikhni kotha noy. Prithibir praachinatama shahar, punyatirtha, peethasthan! Ramayana Mahabharata muni rishi sadhak Hindu Musolman Bouddha Jaina shob mile ei Banaras er ekta bhelki ache jar foley shohor ta nongra hoyeo oitije jholmol korte thaake. Jara ekhane boshobas kore tara din gujranor chintay aar e shob kotha bhabbar somoy payena, kintu jara koyek diner jonyo berate ashe tara eishob bhebei moshgul hoye thaake* (Ray 434).

[While looking downwards, what you're witnessing is no mere lane, its the lane of Banaras. Banaras! Kashi! Varanasi!- Not at all a simple thing to grasp. The oldest city of the world, a pious land, a land of devotion! With its renderings of Ramayana and Mahabharata, the conglomerations of Sages, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains Banaras has such a magic that, despite its squalor, it shines in its own heritage. Those who live here don't think about all these in their pursuit of earning livelihood, but the ones who come here to spend some says ruminate on these things only.]

What is interesting here is Feluda's distinction between the Insider's Kashi and the Outsider's Kashi. The insiders Kashi is vibrant but demystified, the outsiders Kashi is mystic. Echoing what Gesler and Pierce calls 'sacred geography' of Banaras, Feluda points out that the city is indeed 'a material or earthly template that provides a solid form for pilgrim activities and beliefs about the divine' (Gesler and Pierce 235). What makes it more interesting is that this mysticism results from a melange of many religions, resisting what Madhuri Desai called 'hegemonic imagination' of 'both nineteenth-century colonial Orientalists and modern-day postcolonial nationalists' (Desai 23). While Feluda accepted the awe-struck mysticism of the city, he hinted towards the everydayness of it as well.

Later on in the story we get introduced to Maganlal Meghraj, a Marwari businessman, the villain of the story who has eyes on the statue for a long time and therefore tries to distract Feluda from his investigation. He describes the city like this:

*Sarnath dekhechen? Ramnagar dekhechen? Durgabari, Manmandir, Hindu University, Benimadhab er dhawaja - e shob kichui dekhlen na, aaj Viswanathji r darwaza r samne gelen, kintu bhitor dhuklen naa, kachori gali te mithai khelen na... Ghoshal Bari te ki kaam apnar? Amar Bajra ache apni jaanen? Chaiti ghat se Assi ghat tirip diye debo apnake, apni chole ashun. Ganga r hawa kheyee apnaar monmejaj khush hoye jaabe* (Ray 464).

[Have you seen Sarnath? Have you seen Ramnagar? Durgabari, Manmandir, Hindu University, The mast of Benimadhav, you've seen nothing, you did go to the door of Viswanathji yet didn't even enter, didn't eat the famous sweets of Kachori gali, what work do you have in the house of Ghoshals? You know that I have a Bajra right? Come here, I will give you a trip from Chaiti ghat to Assi ghat. Your heart will be full of joy once you feel the cool breeze of the Holy Ganges.]

We might notice the difference of two perspectives here. While on one hand, Feluda tries to comprehend an insiders view of the city, Maganlal readily takes recourse to the discourse of tourism, of the city being a combination of visitable spots, whereas to Feluda the city is something more, something beyond its tourism.

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# A Sociological Exploration of Examining the Relationship between Occupation and Social Hierarchy Regarding 'Paari System' of Varanasi Cremation Ground Workers

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## Abstract

*The study investigates the relationship between occupation and social hierarchy in the 'Paari System' of Varanasi cremation ground workers. The research aims to understand the occupational-based hierarchical structure among cremation ground workers, the reasons for choosing the business as a hereditary business, and the role of the Paari system in examining the relationship between occupation and social hierarchy. The study used a closed-ended interview schedule to gather empirical data from 43 cremation ground workers in Harishchandra and Manikarnika Ghats of Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. The findings revealed that the Paari system is a process of running a person's business, given to them by the Dom Raja. The system provides equal compensation based on the number of dead bodies burned and the amount of money taken.*

**Keywords:** Cremation ground workers, Occupation, Paari system, Social Hierarchy.

## Background

In the historical context, Dom community is socially discriminated and deeply troubled in the caste system of India. Presently, the Dom community has been recognized as a Scheduled Caste under Article 341 of the Indian Constitution.

Their genesis comes from the Hindu mythology that Doms were cursed by Lord Shiva when a member of Dom community Kalu Dom stole an earring of the goddess Parvati. To gain forgiveness, Doms agreed to become the keepers of the flame.

Doms help people to perform the last rites of their loved ones near the banks of the Ganga. Despite providing help people attain Moksha, unfortunately, Doms are considered to be untouchables and outcasts in the society. It has been observed that Doms are not allowed to visit temples of the Varanasi city including Vishwanath temple.

In Varanasi City, the Manikarnika and Harishchandra Ghats are known for the funeral occupation of the Dom community, who follow a hierarchical system with the highest position being Dom Raja. Each Dom family participates in the funeral work for a set number of days per year, with no fixed choice for Paari. However, corruption is alleged in the distribution of Paari, with the highest number of Paari being exercised by Dom Raja's family members and relatives.

The amount of each Paari is fixed at Rs. 200 paid by the family members of a deceased person. It is the choice of the family members of a deceased person to contribute more to the Dom workers in the form of alms, gold or extra money. Dom raja keeps the record of days of Paari of every Dom and act as an administrative authority showing the hegemony on the business of corpse burning. There is a concept of Mukti Dham where sacred fire is kept, where the family member of a deceased person needs to pay a sum to the Dom Raja to take the fire. Therefore, Dom raja enjoys the immense status and respect within the hierarchical system of Dom community.

The funeral occupation is very difficult and hazardous as Doms face health risks like Blisters on hands, smoke and flames from burning pyres, problems in eyes and lungs etc. When Doms give fire to dead bodies they have to stand beside the bodies in the extreme heat, require to ensure that the corpse is completely reduced to ashes. Doms have to perform the work of cleaning of ashes at the Ghats in the same wages

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Even though the funeral occupation has religious importance, Doms are afflicted with the notion of purity and pollution. Doms are discriminated doubly, first by caste system and then by the Dom caste elites due to a class hierarchy maintained by the Paari system.

### Literature Review

The Dom community occupies a pivotal position in the funeral services sector at the Manikarnika and Harishchandra Ghats in Banaras, where their labour contributes significantly to the local economy. This community has maintained this occupational role for centuries, with an estimated population of approximately 20,000 individuals residing in close proximity to these Ghats (Choudhary & Sharma, 2022). Historically recognized as a Scheduled Caste, the Dom community has endured systemic discrimination, which has relegated them to roles such as scavengers, corpse-burners, and sweepers. Even during the Covid-19 Pandemic, they performed the critical work of handling the corpses of Covid-positive deceased persons. (Bhaskar, 2021). A survey conducted in the West Midnapore district of Bengal highlighted the persistent social exclusion faced by the Dom community, as evident by prohibitions such as inter dining and discriminatory practices enacted by members of higher castes (Bhattacharya, 2021). In Varanasi, there exists a prevailing belief that a Hindu individual cannot achieve moksha (salvation) unless they receive Mukhagni (the last fire) from a Dom; however, this community faces social seclusion along the Ghats and experiences untouchability (Husain, 2017). The Dom community residing in the Terai region of Nepal, primarily comprising Hindu migrants from India, experiences pronounced social exclusion and is designated as untouchable. They pre-dominantly lack land ownership and formal education, with minimal involvement in political processes and resource management (Yadav, 2018). The traditional caste-occupation paradigm in India has undergone transformation as individuals increasingly pursue vocational choices driven by factors such as social legislation, educational access, and modernization, reflecting the ramifications of policies designed for the upliftment of Scheduled Castes (Jaiswal, 2022). In Varanasi, the Dom community adheres to the Paari system in the context of cremation work. Despite achieving a degree of financial stability, educational attainment remains low, particularly among women, who often remain uneducated and confined to domestic responsibilities, adhering to prevailing patriarchal structures (Rai, 2021). The pollution-purity dynamic inherent in the caste system has systematically marginalized the Dom community, forcing them into the informal sector and exposing funeral workers to considerable health risks (Kumari, 2019). The socio-economic and cultural facets of the Dom community in Varanasi illuminate their resilience in the face of social stigma and economic adversity. The analysis stresses on the necessity for policy interventions aimed at addressing their socio-economic marginalization while acknowledging their cultural contributions to sacred rituals (Sharma, 2024). In Siraha District, Nepal, the Dom community encounters caste-based discrimination, limited access to educational opportunities and resources, along with the repercussions of modernization on their traditional livelihoods. Targeted policy measures are advocated to facilitate the upliftment of this community (Sah, 2007). The socio-cultural circumstances of the Dom community in Banaras highlight their indispensable role in cremation rituals, juxtaposed with the persistent social stigma of "Impurity" associated with their vocational roles. The analysis sheds light on the interplay between caste, religion, and social hierarchy within Banaras (Singh, 2022). The escalating pollution levels at the Ghats of Varanasi, caused by domestic sewage, industrial effluents, and ritualistic offerings, have severe environmental and cultural consequences. The study underscores the urgent need for effective waste management strategies and community engagement to preserve the ecological balance of this cultural site (Basak et al., 2015). The marginalized status of the Dom community, exacerbated by the sensationalized portrayal of their role as corpse-burners in media, contrasts sharply with their lived realities. Women in the community face additional marginalization, confined to domestic roles under societal oversight. Previous researches advocates for addressing institutional discrimination and advancing the community through education, employment opportunities, and social support programs.

### Objectives of the study

1. To explore the socio-economic factors and cultural influences that contributes to the Dom community's hereditary association with cremation work.
2. To analyze the role of the Paari system in shaping occupational identity, social hierarchy, and community dynamics within the Dom community.

**Methodology**

**Sampling:** 43 cremation ground workers from Harishchandra and Manikarnika Ghats selected using purposive sampling (non-probability method).

**Data Collection:** Closed-ended interview schedule used to gather insights on the Paari system, occupational divisions, and social challenges.

**Study Focus:** Understanding hereditary work practices, caste-based job restrictions, and the impact of the Paari system on labour distribution.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation****Table 1: General Profile of the Respondents**

<i>S.NO.</i>	<i>Particulars</i>	<i>Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
	<b>Age-Group</b>		
1.	20-35	15	34.88
2.	35-50	10	23.25
3.	50-65	8	18.60
4.	65-80	10	23.25
	Total	43	100
	<b>Educational Qualifications</b>		
1.	Illiterate	15	34.88
2.	Primary education	18	41.86
3.	Secondary Education	10	23.26
	Higher Education	0	0
	Total	43	100
	<b>Caste</b>		
1.	Chaudhary	43	100
	Total	43	100
	<b>Marital Status</b>		
1.	Married	34	79.06
2.	Unmarried	9	20.93
	Total	43	100
	<b>No. of children</b>		
1.	0-04	21	61.76
2.	04-07	13	38.23
	Total	34	100
	<b>Type of Family</b>		
1.	Joint Family	35	81.39
2.	Nuclear Family	8	18.60
	Total	43	100
	<b>Monthly Income</b>		
1.	3000-4000	14	32.55
2.	4000-7000	16	37.20
3.	7000-12000	13	30.23
	Total	43	100

This table presents demographic and socio-economic details of 43 respondents across different categories such as age, education, caste, and marital status, number of children, family type, and monthly income.

**Table2: Is funeral work your hereditary occupation?**

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Particulars</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Yes	43	100%
2	No	-	-
	Total	43	100%

The table shows that 100% respondents work at funeral occupation which is wholly inherited.

**Table 3: Is it important for you to follow this occupation?**

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Particulars</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Yes	30	69.76%
2	No	13	30.23%
	Total	43	100%

The table shows that a majority feel the obligation to continue the tradition.

**Table4: If you get an opportunity to change the occupation, would you change the pattern of the work?**

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Particulars</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Yes	25	58.13%
2	No	15	34.88%
	Total	43	100%

The table suggests that a significant portion is open to modify their occupation.

**Table 5: Do you have any specific system in the funeral occupation?**

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Particulars</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Yes	-	-
2	No	43	100%
	Total	43	100%

The table suggests a lack of formal structure or standardized procedures in their work.

**Table 6: What is the minimum number of Paari given in a month?**

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Particulars</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	0-10	03	6.97
2	10-20	07	16.27
3	20-30	10	23.25
4	30-40	23	53.48
	Total	43	100

This suggests that the majority manage a significant number of funeral services each month.

**Table 7: Do you have any choice but to shift the part?**

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Particulars</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Yes	38	88.37
2	No	05	11.62
	Total	43	100

This implies that most people enjoy a certain amount of flexibility at work.

**Table 8: How much time do you spend during your Paari?**

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Particulars</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Day	05	11.62
2	Night	06	13.95
3	All day and night based on the number of Paari	32	74.41
	Total	43	100

This suggests that most have erratic schedules and put in long hours at work.

**Table 9: How much do you earn at one Paari?**

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Particulars</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	0-100	15	34.88
2	100-200	05	11.62
3	200-300	08	18.60
4	300-400	15	34.88
	Total	43	100

It indicates the income variation within the same occupation.

**Table 10: What type of problems you face in the funeral work?**

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Particulars</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Blisters on hands	11	25.58
2	Eyes infection	9	20.93
3	Lungs infection	10	23.25
4	All these above	13	30.23
	Total	43	100

This shows that each person suffers from at least one health issue reflecting the hazardous nature of work.

**Table 11: Have you ever got anything extra irrespective of wages from the deceased person's family?**

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Particulars</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Yes	07	16.27
2	No	36	83.72
	Total	43	100

The data is against the common perception of doms charging high fee for last rites.

**Table 12: Do you think that people from upper caste or other caste share food and water with cremation ground workers or Dom raja?**

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Particulars</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Yes	-	-
2	No	43	100
	Total	43	100

This shows the social exclusion faced by the community.

**Table 13: Do you pride in your work?**

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Particulars</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Yes	43	100
2	No	-	-
	Total	43	100

This shows that they are proud of their work even after so hardships.

**Table 14: Do you want your children to continue the same line of work?**

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Particulars</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Yes	10	23.25
2	No	33	76.75
	Total	43	100

This suggests the desire to break away from the occupation for the next generation.

**Table 15: Does Paari system have any impact on your community?**

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Particulars</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Yes	-	-
2	No	43	100
	Total	43	100

The respondents do not believe the occupation has a major impact on their larger social environment.

### Result and Discussion

- **Work & Income:** Most workers operate in shifts (Paari), with 53.48% working 30-40 shifts a month. Earnings range from ₹100-400 per day, depending on the number of cremations.
- **Health Issues:** Workers suffer from blisters (25.58%), lung infections (23.25%), and eye problems (20.93%) due to prolonged exposure to fire and smoke.
- **Social Discrimination:** The Dom community faces exclusion from upper castes, which refuse food or water from them and exclude them from social functions.
- **Hierarchy & Gender Roles:** Work distribution is controlled by the Dom Raja, with a hierarchical divide between Dom elites and cremation workers. Women generally do not participate but may collect priest fees when required.
- **Material Benefits:** 16.27% of respondents have received extra material gifts (gold, silver, etc.) during cremation rituals.

### Occupational-based Hierarchical Structure of Dom community

The Dom community, known for their traditional cremation rituals, has a hierarchical structure influenced by lineage, seniority, expertise, and reputation. Leaders and elders oversee rites and decision-making, while practitioners specialize in cremation, purification, and funeral ceremonies. Labourers assist with tasks like pyre preparation and maintenance.

#### Reasons for choosing the cremation business as a hereditary

- **Cultural Tradition & Sacred Duty** – Doms see funeral work as a sacred responsibility with deep religious and cultural significance, ensuring proper last rites.
- **Economic Necessity** – Funeral work is the primary source of income for many Dom families, offering financial stability in a region with limited job opportunities.
- **Caste & Social Structure** – The Dom community is traditionally assigned cremation-related tasks, making it difficult to pursue alternative careers.
- **Generational Knowledge Transfer** – Children learn cremation skills from elders, ensuring the continuity of the family business.
- **Legacy & Family Obligation** – The occupation is an ancestral tradition, driven by duty, identity, and respect for ancestors who built and sustained the business.
- **Emotional Connection & Service to Society** – Doms feel pride and empathy in their work, helping families find closure during loss, strengthening their bond with the community.

#### Role of the Paari system with occupation and social hierarchy

The Dom Raja, the keeper of the sacred flame at Manikarnika and Harishchandra Ghats in Varanasi, is the leader of a marginalized community. The Paari system, a hierarchical work distribution mechanism, favours elite Dom families, reinforcing economic and social dominance. Addressing these structural inequalities requires acknowledging their deep-rooted impact rather than dismissing concerns.

#### Conclusion

The Paari system among the Doms of Varanasi structures work distribution in cremation activities, balancing tradition and social hierarchy. While it maintains efficiency and community solidarity, it also reinforces caste-based marginalization. The Doms, historically deemed "untouchable" due to their association with death, have limited decision-making power, following directives from higher authorities like the Dom Raja. Despite this, they support each other, often pooling resources to help families in need. Their coordinated efforts ensure the smooth functioning of the Ghats, demonstrating both resilience and a strong work ethic. The system provides fair work distribution, allowing periodic relief from the strenuous cremation process.

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# Sacred Journey towards Death: A Study of Institutional Death Practices and Pilgrimage in Kashi

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## Abstract

जातस्य हि ध्रुवो मृत्युर्ध्रुवं जन्म मृतस्य च ।  
तस्मादपरिहार्येऽर्थे न त्वं शोचितुमर्हसि ॥

Bhagavad Geeta: Chapter 2, Verse 27

It means “Death is certain for one who has been born, and rebirth is inevitable for one who has died. Therefore, you should not lament over the inevitable.”

This study thematically examines individuals who travel to Kashi, the Hindu sacred city, to die at the end of their lives, to attain moksha or liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Death-related beliefs and actions have significantly evolved throughout human history. The study explores the phenomenon of institutional death in Kashi where death is believed to offer a direct path to moksha—liberation from the cycle of rebirth. The religious institutions now play a more formalized role in managing end-of-life rituals. Institutional death refers to the structured processes administered by these institutions, which oversee various aspects of death and post-mortem rites. Using a qualitative methodology, this study analyzes ethnographic records, interviews with institutional staff, and documented observations of ritual practices to obtain a thorough knowledge of the motivations for attaining Moksha, particularly in Kashi. Thematic analysis has been used to dive into the perceptions of the participants and present a comprehensive description of their motivation. The aim is to explore how institutional involvement has influenced traditional practices and the individual experience of death. The findings reveal that institutional death standardizes and preserves essential rites amidst the rising demand while altering the personal dimensions of the process. The data collected by the researcher indicates that this study concludes that although these institutional practices support Kashi’s capacity to accommodate pilgrims, they also transform death from a deeply familial experience to a regulated service. Ultimately, institutional death facilitates access to sacred rituals for achieving moksha, ensuring dignified and meaningful end-of-life experiences aligned with the city’s spiritual mission, blending traditional beliefs with practical care for pilgrims seeking peace in their final moments.

