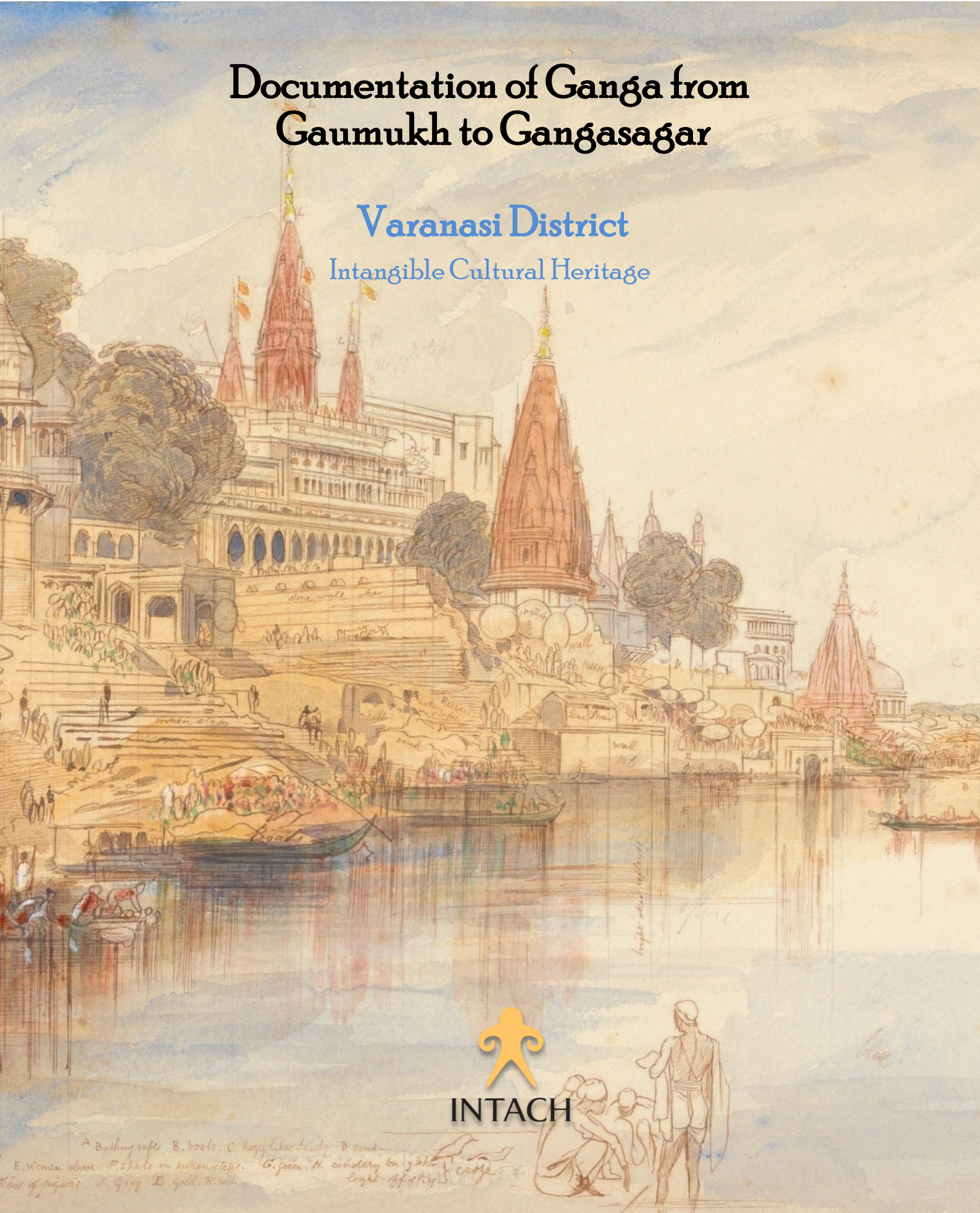


Documentation of Ganga from Gaumukh to Gangasagar

Varanasi District Intangible Cultural Heritage



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A. Bathing rafts. B. boats. C. heavy lilac dandy. D. sand.
E. Women above. F. shells on broken steps. G. green. H. cindery on yellow
kind of papers. J. Gray. K. gold. R. red
light off sky



Cover Page Image: Edward Lear, 1812–1888, British, Benares, 1873, Watercolor with pen in brown ink over graphite and gouache on moderately thick, rough, beige wove paper, Yale Center for British Art, Gift of Michael D. Coe, Yale MAH 1968

Documentation of Ganga from Gaumukh to Gangasagar

Varanasi District

Intangible Cultural Heritage

July- September 2019

Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage

National Mission for Clean Ganga
(Reg. Society)
Ministry of Jal Shakti
Department of Water Resources, River Development & Ganga Rejuvenation
Government of India




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Varanasi through the Ages - A Glimpse



Ghats of Varanasi

The story of the holy city of Varanasi is a combination of legend and historical facts. Kashi has been described in 15,000 verses in the Kashi Khanda of the Skanda Purana. According to it, this city is in the world but not limited by it. It is in the middle of the universe, but not in the midst of the universe. Goddess Parvati, in her admiration for the city, exclaims to Lord Shiva at one point in the Kashi Khanda, ‘Even though it sits upon the earth, Kashi is not an earthly city.’¹ Lord Brahma, the creator, says, ‘Many times have I, who spread out the creation, created the world. But Kashi is of another sort, created by Shiva himself.’²

The Mahabharata refers to an ancient kingdom called Kasi with its capital at Varanasi, the latter being founded by Divodasa, believed to be a descendant of the dynasty of the Vedic Aryans and the founder of the Indian system of medicine, Ayurveda.

The settlement of Varanasi as a ‘city’ dates back roughly to the period 2000–1800 BCE, when the Aryans are said to have moved into the Gangetic plains. Kashi has been referred to as an affluent kingdom, a land of sacrifice and a centre of learning in various historical sources such the Vedas, Upanishads and other regional and Sanskrit literature.

Kashi became one of the important Tirthas of the Jainas, from the eighth century BCE, the period when the 23th Tirthankara, Parshvanath was born in this city. Sarnath, a suburb of

Kashi flourished as a Buddhist centre from 535 BCE onwards when Gautam Buddha preached his first sermon here.³

The history of Varanasi becomes clearer from sixth century BCE onwards as reflected in the Buddhist texts, Jataka tales, the Mahabharata and the Puranas that were written around this time. During this era, the worship of Puranic gods as well as the rise of Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna, other cults and rituals associated with the temples along with the development of popular rites of puja and pilgrimage grew in prominence.

It was around the 8th and 6th century BCE that the sixteen great kingdoms, called the Mahajanapadas existed in the northern part of India.⁴ Several texts make frequent reference to these Mahajanapadas out of which Kashi was one of the significant centres along with Magadha to its east and Kosala to its north. During this time, Kashi was an important trade centre. The presence of the river Ganga and multiple trade links enhanced the commercial prospects of the city.

The Shungas in the 1st century supported Brahminism. Pushyamitra Shunga performed the Vedic Ashvamedha twice in Varanasi. After the Shungas, the Kushanas came to power and extended their rule here. In 635 CE, when the famous Chinese explorer Hiuen Tsang visited the city, it was an important settlement of innovative thinking and spirituality along the Ganga River.

By the end of Gupta rule in the 6th century CE the stronghold of the Hindu pantheon became momentous in Banaras, giving way to several devotional movements. In the early medieval period, Varanasi had passed from one ruler to another – from the Maukharis of Kannauj to the Gurjara-Pratiharas (9th century). In the mid-10th century, it was under the rule of the Pratihara dynasty and had expanded southward.⁵ Varanasi grew as a centre for art, culture, thought and religion that drew intellectuals and artists from across the Asian and European continents. They came to the city in search of inspiration and like-minded discourse.

The city remained under the control of several Hindu kingdoms till the Delhi Sultanate established its rule over the city. In 1206 CE, with the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate, the entire Ganges valley came under Muslim domination. It remained in Muslim hands for over 500 years. The history of this period is complicated, and various Muslim dynasties which came to power through the centuries were far from monolithic in their policies toward the sacred sites of the Hindus. There were certainly high moments in these centuries, when Kashi recaptured something of its lost glory. There were times of ambitious temple construction and stimulating scholarly activity. The religious life of the city was under almost constant threat. At least six times during these years the temples of Kashi were destroyed. 'Following the sack of the city by the forces of Muhammad Ghuri, temples were destroyed again in the 1300s under Firuz Shah Tughluq'.⁶ The architectural and living culture of Banaras was disrupted repeatedly and underwent constant changes in terms of demolitions, constructions and re-constructions by the Tuqhlraqs, the Sharqi kings, the Lodis, and finally by the Mughals.

The Puranas of Kashi were further elaborated and revised. The Kashi Khanda reached its final form around the mid-14th century. The Kashi Rahasya, with its eclectic and mystical view of the city, and the Kashi Kedara Mahatmya, which glorified the southern sector of the city, also gained popularity. Following Lakshmidhara's example from the 11th century, digests on various matters of dharma were compiled, as well as manuals for pilgrims.

A new religiousness was rising all over North India, comprised of Bhakti devotionalism and Tantric counter-culture between the 15th and 17th century. These were people's movements that shared distaste for ritual, the brahminical establishment, and the caste system. The life of devotion was no longer the prerogative of the elite but of all, regardless of class and caste. With the Bhakti movement, a vibrant new poetic literature composed in vernacular languages surpassed Sanskrit literature.

The two Bhakti poet mystics whose verses are most beloved today are Kabir and Tulsidas. Kabir was from a very low-caste julaha weaving family who, according to some, were recent converts to Islam. In his terse, satirical couplets, Kabir ridicules all religions and Kashi's traditions of ritual and pilgrimage. He expresses devotion for personal god who is undefinable in human terms. Like Kabir, Tulsidas wrote in Hindi. But unlike Kabir, he was a Vaishnav, a firm follower of Ram and Hanuman. His subversion of the Sanskrit pandits lay in rendering religious literature into the language of the people. His translation of the Ramayana into a version called the *Ramcharitmanas* remains a classic. Tulsidas is also said to have launched, for the unlettered, the annual performances of Ram's story that continue today, called the Ramlila.

The crumbling of the Mughal Empire coincided with the dominance of Marathas who supported the establishment of a Hindu Empire. In 1738, Mansaram, the zamindar of Gangapore became the founder of the present line of the Kashi Raj, followed by Balwant Singh.⁷ By 1794, the political governance of Banaras came under the British dominion, leaving only the religious and cultural matters to the discretion of the rulers. Located on the Ganga and the main west-to-east trade route, Banaras continued to thrive as a centre for trade, during the 18th Century. It had become the subcontinent's inland commercial capital. Merchant bankers from other parts of India were drawn to the city for its commercial opportunities and amassed wealth. In order to regulate their complex trading and banking world, they organized themselves into a structure whose pinnacle was a tightly-knit oligarchy of nine trading family called the Naupatti or 'Society of Nine Sharers.'

In 1939, Vibhuti Narain Singh, referred by the title of Maharaja or Kashi Naresh promoted the learning of classical Indian arts and culture. In 1947, he handed over most of his territory to the new government of Independent India. Local political power became intimately connected to cultural patronage. The maharaja, the elite, and the merchants developed new cultural and patronage styles, in which everyone participated. These consisted of fairs and festivals, ceremonials such as the Ramlila, competitions of music and bodybuilding, the development of religious practices, and reformist activities.

Even today the Ramnagar fort that was built by Raja Balwant Singh in 1750 is inhabited by the present Kashi Naresh, held in high regard by the people of Ramnagar. The fort houses a museum, the entry to which is ticketed for the general public. One finds a collection of antiques, weaponry and other items from the royal history at this museum. The world renowned Ramlila—the theatrical presentation of the story of Ram—is performed around this fort for one month every year.



Wall Paintings of Varanasi showing the king during a procession

Travellers and Visitors to Kashi

India's religious faith revolves around Kashi, situated mid way along the mighty Ganga's journey from Gangotri to Ganga-Sagar. Throughout history—armies, citizens and explorers—have passed Varanasi at some point or another. Since time immemorial, Banaras has drawn in varieties of visitors like the pilgrim, the thinker-philosopher, the merchant, the king and his cohort, or the explorer to name a few.⁹

Fa Hien (337–422)

After having walked the Silk-Road, passing by Gandhar, Taxila, Utchh, Mathura, Varanasi and Gaya, Fa Hien stayed in Patiliputra for three years collecting, copying and studying the Buddhist texts. About his short trip to Varanasi Fa Hien writes: "From Patiliputra I walked 22 Yojans (280 Km) west to reach Varanasi. Only 10 Litarah (12 Km) north-east is located the

legendry Sarnath, where I witnessed many Buddhist Viharas and the famed deer-park of the saintly sages.”

Hiuen Tsang (602–664)



Hiuen Tsang left China and reached Kashi via Afghanistan at the young age of 27 years. About Varanasi's grandeur he said: “Varanasi has 20 grand temples with huge spires and structures made of carved stone and painted wood. A copper statue of Shiva is no less than 100 feet tall and seems alive [...] in the north-east of the capital flows the river Varuna. Westwards from here is a stupa built by Ashoka which must be 500 feet high. In front of this is a stone pillar which glimmers like a mirror. Its ice-like surface appears to reflect Buddha’s image before which one can pay obeisance.” This stone pillar, in fragmented form, can be seen in the Sarnath Museum. Even today, it has a mirror-like sheen.

Hiuen Tsang (image: Wikimedia)

Al-Biruni (973–1048)

Travelling to India in 1017 with Mahmud Ghazni, Al-Biruni was enamored by India’s philosophy, religion and way of existence. Mathematics, physics, nature-science, history, linguistics, anthropology, and astronomy are only a few subjects which he excelled at. In his book - *The Book of India*, he wrote extensively about the society, cities, villages, lives of the people of India. His take on Banaras strikes one as very insightful: “The sages and mendicants gravitate to Banaras and then refuse to leave, much like the people attached to Ka’aba who refuse to leave Mecca. They stay there till death in the hope that afterwards they may achieve salvation and stay here forever. It is believed that if you have committed a crime such as murder, your punishment will be commensurate to your sin. But only if the sinner comes to Banaras can he be absolved of sin.”

Dara Shikoh (1615–1659)

Dara Shikoh was the eldest son of the Mughal Emperor Shahjahan and his queen Mumtaz Mahal, who commanded an infantry of sixty thousand men and a cavalry of fifty thousand. He was also appointed the governor of important states like Allahabad, Gujarat, Multan and Kabul at different points of time.

In Banaras, under the tutelage of Bairagi Baba Laldas, and with the assistance of 150 Vedic Pundits, Dara Shikoh embarked on the task of understanding and translating no less than 50

Upanishads into Persian. This was published under the title of *Sirr-e-Akbar*. Following this, he wrote a tome *Majma-ul-Baharien*, ‘Meeting of Oceans’, where he tried to fuse the teachings of Sufism and the Vedant. To commemorate the Mughal crown-prince’s residency in Banaras, a still-existing borough, Daraganj, was established.

Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605–1689)

Jean Baptise Tavernier, a French traveler, jeweler and gem-merchant, started his voyages from Antwerp and Paris. In India, he travelled from Surat to Agra, Puri and Golconda, and of course to Kashi. Because of his ingenuity the Mughals called him *Hunarmand*. In his iconic travelogues *Travels in India*, published in 1676, he describes Banaras: “Benaras is a large and very well-built town. The majority of the houses being of brick and cut-stone, and more lofty than those of other towns of India; but it is very inconvenient that the streets are so narrow. It has several *caravanserais*, and among others, one very large and well-built. In the middle of the court there are two galleries where they sell cotton, silken stuff, and other kinds of merchandize. The majority of those who vend the goods are the workers who have made the pieces, and in this manner foreigners obtain them at first hand.”



Jean Baptiste Tavernier (image: Wikimedia)

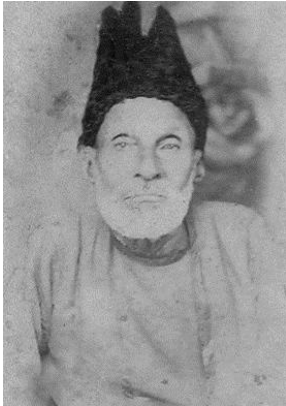
Francois Bernier (1620–1688)

Landing at the port of Surat in Gujarat, this French physician left France at the age of 36. He was soon appointed as the personal physician to Dara Shikoh. He was retained as the designated doctor to the Mughal durbar by Aurangzeb even after Dara’s death. He travelled with the royal entourage and later with his fellow Frenchman, Tavernier. These travels gave him an experience of India which he later wrote in his book *Travels in the Mughal Empires*. About Banaras, He writes: “The town of Benaras, seated on the Ganges, in a beautiful situation, and in the midst of extremely fine and rich country, may be considered a general school of gentiles. It is the Athens of India, where Brahmins and other devotees reside; they are the only persons who apply their mind to study.”

Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797–1869)

Mirza Ghalib, one of the greatest Urdu poets, passed through Banaras in 1827, on his way to Calcutta. Banaras’s charm tempted him to stay, which he did, for one whole month. To

immerse himself in the spirit of the city, he hired a *haveli* in Naurangabad .He wrote a lengthy ode to Banaras comprising of 108 couplets. In this poem *Charag-e-Dair*, ‘The lamp of the Temple’, he referred to Kashi as ‘The Ka’aba of the East’:



“I will go to Ka’aba and there blow aloud a conch-shell! In Banaras, along with temples, I’ll build a Pyramid as well! Wah! What can one say about Banaras? One can’t find another city like that anywhere. I chanced here in the twilight of my life. Had I been young, I would have stayed put here and never left. O Allah! Please protect this utopia from the evil eye, for it is far superior to any paradisiacal heaven: Kind Allah, do save Banaras from any bad omen! This paradise, this bliss, this dreamland, this heaven!”

Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (image: Wikimedia)

Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941)

Kashi was visited several times by Rabindranath Tagore. The triumvirate of Annie Besant, Mahamana Malaviya and Gurudev got along famously. He would stay at the Malaviya home on the campus of BHU, where he was the chairperson of the Bhartiya Kala Bhawan. In one of his presidential addresses, he talked about Banaras: “The best place to preserve and protect ancient Indian manuscripts and culture is Kashi. The marked difference between other pilgrim spots and Kashi is that this is not only a confluence of rivers of faith, but also of all rivulets of Indian knowledge systems. If the regional languages and cultures of India want to extend their reach beyond the boundaries of their respective regions, then Banaras could become the centre of this endeavour, because Banaras doesn’t belong to a region, but all the regions reside within this conurbation. In the history of Hindu India, whatever streams of knowledge sprang-up, all came and converged here in Kashi at one time or another.”



Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore (image: Wikimedia)

HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF BANARAS

बनारस

800 BC
राजघाट में प्राचीनतम बस्ती
Ancient settlement at Rajghat

700 BC
तेरहवें जैन तीर्थंकर पारश्वनाथ का जन्म
Birth of the 23rd Jain Tirthankar, Parshwanath

600 BC
काशी एक स्वतंत्र महाजनपद
Kashi was an independent Mahajanapad

528 BC
सारनाथ में बुद्ध का प्रथम सर्वापदेश
Lord Buddha gave his sermon at Saranath

340 BC
अशोक द्वारा सारनाथ में स्तूप तथा स्तूप की स्थापना
Emperor Ashoka installed stupa & pillar at Saranath

175 BC
शुंगकाल
Shunga Empire

81 AD
कानिष्का शासन, सारनाथ में बोधिसत्व मूर्ति
Kanishka Rule, Bodhisattva installed at Saranath

4th-5th Century
गुप्तवंश का शासन, फाहियान की वाराणसी यात्रा व सारनाथ यात्रा
Gupta Rule, Fa Hien travelled to Saranath & Banaras

606-647
ह्वेन-त्संग की वाराणसी व सारनाथ यात्रा
Hsuan Tsang travelled to Saranath & Banaras

9th Century
शंकराचार्य ने शंकर-द्विदिव्यय त्रयी
Shankaracharya composed 'Shankar Digvijay'

1194-97
खुजुरीन ऐक क हर्षना, काशी में भारी सटपाट
Qutub-ud-din-Iltutmish attacked and looted Banaras

12th Century
साहजवालों का शासन
Gohadwala Rule

15th Century
सिखंदर लोदी का शासन, मंदिरों का विध्वंस
Sikandar Lodi reigns, temples destroyed

15th-16th Century
काशी में रामानन्द, रेवारास, कबीर का वाप, व कल्याणदास और चैतन्य का प्रवास
Ramanand, Ravidas, Kabir Das resided at, and Vallabhacharya, Chaitanya visited, Kashi

1531
बनारस व सारनाथ में हुमायूँ का डेरा
Humayun camped at Saranath and Banaras

Historical Timeline from the publication by MOC, INTACH and NSCM- 'Ras Ras Banaras- A Virtual Experiential Museum'

Historical significance of Rajghat

In 1939, when digging was being done to extend the Banaras railway station, a number of antique coins, idols and mudtoys dating to 8th century BC were found. Over the years, apart from the prehistoric structures of river-bund and old fortification, terracotta idols, toys, vessels, coins, seals and beads belonging to the Gupta, Kosambi, Indo-Greek, Magh, Shunga and Kushan periods have been unearthed. These excavations have pushed back Banaras's historical timeline to almost 2000 years before Christ. This led to the discovery of the the most ancient foundations and walls of the civilization of Kashi.

Prof. Vidula Jayaswal, a key figure involved in these excavations at Rajghat, has also interestingly tried to connect the dots and relate the Jataka tales with these archeological finds. The Jataka tales, are believed to be between the time frame of 3rd century BCE- 4th century CE. Through the case study of two Jataka tales (Akitta-Jataka - No. 480 and Kachhapa-Jataka - No. 178), she has tried to develop a interdisciplinary programme for the study of myths and archeology. Varanasi finds its mention in the Jatakas tales and archeological records of the city are documented as well. This gives a scope to make correlations and comparisons of the incidences of jatakas and the excavated remains.

As an example, the Akitta-Jataka narrates a story of Akitti, a Bodhisattava born in a bhramin family who went to Varanasi to receive further education. According to the story, the gate and the quay of the settlement where he resided was named after him. One of the significant sites near Paharia Mandi in Varanasi is called Akhta. This site is very close to Sarnath and archeological evidences from this site point to the assumptions that it was a bhramin settlement where vedic rituals were performed as a daily routine. According to Prof. Jayaswal, the habitation floors of sites at Akhta, retain traces of fire ritual performances, ritual earthen pots, pottery discs and kapalas, identified as objects used in Vedic rituals. These back the assertions of the site being a bhramin settlement as mentioned in the jataka tale. The rivulet Akhta nala and the modern day name of a settlement at Akhta also connects to the aforementioned tale. For, assigning one name to a settlement and to a quay is not a common practice in this part of the country, which makes its connection to the jataka tale a possibility. Since at later vedic times only one settlement, Akhta was in existence, it may be suggested, She asserts that the story of Akitti travelling from his settlement to Varanasi for education could be of the post-later vedic phase. The archeological finds state that Akhta and Kashi-Rajghat were separate settlements between Janapada and Late Kushan times, from 800 BCE - 3rd C CE. The excavation and the stories also reveal that perhaps, these connections and linkages seem to be logical to accept and that Akhta would have been the backdrop where the events of the Akkiti-Jataka might have taken place.

Celebrated Citizens

The list of eminent citizens born or bred here and forever connected to Banaras is a long one. Mythology links the holy trinity of Brahma-Vishnu-Mahesh to Kashi. The religious texts talk about the ties of Jain Tirthankars, The Buddha and Adi Shankara to the region. And history abounds with names of emperors like Ashoka, Kushan and Harshavardhan, invaders and rulers like Mohammad Ghori, Qutubuddin Aibak, Sikandar Lodi, Humayun, Akbar, Shahjahan and Aurangzeb, and Britishers such as Warren Hastings, Cornwallis and Francis Hastings who all, in their inimitable way, shaped the face and fortune of this city civilization.⁹

The 19th and 20th century avows its own honour roll of such denizens. A few personalities, including three remarkable women, do stand out, however, for their significant contribution to the city of Kashi.

Rani Bhawani (1716–1795)

After the untimely demise of her husband, the king of Nator State in Bengal, Rani Bhawani took over the reins of the kingdom and established her credentials as an able administrator and a benevolent patron of religion, philosophy and theology.

During her long sojourn at Banaras, the Rani built many temples dedicated to the feminine divine, thus giving a deeper dimension to Shiva-obsessed Kashi. Tara, Durga, Kali, Vishalakshi are a few Mother goddesses that she revered by building their abodes, along with several shrines dedicated to Shiva and Krishna. The striking red stone structure of Durga Temple and tank, standing tall in the southern part of the city, as well as many of the rest-houses, watering-holes, perennial tanks and shady trees that dot the perilous path of the Panchkroshi Parikrama, were a gift of the very capable Rani to the city. In all she constructed 60 ponds, 18 step-wells, 15 temples, more than 500 dwellings and four major ghats in Banaras.

In the Annapurna Temple, dedicated to the goddess responsible for feeding people, the Rani was known to distribute almost 2000 kilos of rice and 300 kilos of Bengal-gram to the poor and needy every day. This queen from a little-known Bengal state came to be known as the incarnation of goddess Annapurna herself.

Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar (1725–1795)

This courageous queen of Malwa, instead of renouncing the world and relinquishing power after the demise of her father-in-law, husband and son, chose to personally lead her army to repel the challengers to her authority. She went on to make temples, shrines, tanks, monasteries and rest houses in no less than 91 places, many beyond the boundaries of her

own princely state. Infrastructure built by Maharani Ahilyabai can be found in far-flung pilgrim spots like Gaya, Somnath, Ayodhya, Mathura, Haridwar, Kanchi, Avanti, Dwarika, Badrinath, Jagannath Puri, Rameshwaram and, of course, Kashi.

Kashi held a special place in her kind heart. Here, the old Vishwanath temple had been pulled down and a mosque built at the very spot. Resourceful Rani Ahilyabai procured a piece of land adjoining the old Gyanvapi plot, and constructed a temple resembling the original which had been destroyed by Aurangzeb. When the pundits of Banaras refused to consecrate the new temple, she got holy men from Maheshwar to sanctify the new Kashi Vishwanath temple. She also gifted many new ghats and shrines to her cherished holy city. In popular lore it is said that the leaning temple of Kashi-Karvat is bowing down in homage to this caring and compassionate queen.

Annie Besant (1847–1933)



Annie Besant, born in London, was a freethinker revolutionary who led many agitations to secure rights for women in Victorian England. After participating in the iconic World Religions Parliament in Chicago in 1893, she was drawn to India, and eventually made it her home and country.

The King of Kashi, Maharaja Prabhu Narain Singh, gifted her a plot of land where she established the Central Hindu College, dedicated to preparing young, thinking minds in sync with the idea of an emerging India. With the support and encouragement of Doctor Bhagwandas and Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya she also undertook a fresh new translation of *Shrimadbhagwat Gita*.

Annie Besant (image: Wikimedia)

In 1913, joining forces with Pandit Malaviya, she offered up her Central Hindu College campus so that the vision of starting the Banaras Hindu University could be realized quickly. BHU held its initial classes here, till its own site was inaugurated. In 1916, with Lokmanya Tilak, she established the Home Rule League and was arrested by the British in reaction. Soon she was elevated to the position of President of The Indian National Congress. In 1921 she was honoured by the BHU with its first D.Litt. degree. Upon her demise in Madras, in accordance with her wish, her ashes were brought to Varanasi to be immersed in the Ganga. Millions came to bid farewell to their beloved Basanti Devi. The ‘woman with a European body but Indian soul’ was thus united with India forever.

Adi Shankaracharya (788–820)

Born at Kalladi in Kerala, Shankar left home for Kashi at the behest of his Guru, Govind Bhagwatpaad. After an arduous journey of more than 2500 kilometers, he reached Kashi and headed straightaway for a dip in the Ganga and then to the temple of Ma Annapurna. Shankar asked not for food but to bless him with the qualities of Knowledge, Renunciation and Attainment.



