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HISTORY

Varanasi is one of the oldest living cities in the world. Many names have been given to Varanasi, though its recently revived official appellation is mentioned in the Mahabharata and in the Jataka tales of Buddhism. It probably derives from the two rivers that flank the city, the Varuna to the north and the Asi to the south. Many still use the anglicized forms of Banaras or Benares, while pilgrims refer to Kashi, first used three thousand years ago to describe the kingdom and the city outside which the Buddha preached his first sermon; the "City of Light" is also called Kashika, "the shining one", referring to the light of Shiva. Another epithet, Avimukta, meaning "Never Forsaken", refers to the city that Shiva never deserted, or that one should never leave. Further alternatives include Anandavana, the "forest of bliss", and Rudravasa, the place where Shiva (Rudra) resides.

Varanasi's associations with Shiva extend to the beginning of time: legends relate how, after his marriage to Parvati, Shiva left his Himalayan abode and came to reside in Kashi with all the gods in attendance. Temporarily banished during the rule of the great king Divodasa, Shiva sent Brahma and Vishnu as his emissaries, but ultimately returned to his rightful abode protected by his loyal attendants Kalabhairav and Dandapani. Over 350 gods and goddesses, including a protective ring of Ganeshaa form a mandala or sacred pattern with Shiva Vishwanatha at its centre.

Each name carries an additional meaning in terms of the sacred symbolism of the city, with each defining a progressively decreasing arc starting and ending on the west bank of the Ganges. While the boundary of Kashi is delimited by the circular Panchakroshi Road, Varanasi is the main city, extending from Asi Ghat and circling around to the confluence of the Ganges and the Varuna. Yet a smaller area, defined as Avimukta, starts at Kedara Ghat in the south and ends at Trilochana Ghat. Most important of all is Antargriha, the "Inner Sanctum" around the Vishwanatha Temple, which encompasses Dashashwamedha Ghat, Surya Kund, the lingam of Bharabhuta, and Manikarnika Ghat. Another, later, interpretation suggests three sectors of khandas in the form of Shiva's trident, each centered around a temple – Omkara to the north, Vishvanatha in the centre and Kendra to the south.

A city which, since it is both an exalted place of pilgrimage and an idealized centre of faith, has been likened to Jerusalem and Mecca. According to the historians, the city was founded some ten centuries before the birth of Christ. The city is mentioned in Holy Scriptures like 'Vamana Purana', Buddhist texts and in the epic 'Mahabharata'. Mark Twain, the English author and litterateur, who was enthralled by the legend and sanctity of Banaras, 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."

Varanasi's prominence in Hindu mythology is virtually unrivalled. For the devout Hindu the city has always had a special place, besides being a pilgrimage centre, it is considered especially auspicious to die here, ensuring an instant route to heaven. The revered and ancient city Varanasi is the religious centre of the world of Hindus. A city where the past and present, eternity and continuity co-exist.

The city of Banaras is situated on the west bank of the holiest of all Indian rivers, the Ganga or Ganges. The relationship between the sacred river and the city is the essence of Varanasi - 'the land of sacred light'. The Ganga is believed to have flown from heaven to wash away the worldly sins of the human race of mortal's. The life and activities in the city centre around the holy river. Life on the banks of the Ganga begins before dawn when thousands of pilgrims - men, women and children - come down to the river to wait for the rising sun when immersion in the sacred river will cleanse them of their sufferings and wash their sins away.

Along the water's edge, there are the burning ghats. The most sacred one is Manikarnika, associated with Goddess Parvati, Lord Shiva's wife. The major shrine is the Vishwanath Temple the abode of Lord Shiva, the most important of the trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara, the Lords of this universe. Around this temple evolved the spiritual identity of Varanasi. The holy city within Banaras is thus called, Kashi, the luminous one or the city of the light.

It is beside the holy waters of the Ganga that the activities for which Banaras is held sacred are performed. Everyday thousands of residents and pilgrims bathe, offer prayers to the elements, to the rising sun, and to their dead ancestors who have been carried away by these waters. What draws people to the river is an ingrained belief that these waters can absolve the sins of many generations.

