

Banaras: The Eternal Passage

Bandana Singh

Assistant Professor, Department of Hotel Management, T John College, Bangalore, India

Abstract: *Banaras, the earthly city, rises from the western bank of the river Ganges, where the river takes a swift bend towards the north. Banaras, has multiple names attached to her lore, be it Varanasi or Kashi — the city of Light, the Luminous. The early morning at the ghats of Kashi, wherein the rays of Sun strike deep into the heart of river and reflects upon the high spires of the temples, and Ashrams along the three miles long liver stretch, Is a scene captured and framed in thousands of hearts.*

Keywords: Varanasi, Spirituality, Avimukta, Eternal Door, Anandavan

1. Introduction

Kashi, has two distinct frames that it offers to its visitors, if one walks within the narrow lanes of the old city, one truly appreciates and become part and parcel of the unceasing earthly cycle of life and death. Once, one step at any of the Ghats along the river, the flowing confluence, a growing influence of the river casts upon the spiritual entity within the Individual, and one visualizes the realm of transcendence and liberation, which Hindus' call as 'Moksha.'.

The Ghats of Kashi, is a gateway to access the ancient secrets of this Holy City. There are nearly 70 Bathing ghats in Kashi. Now, one experiences a different picture of the ghats depending upon the time and season of the year. At one moment, Several Ghats may be crowded with pilgrims from all parts of the country, and also from different countries, and at that same moment, few ghats may be as quiet as space. Kashi is also home too many ashrams, continuing the tradition of Spiritual education, for which Kashi has been known since antiquity.

The most astounding feature which startled us that, in accordance to The customs of Hindu Tradition, the cremation grounds must be situated or are mostly situated outside the city limits, mostly in the southern parts of a city, as a symbolic connection to Yama (The God of death), in Kashi it is a strange phenomenon, as the cremation grounds i.e. Harishchandra Ghat and Manikarnika ghats are not only in the middle of the city but also next to the bathing ghats, where pilgrims and residents of Kashi complete their early morning baths and follow their Spiritualistic rituals. The only meaning that may be subscribed to such strange practices, is that death in Kashi, is not an end, but the beginning of a new journey of the soul. Dying here means liberation from the never-ending cycle of life, and Death.

2. Objective of the Study

To explore the spiritual realm of Varanasi and to establish its association with the philosophical traditions of Hinduism

3. Methodology

An exploratory research approach has been chosen since this research would help in having a better understanding about the city of Varanasi, recognition of Varanas as the spiritual

gateway, to evaluate and assess the myth and true history associated with the city of Varanasi.

4. Literature Review

In Banaras- City of Light, Diana L. Eck writes, "Banaras is one of the oldest living cities in the world, as old as Jerusalem, Athens, and Peking. It occupied its high bank overlooking the Ganges in the cradle days of Western civilization. Its antiquity has caught the imagination of many..." (1)

Reverend M. A. Sherring, a missionary in Banaras around the mid-nineteenth century, wrote a gushing praise on the antiquity of the city.

"Twenty-five centuries ago, at the least, it was famous. When Babylon was struggling with Nineveh for supremacy, when Tyre was planting her colonies, when Athens was growing in strength, before Rome had become known, or Greece had contended with Persia, or Cyrus had added lustre to the Persian monarchy, or Nebuchadnezzar had captured Jerusalem, and the inhabitants of Judaea had been carried into captivity, she had already risen to greatness, if not to glory." (2)

Mark Twain famously quipped upon the antiquity of Banaras in his memoir, 'Following the equator,' — "Benares is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together!" (3)

Banaras is the city of continuing tradition, life in Kashi is a slow affair where the soul; slowly comes out of its groove, travel the distance of enlightenment. It reflects the soul in new fittings.

Lewis Mumford, in The City in History wrote, that a city is "energy converted into culture" (4) for Kashi, I feel the opposite, it is a culture converted into energy, fused with our lives in such a manner that the culture reflects the inner emotions of Human nature. It is a city as rich as India. The India we witness in "Kashi" reflects the symbolic Hinduism combined with the elaborate and ancient ritual tradition of Hinduism. It is a way of life in which all the senses are used in the divine's apprehension.