Adishankarasharya by Raja Ravi Verma (image: Wikimedia)

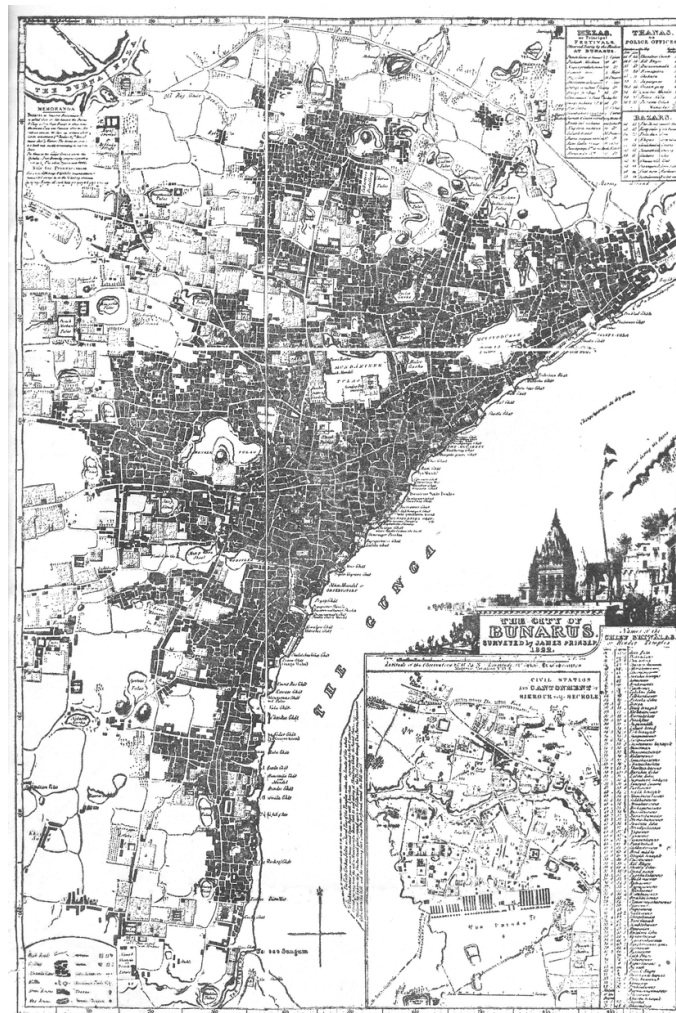
Once, as he was headed to the Ganga, a lady sat in the middle of the road with the dead body of her husband. When Shankar requested her to move it away, she asked him to directly tell the corpse to move. “How can a body, which has lost its *Shakti* move?” asked an amazed Shankar. The woman shot back, “You recognize only the Absolute *Brahman*. But see how without *Shakti* or ‘the female power’ even an omnipotent male Shiva turns into a lifeless cadaver.” Shankar saluted her and henceforth acknowledged the power of the divine feminine as well.

On another occasion, an outcast with four dogs blocked Shankar’s path. When Shankar’s disciples asked the man to move, he asked, “Whom do you want to move? The body that is me, or the soul that is me?” When one of them cursed him angrily, he said “There is the same soul in all men, damned or blessed. The sun, whether reflected in the holy Ganga or in a sinful cup of wine, remains unchanged.” Shankar immediately understood his divinity and fell at his feet, whereupon the man transformed into Lord Shankar Himself. And since that day they say, “Where Shankar and Shankar come face to face, Kashi is a blessed place!”

Adi Shankar equated Varanasi with the whole globe. He left the city to fulfill his task of establishing four Temple-Seats in the far corners of the country. At a very young age, the man who believed that the ‘World is but a small family’, passed away, having already achieved his purpose in life. As he used to say, “The important thing is not the individual man, but the collective universal whole that binds us all together.”

James Prinsep (1799–1840)

In 1820, young James Prinsep was sent from Calcutta by the Company to be the Assay Master at Benaras Mint. The moment he saw Banaras, Prinsep was so captivated by the city that he dedicated the next 10 years to the betterment of the place, by streamlining its administration, writing extensively about it and making dozens of drawings and sketches of its localities.



James Prinsep's map of Banaras published in 1822

Singh Rana P.B. 2018. Urbanisation in Varanasi and interfacing Historic Urban Landscapes (researchgate.net)

Prinsep was responsible for making the first correct map of Banaras, preparing blueprints of important temples and mansions, calculating the position of the stars over its sky, laying an

underground sewage system, finding ways to tackle flood waters of the Ganga, correcting the measure and weight of minted coins, establishing The Benaras Literary Society, deciphering the Brahmi-Kharoshti script to decode Ashokan edicts, undertaking an accurate census, recording boroughs, houses, ponds and shrines, listing essential commodities, and laying a bridge on the river Karamnasa. Also well-known are his sketches of Banaras; so vibrant that the city seems to almost move before one's eyes. Prinsep's yeoman service to his 'revered holy beloved city' puts it forever in his debt. Prinsep's obsession with Banaras was so well known that his British colleagues gave him the nickname *Gora Banarasi*. In 1833 he published *Benaras Illustrated* from Calcutta, which included several dozen of his lithographs of the ghats, temples, fairs, bazaars and life in the city, as well as word portraits. James Prinsep accomplished so much in India and England in his relatively short span of life that a variety of flower was named 'Prinsepia' after him. Today wherever a Prinsepia blossoms, people think of the Banarasi Englishman.

Sir Alexander Cunningham (1814–1893)

19 year old Alexander Cunningham came to India from England as a rookie engineer with the Bengal Engineer Group. In a happy coincidence, the moment he landed in Calcutta in 1833, he met James Prinsep, and the rest is history – or rather archaeology! From here on, apart from serving the Company as an engineer and in many other positions, history and archaeology became his passion. Cunningham went to Banaras and with F.C. Macy set up the archaeological dig of the stupas of Sarnath to unravel its mysteries.

During his time with the army and as ADC to the Governor General, Cunningham travelled all over India and he used every opportunity to understand the history and the archaeology of the place. After Banaras he worked closely on several sites from Sanchi to Taxila. His research and excavation activities were underwritten with his personal funds. But he realized the need for a formal institutionalized approach to manage the archaeological treasures of a vast country like India. In 1871, his untiring effort led to the setting up of the Archeological Survey of India by Governor General Canning, with Cunningham as its head. He authored many volumes on his interpretation of history based on archaeological findings. His journey from novice engineer Cunningham to becoming Sir Alexander began in Banaras and it would not be wrong to say that the man known as 'Father of Indian Archaeology' was a son of Banaras.

Rani Laxmi Bai (1828-1858)

Born on 19th November, 1828 in Varanasi, Lakshmi Bai, later became the Rani of Jhansi, the queen of the princely state of Jhansi in North India. She was one of the leading figures of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and became a symbol of resistance to the British Raj for Indian nationalists. She was born in a Marathi Bhramin family who gave her



the name Manikarnika Tambe, which was later nicknamed as Manu. Today, her birthplace is marked in Varanasi near Asi as the Rani Laxmibai Janmasthan, an open museum space. This site is visited by the tourists and locals alike.

Mahamana Madan Mohan Malaviya (1861–1946)

When the notable personalities of Banaras are counted, a name that shines bright is that of Bharat Ratna Mahamana Madan Mohan Malaviya. Proficient in Sanskrit, Hindi, Urdu and Persian from a young age, he also composed poetry under the nom de plume 'Makrand', which was published mostly in local magazines. In 1886, Malaviya's address to the second convention of the Indian National Congress greatly impressed its incumbent President, Dadabhai Naoroji, and thus began his political life.

Madan Mohan Malaviya, 1961 - stamp of India (image: Wikimedia)



Malaviyaji also became the editor of *Hindustan* newspaper and, while continuing to practice law, edited other papers like *Indian Opinion* and *Abhyuday*. With Motilal Nehru he brought out a new daily called *Leader*. As time went by, it was Banaras, and not Allahabad, that started drawing him in. Malaviyaji decided to dedicate his life fully to the national cause, spirituality, education, literature and social work. Chairing the first Hindi Literature Conference, he said, "Hindi speaking people should educate themselves properly in Hindi. But bringing Hindi and Urdu together is also an important task." He was a vociferous opponent of dividing India in the name of religion and advocated many new rights for citizens. But the most important task of his life was yet to be accomplished.

In 1911, with Annie Besant, he dreamt of establishing a grand university where students could study not only cutting-edge science and technology, but learn the most ancient Indian traditions, cultural and religious practices, and Sanskrit. After getting the King of Kashi to promise a suitable piece of land for this endeavour, he traversed the country, raising funds from rich royals and commoners alike. Wherever he went he would recite and interpret the Gita for people and ask them for money for the university in return. In 1916, his wish was fulfilled and thus was born the largest residential university of Asia. Present at the inaugural was Mahatma Gandhi who gave him the new sobriquet of *Mahamana*, 'the great hearted'.

Mahamana was the first Chancellor of Banaras Hindu University, and then a proctor for life. He also built a grand Shiva Temple inside the campus, known as the New Kashi Vishwanath. In 1946, when he breathed his last, the whole town grieved the loss of the man who gave our nation the immortal dictum of *Satyamev Jayate* or 'Truth shall prevail'. In 2015, the country conferred the highest civilian award of Bharat Ratna on Mahamana.

Chinnaswami Subramaniya Bharati (1882–1921)

Subbaiah was born in Tirunelveli of Tamil Nadu. Seeing the young boy's grasp of music, language and poetry, people started calling him 'Bharati - the son of Saraswati'. At age 16, life took an unforeseen turn, when his father died, and he had to move in with his father's sister, who lived in Banaras. Banaras proved lucky for young Bharati. Here he mastered Sanskrit, studied the Vedas and Upanishads, apart from learning 32 Indian and foreign languages. Banaras gave him the opportunity to explore a spiritual dimension and to connect with the national political scene.

Back in Madras, Subramaniya Bharati concentrated on writing in Tamil and bringing out Tamil and English journals. In between, back in Banaras, he met Sister Nivedita, who had been close to Swami Vivekanand. She inspired Bharati to write extensively on women's issues. Recognizing the revolutionary nature of his poetry, the British arrested him. It was Annie Besant who bailed him out. In 1919, after meeting Mahatma Gandhi, Bharathiyar shifted his focus to the concept of *Swadesi* in a new magazine called *Swadesi Mitran*. Bharati, arguably the greatest Tamil poet of the 20th century, wrote on every conceivable subject on earth. In his last public address, delivered from the steps of Erode Library, he spoke about the 'Immortality of Man'. There is no doubt that this man, shaped in his adolescence by Kashi-Varanasi, is an immortal Indian.

Lal Bahadur Shastri (1904–1966)

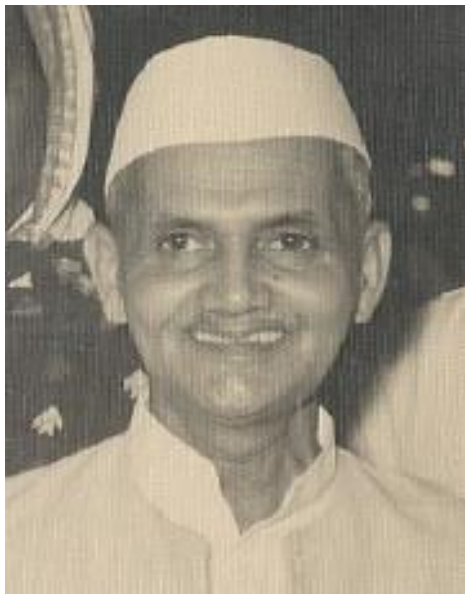
Born in Ramnagar of Banaras, Lal Bahadur Shastri lost his father in childhood. Forced to live with his maternal grandfather in Mughal Sarai, he started his education by learning Urdu and Persian. Once when his uncle killed a pigeon, young Lal Bahadur went on a hunger strike. This was his first brush with *Satyagraha* or non-violent peaceful protest. At the age of 13, when floods in the Ganga made it difficult to attend school in Banaras, he jumped into the river with books tied to his head and swam across to attend classes. But his bright career as a student was under threat because of lack of money for school fees. In this situation, one of his school teachers hired him to teach his own children, so that Lal Bahadur could continue his studies.

At the age of 17, after attending a public meeting in Banaras addressed by both the Mahatma and Mahamana, he decided to dedicate his life to the cause of Indian independence. He was arrested but released on account of being a juvenile. Prodded by Acharya Kripalani, Lal Bahadur did complete his course and got a degree of 'Shastri' from Kashi Vidya Peeth, but his heart and soul remained with the freedom movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. He spent 9 years in various prison terms.

After independence, Shastri ji was appointed the Home Minister of U.P. under the leadership of Pandit Gobind Ballabh Pant. Sticking to his lifelong commitment to non-violence, Shastri ji urged his police force to avoid the use of cane batons and instead use water cannons for crowd control.

In 1952, when the first elected government was constituted at the centre, Shastri ji was made the Railway Minister. When lives were lost in a rail accident, he immediately took responsibility for the tragedy and resigned. Prime Minister Nehru refused to accept his resignation and instead started grooming him as his ‘undeclared’ successor.

In 1964, Lal Bahadur Shastri took oath as the second prime minister of India. At this critical juncture when the nation faced many challenges like shortage of food grain, language riots, and military threats from Pakistan, Shastri ji gave the clarion call of ‘*Jai Jawan –Jai Kisan*’ inspiring a green revolution in the country and imparting a befitting strategic defeat to the adventurous neighbour. The country still salutes this son of the soil, and wonders what other achievements this brave-heart of Banaras would have attained, had he lived longer.



Lal Bahadur Shastri (Image: Wikimedia)

Endnotes:

1 Eck Diana L., *Banaras: City of Light*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1993; p. 296

2 Ibid, p. 298

3 Medhasananda Swami, *Varanasi at the Crossroads*, Kolkata, RamaKrishna Mission, Institute of Culture, 2002; p.11

4 Majumdar Nandini, *Banaras: Walks through India’s Sacred City*, New Delhi, Roli Books Pvt. Ltd, 2014; p.10

5 Ibid, p.11

6 Eck Diana L., *Banaras: City of Light*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1993; p. 83

7 Medhasananda Swami, *Varanasi at the Crossroads*, Kolkata, RamaKrishna Mission, Institute of Culture, 2002; p.16

8 Vidula Jayaswal, *Varanasi: Myths and Scientific Studies*, New Delhi, Aryan Books International, 2013

9 Travellers to Kashi and Celebrated Citizens sections from *Ras Ras Banaras, A Virtual Experiential Museum*, Copyright © 2019 MoC, NCSM and INTACH

Traditional Knowledge

“The whole city is a university. Unlike classes, departments and colleges, every house belonging to a Brahmin is a centre of education.”

Francois Bernier

In this documentation, the segment on traditional knowledge has been documented as a mixture of stories shared by scholars and old knowledge holders residing in Varanasi. These stories are related to facets of daily life and associated practices that convey the spirit of Banaras, and status of traditional elements like Yoga and Ayurveda.

In some of these anecdotes, one finds a lingering sentiment for the Banaras that existed in the past. Traditional knowledge, in this chapter, is looked through the lens of academicians and scholars from different fields, residents of old houses and bhawans, and purveyors of traditional methods of healing and well-being.

The city was divided into the Pukka Mahal which stretched to the east of a street that ran from Chowk in the north to Godowlia in the south and the Kachcha Mahal area which lay west of that street. Today one can hear of the demarcations of the city into the Pakka Mahal and the Kachcha Mahal from some of the people. Some of the most holy sites like the Kashi Vishwanath Temple and the Manikarnika Ghat are situated in the Pakka Mahal area. The Pakka Mahal comprises one of the densest architectural layouts with an inimitable network of lanes that support various forms of movement. Within these lanes, there are residential houses, shops selling a variety of utility as well as food items, ashrams and Ved Yajna schools, dance and music institutes/classes, temple compounds as well as shrine sites, restaurants and cafes, and market clusters.



‘The areas which have high density of religious heritage properties are also the highest in density of commercial wholesale and retail outlets’.¹ The total length Varanasi’s galis is said to be 480 kms and the Vishwanath Gali that houses the Kashi Vishwanath Temple is one of the most crowded lanes with hordes of little stores selling puja samagri and other items, and pilgrims queuing up to enter the temple.² The Vishwanath Gali is a highly guarded lane with policemen deputed at all the entry and exit points.

Crowded Vishwanath Gali

Kashi-Vishwanath Temple

Considered the center of Hindu Sanatan faith, Kashi-Vishwanath temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva, is known as one among the 12 Jyotirlingas found all over India. This temple has been built-destroyed and built again several times during its history. It was reconstructed in the year 1780 by the Maratha monarch, Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar of Indore. All year round, each day, from predawn to past midnight, thousands of pilgrims visit this temple, with loud chants of "Om Namah Shivay" and "Har Har Madadev" rending the air. A visit to the city of Varanasi is considered incomplete without the 'darshan' of the presiding deity. The lanes and roads leading to the temple are crammed with people during special festivals like Mahashivratri, Kanwariya season and more.

Along with the Vishwanath linga, there are depictions here of Avimukteshwar, Baikuntheshwar, Kubereshwar and Vighneshwar. There are also shrines dedicated to Yakshas, Nikunj, Mahakal, Dandpani and Virupaksh shivlingas.

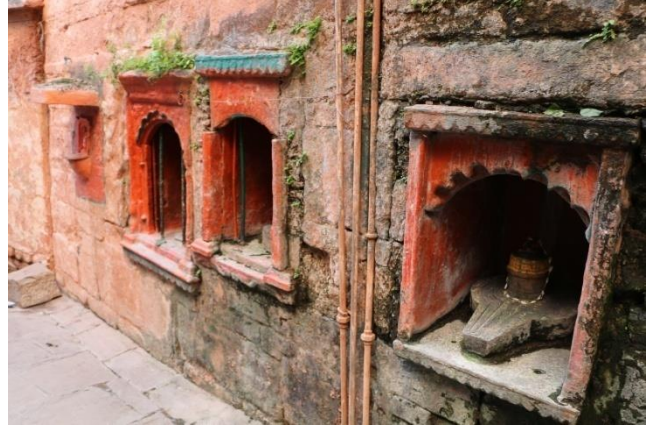
Different aartis are performed daily for the deity five times in a day. These are the Mangala Aarti – At 3 AM in the Morning, Bhoga Aarti – From 11.15 AM to 12.20 PM, Sandhya Aarti – As the name suggests – it takes place in the evening, from 7 PM to 8.15 PM, Shringara Aarti – it extends after evening, from 9 PM to 10.15 PM and lastly the Shayana Aarti – In the last hours of the evening, from 10.30 PM to 11 PM. Special pujas and rituals are also organised by the temple priests other than the regular aartis.

Bishop Reginald Heber, the Anglican Bishop of Calcutta is said to have made a trip to Banaras in 1823 and 1824 and written:

“...The streets like those of Chester, are considerably lower than the ground-floors of the houses, which have mostly arched rows in front, with little shops behind them. Above these, the houses are richly embellished with verandahs, galleries, projecting oriel windows, and very broad overhanging eaves, supported by carved brackets. The number of temples is very great, mostly small and stuck like shrines in the angles of the streets, and under the shadow of lofty houses.”³

There are various beliefs that try to explain the geographical divisions of the city into different zones on the basis of divinity. One such belief is that the city consisted of four divisions namely, Kashi, Varanasi, Avimukta and the Antargriha of Vishwanath. There is another view that divides the city into three sections, extending from north to south namely, Omkara, Vishweshwara and Kedara respectively.⁴

Apart from the major temples, shrines and other centres of religious interest, there are multiple small and big sites, corners and lanes that house either idols or a dramatic representation of various gods. Such arrangements can be found tucked inside old houses, or hidden between spiraled lanes in the most unusual locations.



Temples and idols found at ghats and streets of Varanasi

It won't be too fanciful to say that the lanes and streets of Varanasi, especially in the old city area, represent an almost impenetrable form of spirituality, primarily manifested in the multiple idols, shrines, sacred groves, and even animals like cows and monkeys that can be occasionally found meandering around here.

Being the city of Shiva (Avimukta—the never forsaken), pilgrims flock the city with great zeal and devotion for darshana—not sightseeing but “sacred sight-seeing”.⁵ Vaishnavism and Shaivism have coexisted in the city and there are different temples (Shiva temples, Devi temples, Vishnu temples, Durga temples, Hanuman temples), holy tanks or wells (Durga Kund, Lolarka Kund, Manikarnika Kund, Pishach Mochan), and other sacred spots which establish it as a stronghold of religious sentiments that have prevailed for years, and still govern a devotee's movement in the city.



Pishach Mochan Temple

Ancient texts have referred to Kashi as a centre of learning, a fact that is reflected in the stories shared by the people of the city.⁶ Dr. Rajeshwar Acharya, a renowned musician of Varanasi says that the city is full of ‘gurus’, and they can be found anywhere on the streets. There is also no particular dress style or appearance of a guru in this city. Everyone holds some or the other kind of useful knowledge but there are also those who pretend to be gurus. This is why it is essential to identify a guru without getting fooled by the fake ones. The city has produced scholars and ‘vidvaans’ in the fields of academics, sports, and spiritual disciplines of the Jainas, the Buddhists, and the yogis. The Vedas and Upanishads and other schools of philosophy and religious thought are taught in the ashrams, various disciplines in music are taught through both the ‘Guru Shishya Parampara’, as well as in music schools following a formal curriculum.

Sarnath is located 13 kms north-east of Varanasi and has been a historically relevant site for Buddhist pilgrims. It is believed to be the area where Gautam Buddha gave his first sermon and set in motion the Wheel of Dharma and began his work probably around the 6 century BCE. As one enters the ruins, a large circular foundation is visible that is believed to be the remaining structure of what used to be the grand Dharmarajika stupa. The tallest structure still standing at this site is the Dhammekh stupa that is encased in Chunar stone and baked bricks. The outer walls of the stupa are adorned with designs such as flowers, creepers, horses, elephants and human figures. Buddha Purnima is celebrated as one of the major festivals here marked by prayer meetings, group meditation and processions.⁷

Also referred to as Isipatana, this city is one of the four pilgrimages mentioned by the Buddha for his followers. The deer park in Sarnath is said to be the spot where Buddha taught the four noble truths and the teachings associated with it. During the rule of Ashoka, Sarnath achieved

numerous temples, viharas, sculptures and stone stupas. Another the small brick building which surmounts the mound known as 'Chaukhandi' was built at the close of the 16th century by Akbar, to commemorate a visit paid to the spot by his father Humayun.

Apart from various temples, the Dhamek Stupa, the Sarnath museum, and the remains of the Ashokan Pillar, there is also an institute of higher learning at Sarnath. The Sarnath museum holds a large collection of statues and artefacts that were excavated from this area including the grand four faced lion capital.



Dhamek Stupa, Sarnath

Maharshi Patanjali, the preceptor of Ayurveda and Yoga, is also associated with Varanasi.⁸ People have faith in traditional medicine which is evident in the numerous Ayurveda clinics and stores spread throughout the city. Yoga is taught and practiced in multiple formats. One such form is visible at the Asi Ghat during Subah-e-Banaras, where people gather in groups to practice yoga on the riverfront. One can randomly spot individuals doing yoga at the ghats or tourists visiting the numerous yoga centres dotted around the city to acquire these skills.

Great thinkers, artists in the fields of performing arts, litterateurs, researchers and historians, scholars of ancient Indian sciences like astrology and Vastu Shastra (traditional architecture), teachers of Sanskrit and religious texts (in still existing traditional Sanskrit schools), and famous religious and spiritual personalities have belonged to or passed through this eternal city of bliss. The likes of Bhartendu Harishchandra (known as the father of modern Hindi literature), Munshi Premchand, Bhakti poets like Kabir Das and Ravidas, Panini (the author of *Ashtadhyayi*), Shankaracharya (the religious reformer of Hindu school of monism), and many more, have shaped the religious, artistic, cultural and intellectual spirit of Varanasi, which continues to attract students from all over the world in pursuit of wisdom, knowledge and learning.

The Varana River flows into the Ganga in the north and the Asi River joins the Ganga in the south.⁹ The Ganga River enhances the holiness of Varanasi with its supremely purifying qualities, and a customary bath in the Ganga is revered by almost every pilgrim.

The poet Jagannatha composed one of the most popular poems in praise of the River Ganga, the '*Ganga Lahiri*' during the Mughal period, which reflects the vigor of knowledge and learning that the city inspired at that time.¹⁰

In ancient times, education was imparted in the homes of teachers, private buildings donated by pious families and even at the ghats. There were many Brahmin teachers who taught just to instil a sense of righteousness without accepting money in return.¹¹ In Varanasi, the tradition of householder-scholars (monastic scholars and household-pandits) who impart knowledge to pupils without accepting any monetary remuneration still prevails.¹²

The current education system of the city is a developed version of certain traditional methods of teaching, the changes introduced and incorporated by thinkers like Pandit Mohan Malaviya (BHU), Babu Shiv Prasad Gupta (Kashi Vidyapeeth), the British colonial influence (Sampurnanand Sanskrit University), J. Krishnamurti (Krishnamurti Foundation), Smt. Bimla Poddar (Jnana-Pravaha). The Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapith and the Sampurnanand Sanskrit University are universities, and the Safia Islamia and the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies are two deemed universities in Varanasi. Apart from these central universities and institutes, there are numerous schools, colleges and private institutes of education. The Bharat Kala Bhawan, a museum within the BHU university campus exhibits a wide collection of Indian miniature paintings, sculptures, a rare philatelic and numismatic collection, unique textiles, and galleries dedicated to Alice Bonner and Nicholas Roerich.¹³ Written in the mid-fourteenth century, Kashi Khanda is one of the most reliable sources of the city's history.



Sampurnanand Sanskrit University

Kaal Bhairav or the god of death is considered a form of Shiva that evolved from the ancient families of deities called Yaksha, Gana, Naga, and Bhairav. Also known as the 'black terror' for his black colour, Kaal Bhairav is deemed a manifestation of Shiva's wrath. He is

considered as the kotwal or ‘police chief’ of Kashi, keeping a check on every person’s good and bad deeds. Today, the temple of Kaal Bhairav is one of the most popular temples in the city.



L to R: Pictorial representation of Kaal Bhairav; Black dog is considered to be the mount of Bhairav

Understanding Kashi

Sh. Hari Ram Dwivedi



Sh. Hari Ram Dwivedi, shared with us a description of the mystical layout of Kashi, the nature of its people and its evergreen spirit of tolerance. A passionate poet, Hari Bhai is a retired employee of All India Radio. He came to Banaras in 1951, when he was in the 9th standard, and has lived here since. He couldn’t detach himself from the values and sentiments associated with his village in Mirzapur district – the land, its agriculture, traditions and the culture. He brought all these along with him, when he

moved to Banaras. He got a job in Akashvani (All India Radio, Varanasi) in the rural programme, while he was pursuing a B.Ed. Folk songs have always held his interest since childhood, and he would always go with his mother to the houses where women would be singing/performing folk songs. He was so enamored by the richness of these folk songs, that he began writing his own (tukkbandi). He says humbly that he is not an expert, or an

academician with a research or teaching background, but he speaks from the knowledge that he has accumulated in the process of experiencing these things.

According to him, it is extremely tough to study this city. The more he tried, the more he got entangled in its complexities. None the less, his interest kept on increasing, and till date he believes he is still studying this city. Every corner has its own flavour of music, literature, art, Akkhadpan, Alhadpan, Dabangayi and Gundayi. All of this is unmatched. This city is one of its kind, and to know this city, one has to ‘live this city’, not merely live in this city. The road that leads to Dashashvamedh from Godowlia, and from there to the Chowk through Macchodari park, Gaaye Ghat, all of that area is Pakka Mahal represented by its labyrinthine lanes and the cultures of food, lifestyle and trade, all of which is born out of these lanes.

Prof. Rana PB Singh



Prof. Rana PB Singh has studied and taught Cultural Geography and Heritage Studies at the Banaras Hindu University. He has studied cultural landscapes and nature throughout his life. He believes that Banaras is a micro cosmos and the word Banaras itself denotes its culture – ‘bana’: ready to serve, ‘ras’: juice of life. Here, Shiva resides in multiple forms like Maheshwara, the supreme lord, or Bhairava, the

black lord. He recalls what his teacher Niels Gutschow had said, “There is no city, at all on this earth, parallel to Banaras.” There is so much complexity, so much contrast, and there is chaos. We call it a Hindu city, but three Jain Tirthankaras were born here, Guru Nanak visited several times, this is the birth place of Kabir, and has a whole Sufi tradition.

