KASHI AS THE CULTURAL CARRIER OF INDIAN CIVILISATION

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Abstract

This study explores the significance of Kashi as a cultural carrier of India's legacy through several territorial levels, as well as tracing the different paths that have historically linked it to the rest of the subcontinent and beyond. Kashi, also Varanasi, is a place that is a living embodiment of Indian culture and one of the oldest and most continuously inhabited towns in the world. This city contains such a fusion with diverse traditions of culture, religion, and intellect, and it also happens to be the spiritual center, primarily in Hinduism. The essay progresses through the transformation of Kashi, from being an antiquity religious center to a center for learning and art in the Middle Ages, to its colonial comeback and current importance as a hub for tourism, education, and cross-cultural relationships. The strong network of pilgrimage routes, trade ties, and modern transportation systems surrounding Varanasi has further entrenched the city as a cultural carrier. Such systems have lightened the transferal of knowledge, art, and spiritual practices. In this way, Kashi answers current issues without losing the spirit of India's vast and varied legacy in fusing tradition and modernity. Kashi is a treasure trove of priceless historical, spiritual, and intellectual wealth which the present thesis itself proves to have been through long ages of shaping and preserving the nation's cultural identity.

*Keywords:*Varanasi, Cultural Heritage,Indian Civilization, Pilgrimage Routes,Spiritual and Intellectual Hub

1. INTRODUCTION

The city of Benaras is otherwise known as Varanasi and Kashi. The Indian state of Uttar Pradesh is its location, sharing a bank with the Ganges River. Known as Kashi in another name, the city is described by the Rig Veda to be bright. It is also often said to be the city of study and temples. India's oldest surviving city is Benaras. She has heritage, religion, beliefs, values, conventions, nature, and individuality embedded in the city. Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism are all institutionalized in the city. There are four thousand temples and three hundred mosques within the city's religious monuments. It is known for its learning, education, music, and arts & crafts. The Ganga and its religious significance are part of Benaras culture. For centuries, people consider these ghats significant for bathing, which the pilgrims use; this is in Sustainable Development of Heritage City: Varanasi, n.d. The northern Indian city was a cultural and religious center for thousands of years. The culture and religion of the city have developed, elevating most people's understanding of many concepts and standards related to music, arts, crafts, and religion. The city of Benaras was essentially a place inhabited by renowned poets, writers, thinkers, and musicians who have been referred to in history dates. Since its formation in the second century B.C., the city has witnessed various developments; the first master plan was formulated in 1950. As the Ganga River forms a blockade to the east, the development process started in the west. High density and low-rise development characterize the organic core. The city outskirts are less crowded and have a variety of town development techniques from both domestic and foreign locations. When people come to our city, they not only learn about.

Figure 1: Kashi Vishwanath Temple

The city of Benaras has a long history dating back to 1000 B.C. Culture, education, and the arts have acquired recognition and popularity globally from ancient times. The Varuna in the north and the Assi in the south, both of which are on the Ganga's bank, are linked to Varanasi's name. Varanasi was given its name by combining the names of the two streams. The original name of Varanasi was Kashi, which came from the Kashis, the earliest Aryan settlers who lived there around 5000 years ago. The epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata, as well as the Vayu Purana, include comparable allusions. Benaras has drawn a large number of Jain munis, or Tirthankars; among these, the seventh, Suparsha, was born in the city, while the twenty-third, Parshwanth, was born in the city's current Bhelupura ward. Around the time of Parshwanath, in the ninth century B.C., Jainism emerged in Benaras.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Shahbazi et al. (2023)demonstrated the significance of hierarchically porous structures that are interconnected in drug delivery, cell culture, and bioscaffolds, allowing nutrients to diffuse and cells to adhere. Interesting bioactive ink for 3D printing of extremely porous scaffolds with

increased biocompatibility was designed by encapsulating vitamin C-loaded gel-like double emulsions within a hydrophobic emulsifier and soy particles. The creation of extremely porous, realistic, and self-lubricating three-dimensional structures was made possible by the thixotropic and mechanical characteristics of the two emulsions. Scaffolds infused with vitamin C effectively promoted cell proliferation, opening up a new avenue for the development of functionalized tissues.