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In the words of Diana L. Eck "It is a tradition that has imagined and imaged God in a thousand ways, which has been adept in discovering the presence of the divine everywhere and in bringing every aspect of human life into the religious arena. It is a religious tradition that understands life and death as an integrated whole. Here the smoke of the cremation pyres rises heavenward with the spires of a hundred temples, and the ashes of the dead swirl through the waters of the Ganges, the river of life." (4)

In 1584, Ralph Fitch, the first English Visitor, recorded his impressions of "Banaras". Fitch, a merchant by profession, was travelling with a small party of merchants and had letters of Introduction from Queen Elizabeth. He records:

"In this place, they be all Gentiles, and be the greatest idolaters that ever I saw. To this town come the Gentiles on pilgrimage out of far countries. Here along the waters side be many faire houses, and in all of them ... they have their images standing, which be evil favoured, made of stone and wood, some like lions, leopards, and monkeys; some like men and women, and peacocks; and some like the devil with forearms and 4 hands." (5)

In 1823 and 1824, Bishop Reginald Heber, Anglican Bishop of Calcutta, while his trip through North India halted in Banaras. He stayed in the western part of the city, at British Cantonment, but curious, explored the city. He recorded his impressions in the following words:

"During my progress through the holy places I had received garlands of flowers in considerable numbers, which I was told it was uncivil to throw away, particularly those which were hung around my neck. I now, in consequence, looked more like a sacrifice than a Priest, and on getting again into the gig was glad to rid myself of my ornaments!" (6)

Heber noted Banaras "a remarkable city, more entirely and characteristically Eastern than any which I have yet seen." (7)

In his around- the- world travel memoir, Following the Equator, Mark Twain observes:

"The Ganges front is the supreme showplace of Benares. Its tall bluffs are solidly caked from water to summit, along a stretch of three miles, with a splendid jumble of massive and picturesque masonry, a bewildering and beautiful confusion of stone platforms, temples, stair-flights, rich and stately palaces—nowhere a break, nowhere a glimpse of the bluff itself; all the long face of it is compactly walled from sight by this crammed perspective of platforms, soaring stairways, sculptured temples, majestic palaces, softening away into the distances; and there is movement, motion, human life everywhere, and brilliantly costumed—streaming in rainbows up and down the lofty stairways, and massed in metaphorical gardens on the miles of great platforms at the river's edge.(8)

Count Hermann Keyserling, who travelled the world, wrote a stunning account of the city, he wrote:

"Benares is holy. Europe, grown superficial, hardly understands such truths anymore.... I feel nearer here than I have ever done to the heart of the world; here I feel every day as if soon, perhaps even to-day, I would receive the grace of supreme revelation.... The atmosphere of devotion which hangs above the river is improbable in its strength: stronger than in any church that I have ever visited. Every would-be Christian priest would do well to sacrifice a year of his theological studies in order to spend this time on the Ganges: here he would discover what piety means." (9)

For a Hindu, Kashi has never been an earthly city, though it may be at the heart of Hindu symbolism, but it sits high above the earth, on top of the trident of its lord and protector, Shiva. Kashi is not constrained by the relentless cycle of time (Kaal), where creation, and dissolution forms an integral part. It is beyond that cycle; it is a platform gateway anchored with the perpetual movement of time and space, but never a participant.

Death in Kashi is a death welcomed and appreciated. Death in Kashi is realized, because here the god of Death, Yama, has no Jurisdiction. Death in Kashi is death known and faced, transformed and transcended.

The city has many names. Many of the names occur frequently in the Sanskrit literature praising the city.

Kashi; The Luminous — This is the most ancient name of the city, used nearly 3000 years ago, it refers to the Kingdom of which this city became the capital. Eventually, In time, the name was adopted by the city itself.

Gautam Buddha came to preach his first sermon in the sixth century B.C. in the outskirts of Kashi. Etymologically, the name "Kashi" derives from Kasha the name of an ancient king, whose dynasty later produced the famous legendary king Divodasa. It is also suggested that it comes from kasha, the name of the tall silver flowering grass which grows wild along the riverbank. In the most popular sense, it is said that the name "Kashi" derives from the Sanskrit root kash to shine, to look brilliant or beautiful. Kashi sometimes referred to as Kashikā is the shining one, the luminous one.

The Kashi Khanda explains: "Because that light, which is the unspeakable Shiva, shines [kashate] here, let its other name be called Kashi." (10)

Varanasi: The Land between the Varana and the ASI

The name "Varanasi" can also be traced to the Buddhist Jataka tales, and in the Hindu epic, the Mahabharata. From the Pali version of this name — Baranasi — comes the corrupted name Banāras, by which the city is widely known today.

According to the city legends, "Varanasi" sits between the "Varana" river, flowing into the Ganges from the North, and the Asi river, joining the Ganges on the south. According to Padma Purāna, "The Varana and the Asi are two rivers, set there by the gods. Between them is a holy land [kshetra] and there is none more excellent on earth." Kūrma Purana mentions: "Varanasi is the city between the Varana and the Asi." (11)

Archaeological excavations combined with old descriptions of the city, that ancient "Varanasi" was situated primarily in the north, on the high Rajghat Plateau, therefore it is most likely, that the city derives its name from the single river that bordered it on the north, known as "Varanasi", where the "Varanasi" met the Ganges. Asi, the southern boundary is hardly a river, except during the rainy season. In the Jabala Upanishad, the legend is described in most religious metaphorical way: "It is called Varana because it obstructs [varayati] all sins of the senses. It is called Nasi because it destroys [nashayati] all sins of the senses." (12)

Avimukta: The Never Forsaken

Lord Shiva: "Because I never forsake it, nor do I let it go, this great place is therefore known as Avimukta." (13) as recorded in a Puranic mātmya.