Everyone has their own way of celebrating the ritual contact with the holy Ganga: some bathe; other dip themselves entirely into the water once, thrice or any number of times; some drink the water; other make water offerings to the sun; while others fill their pots with holy water to take back to their homes to perform rituals and purification. The offerings to the sacred waters vary. Pilgrims give flowers, fruits, lamps and their respectful prayers. On festival days and religious occasions the riverside is thick with their colorful bobbing up and down on the waters.

The land around Banaras is also held sacred since Shiva is believed to have lived here. There are thousands of temples at Banaras dedicated to different gods and goddesses, particularly to the deities of good fortune and prosperity and to the sun and the planets. The most important are those that honor the diverse manifestations and attributes of Shiva. The major shrine at Banaras is the Vishvanatha Temple, devoted to Shiva, the Lord of the Universe.

The appearance of the pillar of light is said to have occurred at the site of Vishvanatha Temple. The holy city within Banaras is thus called Kashi 'The Luminous One' or the 'City of Light'. Light in Hindu philosophy has great meaning for it exemplifies the wisdom that destroys the darkness of ignorance. Sin and evil are understood to be the acts of ignorance. When wisdom is acquired, evil will disappear. Sin cannot be washed away by water or prayer but only by wisdom. Immorality is also reached through wisdom and understanding. So the City of Light is the City of Eternal Wisdom as well. To die in the city beside the river of life is to die with a promise of redemption, a promise to be liberated from the endless cycle of life and death and reincarnation, and to gain moksha or eternal absolution. So for centuries thousands of people have come to Banaras to die and thousands have brought the ashes of the dead here to immerse them in the holy waters.

Banaras has always been associated with philosophy and wisdom. A place of learning for many years, the Banaras Hindu University carries on this tradition. The University campus, to the south of the city, was built at the beginning of this century. Pundit Madan Mohan Malviya was instrumental in founding it. On campus is the Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum, which originated from the private collection of Rai Krishnadasa.

The Banaras region was administered by Hindu rulers for several hundred years until the 17th century, when it fell into the hands of the Mughals. As was the practice many buildings of the previous rulers and the religious structures of the Hindu and Buddhists were demolished during the wars of the conquest.

In Banaras we find many places where a temple once stood and where now mosque or some other structure stands. However, there is a little known farman, or royal decree, in the Bharat Kala Bhavan museum, which claims that Aurangzeb, the last great Mughal ruler, ordered his administrators to abstain from destroying any more temples. In succeeding years as Banaras continued to grow, the temples that were destroyed, were rebuilt or relocated.

Since Banaras is a pilgrimage centre, revered and honored throughout India, pilgrims come from all parts of the country to visit it. Some travel 2,000 kilometers to bathe in the Ganga and to honor their dead. Earlier pilgrims used to walk to Banaras on foot, and along the way visited other pilgrimages. The antiquity of Banaras is known not just by the archeological remains but by the diverse and varied literature of India

PLACES OF INTEREST

River Front (Ghats)

The great river banks at Varanasi, built high with eighteenth and nineteenth-century pavilions and palaces, temples and terraces, are lined with an endless chain of stone steps – the ghats – progressing along the whole of the waterfront, altering in appearance with the dramatic seasonal fluctuations of the river level. Each of the hundred ghats, big and small, is marked by a lingam, and occupies its own special place in the religious geography of the city. Some have crumbled over the years, others continue to thrive, with early-morning bathers, brahmin priests offering puja, and people practicing meditation and yoga. Hindus regard the Ganges as amrita, the elixir of life, which brings purity to the living and salvation to the dead; sceptical outsiders tend to focus on all-persuasive and extreme lack of hygiene. Ashes to the dead, emissions from open drains and the left-overs from religious rites float by the devout as they go about their bathing and ceremonial cleansing.