**Keywords:** Mukti Bhawan, Kashi, Death, Moksha, Pilgrims, Rituals, Liberation.

## Introduction

Kashi, or Benares, (also known as Varanasi) is one of the oldest living cities in the world. It is believed that those who pass away on Kashi’s sacred land are liberated from the endless cycle of birth and rebirth, attaining salvation. Although its origins remain a mystery, Kashi, home to Lord Shiva and Parvati, is defined by the Ganges River, which is thought to cleanse mortal sins. Those born in Kashi are considered blessed, while those who die there are deemed truly fortunate. Here, life and death are intricately woven in harmony, with past and present, wisdom and eternity, merging beautifully within this ‘city of learning and burning.’<sup>[10]</sup>

In recent decades, death practices in Kashi have become more structured through institutions offering ritual assistance, end-of-life care, and spiritual guidance. This study explores the evolution of pilgrimage to Kashi, focusing on the institutionalization of these practices. It examines the reasons for these changes and the balance between traditional beliefs and contemporary needs, highlighting Kashi’s significance as a pilgrimage site and the role of institutions in shaping the sacred journey toward death.

The sacred journey towards death in Kashi, a revered Hindu pilgrimage site, embodies profound spiritual significance and complex institutional practices surrounding death. Pilgrims travel to Kashi with the aspiration of attaining moksha, or liberation from the cycle of rebirth, which is deeply rooted in Hindu beliefs about karma and dharma. This journey is not merely a physical act but a transformative experience that intertwines personal narratives with cultural traditions, reflecting a broader understanding of death as a positive aspect of life.<sup>[32, 29, 30]</sup>

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Kashi has a spiritual significance which means it is considered a microcosm of the universe, where the attainment of moksha is believed to be facilitated by the sacred geography and rituals associated with the city. The pilgrimage to Kashi is often seen as a culmination of one's spiritual journey, where death is viewed as a joyous transition rather than a tragic end. <sup>[31]</sup>

Just as people in the West plot where and how they are to be buried, Hindus plot and fantasize about how they will die. There are hospices like Kashi Labh Mukti Bhawan and Mumukshu Bhawan. Institutional Practices in Kashi involves various sacred specialists, including priests and caretakers play crucial roles in guiding pilgrims through death-related rituals, emphasizing the interconnectedness of life and death and the practices surrounding death in Kashi are influenced by a blend of traditional beliefs and contemporary reflections on mortality, showcasing the dynamic nature of Hindu death rituals.

Death is an intrinsic part of human life and has always been a profound source of concern. Since humanity's beginning, people have pondered the mysteries of death, often focusing on its more unsettling aspects. Scholars suggest that, despite its inevitability, humans struggle to truly comprehend their own end. Death remains one of the most challenging concepts to define. Attempting to define it from a single perspective not only restricts its vast range of meanings but also undervalues its significance in today's context. <sup>[8]</sup>

A person may die physically but not socially. Life has an end which is called death. After death we all believe that there are two places where the spirit goes. The two places after death are Heaven and Hell. The good spirits are gone to the Heaven and the bad spirits are gone to the Hell. <sup>[35]</sup> But in Kashi they say if a person dies here they get liberated from the cycle of birth and rebirth, they attain moksha. In Kashi, Indian/Hindu denizens look at the process of dying in a starkly different manner. People did not afraid of death here. Per contra, in Kashi, death is a matter of delight. It is a very striking fact that not only the denizens of Kashi look differently at death here but the outlook of denizens of other states of India on death is utterly different whenever death is mentioned in association with Kashi. <sup>[2]</sup>

Kashi- Khaṇḍa of the Skanda- Purāna depicts that Brahmā himself says about Kashi that sacred rituals, no matter even if they are diminutive, observed by people will render benefit in the form of liberation. It has been delineated in Kashi- Khaṇḍa of the Skanda- Purāna that abandoning one's body in Kashi is deemed as Dāna (religious gift), Tapas (penance), and Yoga- these facts consonance the euphoria of Nirvāṇa (salvation) in Kashi. Hindus from all over the world come to Kashi to die, be cremated, and have their ashes poured into the river. <sup>[2]</sup>

The exploration of death practices and pilgrimage in Kashi reveals a complex mix of spirituality, cultural beliefs, and institutional frameworks. The journey toward death in Kashi is not just a physical transition but a profound spiritual quest, influenced by historical, religious, and social factors. The city is seen as a place where death is celebrated, often viewed as a joyous occasion, in contrast to the general societal reluctance to discuss death. The religious understanding of death in Kashi shapes the experiences of its inhabitants and intertwines with cultural practices. Institutional death services are particularly beneficial for pilgrims from outside the city, helping them on their spiritual journey to attain moksha. <sup>[3, 4, 9]</sup>

### Literature Review

The city of Kashi is revered in Hinduism as a sacred destination for attaining moksha. This belief in Kashi as a gateway to salvation has drawn countless pilgrims seeking to die in this holy city, imbuing it with profound cultural and religious significance. Diana Eck's *Banaras: City of Light* (1982) lays a foundational understanding of Kashi's spiritual relevance, depicting the city as a space where the mortal and divine meet. Her work emphasizes how the city's sacred geography plays a central role in Hindu cosmology and rituals around death. It delves into the profound relationship between Kashi and the concepts of death and moksha. Eck explores how Banaras is considered the ultimate destination for Hindus seeking liberation from the cycle of rebirth. <sup>[26]</sup>

The ritual importance of dying in Kashi is rooted in centuries-old Hindu traditions that highlight the city's unique role in the journey toward moksha. Parry's *Death in Banaras* (1994) provides an in-depth ethnographic study of these death practices, exploring the spiritual, ritualistic, and economic dimensions associated with end-of-life rituals in Kashi. Parry describes how priests and other facilitators play essential roles in these rituals, enabling pilgrims to fulfill sacred rites before death. <sup>[5]</sup>

Cultural and demographic factors significantly influence the decision to undertake a pilgrimage to Kashi for death. Age, gender, and caste play critical roles in shaping motivations and expectations for this journey. Priyanka, (2010) in her book "*In the City of Good Death*" weaves a layered story around a death

hostel in Varanasi. Her work juggles the natural and the supernatural, the Ghats and the grief that abound in Kashi as well as the rites and rituals surrounding death, with ease. Dying a good death is a significant part of Indian culture, and is an important constituent of the book.<sup>[28]</sup>

The sacred death practices of Kashi have increasingly adapted to meet contemporary spiritual and logistical needs. Traditional beliefs and practices have transformed under the pressures of modern life, resulting in modified rituals and new pilgrimage patterns. Paul, Sanchita in the article “*Venerated Varanasi: The Eternal Quest for Evanescence*” explores the unique cultural and religious significance of Varanasi, a city renowned for its mysticism and spiritual allure. It delves into the concept of **dark tourism**, particularly **thanatourism**, where visitors are drawn to places associated with death. Varanasi, with its numerous Ghats and the sacred Ganges, is a focal point for those seeking **salvation (moksha)**, believing that dying in this city liberates them from the cycle of rebirth.<sup>[24]</sup>

As death-related pilgrimage to Kashi has become more organized, a range of institutions now offer services that help facilitate pilgrims’ final journey. Singh (2017) discusses how “death tourism” has spurred an array of institutional offerings, from ritual assistance to specialized end-of-life care.<sup>[13]</sup> According to numerous scholars “moksha tourism” and the rise of businesses dedicated to supporting pilgrims with ritual and practical needs, including arranging cremations and providing hospice services. This institutionalization marks a shift from purely individual or family-organized rites to a structured, service-oriented approach to death, as Kashi’s sacred death practices adapt to a modern framework. Sharma (2019) aims to understand about existential authenticity and existential anxiety in tourism studies through an investigation of tourists’ perceptions of death, the Self, and ‘others’ at the cremation grounds in Varanasi.<sup>[21]</sup>

The institutionalization of death practices in Kashi has led to a complex interplay between traditional and commercialized forms of pilgrimage, raising questions of authenticity and commodification. Parry’s *Death in Banaras* (1994) highlights traditional practices that are more intimate and personalized; contrasting them with newer, organized forms that cater to broader demands.<sup>[5]</sup> Singh, Rana P.B. (1997) explores Varanasi’s significance as a sacred space in Hindu society, focusing on its role as a major pilgrimage center. It discusses the city’s historical development of pilgrimage circuits, its cosmological symbolism, and spatial arrangements. The ritual movements of pilgrims are connected to the city’s geography and religious calendar. It also examines how sacred sites from across India are represented in Varanasi, making it a spiritual microcosm. The article highlights tensions between preserving the spiritual essence of Hindu death rituals and accommodating large numbers of pilgrims, with economic imperatives intersecting with traditional rites.<sup>[13]</sup>

Despite the extensive literature on death and pilgrimage in Kashi, there is limited research on the observation and documentation of institutional death, a phenomenon unique to this sacred city. While these institutions are mentioned in ancient scriptures, the structured practices of planned death and the inclusive environment they provide for end-of-life preparation require an anthropological lens for deeper exploration. Engaging with practitioners and their lived experiences can offer profound insights into Hinduism’s spiritual and moral framework. Existing studies have primarily focused on death rituals and the services that have emerged around them. This study seeks to bridge that gap by thematically analyzing a descriptive case study of individuals who journey to Kashi—the Hindu sacred city—to spend their final days in pursuit of moksha, or liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative approach to gain comprehensive understanding of people’s reason for attaining Moksha, particularly in Kashi and the role of institutionalized death practices and pilgrimage to Kashi. Data collection involved a review of existing literature, including historical texts, ethnographic studies, and recent academic articles focused on Hindu death rituals and pilgrimage. Secondary data sources provide insights into how Kashi’s practices have adapted over time and how various institutions influence the pilgrimage experience. We used thematic analyzing to delve into the participants’ perceptions and provide a detailed account of their inducements. A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data, based on Indian and western literature reports. Theme saturation was achieved after interviewing 9 participants. An analytical framework combining cultural, economic, and religious perspectives was applied to interpret these changes, focusing on the interplay between traditional beliefs and contemporary institutional practices. For this study, a homogenous sample of 9 participants was chosen. The technique of criterion based purposive sampling was needed to assess and

select the participants. We initially contacted the administration departments of Mumukshu Bhawan and Kashi Labh Mukti Bhawan and requested their cooperation in conducting this study. With their permission, we requested that they give us the names of the participants who had been staying in their centers. Once the list was compiled, prospective participants were contacted in person, briefed about the study's purpose, and asked for their permission to participate. Those who agreed to participate in the study were then asked questions based on the guidelines for inclusion and exclusion that had been determined beforehand. Based on this data, participants who met the selection criteria (i.e., those who were over 60 and had come to Kashi for the attainment of moksha) were contacted and asked to schedule an in person interview. A schedule of non-directive, open-ended interview questions was prepared.

### **Result**

The study's findings reveal significant transformations in Kashi's death practices, particularly due to the rise of institutionalized support for pilgrims seeking to die in the sacred city. Several themes emerged, highlighting changes in ritual practice, the role of institutions, and the socio-economic dynamics of pilgrimage to Kashi.

#### **1. Transformation of Traditional Rituals**

As institutional support systems have developed to ease end-of-life journeys, traditional death ceremonies in Kashi have changed. In the past, local priests and family members conducted these rites, but more recently, organized services that help with ritual planning, cremation, and other religious rites have become more prevalent. This change implies that although the fundamental components of funeral rites are still based on Hindu doctrine, the means of delivery has evolved to meet contemporary demands.

#### **2. Expansion of Institutional Services**

Those who are traveling to Kashi with the intention of dying there can now receive specialized care from organizations such as hospices, ritual service providers, and moksha hostels. These establishments provide a structure that enables more people to travel by meeting a variety of needs, including housing, ceremonial direction, and medical attention. This tendency has made it possible for pilgrims to continue engaging in these holy rituals even if they don't have family or local support. According to the literature, this transformation is a reflection of larger changes in Hindu society, where organized bodies are increasingly mediating access to religious activities.

#### **3. Economic and Cultural Implications of Moksha Tourism**

An economic component that is frequently referred to as "moksha tourism" has also surfaced with institutionalization. A variety of commercial services, ranging from setting up cremations to offering religious counseling, have emerged in Kashi as a result of the monetization of dying-related activities. In addition to making the city more well-known as a place for spiritual pilgrimages, this development has sparked debate regarding the commercialization of religious ceremonies. Although economic considerations undoubtedly play a part, scholars observe that pilgrims nonetheless have a deep underlying devotion to the journey's spiritual goal, striking a balance between reverence and practicality.

#### **4. Impact on Spiritual Perception and Experience**

The way pilgrims view and experience their journey toward death has been impacted by the changing areas of dying practices in Kashi, which has been formed by institutional engagement. According to the literature, although conventional views on moksha have not changed, the experience itself has become more regimented, which may have an impact on an individual's spiritual path. These modifications have increased accessibility without necessarily lessening the pilgrimage's spiritual importance, since many pilgrims see the institutional amenities as enhancing rather than taking away from the sacred experience.

### **Discussion**

The study's findings suggest a duality of tradition and modernization in Kashi's death practices, highlighting both the benefits and challenges of institutionalized death pilgrimage. To begin with, it is noted that the evolution of sacred practices has become more ordered considering the fact that the basic tenets of rituals surrounding death in Kashi are still observed. This institutionalization aims to provide modern-day pilgrims, who are likely to be unfamiliar or have no family, with something to fall back on. In this sense, institutionalization increases the people involved in such practice as well as the number of people who can perform the sacred act even if they do not have the means to do so on their own. However the change in the death ritual raises concerns about the level of spiritual engagement as these ritual and practice are performed by someone or third party rather than family members or close community members.

Another critical dimension is the economic impact of what has been termed “moksha tourism.” The commercialization of services related to death rituals in Kashi has made the pilgrimage process more accessible both financially and spiritually, yet it also raises ethical considerations about commodifying sacred rites. The literature indicates that while some view these services as supportive, others question the implications of monetizing such spiritual experiences. This phenomenon displays a tension between the desire to maintain the sacredness of death rituals and the economic reality of providing structured, accessible services. As growth is seen in religious tourism, there is a need for proper management and sensitivity to preserve the authenticity and respect for the practices involved.

The results also show that pilgrims' perceptions of their own spiritual journeys are impacted. The degree of personal attachment to the traditions may be influenced by institutional support. Even if mediated by someone, institutional services are seen by many pilgrims as a way to complete obligatory rites, indicating that the divine aim is still at the heart of the experience. However, there is also evidence that the highly personal aspect of the pilgrimage may be gradually altered by the institutionalized services' structured format. Pilgrims may experience a form of ritual detachment, as the spiritual responsibility shifts from family to hired professionals. This shift underscores the broader challenge of balancing modern convenience with preserving traditional spiritual practices intimate, self-driven aspects.

### Conclusion

This research investigates how death rituals and the act of pilgrimage are changing in Kashi as traditional customs come into contact with administered forms. Results show that whereas Kashi, the sacred city, still serves the purpose of providing moksha to believers, the pilgrimage experience has been enhanced due to the development of organized support structures. Such institutions as moksha hostels, hospice and ritual services provide structural support thus enabling many more people to engage in the spiritual journey in anticipation of death. Nevertheless, this change also brings new challenges associated with concerns about authenticity, commodification and the intimate aspect of the pilgrimage.

According to proverb if the best gift to life is death, then best place of this gift is Kashi. The institutionalization of these practices, while expanding accessibility, brings economic and ethical considerations into focus, particularly with the advent of “moksha tourism.” Both of them have somehow affected the sanctity of death rituals and processes, posing serious questions about the commercialization and commodification of sacred practices. Many pilgrims view these institutional services as enhancing and marking the path carrier rather than detracting from their spiritual journey. But for few of them commerce and market has acquired a significant space in the journey that was sacrificial and spiritual. Kashi in between both is trying its best to retain the core values and significance of its sacred landscape. The modern institutions are enhancing the needs and requirements of modern society with spiritually driven journey. In between both Kashi remains Kashi the doorway to Salvation/Moksha- liberation from the cycle of life and birth.

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# Kashi Unveiled: The Eternal Tapestry of Spirituality, Culture, and Heritage

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## Abstract:

*Kashi, an ancient city perched along the Ganga's sacred banks, stands as a living testament to India's spiritual, cultural, and intellectual dynamism. Known today as Varanasi, it transcends its identity as a mere urban centre, embodying a rich confluence of religious traditions, artistic expression, and philosophical thought. This paper aims to unravel the intricate layers of Kashi's historical and contemporary significance, exploring how it has both shaped and been shaped by the powerful forces of religion, philosophy, and socio-political change over centuries. Through a multidisciplinary approach that examines archival records, oral histories, and modern interpretations, this research investigates Kashi's enduring role as a hub for scholars, artists, and spiritual figures. Furthermore, it addresses the profound challenges posed by modernization and environmental pressures, particularly concerning the preservation of sacred landmarks like the Ganga River and the iconic ghats. Additionally, the paper explores Kashi's transformation into a global centre of tourism and medical innovation, highlighting its remarkable ability to evolve while maintaining its core cultural and spiritual essence. Ultimately, this study provides a comprehensive view of Kashi's enduring legacy, offering fresh insights into the delicate balance between heritage conservation and progress in India's most historic cities.*

## 1. Introduction

Kashi, also known as Varanasi or Benares, is regarded as one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, with a history that stretches back thousands of years. Located on the sacred banks of the Ganga River, Kashi is of immense importance as a spiritual, cultural, and intellectual centre in India. For pilgrims, scholars, and artists, Kashi is more than just a city; it represents a deep intersection of spirituality, cultural expression, and intellectual exploration. In Hindu mythology, Kashi is honoured as "the city of light," believed to have been created by the deity Shiva, which adds to its sacred significance. The city also holds great importance in Buddhism and Jainism, fostering a unique blend of religious traditions that have coexisted and evolved over the centuries.

In addition to its religious significance, Kashi is celebrated for its rich contributions to India's artistic and cultural heritage. The city's musical legacy, particularly the Benares gharana of Hindustani classical music, along with its literature, visual arts, and craftsmanship, showcases a vibrant cultural scene that has continually adapted to historical changes. Kashi's intellectual and philosophical traditions are equally impressive; it has long been a hub for learning and discussion, attracting scholars from around the globe to explore topics ranging from ancient Sanskrit texts to contemporary scientific research.