There are 1,388 Muslim Islamic shrines here, both Shia and Sunni. So, how can you just call this a Hindu city ? This is like a mosaic.

The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts decided that something special from Banaras has to be highlighted in a way that one can communicate to the children, especially young students, and within that group, especially the girls. Under the guidance and the framework cast by Mr. Kamlesh Dutt Tripathi (IGNCA), which was accepted by the Ministry of Culture, three small schools were selected with three different themes that were to be highlighted at the interpretation centres planned as under:

- 1) Prabhu Narayan inter-college at Ramnagar – the theme is Performance Arts because this area is famous for its Ramlila.
- 2) An all-girls school at Durgakund – the theme is math, monastery and ashram tradition because lots of ashram traditions can be found in this area.

3) Harishchandra Inter-College in Maldahiya – there are many music gharanas in this area, hence music became the theme.



The interpretation centre by IGNCA at Harishchandra Inter-College in Maldahiya

Content related to these three themes is being put up on the website, as well as detailed brochures containing information regarding the same are being brought out. It has begun with these three themes, and more themes may be added in the future.

He says he has a big collection of 300 books on Kashi – some old, some xerox copies, some rare copies; over 150 maps, out of which almost 99% have been made by him, either replicated, copied or resurveyed and then developed, but no individual or institution to give these away to. He wonders “Who will take care of all this, who will be the successor?”

He believes that there should be a focus on Spiritual and Pilgrimage Tourism here. Tourism may be always secondary, for relaxing purpose; the real purpose should be to touch the spirit like Shikoku, Japan (Buddhist Pilgrimage route) or Santiago de Compostela, Spain (Catholic pilgrimage route).

Stories from the Pukka Mahal of Banaras



Sh. Raman Shankar Pandeya at his home in the Pakka Mahal area of Varanasi

Sh. Raman Shankar Pandya belongs to the Johri community, originally hailing from Gujarat, but his family has been residing and doing business in Varanasi for ages. From Golconda Fort in Hyderabad, to Haider Ali, his forefathers have served many great patrons of art in the field of jewel making and diamond cutting. His forefathers, who worked as ‘jewellers’ for Tipu Sultan, were informed about a fearful fate in store for them because of which they decided to escape back to Gujarat. While they fled towards Gujarat on camels, they lost their way and ended up in Kashi. He returned to Kashi to revive the traditional art of Gulabi Meenakari.

Sitting in a leisurely manner, fitting himself into a nook of a door, Pandya ji picks out segments of memories, myths, facts and music to describe his Kashi, giving it the status of a masterpiece. According to him, a 400-500 year old model representation of Kashi that shows endless lanes, and no roads is a true picture of Kashi.

He seems in his element when talking about Kashi, and as his passionate story-telling continues in an impromptu baithak, people come and go. In his sharing of tales of his Kashi, his excitement is palpable but there is also a rueful regret for the Kashi that once was; something that perhaps survives in his imagination. His house, hidden between endless lanes and protected from every ray of sunshine, has a unique architecture and atmosphere, thronged by visitors, friends and workers for varied purposes during the day. He relates stories that reveal the fervour that dominated the city once.

His days comprise of all these tangible and intangible elements and activities, making the Kashi of his words and thoughts come alive, not just imagined. He recalls conversations exclusive to Banarasis, wherein one person would ask “Kya ho?” directing a question to the other person, and the other person would respond with a mere, “Ha ho!”, and the entire gist of the conversation would be packed into these two mini sentences. The two people involved in such a conversation would comprehend all the rest through these two words. He shares with

us this special style of communication that packs the details into mini two-three word sentences, and the persons involved go ahead with their respective programme.

In the Varanasi of today, the use of these peculiar styles might be diminishing, but like he himself said, 'Kashi lupt nahi ho sakti', it hasn't died. One can still find, though selectively, patrons and learners of Banarasiana, interacting with one another, using such colloquialisms and vernacular argots. Words and exclamations like 'Guru', 'Jiyo Raja', 'Har Har Mahadev' retain a nativeness in the intangible vocabulary of this city.

There are four divisions in the so-called higher-class societal composition in Varanasi. After the Rajwada (royalty), there is the Raees, the Zamindar, the Mahajan (the one who invests money/financier), and the Kothidar (vyapari or businessman). The Mahajans of Kashi used to have 350 branches all over India before Independence. In an era where communication and transport were highly sparse and difficult, they had already advanced to that level.

The Shaukeens of Banaras

With the weakening of a centralised Mughal power in the 18th century, the local administrators grew more independent, and through a series of leases, the political responsibility for Banaras passed from the hands of the Nawab Wazir of Awadh to a local Brahmin landowning family. New alignments of local power began to take place, trading centres began to compete with one another and merchant bankers flocked Banaras for its commercial opportunities. A community of people called Gosains were basically monks who had become traders and soldiers. They were mendicants who traded goods and developed military skills to protect themselves while they moved on pilgrimage routes. An elite community grew out of the collaborations between the merchant bankers, Gosains (traders), and Rajas of Banaras. These people participated in and influenced the political, cultural, social decisions of the city. From patronizing music, dance, theatre, literature, and arts and crafts, to racing their horse-driven carriages down the streets and sailing king-sized houseboats down the river, these aristocrats regarded themselves with pride as shaukeen or 'full of passion'.¹⁴

Sh. Amitabh Bhattacharaya

A student of philosophy, Sh. Amitabh Bhattacharaya has been living in Banaras for over 60 years. He has been associated with a newspaper as a journalist for almost 40 years. He calls the city spiritual and pluralistic in character which makes it possible for 27 (or more) sects to co-exist. Banaras has a sprawling tangible as well as intangible culture reflecting a



congregation of atheism, partial atheism and complete theism. The city with a history of 28 names is known for its tolerance which is evident in its religious assets - the number of temples representing myriad faiths. He believes that all the sects share a love-hate relationship and the city is piously addicted to loving everything. For him, Banaras throughout history has always been above ritualism – a rather protestant city deeply immersed in Shaivism.

The vibe of the city places spiritualism over ritualism and religion, maybe due to Shaivism – Shiva’s faith which portrays him not as a deity but as someone who works for kalyan or welfare (mentioned in Vedas). Shiva signifies a dualist philosophy which states that so long as we are ignorant we are ‘jeev’ (alive). Nandi the bull who is often seen outside or around a Shiva linga is the metaphor of ‘being’, and the door of the temple or the room where the linga is situated, signifies ignorance. The bull relentlessly strives to open the door and the moment this door opens, Shiva (the linga) is visible which means that Shiva has enlightened the ‘jeev’. The ‘jeev’ becomes an enlightened ‘jeev’ (Shiva prakashvaan) after he sees Shiva. This philosophy can be seen in the temples of the city with Nandi sitting at the entrance. This dualist philosophy gave rise to a number of temples being built simultaneously in Kashi almost 1000 years ago. Before this, the prevalence of Vedic philosophy considered Brahman as the supreme, and there was no emphasis on temple building.

Drawing a connect between the current nature of the city and its long history, he speaks of how Buddha and his teachings are evident in the guiding philosophy of the city – the attitude of desirelessness entrenched in Buddha’s words, “my mind has come out of dormancy but my body is in inertia.” This approach approximates a state where one doesn’t wander around searching for alternatives to attain a fulfilling life hence it is also called a state of being without alternatives, wherein one stops running after vikalp (alternatives) and embraces an outlook of contentment.

Amitabh ji explains that there is a belief in Banaras that the human body is a temple and the soul is the deity. This belief is inspired from the Ganga which exhibits a distinct behaviour in this city by reversing the course of its flow from south to north. This anti-flow symbolizes an act of introspection, a journey within, into the self – into ‘chidakash’, a state where the sky enters our consciousness and the sky and our soul become one. Such introspection is to be learnt from the Ganga.

He shares that “Banaras is not heritage (past perfect) to me, it is lineage (present continuous). It is an art of living.” One finds here the maximum possible sects of all religions – Shia, Sunni, Ashraf, sects of Jews, Jain, Catholic, Protestant, and Hindu – coexisting in peace. This is a very unique co-habitation which has strengthened the city and its spirit of solidarity, tolerance and acceptance by never allowing political ploys to penetrate and damage the

intricate mesh of balance among various sects. There have been small fights, unrests and upsurges but nothing major in terms of religious or cultural clashes.

He feels an interesting shift is seen in parts of Banaras where it has served as a refuge for many displaced people during the 1947 partition and other wars. Banaras is known for its Mumukshu Bhawans, belief in mortality, and attainment of Moksha. Pilgrims flock the city to pray for and seek a peaceful death, and detachment from the cycle of rebirth. The refugees settling in Banaras began exploring livelihood and sustenance options and managed to remould the operative framework of the city by seeking to live here; and contrary to the Banaras desire of a peaceful 'end' here, the notion of an immortal mind and mortal desire also developed. In certain old houses one can find a glimpse of this faith in mortality where the owner would get a white marble at the entrance inscribed with, "Idameep na tishthet" (this too shall not stay).

Monastic Traditions

With ascetics like Trailanga Swami, Swami Mahadevananda, Tarak Brahmananda Saraswati, Harihar Swami and many others, the city has a tradition of sadhus or ascetics who have directed spiritual services and practices for the people.¹⁵ The sadhus live in mathas or monasteries that belong to various sects and sub-sects of Hinduism; they live a disciplined life of devotion and undertake the study of scriptures (Swadhyaya).¹⁶

Apart from the ascetics who live in an ashram, math or a monastery, there are other holy men who roam independently and whose descriptions vary- while some wear only a kaupina (loincloth), others keep long beards, matted locks and besmear ash on their bodies.¹⁷

The dandi swamis or ascetics are devotees of Shiva, and can be recognised by the 'danda' (ascetic staff) they carry with them at all times. Adi Shankaracharya founded this sect in the ninth century and its members are staunch defenders of the orthodox Hindu tradition. Muchhali Bandara Math at Nagwa, Chausatti Math at Chausatti Ghat, Dharam Sangh in Durga Kund, Sanatan Gaudiya Math and Mata Anandmai Ashram are some of the ashrams and mathas in Varanasi.

The Kashi Mumukshu Bhawan Sabha was established by Swami Ghanashyamananda in 1920 in Kedar Khand near the banks of River Ganga. Its campus is spread over five acres of land comprising of Ishwar Math for dandi swamis, Ved Vedang Mahavidyalaya for teaching Sanskrit to students, as well as Prathama Vidyalaya to teach Sanskrit to young boys in the gurukul format. The Bhawan also provides accommodation for old people who want to spend the last days of their life in Kashi. There is a yagyashala, four temples, and an Ayurvedic and Homeopathic charitable dispensary in the premises of the Mumukshu Bhawan. There are about 150 rooms with an underground enclave for sadhana for dandi swamis in the Ishwarmath, where they are provided free food, lodging and milk.



Swami Ishwaranand Teerth is a dandi swami who has been living at the Mumukshu Bhawan for the last 20 years. They follow the traditions of Adi Guru Shankaracharya who believed in 'Brahm satya, jagat mithya', and hence they follow this principle in the form of sanyaas. This can be interpreted such that the earth (srishti) remains as it is but a person who attains self-knowledge and self-awareness (aatm-gyani), perceives everything from a different outlook. One has to give up the hope of receiving something in lieu of a deed done. They live a life where their deeds are directed by the 'contentment' of doing a good deed without expecting favour or good fortune.

He says that Brahmin men who come to live here have to follow the lifestyle which is centered around bairagya (detachment or renunciation), and as a part of a daily schedule, one does puja-path, Ganga snaan, daan, and other such activities as prescribed by their tradition. In this compound, there is also a separate space for old women and widows. Lodging and food is provided free of cost to those who enroll for this ritualistic tradition and decide to follow the principles of life as prescribed by the organization.

The Hindu religion is based on the concept of re-birth (punar janam). The Vedas (shrutiyaan) are a written proof for us, and the Puranas (smritiyan) follow the Vedas. The Puranas say that Kashi-vas can help you attain moksha or salvation. But Vedas say that one cannot attain salvation without knowledge. One will not attain salvation just by living in Kashi, but one will have to perform Karma (deeds), attain aatma gyan or brahm gyan while staying in Kashi. The Puranas state that a karma performed in a Tirtha (pilgrimage place), be it good or bad, will definitely have a result, as compared to at any other place. The attainment of Brahmgyan is a process of thorough struggle which includes Satya, Ahimsa, Brahmacharaya, Niyam, Pranayam, and more such self-strengthening principles that maximize Aatma-gyan.

Swami ji says that there have been people who came to enroll in the Mumukshu Bhawan, and were initially accepted, but eventually when their conduct was examined, they were asked to leave the ashram. This reflects a strict code that is followed in terms of maintaining, retaining and passing on a tradition that is culturally conforming to the norms of the bhawan. The dandis are allowed minor variations in their daily schedule based on their previous social and cultural background. Accordingly, some of them perform meditation if their body allows, self-study the Upanishads if they are literate, or do a Ganga snaan after waking up early every morning. Every Dandi holds the same belief in their monastic tradition, but their ways to follow this tradition might vary. Once a year an annual celebration (utsav) at the bhawan includes a big feast (bhandara).



Mumukshu Bhawan At Asi

The complex also houses a primary school where the medium of teaching is Sanskrit. It is affiliated to the Sampurnananda Sanskrit University, and the students get their meals in the school, prepared in one of the four kitchens that are run at the Bhawan. At present, there are about 50-60 people residing in the Bhawan. There is also conditional accommodation available for travelers.

Varanasi has also been home to countless sadhus who live independently and roam the city, mainly belonging to the Shaiva sects, including Yogis, Aghoris, Nagas and Dashnamis, among others.¹⁸ In the sixteenth century, a great saint called Baba Kinaram travelled all across India with the aim of alleviating the sufferings of the people. Finally, on the banks of



the Ganga in Varanasi, he set up his dhuni (sacred fire), and continued his sadhana or service. The continuous burning fire (akhanda dhuni) of Baba Kinaram and the tombs of all the Siddhas of the lineage in the same compound, embody the continuing legacy of Aghor Siddhas in Varanasi. This Yoga bhumi (land of sadhana) of the Aghor Siddhas is found at the Aghoracharya Baba Kinaramaghor Shodhevamsewa Sansthan in Shivala.¹⁹ It is known as the Krim Kund.²⁰

Aghoracharya Baba Kinaramaghor Shodhevamsewa Sansthan

The Benaras Gazetteer, Vol. XXVI of the District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh (1909), mentions some of the special sects and their akhadas that were prevalent in the city. The Nanakpanthis, founded by Nanak Shah, the apostle of the Sikhs, had several akharas in the city mostly near Durga Kund, Chauk and Mirghat. Separate establishments were found of the chief orders of this monastic akhada of the Nirmalis and the Udasis, who in spite of minor differences met and ate together on specific occasions. The Naga, though not strong here, have akhadas like those of the Nirbanis, Niranjani and Junas spread around the areas of Shivala Ghat and Hanuman Ghat. Kabir, a weaver of Benaras and a pupil of Ramanand is considered the founder of the Kabirpanthis who had a fairly large settlement in the Kabir Chauraha Muhalla. Another sect is of the Gorakhpanthis, who claim their descent from Gorakhnath, had two akharas near the Town Hall and near Kal Bhairon area. Shivnarayanis, Dasnamis, Kurils and Radhaswamis are other important sects that had a presence in the city.

The Aghori Community



The Aghori community, a relatively secret sect, is both feared and respected by the larger society due to their non-ordinary spiritual practices. The Aghoris, who consider themselves as descendants of Shiva's lineage, live in extremes of nature and/or fringes of society like the cremation grounds around Varanasi, considered one of the holiest cities for this community.

Not much is known about the origin of this community or tradition. There are many theories, though two lines of thoughts stand out – one who believes that their lineage originated from Avadhuta Siddhas of Varanasi whose patron god was Lord Dattatreya, who is an embodiment of all the three primary gods of the Hindu pantheon – Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. The first Aghoreshwaracharya was Bhairavcharya. The other line of thought accords their origin to the Kapalika sect in north India which appeared during the 7th CE. Kapalikas derive their name from the word kapalin or one who carries a skull. However, both lines of thoughts agree that it was the mystical Aghori saint Kinaram Baba who was responsible for reviving the tradition during 16th CE and which exists till today. Kinaram Baba is said to have been born in Ramgarh village in the district of Varanasi. After traveling far and wide, he settled down in the city of Varanasi where he served the people and also attained samadhi. A temple/ashram (Baba Kinaram Aghor Ashram or Krim-Kund) at the place of samadhi holds the remains of his skull along with the yantra of goddess Hinglaj (the chief goddess of the Aghoris).

The Aghoris are monastic and believe in the philosophy of non-duality including life and death. Death is a state of liberation from all things material and illusionary, and hence all their rituals and practices are means and ways to embrace the concept of death, and transcend from the lower-self to the higher universal Self. They practice Aghor Sadhna to reach a state of 'Aghor' which is defined as absence of fear, dread or difficulties and is beyond the state of wakefulness or dreams (or the fourth state, Turiya). Some of these practices are sitting on corpses, remaining unclothed or wearing black robes, smearing ash all over their body from cremation grounds which is considered sacred, eating flesh from human and animal corpses, and indulging in particular sexual practices in these grounds. The Aghoris shun the rigidity of religious practices, materialism, people and violence in any form, and prefer to be out during the night time than daytime. Advanced Aghor practitioners are often consulted for their supernatural healing abilities.

Some of the significant pilgrimages in Varanasi include the Panchkroshi Yatra, the Antargrihi Yatra and the Panch Tirthi Yatra. It is believed that the circumambulation of a sacred shrine is one of the best ways to seek forgiveness for sins committed during one's lifetime. The Panchkroshi Road has 108 sacred 'stations' along its route, which include Shiva and Devi temples, and shrines of Ganeshas, Ganas and Bhairavas.²¹ The number 108 reflects various aspects of the cosmic order, and the journey which begins with a ritual bath at the Manikarnika Ghat encircles a sacred field with a radius of 17.6 kilometres.²² The circumambulation of the Visheshwar Khanda (section) of the old city of Kashi (it was divided into three sections – Kedar, Omkar and Visheshwar), is called the Antargrihi Yatra. The Panch Tirtha Yatra begins at Asi Ghat and takes the pilgrim to five stops (tirthas) – Dashahvamedh Ghat, Manikarnika Ghat, Panchganga Ghat and the Adi Keshava Ghat.²³

Seeking Mukti

During one of the team visits, a boatman shared a story about a distressed woman who jumped into the Ganga with her two children. She walked to the Malviya Bridge in a hopeless state of mind and jumped into the depths of the river. The people who saw her do this raised an alarm and the nearby boatmen hurriedly rowed towards her and saved her and her children from drowning. The boatman narrated this story in an underwhelmed tone with no sympathy whatsoever for the sufferings of the woman. For him, his story was a testament to the significance of Varanasi in people's minds, "Ab har kisi ko yahan pe maut naseeb thodi hoti hai (Not everyone is fortunate enough to die here)."

Next, he related the story of how blessed his son was who attained death in Kashi. His son died of an incurable fever. As he exhumed selective facts to share this story, his face seemed to both tremble with the recollection of loss, and a sigh in anticipation of a freedom from the cycle of rebirth for his son.

Devout Hindus aspire to die in Kashi, to be cremated at Manikarnika Ghat, and to have their ashes immersed in the Ganga. The desire to spend the last days of one's life in Kashi (especially within the Antargriha – the inner zone), has been one of the central reasons for countless Hindus to flock to the city. Jalashayee, a custom wherein a dying person is shifted near the banks of River Ganga till he dies, has been prevalent in the city. Acts of intentional drowning in the Ganga and prayopaveshana (to starve oneself to death) have been witnessed in the city.²⁴ The film, 'Hotel Salvation' or 'Mukti Bhawan', revolves around the existing concept of Mukti Bhawans in Varanasi. These are limited stay bhawans where one checks in, awaiting death and thus seeking salvation.



Widows in Varanasi

The ardent belief that one can attain salvation by dying in Varanasi, has also led to the custom of widows coming from different places to reside here. Since the city is home to countless communities and cultures, it has been a refuge for desolate widows too. Maa Anandmayi Ashram, Birla Widow Home at Chowk, Asha Bhawan, Nepali Widow Ashram run by the Nepalese Government and the Durga Kund Widow Ashram are some of the known widow ashrams in Varanasi.

Ayurveda

Dr. Shashikant Dikshit



Dr. Shashikant Dikshit has been an Ayurveda doctor since 1968, the year when he received his final degree in Ayurveda with Modern Medicine and Surgery from the Lucknow University. His choice of practicing Ayurveda was a natural one, as his father and grandfather had been one of the most sought-after Ayurveda doctors in the city. He continues the lineage started by them. The first clinic by their family was established by his grandfather in 1911, followed by his father, who joined the practice in 1930.

Varanasi and Ayurveda share a long history that begins with Dhanvantari or Divodasa, the father of traditional Indian medicine (Ayurveda), being one of the earliest kings of the city

and, Sushruta, who is accepted as the father of Indian surgery by the World Health Organization, attaining his education in Varanasi.

Dr. Shashikant explains that Ayurveda identifies and diagnoses various diseases by reading of the pulse – the sole test conducted by an Ayurvedic doctor clubbed with an interrogation of the patient on his symptoms- to establish the ailment, and subsequently prescribe suitable medication. An Ayurvedic doctor can diagnose heart problems, stroke, diabetes, arthritis and many other diseases or infections. Referred to as a vaidya, an Ayurveda doctor would not traditionally use any instruments or biological tests to treat his patient.

Talking about the general perception among the people of Varanasi, Dr. Dikshit says that there is faith regarding Ayurveda, but the expectation of quick results, the convenience of modern allopathic medicine (popping a pill, injections, tests etc.) and the lack of knowledge on which vaidya to consult, is a deterrent when the patient has to select a doctor or medication.

Compared to the convenience of allopathic medicine, where a single medicine for cough can be purchased at different rates, Ayurvedic medicine can be expensive. The amount of effort required to use the medicine (pastes, powder to be consumed with milk and certain lifestyle changes to be made in order to attain maximum results from medication), make it not the most preferred option. Another deterrent is the psychological satisfaction of getting a technology – supported confirmation report which reveals the inside secrets of the body to the human eye, thereby making it more believable and reliable. This creates trust in allopathic medication.

However, an interesting amalgamation can also be witnessed here— as shared by Dr. Dikshit—there are patients who are wary of getting an operation done, and insist on getting cured through Ayurveda. Such patients depend on medical test examination to confirm their disease, and then seek Ayurveda medicines to treat that particular disease. He believes that this selective alternation is natural and inevitable with the kind of advancements happening in modern diagnostics, but it also reflects the rooted-approach and proven effectiveness of Ayurveda.

Ayurvedic medicines are prepared by mixing jadibuti, ras rasayan (juice of the plant, or vegetable sources from the various parts of the plant like root, leaf, flower, fruit extract or plant as a whole), and bhasma (ash), to make a churna (powder) or paste of these ingredients.



Ayurvedic medicines and shops

For preparing medicines, Dr. Shashikant purchases medicinal plants and herbs from the supplier and prepares the final medicine in the kaarkhana (factory), which is in his house. At the clinic, only basic medicine is kept and prescribed to the patients, and more complex medicines are prepared in the kaarkhana.

Dr. Dikshit has been following the research done by his father in his preparations. Recalling the change in practices, he says that earlier the medicine was prepared on a cow dung fire. Now, since cow dung is expensive, the medicine is prepared on a stove. Ayurvedic medicine is made of ingredients found in nature, processed from their most natural form and hence the medicine is usually a very strong dose. For example, earlier the vaidya used to prepare pastes using pearls, a practice which is now diminishing, due to the high costs involved.



Man selling jadi-butis near Asi Ghat

In the field of Ayurveda medication, the cost of raw material, manual labour, and maintenance has shot up, which explains the prevalence, inclination of the patient and ultimately the sustenance of alternate medicines. Despite all this, he feels that people still have faith and patience for this system of medicine.

Talking about his family lineage into the practice of Ayurveda, he says that his own son went on to become a cancer surgeon because he was not interested in Ayurveda as it requires the doctor to be available for the patient at all given times, and the medication is generally prescribed for a prolonged period. An Ayurvedic vaidya shares a deeper relationship with his patient since he is required to communicate with the patient and derive maximum knowledge about the symptoms and health background from the patient without the help of medical tests.

He has received many enthusiastic queries from persons who wanted to apprentice under him, but since this practice requires utmost patience and dedication, he has not been able to find these virtues. People come to him, not with an inclination to invest time into honing their skills, but to gain instant knowledge that would enable them to begin their own practice. This is not acceptable to him because this vidya (knowledge of Ayurveda) is his legacy.

The Uttar Pradesh government has 8 Ayurvedic Medicine colleges in the state. The AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy) ministry has undertaken various research projects aiming to make Ayurveda more user friendly.

Walking around the lanes and roads of Varanasi, one can spot many Ayurvedic massage and healing centres that offer a long list of therapeutic massages. Considering the rising consciousness about the benefits of natural medication and well-being options, these centres appeal to international and domestic tourists alike. Though the composition of users who avail these services has not been ascertained, the Ayurvedic centres (as the ones seen around Asi) are well presented and marketed in a more global manner. A cursory scan of the sign boards of such centres reveals English to be the preferred language, and the choice of other languages (local, or other languages) varies in the designing of sign boards and promotional pamphlets.

Similarly, there are clinics that deal in Ayurvedic treatment and medication, but as Dr. Shashikant cautioned, the reliability and authenticity of these (in terms of practice, knowledge and skill), remain a matter of individual discretion.

Akhada

There used to be akhadas of music, poetry, sword fighting, religious teaching and exercise in Banaras.²⁵ As a place that provides opportunities for leisure and recreation, an akhada (a gymnasium) enables one to nurture one's body and mind in a structured manner, which in turn brings overall well-being and discipline.

Every akhada has at least one shrine dedicated to Lord Hanuman, and the beginning of Nag Panchami celebration at the Swaminath Akhada is marked by a Hanuman puja.²⁶ Lord Hanuman is worshipped, and an offering of milk and lava (a preparation made from rice) is made to the Nag Devta. Lord Ram is also worshipped in this akhada and every pillar bears the words 'Shri Ram'. Founded by the poet-saint Swami Tulsidas, the Swaminath Akhada at Tulsi Ghat, also known as the Tulsi Akhada, hosts a special kushti (wrestling) competition on the occasion of Nag Panchami. The akhada is thoroughly cleaned and colourful flags are strung all across the premises. On other days, the akhada is cleaned daily, the mud ring is tilled and prepared for practice and water is sprinkled to cool the area. The trained wrestlers (pehalwans), wearing a loincloth (a red coloured langot), wrestle with each other cheered on by the crowd with frequent roars of 'Har Har Mahadev', motivational slogans, and other celebratory shouts. Apart from competing with one another, the trained wrestlers also perform master flips to display their skills and strength. Once the competition and other displays of strength come to an end, prasad of chana, laddu and batasha is distributed. Sh. Mewa Lal looks after the operations at the Swaminath Akhada, under the leadership of Mahant Vishwambhar Nath Mishra. He says that Nag Panchami is an extremely important day for akhadas, and on this day, all the wrestlers will definitely visit their particular akhadas to worship the lord, but fighting is optional.



Scenes from the Tulsi Akhada at Tulsi Ghat

Sh. Sundar Yadav conducts puja at the Swaminath Akhada, a tradition he has inherited from his father. He says that this akhada has produced great fighters like Banke Ramji Maharaj and Amarnath Maharaj. Bodybuilders of varying ages come to the akhada early in the morning (usually before sunrise) to exercise, practice old routines and learn new techniques from their gurus or seniors. Since the Swaminath Akhada is located at Tulsi Ghat, the bodybuilding enthusiasts are also seen bathing in the Ganga. They massage their bodies with mustard oil, perform Dand-Baithaks (sit-ups), Jodi Phirna (turning the jori – a pair of wooden cylinders tapering at one end, filled with iron or concrete), push-ups, and other exercises using the Gada (the mace), or the Nal.²⁷

Moving on from the traditional arenas of exercising and wrestling, and the concept of open akhadas with mud pits for wrestling, neem or mango trees to provide shade and keep the premises cool, and shrines of Lord Hanuman and other gods, the city today has also accommodated modern gyms with wrestling mats, air conditioned rooms and modern equipment. Wrestlers at the Swaminath Akhada talked about the high protein diet (especially milk and ghee) that is a pre-requisite if one practices the bodybuilding routine at an akhada, and the introduction of changes (eggs and supplements) that have taken place in the dietary requirements of a wrestler. This remains a personal choice as some wrestlers are strictly vegetarian.