For centuries, pilgrims have traced the perimeter of the city by a ritual circumambulation, paying homage to shrines on the way. Among the most popular routes is the Panchatirthi Yatra, which takes in the Pancha, (five) Trithi (crossing) of Asi, Dashashwamedha, Adi Keshva, Panchganga and finally Manikarnika. To gain merit or appease the gods, the devotee, accompanied by a panda (priest), recites a sankalpa (statement of intent) and performs a ritual at each stage of the journey. For the casual visitor, however the easiest way to see the is to follow a south-north sequence either by boat or on foot.

Asi Ghat to Kedara Ghat

At the clay-banked Asi Ghat, the southernmost in the sacred city, at the confluence of the Asi and the Ganges, pilgrims bathe prior to worshipping at a huge lingam under a peepal tree. Another lingam visited is that of Asisangameshvara, the "Lord of the Confluence of the Asi", in a small marble temple just off the ghat. Traditionally, pilgrims continued to Lolarka Kund, the Trembling Sun", a rectangular tank fifteen metres below ground level, approached by steep steps. Now almost abandoned, except during the Lolarka Mela fair (Aug/Sept), when thousands come to propitiate the gods and pray for the birth of a son, Lolarka Kund is among Varanasi's earliest sites, one of only two remaining Sun sites linked with the origins of Hinduism. Equated with the twelve adityas or divisions of the sun, which predate the great deities of Modern Hinduism, it was attracting bathers in the days of the Buddha.

Much of the adjacent Tulsi Ghat – originally Lolarka Ghat, but renamed in the honour of the poet Tulsidas, who lived nearby in the sixteenth century – has crumbled. Continuing north, above Shivala Ghat, Hanuman Ghat is the site of a new temple built by the ghat's large south Indian community. Considered by many to be the birth place of the fifteenth-century Vaishnavite saint Vallabha, who was instrumental in the resurgence of the worship of Krishna, the ghat also features a striking image of Ruru, the dog Bhairava, a ferocious and early form of Shiva.

Named for a legendary king said to have almost lost everything in a fit of self-abnegation, Harishchandra Ghat, one of the Varanasi's two cremation or burning ghats, is easily recognizable from the smoke of its funeral pyres.

Further north, the busy Kendra Ghat is ignored by pilgrims on the Panchatirthi Yatra. Above its steps, a red-and-white-striped temple houses the Kedareshvara lingam, an outcrop of black rock shot through with a vein of white. Mythologically related to Kedarnath in the Himalayas, Kedara and its ghat become a hive of activity during the sacred month of Sravana (July/Aug), the month of the rains.

Chauki Ghat to Chausathi Ghat

Northwards along the river, Chauki Ghat is distinguished by an enormous tree that shelters small stone shrines to the Nagas, water-snake deities, while at the unmistakable Dhobi (Laundrymen's) Ghat clothes are still rhythmically pulverized in the pursuit of purity. Past smaller ghats such as Mansarovar Ghat, named after the holy lake in Tibet, and Narada Ghat, honouring the divine musician and sage, lies Chausathi Ghat, where impressive stone steps lead up to the small temple of the Chausathi (64) Yoginis. Images of Kali and Durga in its inner sanctum represent a stage in the emergence of the great goddess as a single representation of a number of female divinities. Overlooking the ghats here is Peshwa Amrit Rao's majestic sandstone haveli (mansion), built in 1807 and currently used for religious ceremonies and occasionally, as an auditorium for concerts.

Dashashwamedha Ghat

Dashashwamedha Ghat, the second and business of the five tirthas on the Panchatirthi Yatra, lies past the plain, flat-roofed building that houses the shrine of Shitala. Extremely popular, even in the rainy season when devotees have to wade to the temple or take a boat, Shitala represents both both benign and malevolent aspects – ease and succour as well as disease, particularly smallpox.