Despite extensive scholarship on Kashi's historical and cultural contributions, limited research addresses the complex balance between heritage conservation and the pressures of urban modernization within this ancient city. Kashi's identity faces critical challenges from rapid development, environmental degradation, and the demands of global tourism, necessitating a deeper understanding of how such forces impact its cultural and spiritual legacy.

### 2.1 Historical and Spiritual Significance

Kashi holds a foundational place in Hindu cosmology, believed to have been created by Lord Shiva. Numerous studies delve into Kashi's reputation as the city of moksha (spiritual liberation), emphasizing that dying in Kashi is said to grant liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Diana L. Eck (1982), in her work *Banaras: City of Light*, offers a comprehensive exploration of Kashi's sacred geography, detailing key spiritual sites such as the Vishwanath Temple and the Manikarnika Ghat, where funeral pyres burn continuously. Eck's research highlights the profound connection between Kashi and liberation, illustrating the city's role as a space where the line between the mundane and the divine is particularly blurred. Kashi's historical significance goes beyond Hinduism. It is also a vital pilgrimage site in Buddhism, with Sarnath, a suburb of Kashi, marking the location of the Buddha's first sermon. Historical records trace the establishment of stupas and monasteries around Sarnath, emphasizing the city's importance in early Buddhist traditions (Mitchell, 2008). Jain literature also holds Kashi in high regard, with references to it as a birthplace of several Tirthankaras. These overlapping religious narratives illustrate Kashi as a place of syncretism, where multiple traditions have thrived.

Despite substantial research into Kashi's religious heritage, relatively few studies address how globalization and mass tourism have affected traditional practices in recent decades. As Sinha (2015) argues, the commercialization of sacred rituals and the increasing presence of digital technology in religious spaces are

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altering the landscape of spirituality in Kashi. These transformations and their implications for the authenticity of spiritual practices remain underexplored.

## **2.2 Cultural and Artistic Influence**

Kashi is widely recognized as a cultural and artistic hub. The Benares gharana, a prominent school in Hindustani classical music, has its roots here and is celebrated for its distinctive approach to rhythm and vocal expression (Kippen, 2000). Renowned artists and scholars like Ravi Shankar and Ustad Bismillah Khan have linked Kashi with musical excellence, highlighting the city's role as a centre of cultural creativity. The gharana's unique style is often credited to Kashi's spiritual atmosphere, which artists believe enhances the meditative quality of their music.

Kashi's literary contributions are equally remarkable. Poets such as Kabir and Tulsidas, both connected to the city, have had a profound impact on Indian literature. Kabir's poetry questions religious conventions and promotes a personal connection with the divine, while Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas* has solidified Kashi's significance in the collective consciousness of Hinduism (Vaudeville, 1974). Additionally, Munshi Premchand, another literary figure, set several of his stories in Kashi, addressing the socio-cultural challenges faced by the city during colonial times.

The craftsmanship of Kashi has also attracted academic interest. The art of Benares silk weaving, in particular, is a vital part of the city's identity, with the Banarasi sari being highly esteemed for its elaborate designs and craftsmanship (Goswami, 2012). However, as Thakur (2010) points out, globalization has prompted changes in traditional artisanal trades, as economic pressures drive younger generations toward urban employment opportunities that offer more stable incomes. This transition raises important questions about the future of Kashi's artistic heritage, an area ripe for further exploration.

## **2.3 Intellectual and Philosophical Contributions**

Kashi has long been a lively hub for intellectual discussion, drawing scholars from across India and beyond. Banaras Hindu University (BHU), established in 1916 by Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, was intended as a modern institution that preserves traditional Indian learning and continues to be a centre for intellectual exchange (Kumar, 2001). BHU provides a wide range of programs, from Sanskrit and philosophy to contemporary sciences, reflecting Kashi's blend of ancient and modern educational approaches. Its research facilities, such as the Institute of Medical Sciences, underscore Kashi's expanding influence in today's academic and healthcare fields.

Historically, Kashi's temples and ashrams served as informal venues for philosophical discussions, especially regarding Vedanta and non-dualism (Dasgupta, 2007). Swami Vivekananda's notable speeches in Kashi highlighted the need to integrate Indian spirituality with modern knowledge, calling for a revival of India's intellectual strength. Despite Kashi's significant role in the development of Indian philosophy, there is a lack of research on its current intellectual environment and how contemporary institutions like BHU connect traditional and modern fields of study.

## **2.4 Environmental and Socio-Political Challenges**

Environmental challenges in Kashi, particularly related to the Ganga River and its historic ghats, have emerged as significant areas of study. The Ganga is revered as a sacred river and serves as a vital resource for millions. However, pollution from industrial waste, untreated sewage, and the pressures of excessive tourism are steadily harming its waters (Haberman, 2006). Studies such as those by Jaiswal et al. (2020) document alarming levels of heavy metals and bacterial contamination, emphasizing the public health risks and ecological implications. Efforts like the National Mission for Clean Ganga aim to mitigate these issues, but progress remains slow, complicated by limited resources and the competing priorities of urban development.

Kashi's socio-political landscape also faces tensions between urban expansion and heritage conservation. Singh (2019) has examined how infrastructural projects, such as the widening of roads near heritage sites, have altered the city's architectural character, occasionally leading to the destruction of historic buildings. Although modernization provides economic opportunities, it often conflicts with conservation efforts, raising questions about sustainable development practices. Current scholarship lacks a focused analysis on how local communities perceive these changes and engage in preservation, representing an opportunity for this study to contribute a ground-up perspective.

## **2.5 Kashi's Role in Tourism and Healthcare Innovation**

In recent years, Kashi has transformed into a prominent site for both international tourism and medical tourism. Every year, millions of spiritual tourists flock to Kashi, attracted by its ghats, temples, and rich cultural heritage (Rana, 2017). The influx of visitors has provided significant economic benefits to the city, leading to job creation and improved infrastructure. However, research by Singh & Gupta (2021) warns that this surge in tourism has resulted in overcrowding, pressure on local resources, and the deterioration of cultural sites.

Another growing sector is medical tourism, with Kashi becoming known for its Ayurvedic and allopathic treatment options. Hospitals linked to BHU and private facilities are now catering to international patients, especially those interested in Ayurvedic therapies, thereby integrating Kashi into the larger medical tourism landscape (Bharadwaj, 2019). While the economic benefits are clear, the swift expansion of healthcare services raises questions about resource distribution and its impact on local communities. The socio-cultural effects of this transformation, particularly regarding Kashi's traditional identity, have yet to be thoroughly examined.

Field notes, sketches, and audio recordings will be utilized to document these observations, ensuring a thorough capture of both the physical and social dimensions of Kashi's cultural landscape. Secondary data analysis will complement the primary data collected through archives, interviews, and observations. Sources include:

- **Environmental Reports:** Studies and data from government and non-governmental organizations, such as the National Mission for Clean Ganga, provide critical information on the pollution levels in the Ganga River and the effectiveness of current conservation efforts.
- **Tourism and Economic Data:** Reports from the Ministry of Tourism and regional tourism boards will be analysed to understand the economic impact of tourism in Kashi, particularly concerning infrastructure strain and resource allocation.
- **Healthcare and Demographic Data:** Data from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the World Health Organization (WHO) will be used to assess the growth of Kashi's healthcare sector and its implications for local resources.

#### 4.1 Historical Continuity and Evolution

The archival research and analysis of religious texts highlight Kashi's long-standing role as a spiritual hub in India, a status it has preserved through various social and political changes over the centuries. Kashi's significance is affirmed in the Rigveda and Skanda Purana, where it is portrayed as a sacred location that provides moksha, or liberation, from the cycle of rebirth. Interviews with priests and local spiritual leaders reveal that these spiritual beliefs still play a crucial role in shaping Kashi's identity today, with rituals and festivals like the Ganga Aarti reflecting traditions that have been passed down through generations.

Despite external influences, Kashi's core spiritual practices show remarkable continuity. Hindu priests at the Vishwanath Temple explain that their role involves upholding traditional rituals while adapting logistical aspects to accommodate the increased influx of pilgrims and tourists. For instance, new digital systems for booking rituals have been introduced, but the fundamental practices remain anchored in ancient scriptures. Similarly, Buddhist and Jain leaders highlight that while tourism has increased visibility, their communities still observe traditional practices aligned with the teachings of their respective faiths.

Oral histories from elder residents of Kashi reveal a strong sense of pride in the city's historical continuity, particularly among families that have been involved in religious services for generations. However, they also express concern about the pressures modern tourism exerts on these practices, with some noting that commercialization risks diluting Kashi's spiritual authenticity. This tension between tradition and adaptation highlights Kashi's resilience in maintaining its cultural ethos despite shifting external dynamics.

#### 4.2 Impact of Modernization on Heritage and Environment

This study highlights the significant effects of modernization on Kashi's heritage sites and environmental resources through field observations and environmental report analyses. According to data from the National Mission for Clean Ganga, pollution in the Ganga River continues to be a major concern, despite various clean-up efforts. The river is often tainted by untreated sewage, industrial waste, and remnants from ritual offerings. Water quality analyses reveal that levels of biochemical oxygen demand (BOD) and fecal coliform bacteria frequently surpass safe limits, endangering public health and biodiversity.

Field observations show that the ghats, which are vital to Kashi's spiritual and cultural identity, are facing challenges from pollution and overcrowding. For example, the Dashashwamedh Ghat draws thousands of visitors each day, resulting in wear on the stone steps and a buildup of debris. Conversations with conservationists suggest that this increased foot traffic threatens the structural integrity of these historic steps, which were constructed centuries ago. Local authorities' attempts to clean and restore the ghats often encounter obstacles due to limited funding and the vastness of the issue.

Regarding socio-economic modernization, discussions with local artisans in the silk-weaving sector indicate a trend away from traditional crafts among younger generations. The renowned Banarasi silk saree, celebrated for its detailed weaving and gold brocade, has traditionally been crafted in small workshops throughout Kashi. However, younger artisans report moving toward more profitable occupations in the urban economy, as weaving offers limited financial security. Interviews with community leaders suggest that this

trend could lead to a decline in artisanal expertise over time, threatening the continuity of Kashi's silk-weaving heritage.

Traditional metalworking and woodcraft industries are also feeling the impact of industrial production and lower-cost alternatives. Artisans share their experiences of how competition from machine-made goods has forced many out of the market, leaving only a handful of families capable of maintaining traditional craftsmanship. These observations point to a slow decline in Kashi's artisanal traditions, prompting concerns about the preservation of its intangible cultural heritage amid economic modernization.

#### **4.3 Kashi as a Hub for Tourism and Healthcare**

The study's examination of tourism and healthcare data highlights Kashi's recent evolution into a globally recognized destination, attracting interest for both spiritual tourism and medical services. The Ministry of Tourism reports that Kashi welcomes over 6 million visitors each year, including international tourists who are captivated by its historic ghats, temples, and rich cultural experiences. Observations at key locations like the Assi Ghat show a diverse mix of tourists, pilgrims, and local devotees, each engaging in different ways. While pilgrims visit for spiritual rituals, tourists are often on the lookout for photo opportunities and guided tours, reflecting the varied motivations of the visitors.

Conversations with tourism professionals indicate a shift in the local economy to cater to the growing number of tourists, leading to the establishment of new hotels, restaurants, and guided tour services over the last decade. However, this growth has also put pressure on Kashi's infrastructure, resulting in increased crowding and litter at popular sites. Some residents express frustration over the commercialization of sacred spaces, citing instances where rituals have been shortened or adjusted to cater to tour schedules, which, they feel, detracts from the spiritual sanctity of these practices.

In the healthcare sector, Kashi has emerged as a key destination, especially for Ayurvedic and alternative medicine. Banaras Hindu University's Institute of Medical Sciences, along with various private facilities, has drawn patients from both India and abroad. According to data from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the expansion of healthcare services has fuelled economic growth in Kashi, creating job opportunities and attracting investments. However, interviews with healthcare providers highlight challenges concerning resource allocation and infrastructure, as the city's aging facilities find it difficult to meet the rising demand.

#### **4.4 Perspectives on Heritage Preservation and Environmental Conservation**

The media analysis uncovers differing narratives regarding Kashi's heritage and environmental conservation, showcasing a complex interaction between local and global viewpoints. Travel blogs, documentaries, and social media highlight Kashi as a city facing challenges from modernization, stressing the importance of global assistance in safeguarding its distinctive cultural heritage. Many popular documentaries depict Kashi's battles with pollution and commercialization as pressing concerns, seeking to raise international awareness and support.

Local perspectives, however, offer a more nuanced understanding of the effects of modernization. Conversations with residents, artisans, and religious leaders show that while there are worries about cultural erosion, many also acknowledge the economic advantages that modernization has brought to Kashi. For example, younger residents working in tourism and healthcare tend to have a positive outlook on modernization, highlighting better job opportunities and improved living conditions. In contrast, older residents and those engaged in traditional practices often feel nostalgic for a Kashi that is less commercialized, expressing concerns that the influx of outside influences could diminish the city's genuine character.

Conservationists involved in this study discuss their efforts to strike a balance between preserving heritage and fostering development, including community-driven initiatives focused on safeguarding the ghats and encouraging sustainable tourism. Some initiatives, such as heritage walks and cultural workshops, have been successful in engaging both locals and tourists, fostering a sense of shared responsibility for Kashi's preservation. However, these efforts face limitations in scale and resources, particularly given the rapid pace of urban development.

#### **5.1 Cultural and Spiritual Resilience in the Face of Modernization**

The resilience of Kashi's spiritual traditions, despite the transformations brought by modernization, reflects a deep-rooted cultural adaptability. Findings from interviews and archival analysis suggest that while modernization has introduced new influences—such as digital bookings for rituals and the influx of tourists—core spiritual practices have retained their authenticity. This resilience aligns with theories of cultural adaptation, which propose that societies can integrate change without compromising fundamental beliefs (Appadurai, 1996).

The ongoing spiritual practices in Kashi, despite the pressures of commercialization, highlight the resilience of cultural continuity in preserving identity. This ability to adapt allows Kashi to keep its sacred essence while also welcoming essential changes. However, some local stakeholders have voiced worries about

the risk of losing authenticity, indicating that this balance is fragile and needs continuous community involvement to prevent commercial interests from overshadowing traditional practices. This emphasizes the significance of community-driven initiatives that focus on maintaining cultural integrity rather than prioritizing tourism revenue.

### **5.2 Tensions Between Heritage Conservation and Economic Modernization**

The findings reveal a key challenge in Kashi's development: balancing the preservation of its rich heritage with the need for economic growth. Observations and interviews with local artisans and conservationists indicate that while modernization has created economic opportunities, it also threatens Kashi's tangible and intangible heritage. The gradual decline of traditional crafts, especially silk weaving and metalwork, highlights the pressures from global markets, where mass-produced goods often overshadow handmade items (Thakur, 2010). This situation illustrates the broader issue of maintaining cultural industries in a globalized economy, where economic incentives tend to favour more commercially viable jobs over traditional crafts.

The consequences of this shift extend beyond economic factors; they signify a loss of unique knowledge and cultural expression in Kashi. As fewer young artisans pursue these trades, the city risks losing vital aspects of its intangible cultural heritage. This situation aligns with theories of cultural vulnerability in urban studies, which argue that economic modernization often disproportionately affects traditional practices that lack institutional backing (Zukin, 1995). Tackling this issue necessitates focused efforts to promote artisanal work through subsidies, improved market access, or educational initiatives that highlight the cultural significance of these crafts.

The pressures on Kashi's physical heritage sites, especially the ghats and temples, highlight the difficulties of balancing modernization with conservation. Observations from the field and environmental reports indicate that rising tourism has caused structural strain and pollution along the Ganga River. This not only harms the city's heritage but also disturbs the ecological balance. The deterioration of the Ganga underscores the critical need for sustainable tourism practices that focus on conservation, reflecting studies that stress the significance of ecological awareness in cultural tourism (Haberman, 2006).

### **5.3 The Role of Kashi as a Global Spiritual and Medical Hub**

Kashi serves a dual purpose as a destination for both spiritual and medical tourism, showcasing its changing identity on the global stage. The city is well-known for its focus on alternative medicine, especially Ayurveda, in addition to its modern healthcare facilities, making it a distinctive spot for health and wellness tourism. This development is in line with the trend of "spiritual tourism" observed at other historic religious sites, where visitors seek a blend of cultural and wellness experiences (Cohen, 2008).

However, this evolution brings up concerns regarding resource distribution and the capacity of local infrastructure. Conversations with healthcare providers indicate that while medical tourism can boost the economy, it also puts pressure on Kashi's resources, which can hinder access for local residents. Therefore, this dual identity necessitates thoughtful policy planning to ensure that the advantages of tourism do not overshadow the needs of the local community.

Additionally, the commercialization of spirituality, evident in the tourist-oriented modifications of traditional practices like shortened rituals, highlights the complex effects of global demand on local traditions. While this shift may provide economic benefits, it also risks turning spirituality into a mere transactional experience. These insights underscore the need for responsible tourism practices that honour local cultural values while promoting economic development. Initiatives such as educational programs and awareness campaigns aimed at tourists could help address some of these issues by encouraging respectful interactions with Kashi's rich heritage.

### **5.4 Local and Global Perspectives on Heritage Conservation**

The study's media analysis reveals a distinct contrast between local and global perspectives on Kashi's heritage preservation. Documentaries, travel blogs, and social media campaigns often emphasize Kashi's vulnerability to modern influences, framing the city as a cultural site under threat. This external perspective has led to advocacy efforts and conservation funding from international organizations, yet local perspectives indicate a more complex relationship with modernization. 40% of your text is likely AI-generated. While many residents strongly feel the need to preserve Kashi's heritage, they also acknowledge the advantages that modernization offers, such as better infrastructure, job opportunities, and greater access to resources.

The differing opinions underscore the necessity of including local perspectives in conservation policies. In Kashi, conservationists support community-based methods for preserving heritage, where local stakeholders are actively involved in the decision-making process. This approach aligns with heritage conservation theories that highlight the importance of participatory methods, suggesting that sustainable preservation can only be achieved when it reflects the community's values and needs (Smith, 2006). By adopting such participatory

models in Kashi, the effectiveness of preservation efforts could be improved, as local engagement promotes a shared sense of responsibility for the city's heritage.

## 6. Conclusion

This study offers an in-depth look at Kashi's lasting importance as a centre of spirituality and culture, while also shedding light on the difficulties it encounters in trying to preserve its heritage amid the pressures of modern development. By employing a multidisciplinary approach that includes archival research, oral histories, and media analysis, the study investigates how Kashi's spiritual identity, artistic legacy, and socio-economic conditions have changed over time, responding to the impacts of globalization and modernization.