Yoga

The word yoga is derived from the Sanskrit word ‘yog’, which means ‘unity’ or ‘to join’.²⁸ Varanasi has a great tradition of yoga learning and practice through centres like ashrams and maths. Yoga is also taught in colleges, private centres and by home tutors, following a specified curriculum. The Banaras Hindu University and Sampurnanand Sanskrit University have separate faculties and departments for Yoga and Meditation. The Bhring Sanhita Kendra at Bhadaini, the Pragya Yoga Institute at Jagat Ganj, Jnana Pravah, the Kashi yoga Sangh at Sankat Mochan are some of the institutions where Yoga is taught.



Hath Yogi Sanat Kumar Mishra resides in Ravindrapuri and teaches yoga through tuitions, both by going to the student’s house, and teaching at his own house as well. He propagates Hath yoga and its knowledge, having attained his education and knowledge from his grandfather, who became his guru. He says that yoga has always been present in Banaras, but while earlier it was mostly the educated that had knowledge of it, today exponents like Baba Ramdev have brought yoga into every household. He says that Yoga is not a medicine that can cure an ailment or disease; rather, it strengthens the body to fight against infections and ailments.

He recalls a time when yoga was taught in gurukuls, and the massive marketing and promotion as is seen today wasn’t there. Only educated people used to follow and perform yoga. He begins teaching yoga after acknowledging the need of the patient or student, and then teaches accordingly, but he feels that the respect that a yoga guru deserves is not forthcoming.

Sh. Vivek Singh has been working in the field of yoga for the last 10 years. He teaches yoga at a government school, and his expertise is in providing therapy through yoga. He feels that in this field there is a lack of unity and uniformity among different stakeholders, and stresses on the need for better institutionalization of the education and practice of yoga. He feels that yoga should be aligned formally with Therapy and Medical Science, which means that a student of yoga should study anatomy, physiology and also complete internships to gain practical knowledge on how to help patients.



Sh. Lahiri Mahasaya and Kriya Yoga



Lahiri Mahasaya in Lotus position; Image: Wikimedia Commons

It was in Varanasi that the famous Yogavatar, Sh. Lahiri Mahasaya revived Kriya Yoga with the blessing of his Guru, Mahavatar Babaji. A quiet revolution started to spread around the world with this process. Kriya Yoga, an ancient meditation technique that was previously only known by people with highest spiritual advancement, was brought into light by Lahiri Mahasaya, giving access to sincere spiritual seekers to learn and practice this sacred art. Shyama Charan Lahiri who was later known as Lahiri Mahasaya earned a high reputation among the 19th Century Hindu religionists. He was popularly also called Kashi Baba and Yogiraj. Lahiri lived with his family in Varanasi rather than staying in a temple or monastery. Unusual among Indian Holy saints, he was a householder, who married, raised a family, and worked as an accountant. Many disciples received initiation into Kriya Yoga from him, irrespective of their caste, religion or any such distinction. Some of the notable names are Yukteshwar Giri, Keshavananda Brahmachar, Bhupendranath Sanyal, parents of Paramhansa Yogananda, Bhaskarananda Saraswati of Banaras, Maharaja iswari Narayan Sinha Bahadur of Banaras to name a few.

The ancient meditation technique of energy and breath control, Kriya Yoga, is part of a comprehensive spiritual path, that introduces meditation practices along with right living. It was in 1861 that Sh. Lahiri Mahasaya revived the practise of Kriya Yoga but it was through Paramhansa Yogananda's book 'Autobiography of a Yogi', that an international awareness for the same began to rapidly rise.

Today, Sh. Shibendu Lahiri, the great-grandson of Sh. Lahiri Mahasaya, spreads the teachings and techniques of Kriya Yoga at the family shrine at "Satyalok" at Chousatti Ghat.

Panchkrosi Yatra

Since the ancient times, the concept of tirtha yatra or a holy pilgrimage has been the motive of a wide variety of individuals for tourism. It was believed to be a journey into sacred time and through oneself, a kind of soul mapping. One of the most popular and important pilgrimages one takes in Varanasi is that of Panchkrosi. During the 16th -19th century, the Panchkrosi yatra became the popular pilgrimage circuit that starts from the Manikarnika Kund in Varanasi. A lot of dharmashalas or pilgrim rest houses are built on this circular route as the devotees take a five night haul to complete this pilgrimage.

The following dialogue of Brahma with Shiva about the panchkrosi region mention in the *Padma Purana (Sristikhanda 14.88-89)*, is also significant to note:

....पंचक्रोशप्रमाणेनक्षेत्रं दत्तं मया तव ॥ 188 ॥
क्षेत्रमध्याद्यदागंगागमिष्यतिसरित्पतिम् ।
तदासामहतीपुण्यापुरीरुद्रभविष्यति ॥ 189 ॥
पुण्याचोदङ्मुखीगंगाप्राचीचापिसरस्वती ।
उदङ्मुखीयोजनेद्वेगच्छतेजान्हवीनदी ॥ 190 ॥

(The Pancakrosa region which was given to Rudra by Brahma, which is very holy city, as Ganga flows from the middle of it. Up to two yojanas Ganga flows in northerly direction, and in the east flows Saraswati. Another two yojanas beyond this Ganga is known as Janhavi) (Hindi translation by Vyas, M. 1957: 104).²⁹

The *Kasi Rahasya*, a 16th century text, mentions five ways in which the Yarta can be done according to the number of days and over-night stays involved in the pilgrimage. over 100 sacred sites and idols are visited as part of this yatra such as Manikarnika Ghat, Durga Kund, Lolarka Kund, Panchaganga ghat, Naaganatha at Amra Village, Bhairava and Bhairavi at Harseer Village, Gananatheshwara at Bhatauli Village, Yaksheshwara at Gaura Village, Uddanda Vinayaka at Bhuyli Village, Trilochana Mahadeva at Trilochan Ghat, and many more.

The end of this pilgrimage happens with donations given as part of a ritual to the bhramin as well as the poor people, conducting Yajna/Havans and consuming and distributing the prasad among kins, friends and neighbours.

This yatra circumambulates the sacred territory of Kashi. For the devotees and pilgrims that are not able to perform the Panchakrosi Yatra undertaking 3-5 night hauls at dharamshalas to complete the pilgrimage, are advised to visit the Panchakrosi Mandir near the Gola Gali in the Chauk area. This temple is said to possess 107 images of the panchakrosi Yatra path (the only image not represented is that of Kapiladhara) in addition to 194 other images associated with the different pilgrimages routes of Varanasi.³⁰

Vedic Astrology

Vedic education and the study of astrology (jyotish) has been practiced and promoted in Varanasi for centuries and numerous students and scholars have visited the city to study these. Earlier, Vedic astrology or jyotish shastra was taught in ashrams and gurukuls. The tradition of studying Vedic astrology continues in Varanasi through educational institutions like the Banaras Hindu University which has a separate faculty for Meditation and Astrology.



Pandit Sanjay Kumar Upadhyay represents the 21st generation of a family which settled in Kashi for education pursuits in Sanskrit, sanskriti and sanskar. His family has done considerable work in the field of Jyotish, Vastu and Tantra studies. He does not have an affiliated degree and has inherited the knowledge of Vedas and jyotish vidya from his elders. He provides services related to astrology. ‘Jyoti’ means prakash or light and ‘ish’ means devta or god. He believes that, if practiced accurately and by a skilled person, the mathematical calculations which are done

using astrology can be very precise and helpful in identifying the reason for a disease or an ailment and in prescribing medicine. Earlier, a jyotish used to prescribe Ayurvedic medicine, but he feels that now some modern medicine should be offered alongside Ayurvedic medicine.

Ved-Yajna

Kashi has been established as a place of scholarship since ancient times and has the traditions of the Guru Shishya Parampara, science, Vedic scriptures, Vedic Paurohitik Karma and Vedic studies since time immemorial. These traditions are still kept alive in their original form.

The word ‘Ved’ is derived from the word ‘Vid’ which means knowledge or knowing and these are the oldest written documents of human civilization. Twenty eight thousand manuscripts of Vedas are kept in the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute at Pune in India. Of these, 30 manuscripts of Rigveda are very important and have been included in the heritage list of UNESCO.

Vedas are also called ‘shruti’, the word shruti is made of ‘shra’ which means ‘to listen’. It is said that Lord Brahma revealed these mantras to the monks when they were deep in meditation. God gave wisdom to four sages: Agni, Vayu, Angira and Aditya, before anyone

else. This knowledge was stored in the form of Vedas, the masterpieces of the literary tradition of the Vedic period, which has been handed over from generation to generation for thousands of years.

The roots of many streams of knowledge imparted in modern society can be traced to the ancient Vedic period, for example Gyankhand from Rigveda, Karmkand from Yajurveda, Ayurveda from Atharva Veda and many other methods were learned from time to time. By modifying these, man has become an expert in all subjects. The Vedas are divided into four parts, respectively:

1) Samhita: This is the Mantra part. The original mantras, which were collected in the Vedas, were compiled and called the Samhita.

2) Brahmin: The discussion of yajna is mainly elaborated in Brahmin texts. It has the explanation of the mantras of the Vedas. The legislation and science is described in detail. There are three main Brahmins: (1) Aitareya, (2) Taitirya and (3) Sathpath.

3) Aranyak: The forest is called 'Aranya' in Sanskrit. The name of the texts that came from the forest is 'Aranyak'. There are five main Aranyaks: (1) Aitareya, (2) Shankhayan, (3) Brihadaranyak, (4) Taitirya and (5) Tavalakar.

4) Upanishad: The Upanishads have intense philosophical and scientific descriptions regarding god, creation and soul. The number of Upanishads is believed to be 1180, but a present only 108 Upanishads are available. The main Upanishads are – Ish, Kane, Kad, Prashn, Mundak, Mandukya, Taitriya, Atreya, Chhandogya, Brihadaranyak and Shweteshwar. Numerous Vedas, Brahmins, Aranyakas and Upanishads have become extinct. Presently ten of Rigveda, thirty-two of Krishna Yajurveda, 16 of the Samaveda, and thirty-one Upanishads of Atharva Vedas are considered available.

Scholars started the composition of the Vedas in 4500 BCE. This means that they were written over a long period of time. And it is believed that the first Vedas were compiled in three parts – Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, which was called Vedtrayi or Veda trilogy.

According to a belief, the division of the Vedas occurred in the time of Pururva Rishi even before the birth of Ram. Later, Atharva Veda was compiled by Rishi Atharvan. On the other hand, some people believe that after the end of Dwapar era in Krishna's time, Maharishi Veda Vyas edited the Vedas by dividing and arranging them into four divisions. The knowledge of these four divisions, was imparted to four disciples Pail, Vaishampayan, Jamini and Sumantu. And consequently Rigveda was entrusted to Pail, Yajurveda to Vaishampayan, Samved to Jamini and Atharva Veda handed to Sumantu.

The tradition of Vedic gurukuls exists even today in Varanasi. The literature of the Vedas is composed of complete compositions of poetry and prose. These are memorized by the students. Pure mantras (recitation) are learnt by listening to the Guru recite once, it is repeated by the disciple twice in proper form. In every recitation technique of Vedas, phonetics are very important and the techniques used are called Kram, Jataa, Ghan, Mala, Rath, Shikha, Dand and Rekha.

Yajna

During ancient times, the kings organized Yajnas for seeking rain, extending the kingdom's boundaries and becoming victorious over the world. Many stories are narrated to suggest that a yajna should be conducted for seeking blessings for getting a son and King Dashratha is said to have conducted yajnas. The sacred festival of Holi started with a yajna.



Havan being performed at the Asi Ghat

Agnihotra, which is performed daily at the temporal level, has been called a daily yajna (sacrifice) and if the yajna is performed according to weather or a special purpose, it is called Naimittik yajna. Among these, the daily yajna became popular as Panch Mahayajna in which food and wealth are offered for god, sage, ghost, father and man. Offerings of food and money was said to be the custom.

Among these Dev Yajna is a token of gratitude towards the deity-god, Rishi Yajna the tradition of knowledge, the Pitra Yajna for family tradition, Bhoot Yajna to express gratitude towards all the creatures and Manav Yajna to express goodwill towards human beings. These



yajnas enhance man's spiritual and moral strength. According to the Vedas, heaven can be attained by means of sacrifice. According to Vedas there are five types of Yajna – Brahma Yajna, Dev Yajna, Pitri Yajna, Vaishwadev Yajna, Atithi Yajna.

Havan is a smaller form of yajna. The process of making offerings to fire after any worship or chanting is called havan.

It is believed that performing a havan pleases the deities. An oblation is offered in a fire lit in the trough for the havan. This offering is immediately received by the deities. There are regular religious rituals performed in various temples in Kashi and at the end of all religious practices, havans are performed regularly in all the temples. These havans may last from two to eight hours. Brahmins sitting on the banks of the river with the kund offer sacrifices while chanting. Continuous yajnas are also performed in temples, some of which last many days. Kashi has temples of all the gods and goddesses. All these temples open at dawn for worship, aarti and bhoga offerings continue till late at night until the doors close. In these temples priests offer prayers for people, but these are conducted in vedic tradition by brahmins on request. These brahmins also go to people's houses to offer prayers and conduct havan for them. Brahmins also go to their house for meals. It is a city where people from all over the world come for pilgrimage and to offer prayers to their forefathers. The main source of income for the brahmins here is priest work. In addition to the idol worship in temples here, the river Ganga, cows and brahmins are also worshipped.

The relation of Kashi to Yajna and Vedas

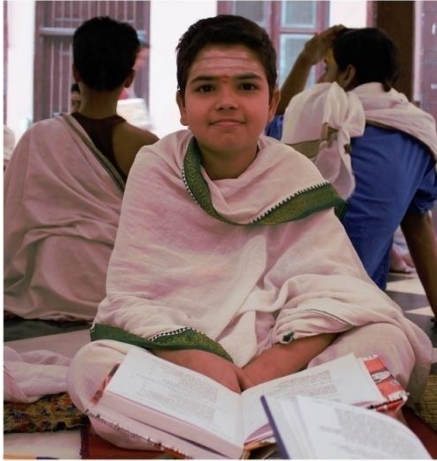
Kashi is a city of intellectuals. In keeping with the ancient tradition of oral transmission of knowledge, any brahmin who studies the Vedas or other Sanskrit scriptures today teaches it to others. The tradition and ancient knowledge both are still alive in Kashi for the same reason. Here, there are brahmins from every state of the country and their communities live in different colonies, like the brahmins from South India live at Hanuman Ghat, Marathi brahmins live near Panchganga Ghat and so on. The scholars who have studied here, teach in different schools all over India.

Lord Brahma who is known as the creator of the world demonstrated his might and valour and to establish his supremacy conducted not one but ten Ashwamedha Yajnas. Ashwamedha Yajna has been the means by which kings and emperors have demonstrated their might and attained the status of Chakravarti Samrat. Kashi Khand chapter 4 of Skanda Purana has the mention of Rudrasar which is the place where Lord Brahma conducted the Ashwamedha Yajna. In the second century Bharvish kings also conducted 10 Ashwamedha Yajnas in Kashi after they had defeated Kushanas and hoisted their victory flag. Presently, this place is known as Dashashvamedh Ghat. According to another story mentioned in ancient texts, King Divodas conducted ten Ashvamedha Yajnas at this place and this is the reason that this place is called Dashashvamedh Ghat.

Teaching Methodology

Shruti and smriti are the forms of education and training that are taught in the Veda schools. The teacher does not charge anything for this training even today and the education of Vedas is given free of cost to the disciples eager to learn.

The basic requirement for learning the Vedas is that the students should have passed grade 5, should be between 8 to 11 years of age and wears the Yagyopavit or the sacred thread. If the students desirous of taking admission to the school have not had their Yagyopavit Janeu Sanskar, the vidyalaya may also perform the ceremony for them. The process of admission is also fairly simple. After filling the form the candidate has to undergo a written test which is based on the curriculum of grade 5, after which an interview is taken which tests their pronunciation. The results are mostly declared on the same day after which parents of the candidate have to fill an undertaking in which they acknowledge handing over their son to the school. Contrary to this, in Guru Shishya tradition, the guru looks after the basic needs of a



A young student

disciple and keeps him in his own house during his training. In the curriculum, along with Vedas, the knowledge of Sanskrit, Hindi, Mathematics, Science, English, and Computer Science is also imparted. Yoga and Philosophy are taught for maintenance of physical and mental health. Different workshops, seminars, debates and trips are organized to develop creativity in the students. Most of the times the Ved vidyalayas work under the guardianship of Maharshi Sandipani Rashtriya Veda Vidya Pratishthan.

The organisations that do not take monetary help from Sandipani, work traditionally, mostly on donations and other means of financial help. Kashi takes pride in maintaining the Vedic tradition and presently there are 24 Ved pathshalas in addition to the Guru Shishya tradition where mini Vedic units are being operated by the gurus at their own residences. Some of the main Ved-vidyalayas of Kashi are:

- 1) Jagadguru Shankaracharya Swami Shri Swaroopanand Saraswati Vedant evam Shodh Samiti Mahavidyalaya, Kedar Ghat
- 2) Shri Pattabhiram Shastri Ved Mimansa Anusandhan Kendra, Hanuman Ghat
- 3) Shri Gopal Chandra Mishra Vedic Sansthan, Brahmanand Colony
- 4) Panini Kanya Sanskrit Vidyalay, Tulsipur, Mahmoorganj
- 5) Shree Vallabhnav Shaligram Sang Ved Vidyalaya, Ram Ghat

In addition to Veda vidyalayas for boys, Kashi also has Ved schools for girls. There is Panini Kanya Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya where students are taught Vedas, Sanskrit, Yoga, Philosophy, Archery and other modern subjects.

When a student comes out of these schools after 7 years they are granted a certificate equivalent to class 10 or 12, after which the students take admission to other

schools/colleges/ universities as per their interest. As far as the question of employment in future arises, it is worth noting that there are ample opportunities of employment in government and public sector for a person well versed in Sanskrit.



Students at a Sanskrit School

Literature and Journalism

Some of the country's greatest thinkers, writers and philosophers are from Kashi. It was here, that the Vedas-Puranas were revealed, great personalities like Tulsidas, Ravidas and Kabir Das made use of the creative environment of the city and wrote their respective works, Buddha gave his sermon and Adi Guru Shankaracharya wrote his analytical treatises.³¹

In the 19th century, new literature, printing presses and journalism flourished in Banaras. The first printing press in Banaras was established in 1819, and the first book to be printed was Tulsī's *Manas*. Banaras quickly became a hub of printing, publishing, journalism and literary activity. The first weekly paper in Hindi, *Banaras Akhbar*, was brought out in 1845. Later, Bharatendu Harishchandra started three journals from Banaras, *Kavivachan Sudha*, *Harishchandra Magazine* and *Harishchandra Chandrika*, as well as the pioneering periodical for women, *Stree Bala Bodhini*. Prose, poetry, drama, essay, humour and journalism was all part of this genius writer's oeuvre, who composed them in Hindi, thus injecting gravitas and fine grammar into an entirely new style of writing. Others who were associated with Bharatendu or influenced by him included writers like Balkrishan Bhatt, Premdhan,

Radhacharan Goswami and Pratap Narayan Mishra. Their work imparted a new significance to written Hindi. It is said that people all over the country started learning Hindi to be able to read Devaki Nandan Khatri's magical and suspenseful novels.

The next generation of Banaras' writers include Munshi Premchand, Jaishankar Prasad, Babu Vishnurao Paradkar, Acharya Ramchandra Shukla, Nand Dulare Bajpai, Shiv Prasad Mishra, Rudra Kashikeya, Acharya Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, Maithili Sharan Gupt, Shivpoojan Sahay, Ugra ji, Shantipriya Dwivedi and Vinod Shankar Vyas. They became the torch bearers of Hindi in the 20th century. Poets Kedarnath Singh and Dhumil helped Hindi poetry achieve recognition across India.

Kabir (1398–1448)

There are several popular versions and accounts on when and where exactly Kabir was born. But a few things are certain – namely the pond-region of Lahartara, his year of birth being 1398, his childhood in the house of the weaver couple Niru and Nima, apprenticeship as weaver, and tutelage under Guru Ramanand, about whom Kabir says:

"With the blessing of the True-Guru, vanished were my gloom and misery! Guru Ramanand cured all of Kabir's dilemma, delusion and quandary!"

Then followed the life of a householder with wife and children, but he continued composing hundreds of couplets, long and short enigmatic poems, mystical puzzles, spiritual posers, and unabashed straight-speak verses. Topping this—in conformist and conventional Kashi—was forthrightness such as this:

"I don't belong to the Hindu clan, nor am I of Muslim faith! Merely a puppet, made of five-elements, who dances in free space!"

What puts Kabir ahead of his era and the rest of his peers is his bold candour, heartfelt sincerity, simplicity, and good-natured humour:

"Kabir stands in the bazaar, praying for the welfare of one and all! He has no friends, nor foes, nor malice towards anyone at all!"

Raidas (1450–1520)

Raidas was born near Banaras at Seer Gobardhanpur village, to mother Kalsa Devi and father Ragghudas, who was a cobbler. Raidas, also called Ravidas, proudly followed his father's vocation, but along with saving soles he also started saving 'souls'; such was his wisdom. He took such pride in his work that once he refused to go for a dip in the Ganga at an auspicious hour, because his work was not complete. When friends insisted, he told them: "If my heart is unpolluted and pure, Ganga will appear in my *kathota* for sure." It is believed that at that very moment water from the Ganga left its bank and appeared in his work bowl.

This pupil of Guru Ramanand worked all his life to remove religious and caste prejudice and to achieve equal rights and privileges for all. Classical knowledge, tinged with the folksy idioms of his poetry, make Raidas a unique voice.

"Krishna, Karim, Ram, Hari, Raghav; all are one, with a different name! The Vedas, the epics, Quran, Puran are not separate tomes, but same!"

Amongst thousands of his followers was Mirabai, from an upper-caste Kshatriya clan of Rajasthan. Mira put up a *chatri* over Raidas's foot-imprint as a mark of reverence to him. She had understood the essence of his message: "Don't bow to the exalted Brahmin, if he has no capability! Bow instead to a low-caste chandal, if he shows his ability!"

Tulsidas (1532–1623)

At birth, Tulsidid not cry but was said to have babbled *Ram*, which is why he was named Ram-Bola. Seeing 'unfortunate circumstances' foretold in his birth-chart, Tulsid's parents abandoned him. But that child grew up to challenge his birth chart, the so-called 'unfortunate circumstances' and the old, ossified world itself. Tulsid first heard a narration of Sanskrit Ramayan by Guru Naraharidas at the age of five. He started following the Guru around to study Sanskrit grammar, Vedas, Vedant, and other knowledge systems with him. In between he visited Ayodhya, Prayag, and Chitrakoot. But after marriage and a 'rebuke' by his wife, he decided to shift permanently to Kashi to stay at the confluence of the Ganga and Asi rivers. He started composing a new retelling of the Ramayan in Awadhi. Using the poetic form of couplets and tetrameter quatrain, he composed a new Ramayan, much to the shock and chagrin of traditional Pandits and scholars who never wished to see 'high literature' rendered in the common-man's language. But Tulsid withstood all tests of fire and, with his *Ramcharitmanas*, was able to take the obscure Sanskrit epic to the most common household. He also initiated a theatrical presentation of Ramayan to reach the Ram story to the unlettered. He composed poetry in classical Sanskrit as well and wrote the *Hanuman Chalisa*, a prayer to Hanuman, which arguably has become one of the most recited poems in India. It indirectly establishes Hanuman in Kashi as *Sankat Mochan*. It is believed that Mughal Emperor Akbar himself paid a visit to Tulsid in his humble hut at Asi. One of Akbar's chosen governors, Abdurr Rahim Khanekhanah compares Tulsid's tome to the Vedas and the holy Quran thus: "Luminous 'Ramcharitmanas' for the saintly is elixir tried and tested! As Vedas are for the Hindus, and for Muslims Quran manifested!"

Bharatendu Harishchandra (1850–1885)

In his short life of 35 years, Bharatendu Harishchandra did such service for literature and society that the second half of the 19th century—the period between 1850 to 1900—is known as the 'Bharatendu Era' of Hindi. He composed his first poem at the tender age of 5, and by the time he was 18, he had started his first magazine, *Kavivachan Sudha*. This published reportage, essays, poems, travelogues and humour pieces by the best Hindi writers of the



Bhartendu Harishchandra Postage Stamp (Image: Wikipedia)

time. Bharatendu himself was a prolific writer who wrote on social topics like poverty, slavery, social-ills, deprivation in the British-Raj and the concept of *Swadeshi* or self-dependence. He was the first Hindi playwright to stage his own plays. His life was dedicated to the advancement and propagation of a new standardized Hindi, although he had a healthy receptivity to other languages and cultures. That is why his motto was:

“Innumerable arts, endless learning and countless variations of knowledge! Soak up from all over the world but spread them in your own language!”

Devaki Nandan Khatri (1861–1913)

Born in Bihar, Devaki Nandan Khatri worked as a contractor collecting and selling forest produce. In the jungle he befriended many rich and famous men who came as hunters or curious travelers, including Ishwari Prasad Narain Singh, the King of Kashi. Spending time in the forbidding jungles, coming across dilapidated castle ruins or hearing folklore about evil forces haunting these parts, Khatri developed a fertile imagination.

In Banaras he built a mansion, Khatri Haveli, and started a printing press by the name of Lahiri Press in Lahurabir area. He started the magazine *Sudarshan* where his novels were serialized regularly. His novels created a magical-shadowy world inhabited by shape-changing elves, brave princes and princesses and dangerous villains. This mysterious world created by Khatri became instantly popular across the country and even those who did not know Hindi started learning it. If the story of his *Chandrakanta* was located between Banaras and Mirzapur, his *Chandrakanta Santati* was based in Bihar. His fame, however, extended as far as Punjab and Bengal.

Apart from mysteries, Khatri also wrote social novels like *Kajar ki Kothari* and histories such as *Gupta Godana*. His contribution in popularizing Hindi as a pan-India language, and Devnagri as a script recognized all over the subcontinent, is matchless.

Munshi Premchand (1880–1936)

Dhanpat Rai was born in Lamahi village of Banaras. After the demise of his mother, if he could get solace anywhere from the cruelty of his step-mother, it was in the world of books, fictional stories and his own imagination. Having learnt Urdu and Farsi at a Madarsa, and English at the Queens College, Banaras, he started writing under the pen-name, ‘Babu Nawab Rai Banarsi’.

But his first collection of short stories *Soz-e-Watan* or ‘Burning for the Nation’ was banned, and five hundred copies found at the writer’s home were burnt. Now the only way for

Dhanpat Rai to save his job was to take another name, and he started a new innings as a writer under the nom de plume of 'Premchand'.

Munshi Premchand completed his graduation and joined the education department in Gorakhpur as Deputy Inspector of Schools. But in 1921, after attending a meeting addressed by Mahatma Gandhi, he vowed to join the Non-Cooperation Movement. He resigned from his government job and shifted to Banaras with a pledge to serve the nation through literature. In Banaras, despite financial constraints, he started Saraswati Press and began publishing the journal *Hans*, apart from regularly penning novels and dozens of short stories. In 1934, dire financial difficulties led him to Bombay to write the film *Mazdoor*. But the British government banned the film, deeming it a provocative work that would instigate workers against the establishment. Premchand returned to Banaras and immersed himself in writing powerful novels like *Godan* and stories like *Qafan*.

In 1936 he chaired the first session of Progressive Writers' Association, but soon breathed his last due to lifelong struggles with poverty and ill health. He left behind a rich legacy of fifteen novels, over two hundred and fifty short stories, six plays and scores of essays, articles and translations. Munshi Premchand is perhaps rightly referred to as the 'Emperor of the Novel' in India.