Dashashwamedha is Varanasi's most popular and accessible bathing ghat, with rows of pandas sitting on wooden platforms under bamboo umbrellas, masseurs plying their trade and boatmen jostling for custom. Its name, "ten horse sacrifices", derives from a complex series of sacrifices performed by Brahma to test King Divodasa: Shiva and Parvati were sure the king's resolve would fail, and he would be compelled to leave Kashi, thereby allowing them to return to their city. However, the sacrifices were so perfect that Brahma established the Brahmeshvara lingam here. Since that time, Dashashwamedha has become one of the most celebrated tirthas on earth, where pilgrims can reap the benefits of the huge sacrifice merely by bathing.

Man Mandir Ghat to Lalita Ghat

Man Mandir Ghat is known primarily for its magnificent eighteenth-century observatory, equipped with ornate window casings, and built for the Maharajah of Jaipur. Pilgrims pay homage to the important lingam of Sameshvara, the lord of the moon, alongside, before crossing Tripurabhairavi Ghat to Mir Ghat and the New Vishwanatha Temple, built by conservative Brahmins who claimed that the main Vishwanatha lingam was rendered impure when Harijans (untouchables) entered the sanctum in 1956. Mir Ghat also has a shrine to Vaishalakshi, the Wide-Eyed Goddess, on an important pitha – a site marking the place where various parts of the disintegrating body of Shakti fell as it was carried by the grief-stricken Shiva. Also here is the Dharma Kupa, the Well of Dharma, surrounded by subsidiary shrines and the lingam over all the dead of the world – except here in Varanasi.

Immediately to the north is Lalita Ghat, renowned for its ganga Keshava shrine to Vishnu and the Nepali Temple, a typical Kathmandu-style wooden temple which houses an image of Pashupateshvara – Shiva's manifestation at Pashupatinath, in the Mathmandu Valley – and sports a small selection of erotic carvings.

Manikarnika Ghat

North of Lalita lies Varanasi's pre-eminent cremation ground, Manikarnika Ghat. Such grounds are usually held to be inauspicious, and located on the fringes of cities, but the entire city of Shiva is regarded as Mahashmashana, the Great Cremation Ground for the corpse of the entire universe. The ghat is perpetually crowded with funeral parties, as well as the Doms, its Untouchable guardians, busy and pre-occupied with facilitating final release for those lucky enough to pass away here. Seeing bodies being cremated so publicly has always exerted a great fascination for visitors to the city, but photography is strictly taboo; even having a camera visible may be construed as intent, and provoke hostility.

Lying at the centre of the five tirthas, manikarnika Ghat symbolizes both creation and destruction, epitomized by the juxtaposition of the sacred well of Manikarnika Kund, said to have been dug by Vishnu at the time of creation, and the hot, sandy ash-infused soil of cremation grounds where time comes to an end. In Hindu mythology, Manikarnika Kund predates the arrival of the Ganga and has its source deep in the Himalayas. Vishnu cooled the kund with his discus, and filled it with perspiration from his exertions in creating the world, at the behest of Shiva. When Shiva quivered with delight, his earring fell into this pool, which as manikarnika – "Jewelled Earring" – became the first tirthas in the world. Every year, after the floodwaters of the river have receded to leave the pool caked in alluvial deposits, the kund is re-dug. Its surroundings are cleaned and painted with brightly coloured folk art, which depicts the presiding goddess, Manikarnika Devi, inviting pilgrims to bathe and worship at its small Vishnu shrine, and at the paduka (footprint) of Vishnu set in marble on the embankment of the ghat. The most important of the lingams is the remains of Tarakeshvara, Shiva as Lord of Taraka mantra, a "prayer of the crossing" recited at death.

Strictly speaking, Manikarnika is the name given to the kund and to the ghat, while the constantly busy cremation ground is Jalasi Ghat, dominated by a dark smoke-stained temple built by Queen Ahalya Bai Holkar of Indore in the eighteenth century.

Scindia Ghat

Bordering Manikarnika to the north is the picturesque Scindia Ghat, with its titled Shiva temple lying partially submerged in the river, having fallen in as a result of the sheer weight of the ghat's construction around 150 years ago. Above the ghat, several of Kashi's most influential shrines are hidden within the tight maze of alleyways of the area known as Siddha Kshetra (the field of Fulfilment). Vireshvara, the Lord of all Heroes, is especially propitiated in prayer for a son; the Lord of Fire, Agni, was supposed to have been born here.