The results indicate that although Kashi continues to uphold its historical role as a spiritual hub, the city's swift evolution into a centre for tourism and healthcare has put significant pressure on its cultural and environmental resources. Modernization has introduced economic opportunities, especially in the tourism and healthcare sectors, yet these changes have come with significant costs to Kashi's traditional practices and the sustainability of its heritage sites. Pollution in the Ganga River, the wear on historic ghats, and the decline of artisanal professions underscore the need for more sustainable policies that can safeguard Kashi's unique legacy.

The findings of this study have broader implications beyond Kashi, providing important lessons for other historic cities grappling with the challenges of balancing economic development and cultural preservation. The research highlights the need for participatory, community-driven conservation initiatives that engage local stakeholders in the preservation of heritage. It is crucial to implement policies that foster sustainable tourism, offer economic assistance for traditional crafts, and encourage environmentally friendly practices to maintain the cultural identity of historic cities like Kashi in the face of modernization.

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# The Enigmatic Charm of the Land of Spirituality Kashi through Diverse Lenses: A Literary Perspective

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## Abstract

*Varanasi, also known as Kāśī or Kashi, is one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world. The paper explores Kashi's multifaceted aspects, delving into its religious, historical, and socio-cultural dimensions. The city holds great religious importance in Hinduism and Buddhism, with the Vishwanath temple considered the center of spirituality. The belief that dying in Kashi grants eternal liberation from the cycle of birth and death underscores the city's significance as a place of salvation.*

*The city's unique charm lies in its timeless narrow lanes, centuries-old structures, The Banaras Hindu University, and the sacred river Ganga that flows through its heart. The study also examines the controversial practices of Aghoris at Manikarnika Ghat and the negative impact of portraying Kashi. Similarly, African countries like Ghana have been depicted negatively, portraying humans as cannibals. However, numerous Indian writers have highlighted the true nature of Kashi in their works to restore the city's authentic essence. So Kashi is a place that thrives on love and creation, where arts and crafts are born and passed down through generations, making it a hub for the spiritual upliftment of all religions.*

**Keywords :** Kashi, Vishwanath temple, spirituality, salvation, aghoris.

India is referred to as the "chosen land of God" due to its rich spiritual history and diverse religious traditions. For centuries, India has been home to sanyasis, mystics, and spiritual seekers who have dedicated their lives to pursuing enlightenment and a deeper understanding of the divine. The concept of spirituality in India dates back to ancient times when sages and rishis lived in forests and mountains, seeking knowledge and wisdom through meditation and self-discipline. Many of these sages were associated with the Hindu tradition and are still revered today as great spiritual leaders and gurus. And Kashi is known as the land of spirituality as it has a connection with Lord Shiva.

The term "Kashi" etymologically signifies "luminosity," specifically referring to a "tower of light." According to Mark Twain, the origins of Kashi predate legend, making it difficult to pinpoint an exact historical beginning. Also known as Benaras, Kashi is remarkable for its geographical location along the left bank of the sacred Ganges River and its captivating historical narrative, which is rich in mythological elements. The city's enduring nature is exemplified by an excerpt from Mark Twain's 1897 work, *Following The Equator – A Journey Around The World*, which remains relevant to this day:

"Benares was not a disappointment. It justified its reputation as a curiosity. It is on high ground and overhangs a grand curve of the Ganges. It is a vast mass of buildings, compactly crusting a hill, and is cloven in all directions by an intricate confusion of cracks that stand for streets. Tall, slim minarets and beflagged temple spires rise out of it, giving it picturesqueness viewed from the river. The city is as busy as an ant-hill, and the hurly-burly of human life swarming along the web of narrow streets reminds one of the ants. The sacred cow swarms along too and goes whither she pleases, takes toll of the grain shops, is very much in the way, and is a good nuisance since she must not be molested."<sup>1</sup>

This ancient city predates the conceptualization of Athens, the establishment of Rome, and the formation of Egypt. Its antiquity is profound; it was constructed as an instrument in the form of a city, facilitating a union between the microcosm and macrocosm—enabling individuals to experience the potential for unity with cosmic reality and to comprehend the pleasure, ecstasy, and beauty of merging with cosmic nature. While numerous such instruments have existed in this region, the creation of a city of this nature represents an ambitious undertaking accomplished millennia ago. There were 72,000 shrines, corresponding to the number of nadis in the human body. The entire process resembles the manifestation of a "mega human body" designed to establish contact with a larger cosmic entity. This concept gave rise to a tradition asserting that visiting Kashi is of paramount importance.

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Kashi's mythology is rooted in the belief that Shiva himself chose it as his winter abode. Despite his ascetic lifestyle in the Himalayan highlands, his marriage to a princess necessitated certain compromises. Demonstrating his graciousness, Shiva opted to relocate to the plains, as Kashi was the most magnificently constructed city of that era. Known by various names—Varanasi, Banaras, or Kashi—this city is believed to be one of the oldest in the world. Historically, accounts describe a grand city called Varanasi, situated between the rivers Varuna and Asi. It was once believed that merely entering this city could grant spiritual liberation due to its potent metaphysical atmosphere. According to the Kashi Khanda Purana, the Kashi Kshetra is depicted as resting upon Shiva's Trishul, with three main temples representing the three primary points of the trident. These principal temples serve as the fulcrum for the mandala: Omkareshwara in the north, Vishweshwara in the center, and Kedareshwara in the south. Each temple establishes its own khanda, or sphere of influence.<sup>2</sup>

The central focus of the city is the Vishwanath Temple, a site reportedly consecrated by Adiyogi himself, despite its history of destruction. Over the past several centuries, particularly in the last six to seven, Kashi has faced three instances of complete devastation. The original 26,000 shrines in Kashi have dwindled to about 3,000 due to systematic destruction during invasions. The Kashi Vishwanath Temple, being the heart of Kashi, must have been an extraordinary site that attracted visitors from around the globe. Unfortunately, we have not witnessed its full splendor. The temple has been demolished and reconstructed three times, utilizing whatever means were available at the time.

Upon arriving in Kashi, Aurangzeb noted that demolition would not deter future reconstruction. The faith practiced there was not governed by centralized leadership; rather, it was deeply ingrained in individual homes and hearts. It was not propagated through organized campaigns but through personal connections and was driven by profound experiences and connections with existence. Recognizing this, Aurangzeb decided to construct a mosque in the central area of the Kashi Vishwanath Temple. He demolished the majority of the temple, leaving only a small portion as a reminder to the people of this culture that the damage done could not easily be rectified. The Kashi Vishwanath linga was relocated outside the temple area, having been moved from its original position in the Vishweshwara sanctum. The mosque now occupies the entire central area, extending from north to south.

When the linga was removed and discarded, the aim was to dispose of it in a location where it could not be recovered. It remains unclear whether it was discarded or broken before being disposed of. Some accounts suggest there were two pieces that people attempted to reassemble out of devotion. Additionally, there is a narrative about Gyanvapi, which means "well of knowledge." It is said that people concealed and preserved the linga in this well to prevent its destruction. Once the situation stabilized, they retrieved it and placed it outside in the southern corner. It is possible that the linga was broken and reassembled, or that a new linga was created. The exact details of these events remain uncertain.

*Land spirituality* is a term that refers to the connection that people have with the natural environment, especially the land that they inhabit or visit. It is a way of understanding and appreciating the sacredness, beauty, and diversity of the earth and its living beings. Land spirituality can also be seen as a form of environmental ethics, as it implies respect and responsibility for the land and its resources.

Similarly Kashi is a hub of ritualistic practices, where water plays a crucial role in sustaining life. The human body is composed of approximately seventy percent water, highlighting its importance. In Kashi, the absence of water for even a single day would elevate its status to that of the divine. As a result, residents venerate the river as their lifeline, conducting daily Ganga aarti ceremonies. This practice exemplifies the belief in the deification of water due to its life-sustaining properties. The rituals performed here are both artistic and elaborate. Agni pooja is conducted in honor of Shiva, Ganga, Surya (the Sun), Agni (Fire), and the universe as a whole. All the priests wear similar clothing, and the aarti is performed in perfect unison. In this context, it is pertinent to reference select lines from Sadhguru's poetic work on Kashi:

"A tower of light of immeasurable height  
The cosmic reach of the blessed city drew  
men of all kinds. Artisans and tradesmen,  
scholars and priests, merchants and mendicants,  
builders and boatmen. Seekers of every kind  
flocked to suck at the teat of eternity."<sup>3</sup>  
These verses allude to the city's aesthetic appeal.

Residing in Kashi signifies a reorientation from familial bonds, sensual gratification, or emotional entanglements towards inner growth. It is crucial to differentiate between a directional shift and an end goal. There are nearly 100 Ghats. The famous and oldest Ghats are the Dhashaswamedh, the Manikarnika, and the Harishchandra Ghat. Some of the Ghats are made there by Hindu rulers, such as Ahilya Bai Holkar of Malwa region, Peshwas of Gwalior, Man Singh of Amber, Jai Singh of Jaipur, and Maharaja of Mysore. Most of the Ghats are bathing Ghats, while two are used as cremation sites. Many Ghats are associated with legends or mythologies, and many are privately owned. The former Kashi Naresh owns Shivala or Kali Ghat.

The aspiration for cremation at Manikarnika reflects a deep desire to conclude one's life in Kashi. The origins of Manikarnika Ghat are steeped in mythology. According to legend, Lord Shiva used his discus to excavate extensively in the pursuit of his earring, resulting in a sweat-filled pit. Despite his efforts, the earring became more elusive with each attempt. Shiva then declared to Vishnu, "The entire city is under my dominion. However, you may keep this location, as you have put in your effort here." Thus, Manikarnika was established.

At Manikarnika and Harishchandra Ghat, where cremations take place, the Aghoris observe the proceedings and inquire about the deceased's age and cause of death. This practice has led some families to cover their loved ones with plastic sheets for privacy. The Aghoris show particular interest in young, vibrant individuals who have faced untimely deaths, believing that the prana (life energy) must exit swiftly upon ignition of the pyre. They aim to harness this released energy for their spiritual practices. However, due to the reluctance of mourners to allow such utilization of their deceased loved ones, there have been reports of body snatching by Aghoris.

These practitioners seek to draw on a portion of the life force specifically during cremation, as they avoid human sacrifice. Historically, Aghoris pursued their spiritual growth in relative isolation, focused solely on the ultimate nature of existence. While they have been marginalized as society has expanded, Aghoris remain harmless, engaging in solitary practices in remote locations. Unlike some individuals who may engage in substance abuse or other harmful behaviors, Aghoris do not negatively impact those around them.

The Aghoris are a group of ascetics who practice a kind of death-related ritual that is regarded as an extreme and abnormal cult. This small group of Hindu ascetics worships the Hindu god Shiva and are adamant renouncers of the religion. They are thought to have broken away from the skull-wielding Kapalika sect that is referenced in Sanskrit texts, and their order is based on the life of an ascetic named Kina, who is thought to be a manifestation of Shiva.<sup>4</sup> According to some accounts, Aghori rituals involve such austerities as living at a cremation site, using skulls as bowls for eating, coating one's body with dead people's ashes, engaging in coprophagy and necrophagy, and meditating on top of corpses (a practice known as shava-sadhana).

According to Aghoris, all social divisions are merely surface-level, and there should be no distinction between the divine and the human, the pure and the polluted, or the untouchable and the Brahmin (the Brahmin is a caste in Hinduism that historically consists of priests, teachers, and guardians of sacred knowledge for generations; they are frequently regarded as the "upper caste" in the social hierarchy). Ron Barrett (2008) claims that the Aghor logic aims to achieve: "fundamental unity of divine creation and the need to deeply internalize an understanding of that unity to attain salvation"<sup>5</sup>.

However, many visitors and media portray Kashi negatively due to the controversial practices of the Aghoris at Manikarnika Ghat. Similarly this situation is akin to the negative depiction of African countries like Ghana, where people are sometimes unfairly portrayed as cannibals. In many African nations and communities in Sub-Saharan Africa, witchcraft has a long history. It has been particularly pertinent to Ghanaian culture, values, and way of life. Because it still influences people's lives on a daily basis, it has fostered spiritual beliefs, tradition, violence, and fear. Witchcraft is viewed differently in Ghana and other African nations depending on the area. It is not something to be taken lightly, and if there are rumors of citizens engaging in it, the word gets out quickly. In Ghana, local residents' and the government's responses to witchcraft and associated violence have also differed by region.

Ghanaian culture has a long history of witchcraft that dates back hundreds of years before the country was even occupied by colonial powers. Witchcraft allegations still have an impact on behavior and way of life today. The subject of witchcraft frequently involves accusations of aggression and violence against women, many of which result in homicides and public executions. From Ghanaian native

perspectives to Western perspectives and studies, witchcraft is viewed through a variety of lenses, ranging from the deed itself to its political implications and related activities.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand when discussing Ghanaians, one finds that their strong communal bonds, vibrant culture, and humble lifestyles dispel any misconceived notions of difference. Understanding Ghana's history is crucial to appreciating its culture. Kumasi and Accra are just two of Ghana's many beautiful locations. For those with a traditionally Western perspective of Africa, Ghana may defy expectations. There is a striking contrast; while some areas are less developed, others are impressively modern. Many people would be surprised to visit Ghana and see homes that resemble those found in the United States or other highly developed nations.

Conversely, numerous Indian writers have sought to highlight the true essence of Kashi in their works, aiming to restore the city's authentic character. Kashi is a place of love and creativity, where arts and crafts are born and passed down through generations, making it a hub for the spiritual upliftment of all religions.

The allure of Kashi has persisted through centuries, attracting pilgrims, scholars, and wanderers alike. This city, one of the oldest continuously inhabited urban centers in the world, boasts a rich tapestry of historical and spiritual significance. The Ganga River, believed to possess sin-cleansing properties, flows majestically through the city's heart. The ghats along the river have witnessed countless rituals and ceremonies over time. The mythological love story of Shiva and Sati infuses Kashi's narrative with divine romance. The sacred Ganga, bearing witness to their celestial love, continues to flow, carrying the spiritual energy that has drawn seekers to Kashi for ages.

Kashi, also known as Varanasi or Benaras, has a unique charm that sets it apart from other places. The essence of Kashi lies in its divergence from the ordinary. The narrow lanes, lined with centuries-old structures, evoke a sense of timelessness. Every step taken within this city feels like a journey through history, with every corner revealing secrets etched in the weathered walls.

The inhabitants of Kashi (also known as Varanasi or Benaras) present a unique demographic profile, with their faces reflecting stories of spirituality, resilience, and a deep commitment to long-standing traditions. The local people have a cheerful disposition, often engaging in hearty laughter and actively discussing various subjects. They possess an extraordinary ability to form connections, creating an impression of familiarity that feels longstanding. Their close proximity to mortality has fostered a general fearlessness among residents. They embrace life fully within their means, often disregarding conventional moral distinctions and acting from a place of authenticity. Many residents show limited interest in external matters, taking pride in their roots in this sacred city, which is associated with Lord Shiva. There is a prevailing belief that the divine presence permeates all things, even down to the molecular level, which is reflected in the local ethos. This inclusive view of the divine creates a diverse community that includes ascetics, saints, and individuals of various moral standings.

In contrast to the frenetic pace of other urban centers, Kashi exudes a tranquil spirituality that leaves a unique impression on its residents. Out of respect, people prefer to use the original name "Kashi" rather than Benaras or Varanasi. The atmosphere is often filled with the chant "Namah Parvati Pateh — Har Har Mahadev," spoken by both residents and visitors. The Vishwanath Temple is the city's primary spiritual center. Visitors to this sacred site may find that seeing the deity is not guaranteed on every visit. The main temple is surrounded by smaller shrines, including those dedicated to Sri Shanishwar and Maa Annapurna.

So, Kashi is a land of spirituality, which inherits the charming sides of ghats, Ganga river, Ganga aarti, and several temples. That is why the place is considered the land of spirituality. But on the other hand, the exercise practiced by aghoris terrified some people, especially foreign Western visitors. Though they enjoy eating raw meats as their favorite cousins. But if someone practices something with human dead bodies, they become frightened. That is why literature, especially Indian English, presented Kashi's beautiful and authentic side. So, Kashi is a land that tries to spread the harmony of humanity rather than a stance of hostility.

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# Kashi and its Contribution in the Medical Science: From Ancient to Modern Time

Sk Abdul Amanullah\*

## Abstract

*This study explores the contributions of Kashi to the field of medical science, tracing its historical significance from ancient times to the present day. By examining the foundational principles of Ayurveda, particularly the influential works of ancient scholars such as Sushruta, the research highlights how Kashi has shaped medical practices and knowledge throughout various periods, including the medieval era. Furthermore, the study investigates the synthesis of traditional Ayurveda practices with modern medical methodologies, illustrating how this integration enhances patient care and healthcare outcomes. Utilizing content analysis as a primary research methodology, the study systematically analyzes historical texts and contemporary literature to identify key themes and innovations in medical practices originating from Kashi. The findings underscore Kashi's enduring legacy in the medical field and its relevance in contemporary healthcare, providing valuable insights for future research and policy development in the integration of traditional and modern medicine.*

**Keywords:** Kashi, Medical Science, Ayurveda, Ancient Scholars, Sushruta, Traditional Medicine, Modern Medicine, Content Analysis.

## Introduction

Kashi (Varanasi), one of the oldest living cities in the world, has made significant contributions to the development of medical science, dating back to ancient times. In the early periods, the city was a hub of Ayurveda, with prominent scholars like Sushruta, who is often regarded as the father of surgery, laying the foundations of surgical techniques that are still relevant today (Dwivedi, 2007). The city fostered learning in various branches of medicine, with its rich tradition of Vedic knowledge influencing health practices through herbal medicine, preventive care, and holistic healing (Sharma, 2010). During the medieval period, Kashi saw the blending of Unani and Ayurveda medical systems, particularly during the Mughal era, further enriching the medical landscape (Alam, 2011). In modern times, institutions like Banaras Hindu University (BHU) have advanced medical education, research, and practice, integrating ancient knowledge with cutting-edge medical sciences (Rao, 2013). Kashi's medical contributions also extend to public health initiatives, with significant efforts towards disease prevention and rural healthcare, as highlighted in various health programs initiated by local and national authorities (Verma, 2016). The city's role in medical science continues to evolve, combining its spiritual heritage with contemporary healthcare advancements (Singh, 2019).