It is suggested that this was the place where the Linga of Shiva was first established and worshipped according to the rituals on earth as the iconic eternal presence of Lord Shiva. Avimukta simply enunciate that people should never forsake this place. The "Never Forsaken" is not merely a city that pilgrims should visit, but they must live here. The pilgrims, who stay back in "Kashi" are called, "Kashivasis", the "dwellers in Kashi", they come to live here, until they die. Some take a Vow, that they will never leave "Kashi", a vow known as "kshetrasannyasa."

Anandavana: The Blissful Forest

Around the twelfth century, North formed the centre of the city where the Varana met Ganga. Even, during the late eighteenth Century, when William Hodges and William Daniell sketched the riverfront of Banaras, "it was a long spectacular bluff crowned with trees and a few prominent temples." (14)

Maps drawn of "Varanasi" city at the beginning of the 20th Century, show the majority of the southern part of the city as gardens and fields, and people who are slowly ageing, remember that during their younger days areas around LahurāBīr and Durga Kund were jungles.

Shiva explains, "My lingas are everywhere there, like little sprouts arisen out of sheer bliss. Thus, it is called the Forest of Bliss." (15) The word ananda simply means Bliss. In the "Sanatani" philosophical traditions It is one of the few words that describe the supreme and attributeless (nirguna) Brahman.

In the Hindu Philosophical traditions, this is the dwelling place of Lord Shiva, he is said to have taken up his permanent residence here.

"Whatever touches Kashi, that thing becomes her, just as a stream of wine poured into the River Ganges becomes like the Ganges. Just as iron touching the philosopher's stone becomes gold, so does one obtain the very form of Brahman, which is the form of Shiva, in Kashi." Kashi transforms ordinary into Rudramaya—"made of the substance of Rudra himself." (16) Kashi is Rudravasa not because only Rudra lives here, anyone and everyone who lives here is Rudra.

Mahashmashana: The Great Perpetual Cremation Ground

Kashi, as a whole, is a great eternal cremation ground. According to traditions, cremation ground is considered as one of the most inauspicious of places, and as a consequence, when members of the funeral party return to their homes from the cremation ground they all have to undergo purification rites. In Kashi, the view stands rebuffed, here, Cremation grounds, especially Manikarnika Ghat is considered the most auspicious of places. Shiva challenges the ordinary distinctions of pure and impure, auspicious, and inauspicious. Therefore, it follows and fitting that his city, where he resides, symbolizes the distinctions more vividly.

The Kashi Khanda explains the "etymology" of the word shmashana:

Shma means shava, a corpse. Shana means shayana, a "bed." Thus do those who are skilled in the meaning of words say about the meaning of shmashana. When the general dissolution comes, even great beings sleep here, having become corpses. Thus, the shmashana is called, "great."

5. Conclusion

I would rather use the words of Diana L. Eck from the book "Banaras- City of Light" to conclude: "The symbol that condenses the whole into the part is common in the Hindu world. The whole of the sacred Vedas, they say, may be packed in a single powerful mantra. Or the whole of the complexity of the Divine may be visualized in a single multi-armed deity. Or the whole of the universe may be depicted in the "sacred circle" of a cosmic map called a mandala. Kashi is this kind of symbol, which condenses the whole of India into a great "sacred circle," a geographical mandala." (17)

References

- [1] Eck, Diana L. Banaras: City of Light, Pg. 10, 11.
- [2] M. A. Sherring, The Sacred City of the Hindus, p. 7.
- [3] Mark Twain, Following the Equator, p. 480.
- [4] Lewis Mumford, The City in History, p. 570.
- [5] Eck, Diana L. Banaras: City of Light, Pg. 13, 14.
- [6] William Foster, ed., Early Travels in India, p. 20.
- [7] Reginald Heber, Narrative of a Journey Through the Upper Provinces of India, p. 392.
- [8] Ibid., p. 371.
- [9] Mark Twain, Following the Equator, p. 496.
- [10] Count Hermann Keyserling, India Travel Diary of a Philosopher, pp. 118-22.
- [11] KKh 26.67. Here Vishnu is speaking, choosing a boon granted by Lord Shiva.
- [12] Quoted in Nārāyana Bhatta, TS, p. 102.
- [13] Jābāla Upanishad 2.
- [14] Eck, Diana L. Banaras: City of Light, Pg. 43.
- [15] KR 14.39.
- [16] KR 14.40-1.
- [17] Eck, Diana L. Banaras: City of Light, Pg. 59