Darak (2020)analysed that textbook formed the primary reservoir of knowledge in Indian schools and held the water of sacredness largely due to exams which depended more on memorization. But beyond being educational artifacts, they played a much more important role: that of messengers of ideas, values, and beliefs-most importantly those of the hegemonic classes. Math and science texts were considered "objective" and therefore "innocuous" in the context of social hierarchy, as opposed to history or language texts. In this paper, I analyzed the levels and patterns of caste, gender, and class domination by using word problems based on SaraswatiShishuMandir (SSM) mathematics textbooks. Without relinquishing a progressive social perspective, I contended that the contexts for word problems should be locally relevant and demonstrated how textbooks about SSM were decidedly slanted.

Addy (2020)explored how architecture served as a political tool in shaping national identity based on religious foundations, particularly in Banaras. It examined the city's-built environment from the early 20th century to the present, highlighting the intertwining of Hindu and Islamic influences. Through case studies, it demonstrated how architecture reflected religious and political agendas, blending indigenous and Western styles to project modernity while preserving national culture. The study revealed how these architectural changes both obscured the past and promoted religious nationalism, creating conflicting representations of identity and place.

Kasi et al. (2021)explored that the worst conditions prevailing among the indigenous people of the world during this pandemic involved limited access to forest areas, limited availability of non-farm activities, inadequate nutritional facilities, inadequate health infrastructure, lack of awareness, and dependency on herbal medicines. Due to social shame and economic inequality, it has been estimated that about 10.45 crore (10.45 million) indigenous people existed in India

and were vulnerable. The tribal people of India had been marginalized and not granted adequate economic resources for a long time due to an absence of developmental measures. The Approvals of industrial projects and the declaration of lockdowns added to their grievances during that period. Using secondary data, news stories, and reports from international agencies, the paper assumes an analytical approach toward the state of the Indian tribal population in response to the government's actions as well as the contribution of local groups to the survival of the pandemic.

Deng et al. (2023) proved that Kashi was long since emerging to be beyond religious importance and it has been a thriving center for education, creative innovation, and intellectual interchange. Once it was the principal center for Vedic studies on religious philosophy, literary work on Sanskrit, scholars coming from the whole of Indian subcontinent and beyond. During the Middle Ages, the city developed into a global town of Hindu and Islamic cultural exchange, further entrenching its legacies in philosophy, architecture, and the arts. Even under foreign administration, Kashi remained important to the continued preservation of Hindu cultural customs during the colonial era. It has also evolved as a platform of political and social organizations with an agenda to transform India's identity, even during the period of colonial persecution. Even today, Kashi remains a thriving center for spirituality, education, and heritage activities with institutions like the Banaras Hindu University playing a very important role in furthering and enriching the ancient heritage of the city. As a living cultural carrier, Kashi formatted and influenced not only the intellectual, spiritual, and cultural horizons of India but those of the world in putting together the components of tradition and modernity.

3. THE MULTIPLE TERRITORIAL LAYERS AND THE ROUTES AROUND VARANASI

One of the oldest cities in the world, Varanasi, boasts of a distinctive spatial and cultural structure characterised by several layers of territories and convoluted roads. Its urban environment can be described as an amalgamation of modern, religious, cultural, and historical elements-from the traditional to the modern, and from the sacred to the secular.

The Sacred Zone is the central sacred area in Varanasi, which is basically organized around the Kashi Vishwanath Temple, that is, Lord Shiva. The area is full of a dense system of temples,

ghats, and small lanes, and the Ganga River is the main attraction. AssiGhat, DashashwamedhGhat, ManikarnikaGhat, among others, are important elements in the city's religious complexion. The paths are trodden by both locals and pilgrims to take religious rites and bathe in the sacred river. A mix of old and new buildings, the twisting alleyways around these ghats are rich in religious and historical significance.