## The Analysis and Interpretation

### *Pertaining to Objective 1*

**O1: To investigate the historical origins and development of Ayurveda medicine in Kashi, with particular focus on the contributions of ancient scholars.**

### **Historical Origins of Ayurveda in Kashi**

The origins of Ayurveda in Kashi (Varanasi) traced back to ancient times, when the city became a prominent center of learning and culture in the Indian subcontinent. Varanasi, considered one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, has long been associated with religious, spiritual, and intellectual pursuits, which naturally extended to medical science. Ayurveda, as a holistic system of medicine, found a fertile ground in Kashi due to its intellectual environment and the presence of learned scholars. The early references to medicinal practices, particularly in texts like the Atharvaveda, form the foundation of Ayurveda's historical connection to Kashi (Sharma, 2001). During the Vedic period, Ayurveda principles that emphasized the balance of bodily humors (doshas) and natural healing systematically recorded and practiced in the city.

As Kashi grew as a major pilgrimage site, it also became a hub for the transmission of medical knowledge. Travelers and scholars from various parts of India and beyond visited the city to study Ayurveda, contributing to the system's spread and influence. Ayurveda's development in Kashi closely linked to the city's tradition of education, where medical knowledge was integrated with spiritual and

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philosophical teachings. The flourishing of Ayurveda in Kashi reflects the city's unique role in blending science, philosophy, and religion into a cohesive system of knowledge.

#### **Contributions of Sushruta and Ancient Scholars**

Among the most significant figures in Kashi's Ayurveda history was Sushruta, often regarded as the "Father of Surgery." Sushruta's contributions were groundbreaking for his time, especially in the field of surgery. His treatise, the Sushruta Samhita, composed in Kashi, became one of the foundational texts of Ayurveda medicine. In this work, Sushruta detailed over 300 surgical procedures and described various surgical instruments, some of which bear striking similarities to modern tools (Dash, 1994). His methods for cataract surgery, rhinoplasty (nasal reconstruction), and the extraction of bladder stones are considered some of the earliest recorded surgical procedures in medical history.

Sushruta's focus on anatomy particularly advanced for his era. He advocated for the dissection of cadavers to gain a better understanding of the human body, a practice that was revolutionary in ancient medical science. His detailed descriptions of the human anatomy and surgical techniques significantly advanced the understanding of medicine and surgery in Kashi and beyond (Zysk, 1998). In this regard, Kashi's role in fostering such progressive medical thought positioned it as a key center for the development of Ayurveda surgery and medical practices.

Other scholars also contributed to the advancement of Ayurveda in Kashi, such as Charaka, whose contributions to internal medicine were foundational. While Charaka was primarily associated with the region around Takshashila, his works and ideas greatly influenced the practice of Ayurveda in Kashi as well. His Charaka Samhita complemented the surgical knowledge of Sushruta by offering comprehensive insights into diagnosis, treatment, and the use of herbal remedies, emphasizing a holistic approach to health (Meulenbeld, 2002). These contributions were part of Kashi's rich intellectual tradition that embraced a multi-disciplinary approach to medical science.

#### **Kashi as a Center for Ayurveda Education**

Throughout its history, Kashi remained a center for the transmission of Ayurveda knowledge. The city's role as a pilgrimage site allowed for the exchange of medical ideas between scholars and practitioners from different regions. Ayurveda schools and learning centers in Kashi ensured the continuity and evolution of medical knowledge. These institutions played a critical role in formalizing Ayurveda education, where students learned the theoretical foundations of Ayurveda alongside practical applications, including the preparation of herbal medicines and surgical procedures (Sharma, 2001).

Kashi's intellectual environment supported the integration of Ayurveda with other systems of thought, such as yoga and meditation, making it a holistic center for healing. The city's emphasis on holistic well-being, combining physical, mental, and spiritual health, reflected the core principles of Ayurveda, which sought to treat the individual as a whole rather than focusing solely on the symptoms of illness. This integrated approach to health and wellness made Kashi a vital link in the preservation and advancement of Ayurveda medicine.

The historical origins of Ayurveda in Kashi are deeply embedded in the city's intellectual and spiritual traditions. From the Vedic period to the composition of foundational texts like the Sushruta Samhita, Kashi has played a crucial role in shaping the evolution of Ayurveda medicine. The contributions of ancient scholars such as Sushruta and Charvaka established Kashi as a center for medical knowledge, particularly in surgery and holistic healing. By preserving and advancing Ayurveda education, Kashi maintained its status as a beacon of medical science, influencing both ancient and modern medical practices.

#### ***Pertaining to Objective 2***

#### ***O2: To examine the influence of Kashi on the medical sciences during the medieval period.***

#### **Influence of Kashi on Medical Sciences during the Medieval Period**

Kashi's influence on medical sciences continued to thrive during the medieval period, despite significant political and cultural changes. During this era, the city remained an important center for learning, where traditional Indian medical systems such as Ayurveda flourished alongside newer influences like the Unani system of medicine. The convergence of various medical traditions, promoted by both Hindu and Islamic scholars, enriched Kashi's medical landscape. This period saw the synthesis of ancient Ayurveda practices with Unani medicine, which introduced in India by the Persian and Arab invaders. As Kashi adapted to the changing political and cultural milieu, it became a unique center where medical knowledge from different traditions shared, developed, and practiced.

#### **The Role of Unani Medicine in Kashi**

The introduction of Unani medicine in Kashi during the medieval period significantly affected the development of medical sciences in the city. The Mughal rulers and their scholars brought Unani medicine, based on the teachings of Hippocrates and Galen and further developed by Arab scholars, to India.

In Kashi, the interaction between Unani and Ayurveda led to a greater understanding of medical treatments and practices. Scholars and physicians from both traditions collaborated and shared their knowledge, often combining treatments from both systems for better patient care. Kashi's status as a major center of learning attracted Unani practitioners who established their own schools, and these institutions operated alongside the traditional Ayurveda centers. The coexistence of these two medical traditions allowed for a blending of ideas, resulting in a more comprehensive approach to healthcare during the medieval period (Nadvi, 2008).

#### **The Continuity of Ayurveda Practices**

Despite the growing influence of Unani medicine, Ayurveda practices continued to thrive in Kashi during the medieval period. Many Ayurveda scholars and practitioners remained active in the city, preserving and expanding upon the traditional knowledge of Ayurveda. The Ayurveda centers in Kashi remained committed to teaching and practicing the principles laid down by ancient scholars such as Sushruta and Charaka. These centers adapted to the new environment by integrating some of the diagnostic techniques and treatments from Unani medicine, while retaining the core philosophies of Ayurveda, such as the importance of balancing the doshas (Sharma, 2001).

#### **Synthesis of Ayurveda and Unani Practices**

The collaboration between Ayurveda and Unani practitioners in Kashi resulted in the exchange of knowledge on various topics, including anatomy, surgery, pharmacology, and disease prevention. This interdisciplinary approach led to innovations in medical science, where treatments became more effective through the combined knowledge of both systems. Kashi's role in facilitating this synthesis made it a vital center for medical advancement during the medieval period.

The blending of traditional Ayurveda practices with the newer Unani system introduced by Persian and Arab scholars marked Kashi's influence on medical sciences during the medieval period. The city became a center for the exchange of medical knowledge, where scholars and physicians from different traditions collaborated and developed new approaches to healthcare. The patronage of rulers and the continued practice of Ayurveda ensured that Kashi remained a critical hub for medical science, contributing to the evolution of medical practices in India during this period.

#### ***Pertaining to Objective 3***

***O3: To explore the synthesis of traditional and modern medical practices in Kashi.***

#### **Synthesis of Traditional and Modern Medical Practices in Kashi**

As India encountered Western medical knowledge, Kashi's established tradition of Ayurveda adapted to incorporate modern diagnostic techniques, treatment modalities, and research methods. This blending of traditional and modern approaches helped preserve the relevance of Ayurveda in contemporary medical practice while also enhancing its efficacy through integration with scientifically tested methods. The synthesis in Kashi has been multi-faceted, combining therapeutic, educational, and institutional reforms that promoted a holistic approach to healthcare.

#### **Incorporation of Modern Diagnostic Techniques**

One of the major areas where traditional practices in Kashi synthesized with modern medicine was in diagnostics. While Ayurveda traditionally relied on the assessment of dosha imbalances, pulse reading, and examination of physical symptoms, modern diagnostic techniques introduced more precise and scientific methods of detecting disease. In the 20th century, Ayurveda practitioners in Kashi began incorporating laboratory testing, imaging techniques like X-rays, and modern equipment for diagnosing conditions, allowing for a more accurate understanding of diseases (Patwardhan, 2014). These advances enabled Ayurveda practitioners to offer treatments that were both rooted in tradition and informed by contemporary scientific knowledge.

#### **Therapeutic Integration of Herbal and Allopathic Medicines**

Another significant area of synthesis between traditional and modern medical practices in Kashi was in the realm of therapeutics. Traditional Ayurveda remedies, which emphasize the use of herbs and natural compounds, integrated with modern allopathic treatments. Ayurveda practitioners began using herbal medicines in conjunction with pharmaceuticals, particularly in cases where herbal remedies alone were insufficient or needed to complement by stronger interventions. This practice was especially

prevalent in treating chronic conditions such as arthritis, diabetes, and gastrointestinal disorders, where Ayurveda's holistic approach enhanced with modern medication (Vaidya, 2006).

#### **Establishment of Integrated Medical Institutions**

The creation of integrated medical institutions in Kashi further facilitated the blending of traditional and modern medicine. One of the most prominent examples is the Banaras Hindu University (BHU), which established a department dedicated to Ayurveda in its Institute of Medical Sciences. This institution became a model for synthesizing traditional and modern medical education, where students could study Ayurveda alongside allopathic medicine, learning how to integrate both systems in patient care (Patwardhan, 2014). The inclusion of Ayurveda in a modern university setting helped legitimize traditional medicine and ensured that future generations of doctors trained in both systems.

#### **Modernization of Ayurveda Education and Research**

The modernization of Ayurveda education in Kashi also played a crucial role in the synthesis of traditional and modern medical practices. Ayurveda colleges and universities in the city began to incorporate modern scientific courses into their curricula, teaching students about anatomy, physiology, pathology, and biochemistry alongside traditional Ayurveda subjects (Mukherjee et al., 2001). This approach prepared graduates to work in environments where they could collaborate with allopathic doctors and use modern technologies in their practice.

Additionally, Kashi became a hub for research in Ayurveda, with institutions focusing on scientific validation of traditional treatments. Researchers in Kashi used modern methods such as randomized controlled trials and bioanalytical techniques to study the effectiveness of Ayurveda therapies and herbal medicines. These research efforts helped bridge the gap between traditional and modern medicine by providing evidence-based support for Ayurveda treatments (Patwardhan, 2014).

**Conclusion :** In conclusion, Kashi has played a pivotal role in the synthesis of traditional Ayurveda practices with modern medical science, creating a rich tapestry of healthcare that honors ancient wisdom while embracing contemporary advancements. The integration of modern diagnostic techniques, the therapeutic collaboration between Ayurveda and allopathic treatments, and the establishment of educational institutions dedicated to this synthesis have collectively enhanced the efficacy and relevance of Ayurveda medicine. This harmonious coexistence not only preserves the traditional knowledge of Ayurveda but also strengthens its foundation through rigorous scientific validation and research. As a result, Kashi stands as a significant beacon of holistic health care, illustrating how the fusion of time-honored practices with modern innovations can lead to comprehensive and effective medical solutions.

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# Historical Assessment of Kashi as a Major Centre of Shakti Upasana

Sunil R. Yadav\*

## Abstract

Kashi is the cradle of India's great cultural heritage. Kashi, which resonates with Shiva's devotion, has a different identity related to Lord Shiva's wife Parvati. When the glory of Kashi is being discussed, the discussion of Shiva along with Shakti becomes inevitable.

This paper will discuss the history and beginning of Shakti worship in Kashi through literary sources like *Markandeya Purana (Devi Mahatmya/Durga Saptashati)*, *Skanda Purana (Kashi Khand)*, *SriMaddevi Bhagavata Purana*, *Harivansh Purana*, *Matsya Purana*, *Brahmavaivarta Purana (Kashi Rahasya)*, *Yogini Tantra*, *Devi Upanishad*, etc. This paper will discuss the significant temples of Kashi associated with Shakti worship, including *Vishalakshi (Manikarnika, Shakti Peeth)*, *Annapurna Temple*, *Navdurga temples and Nav-Gauri Temples*. Prominent among these are *Sringar Gauri Temple*, *Mangala Gauri*, *Lalita Gauri*, *Jyeshtha Gauri*, *Saubhagya Gauri Temple* etc. Among other significant temples, *Sankatha Mata Temple*, *Durgakund Temple*, *Varahi Temple*, *Kaudi Mata Temple*, *Shri Tripur Bhairavi Temple*, etc., have special significance. Through this research paper, we will describe the festivals, folk songs (Pachra, Birha), worship methods and folk culture of Kashi.

Finally, we will conclude that Kashi is a significant center of Shakti worship. When Lord Shiva himself is incomplete without Shakti, how can the description of Kashi be complete without discussing Shakti worship?

**Keywords :** *Banarasipana, Shiv-lok, Avimukta, Anandkanan, Surandhan, Molini, Rudravasha, Sristi-Khanda, Sati-khanda, Rudra-Samhita, Uma-Samhita, Mahatmya, Shaktipeeth, Durga-shaptashati, Varahi, Bageshwari, Vishalakshi, Sankata, Durgakund, Gauri(white goddesses), Ashtadevi, Digpal, Vetal(Vampires), Matrakas(mother goddesses), Yogini(sorceresses), Chandi, Yakshi(tree spirits) Pachra etc.*

## 1. Introduction

*Yatra Naryastu pujiyante; ramante tatra devata,*

*Yatra itaastu Na Pujiyante Sarvaastatrafalaah Kriyaah(3.56, Manusmriti)<sup>1</sup>*

The above verse of *Manusmriti* means that "where women are respected, divinity flourishes, and where they are disrespected, all works become fruitless." The same applies to Varanasi, as goddesses have been worshipped here for centuries. Thus, the city becomes a place of gods and goddesses, and all works and deeds performed here are fruitful.

Religion and faith have been developing since the beginning of human civilization. Male and female elements establish balance in nature. In Indian philosophy, Shiva and Shakti are said to be the origin of the creation of the universe. Kashi is an ancient city. "*Banaras is older than history, older than tradition, older than legends and seems twice as old as all of these put together.*"<sup>2</sup> According to the Puranas, Kashi was founded by Lord Shiva himself. Baba Vishwanath, Maa Ganga, the ghats and Banarasipana spiritually illuminate Kashi. It is said that every pebble of Banaras is Shiva. The worship of Shiva, along with Shakti, is an essential feature of Kashi, representing a very complex Shakta devotional tradition. In the devotional tradition, Shaktism, Vaishnavism, and Shaivism represent a solid devotional tradition. Evidence of Shakti worship is apparent through the Vedas, Puranas and epics. On the one hand, Baba Vishwanath is seated here, while on the other hand, there is also a famous ShaktiPeeth here. It is said that "whatever is in the whole of India, the same is in Kashi. Here, 12 Jyotirlingas and 51 ShaktiPeeths are also established as reflections.

Kashi, the eternal city of Varanasi, has been a revered pilgrimage site in Hinduism and Shaktism for centuries.

## 2. Historical background of Kashi

Since ancient times, Kashi has been an equally important place for Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The first reference to Kashi in the Vedas, Atharvaveda(Pippalad), mentions Kashi as a sacred city (Eck, 1982)<sup>3</sup>. Puranic accounts: Skanda Purana, Padma Purana, Brahmvaivarta purana, Markandeya Purana and Linga Purana describe Kashi as a revered pilgrimage site. According to Shiva Maha Puran, there is a description of the creation of *Shiva-lok* area and Kashi, according to which Kashi was established by Lord Shiva himself.<sup>4</sup> The great Indian epic records Mahabharata (84 Vanparva, 24 Bhismparva, 5 Karnaparva, 30 Anushasana parva) and Ramayana mention Kashi as a significant urban center. Kashi was an important Buddhist center during Gautama Buddha's lifetime (6th century BCE). He preached for the first time in Sarnath, a historic place in Kashi. Kashi was a major Jaina center, as it was the birthplace of four Jaina Tirthankaras, including

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Suparshwa Nath, Chandraprabhu, Shreyansh Nath and Parshvanath -- the 7th, 8th, 11th, and 23rd Tirthankaras -- respectively.

The name Kashi is derived from Prakash which means knowledge. It means forest of Kas-grass and Kashi tribe. Kashi has different names in literary works, **Anandkanan**: forest of bliss, **Avimukta**: never to be abandoned, this is because Lord Shiva himself established a linga here and ordered never to leave Kashi.<sup>5</sup> It is also mentioned in the Shiva Maha Puran in Srishtikhand Chapter 6, verses 27–31. Kashi has different names in Buddhist texts too like **Surandhan**, which means city of strong defence, **Pushpawati**, Molini etc.<sup>6</sup>

**Rudravasha**: This is the dwelling place of Shiva, who is known also by his ancient name, Rudra. Here the Supreme God has taken up permanent residence.<sup>7</sup> **Mahasamshana**: Kashi is Mahasamshana for Hindus because Manikarnika Ghat of Banaras is considered a holy crematorium. It is said that dying in Kashi gives salvation.<sup>8</sup>

The name Varanasi indicates the geographical boundary as the city was between Varuna and Assi, tributaries of the Ganges.<sup>9</sup> Varanasi is also an ancient name, found in both Buddhist Jataka tales and the Hindu epic Mahabharata. From the Pali version of this name- Baranasi comes the corrupted name Banaras, the name by which the city is most commonly known today. In both Muslim and British India, the city was named "Banaras", but in independent India, Varanasi has been revived as the official name of the city.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Geo-Cosmography of Kashi and its Shakti Goddesses

There was a deep cosmic map behind the establishment of Kashi city. The cosmic map of Kashi has been studied by Prof. Rana P.B. Singh, who is famous for his expertise on Kashi. In this context, he has studied the cosmic structures of the Shakti temples of Kashi as well as Shivalingas and other temples.

Rana P.B. Singh has created maps of shakti temples of Kashi. He has described the cosmological positions and their meanings. It was a great sense of sacred formation of building temples. The Cosmogony associated with the shakti temples of Varanasi is very intricate replica of Ancient Indian cosmography. The Kashi Mandla is divided in 8 regions followed by Asthadevis of Kashi, which represents 8 directions. A year has 12 months which is followed by 96 Shaktis, along with 8 Bhairavas, 8 Dignals, 24 Vetals, they become 144. (8 ashtadevi+96 Shaktis+8 Bhairav+ 8 Dignals+24 Vetals = 144. Now, 12(Zodiac) × 12 Months = 144. This can also be observed in case of The Yoginis, as Kashi has 8 regions, 8 Directions.  $8 \times 8 = 64$ . The number of Temples and Deities of Shakti of Kashi are also in form of Cosmic numbers like 9 Durgas, 9 Gauris, 56 Vinayaka, 8 Matrakas etc.<sup>11</sup>

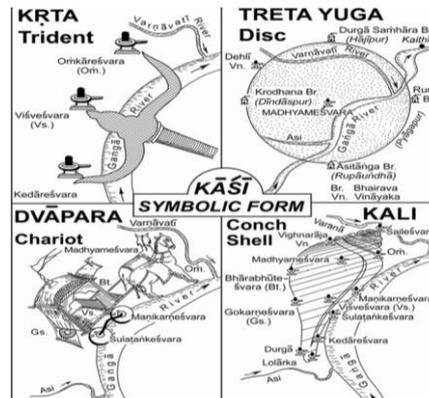


Fig-1. Image showing the Puranic depiction of Kashi's structure.