Jaishankar Prasad (1890–1937)

A great scholar of Sanskrit, Urdu, Farsi and English, Jaishankar Prasad is counted amongst the founders of Romanticism in Hindi literature. His initial poems were in Braj-Bhasha, a dialect of Hindi, but soon he shifted to a new, standardized Hindi which became the medium for his poems, essays, stories, novels and plays.

Apart from composing poems of varying length, Prasad wrote poetic verse novellas and thirteen plays. Regarded as the father of modern playwriting in India, he staged many of these. His historical dramas like *Skandgupt*, *Chandragupt* and *Dhruvaswamini* are considered timeless classics. With seventy-three stories and three novels to add to his repertoire, Prasad is firmly placed in the pantheon of immortal Indian writers. His poetic verse novella *Kamayani* is termed the 'Tajmahal of Hindi literature'.

Hindu Genealogy Accounts or Pothis

Among Hindus, genealogy or the study and tracing of one's family history and lineage is a form of traditional knowledge that is being preserved by very few priestly families. This knowledge has been transferred from generation to generation through registers or pothis.

Haridwar is said to be the hub of such families that study and maintain genealogy, while Varanasi, Patna and Gaya also have a few pandas continuing this tradition. Since a lot of Hindus visit Varanasi for the last rites/death rites of their deceased family members, these priests and their families keep these genealogy accounts or pothis that are reopened on every visit to add new and relevant information. When a pilgrimage is made to a holy/sacred place in such circumstances (mostly for last rights), family members connect with their region assigned priest who has been keeping these records and he adds to the pothi names and signatures of the visiting family members, and the name (and date of death) of the deceased member. During such a visit, families are able to revisit and retrace their family roots.

These Hindu pilgrimage records kept by the pandits are updated periodically, but only as actual registers, as they are not keen on digitizing them. Hindus visit the holy towns of Haridwar, Varanasi and Gaya among other sacred sites for various religious and cultural purposes like pilgrimage, cremation of their dead and the immersion of a kin's ashes in the holy river Ganga.

A visiting family member is required to personally sign the family genealogical register furnished by his or her personal family panda after updating it for future family visitors and generations to see, and to authenticate the updated entries. Friends and other family members accompanying on the visit may also be requested to sign as witnesses. What is amazing about the process is how they are able to identify the correct register for each family.

Ancient Manuscripts or Pandulipis

A manuscript is believed to be an old document that was written by hand before printing was invented. India is home to many such ancient manuscripts that have been prepared on paper, palm leaves and other perishable and non-perishable materials. These texts contain and preserve the ancient traditions of Indian science and cultural heritage. There is subject diversity in these manuscripts, ranging from traditional knowledge from the Vedas to mythical stories and fables of the Panchatantra; from rituals, practices and codes of conduct followed by the society to arts and its intricacies, compiled and preserved for thousands of years. These texts form and help in framing the history of Indian Society and tradition.

Varanasi houses the Sampurnanand Sanskrit Visvavidyalaya (SSU), the oldest Sanskrit university in India. The University has acquired a valuable collection of 1,25,000 manuscripts covering all the subjects in Devanagari, Bengali and Sarada scripts. Their catalogues comprise collections acquired from 1791-1981 which contain a large number of extremely valuable manuscripts.³²

The university signed a MoU with the National Mission for Manuscripts in 2005 and has worked on thousands of manuscripts so far. They are continuing with the traditional method of conserving thousands of old manuscripts stored at the Saraswati Bhawan Library situated

on the SSU campus. Apart from the conservation of this exquisite material heritage, the digitization of some of these ancient texts is also being done. A 1000-year-old manuscript of Sri Bhagwat Gita, which is one of the oldest manuscripts in India, is also said to have been digitized for the first time by the Saraswati Bhawan Library. IGNCA is also involved in creating DVDs of its catalogues that contain information of the varied and vast collection present in this library. The work to make them accessible online is in progress.



1000-year-old manuscript (Photo source: Patrika.com)

The Saraswati Bhawan building in the university is earmarked for manuscripts and in 1988-89, an air-conditioned building was constructed for the preservation and maintenance of these texts. The Library also has the facility for microfilming and Photostat of manuscripts.³³

The rare manuscripts in the fields related to Ayurveda, Jyotish Vidya, Karm-Kand, Vedant, Sankhya-Yoga, Dharma Shastra, Purana Itihaas, Nyaya-Vaisheshik, Mimamsa, literature, grammar, art, music, Bhakti, pandulipis related to Buddhism and Jainism, and others are preserved in this library. A majority of the texts here are in Devnagari script. Other Manuscripts are in languages and scripts like Bengali, Oriya, Arabic and Persian to name a few. These manuscripts are written on various materials like handmade paper, leaves, wood and rock.



The Saraswati Bhawan Library building, SSU (Photo source: official website of SSU)

Endnotes:

Traditional Knowledge

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- 4 Medhasananda Swami, Varanasi at the Crossroads, Kolkata, RamaKrishna Mission, Institute of Culture, 2002; p. 25, 26
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- 6 Medhasananda Swami, Varanasi at the Crossroads, Kolkata, RamaKrishna Mission, Institute of Culture, 2002; p.10
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31 Literature and Journalism section from *Ras Ras Banaras, A Virtual Experiencial Museum*, Copyright © 2019 MoC, NCSM and INTACH

32 <https://namami.gov.in/manuscript-resource-centres>

33 <https://www.ssvv.ac.in/library>

Art & Craft



Wooden toys of Varanasi

The culturally rich Varanasi of today has a history of art and craft tradition that has evolved over time with the city. Varanasi itself became the subject for paintings, some masterpieces of which were created by James Prinsep in the 1800s. The age old sculpture and painting traditions along with various crafts like wooden toy making, Gulabi Meenakari work, metal enameling, brocade and textile weaving and manufacturing are considered to be the heart and soul of the material heritage and creative expressions of the city. Dress and costume making, jewellery and ivory work have also been well known arts of the city. Many handicrafts are based in particular localities. For example, the Thatheri Bazaar area is significant for brass works, Hadha Mahalla for toys, clay works and sculpture and Chowkhamba area for jewellery.

Multiple forms of arts and crafts seen in objects, performances, related practices and skill-sets are still evident in the city. These represent a mix of both the traditional and contemporary styles. One can find sculpture, wooden toy-making, Gulabi Meenakari, items made of Ashtadhatu, metal work, pottery items and wall paintings outside/inside homes. The exquisite Banarasi sarees and brocades made using exclusive techniques and designs like the Shikargah or Kimkhab on the handloom by master craftsmen are still produced on special demand.

During the course of the research, various artists were interviewed on the present status, sustainability, continuity of traditions and the elaborate techniques involved in these arts and crafts. Some have been revived, some are on the verge of extinction, some are being produced in the traditional way and the rest with newer additions to their technique. In the current context this has either driven or been impacted by the demand-supply structure.

Painting

Varanasi has been the inspiration for many artists and a rich tradition of painting style has evolved over the years. During the Mughal era, many court painters brought the Mughal style of painting to the city. It is said that one such, Lalji Musawwar, settled in Varanasi, after coming here with the self exiled Jawanbakht Jahandar Shah towards the end of the 18th century. A local artist Ustad Sikkhi learned the style from Ustad Lalji and founded the Banaras sub school of later Mughal paintings. This style of water colour or oil painting was distinctive and featured portraits from life (later from photographs). Ivory paintings and their traditional representations of dhyana, especially as cult objects, also became popular.

Two distinct styles emerged: the Indian School of Painting and the Company (European) style, which was mainly an Indian version of the European style of painting. This school of painting is said to have originated in the city and used various aspects of Indian life as its subject and inspiration. Apart from these, the localized art of wall painting was widespread in the city.

The local ruling class and western artists made substantial contributions to the field of paintings. The kings were the main patrons of paintings and commissioned works often. For example, Maharaja Uditnarain commissioned a wall painting in the Kali temple at Ramnagar Fort. An important illustrated manuscript of this time was Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas*, which is now scattered in various collections and dates back to the late 17th or early 18th century, and shows a different style, more linear but vibrant with crowded scenes and fast moving figures. Bharat Kala Bhavan and Ramnagar Fort collections still preserve some of these old works of art.

Maharaja Ishwari Narain Singh was another connoisseur and patron of the arts who loved music and poetry and was dedicated to the learning of arts and crafts. During his time the study of European paintings became popular and their influence expanded. Some artists who flourished then include Hatkerlal, Gopal Chand, Balai Chand, Suraj and Shivaram. Artists proficient in wall paintings were Kamalapati, Chunnilal, Munnilal, Biharilal, Mahesh Prasad, Ganesh Prasad and Misrilal.¹

Among the European visitors to this holy city, there were many British, both male and female, who were enthusiastic amateur artists like William Hodges R.A., James Forbes, Thomas Daniell, William Daniell, Edward Lear, and James Prinsep. The Daniells were

criticized by some scholars and artists for their vision. Edward Lear, a professional artist of England, who visited Varanasi in 1873 and painted scenes of the city, remarks in his diary:

“How well I remember the views of Benaras by Daniell R.A.: pallid, grey, sad, solemn. I had always supposed this place a melancholy, or at least a staid and soberly-coloured spot, a grey record of bygone days. Instead I find it one of the most abundantly buoyant, and startlingly radiant of places, full of bustle and movement. Constantinople or Naples are simply dull and quiet by comparison”.²



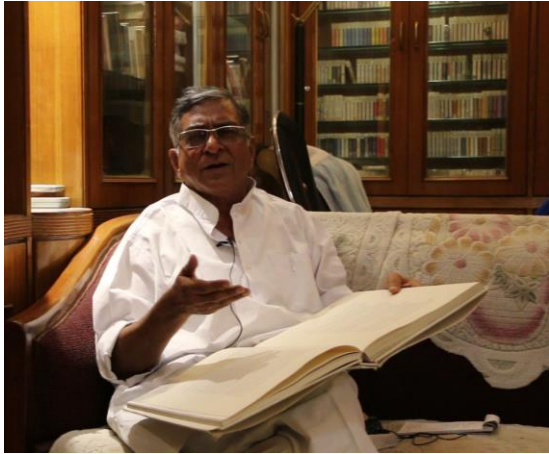
Edward Lear, 1812–1888, British, Benares, 1873, Watercolor with pen in brown ink over graphite and gouache on moderately thick, rough, beige wove paper, Yale Center for British Art, Gift

Another European visitor, Fanny Parks, draws attention to the inadequacies of the painters to represent the beauty of Varanasi through their artworks. He said:

“In the midst of hundreds and hundreds of temples and ghats, piled one above another on the high cliff or rising out of the Ganges, the mind is perfectly bewildered; it turns from beauty to beauty, anxious to preserve the memory of such, and the amateur throws down the pencil in despair”²

James Prinsep, the most well known in terms of artworks of Varanasi, has left a number of illustrations and lithographs of the city. He came to work in the city’s mint but gradually started identifying himself with the city. He was a great draughtsman, numismatist, epigraphist, town planner, cartographer, architect and artist among other things. His illustrations were collected and published as *Benaras Illustrated* in 1830.

Dr. OP Kejriwal



Dr. OP Kejriwal, the author of *Benares Illustrated by James Prinsep*, a historian, administrator and ex-convenor of INTACH Varanasi chapter, speaks at length about Prinsep's valuable contributions to the city and to the history of India. "He was the first to draw the map of Banaras...with geographical statistics," he states. He highlights the historic constructions in Banaras planned by Prinsep himself including the St. Mary Church steeple, the Karmanasha bridge, the mint where he

worked, the Nadesar Kothi (now a hotel), the minarets of the Aurangzeb mosque (which aren't there now), the Vishveshwar Ganj market area and many more. "In 1843, Davidson came to Banaras and said that if you want to know about Banaras, the best way is to go through the sketches of James Prinsep."

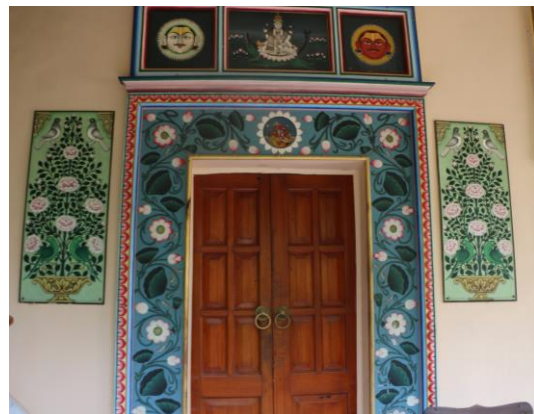
Dr. Kejriwal feels that if local students could learn about Prinsep and his dedication to Banaras—as is evident from a study of his beautiful detailed illustrations—an interest could be ignited in them for their city.

The city continues to be the muse for innumerable artists. Young amateur artists can be spotted at various ghats or lanes and historic areas of the city, sketching and painting. Some artists also exhibit and sell their work at the ghats.

Wall Paintings of Varanasi

The tradition of wall paintings, famous all over north India, was seen in Varanasi as well. Heber describes these wall paintings:

"The material of the building is a very good stone from Chunar, but the Hindoos here seem fond of painting them a deep red colour, and indeed of covering the more conspicuous parts of their houses with paintings in gaudy colours of flower-pots, men, women, bulls, elephants, gods and goddesses in all their many forms, many headed, many handed and many weaponed varieties."³





Paintings are made outside the houses near the entrance

In addition to decorating the walls outside the houses, the inner walls of the rooms and temples were also adorned with wall paintings. The main purpose of these was to protect the house from evil spirits and have a pleasant effect upon the dwellers and passers-by. Stories from the Ramayana and other religious traditions of the land, scenes of daily life and animal figures like deer, elephants, horses and fish were painted.



The owner of the Hotel Ganges View at Asi Ghat, **Mr. Shashank Narayan Singh**, shares his experience as an artist and on his attempts to revive the art of wall painting. It makes for an interesting case of blending tourism with culture. As an hotelier, he wanted to showcase the local traditions by installing the local art of the city at his hotel. He believes that an hotelier indirectly becomes a cultural ambassador and can do much to share the culture of the city with the visitors.

In the mid-nineties, he along with Sh. Anjan Chakravarty, Prof Rana P.B Singh and others started a series called ‘Aspects of Banaras’, where a weekly programme was organized comprising performances, lectures and demonstrations by artists. They requested a few artists to come to Banaras and work with them. A few of these mural and miniature artists stayed with them and have been working here for the past 15-20 years. Other arts and crafts like metalwork and terracotta were introduced too. The hotel is known for its wall paintings and artistic creations. He says that when the hotel was being constructed, a few spaces were left for these artists to paint upon. This effort was appreciated and encouraged by many, and is a good way to promote local art forms.

He describes two forms of wall paintings. The first being quick painting, where after white washing the house post a marriage or some important ritual, the artists make freehand simplistic drawings. The work of these artists is very fine. The other form of painting done by the local artists is more durable and refined. The themes are typically bels (or creepers), lord Ganesha, banana trees, images of sun and moon, elephants, camels, horses etc. that are drawn near or at the entrance of the house.



Wall paintings

The colours used are mostly the traditional ‘earth’ colors. These are often mixed with gum-arabic. Now, oil paints are used as well. Very few traditional wall painters are left in Banaras, he adds. The majority have shifted careers for a better livelihood, as the demand for this traditional art has diminished. He has tried to create an inventory of the artists who were involved in this field. He feels that there is a need to revive these art forms. The artists do not get any benefits, and unlike earlier times, there are no patrons for these arts. Guidance of the elderly and experienced artists and the active participation of the young, along with the interest of the government and other cultural organizations, is the need of the hour to conserve and preserve these traditions of Varanasi.



Artists Jayendra Shankar Mishra and Dayashankar creating a large mural for the VEM at Man Mahal Palace

In fact, a positive initiative has been the involvement of local artists Jayendra Shankar Mishra and Dayashankar by INTACH in creating a large mural for the newly conceptualized Virtual Experiential Museum at the Man Mahal palace. This is a project of the Ministry of Culture and such measures are important to keep alive these diminishing art forms.

Sculpture

Looking back at the history of sculptures, rulers in various parts of the country in different eras got sculptures made for decorative and religious purposes near forts, temples, palaces and other public spaces. These sculptures have played a very important role in decoding India's history. Varanasi, being one of the world's oldest living cities, has a wide array of architectural and sculptural evidences that are still preserved. Bharat Kala Bhavan and Sarnath Museum house a numbers of sculptures that were excavated and recovered at various spots in the city, Sarnath and neighbouring areas of Varanasi. Early specimens of stone sculptures not only give us a peek into the lives of our ancestors but display the skills or techniques involved in creating those pieces of art. It is believed that Varanasi, as Shiva nagri, is home to thousands of Shivalingas.



Sculptures on display



Among the many sculpture shops, Shree Jaipur Murti Kalakar shop belongs to **Sh. Anuj Gaur**. His family, originally from Jaipur, has been involved in the sculpture business for years. He is the third generation taking the art form ahead. According to him, around 500 artisans work as sculpture artists in Banaras today. There are various stages in the art of sculpture making, beginning with sculpting, painting, finishing and polishing. The customer base for these sculptures are locals, tourists, saints, and pilgrims.

The raw material (chunks of stones) are sourced from Rajasthan, Bihar, Odisha, and Mirzapur. The costing depends on the quality and quantity of these stones. A lot of technical changes have been incorporated in the field of sculpture-making over the years, he adds. Machines have been introduced along with a new range of tools thus, reducing handwork. The handwork was time consuming but very fine. Machines have led to growth in business as it provides a good balance between the demand and supply.

The sculptors work with him on a contractual basis and the money is decided according to the size and time taken for specific sculptures. At his workshop the process of sculpting was demonstrated by his artisans. Some articles like the small animal figurines (undercut work) such as elephant, camels, and owls are exported from here because the finishing (and nakkashi) is said to be the best in Varanasi. To get an idol of Shiva or a Shivalinga, people come all the way to Varanasi. He believes that in the age of education and opportunities, nobody would ideally want their sons or daughters to end up in this field and stresses on the value of training workshops in this field for this reason.



Process of painting and decoration on sculptures

Another sculptor, **Sh. Ashok Kumar Murtikar** owning a shop at Asi Ghat, has similar views about the continuity of this tradition. He has two sons, and a daughter, and neither are interested in this work. He believes in training and would gladly offer it if someone wants to learn from him. In spite of the lack of interest the younger generation is showing in the craft, he envisions that 5-10 years from now, this store might still be functioning as they have started teaching the craft to some people who shall hopefully take it ahead.



Apart from various idols, another form of sculpture is prevalent in the city. Portrait sculpting requires skills to translate a picture into a realistic looking sculpture. Carving real human figures to make them look identical to the personality is not only a skill that requires training but is also very rare. **Sh. Kishan Lal and Sh. Bunt Verma**, of the Bhartiya Murtikala Kendra in Gaurigunj, are the 2nd and

3rd generation of artists respectively. The father-son duo describe the elaborate process of portrait sculpture making and the tools involved in creating their master pieces. For mud sculpting, they use a set of wooden tools and for the final stage stone sculpting the tools are made up of metals like iron.

They specialize in portrait sculptures using photographs. The process remains same for every project they take. First the work is done using clay, which once ready, is okayed by the customer. The same work is then made on plaster. Once the plaster molding is done, they use tools to duplicate the portrait onto stone. The tools, grinders and other machines make this work easier as the duplication is created using exact measurements. It is a very lengthy and painstaking process which could sell for anything starting from Rs. 15000-20000 and this sculpting work takes them a minimum of 1-2 months. For the sculptors, he says, working on red sandstone is tougher as compared to working on marble. Earlier all the work was done with hands, as machines or advanced tools were not available. He states that to stay in the market, using the machines becomes important.



The tools and techniques for portrait sculpture making

In terms of continuity, they assert that nobody is interested in this work as it is very tiring and requires a lot of hard work. Since the material is expensive and the raw materials have always been a cause of worry, the cost of raw material should be reduced for people to even get interested in investing in the craft, they suggest.

Puppetry



Abhinav Kala Samiti led by Sh. Rajiv Kumar Srivastava, specializes in Putul Rod/ American puppets and glove puppets and presents Ramlila and other such stories through these puppets. They believe, that even the illiterate can be educated using this means as the stories can reach out to them. Stories on contemporary issues like beti bacaho-beti padhao, on education and swachhta abhiyan are also written and performed by the samiti to educate society on these new age issues.

The glove puppets are famous in the northern region of India as Gulabo-Sitabo and are made of Papier-mâché. The puppet tradition comes from Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh and not from Varanasi. It served as entertainment for the nawabs and their ranis. Sh. Srivastava started their samiti not merely for entertainment but for dissemination of knowledge and to address various social issues. They started their group in 1992. Till date, they have collaborated with various organizations like Dr Shambhunath Research Foundation, Plan India, Save the Children, UNICEF, Janak Samiti at Varanasi, Mamta Sansthan and more to present puppet shows created on diverse themes ranging from the girl child to mythology and Clean India. They also involve village women in their programmes and songs are composed for them to sing during the puppet shows.

Toy Making

The city celebrates multiple festivals throughout the year. With every festival, small items including toys related to that specific festival are made and sold. The materials vary from mud, wood, Papier-mâché, copper and other metals. This is considered to be a specialty in Varanasi. These small items have educational importance attached to them as they teach the user about the various cultural traditions and the mythology of the city.



Wooden sinduras can be spotted in handicraft shops

Toys like tava, chulha, belan, chakla, sabzi, fruits, gai, bael, tota, ghoda, uunth, along with idols and gods like Hanuman, Radha-Krishna, Laxmi, Ganpati, Ram-Laxman, Sita and others are sold during various festivals and fairs. During the Chaitra month, Ramnavmi is celebrated and idols of Ram, Sita, Laxman, Hanuman and toys made of clay are sold in the markets. During the Jagannath Yatra, idols of Lord Jagganath, Subhadra and Balram are seen; during Nag Panchami, near the melas at Nagkuan, idols and toys of Nag devta and during Laxmi Kund mela, masks of goddess Laxmi are available. During the Bhadra season, Tulsidas's Ramlila enactments can be seen in Ramnagar. The characters of the Lila wear special masks made out of Papier-mâché. Replicas of the same are sold in the market place. Some copper masks can also be found in certain places in the city. During Diwali, fairs are organized at various places in the city which sell Laxmi, Ganesh and other small idols and masks. Apart from these, various earthen lamps of 5, 7 or 11 diyas made in different styles can be found in Varanasi.



Idols of gods and goddesses made of wood

Among the different materials used to make these toys, wood is important. Among the mass produced wooden artifacts, the sinduras, bartans, charki, have always been in demand. These wooden articles are mostly colored with 'lac'. Certain areas of the city like Kashmiri Gunj, which fall in the Khojwa Bazar area is exclusively dedicated to wood work. As one enters this area, small homes with verandahs and courtyards doubling up as workshop areas for the artists who live and work there can be spotted. Most houses in this locality have a kharad/turning machine and wood work happens in a majority of houses in this location.

One such house and workshop belongs to master craftsman Sh. Ram Khilawan, who shared in-depth information regarding the craft and his journey of learning and promoting the craft.

Since he learnt the craft quickly, he moved on to start his own business and now hires workers who work for him. He spread this business by selling his products in Delhi, Lucknow, and Kanpur. Earlier, he says, the work was done with Kheyhr wood which is red in colour. Koraiya, Safeda and Haldu wood are also used. Very rarely, a black coloured wood called Abnoos is used. Today, keeping in mind the cost and availability, most of the work is on Eucalyptus and Koraiya wood. As for machines, earlier all the work was created by hand and gradually machines like the Koon were made using the Kheyr wood. The other tools and machinery made from iron followed, like the Chausa, Rukhana, Barma, Pakhi, Kathni, Barni, Basula, and Pharahi.



Process of making a wooden toy

The designs were/are made as per imagination and inspiration, he says. Once the product is ready, the color is added on dry wood so that it can last longer. A colour known as Chapda is brought from Purulia in Bengal, which upon melting can be used for colouring.

As for training, he teaches his workers, family members and students by demonstrating the techniques himself, since he has a good understanding of the techniques of the craft. Being a government awardee, some government training centres also give him opportunities to train new craftsmen.



Sh. Rajkumar Singh, the grandson of Sh. Ram Khilawan ji, narrates the process of creating the wooden artifacts. First, the wood is cut, dried and seasoned, so that it remains strong and solid. It then goes on the turning wood and the required shape is given. If it requires colour then lacquer or paint is added, after which every product undergoes a finishing process and is thus ready for export or sale. They sell to exporters in Delhi, Bombay, Chennai, and Jaipur.

Sh. Ram Khilawan Ji with his old traditional wooden toys

Sh. Rajkumar states that the reason for the lack of market in Varanasi for this work nowadays is its cost value. The artisans who aren't earning well start moving out into other jobs like pulling a rickshaw or selling tea at stalls. He adds that there is little being done to sustain the craft, despite its GI patent, which is why it is surviving for now but the artists are diminishing on account of better work options and remuneration elsewhere. He suggests that such crafts should be included in the curriculum of schools to teach the youngsters, make them aware and inculcate an interest in these arts and crafts, apart from better promotion of these art forms by government bodies.

The demand for the Russian/nesting dolls is the highest followed by miniature god idols or human figures/statues, whereas the sinduras used for weddings, and kitchen sets were the most popular products earlier. Most families make these here and supply to the Dalmandi from where they are exported.



Indigenous designs of the nesting/Russian dolls



The demand and supply of these crafts eventually decides its value in the society. **Sh. Anup Kumar Mishra**, an Economics professor at the DAVPG College, Kashi Hindu Mahavidyalaya, puts forward some ideas and suggestions while narrating his experiences and knowledge of toy making and other art industries of Varanasi.

He mentions villages near Varanasi like Kandwa and Adalhaat where potters live. Their livelihood depends on the festivals that take place in Kashi. They produce the toys that are sold during these festivals and earn their living from it. Looking at the economics of this, he states that the toys made of clay are dependent mostly on the festivals but the wooden toys are based on export and their demand is falling. Our cultural scenario is changing, he adds. As an economist, he affirms that it is repeatedly said in the sustainable development model that the cultural spirit of a place is a very important component. Earlier, while the livelihood

of the artists depended on work in this sector, nowadays, since the demand is low and the art forms are losing their value, the artists are forced to look for other work.

The promotion of cultural elements is required so that these artists and cultural practitioners are protected and these dying art forms can be preserved along with the overall cultural heritage of the city. Sh. Mishra insists that the field of cultural economics should be treated seriously. Moreover, the sustainable development model which is a global tool involves the amalgamation of society, environment and economics. He stresses on the fact that the fourth pillar of culture should be given the same importance as the other three. He suggests that the generation today should incorporate old values and cultural heritage while practicing their new and modern lifestyle. An interest should be created in the present generation for the folk arts, dances, other performance traditions and various festivals. This would in turn help the livelihoods of the local folk artists and performers to carry forward the tradition and earn their living from it.

Metal Work



Metal Kalash are found in abundance in the Thatheri Bazaar

The Thatheras are a community engaged in the production of metal household utensils among other objects, and reside mainly in Northern India. Varanasi boasts of a Thatheri Bazaar, located near the Chowk area. Making of the city's brass and copper vessels and Naqqashi work (carving on metal) used to be a major industry of Varanasi. The market and its lanes still exist but the energy and fervour of the earlier work is missing.

Ashtadhatu work has been another specialty of the city. As the name suggests, this work is created with an amalgamation of 8 metals. **Dr. Pramod Giri**, who heads the handicraft department of Jnana-Pravaha, shares his knowledge and ideas regarding the metal repousse and Ashtadhatu work that is found in Banaras. Jnana-Pravaha, founded in 1997, is a centre of study and research of the arts and culture of India.



Ashtadhatu work is made from an amalgamation of 8 metals. The basic metals in the Ashtadhatu work include copper, zinc, tin, lead, iron, antimony, gold and silver. Sculptures or artefacts are specially prepared using age old techniques. Sand casting and lost wax technique are used to create the objects. Lost wax is the oldest known technique. First the model is created with wax, after which it is coated with different types of clay. This mould made of clay is heated with wax and placed in the 'bhatti' (furnace) where the Ashtadhatu is being prepared. The metals are melted inside the mould and the final artifact is prepared. This process has been the same for centuries with very rare technological additions. The molded sculpture is then taken to the file master who separates the extra metal using the raiti. Lastly, it is transferred to the person who works on the detailing of the sculpture by carving on it and the chamak (glaze) is added to the artifact by polishing it. Presently, there is demand for Ashthadhatu decorative items like flower vases, utensils, ornaments and other daily use items.