Figure 2: Monitoring Kāśī's Spiritual and Pilgrimage Paths

The city of Benares, built centuries ago and retaining its medieval design and architecture, borders the holy place. Old temples, religious centers, and crowded markets characterize this area. Many consider these curved, narrow lanes, called "galis," highly significant for their history. The thickly settled villages, which constitute the urban texture, are a reflection of the centuries-old religious, cultural, and commercial exchanges. Important streets that connect the city's old legacy and modern pulse are Maharaja Gali, Thatheri Bazaar, and Raja Gali.

One can start to see the commercial activity in Varanasi as one gets away from the sacred zone. The VishwanathGali and Godowlia Market represent thriving markets where vendors sell handicrafts, textiles particularly the famous Banarasi sarees, religious items, and other regional products. These neighborhoods show off a different side of Varanasi's character that is thriving with both tradition and business, and these are the heart of the city's economy.

The largest chunk of Varanasi's population resides in the residential layer, located outside the old city and near the city's outskirts. Despite being more modern infrastructure and relatively less congested than the historical centre, these districts retain, nevertheless, the culture values. With time, new suburbs and residential colonies have been developed and created an outer periphery that stretches from the city center.

New transportation networks, industrial districts, and urban development zones have emerged on the fringes of Varanasi. The most important transportation routes linking the city with other regions of India are the Varanasi-Lucknow Highway, Varanasi-Allahabad Road, and Varanasi-Mirzapur Road. These routes constitute a vital territorial layer that allows for the flow of goods and people in and out of the Varanasi area while creating a boundary that separates the historical city from the rapidly modernizing outer zones.

Ancient and modern routes also form a vital part of the territorial organization of the city. In this sacred zone are pathways and ghats, that have ritual importance; like the winding road that takes Kashi Yatra, a sacred route connecting those religious sites of great importance. Roadways and railways also come out from Varanasi, most importantly to cities like Allahabad, Lucknow, and Kanpur. Besides being a road, the Ganga River also served as a historical and spiritual route for pilgrims and transport.

4. THE PANCHAKROSHI PILGRIMAGE

In the ancient city of Kashi (Varanasi), which is commonly considered to be the spiritual center of India, the Panchakroshi Pilgrimage ranks as one of the most important and most sacred religious and cultural pilgrimages. The devotees on this holy pilgrimage come to pass a very transformative journey as they visit five important temples in the city's environs, each of which

symbolizes a significant Hindu religious landmark. The Sanskrit words "Pancha" (five) and "Kosha" (a traditional unit of distance, approximately equal to 2.5 kilometers) form the base for the name "Panchakroshi". This implies that the trek covers the holy soil of Kashi and has a total distance covered of approximately 12.5 kilometers. As a rite, therefore, these pilgrims undertake the sacred walk with the intention of purifying their souls towards achieving spiritual enlightenment and heavenly blessings-all thought to lead to a higher state of consciousness and eventually spiritual emancipation-moksha.

Between the microcosmic realm, or the region around the Vishveshvara temple, and the culturally imagined outer edge of the universe (Chaurashikroshi), the PanchakroshiYatra pilgrimage route passes through holy territory (kshetra), which stands in for sacred macrocosmos space.

According to Hindu tradition, every month of the year is filled with diverse religious events that help pilgrims to receive merit, besides visiting holy places that impart unique merit or power that builds up through good deeds and acts. However, the deeds performed by pilgrims in certain months like Ashvina, that fall between September and October, Karttika, that fall between October and November, and Margashirsha, that fall between November and December are believed to bring more good virtues.