Panchganga Ghat to Adi Keshva Ghat

Beyond Lakshmanbala Ghat, with its commanding views of the river. Lies one of the most dramatic and controversial ghats, Panchganga Ghat, dominated by Varanasi's largest riverside building, the great mosque of Alamgir, known locally as Beni Madhav-ka-Darera. With its minarets now much shortened, the mosque stands on the ruins of what must have been one of the city's greatest temples, Bindu Madhava, a huge Vishnu temple that extended from Panchganga to Rama Ghat before it was destroyed by Aurangzeb and replaced by an impressive mosque. Panchganga also bears testimony to more favourable Hindu-Muslim relations, being the site of the initiation of the medieval saint of the Sufi-Sant tradition, Kabir, the son of a humble Muslim weaver who is venerated by Hindus and Muslims alike. Along the river front lies a curious array of three-sided cells, submerged during the rainy season, some with lingams, others with images of Vishnu, and some empty and used for meditation or yoga. One of these is a shrine to the Five (panch) Rivers (ganga) which, according to legend, have their confluence here: the two symbolic rivulets of Dhutapapa (Cleansed of Sin) and the Kirana (Sun's Ray), which join the mythical confluence of the Yamuna and the Yamuna and the Sarasvati with the Ganga.

Above Trilochana Ghat, further north, is the holy ancient lingam of the Three (tri) Eye (lochana) Shiva. Beyond it, the river bypasses some of Varanasi's oldest precincts, now predominantly Muslim in character; the ghats themselves gradually become less impressive and are usually of the kaccha (clay-banked) variety.

At Adi Keshava Ghat (the "Original Vishnu"), on the outskirts of the city, the Varana flows into the Ganga. Unapproachable during the rainy season, when it is completely submerged, it marks the place where Vishnu first landed as an emissary of Shiva, and stands on the original site of the city before it spread southwards; around Adi Keshva are a number of Ganesha shrine.

Vishwanatha Khanda

the Old City at the heart of Varanasi, between Dashashwamedha Ghat and Godaulia to the south and west and Manikarnika Ghat on the river to the north, lies Vishwanatha Khanda, sometimes referred to as the Old City. The whole area rewards exploration, with numerous shrines and lingams tucked into every corner, and buzzing with the activity of pilgrims, pandas and stalls selling offerings to the faithful.

Approached through a maze of narrow alleys and the Vishwanatha Gali (or Lane), the temple complex of Vishwanatha or Visheshwara, the "Lord of All", is popularly known as the Golden Temple, due to the massive gold plating on its shikhara (spire). Inside the compound - which is hidden behind a wall, and entered through an unassuming doorway - is one of India's most important shivalingams, made of smooth black stone and seated in a solid silver plinth, as well as shrines to the wrathful protectors Mahakala and Dandapani, and the lingam of Avimuktेशvara, the Lord of the Unforsaken, which predates Vishwanatha and once held much greater significance. The current temple was built in 1777 by Queen Ahalya Bai Holkar of Indore, and is closed to non-Hindus, who have to make do with glimpses from adjacent buildings.

Vishwanatha's history has been fraught. Sacked by successive Muslim rulers, the temple was repeatedly rebuilt, until the grand edifice begun in 1585 by Todar Mal, a courtier of the tolerant Moghul Akbar, was finally destroyed by Aurangzeb. On its foundations, guarded by armed police to protect it from Hindu fanatics, stands the Jnana Vapi Mosque, also known as the Great Mosque of Aurangzeb. Its simple white domes tower over the Jnana Vapi (Wisdom Well), immediately north, housed in an open arcaded hall built in 1828, where Shiva cooled his lingam after the construction of Vishwanatha. Covered by a grate to prevent people jumping in, in search of instant moksha, and covered with a cloth to stop coins being thrown in, only the presiding brahmins have access to its waters, considered to be liquid knowledge.