Source: Singh, R. P. B. (1994). Kashi: The symbolic Forms [English]. In *Sacred Geometry of Varanasi*.

So, we see that all the Shakti temples of Kashi are built in a certain cosmic structure.

### 4. Shakti worship: Origin and continuity

It is difficult to estimate exactly when the worship of Shakti started in the world. But it can be said with full confidence that it started from the beginning of the conscious world. Since everything has originated from some mother power, the conscious world must have also respected and honoured the power that gave birth.

In ancient Indian philosophy, the proof of Shakti worship is considered from the origin of the universe. The description of Devmatas (Aditi) in the Vedas, the terracotta idols of mother powers of the Indus Valley Civilization can be the initial evidence of Shakti Sadhak society.

Shakti has been discussed in detail in the *Sati Khand* of *Shiva Mahapurana*. Which includes Sati becoming the daughter of Daksha Prajapati, Daksha organizing a yagya, insulting Shiva by not inviting him to the yagya, as a result Sati giving up her life in the fire of the yagya, Shiva as Veerbhadra destroys everything, finally Shiva mourning with Sati's body, Vishnu destroying Sati's body and bringing Shiva to consciousness.<sup>12</sup>

Here comes the information regarding establishment of Shakti Peethas. Wherever the body parts or ornaments of Sati fallen, those places became as shaktipiths. Almost this same description of this episode is mentioned in the seventh Skandha of Srimaddevi Bhagwat Purana.<sup>13</sup> It is noteworthy that the number of Shakti Peethas has been mentioned differently in different texts. According to Srimaddevi Bhagavat Purana, their number is 108, according to Markandeya Purana (Devi Mahatmya/Durga Saptashati) and Tantra Chudamani, their number is 52, and in Skanda Purana their number is mentioned as 18.

In the third Parvati Khand of Shiva Maha Puran, there is a description of Goddess Parvati as wife of Lord Shiva.

The description of Shakti Mahatmya is found extensively in religious texts, which shows the growing influence of Shakti and Shakta Bhakti tradition. Uma Samhita of Shiva Mahapuran describes the contribution of Devi in the killing of demon brothers named Madhu and Kaitabh and killing of demons named Shumbh-Nishumbh.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, in Mahishasur Sangram, there is a story of the killing of Mahishasur by Devi. The demon Chanda-Munda of demon king Mahishasur, impressed by the beautiful form of Devi, describes the form of Devi to Mahishasur. Mahishasur sends a demon named Dhoomraaksha to Devi, but Dhoomraaksha is killed by Devi. Due to this, Devi got a popular name "Dhoomavati Devi". After this, Mahishasur sends Chanda-Munda and Raktabeej to Devi with a marriage proposal. But the marriage proposal was rejected by Devi. With this, a terrible war broke out, but ultimately Devi killed the demons. After that Mahishasura himself came forward for the battle. Seeing the beautiful form of the Goddess, Mahishasura was fascinated. He again proposed to the Goddess for marriage, but the Goddess killed Mahishasura in a fierce battle.<sup>15</sup> After this, the Goddess was named "**Mahishasuramardini**".

There is a similar story behind the Goddess's form and name behind "Durga". In ancient times, a demon named Durgam had created terror in the entire universe in the form of King Ruru's son. Durgam imprisoned all the four Vedas, due to his terror, hunger, famine and terrible tragedy spread in the universe. Then the humans pleaded to the Goddess and asked for welfare. Hearing the plight and suffering of the humans, the Goddess started crying fiercely. Here her "Shatakshi" and "Shakambhari" forms are born. Shatakshi means the Goddess with hundred eyes, who created all the oceans, rivers etc. by crying with the help of her hundred eyes. After this, the Goddess manifested all the vegetation in the form of Shakambhari. Which brought welfare to the creation. After this, the Goddess fought a fierce war against the demon Durgam for the liberation of the Vedas. In which Durgam was killed. After this, Goddess Shakti became famous in the world as Durga. During the Durgam war, the "ten Vidyas" originated from the body of Goddess Shakti. Which are as follows,

1. Kali,
2. Tara,
3. Chinnamasta,
4. Srividya,
5. Bhuvaneshwari,
6. Bhairavi,
7. Bagla,
8. Dhruma,
9. Tripusundari,
10. Matangi.<sup>16</sup>

Almost similar description of the above mention events is found in Srimaddevi Bhagwat Purana.<sup>17</sup> The same incident is described in the Devimahatmya/Durgasaptshati section of Markandeya Purana.<sup>18</sup>

#### ❖ **Beginning of Shakti worship:**

Shakti fought wars for the welfare of the people on many occasions. Devi Mahatmya was established as the supreme power of the universe. As a result, the tradition of worshipping Devi developed.

In Uma Samhita of Shiv Maha Purana, Devi herself has said that, just like a cow gets restless on seeing its calf, I also get restless on seeing my devotees. Devi further says that devotees should not have any kind of fear as long as I am around. The Goddess further says that for the welfare of the universe, I will always protect the universe by killing the demons."<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, in Shlokas 7, 8, 9, 10, Chapter 51, Uma Samhita, three ways have been mentioned for the worship of Shakti:

1. Gyanyoga,
2. Kriyayoga,
3. Bhaktiyoga.

For its description, in Shloka 10, it has been said that, Bhakti will arise from Karma, Gyan (Wisdom) will arise from Bhakti(devotion) and the path of liberation will be paved with knowledge.<sup>20</sup> This explanation of Shakti worship matches the teachings of Gita.

❖ **Importance of temple and idol in Shakti worship:**

Installing the idol of Shakti in holy cities brings immense merit. In this context it is said that the idol of the Goddess should be established by devotees in holy cities, which include Varanasi, Kurukshetra, Prayag, Pushkar, Gangatar, Samudratat(seashore), Naimisharanya, Amarkantak, Shriparvat, Gokarna, Gyanparvat, Mathura, Ayodhya, Dwarka etc. And establishing a temple brings immense virtue. Apart from this, it is also said that, by just thinking of building a temple of Goddess Shakti, a person attains heaven and happiness along with his family.<sup>21</sup>

❖ **Commencement and significance of Navratri fast:**

The evidence of fast related to Shakti worship is described in Devimahatmya/Durga Saptashati of Markandeya Purana. According to this, by observing Navratri fast, Surath, son of King Virath, regained his kingdom. For the worship of Navratri, provision has been made for fasting by worshippers in Sharad Navratri and Chaitra (Basant) Navratri. (Sloka 5-7, Chapter 26, Skandha 3, Shrimaddevi Bhagavat purana)

❖ **Significance of Kanya Pujan:**

Kanya Pujan is an important part of Navratri worship. In this context, it is said that, a one-year old girl should not be worshipped. Worship of different girls should be done for 9 days. Respectively;

**Table- 1.** Age of Kanya and their forms for Kanya Worship in Navratri.<sup>22</sup>

Days	Age	Forms
First day	2 years old girl	Kumari form,
Second day	3 years old girl	Trimurti form,
Third day	4 years old girl	Kalyani form,
Fourth day	5 years old girl	Rohini form,
Fifth day	6 years old girl	Kalika form,
Sixth day	7 years old girl	Chandika form,
Seventh day	8 years old girl	Shambhavi form,
Eighth day	9 years old girl	Durga form,
Ninth day	10 years old girl	Subhadra form

Thus, it is clear that in Kanya Pujan, a girl below one year of age and a girl above 10 years of age cannot be worshipped. One girl should be worshipped every day during the 9 days of Navratri, otherwise 9 girls should be worshipped every day. Devotees can also worship 9 girls on the last day of Navratri.

**5. Kashi and Shakti Worship: As a significant center**

Kashi has been a great religious-cultural center since ancient times. Kashi, the cultural capital of India and Hinduism, is complete in itself. Shakti Devi arrived in this city along with Shiva. The devotional tradition of Kashi included Shakti along with Shiva in the highest devotional tradition and established Kashi as a great center of Shakti worship.

Initially the feminine power of nature was Prakriti, and the masculine power of nature was Purusha, later Shakti acquired some new identities like Iccha-Shakti: power of deep consciousness, **Sthana-Shakti**: nature and power of various places, **Vak-Shakti**: power of words, **Kriya-Shakti**: power of rituals.<sup>23</sup>

**Table- 2.** According to Kashi-Khand, there are total 324 named Shakti goddess forms. Which have been organized into different groups.

Sr. No.	Group of Goddess	Total No.
1.	Shakti	96
2.	Kshetra Rakshikas	8
3.	Nav Durgas	9
4.	Gauris	12
5.	Yoginis	64
6.	Matrikas	12
7.	Chandis	9
8.	Kshetra Devis	41
9.	Panchkroshi Route Devis	12
10.	Independent Devis	12
11.	Folk Goddesses	42

The 324 forms of the goddesses mentioned above are related.<sup>24</sup>

A similar description has been given by Diana L. Eck, who also divided the Shakti goddesses of Kashi in the following manner;

- |                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| 1. Yoginis (Sorceresses),        | 2. Yakshis (tree spirits),                    |
| 3. Matrakas (mothers goddesses), | 4. Vetals (vampires),                         |
| 5. Shaktis (powers),             | 6. The Gauris (White goddesses) <sup>25</sup> |

❖ **Religious Pilgrimages Related to Shakti:**

Many pilgrimages related to Shakti worship are organized in Kashi, which are clearly described in the *Kashi-khanda of Skanda Purana*.

❖ **Navdurga/Navchandi Yatra:**

"*Navamyamathavasthamiyam Chandiyatra Shubhavah*" - Linga Purana.

This means that Navchandi Yatra should start on every Navami. In this Yatra, the devotee should chant 9 names of Maa Durga. This is mentioned in 100 Shloka, Chapter 76, *Kashi Khand*.<sup>26</sup>

❖ **Navgauri Yatra:**

"*Athaam Paramam Pravakshayami Gauritramanuttamam, Shuklapakshatriyam Yatrim Vishvagridda*"

This means that Navgauri Yatra is supreme and it should start on the Tiritiya of Shukla Paksha.<sup>27</sup>

❖ **Panchkoshi Yatra:**

Panchkoshi Yatra is also incomplete without Goddess Durga.

"*Jai Durga! Mahadevi! Jai Kashinivasini!*

*Kshetravighnahare! Devi! Punardarshanmastu Te!"*

It means O Mahadevi Durga, victory to you, victory to the residents of Kashi, the destroyer of all the sorrows of this region, we pray to you that we may get your darshan again. The pilgrims move forward while chanting this mantra. The Panchkoshi Yatra passes near the temple located at Durgakund.<sup>28</sup> In the journey of 56 Vinayakas also, it passes through the Durgavinayak temple located in the premises of the Durgakund temple.

❖ **Chatushashthi Yatra:**

This journey is related to the journey of 64 *Yoginis*. This journey starts at Chaushatthi Ghat.<sup>29</sup>

❖ **Trikon Yatra:**

In this journey, the worship is done by taking bath in the kund of the three major Durga temples of Kashi. The worship is done by taking bath in the water kund (now extinct) of *Durgakund*, *Lakshmikund* and *Bageshwari temple* located at Jaitpura. All three are located in three different areas of Kashi.<sup>30</sup>

❖ **Annual Shringarotsav:**

In various temples of Kashi, there is a ritual of complete decoration, adornment, celebration and special worship of the deities. In this sequence, the decoration of Annapurna Mata temple is done on Falgun Shukla Ekadashi. Dhumavati Devi, *Dhoopchandi* is decorated on Chaitra Shukla Ekadashi.<sup>31</sup> On the 6th day of Janmashtami, Shringar Mahotsav is organized in Durgakund temple.

❖ **Annakoot Mahotsav:**

Annakoot Mahotsav is celebrated every year in various temples of Kashi. In this people usually donate food grains. But nowadays there is a trend of donating money instead of food grains. This practice is performed every year in Annapurna Mata Temple, Durgakund Temple etc. This practice is going on in the same form in other temples as well.

All the above worship methods, Shringar Mahotsav, Annakoot Mahotsav, religious pilgrimages, fasts and worships, make it clear that Kashi is an important center of Shakti worship.

In this context, we will discuss the major Shakti temples of Kashi ahead.

**6. Major Shakti temples and Devi deities of Kashi**

According to Kashi Khand, it has already been told that there were 324 Shakti Devi temples in Kashi, here we will discuss the major Devi temples of Kashi:

**Table -3. Navdurga temple of Kashi, Source: Tripathi, K. ed., (2008). KASHIKHANDA [PART ONE]. Varanasi: Academic, Research & Publication Institute, Sampurnanand Sanskrit University. pp. 36-37.**

Sr. No.	Name of Durga temple	location
1.	Shailputri Durga	Madhiyaghat, Varuna
2.	Brahmcharini Durga	Durgaghat, Panchganga
3.	Chandraghnata Durga	Chandraghanta Gali, Chauk (Formerly as Chandu ki Gali)
4.	Kushmanda Durga	Durgakund

5.	Skandmata Durga	Bulanala, Jaitpura(Bageshwari temple)
6.	Katyani Durga	in the Atmavireswar temple
7.	Kalratri Durga	Kalika Gali (as Kali mai)
8.	Maha Gauri Durga	Panchganga (as Annpurna)
9.	Siddheshwari Durga	Siddhmata Gali, Bulanala mahaal

Table-4. Navgauri Temple of Kashi, Source: Tripathi, K. ed., (2008). *KASHIKHANDA [PART ONE]*. Varanasi: Academic, Research & Publication Institute, Sampurnanand Sanskrit University. pp. 30-31.

Name of Gauris	Location
Mukhnirmailaka Gauri	Gaighat
Jyestha Gauri	Karnaghanta mahaal, Jyeshtheswar.
Saubhagya Gauri	In the temple of Vishwanth ji.
Shringar Gauri	Vishveshwar Temple
Vishalakshi Gauri	Mirghat near Manikarnika
Latila Gauri	Lalita ghat
Bhavani Gauri	Kalika gali, Shukreshwar temple
Mangla Gauri	Ghabhastishwar temple, Panchganga Ghat
Mahalakshmi Gauri	Lakshmikund, Prasad mahaal

The Navdurga temple of Kashi represents the nine forms of Durga Devi. Similarly, the Navgauri temples represents the Nine forms of Goddess Parvati.

❖ **Other significant Devi temples of Kashi**

• **Nav-adhishtatri devi temple**

The new presiding deities of Kashi were established, 8 in 8 directions and one in the middle. These goddesses were established to protect the Avimuktेश्वर area (Kashi). Whose names respectively: 1. Shatanetra 2. Sahastrasya 3. Ayutabhujā 4. Ashwarudha 5. Gajasya 6. Tvarita 7. Shavvahini 8. Vishwagauri 9. Saubhagyagauri.<sup>32</sup>

• **Sheetla Devi Temple**

Sheetla Mata Mandir is situated on Sheetla Ghat. Sheetla Mata is associated with Small Pox fever. Worship of Sheetla Mata is a rural product. She is a *Matrika Devi*. Worship of Sheetla Devi is popular in Banaras and its surrounding areas.<sup>33</sup>

• **Vishalakshi Temple**

Vishalakshi Mata Mandir is the most sacred and important temple of Kashi. The eye/earring of Mata Sati fell here, due to which it was established as a famous Shakti Pith. According to Devi Bhagwat Purana, it was the first among the 108 Shakti Piths. Vishalakshi literally means Wide-Eyed Goddess. Which matches the names *Shatakshi*, *Meenakshi (Madurai)*, *Kamakshi (Kanchi)*, *Virupakshi* etc. Vishalakshi Temple holds great importance for South Indian devotees. This temple is maintained and constructed by *Nattukottai Nagarathar*, a business community of Tamil Nadu. This temple is located near Manikarnika Ghat and Vishwanath Temple.<sup>34</sup>

• **Annpurna Temple**

Annpurna is near the famous Vishwanath temple. Annapurna Devi is identified with the Goddess of Food and Nourishment. According to the mythological stories related to Annapurna in Kashi, when sage *Vyas* was about to curse Kashi due to hunger, Shiva and Parvati themselves fed him in human form. Annapurna is called the queen of Kashi and the mother of all three worlds. Annapurna temple is an important pilgrimage for Kashi and Shakti devotees.<sup>35</sup>

• **Durga Kund Temple**

The story of Durgakund temple is based on a mythological incident, which is related to the marriage of *Shashikala*, daughter of King *Subahu* of Kashi, with a prince named *Sudarshan*. There was a war between Sudarshan and Yudhajit over Shashikala, but Mother Bhagwati fought on behalf of Sudarshan and Sudarshan emerged victorious, Shashikala and Sudarshan got married. King Subahu built a Durga temple in Kashi, and Sudarshan built a Durga temple in Ayodhya. Goddess Durga blessed Subahu that she will never leave Kashi and will stay here for the welfare of Kashi.<sup>36</sup>

- **Sankata Mata Temple**

Sankata Devi means "Goddess of dangers" the goddess who removes dangers for her devotees. In mythology she is called *Vikata Matrika*, "fierce mother". There is no clear evidence of her origin, but she is very popular locally. Devotees observe *Sankata-Vrat* which is observed on Fridays to worship Sankata Devi.<sup>37</sup>

- **Chausanth Yogini temple**

As secondary powers, 64 forms of Shakti are described as *Chausath Yogini*. In the Shakta sect, these Yoginis are worshipped by *Vamacharis* (Tantrik worship). Detailed information about the origin of Yoginis and their powers is available in a book called *Yoginitantra*. Temples of 64 Yoginis are also established in Kashi. In which the temple of 60 Yoginis is located at Ranamahar, Chausathi Ghat. And others include *Varahi Mata Temple* at Manmandir, *Mayurika* Yogini at Lakshmikund, *Shuki* Yogini at Dhaudiyabir and *Kamakshi* Devi at Kamchha.<sup>38</sup>

Apart from the temples mentioned above, there are many other important Shakti temples in Kashi. Kashi is called the city of temples, and Shakti temples have an important role in making Banaras a city of temples.