Idols made of Ashtadhatu are sold at the Jnana-Pravaha shop

He mentions another craft promoted at Jnana-Pravaha and famous in Varanasi, that of repousse metal work. Earlier it was done on gold and silver, but due to lack of availability and cost issues the same art form with the intricate and detailed work has been introduced on brass and copper. The tools include hammers, chisels, nails of various sizes and varying sharpness.

Over time, the demand for these crafts has decreased. The traditional craftsman's family members themselves do not wish to take the art form forward. The shortage of demand is the primary reason for this.

The art is a form of tapasya, Dr Giri says, the more time one invests in the work, the better one gets, but nowadays, nobody is ready to invest the amount of time required for these handicrafts. Jnana-Pravaha, as an institution has invested in these traditional artists and equipped them with the needs and technologies of today. The centre researches and provides the artist with the information and technology required to create the art work. They train them and are also trying to introduce more artists to these art forms to conserve, preserve and promote the same. Workshops are also conducted for colleges and schools in the city.

Metal Repoussé

Repoussé work is a traditional technique of working with metals in which part of the designs are raised in relief from the back by hammering on the reverse side. The name repoussé is derived from the French word *pousser*, which means 'to push forward'. The opposite of repoussé is *chasing* (or engraving) where the metal is 'pushed down' or worked upon from the front to refine the design.

Both these techniques are often worked together to create a final finished piece and utilize the plasticity of metal to form the desired shapes. The process is relatively slow where a continuous sheet of metal is worked upon, without the loss of metal in the process and maintaining the same thickness throughout. The process is also called embossing and debossing.



Ganga Jamuni

Banaras has always been a spiritual city, and has been ruled by many Raja-Rajwadas. As and when they ruled, the art differed and changes were seen. Different styles and specializations were brought in. This city has thus gained a cross-cultural and mixed style of artwork and ethos, referred to as 'Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb'. 'Ganga Jamuni' term is, or was, frequently used by weavers, goldsmiths and other metal craftsmen. Technically, it relates to the practice of using two metals to decorate a form, such as gold and silver or brass and copper. This term is also applied when a brocade is woven with gold and silver zari, a jewellery item is made with gold and silver or more than one colour is used in enameling work. The term highlights the impact of religious coexistence through the artwork.

Ramlila Costume Shops



Ramlila and other festivals are celebrated with great enthusiasm and zeal in the holy city of Varanasi. The elaborate costumes and masks are found at a number of costume shops laid out at various areas of Chowk and Thatheri Bazaar in Varanasi. These shops provide costumes, crowns, beards, clubs, swords, jewellery and much more. The business thrives on the festival seasons. Since Varanasi can be considered as a city that celebrates multiple festivals, the demand for costumes and props is always high.

Weaves of Varanasi

A world famous centre of hand-made textiles, Banaras is well known for its brocades, zaris and saris since ages. The closely woven exquisite Banarasi brocades are worked out on silk fabrics with gold or silver zari. The quality of gold and silver used earlier was said to be so pure that the lustre and colour remained for hundreds of years.

Mrs Colin Mackenzie, a traveler to Banaras in 1847 AD, furnishes a very interesting account of the shops which dealt in the zari brocade:

“...this was the house of the richest manufacturers at Banaras. Half of the room was raised one step. Here we sat while bales of the most magnificent gold and silver stuffs, called “Kinkob” were unrolled before us. I do not suppose any European brocades equal them. They are used by the natives for trousers.....some of the muslins spotted with gold, and muslin shawls and scarves with gold and silver borders for about thirty rupees were beautiful...”⁴



Banaras Brocade Designs

Historical Perspective

One can find references to several varieties of textiles since the Vedic period. The Rig Veda mentions a certain kind of cloth called the Hiranya, where the gods and other figures are created in gold. This kind of textile is considered to be the earlier equivalent of the present day zari work and the Kimkhab. In Pali literature, Banaras is referred to as a reputed centre of textile manufacture, famous for its Kasikuttama and Kasiya. *Divyavadana*, a Buddhist Sanskrit text of the Gupta period (ca 350 to 500 CE) makes references to fabrics called ‘Kashika-Vastra, Kashi Kashikamsu and so on’.⁵ The *Lalita Vistara*, another Buddhist text

also refers to garments made of Kashika fabrics. The designs and patterns on these exquisite and fine fabrics included floral and vegetal designs, animal and bird motifs and geometrical designs. Other sources like the Jataka tales and Pali texts also become significant sources to study the growth and history of the weavers, their techniques, and the growth of the textile and its various forms. According to the *Mahaparinibban Sutta*, tradition goes that Buddha's mortal remains were wrapped in a textile manufactured in Banaras.

Some European travelers have left us with detailed accounts of their visits to the city, also highlighting the textile industry and its usage among other things. Ralph Fitch (1583-91) mentions that Banaras was a thriving cotton textile industry hub and manufactured turbans for the Mughals in large numbers. Peter Mundy (1632) says that he found a silk canopy hanging over the Shivalinga in the Vishwanath temple. It is assumed that it would have been made of zari or brocade. 'Manucci in his famous travel book "Storia Do Mogor" (17th C) records that Banaras exported to all over the world, its gold and silver zari textiles, which were "of the best quality".'⁶

The exquisite Banarasi sarees and brocades boast of intricate and exclusive techniques and designs like the Shikargah, Nakshabandha, Ganga Jamuni and Kimkhab, worked on the handloom by master craftsmen.



Banarasi Handloom

It is believed that earlier two localities of Banaras, Madanpura and Alaipura, controlled the manufacture of the zari and brocades respectively. However, presently both the centres (along with a few new areas) manufacture both varieties. The increase in demand of the Banarasi cloth has led the manufacturers to resort to the mass producing power looms as well. These looms not only work on 2-3 fabrics or more at a time but efficiently deliver work similar to that of a handloom. The exclusive handloom based brocade designs like the Shikargah, Nakshabandas, and Kimkhab etc are still produced on special demand. At the same time, the

rise of power looms feeds the demand for Banarasi textiles for the masses by retaining and reproducing certain characteristic elements, and also adding contemporary details to the traditional weaves.



Rows and rows of textile shops are found in the labyrinthine lanes of Varanasi, especially the famous Vishwanath Gali. The Chowk and Godowliya areas are brimming with these shops attracting tourists and city dwellers alike.

Shops selling saaris in the lanes of Varanasi

Shikargah

The Shikargah motif, which is said to be derived initially from a Persian-Arabic heritage, attained pre-eminence in the art forms of Mughal India. The luxury loving connoisseurs of Mughal India, particularly in Banaras, fashioned the Shikargah textile by initially feeding in the memories of hunts, rarely documenting any specific historic hunting episode. This style was turned into a jungle scene with mystical and animal figures.

The weavers working in the Madanpura area were known for their textiles having a distinctive clarity and a firmness of texture while executing a certain design on loom. While this area was known for its design, the technical acumen was centered at Alaipura which worked essentially on Nakshabandhas or Jalabandhas.



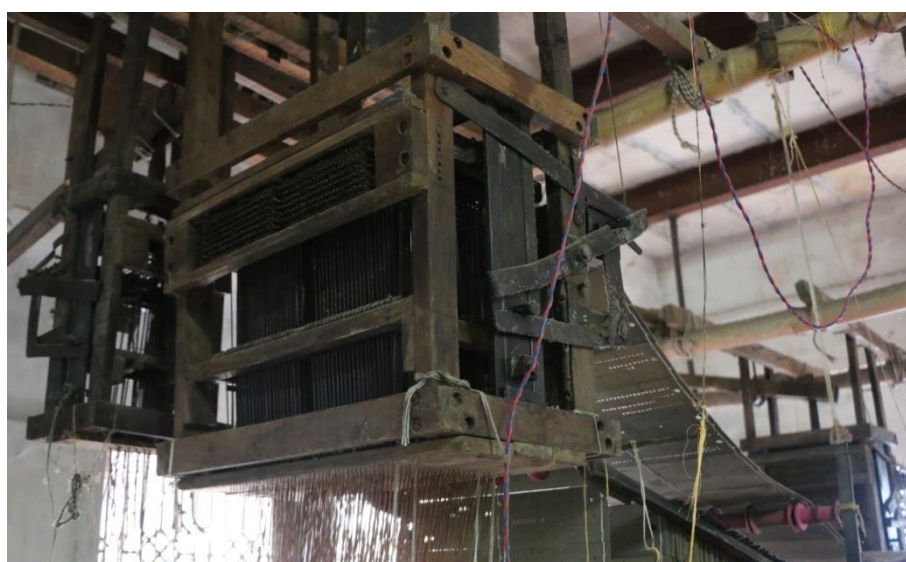
Shikargah motif in Banarasi Brocade

Nakshabandha

The naksha or jala making is an old technique known to Banaras. The *Ain-i-Akbari* by Abul Fazl throws some light on the Nakshabandhas. Banaras is one of the most important weaving centres where Nakshabandhas were created and used.

The elaborate process of working on a naksha begins with the designs first being made with steel pens on mica, of the actual size required on the fabric. These were kept as permanent records with the master designers. The actual nakshas made for following the designs were then tied on to the loom, an arrangement of threads built in a manner that upon being fixed on the loom, the weaver could lift the required warp threads to create the desired design on the fabric.

These indigenous equipments called the nakshas or jalas wove complicated designs on handlooms. In modern weaving the jacquard has taken this position.



A jacquard

The Handloom Industry: Weavers and their Looms

As one enters small congested rooms housing elaborate indigenous wooden looms, one notices complex and elaborate arrangements of cotton/silk strings from top to bottom. A patient weaver sits inside this frame, passing the shuttle through the layers of the warps and wefts swiftly.

Another typical setting is that of the textile shops with thick white mattresses and cushions laid out, and piles of hand-woven cloth neatly stacked up. One such shop belongs to Sh. Haji Haseen Mohd., a handloom seller in the Peeli Kothi area of Varanasi. He mentions that Banarasi sarees have been produced for centuries. When the jacquard was not known, all the sarees were made using the jala. With the creation of the jacquard, the card cutting began, and the sarees were created using the jacquard. The two distinct techniques called Kadhwa



and Phenkua work and the functioning of the jacquard are explained and demonstrated by Sh. Haseen and his sons along with two of their weavers, Ansar Ahmed Ansari and Nayeem Akhtar.

A Kadhwa Loom weaving the Tibetan Gyasar

Involved in the family business since childhood, Sh. Haseen learnt the craft from his father, who was a master weaver. Today, he provides raw material and cloth (thaan) to the top fashion designers and has many weavers working for him. His family had been working in this field for generations (traced back to 1886).

Another distinctive textile described by him, is known as the Tibetan brocade with a handloom technique (Gyasar) of a double warp. His family started working on the Gyasar fabric 100-150 years ago. Since then they have manufactured this specific textile on their looms. For the Tibetan brocade, viscose is used as weft to make the cloth thick. Cotton can also be used sometimes to give the cloth some thickness.

The process of working on the handloom begins by the selection of its chief element, the yarn. Banaras is known by its fabrics made from silk yarns. The yarn, after being duly processed undergoes treatments like bleaching and colouring. The original state of the silk thread has a gum like substance and is yellowish in colour. This substance is removed to bring the sheen and softness in the yarn. The sizing process of the thread is done so that they can be laid out as the warp or weft. The process of colouring/dyeing the thread begins by cooking the chemical-based colour mixed with water, soaking the threads, and repeated dipping in water till the desired shade is acquired. Presently, numerous varieties of thread like Bangalore silk, China silk, and others are bought from the market.



The process of dyeing and drying the silk yarn

The most important aspect of working on the design to be translated to the fabric is first prepared on paper by the designer, before the cards are punched. The cards are punched according to the graph measurements. The design is first made on the graph sheets, which is then transferred on to the cards by punching them. Later, the cards are used on the jacquard machine. The weave can start only when the cards are loaded on the jacquard. One colour thread per card can be used in the weft. To add a different colour, another card is used.

Nowadays the cards are cut using machines but hand tools were used earlier. Earlier the card for the jacquard was cut from the design of the jalas (around 1975-80s) but post 1980s the graph paper took the place of the jalas for design making and card cutting purposes.

Some designs have been passed on for generations. Various mythological designs were used earlier for the brocades. Tigers, lions, elephants, deer, peacocks and parrots were high in demand along with running patterns of leaves, bel (running floral pattern), butis (single flower or figure not joined to a running pattern), jals (enclosed buti in a network of geometrical patterns in compartments or closed spaces) and jangalas (woodland designs or an arabesque).

The model of the design or naksha (or in today's age the 'jacquard') is hung over the loom. In the case of the jala, it is attached on the top of the loom (just like the jacquard machine) and the lower half of the jala is then attached to the tana (warp). Each thread of the jala is connected to each thread of the tana which leads to the creation of the desired design.

The weaver sits facing the length of the loom. Various articles hang from or are attached to the bamboo structure like the Paghia, Gathwa, Hatha and Gulla. The shuttle or Dharki is made of buffalo horn with a smooth glazed surface which enables it to slide swiftly. As the weft thread passes from side to side, over one set of warp threads, and under another, and then under the first and over the other set, the network thus formed becomes the fabric. By means of the Hatha or reed, the weaver beats the weft threads close to the fabric as it proceeds. The design is created on the reverse side of the cloth. The weaver keeps checking every once in a while with the help of a mirror to see if the design is being made without flaws.

The cost of building a new loom itself needs a minimum of Rs 12-15,000 for the parts excluding the jacquard. The jacquard separately costs around Rs 7-8,000, depending on the need, design and hooks. Jacquard needs are very different and depend on the design. A jacquard can require 500, 600, 6000 or even 10,000 cards depending upon the colour and the design. The more colours one adds, the more the cards required. For example, if a design of 3 inch is repeated, the cards for that would be approx. 300. A 6 inch design will require double the cards. The width of the handloom is a standard 45 inch.

Sh. Haseen informs that the jala work is almost lost in Banaras, ever since the jacquard took over. Very few weavers are equipped with the techniques to be able to work on the jala. There are no jala makers either. He added that one jala with one design made by one man can take up to 10 days, whereas the graph design of the same jala would take 2-3 days.



Sh. Haseen in his Shop

The jala is painstakingly woven to create the required design. Today it is easier to work on the computer to create the graph designs. The quality of work remains the same for both the jala work and jacquard work, which makes the weavers opt for the graphs and jacquards for easier and quicker production.

His weavers work on both design techniques used in the loom: the Kadhwa work and Phenkua work. The cost of the former is more as it is time consuming and requires multiple people working on the loom sometimes. The main difference between the two is that in the Kadhwa loom, selected parts of the tana are lifted and the desired threads of the bana (weft) are thrown. It is more time consuming and difficult. Zari is used in the weft and mostly pure silk thread is used in the warp.

In terms of continuity, he carries forward the business of his father, and his sons are preparing to take it ahead after him. They have not learnt the techniques of weaving but are involved in the family business. A reason for this, he believes, is that today's generation does not take so much of interest in learning the techniques of the craft by sitting next to a weaver for long hours trying to grasp the technicalities. Mostly, people want the readymade cloth and engage in the sale-purchase of the cloth. Presently, he has around 70 weavers working with him. All the loom parts and the raw materials are provided to the weavers by him. Amidst the weaver families too, the newer generation is moving out of the profession or to the power loom. Within Banaras very few use the handloom. According to him, approx. 30-40 percent handlooms exist in the city. The rest have been sucked into the power loom industry. The new generation, he adds, is not interested in the handloom tradition—which is why it is not thriving.

He reveals that the government has tried in multiple ways to revive and promote the Banaras handloom industry. Many training centres have been established but in spite of these measures, the sector isn't developing. Not many new weavers are being trained and the power loom industry is on the rise. The Peeli Kothi area, where he lives and works from, has a number of weavers of handloom, but this number keeps reducing every year. Earlier his area comprised fully of handloom weavers, but today around 50 percent have shifted to the power loom. The future of handloom doesn't look very bright, he says.

The working hours of the weavers are very strenuous. They do not get holidays and are provided an hour's lunch break. Since the weaver community is predominantly Muslim, during Ramzan, for instance, the weavers mostly take a break from work in the afternoons since they observe a fast. They work the night shift during those days to keep up with the hours required to finish the cloth. They work with full dedication around the festival time, because the earnings are higher.

More changes in terms of the functioning of the loom have happened. The Khaddi in the loom was not used earlier and was added for improvement and faster work. Big and elaborate designs can be created with ease with such new improvements in the field of handloom. Since the cards are space consuming and heavy and require a large storage space, efforts could be made to reduce the cards, he suggests. He goes on to mention that the microchips have not yet been installed in the handloom in Banaras but are used in power looms all over. Slowly, electronic jacquards are entering the market which are using chips and discarding the cards, he adds.



Sh. Sribhas Chandra Supakar, a freelance textile designer based in Varanasi, who won a national award in 1995 for the revival of Awadh Jamdani weaves, has put in years of research and worked extensively in the field of lost Banaras textile traditions like the Gethua. He believes it is equally important to keep the old traditions alive while keeping abreast of new designs. In 2008, with the help of Alliance Française de Delhi he showcased these designs in an exhibition in New Delhi, the 'Kashi Kaleidoscope'. Designs like the Shikargah spread and a number of coloured zaris which are uncommon today were exhibited. The old styles and designs collected over a number of years were worked upon functional looms.

According to him the Banarasi handloom today is defined as containing elaborate zariwork, embroidery and certain fixed motifs worked on a good thick silk cloth. The loom in itself is very special in Banaras and the weavers are very technically advanced.

The designs have changed over the years and he feels they should be studied by era. He urges strongly that such work, even if at a small scale with a single loom in working condition kept purely for educative purposes, should be created with the support of the government to keep the continuity of the tradition alive. Apart from funding the artist and his craft, the art form should be given the same respect. The craft in recent years has been associated with high fashion which leads to high end designers and celebrities demanding the handloom. This step, he feels, will also attract the young generation to the craft.

A detailed practical and theoretical knowledge of the loom should be provided in design and fashion schools. Presently, subjects are divided into weaving theory, fabric structure, yarn study etc., but the practicality of the Benarasi loom is taught very superficially. He feels that a government intervention is required to appoint deserving and highly skilled master

craftsmen to pass on this tradition. Another suggestion he has for the growth and future of handloom is the construction of a centre for these craftsmen, which should be opened as a Banaras craft village, located in the city. He hopes this centre would involve knowledgeable and skilled people in running handloom workshops and training for other well known Banarasi crafts. This, he believes, would be self sustaining and very beneficial for selling the final products too. This education centre could include a museum to disseminate the history and various myths and stories about Banarasi textiles.

One gets a fair idea about the innovations and experimentation in the arena of the Banarasi fabric, while conversing with young designer Sh. Hemang Agrawal, Creative Director of The Surekha Group. Taking over his father's business, working with Indian and international brands all over the world, and being involved in the learning and creation of Banarasi textiles for the last 12 years, his focus is on creating new designs other than the traditional Banarasi patterns. He says that the textiles they work on are mostly neo-traditional, where the techniques and vocabulary are traditional but the style is contemporary. He adds that the world of fashion and textiles is moving ahead with the times which lead to the need to contemporize patterns for current customers. Their aim is to create a palette of all shades and a diverse customer base along with traditional designs.



“We have been able to play around with and have tweaked the loom. We have been able to put yarns which were otherwise thought impossible to put on the handloom. We have been able to put pure metals, stainless steel, leather and much more as yarns on the looms... that is where we have experimented a lot with the textures and technology of the handloom or power loom.”

– Hemang Agrawal

According to him power looms and handlooms can coexist as there is a clear market for both, to cater to a variety of customers. The crux of the solution, he adds, lies in working towards the skill development, preservation and promotion of the art. New banks of weavers should be given training and it should be made as remunerative as any other profession. For him, the solution lies not just in saving the weaver but the skill itself. In addition, a feeling of being an artisan and creating works of art with pride should be inculcated in weavers and artistic endeavours should be awarded.



Power loom in Varanasi

Women's role in the Banarasi handloom

Unlike many other areas of India where weaving is often the domain of women, one cannot find any women weavers in Banaras perhaps because of the intense physicality of the job. It uses a throw shuttle rather than a fly shuttle (where one pulls and the shuttle goes through) – this requires a hand span of at least 52-53 inches to throw the shuttle. Lifting the harnesses in the loom also requires strong calf muscles as it is a very heavy machine. For this reason, the industry in Varanasi is male dominated. The women in the weaver's household are usually given the task of filling the bobbins with thread, which are used in the shuttles.

Zari Embroidery

The gold and silver threads woven into Banarasi sarees or used for elaborate embroidery are very famous in Banaras. The Shivala neighbourhood has many workshop-homes of zari embroiderers. A long needle hooked at the end manipulates the thread. Most zari artists begin learning from a young age and have flexible working hours as they work mostly at their workshop-homes.

Gulabi Meenakari

Enameling may be described as the art of colouring and ornamenting the surface of metal by fusing to it various mineral substances. To quote A.K. Coomaraswamy (1913), “Minakari or the art of enamelling is essentially a North Indian art and has attained such perfection as to be fairly reckoned amongst the mastercrafts of India.” The mention of enameling in the *Ain-i-Akbari* makes it clear that the art was well established in India around Akbar’s time. Writing about jewellery and ornaments practiced in Hindustan, Abul Fazl in the *Ain-i-Akbari* says:



“The minakar or enameller, works on cups, flagons, rings, and other articles with gold and silver. He polishes his delicate enamels separately in various colours, sets them in their suitable places and puts them to the fire. This is done several times. His charge is sixteen dams for each tolah of gold, and seven for a tolah of silver”.⁷

Gulabi Meenakari

Jaipur, Alwar, Delhi and Banaras were the principal places where enamelling was practiced. The nature of Banaras pink is similar to that of the Jaipur red. It is equally elusive, applied last and requires the least firing. Only a master enameller can bring out the silken lustre and pleasing shade of rose pink. In the nineteenth century the phrase “Lal meene ke liye jaipur; gulabi meene ke liye Banaras” was on the tongue of every Indian jeweler and enamel loving individual.

Baden Powell (1872) mentioned Banaras as a place which stands “next to Jaipur in the art of enamelling”. T. N Mukharji (1888) also says: “In the north western provinces (now U.P.), Banaras has long been famous for its enamel in gold”.⁸

It is said that the ‘hanthi ke munh ka kada’ (elephant-trunk bracelet) was introduced by the Banarasi master goldsmith and these have knobs enameled with white and covered all over with minute floral scrolls in pink which are considered the most attractive forms of knobs available in Indian bracelets.

The Bharat Kala Bhavan has a representative collection of this art form and the National Museum has a good collection of Banaras pink enamels. The revival of the pink enameling of Banaras is a recent development. One such revivalist is **Sh. Raman Shankar Pandeya**, a well regarded jeweler and resident of Banaras. Pandeya ji, who belongs to a raees Brahmin family who are johris by profession, recalls an incident that influenced him to work on the



revival of the pink enamel work. He said that he came to Banaras after living for 25 years in Mumbai, when Smt. Pupul Jayakar told him to revive the Meenakari tradition.

Sh. Raman Shankar Pandeya showcasing his jewellery collection

This statement hurt him and inspired him to leave everything and come back to the city to revive the art form. He states that the jewellery market flourished at one point and had the best diamond cutters. Bhaironath was where numerous master craftsmen used to reside. They used to assemble in the evenings and discuss each other's crafts, take inspiration, and have a healthy competition with each other. This could have been a trigger point for the beginning of the Gulabi Meena, he says.



Meenakari jewellery pieces from Sh. Raman Shankar Pandeya's collection

Pink enamelling is found in France, Lahore, but the pink of Banaras is the actual pink of the rose, he asserts. The others have a tint of purple or are a shade above or below. Sh. Pandeya calls the other variants lotus pink enamel, a pink with a little purple black mixed, which doesn't have the shine and lacks delicacy in terms of appearance. The shading and delicacy of the Banarasi Meena is very distinctive and the meena workers of Varanasi have mastered the art to create the perfect pink of the rose. The work is done with a fine brush and when the brush is used over and over again, the work becomes finer. He remarks that the artists of Banaras can give you anything but their brushes as they have reached a level of perfection with those brushes.

He mentions the various style of enamelling. The Jaipuri Meena is called Bharwa Meena. The process of the Pink Meena is said to be the most difficult. There are 3 styles of Meenakari in Banaras. The first is the Bharwa Gulabi like that of Jaipur Bharwa which is rare today. The pieces of meena are joined to acquire natural shading by setting and studding the stone in the ornament directly before sending it to the furnace. This requires a lot of skill and effort. The second style is the Paani Gulabi, in which the assembly of the meena is done and then shading is done over it. When this work is taken out of the furnace the lustre is such that it

appears to have water inside it. The third and last style is the Thalma (painting) Meena, which is the typical Banarasi Meenawork. The pink enameling is also called Khadiya Meena (khadiya means chalk or calcium), because the base is always white. The motifs are worked out, the Saan is cut and the cast is given to the meenakar who fills the colours, outlines and then does the shading before polishing and finishing the work.

When he got into the revival process, Pandeya ji observed that there was a period of 30-40 years in Banaras where people were forgetting the importance or the existence of the pink



Pieces from his collection that showcase chikoti, Partaji and Nakkash work

Meena. He showed designs and ornaments like the Hanthi Kadha, necklaces, Victorian neckpieces, and other ornaments, which look heavy but the work and technique is so fine that when one wears it, it doesn't feel heavy. Among other fine pieces of art, he describes the Chikoti work (motif on motif work), Partaji work (meena stands out above the silver), Nakkash work, and others.

Usually the designs for these ornaments and objects were prepared by chitrakars or artists, who generally worked for the master-jeweller and kept books of patterns and designs from which customers made selections. The sunar or goldsmith then made the metal cast or article to be enameled which was eventually passed on to the gadhai (called Nakkashivala or Gadhia in Banaras) or an engraver who engraved the pattern on it.



The Sketchbook of Meenakari artist - Mohan Prasad Sharma

The process of Meenakari begins with filling the other side of the cast with lac, so that during khudai the base remains hard. Later the lac is removed for encrusting the stones. Before it goes for stone work, it is filled with yellow meena so that the meena work on the other side doesn't ruin and a balance of temperature is maintained on both sides. This is followed by the chhilai work. Two main colours are used: green and white. The leaves get a transparent green so chamak work is done for chhilai there. Where white is filled it is given ruukha rough work. The kalam is made by hand and pure iron is used for that. To sharpen the kalam or tool for engraving, a Saan is used (specific kind of stone). For sharpness, carborendum stone is used and for the chamak, a tool called Jila Saan is used.



The sons of late Sh. Mohan Prasad Verma sharing the step by step process of Gulabi Meenakari

The next step is the meena work. The meenas are bought in glass and stone form. They are ground in a khal (mortar-pestle). For very little meena, a Hakik (kind of stone) Khal is used. With a fine brush the meena paste is then applied. Bubbles are to be avoided. After the meena is put, it goes for firing in the furnace. The process is tiring and lengthy and it is 'fired' after every colour is applied. Once the glaze is achieved, the Gulabi paintwork begins. A tool called Baknal is used during the firing process. The smaller pieces and works are done using a spirit lamp, whereas the rest are heated on a big heater after being put over a metal sheet. One has to be careful to avoid over-heating as that could ruin the lining or even worse, melt the metal. The gold is seen only after the finishing of the final product. Three chemicals are used to bring out the lining and colour – Soura, Tutia and Nausadar. They are mixed together in the khal with water. The final product is soaked in it and heated again till the desired finesse is achieved.

The sons of late Sh. Mohan Prasad Verma, who have been in the field for long, mention that this art form is not taught at any specific place and requires a lot of patience. Since it is their family tradition they have been carrying it forward. One of the sons, Sh. Vinit Verma, specializes in painting on the meena. The ceramic colour is mixed with sandalwood oil on the Hakik stone. Three colours are used for painting: carbine colour for outline, and shades of pink and blue for the inside. For lining, the finest brush is used and usually they make these brushes themselves. The object is heated again after outlining, after which shading is done with rose pink colour, which appears as a violet shade till it is fired.