Pilgrims offer their sankalpa or statement of intent here, before commencing the Panchatirthi Yatra. Slightly north, across the main road, the thirteenth-century Razia's Mosque stands atop the ruins of a still earlier Vishwanatha temple, destroyed under the Sultanate.

Close by, the temple of Annapurna Bhavani is dedicated to the supreme Shakti ("She, the Being of Plenteous Food"), the queen and divine mother also known in this benevolent form as Mother of the Three Worlds. As the provider of sustenance, she carries a cooking pot rather than the fearsome weapons borne by her horrific forms Durga and Kali. A subsidiary shrine opened only three days a year houses a solid gold image of Annapurna. Nearby is a stunning image, faced in silver against a black surround, of Shani or Saturn. Anyone whose fortunes fall under his shadow is stricken with bad luck - a fate devotees try to escape by worshipping here on Saturdays.

The Kashi Vishwanath Temple

Also known as the Golden Temple, it is dedicated to Lord Shiva, the presiding deity of the city. Varanasi is said to be the point at which the first jyotirlinga, the fiery pillar of light by which Shiva manifested his supremacy over other gods, broke through the earth's crust and flared towards the heavens. More than the Ghats and even the Ganga, the Shivalinga installed in the temple remains the devotional focus of Varanasi. Entry restricted for foreigners.

SHOPPING

Varanasi is famous for its silk weaving, and Banarasi silks are a part of every girl's wedding trousseau. Banaras Brocades are prized the world over. Brassware, copperware, wooden and clay toys and exquisite gold jewellery are some of the other craft the city is famous for. The hand-knotted carpets of Mirzapur and musical instruments are among the other shopping attractions. Banaras is also famous for its 'Langda Aam', a variety of mangoes available in the summer. Betel leaf is also a specialty. The main shopping areas are Chowk, Vishwanath Gali, Thatheri bazaar, Lahurabir, Godaulia, Dashswamedh Gali and Golghar.

With hustlers and rickshaw drivers keen to drag tourists into shops offering commission, shopping in Varanasi can be a nightmare but it's worth seeking out the city's rich silk weaving and brasswork. The best areas to browse are the Thatheri Bazaar (for brass), Jnana Vapi and the Vishwanatha Gali with its Temple Bazaar (for silk brocade and jewellery). State-run emporia in Godaulia, Lahurabir and the Chowk - the three Handlooms outlets at Lahurabir, Nadesar and Neechi Bag, and Mahatex in Godaulia - of fixed prices and assured quality. Housed in a former palace opposite the Taj Hotel, Cantt, the CIE has a large and impressive selection but, despite its official-sounding name, is outrageously expensive. Kashmiri-run chain aimed exclusively at the five-star market.

Sales pitches tend to become more aggressive when it comes to silk, and you need be wary of the hard-sell. Qazi Sadullahpura, near Chhavi Mahal Cinema, lies at the heart of a fascinating Muslim neighbourhood devoted to the production of silk.

Upica, the government-run emporium has the advantage of fixed prices, with outlets at Godaulia opposite the Taj Hotel, Cantt. Handloom House, D64/132K Sagra, another government sponsored chain, is the best and safest place to buy silk with a modern showroom although the sales staff appear disorganized. For tailoring, try Paraslakshmi Exports, Chandrika Colony Sagra (ph: 361496), a silk business providing a good and prompt service; they'll deliver to your hotel, and also offer ready-made waistcoats and boxer shorts.

URBAN HAAT

Keeping the preferences of tourists in mind the city has developed an Urban Haat where artisans (State and National Awarded) from various states are brought together to showcase the handicrafts of India daily on roster basis of 15 Days. So that the excitement of up coming crafts remains the same. The Compound of Haat is provided with all basic public amenities accolade the Indian music, art, craft and culture spiced with exclusive food plazas.

Venue : Urban Haat, Sanskritik Sankul, Maqbool Alam Road, Chowka Ghat, Varanasi.