### 7. Beginning of contemporary Durga Puja in Kashi

The Bengali origin of the present Durga Puja in Kashi began in the 1770s, when Bengali families settled in the areas around *Bengali-Tola*, *Madanpura*, *Jaitpura*, *Godowalia*. They started Durga Puja. Formed Durga Puja committees. In 1767 a Bengali family installed the idol of Durga, which miraculously people were not able to immerse at the end of Navratri. Later it was reinstalled in the same form. The popularity of Durga Puja increased due to the influence of many such miraculous events. Public Durga Puja was celebrated for the first time in Banaras in 1922.<sup>39</sup> Currently Durga Puja is celebrated with great pomp in the city of Banaras during Sharadiya Navratri. People worship Goddess Durga with full enthusiasm and devotion. Many pandals and idols are installed all over the city. Many fairs are organized.

Therefore, at present the prevalence of Shakti Puja and Durga Puja is increasing in Banaras.

### 8. Cultural and Religious Significance of Shakti Upasana in Kashi

Shakti worship is deeply embedded in the folk culture of Banaras in various forms. There is a saying in Banaras that "*Saat Vaar, Nau Tyohar*" which means that there are 7 days in a week and there are 9 festivals to celebrate. This shows the rich culture, festivals, religious rituals and diversity of Banaras. "It would not be inappropriate if Banaras is called a huge museum of various religions."

In classical dance, Shiv-Shakti Aradhana, Ganga Avtaar, Mahishasuramardini, Kali, Tandava, etc. are shown. In folk singing, Pachara, Birha are sung as Devi songs. Many popular songs like

*"Vyakula Nayanwa, Chahila Darshanwa,  
Manwa Lagal Ho, Maaiya Binti Hamar"*<sup>40</sup> have been sung.

Apart from this, Karaha is very popular in worship (Bageshwari Temple, Jaitpura).

Thus, we see that the importance of Shakti worship is not only religious but also cultural.

**Conclusion:** Now finally it is concluded that Kashi is the significant centre of Shakti worship. Shakti worship has a special significance in Kashi, in the city of Shiva. Shakti worship is an integral subject of the various religious-cultural traditions of Kashi. This tradition has been going on since ancient times, and will continue uninterrupted in this manner till time immemorial.

The glory of Devi worship flows in Kashi's many Shakti temples, Puranas, scriptures, religious rituals, local-cultural and research works. If Kashi is Shiva's home, then Shakti is the housewife in this house and his worshippers are his children.

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## Impact of Migration on the Culture of Kashi through Ages

Vikas Kumar\*

### Abstract

*The great Kashi is regarded as one of the oldest surviving culture of the world. The Kashi bears its name from Rigveda, the place of light which is still celebrated as festival of light. Kashi is known for its glorious past and splendid present. The Kashi is ever living cultural capital of India, known for its cultural uniqueness and myriad beauty tenet. Many factors have shaped the cultural legacy of Kashi making apart from other cities. In those factors migration stands apart and this migration has an effective affect on the cultural journey of Kashi. The researcher would divide this migration process into different parts starting from Lord Shiva to present day PM Narendra Modi, their advent and cultural impact. Kashi has come through many steps of migration, each step has added something unique to the culture of Kashi. Kashi is unique blending of mixed culture making it laboratory of cultural experiment. Kashi has blessings of myriad cultural facets but it is known mainly for the abode of Mahadeva, the popular chanting by people is 'हर हर महादेव'. The researcher will travel the whole journey from Rigveda to present day and will also evaluate the impact of migration on the Culture of Kashi.*

**Keywords :-** Migration, Kashi, ages, culture, medieval period, mahajanapada, centre of learning, Vishwanath temple, Ganga river, dimensions

**Rationale of the Study :-** This study aims to find out about the impact of migration on the Culture of Kashi. This research will find a common connection between migration and cultural changes. Cultural shaping of Kashi attributes many factors, this study will correlate it to migration as an important factor. Cultural survey will be able to find out undeciphered cultural layers of Kashi.

**Methodology :-** This study will use the historical analysis method to reach its objectives. It is accompanied by survey method and content analysis.

**Introduction :-** Migration may be summarised as a phenomenon of changing places either temporary or permanent in search of food, shelter or occupation. People used to travel from one place to another. Kashi has also witnessed such type of travellers. Making of Kashi had gone through such type of processes. At the time of 6th century BCE Kashi was regarded as one of the stronger Mahajanapadas among sixteen Mahajanapadas. Kashi is regarded as synonymous of cultural heritage.<sup>1</sup> About commenting on Kashi an American author **Mark Twain** has rightly said that 'Kashi is older than history'.<sup>2</sup> Nowadays it is known as Varanasi or Banaras, situated in Uttar Pradesh of India.<sup>3</sup> From the centuries the city had attracted many scholars, poets, travellers, religious figures, leaders etc. One of such prominent figure was Urdu poet **Mirza Ghalib**, who mentions about uniqueness of this great Kashi, not only this but he also wish to be native of Banaras rather than Delhi.<sup>4</sup> French historian and Indologist **Alain Danielou** has mentioned much more about cultural beauty of Kashi. He regarded Kashi as the knowledge capital of ancient India and cultural centre of North India. In ancient India some places gained unique position in the field of *SHIKSHA-DIKSHA*, Kashi was one of them except Taxila, Nalanda, Mithila etc. Kashi may be regarded as pioneer in Hindu scriptures tradition.<sup>5</sup>

The journey of any place can't be secluded, there are multifactor impact on the cultural shaping of a place and migration is one of them. The Kashi has witnessed many patterns of migration from ancient times to till date. Each migration has added something special to Kashi. Kashi is known for abode of Lord Shiva and it has become synonymous of Kashi. Earlier Lord Shiva used to reside in the Himalayan region but due to worldly reasons he decided to be in Kashi.<sup>6</sup> In *Skanda Purana* it is mentioned about migration of Lord Shiva from Himalayan region to Kashi. This migration is still impacting on the Culture of Kashi. Due to this millions of people visit Kashi for Vishwanath temple and related Hindu rituals. Banaras is known for its cultural gravity, each ritual associated with religious and cultural reasons.<sup>7</sup> Banaras is famous for its beautiful ghats and temples. Each ghat and temple has its own reason of formation. Banaras is synonymous with the Lieden city of Europe for its centuries old cultural analogy. Great saints, poets, writers, preachers, monks, sages etc are directly associated with Banaras and its unique culture. Some of the prominent names can be like Tulsidas, Kabirdas, Ravidas etc who migrated to Kashi and enriched the

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culture of Kashi. The famous holy book of Hindu religion *RAMACHARITAMANAS* was penned down at the soils of Kashi.<sup>8</sup> Tulsidas spent major period of his life at Kashi, this Kashi influenced him and he influenced Kashi in the same manner and quantum. Kashi has witnessed the penning down of this great epic. Tulsidas has built *SANKATMOCHAN MANDIR* in the memory of Lord Ram and Hanuman. This temple has also enriched the great culture of Kashi. Kabir and his *DOHAS* has also influenced the lifestyle, temperament, thinking and other aspects of life on the Culture of Kashi. Imprint may be seen everywhere of Kabirdas's thoughts on the people of Kashi. One of such Saint were Ravidas whose memorial is at Sir Govardhanpur in Varanasi.<sup>9</sup> His teachings are also in the Guru Granthsahib of Sikh religion. In this way this Kashi is also associated with Sikhism, that makes Kashi a place of all religion. Although Kashi bears its roots from Brahmnic tradition but it accepts all sects and it makes unique to the Kashi.

At the time of 8th century Kashi became the centre of learning.<sup>10</sup> Kashi attracted many scholars from across the whole south Asian sub-continent for enlightenment. This migration also paved the way of transforming Kashi into epicenter of cultural heritage. The author of *ASHTADHYAYI*, Panini and propagator of *ADVAIT* philosophy Shankaracharya are also associated deeply with Kashi.<sup>11</sup> At the same time it started becoming the centre of Hindu revival and gained prominency due to abode of Lord Shiva one from trinity Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh. Acharyas of Kashi used to teach their disciples in Gurukulas, a system known for teacher-student relationship.<sup>12</sup> Kashi became the centre of Gurukul system in northern India. Due to this fame Amer King Sawai Jai Singh established cosmos observatory at Kashi. In medicine the famous Surgeon Sushrut was also associated with Kashi, that lead to him in the service of humanity. Later on Banaras pioneered in Sanskrit education that became the symbol of Kashi. Banaras is situated on the banks of holy Ganga that attract millions of devotees to perform Hindu rituals.<sup>13</sup> Their coming to Varanasi enrich the culture of Kashi and strengthen Hindu cultures. Banaras attracts millions of tourists from national and international due to its unique culture heritage. Migratory people coming to Varanasi add on something special to the culture of Kashi while going back. On the occasion of festivals and other rituals people visit Kashi to get purified themselves. Kashi is witnessing such types of migration from time immemorial due to relation with Brahmnic tradition. Kashi is to be believed as a place of salvation, people wish to take their last breath at Kashi to attain *MOKSHA*. In the area of Assi in Kashi there is found *MUMUKSHU BHAWAN* where people stay to take their last breath.<sup>14</sup> Old persons have lots of experiences that causes enriching of cultural heritage to Kashi. Banaras is known for its funeral pyres and crematorium, the famous shamshans are Manikarnika ghat and Harischandra ghat. Due to association with Hindu culture people wish to be cremated at these ghats to attain *MOKSHA* and journey to heaven. It is so famous that people have to wait in queue to cremate their beloved ones. Philosophically it contributes about rebirth and doing good deeds while on earth. People coming for these rituals make Kashi auspicious.<sup>15</sup>

Kashi was going well with all its prosperity, people were happy under Kashi kingdom. But especially in the medieval period many attacks were done to destroy the old heritage of Banaras. Kashi suffered heavy losses during these attacks especially on cultural front. It seems that there was deliberate efforts to wipe out long standing Hindu cultures. One of such effort was made in the 1194 CE by Qutub-din-Aibak who try to destroy the eternal culture but somehow it get survived. In the reign of Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq this Kashi witnessed surge again, many scholars migrated to Kashi and started contributing.<sup>16</sup> Again Kashi felt setback in the reign of Feroz Shah Tughlaq and Sikander Lodi, who ordered destruction of temples and cultures. Again Kashi saw a big loss in respect of cultural front that took a longer time to stand again. During the reig of Akbar Kashi felt mixed experience more positive and less negative. Although in 1567 CE Akbar conquered Kashi but he didn't disturb Kashi and maintained the basic ethos of Kashi. The heavy damage to Kashi was done by his successor Aurangazeb, not only he plundered but destroyed many important temples of Kashi including Vishwanath temple. The reign of Aurangazeb is remembered as heavy blow to Kashi's great culture. The medieval period of India for Kashi does not bear good signs, it is full of sorrow and transient loss of culture. But, due to having deep rooted cultural intricacies Kashi survives every time and add something new to her cultural heritage. So, these coming to Kashi contributed negatively on the cultural front of Kashi.<sup>17</sup>

Kashi has not witnessed only setback but good fortune has also been recorded in the name of Kashi. Many scholars, rulers, patrons, saints, sages etc chose Kashi for revival purposes and they did whatever was

possible. Gahadavalas of Kannauj ruled in parts of UP and Bihar, they made centre at Banaras.<sup>18</sup> They tried to revive it upto their ancient glory. They returned back the prestige of Kashi. Migration of Ahilyabai from Madhyaprant to Kashi maybe regarded as revival of Vishwanath temple and Kashi, she repaired the damaged temple in the odd hour. This temple was brutally damaged by Aurangazeb to wipe out Hindu culture but Ahilyabai made it stand again. Another warrior Ranjit Singh offered gold to be plated at the top of the temple that raised the prestige and morale of the devotees. These were not native of Kashi but they did it wholeheartedly. In this way this migration impacted positively to Kashi.<sup>19</sup>

During the time of British period Kashi also witnessed many changes. In the year 1791 CE, Jonathan Duncan established *SANSKRIT PATHSHALA* for the training of officials. Banaras was part of Bengal presidency, so Britishers focus special attention on it. This time Kashi felt a new sign of culture coming from west.<sup>20</sup> Kashi assimilated and adopted these changes in it. In the same time many educational institutions were established by Britishers in their own medium that made Kashi to smell new fragrance of culture. In the other spheres of life these changes also occurred especially in the administration field. Migration of two persons need special mention and those are Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya and Annie Besant, they established educational institutions catering cultural and modern education. Annie Besant from Irish origin chose Kashi as her workplace. Malviya ji originally belongs to Allahabad but he founded Banaras Hindu University at Varanasi.<sup>21</sup> Annie Besant founded Hindu School for upliftment of society. Migration of these two stalwarts to Kashi continued the tradition of educational legacy of Kashi.

So, my research clearly shows a pattern between migration and impact on culture. This study may be base for further researches. Making of Kashi had long and extensive process that may be explored in a newer dimension like migration.

#### Conclusion:-

Kashi is known as the oldest living city of the world. From ancient to present time it has been shaped by many factors, migration is one of them. Migration has impacted the basic essence of Kashi through the ages. From the first migration of Lord Shiva to till now it is being shaped continuously by this. At present time it is again in news due to electoral reasons, people are coming and wish to be native of Banaras. Kashi used to be centre of learning through the ages, so people get attracted easily. Nowadays Varanasi is being encircled by the migrants who are adding something unique to Kashi. Rich culture act as a pull factor for Kashi, so millions of tourists chose Kashi to visit at least one time. Kashi may be the case study for cultural study.

#### Notes:-

1. Sukul, Kubernath(1977), Glory of Varanasi, Bihar Rashtrabhasha Parishad, Patna.
2. Statement by an American author shows the glory transnationally.
3. Due to situation between Varuna and Assi hence called Varanasi.
4. Prominent Urdu poet(शायर) whose quotes matters a lot.
5. Altekar, A.S.(1944) Education in Ancient India, Nand Kishor and Bros, Banaras.
6. This may be referenced from Skanda Purana.
7. Sukul(1977) op.cit. p-21.
8. Sukul, Kuber Nath(1974) Varanasi Down the Ages, Varanasi Bhargava Bhashan Prakashan, Patna.
9. It attracts thousands of tourists every year especially from Punjab region.
10. Mookherjee, R.K.(1957) Ancient Indian Education, Macmillan, Bombay.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Diana, L. Eck(1983) Benaras: The City of Lights, Columbia University Press.
14. Havell, Ernest Binfield(1905) Benares the Sacred City, Blackie & Sons Ltd, London.
15. Sukul(1974) op.cit Pp-33-37.
16. Motichand(1962/1985), Kashi Ka Itihas, Vishwavidyalaya Prakashan, 2edition.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Gold plated dome is still visible.
20. Motichand(1985), op.cit.
21. Sundaram, V.A.(1935) Benaras Hindu University, R. P., Banaras.



## **Bodhisattva Sculpture found from the Excavation at Sarnath in 2014 : with context of Kashi Region**

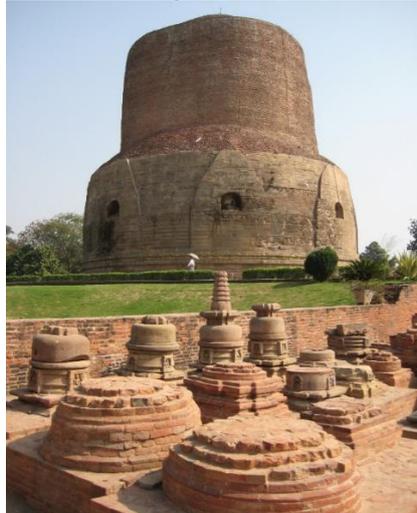
**Vivek Shukla\***

Sarnath, situated in Varanasi approximately 8 to 9 Km far from cant Railway station. This place has an important place in world history as well as in Buddhism because, Lord Gautama Buddha gave his first sermon at the place. Buddhists kept deep regard for the place. In Buddhism Sarnath is also known as Rishipattan or Mrigdaav



**Fig.-1 Dhamek Stupa viewed by the earlier explorers-Courtesy ASI**

Rishipattan or Mrigdaav: in Buddha scripture Mahavastu has a great importance a record number of sages around 500 were living at the place and getting Nirvana and due to this reason this place is also known as Rishipattan.<sup>1</sup> Mrigadaav got its name because in a story a forest were full of Deer roaming here and there freely and it was prohibited to kill them just because an order was passed by king of Varanasi.



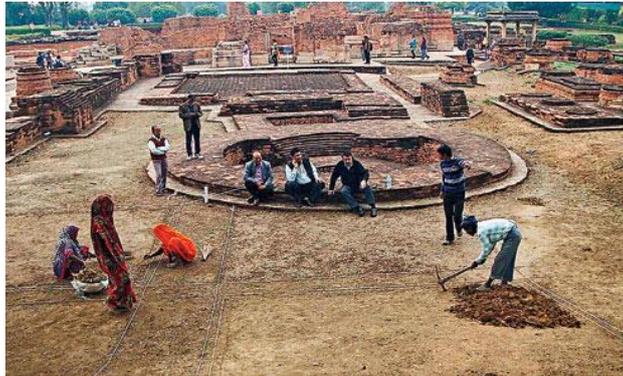
**Fig.-2 Excavated area in front of Dhamek Stupa, Sarnath (Source : Author)**

In medieval period the name of this place is also written as Dharma-chakra or Sadharmachakrapravarta-vihar. Its present or modern name is derived from Sarnath which is also a name of Lord Shiva. From the very outset Sarnath has been the center of attraction for many scholars, excavationists and Historians.<sup>2</sup> First of all in 1794 Mr. Jonathan Duncon gave a description of two boxes

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found from Sarnath by Babu Jagat Singh, who was the chief of the court of King Chet Singh of Varanasi. Chet Singh has destroyed Dharmarajika Stupa and built a market of his name from bricks and stones found in the city. In 1815 AD, Colonel C. Mackengy was the first person who started archaeological excavation but unfortunately he didn't sufficient result out of it. In 1935-36 this great work of excavation was carried forward by Archaeological survey of India. General Alexander Cunningham, who has completed the excavation and described about the place in his annual report of Archaeological survey department.<sup>3</sup> His work was mainly focused on Dhamek, Dharmrajika and Chaukhanndi Stupa. At Sarnath excavation work during 1851 to 1853 has been carried by Morkham Kitto.