They are trying to bring a few changes and innovations to the Gulabi Meenakari work, like bringing the Gulabi work to the front of the jewellery piece as opposed to the earlier designs, where the Meenakari would always be at the end that is not displayed. They have tried to incorporate new designs to keep up with the demands of the modern customer base.

The traditions and techniques of the art forms have over time seen a few losses, some innovation and some age old artistry and craftsmanship. Looking at the future of these art forms, what really matters is its continuity, transfer and, in some cases, its revival.

Endnotes: Art and Craft

1 Medhasananda Swami, Varanasi at the Crossroads, Kolkata, RamaKrishna Mission, Institute of Culture, 2002; p. 699

2 Ibid; p. 701, 702

3 Ibid; p. 705

4 Ed. Mookerjee Ajit, Banaras Brocades, New Delhi, Crafts Museum, 1966; p. 37

5 Smrti, Brijpal Das Commemoration Volume, Varanasi, Brijpal Das – Rama Devi Foundation, 1995; p.128

6 Ed. Mookerjee Ajit, Banaras Brocades, New Delhi, Crafts Museum, 1966; p. 33

7 Smrti, Brijpal Das Commemoration Volume, Varanasi, Brijpal Das – Rama Devi Foundation, 1995; p. 116

8 Ibid; p. 116

Food Culture



Flavoured Lassi

Varanasi is said to rest on the trident of Lord Shiva and his omnipresence is evident in the lifestyle, language and food cultures of the city. Banarasis exude an inadvertent love towards food, with an exceptionally large appetite for sweets. It is said that no one should fear going away hungry from Varanasi because ‘Maa Annapurna, the goddess of food, is a permanent resident of the city’.¹ One can find an interesting and wide array of foods here. The streets are bustling with people at all hours of the day, and crowds are seen enjoying multiple varieties of food on the streets as well as on the ghats, inside various restaurants, cafes, and bakeries. The people of Varanasi take pride in sharing their indulgence for food, which becomes apparent from the queues witnessed at the chaat or mithai shops. University students are seen immersed in discussions while sipping hot tea from the misty fragrant kullhads.

The characteristic roads, streets and lanes of Varanasi appear additionally vibrant when the foods on offer drive large amounts of people to begin their mornings with the traditional kachori-subzi breakfast and the kullhad chai. They can also relax in the evening with chilled thandai or crispy-spicy snacks, and soak in the boisterous vibe of a daily celebration involving food.

While there are certain foods typically prepared during a particular season or festival, there are others which are available in abundance throughout the year. Every occasion calls for its own unique preparations, enjoyed twice as much by distributing among neighbours and friends. There are some food preparations specifically tied to the festivals like the Kashi Vishwanath’s ‘Annakut ka Shringar’, ‘Annakut Darshan’, and the ‘Chhapan (56) Bhog’ of Gopal Mandir. The Langda aam (a variety of mango), is relished by the people of Varanasi, and in mango season (which begins from June), the markets are brimming with it.



During the month of Ramadan, areas like Madanpura come alive when groups of people mostly Muslim men and children, gather in the market streets in the evening to purchase traditional sweets and other food items. The lanes of Dalmandi are laced with stores and restaurants offering kebabs, biryani and nihari. The ramshackle shops do brisk business churning out bade ke kebab, gurda kebab, shami and galouti on their tandoors and tawas. Walking further into the lanes of Dalmandi, a Muslim populated area situated in the middle of the city, one passes through numerous small sweet shops offering a variety of colourful sweets.

The story of Annapurna

One day, a hungry Shiva asked Narada the reason for his hunger. Narada told him that his wife, Paravati, was the reason behind his hunger. Narada said that a dutiful wife brings good fortune to her husband. Next, he went to Shiva's house where he found a starving Parvati. He told her that Shiva, her husband was the reason behind her hunger as only a capable husband can support his family with ample earnings. Paying heed to Narada's words, the very next day, Parvati left home with her children in search of food. Narada taught her how to persuade people to give her food. She returned home in the evening with baskets full of food that she had collected from many families, and fed it to Shiva till he was completely satiated. Hence forth, Parvati came to be known as Annapurna.

Lassi

Fruit and dry fruit-flavored lassi can be found at stores like the Blue Lassi Shop, near Manikarnika Ghat. Plain curd and malai lassi are quite popular. Old patrons still prefer shops in the Chowk or Pakka Mahal area where the intertwined vine-like lanes present many lassi options. This cool refreshing drink is mostly enjoyed in the kullhad. The kullhad deserves a

special mention in the food culture of Varanasi, with its use witnessed in large numbers in the lassi and the tea shops. Made of clay, this unique pot is economical, hygienic and a symbol of the continuation of local culture.



Plain and flavoured Lassi are served in the Kullhad

The Kashi Chaat Bhandar and Deena Chaat Bhandar near Godowliya begin operations around 3 pm and serve delicious varieties of chaat papdi, tamatar chaat, palak pakodi, dahi papdi, falooda and gol gappa to the customers who queue up at these stores. At the market streets of Godowliya, including the ones that lead to Chowk, and the lanes that lead to the Dashashvamedh Ghat, one can find multiple food options like poori, samosa and sandwiches, with restaurants serving different cuisine, chaat corners, ice-cream vendors, small sweet shops tucked into corners, lassi and thandai shops, peanut sellers, fruits and vegetable sellers, paan and chai shops offering delights to suit different taste buds till late into the evening.



Varanasi Chaat is the most famous street food of the city

The stretch from Asi Chauraha to Godowliya (approximately 3 kms) is full of small and big shops, make-shift tents, cart vendors, and restaurants where one can find numerous foods being sold. There is egg roll, and omelette in the tea shops, vegan bakeries, Indian cuisine (ranging from Mughlai to idli sambhar), paan, bhang, chaat, chicken, noodles, momos and a number of sweet shops like the Ksheer Sagar – a truly exhaustive list of options for someone who wants to eat street food.

Ram Bhandar in Chaukhambha Gali attracts the majority of morning poori-jalebi breakfast lovers. All food items here are prepared in desi ghee, like the popular kachori-sabzi. There is also the delicious gol kachori and badi kachori served with aloo rasa. Roasted chana, peanut, murmure prepared with chopped onions, chillies, and spices, and bhutta (corn) become quick-bite snacks savoured by the people while strolling at the ghats and market places. Lemon tea is prepared within 20 seconds by pouring hot water from a big aluminium kettle over freshly squeezed juice, with masala (powdered spices) added to it. This is served in paper cups, and can be found at the ghats.



Kachori-Sabzi and Jalebi is an ideal breakfast for the residents of Varanasi



A local quick snack prepared within minutes, comprises of roasted Makai ka Murmura (corn), Hara Makai ka Murmura, matar (pea), chips, Pingal (local name for a long rice-like item), chana, peanut, and Chiwda (rice based food item). All of these are dry roasted in salt, mixed with some powdered spices and chillies, and eaten with a chutney which is a thick blend of onion, coriander, mint and chillies. Sh. Nanhe Kumar sells a lesser-known snack known as Suhaal ki Chaat. He comes to the ghats regularly to sell this chaat. He states that this chaat is enjoyed by people elsewhere in India but since the people of Varanasi are known to enjoy life to the fullest and partake of multiple varieties of food, the

chances of finding the chaat in this city are higher. The Suhaal are crispy, savoury pastries that are crushed and mixed with cooked chhole (chickpeas), onion, salt, pepper and special chutney (made using coriander, chillies, tamarind, cumin powder and lemon juice) to make the Suhaal ki Chaat, which is best enjoyed hot.



Khoya Gali is the wholesale market for milk products, and the makers of sweets buy their raw materials mostly from here. Khoya is a key ingredient in the sweet-making traditions of Varanasi. It is churned out of milk and used for various sweets, ranging from barfi to milk cake. While some of the old sweet shops like Madhur Jalpan in Chowk, Shree Rajbandhu in Kachori Gali (famous for pedas and namkeens), and Madhu Bahar at Asi, continue to thrive, the relatively newer outlets like Ksheer Sagar (which fuses the Banarasi and Bengali traditions) have created a distinct niche for themselves in the sweet market.

Jaleba, a bigger form of jalebi is a special preparation seen in the markets of Varanasi during Kajri festival. On the night of Ratjagga, some sweet shops remain open till late in the night, celebrating the Kajri season by preparing Jalebas.



Jaleba is prepared and sold during Kajri festival



Laung Lata is an exquisite, light caramel coloured, deep fried sweet stuffed with flavored khoya (milk solids), and soaked in sugar syrup. It derives its unique name from the use of clove in its preparation. Once the sweet is ready, a piece of clove is inserted into it as the final garnish.

Laung Lata

Mallaiyo, a delicious sweet delicacy, is available only during the winter season. Milk is churned the whole night to attain a feather-like level of fluffiness, which is then flavored with saffron and garnished with pistachios and chunks of rabri. It is served in kullhads and has the appearance of a delicate fluffy milk cloud. Chaukumbha Gali is known to have good Mallaiyo during the winter season. It can be seen in the market only after the month of October, and savoured during the cold winter season.

Emerging cafes and restaurants mostly in the area of Asi, and around the Manikarnika Ghat, as well as other ghats, are catering to the taste buds of a global customer. These cafes contribute an interesting array of foods to the evolving food culture.

Banarasi aaloo papad is another speciality of the city. Locals make these papads at home. The thinly cut potato is mixed with spices and is left to dry on the rooftops/open areas. Once dried, they are fried and the transparent crunchy potato papads are relished. At the Chowk area, there are a variety of local murabas and pickles to be found. The Banarasi stuffed fat red chili pickle is the most well known among the pickles sold in the market.

Varanasi is also known for its vegetarian dishes. Some restaurants serve sattvik thalis. The Banarasi dum aaloo is considered a delicacy here. Matar ka Nimona, another unique vegetable dish made of green peas is consumed with boiled rice and the special stuffed red chilly pickle.



There are multiple Thandai shops in the galis and market area of Varanasi

A cooling drink made with milk, malai, dry fruit (almonds and pistachios), and cardamom, the thandai stands true to its name, providing relief from the searing heat. While serving thandai, the shopkeeper will ask if you want bhang in it, and prepare your thandai accordingly, finishing with a rigorous shaking of all the ingredients achieved by cupping two glasses together. Bhang is available openly throughout Varanasi. There are government bhang shops from where one can purchase bhang powder, or the green-coloured, thickened paste like form of bhang. Backed by the faith that it is Bhole ka Prasad or Baba ka Prasad, bhang enjoys its own special spot in people's lives here. There are multiple thandai shops at Godowliya offering kesariya badam, Banarasi thandai, pista badam, gulab sharbat, nimbu masaledaar, soda masaledaar and lassi.



Hot Chai being served

Paan

There are a countless number of paan shops in Varanasi. While the Banarasis say their shops are categorized on the basis of preference of different varieties of paan, people can be seen sourcing their entire day's paan supply from a single shop, and carrying it with them. These paan (which are not instantly eaten) are kept folded with the help of a little stick which holds the ingredients inside the leaf



intact. Before eating the paan, the stick is removed, and as they say in Banaras, “paan jamaya jaata hai.” Sh. Jawahar Lal Chaurasiya, locally known as Raju, sells betel leaves in his store in the Thatheri Bazaar. He says that most of the Banarasis eat the desi paan, which uses the desi patta or Mahua leaf that comes from Lucknow. The Magahi Paan is available from November to March.



Varieties of Paan

Endnote:
Food Culture

1 Sinha Kunal, *A Banarasi on Varanasi*, New Delhi, Bluejay Books, 2004; p. 23

Oral Traditions & Performing Art



The category of performing arts includes vocal and instrumental music, dance and theatre. The verses sung during the theatrical performances, the songs both classical and folk and the themes of the dance traditions rely on tales and epics, legends and myths, and include prayers, chants, songs and ballads, which come under the umbrella of oral traditions. These expressions play a key role in keeping the traditions alive by passing on knowledge, beliefs, socio-cultural values and forming a collective memory for communities.

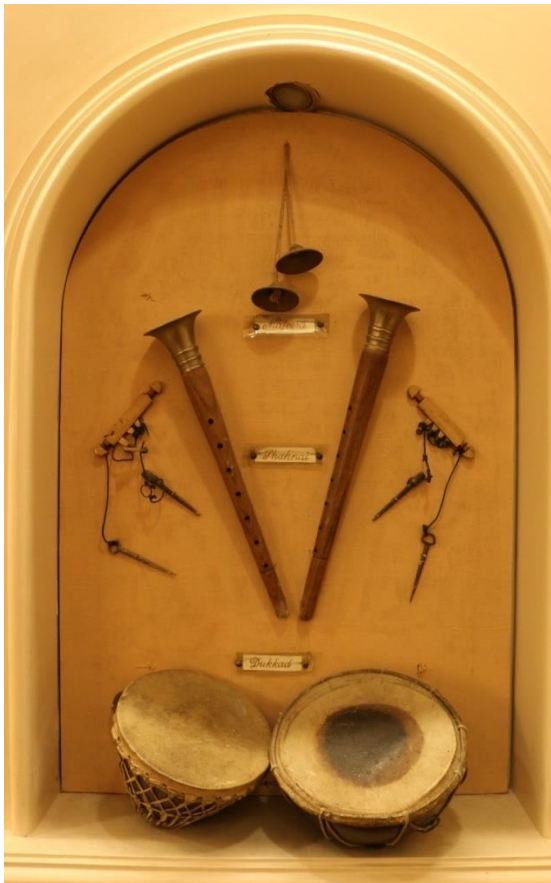
These performing arts and traditions collectively form a vital part of the culture of Varanasi. This city boasts of numerous schools of music and dance. It is home to the widely popular dramatizations of Lord Rama and Lord Krishna's life in its famous Ramlila and Krishnalila. In the development of any branch of art, such as music or dance, a vital factor is a suitable atmosphere in which one's creative ability can manifest itself freely. With Shiva, as creator of music, being the city's presiding deity and the multi-dimensional, colourful and carefree life ethos of the city, there is a favourable environment for music and other arts to flourish.

The tradition of disseminating knowledge of these art forms to numerous generations over the years has been enabled by the Guru Shishya Parampara. The gurus imparted the knowledge that was passed on to them by their elders. The tradition of gharanas or schools of music, art and dance has occupied an important place in the history of Indian culture. The music style in Banaras gradually intensified and got codified to form the Banaras Gharana. The most well-known 'gharanas' according to practitioners and scholars is that of Tabla and Kathak. Their age old traditions are deep-rooted and can still be found flourishing in the city. Musical instrument shops and music schools can be found in a number of localities and galis of the city. Vocal singers are of divided opinion about the gharanas of vocal music in the city. The music of Banaras is known by a few gharanas such as Senia Gharana, whose founder is

considered to be Tansen himself, the Mishra Gharana which claims to have a history of over 400 years, named after two Mishra brothers, Hariprasad Mishra (also popularly known as Prasadhu) and Manohar Mishra, the Mishra Gharana of Buddhu founded by a well-known sarangi player and vocalist Buddhu Mishra, the Ramsahay Gharana of tabla and many others.

Music

Varanasi has been the home of musicians and artists for ages. The spiritual atmosphere of the city gave the musicians a creative space to nurture and extend their music tradition. The royal patronage over the years and of the Muslim rulers specifically, played a vital role in the growth of the Banaras Gharana of music. Varanasi emerged as a centre of Hindustani music along with the other important centres such as Delhi, Agra, Lucknow and Gwalior.



Dhrupad, Khayal, Dhamar, Tarana, Ghazal, Tappa, Bhajan, Thumri, Dadra, Kajri, Chaiti, and Hori sung in Banaras, especially by female vocalists, became prominent in North India. Similarly, for musical instruments, it became known for the veena, shehnai, tabla and sarangi, as well as sitar, sarod and pakhawaj. Folk instruments like turi, bheri, tikara, damama and jharjhari were popular in earlier times. Varanasi occupies a high place in the Thumri culture of north India. It does not feature tanakari; the emphasis is on emotions. Generally based on romantic texts and songs about the beloved, the thumris are composed in simple taals from lighter ragas. The credit for Banarasi Thumri goes to the Kathaks of Varanasi and to Wazid Ali Khan of Awadh. It is believed that while Lucknow Thumri was growing, the Banarasi Thumri developed a certain character as the courtesans and singers here made it more soulful and expressive. While the musicians developed the Thumri style in melodious forms

of classical music, the courtesans beautified it with their soulful rendering. Famous Thumri singers remembered today are Maujuddin Khan, Bade Siyaji, Chote Siyaji, Bade Ram Das and Chote Ram Das among others.¹

Varanasi has also been known for the rich tradition of the Tappa. Shori Mian's chief disciple, Mian Gammu and his son and disciple, Shadey Khan, belonged to the Darbar of Raja

Uditnarain. He trained two tawaifs, Chitra Bai and Imambandi, in Tappa, and they went on to become great exponents of this style.²

Banarasi singers are also known for the Khayal. The word loosely translates to ‘imagination’ as the form demands improvisational flexibility and creativity, which become the most important ingredients for this style of music. Khayal compositions draw freely from Hindu and Muslim texts. One of the chief centres for Dadra, Varanasi excelled in the finest styles rendered by the Tawaifs of the city. The local folk tradition of the Kajri was also refined and enhanced with artistic touches by the Tawaifs. This Banarasi Kajri became a special contribution to music, like the Chaiti of Mirzapur or the Hori of Vindhyachal and for a long time, it was customary for local women including professional dancers to sing during the large fairs of the season.



Shehnai and dhol players at the ghats

In and around Varanasi, two distinctive sects of traditional professional musicians rose to fame, the Gandharvas and the Kathaks, who were devoted to learning, teaching and performing the arts. It was not just a profession and a means of livelihood for them, but a form of devotion and Bhakti. A large group of Kathaks settled in the Kabir Chauraha and surrounding areas of the city. The Kathaks, it is said, came to be known as Misra in Varanasi, and later changed their titles to Maharaj, Sahay, Prasad etc. Another area that came to be predominantly occupied by musicians and artists is the Ramapura area of Varanasi.

Padma Bhushan Dr. Chhanu Lal



Padma Bhushan Dr. Chhanu Lal, an artist par excellence, was born on 15th August, 1936, in Azamgarh but finds himself to be bound by a ‘relation of blood with Varanasi’. He explains this relationship with the city. His grandfather (‘khaas nana’) Pandit Baggadh Maharaj resided at Kabir Chauraha and his brother Pandit Gudai Maharaj Shanta Prasad, referred to Chhanu Lal ji as his nephew (‘naati’). Another exceptional artist, Pandit Bade Ramdas Ji Maharaj, was his

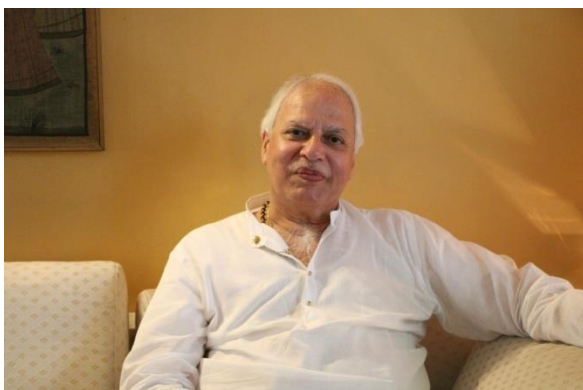
great grandfather ('par nana') whose only daughter was married to Pandit Baggadh Maharaj. Baggadh Maharaj's sister ('khaas behen') was Chhanu Lal ji's paternal grandmother. Pandit Anokhe Lal Maharaj, the tabla player ('Tabla Samrat', he calls him) was his father in law ('sasur'). Pandit Kishan Maharaj was his brother in law ('sadu bhai'). All these intertwined relations reflect his personal connection with the city.

On his views on the gharana system and the Guru Shishya Parampara, he says he does not feel that the style of music that the city had and is continuing to nurture should be classified as a gharana. A firm believer of the Guru Shishya Paramapara, he is a fount of knowledge as he has with him the compositions and techniques passed down to him from generations. He mentions a famous Thumri singer from Lucknow, Maujuddin Khan, who came all the way to Varanasi just to learn from his great grandfather Pandit Jagdim Maharaj. He asserts that it is in his 'parampara' to not take the name of a gharana and instead call it a style of singing; his great grandfather's and father's style of singing, which he is simply carrying forward.

He is of the opinion that the essence of music can be extracted from the shastras and the only way music can prosper and continue to grow, is in the learning and teaching of the shastriya sangeet (classical music); else the music of today will remain entangled in the classifications and distinctions of gharanas. It is not about questioning the beliefs of numerous others who believe in a gharana system, but simply his stand on the tradition.

His method of training falls in line with the teaching styles of his gurus and elders. He doesn't believe in certifications and degrees that a lot of the universities and schools of music offer. It is important to learn the theories and technical aspects of music but the essence lies in the practical usage and devoted and concentrated riyaz of the learner. He prepares very few and selected students who wish to learn and more importantly understand the nuances of music and its intricacies.

Padma Bhushan Pandit Sajan Mishra



Renowned singers, Pandit Rajan and **Sajan Mishra** are carrying forward a 300-year-old lineage of Khayal singing of the Banaras Gharana. Having performed at numerous national and international concerts, the Mishra brothers received their initial musical training from their grandfather's brother, Bade Ram Das Ji Mishra, their father, Pandit Hanuman Prasad Mishra, and from their uncle, Pandit Gopal Prasad Mishra, who were renowned artists of Banaras, along with their grandfather Pandit Sursahai Mishra.

Both Rajan-Sajan Mishra, were 'Ganda-bandh' students of Gayanacharya Swargiya Pandit Bade Ramdas ji. Pandit Sajan Mishra say that they have been lucky that they were born in Kashi in the family of musicians and are fortunate to be living in the neighbourhood of Kabir Chauraha where the Kabir Math is situated. This area is well known for the master artists of Banaras music and dance who lived here.

The Banaras Gharana:

He says that the oldest tradition in Banaras is of music. Speaking about the gharana he says that it is important to understand how a gharana is created. According to him, the music originated from prakriti or nature, but calling Banaras a gharana may be justified as the style of traditional knowledge of music and dance that developed in the city saw years and generations of artists who nourished and nurtured these specific styles.

The reason why he calls this style of singing 'Banaras gharana', is because he feels it is only in Banaras that dance and music (both vocal and instrumental) were practised and performed. It is wholesome in nature and has established itself as a gharana in all these fields.

Continuity of tradition

The Mishra brothers established a school/ Gurukul 18 years ago in Dehradun, named Viraam - the Gurukul'. Since they have busy schedules, both the brothers manage to spare 2 months in a year to personally train and educate their students there. The students enrolled at the gurukul are of an advanced level. The beginners take training from Pandit Rajan Mishra's son, Sh. Ritesh Mishra and once they reach a certain level, they are transferred to the gurukul. The routine maintained at the gurukul follows strict discipline and follows the kind of training similar to the Guru Shishya Parampara.

They have a number of students who are being trained to take their style of music forward. His brother's sons Ritesh and Ajneesh Mishra and his own son Svaransh Mishra are expected to continue the tradition and legacy that they will leave behind. Many of their talented students as well as their sons give them the faith that their music tradition has a bright future. To enhance and elevate the status of music, he believes exponents and experts with knowledge and experience should be given a platform to revive, restore and disseminate the traditions and values. He feels, that the government and organizations alike should meticulously and thoughtfully select and promote artists from the city for the upliftment of the culture of Varanasi.

Dr. Rajeshwar Acharya



Born in 1943, **Dr. Rajeshwar Acharya** is the son of Pandit Padma Narayan Acharya who was a well known scholar in the world of Hindi Literature. His father, being a friend of Pandit Omkar Nath ji Thakur ('Sangeet ke Yug Purush'), assisted him during the translation of *Kamayani*, a Hindi epic poem by Jaishankar Prasad. Dr. Rajeshwar was about 8 at that time, and when he tried to sing like Pandit ji, his talent was noted by people, and that's how he ended up getting admission in the music school

at BHU at the age of 10. He learnt from Pandit Omkar Nath ji Thakur's disciple, Adarniya Swargiya Pandit Balwant Rai Bhatt or Bhawrang. At that time, he recounts that education in music was taken very casually, and girls would often enrol for music classes as a vocational subject during the holidays. He wanted to highlight the academic value of music, and he went on to complete a PhD in music. He has performed classical music, folk music, and holds a record in 12-hour non-stop Jaltarang Vaadan, and another record in 13-hours non-stop singing. He told Ustad Bismillah Khan ji, that he must ask the government to introduce shehnai education in an institutionalised environment.

The fact that there aren't shehnai teachers in formal education institutions in the country, at any level, is worrisome. A similar lament is expressed by shehnai artist Sh. Chandrakant Mishra. About Varanasi, Dr. Acharya says that any person who lives in Kashi, even for a brief period, will most definitely feel homesick for Kashi.

Views on musicality and musicians

Since every human has this basic musical fibre inside, the language and sound of music is understood everywhere in the world; One cannot be asked to laugh or smile in English, or cry in Hindi, such expressions are the same everywhere. The impact area of music is not merely limited to the performance aspect, its affectivity is multidimensional. He is known for Dhrupad, Khayal, Thumri and folk styles of music.

Sh. Rahul and Sh. Rohit Mishra



Rahul and Rohit Mishra are the 5th generation (paternal side) and 7th generation (maternal side) to continue and carry forward the music traditions of their family, which has left its mark in this field for the past 300 years. From the age of 7, they started their training from their father Pandit Triloki Nath Mishra and later took advanced training from Pandit Rajeshwar Prasad Mishra, who is from the Banaras Gharana and was trained under Pandit Ram Das's Gharana.

Post several years of training under both the gurus, they started their education in music under Late Padma Vibhushan Shrimati Girija Devi, who herself was a disciple of their great grandfather Pandit Sarju Prasad Mishra. After 10 years of learning from her, she gave them their 'Gandas'. Through this tradition, rare songs and compositions are transferred only to special, devoted and dedicated students. The brothers themselves have started training the younger generation. The training methodology is the same as what they have learnt from their gurus. They have learnt all forms of classical music like Dhrupad, Dhamar, Khayal, Thumri,

Tappa, Kajri, Chaiti, Hori, Bhajan and more. They stress on the fact that expression and bhaav plays a major role in the Banaras Gharana. Music is a form of art and Banaras' music is a combination of sahitya (literature) and art (expressions), says Rahul Mishra. He adds that the expressions are very vital as they help in creating a visual picture for the viewer while they sing.

Guru Shishya Parampara

The brothers have grown up following and learning under the Guru Shishya Parampara and believe that to learn the nuances you have to be with the Guru at all times. When at the guru's place, Guru Seva also has to be done, they say. The usual routine at the gurukul which they attended, included: practice at 4 am, making breakfast and tea for their guru and themselves, classes, lunch, rest, serving the guru, eating dinner and practising for a few more hours before finally sleeping. The mundane routine not only teaches discipline but makes one connected to their guru and the art form. The teaching style of the guru was another aspect that they grasped and followed in their style of teaching. They believe the curiosity in today's student is lacking maybe because the involvement is less. They feel that concentration level of the students is fading too. It is also about investing time. "We don't call it wasting time. It's always an investment when you're learning something...." says Rahul.

Sh. Devashish Dey



Sh. Devashish Dey, a guru of Hindustani classical music in Varanasi, has founded Shilpayan, a school of music for people of all age groups to promote and preserve the music traditions. Having learnt from his Guru, Pandit Pashupatinath Mishra of the Banaras Gharana, and from Pandit Mukund Vishnu Kalwin of Gwalior and Agra Gharana, he has worked towards the growth, dissemination and promotion of classical music in the city. Being an A grade artist of Akaashvani, performing

at many national and international concerts, he teaches the young generation, to spark in them an interest in and desire to pursue classical music.

His academy presently has 250 students who are trained by him and 6 of his senior students. Both his son and daughter also learn music with the same passion. He has tried to take the goodness of both institutional learning and the Guru Shishya Parampara and merge them to form the methodology of teaching at his school. They use social media and WhatsApp groups, circulate course material between each other and share links to old archival songs, to spread the knowledge of music. They have started a culture of mehfil/baithak, where students sing and gurus listen and judge the performances. Creativity is always encouraged.