The most propitious time to participate in the Panchakroshi Yatra is during the the month of pollution (Mala-masa) or the extra month (Adhi-masa), the intercalary month of the leap year. According to Hindu lunar calendar, between 1945 and 2047, there will be 37 malamasas. However, pilgrims also attend Panchakroshi Yatra during the spring (Chaitra-Vaishakha, March–May) and winter (Magha–Phalguna, January–March) seasons. Maha Shivaratri, translated literally as "the great night of Shiva" or Shiva's marriage day, is celebrated annually on the thirteenth dark half or waning of the month of Phalguna (February–March; the most recent was on March 8, 2016, and in 2017 it would be on February 25). It also marks the completion of a lunar year.
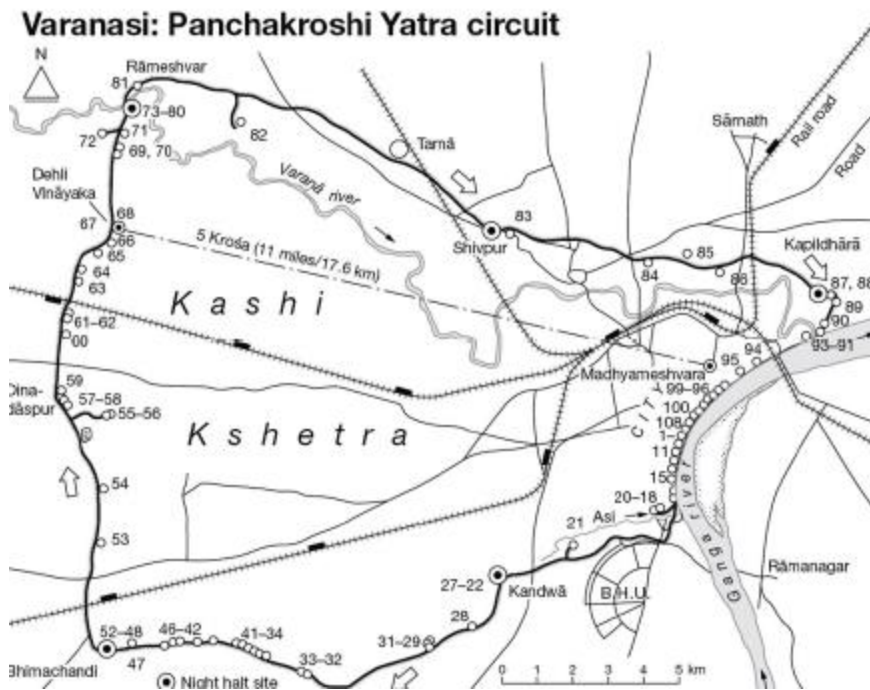
Figure 3: Map of the Panchakroshi Yatra Circuit in Varanasi

The Panchakroshi pilgrimage typically covers a duration of some days wherein pilgrims trek the entire stretch which is approximately 80 to 90 kilometers long. It's customary for many devotees to prefer to trek barefoot as a symbol of humility and devotion, thus quite physically grueling. The pilgrims perform a number of rituals during the journey, including bathing in sacred rivers, praying in temples, and making obeisance to Lord Shiva, which are essentially pertinent to the spiritual purposes of the pilgrimage. However, the physical difficulty was considered a small price to pay for the spiritual benefits of the pilgrimage, including purification, offering of prayers, and receiving divine blessings. Although the experience of spirituality is the primary goal of the pilgrimage, it also really tightens social and cultural bonds of a person. Since this pilgrimage binds people from different walks of life together under a single trusted like Lord Shiva, the bond during their visit generally becomes an uncommon cultural and social connection. As pilgrims commonly buy religious offerings locally, stay in local accommodations, and patronize the local businesses and artisans, the pilgrimage also has a significant impact on the local economy. Besides influencing the physical and financial world, the Panchakroshi Pilgrimage is a deeply transformative spiritual experience that binds the pilgrim to the divine,

Varanasi's sacred topography, and the rich Hindu worship heritage. The pilgrimage, more than just a journey of holy sites, actually nudges devotees toward greater comprehension of religion, faith, and the ultimate pursuit of liberation. A pilgrim destination of thousands every year, the importance it finds only increases, highlighting its time-honored role in the spiritual and cultural life of Varanasi and granting it a timeless representation of the religious legacy and devotion that city enjoys.

5. ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Varanasi, also known as Kashi, is an eternal embodiment of India's glorious heritage of spirituality and culture. For thousands of years, it has been a vibrant cultural carrier that has preserved and transmitted the very essence of Indian civilization. With its great historical and deep religious significance, this ancient city is a sole place for where the line between the sacred and the secular blurs, and where social customs, intellectual pursuit, creative traditions, and spirituality converge. Kashi, the world's oldest city that is still inhabited, has a long history of contributing to India's national identity and culture. Not only are these physical structures, but the city's revered temples, ghats, and pilgrimage routes are vibrant expressions of its deep spiritual and cultural heritage that also provide a framework for reflection, worship, and cross-cultural exchange. Kashi's intellectual contributions, especially through establishments like Banaras Hindu University, have equally helped to preserve and disseminate knowledge, philosophy, and the arts that have enriched the broader Indian and international intellectual landscape. Moving with the changing dynamics of modern society, Kashi has adapted its fundamental cultural and religious values to the demands of modernity and urbanization. The annual festivals, customs and educational institutions of the city, all which are effectively vying for promoting intellectual discussion, cross-cultural interaction and tradition preservation, uphold the reputation of the city as a center of religious activities and progressive ideas. It is Kashi's hybrid character which cleverly combines old traditions with modern ideas to create a setting that will have the past and the present engage in continual dialogue with each other. The varying degree of change within continuities, in comparison with ancient roots, very much demonstrates Kashi's adaptability and importance while it negotiates the contemporary world. Apart from

being a type of expression that personifies the continuity of Indian culture and civilization, Kashi is a beacon to the world community in that it insightfully offers perspectives on the interconnectedness of history, culture, and modernity with its varieties of spiritual practices and artistic and intellectual pursuits. Kashi manages to sustain its influence over generations and forms a bridge between the past, present, and future. In this sense, it remains a living embodiment of India's strong cultural and spiritual traditions.

In order to enhance the facilities and infrastructure at pilgrimage sites of all faiths, India's national government set aside INR 11.7494 billion, which translates to US$ 199 million, for the PRASAD initiative in the 2014–2015 budget. Under the PRASAD program, all of India's ancient historical and cultural pilgrimage routes as well as the locations they are connected to shall be renovated. One-fourth of the substantial amount (approximately INR 893 million or US$ 15.13 million) sanctioned to the city of Varanasi under this scheme in October 2015 would be utilized for repairing the Panchakroshi Yatra route. Moreover, since the PRASAD and HRIDAY programs share the perspective of UNESCO regarding heritage conservation and its applications for sustainable development, UNESCO has made public endorsements of the programs.

6. CONCLUSION

The country recognizes the city of Benaras with its prominent customs, cultures, norms, values, beliefs, and standards. Beyond uplifting people's lives, temples, shrines, ashrams, historical places, monuments, ghats, the Ganga River, Benaras Hindu University, and Hinduism as a religion have all contributed enormously to the development of the city and, by extension, the country at large. The city's diversity and rich cultural heritage have especially attracted tourists and citizens alike. Most favorite for the people are the ghats, the Ganga River, and historical and religious sites.This city has a spiritualism and a charming charm about it. All of the customs, prayers, rituals, and celebrations illustrate these aspects.Many great historians, philosophers, traders, archaeologists, and other people have been attracted to this city from ancient times. Besides its ancient monuments and religious beliefs, it is now famous for factory building, industries, and educational institutions. People are considering education valuable and

developing themselves into the virtues of effort and resourcefulness. These people work in the agricultural industry, engage in farming, are weavers, craftspeople, grocery store owners, tea vendors, and other related occupations. The city showcases a variety of cultural and traditional characteristics. Lastly, it can be said that, apart from aesthetics, artistic expression, customs, and traditions, the city of Benaras is recognizing new and modern approaches and ways that are advancing the city.

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