In 1865 AD, C. Hone also did some excavation but he also didn't get any useful result through the excavation. In the year 1904-05 AD, F.Oertel has started excavation work in the field of ancient Mrigadaw from where he discovered Moolgandhkuti-Vihar that is statue of Bodhisattva, in the position of Dharmachakra Pravartan. In 1907-08 Sir John Marshall has started excavation with Sten Konow, W.H. Nicholas, Dayaram Sahni, and B.B Chakravarty.<sup>4</sup> He found 3 Mahavihar of post Kushana. These Mahaviharas use to be home for many of Buddhists. For the preservation of the archaeological heritage of Sarnath an archaeological museum was open in 1904.<sup>5</sup> Gaj Prishthakar Chaitya of post Maurya region was discovered by H. Hergrives in 1914-15. In 1921-22 Path and building between Dhammekh stup and main temple came to existence when Dayaram Sahini did excavation at Sarnath.<sup>6</sup> The most recent excavation conducted at the site under the direction of B.R. Mani and Ajay Srivastava of the Archaeological Survey of India has pushed back the antiquity of the material remains at the site to about one-and-a-half centuries. Needless to mention that the Identification of Sarnath as the place of the first Serman of Buddha is significant for the history of Sarnath which archaeological and religious importance is increasing till the date.



**Excavation at Sarnath (2014) Courtesy-ASI**

After the enlightenment at Bodhgaya, Buddha had decided that he will give preaching to his 5 disciple at Sarnath. His preaching is known as Dharmchakrapravartan.<sup>7</sup>



**Excavation at Sarnath (2014) Bodhisattva Sculpture Courtesy ASI**

**Dharmchakrapravartan:**

The concept of Dharmchakrapravartan is talk about truth of live.<sup>8</sup> What is reality of this illusionary world? Gautam Bhuddha has talked about four truths in his sermon on truth which are following:

1. World is full of pain and sorrow
2. Reason of pain and sorrow are sex and desires
3. Pain and sorrow can be annihilated
4. Pain and sorrow can be overcome by following Ashtangikamarga

Figures and Tables

These noble eightfold path area

- |                    |                        |
|--------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Right View      | 5. Right livelihood    |
| 2. Right intention | 6. Right effort        |
| 3. Right Speech    | 7. Right mindfulness   |
| 4. Right action    | 8. Right Concentration |

In his preaching of livelihood Bhudha talked about a third way that is middle.<sup>9</sup> He told that one should neither lament nor to keep too calm of oneself. His first sermon was full of solution of the problem of this worldly world and anxiety.<sup>10</sup> After the preach of Gautam Buddha Sarnath became the center of knowledge in that period and from the date continuously carry forward that great tradition, Sarnath is still a knowledge of center for all human being but Buddhist treat this place most holiest in the world.<sup>11</sup> In Sarnath when Buddha formed an association for religious speech the two son of an aristocrat from Varanasi became Bhuddha's disciple with their 54 other friends. Buddha's first association was formed by his 5 monks whom he sent to different direction for deliver sermons so that people live far from the Sarnath can have the massage of Lord Buddha.<sup>12</sup> After the death or Mahaparinirvana of Lord Buddha, 200 years later huge development took place in Sarnath in the reign of Ashoka. Lots of archaeological evidences of Ashoka's reign are still available in Sarnath.<sup>13</sup> Inscription on the pillar says about stopping the disintegration of Buddhist Association.<sup>14</sup> In Buddhist literature this inscription consider as an order of Lord Buddha which says "Whosoever will cause the disintegration, even if the monk will be expelled act of Association".

In sarnath the religious evidence of Shunga Dynasty is not found except one dozen of Vedika stabh which were supposed to be built in around 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. with the beginning of Kushanas in north India.<sup>15</sup> In the reign of Kushanas when religion and culture were revival and Mathura became the center of this revival then Sarnath too was not uninfluenced many new vihara of Buddhism were made here. In reign of king Kanishka, some monk from Mathura had established a sculpture of Bodhisattva with an umbrella on top made of Redstone in Sarnath.<sup>16</sup>

In the period of Kanishka two kings of Varanasi also helped in the establishment of the statue and in the result the name of both of the kings inscribed on a statue.<sup>17</sup> In Gupta's period Sarnath was at the top of its prosperity, most beautiful statue were built, and Sarnath became more popular.<sup>18</sup> In the period of Chandragupta II (376-414) famous Chinese traveler Fa-hien visited Sarnath and saw the four Stupas and two Viharas.<sup>19</sup> In Sarnath on a statue of Buddha an inscription reveal that the statue was donated by Kumargupta I (414-55 A.D).<sup>20</sup>

During the reign of Harshvardhan, Chinese traveler Hiven-Tsang visited Sarnath and described its beauty in his famous book.<sup>21</sup>

**Conclusion:**

This paper have been talked about Bodhisattva sculpture found from the Excavation at Sarnath in 2014 . This paper has been also talk about the life of Gautam Buddha from Dharmchakrapravartan to Mahaparinirvana. Instead of archaeology only this paper is also talked about history related to Sarnath. In the archaeological sites in Kashi.Sarnath has its own importance. Sarnath is not only a holy place for Buddhist it is also a one of cultural and archaeological heritages of high religious importance. Art has always played an important role in reconstructing of history especially the social life of ancient times. There are various forms of art which were presented in ancient India- Painting, Sculptures, Terracotta, Plaques and motifs etc. Artist work according to the social formation of the given time period of History but these dynamics can be changed according to economic changes in the society. Although there is various other factors which are responsible for changes in artist work like the new mode of production, in

the patron class and in socio-religious institutions and ideologies, which in their turn create new requirements and fresh opportunities for the emergence of new forms and content in art. However, art can also be classified on the basis of their medium. Different medium required different techniques and tools. Variations in the style resulted in regional Variation of art.

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# From Early Age to the Production of Wootz Steel in Varanasi (Kashi) Region: Some Observations

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Yogesh Raj\*\*

## Abstract

*"Iron has been playing a crucial role in human's day-to-day life. Today, we can say that it is the most exploited metal by man on earth. Historical and archaeological evidence testifies that for thousands of years, the Indian culture produced different iron artefacts in different parts of India. Varanasi (Kashi) region has been a prominent centre for producing such artefacts in northern India. Archaeological sites like Rajghat, Ramnagar, Agiabir, Latif Shah and Raipura yielded evidence to testify it. When Iron metallurgy gradually came to its peak then, iron craftsman refined their technology. They alloyed iron with carbon to produce the Wootz steel, creating the world-famous Damascus Swords and exporting them to the world. In this paper, a review approach was used, and we discussed why the Varanasi (Kashi) region was the prominent region for producing and using iron artefacts from the very beginning of the Iron Age in northern India. The research also addresses how ancient craftsmen gradually developed in this region and its connection with world iron technology; for this research, we reviewed worldwide published archaeological reports and papers."*

## Introduction

It is said that Varanasi is one of the oldest living cities in the world, proven by different literary and archaeological evidence. From the beginning of Indian history, it has been Religiously and Economically an important city in North India. The Atharva Veda Samhita, Mahaparinirvana Sutta, Digh Nikaya, and even Mahabharata mention it in the six prominent cities that existed in ancient times (Sukul, 1974; Tripathi, 2013). The ancient city Varanasi has been identified with the present site of Rajghat, which is situated on the confluence of the Ganga and Varuna. Due to its strategic location and hospitable nature, it has been socially, economically, and politically active throughout the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE (Tripathi, 2013; Uesugi, 2018). Economically it was one of the focal points in northern India, famous for silk cloths, ceramic industries, and metallurgical equipment.

We can understand the richness of the metallurgical industry by shreds of evidence of different metal objects brought to light by its satellite settlements like Aktha, Sarai Mohana, Ramnagar, Agiabir, Latif Shah, Anai etc. Iron metallurgy was the primary industry among the native's metallurgical industry, which allowed them to push for further development. They created different weaponry, agricultural tools, household objects, and medical equipment, such as surgical knives, swords, daggers, ploughs, sickles, etc. They improved their technology with time, experience, and keen observation and started making wrought iron which paved manufacturing of wootz steel.

Wootz Steel was a marvelous creation by our ancestors, and it was also known as "Hinduwani" in Arab countries (Jaikisha, 2009). Al-Beruni describes the manufacturing process of Wootz Steel. The periplus of the Eritrean sea states that Ktesias was presented two swords of Indian steel by the Malloi in Persia; Herodotus, the father of history, mentioned that the sharp arrowheads were used by the Indian soldiers who fought in the battle of Thermopylae in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC (Jaikishan, 2009). These references show us the demand for Indian iron in the world for manufacturing, from small surgery blades to swords of the tremendous warriors.

### Dates yielded by Excavated archaeological sites

Archaeological Sites	Yielded <sup>14</sup> C Dates
Rajghat (25°19'34.6"N; 83°02'07.9"E)	1100BCE - 800BCE
Aktha (25°21'45.0"N; 83°00'17.2"E)	1800 BCE-1450 BCE
Agiabir (25°13'52"N; 82°38'41"E)	1200 BCE
Anai (25°27'05"N; 82°44'20"E)	1100 BCE-700 BCE

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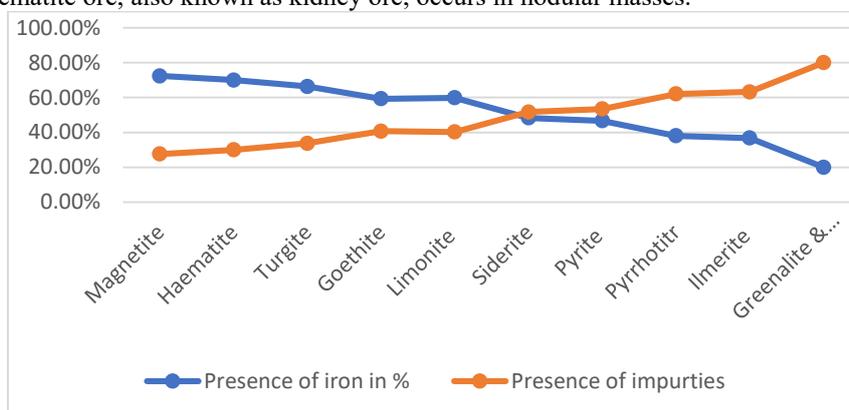
Raja-Nal-ka-Tila	1400 BCE-1300 BCE-1000 BCE
Ramnagar (25°16'29.8"N 83°01'25.9"E)	1780 BCE, 1190 BCE
Raipura (24°40'40"N; 82°58'20"E)	1700 BCE-800 BCE
Malhar	1800 BCE

**Iron working**

Extracting Iron metal from Iron ore is the main essence of iron metallurgy; we need iron ore, fuel for temperature, a working furnace (Tuyere, Bellows), and craftsmen or artisans for this process.

**Iron Ore**

An ‘Ore’ is a mineral or mineral aggregate containing precious metals, which occur in such quantity, grade, and chemical combination to make extraction commercially profitable. Iron ore in which iron metal is in abundant quantity. Local artisans preferred lower-quality iron ore because it was easy to break and extract metal at even lower temperatures (Upadhyay, 2024). Magnetite and Hematite are popular ores among us, but there are a few other ores also, such as Turgite, Goethite, Limonite, Siderite, Pyrite, Pyrrhotite, Ilmenite and Greenlit. Magnetite ore has magnetic properties and is also known as the black ore. Hematite ore, also known as kidney ore, occurs in nodular masses.



\*Iron Ore with the presence of iron metal (Chakrabarti-1992)

**Charcoal**

Heat generation is the crucial element of smelting, produced through burning charcoal. Charcoal was obtained by burning wood, mainly Katha, Sal, Sarai or Sakhu, and Tendu, by local artisans (Upadhyay, 2024). To cool that fire, they use sand or dust but not water; this method makes charcoal heavy and durable, lasting a long time (Upadhyay, 2024) comparatively.



Fig. 1: Iron Smelting Furnace, Raipura, Sonbhadra, Trench YI-11, (Upadhyay 2013).

**Furnace**

The furnace (kiln) is also called Bhatthi, Gar, or Kothi in the local language (Upadhyay, 2024), usually constructed under the shade of a hut or tree, and smithies stuck their tools under the roof (Verrier,

1942). There were different types of furnaces (Bowl Furnaces, Domed furnaces, shaft furnaces) in early times; they differed in physical form, but the basic principles of operation were the same for all primitive furnaces (Tripathi, 1998; Tiwari, 2010). Mainly, furnaces were vertical-conical, 80-90 cm high with a lower diameter of 25-30 cm and upper diameter of 12-15 cm, built with ordinary clay mixed with straws (Tripathi, 1998; Tiwari, 2010; Upadhyay, 2024; Jaikishan, 2009). There was a small opening at the bottom of the furnace for Tuyere. Furnaces were designed in such a way that they can generate enough temperature and conditions so that iron bloom can be extracted easily.



Fig. 2: Close-up view of iron smelting furnace showing tuyere hole, thick furnace wall and small smelting chamber Period II, Raipura, Sonbhadra. (Upadhyay 2013).

### Bellows

The bellows in folk talk, ‘two snakes that whisper in one hole,’ ‘two heads that speak with one voice saying ‘phusur phusur’ (Verrier, 1942). The pair of bellows are made side by side before the furnace, each working alternative. They were made of circular wooden shapes like a big bowl, with the top covered with animal skin, mainly goat (Verrier, 1942; Upadhyay, 2024). A hole was made on one side to attach bamboo tuyere, which carried the air blast to the furnace to produce fire when the skin cover was pressed mechanically.

### Tuyere

Tuyere is known as Naria or nari-thondi by local smiths (Agaria). It was cylindrical and built of ordinary clay mixed with fine straw or husk. The size varies from 30 to 50 inches in length with a diameter of 1-1.5 inches, depending upon the comfort of the artisan; it looks like a sun-baked pipe (Verrier, 1942; Upadhyay, 2024). Which connects the bellows with the furnace; it carries the air produced by the bellow.

### Smelting

The inception of the smithy was a religious ceremony because iron smelting was considered a sacred ritual. Agria prays to tribal gods Lohasur and Agiasur (Upadhyay, 2024; Verrier, 1942). During the day, artisans and their families visit the jungles to collect ore and wood for charcoal; with the sun going down, they begin smelting (Verrier, 1942). At first, fine broken charcoal filled up to 4 inches in the bottom pit of the furnace; above this, a tuyere was placed. After that, charcoal mixed with small iron ore pieces (smaller than an inch) filled up to the top of the furnace. With the chants of victory to Lohasur Baba! Agyasur, I rely on you; the stove was ignited through the tuyere hole. The Agria woman mounts the bellows, supports herself with a stick, or holds on to a cord suspended from the roof and begins to work. As the charcoal and ore get less into the furnace, anyone from the family refills it (Jaikisha, 2009; Upadhyay, 2009; Verrier, 1942). After the shift of 3 to 5 hours of work, the woman stopped, the bellows were removed, and the Tuyere was removed carefully. The blazing coals pour out in a red cascade, and then the man, with the help of sansi (tongs), lifts out the rough, spongy bloom of glowing semi-molten iron and carries it to the anvil. Where it was hammered heavily, and slag, which was still in a fusion state, was removed (Verrier, 1942).

### Wootz steel

One of the most significant material discoveries originated from the Indian subcontinent is Deccani wootz steel. Dr George Pearson first used the Term ‘Wootz’ on 11 June 1795 in a lecture at the Royal Society of London. It was coined by European trading traveller for steel, which was manufactured in Southern India; it was a quality steel manufactured by our ancestors (Jaikisha, 2009; Agasti & Pani,

2023). Wootz steel is an alloy of iron and carbon, and to prepare it, it was essential to control the carbon content in steel because the mechanical properties of steel are critically dependent on the carbon content (Balasubramaniam, 2020). Wootz steel was made through a crucible process, in which the carburization of wrought iron and melting was carried out inside a closed refractory crucible (Agasti & Pani, 2023). This refractory crucible was kept with two pieces of iron, one wood piece of *Cassia auriculata*, and green leaves of *Calotropis gigantea*, and the mouth of the crucible was sealed with clay (Agasti & Pani, 2023; Jaikisha, 2009). Depending on the size, three to four dozen of these sealed crucibles were placed in the furnace, and the stove bellows for 24 hours continuously. In between, crucibles were rotated with the help of a long pincer (Jaikisha, 2009). This lengthy process produces great quality wootz steel, exported from India to Syria, Persia, and other parts of the world. This Wootz steel was the staple source for making famous Damascus swords (Agasti & Pani, 2023).

#### **Damascus Sword**

The sword was the most helpful weapon in close combat; therefore, the terror and majesty of the sword were greater than those of the other weapons. The Damascus sword obtained its reputation due to its extraordinary mechanical strength, flexibility, incredibly sharp cutting edge, and typical surface structure (Balasubramaniam, 2020; Agasti & Pani, 2023). The Damascus sword got its name Damascus because of the specific watery/wavy pattern on its surface, not because it was made in Damascus city (Agasti & Pani, 2023). Prakash (2011) has mentioned that European blacksmiths have been trying to attain a Damascusine structure for at least the past centuries. Instead of succeeding, they developed the 'Pattern welding' technique, consisting of forge welding of steel rods and strips of carbon content and giving them several folds and twists, followed by repeated forge welding. This creates a beautiful pattern in black and white after the final heat treatment, polishing, and etching with organic and inorganic acids.

Quenching was a popular method that provided the Damascus swords's hardness, strength, and watery pattern. This hot wootz-steel sword was to quench into the water for a few seconds and then withdraw it so that the heat in the thicker edge (retained heat) could convert martensite into the tempered structure (Scott & Cleere, 1988; Balasubramaniam, 2020; Prakash, 2011). Sushruta and Varahamihir (1956) mentioned using alkaline sap and ash from banana trees to quench these blades briefly, followed by self-tempering. Thrusting the red-hot blade into the green trunk of the banana was another preferred method by the Indian artisans, where its alkaline sap was sufficient to quench the blade to martensite. Then, the dried sap acted as a heat insulator, helping temper the thin cutting edge by conducting heat from the thicker back part of the blade (Prakash, 2011).

#### **Conclusion**

As we discussed, Varanasi (Kashi) is a pretty old settlement. Excavation of different archaeological sites like Rajghat, Ramnagar, Anai, Raipura, Latif Shah, etc., in the city's periphery and the surrounding districts yielded evidence to testify. It has played an important role economically, socially and politically since then. Production of iron gives the required thrust to develop this region and make Varanasi a focal point for nearby settlements. Iron production has been developed from the copper smelting process in this region. As we know, the temperature required for copper smelting is lower than for iron smelting. Evidence suggests that iron ore was used as a flux material in the copper smelting process in the early phase of iron introduction. Gradually, with experiments and experience, smelters learned to maintain high temperatures in their furnaces to smelt iron easily. To make Wootz steel, it needs a high temperature for a long time; for this, smelters shrink their furnace size and make their wall thicker, and they even create a crucible for maintaining the high temperature for a long time. With this Wootz steel, early Damascus swords were made in southern India, but their production in other parts of India started when swords became popular.

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