Students from his school: Shilpayan

Creatives and Changes

He believes in experimentation and has added new changes to old styles and formats of ragas to make it interesting and different. He has tried using Hindi sahitya to enrich both the music and Hindi literature. Annual competitions between students are organized to create ‘bandish’ or compositions. Classical antakshari is played by the gurus and students which eventually leads to the students memorizing the compositions by heart.

Usage of modern tools to create interest is one key feature of this training methodology. They have published journals on various facets of music. Through the Shilpayan music broadcast or WhatsApp group, he shares rare recordings of classical music from his collections with a detailed write up about the same, every morning and evening. Such an efficient means of using the present day technology to disseminate knowledge and share hidden treasures is a noteworthy endeavour.

Folk Music

Varanasi is a rich pool of knowledge and tradition. Along with a strong background of classical music, the city boasts of rich folk traditions. The folk music of Banaras, whether absorbed from other areas or evolved from within the city, is said to be age old. The folk styles sung by the people generally included the Kajri, Birha, Kawali, Khemta, Purvi, Lavani and Jhula.³

Traditions of Kajri

The word ‘kajri’ is possibly a derivative of kajal (kohl or black). During the monsoon, the black clouds bring relief and a reason to rejoice, which is manifested in singing out loud and dancing, celebrating and welcoming this month with great joy. Mirzapur is considered the place where Kajri originated. In Uttar Pradesh, there are three forms of Kajri- Dangali Kajri, which is a competition between two or more performers; Shastriya Kajri, which is sung on a performance platform; and the third is sung by women during monsoon evenings while dancing in a semi-circle, known as Dhunmuniya Kajri. The Kajri songs, sung mainly by

womenfolk, are folk poetry that was composed by many renowned writers such as Bhartendu Harishchandra of Kashi and Premaghan of Mirzapur among others.⁴

Folktales of Mirzapur mention a woman called Kajali whose husband was away in a distant land. The arrival of monsoon and the separation from her beloved became unbearable. It is believed that she started crying at the feet of the goddess and these cries took the form of the popular Kajri songs.

Sh. Hari Ram Dwivedi



Sh. Hari Ram Dwivedi or Hari Bhai, a retired employee of the All India Radio, is a poet with a passion for local folk songs, which have always held his interest since childhood. He was so enamoured by the richness of these folk songs, that he began writing his own (tukkbandi). He humbly says that he is not an expert, or academician with research or teaching background, but he speaks from the knowledge that he has accumulated in the process of living, feeling and experiencing these things.

He has composed folk tunes, and taught students who wanted to learn folk songs. He taught them at his house, and these students began singing in a group at Akaashvani. He still gets some people who want to learn from him: he helps them but doesn't take classes anymore. The folk songs of Banaras are sung in Bhojpuri.

He believes that 'cassette culture' has damaged the culture of Bhojpuri folk music. On changes that have appeared in the folk music of the region, he says "Change is a constant, and should be accommodated to avoid monotony. But when an old tradition gets extinct, or when I am no longer able to see or get something from my childhood, I certainly feel an ache. But that does not mean I will stop the change from happening. My shortcoming will be the inability to conserve it, and it is completely my (our) fault." (translated text)

Bhojpuri is divided into three parts –

1. Kashika: spoken in Kashi and surrounding regions
2. Ballika: spoken in Baliya region
3. Mallika: spoken in areas of Bihar

He adds, "Since Varanasi is closer to Awadh, our dialect is influenced to some extent by Awadhi. It is Bhojpuri, but with Awadhi influences.... "

There used to be akhadas where dangal was performed during Saawan and Kajri. It's hardly visible today and this reality is difficult to accept. "Roz chaughatta lagta tha". Women used to gather at 8 - 8:30 pm every day after completing their chores, and used to sing together,

holding hands, moving together in circular motion. This used to continue till 12 in the night, even if it would rain, these women would continue singing.

Kajri is not a song; it is a festival which is celebrated after Rakshabandhan (first day of Bhadon falls after Rakshabandhan, then the 2nd day is a night-long celebration in the form of ratjagga, and the third day of Bhadon is Kajri). Kajri was celebrated this way in the city as well as the villages, but now it is a rare sight in the city, and although it has diminished in the villages too, one can still find Kajri celebrations in some villages. The Bhadon ki Teej that falls during the Krishna Paksh, is celebrated in the form of Kajri. Mirzapur is where Kajri originated, after which it came to Banaras. Dhunmuniya is a form of Kajri that is sung by both men and women, but with different songs.

This form of Kajri celebration (or 'chaughatta', a more community engaging, and socially celebrated form) has more or less vanished from the city lanes, but on the night of Kajri, one can still find Jaleba being prepared and sold at shops, and women singing and dancing.

Akhada Kajri has many tunes, one of which is called Shayari Kajri, and within the tunes (forms) of this form of Kajri, is something called Tod waali Kajri, which again has five parts—mukhda, antara, latka, udaan, and tek. These nuances are entirely typical, and can be understood only through singing or listening. The variation in this particular tune is the latka that is sung right after mukhda (unlike the usual rendition in which mukhda is followed by antara). Latka is a complete little song/ lyric suffixed in the middle of the tune, and it is the most attractive section of the tune. This adds an elemental attraction to the tune. The singing of one Kajri can continue for more than an hour at a stretch.

When the akhade waalas sing one Kajri which has four stanzas, the rendition can continue for up to an hour because of the repetitions, which is the specialty of this folk music. Now, this tradition is vanishing as the people who used to perform it, discarded many of the elements from their performance, and the public has started to lose interest.



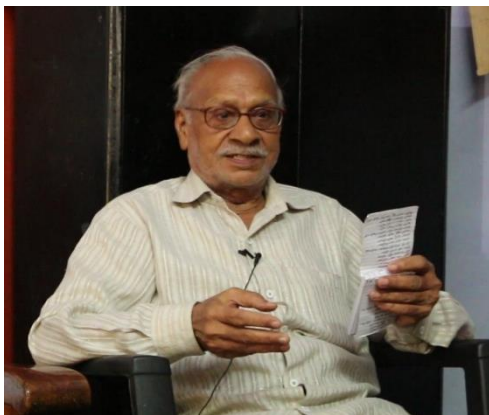
Men from Chitaipur village sing kajri

In the domain of folk songs, Kajri is the richest form of music here, having the highest number of tune (dhun) compositions. There are more than a hundred tunes of Kajri, which can be performed solo (ekal), as a duet, or with a group. This musicality (lyric, tunes, performance) of Kajri reflects jubilation and exuberance ('ullas ka sangeet hai'), since it is celebrated at a time when rains provide cooling relief to the land and people, after a spell of the searing summer sun. The main theme in Kajri music is the experience and expression of joy and happiness. People are rejoicing because rains will allow cultivation and farming, which in turn will provide them crop for sustenance.



Sh. Vijay Shankar Pandey and his wife Smt. Susheela Pandey reside in a village within Varanasi called Chitaipur. Chitaipur is 5-6 kms away from the centre of the city. The women and men of this village appear to have kept the tunes and compositions of Kajri alive here. Like Mirzapur, the

Banaras Kajri is famous too, they say. The songs take inspiration from devotion, romance, love, Lord Krishna, jhoola (swings), old myths, stories and even Veer Rasa. Kajri song books can be bought from old shops.



Sh. Gauri Shankar Tiwari who is also referred to as 'Bhukkhad Banarasi' (his upaadhi or title) hails from the village area and feels a close connection with it. He takes the real life village problems and puts them in present context to create poems and Kajri compositions. He uses the same tunes but the problems are different and relevant today. For him, the presentation is the same but the content is different and very contemporary. For example, when

Varanasi witnessed less rainfall and there was a drought-like situation, because of which crops suffered, how does one celebrate Kajri, he questions. He adds that when the heart and soul aren't happy, a celebration is not possible.

Instrumental Music

Tabla



Banaras evolved its own style of tabla playing and this gharana was called Banaras Baaj. This tradition that is said to have been developed by

the legendary Pandit Ram Sahay is around 200 years old. The oral tradition was passed down from generation to generation and retains its richness and purity till date. In the Benaras Baaj, the art of playing the tabla as a soloist is respected and promoted. The technical aspects of this tradition include the cyclic melody or Lahara, the Laggi Ladi (melodies repeatedly strung in a beautiful and aesthetic form to generate a pleasing performance) that is considered a specialty of the Banaras Gharana and the multiple unique compositions that have been passed on from the beginning of the tabla tradition in the city.

Pandit Puran Maharaj



Grandson and student of renowned tabla player, Pandit Kanthe Maharaj, **Pandit Puran Maharaj** became the ‘Ganda-Bandh Shishya’ of his grandfather. His father Pandit Kishan Maharaj, was another acclaimed artist but could not give enough time and training to his son in his early days. At the age of 17 he got his first chance to perform in Kolkata with the blessings of Ustad Ali Akbar Khan. He says his training was of the shuddha (pure) Banaras Gharana of Tabla, whereas today people are mixing gharana styles for popularity.

Talking about his childhood he says that even though he followed the Guru Shishya Parampara, his grandfather’s teaching methodology would be tweaked just a little because he was his grandson. He narrates instances where his grandfather and later his father would bribe him with money so he would eagerly pick up techniques of the instrument. Even though such tactics were used by his grandfather and father sometimes, the strict teaching style of the traditional Guru Shishya Paramapara was also implemented. He himself follows the teaching style of his elders.

The similarities between the tabla and the pakhawaj can be drawn from 2 gharanas only, Punjab and Banaras. They use the bols of the pakhawaj. In the Punjab Gharana, the playing is done with a closed hand whereas in the Banaras gharana they use an open hand to play the instrument. The playing of the tabla in the Banaras Gharana is a different and distinct style altogether. He adds that the Banaras style of playing the tabla doesn't mean playing the instrument very loudly with a hard hand but it's the technique of the open hand that makes it different and gives the required sound.

Famous gurus of the Banaras Tabla Gharana who developed this style and created a name for it includes names like Pandit Ram Sahay, Shanta Prasad, Gudai Maharaj, Kanthe Maharaj, Kishan Maharaj, and Anokhe Lal. The Gurus and the students of earlier times, he says, had a different level of devotion and dedication, which is gradually fading.

He asserts that the training can never be complete if one follows the university and school systems, the involvement of the guru plays a key role in shaping an artist. Nevertheless, the

Guru Shishya Parampara is being carried on with some changes and additions to be accommodated according to present times.

Guru Kishor Kumar Mishra



Born in Kolkata, Guru Kishor Kumar Mishra spent the majority of his life and childhood in Varanasi. The maternal side of his family was associated with the sarangi tradition and his brothers Santosh and Vinod are 7th generation sarangi artists themselves. His grandfather, Sh. Madhav Prasad Mishra, and father, Sh. Bhagwan Das Mishra, played sarangi but his uncle Sh. Markande Prasad Mishra began playing the tabla. His grandmother was from the family of Pandit

Ram Sahay, a reputed guru of the Tabla Gharana and his Guru Pandit Sharda Sahay was the 5th generation artist in the Banaras Tabla Gharana tradition.

He was introduced to the instrument through his uncle who unlike the rest of his family elders, began to learn tabla instead of sarangi. According to him, traditionally, the first rule is to learn vocal music and later learn whichever musical instrument one is interested in.

The story of Pandit Ram Sahay and his journey to learn and later spread the knowledge of the instrument in Varanasi is something all tabla players of this city may narrate. The gharana of tabla itself got its fame because of the said Guru and his interactions with the city and the instrument.

Sharing the story briefly about how Pandit Ram Sahay searched for a tabla guru to start his training and found Sh. Modu Khan in Lucknow. After learning for 12-13 years, he came to Banaras. During this time the use of two fingers in the tabla playing tradition was prevalent here. He added the use of three fingers, the bol of 'tete-kete' and the open sound of the left tabla or the 'baayan', which sounded like the pakhawaj and went with the mood and atmosphere of the city at that time. The open sound and the usage of the fingers in the style of Banaras is what makes its gharana special and unique.

A lot of the compositions, he says, are based on the countless temples of the city like the Shiva Padant, and the Kali Padant. This makes the compositions unique and more connected with the city and its atmosphere.

Guru Shishya Paramapara Vs the School Curriculum

With his 55 years of experience, he firmly believes that the process of learning music is the traditional method of Guru Shishya Paramapara, through the 'seva bhaav' of a student. He

insists that music and the learnings cannot be bought. The guru needs to assess his students and their feelings towards music, their interest and the future of music in the hands of the students, before teaching them or passing on his knowledge to them.

He himself has been part of the faculty of music at school-university level, to judge the difference between the two methodologies. He believes that even today, there is a selected crowd that wants to pursue music. Certifications have become relevant today and people are lining up to study their BA, MA and PhD in music. Some of these, he feels, are gifted whereas the others are just concentrating on the degrees and running around completely losing sight of the purpose of learning music. Theory is relevant but the practical usage is the most important in any performing art form He takes very selective students who learn with dedication and seriousness.

Earlier all the knowledge was transferred orally, and notations were never given much importance. He supports education and believes that the positive aspects of both styles should be merged. He was the first child in his house who continued music along with his studies. The same education helped him take notations of the bols that his guruji recited orally, which serve as archival knowledge for him today.

The Present Status of Tabla

He feels that learning different styles and variations of an art form helps the artist. Earlier, people used to play as soloists; these days the demand for accompanying and supporting artists is more. The music field is adapting to the present times. His belief is that the position that classical music had 50-60 years ago will be maintained in the future as well. A lot of people, he said are getting attached to and joining the field of music.

Shehnai

The shehnai tradition also finds its place in the city of Varanasi as some of the most distinguished shehnai players have belonged to this city. One of the best-known exponents of the shehnai was Bharat Ratna Ustad Bismillah Khan. Today his students are spread all over the globe, but his legacy is under threat. His house in Sarai Harha is maintained by his grandson, Sh. Nasir Abbas. The living room where Ustad used to sit and practice for hours, is adorned by many photographs and awards that the late maestro received.



Ustad Bismillah Khan's House in Sarai Harha

Sh. Nasir Abbas

Sh. Nasir Abbas, has learnt a lot from his father and grandfather. He is the son of the second son of Ustad Bismillah Khan and travelled with them extensively. Presently he is continuing his family tradition.

His grandfather's teaching methodology involved strengthening the basics of music so that it gets ingrained in one's system. He learnt mainly from his father who learnt from Ustad ji, passing down the tradition in the family. The technique used by both was the same where one by one each raga was set and taught. When one raga gets set in the system, the others can be picked up easily, they believed.



Reminiscing about a legend

Ustad Bismillah Khan used to sit and do his riyaz in a tiny room near the entrance of his house. According to Sh. Abbas the power of his grandfather's music was such that people who walked in to sit for 10 minutes or so, eventually left after hours, listening to and appreciating his music.

Ustad ji's daily routine involved waking up at 4 am for namaz, resting a little, then practicing from 9-11 am. After namaz and post lunch, he would rest some more before beginning his riyaz again. He played at the Balaji temple for three and a half years. Like any other artist, Ustad Bismillah Khan ji was very attached to his shehnai and would never let anybody else play his personal shehnai.

Through his art, he supported many families. After his demise, the families now find it hard to make ends meet and can hardly focus on the music.

Taking traditions forward

The tradition is being followed and continued by his students, taking it forward in their limited capacity. The current situation of their house is, however, very bleak and is not hidden from the public eye. Help in terms of maintaining the house, spreading the teachings and tradition of Ustad ji and the shehnai, and to build some kind of academy which can take this art form and his legacy forward are a few things that would make a lot of difference, he adds.

Sh. Chandrakant Mishra



Sh. Chandrakant Mishra is a well known shehnai artist from the city and the grandson of Pandit Swargiya Nand Lal ji's family. His grandfather started teaching 'shehnai vaadan' to him when he turned 7, and after being educated by his grandfather for 5-7 years, he was taken to Guruji, Banaras ke Thumri Samrat, Pandit Mahadev Prasad Mishra ji. Under his guidance, he learnt to play the shehnai and learnt vocal music. After the demise of his grandfather and

father, he continued his education in the instrument with his maternal aunt's son, Sh. Rama Shankar ji. Today, when none of these members from his family are alive, he is the sole artist continuing the family tradition.

Shehnai vaadan is considered 'mangal dhvani', and hence played especially during weddings. Initially, he also played shehnai at a lot of marriage functions, and with time, through the efforts of Ustad Bismillah Khan, the art of playing shehnai was encouraged at bigger platforms such as conferences and concerts which would start with the 'mangal dhvani' of shehnai.

Parts of the instrument

Pyaala: the detachable conical bell metal piece, fixed at the bottom of the wooden piece of the instrument.

Pipe: Used to change notes and scale.

Banaras Gharane ki Shehnai

Shehnai is a solo instrument, mostly played at the beginning of a function, event, or special occasion. It is also played in duet with vocals, sitar, violin, flute, or clarinet. The style and technique of playing shehnai depends on the vocal music that it follows. Punjab Gharana will play shehnai in tune with its indigenous vocal music; similarly, in Banaras, it is played according to the way one sings, which becomes the style of Banaras Gharana, and since he has learnt vocals, according to the Banaras Gharana, he plays Khayal, Thumri, Dadra, Chaiti, Hori, Kajri tunes on the shehnai. These are the traditional tunes of Banaras, understood and rendered more by the people of Banaras, than from other regions of the country.

Continuation through teaching and practice

Students willing to learn this art form are decreasing as there is less scope for them in this field. One can definitely find people who want to learn this instrument as a skill or passion, but not professionally. It is rare to come across someone who wants to learn this instrument and depend on his skill to sustain his family, earn a livelihood, or take this up as a viable profession. A well-made shehnai is not easily available, he shares. 70-80 years back, there

were people who used to make well-crafted shehnais but now it is difficult to find a good instrument in the first place. The wood used, the distance between the seven holes (sur), and other such nuances have to be set and adjusted by the artist. It is expected that after crafting 50 instruments, there is a possibility of getting one good shehnai. Hence, a good instrument can cost up to Rs 50,000. He himself uses one of his grandfather's shehnais, a more than 100-year old piece which was purchased from the bazaar near Peeli Kothi.

Sarangi

Sarangi was part of the music culture of Varanasi from 19th Century onwards and Pandit Buddhu Mishra was said to be a pioneer in the Sarangi Gharana of the city.⁵ A short-necked string instrument, the sarangi is an integral part of the Hindustani classical music and is said to resemble the human vocal chords most aptly. The belly (pet or pasli) of the instrument is hollowed out in the front, the neck (chhati) and the head (magaz) are hollowed out at the back.



A sarangi

Sh. Kanhaiyalal Mishra

Sh. Kanhaiyalal Mishra is the 9th generation of the Mishra family, which has been playing sarangi traditionally. 8 to 9 generations of this family have traditionally been playing the tabla as well. The 10th generation is also continuing this tradition, with his younger son in this field. There are 7-8 gharanas in Banaras, belonging to the same family though; all gharanas have had 8-9 generations engaged in sarangi vaadan. But today the number of families has come down to 2 or 3, where sarangi teaching continues in its traditional form.

From the age of 13 he learnt from his father, Swargiya Pandit Bhawani Prasad Mishra. Pandit Munshi Lal ji Mishra, his



grandfather, was a maestro during his time. “My father took me to Pandit Hanuman Prasad Mishra ji (Father and guru of Padma Vibhushan Pandit Rajan, Sajan), who tied the ‘Ganda’ and made me his shishya. Guruji died in 1999, and since then my shiksha is still continuing under Pandit Rajan, Sajan. My guruji wanted me to continue the tradition of sarangi vaadan, and share my education with others; hence I established a sarangi gurukul at my place, in the name of my father and guruji.”

This is the first gurukul in the country, he says, that is teaching sarangi free of cost, and the Guru-Shishya Parampara is followed strictly. All the senior students have to teach the juniors, and in the evening, Kanhaiyalal ji sits down to teach and examine his students. 14-15 students are learning how to play sarangi at present, out of whom, 2-3 have created a niche for themselves in Banaras, and in the country as well. It is important to know singing in order to learn sarangi. If a student can sing, it gets easier for the guru to teach him how to play sarangi.

The city of Varanasi has always respected artists. At least 50% of India’s famous singers have also been sarangi players, like Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan Sahib, Ustad Amir Khan Sahib, and many more. According to him, his ancestors have said that the history of sarangi can be traced back to the Ram Kaal and Singi Rishi is said to have invented this instrument primarily to sing bhajans for gods. It is believed that Raavan learnt how to play the instrument as a tapasya from Singi Rishi to please Lord Shiva. The Ravanahatha is a precursor to this instrument, it is believed.

Teaching and Practice



Sh. Kanhaiyalal Mishra with his students

The Guru Shishya Parampara followed here does not believe in keeping the student here all the time because play and formal study is also important. He tells stories to the students just the way his guru used to tell him, and there are no classes for theory. Seeing, hearing, testing and understanding (dekhna, sunna, parakhna aur samajhna) how others play the instrument is

something that is encouraged a lot. The student goes to various other concerts and programmes to learn about the nuances of playing sarangi, and then tries to play in the similar manner and learn from this experience. It is not necessary to only learn from one guru. One must go and observe the other artists and study all possible sources. Students are also told to refer to the books for the written part which is how they receive their titles like Prabhakar, Visharad etc.

He adds that in Varanasi, the sarangi is played in 4 styles: Khayal, Thumri, Dadra and Chaiti. Apart from this, Tappa, Dhammar is also played on sarangi in Banaras. A smaller sarangi called Chhootis is used to play Tappa because it is a very fast tune, and a smaller instrument makes it more convenient to run the fingers up and down quickly. In their style of playing



Chhootis: A smaller Sarangi

each and every word of the lyrics on the instrument as this style of playing is Gayaki Andaaz, which is the closest to singing. First they teach the simple tune to the students, and once the student picks up the tune, further nuances (khanka, murki, meend or sliding movements, ghamak or shakes) are taught and polished. A good sarangi can cost between Rs. 30-40,000, which will be made of Tun (Indian mahogany). One can also get it for Rs. 10-12,000, made out of Mahua wood.

Flute

Varanasi does not boast specifically of a classical tradition of flute playing or a flute Gharana but the widely available instrument can be spotted at all music shops as well as with vendors selling goods on the streets of the city. Every now and then, one can hear the sound of a flute at the ghats, especially during early morning and late evening hours. The Rewa Kothi, Raja Mahal Ghat and many such spots are fixed for musical gatherings of the young and old alike. The flute is one of the most popular instruments in such informal public gatherings and many people are seen on the boats, at the steps or in quiet cozy corners of the ghats playing and practicing the flute.



Flute players at the ghats

Sh. Atul Shankar



Belonging to the Banaras gharana, **Sh. Atul Shankar's** family follows the Shehnai Parampara from generations. The first was Pandit Nandlal ji, then his elder brother Ramanand ji and his son Pandit Ram Khelavan ji, his brother Pandit Kanhaiya Lal ji, Hera Lal ji, Shyam Lal ji, and Panna Lal ji. His father Pandit Rama Shankar ji, was an A grade artist in the AIR, a renowned shehnai player who taught him in his initial years. He also took training for vocals from his mother Smt. Rita Shankar. Sh. Shankar has also learned from late Pandit Bhol Nath Prasanna. He continued his training under Sh. Ajay

Prasanna and has performed at many concerts. He has completed his B Mus, M Mus and PhD from BHU. Even though the study of music is divided into theory and practical, the real test and knowledge gained by an artist is mainly from the practical aspect. One needs to perform and practice in order to understand the nuances.

His induction into playing the flute happened at a young age because of his father. Even though both shehnai and flute are wind instruments, their techniques are very different. The flute style of Banaras is not exclusive but the songs and tunes played by the artist automatically become special when the Banarasi Thumris, Dadras, Kajri, Chaiti that are typical and exclusive to the city's music are played on the flute.

The instrument

Bansuri or flute is made in different tonal scales and the mukhran (blowing side) and the distances of the other holes for the 6 notes decide the sound quality of the instrument. Its sound quality is checked at intervals by blowing into the mukhran time and again while creating the instrument. Unlike other instruments, this is tuned only once, which makes the art of making flutes a very difficult task.

Teaching methodology and scope



Sh. Shankar's mother teaches vocal music to his students and he teaches them the flute. For flute, he says, the various sargams should be practiced to set the fingers on the swars. The finger moving technique and speed exercise is of utmost importance. He teaches a creative class course for students at IIT, BHU. Nowadays, he feels, the music scene has changed. Nobody has enough

patience to hear classical music for hours and the young people are working towards creating

fusion music. He followed the Guru Shishya Parampara himself and believes that the more one hears music, the more one realizes its finer nuances. Like many of his contemporaries, he feels that there should be more job opportunities as teaching staff for musicians from all spheres. BHU has a post for flute teaching and other institutions should follow suit. If there is no future for the musicians, the youngsters will be hesitant to learn the art forms, he points out.

Sankat Mochan Sangeet Samaroh

The Sankat Mochan Music festival is celebrated annually on the waxing moon of the Chaitra month. The location for this event is the Sankat Mochan temple and performing artists are invited from all over the globe. This well known music festival has a long list of national and international artists who have performed in the courtyard of this Hanuman temple. This is considered to be one of the most awaited festivals in Varanasi and music enthusiasts cram the inner courtyard as well as the rooftops.

Dance

Apart from the classical dance form, folk and popular dance styles also developed in the city. One of the known popular dances was that of the Gaunaharins, who were generally hired during fairs and festivities. Like music, the dance forms were also subdivided into three forms namely classical, semi-classical and folk. The classical dance was performed for elite audiences for private ceremonies and at the maths and temples during special occasions. Apart from private recitals and mehfilis, occasional public performances were arranged. The semi classical dance was for selected and chosen audiences whereas the folk dances were for the general public. During the Budwamangal, or boat-festival, vocal, instrumental and dance artists performed on boats on the river Ganga. A number of festivals like Holi, Ramlila, Kajri, Teej, etc were an integral part of the music and dance traditions of the city.



Kathak

Kathak grew to become a specialty and a unique feature of Banaras along with two other major centres in North India: Jaipur and Lucknow. Since dance is said to originate from Lord Shiva, and Banaras is the city where he is believed to reside and even perform the Tandava, the Kathak style of Banaras is dedicated to and imbibes elements and characteristics of Lord Shiva.

Sh. Ravi Shankar Mishra



Sh. Ravi Shankar Mishra belongs to a traditional family which has been involved in the field of music for generations. Irrespective of the commercialization in music today, the language of music still remains the same, he says. The art form, apart from being a career and means of livelihood, happens to be a source of enjoyment and happiness primarily. His Guru, late Smt. Alaknanda Devi, was a renowned dancer from the Banaras Gharana. She was the elder sister of Smt. Sitara Devi. She

worked in the Bombay film industry but returned to her city to teach and promote the dance form.

He was born and brought up in Banaras and takes immense pride in being a Banarasi. He stresses on the fact that the Banarasis have Akkhadpan ingrained in them. His father late Sh. Nageshwar Mishra worked in BHU as a Tabla player. He narrates how at that time, the artists were not in favour of doing jobs and being confined to a certain place. The ‘mauhaul’ was such that the dance form started moving towards kothas from temples and began to lose its purity. This resulted in the artists looking out for jobs and social security. The likes of Pandit Omkar Nath Thakur ji started bringing good artists to BHU and began training and teaching the dance form. These artists would do independent work as and when required and continue with their teaching jobs as well.

Comparing the Guru Shishya Paramapara to the institutionalized training centres, he says that the latter has fixed timings, which creates limitations. As a guru if he feels like teaching a certain set of movements and the class time limit is crossed, the mood of the artist is disturbed. He himself is a supporter of the Guru Shishya Parampara. Here, the student would be with the guru all day and as per the mood of the artist/guru, the student would keep receiving little doses of knowledge. These little nuances are missing in the institutionalized training centres. He suggests that minor changes be brought about in the style of teaching and established and distinguished performers should be invited for workshops and training sessions. Unlike the old style of following and learning from one guru, he says, now people

are more supportive and open to learning from various gurus. He himself supports this new change as long as the gurus are remembered and respected.

He mentions two types of taalims or styles of education that the present day gurus adopt. One is for the outsiders and one for their family. This depends on the interest and mood of the students. The guru judges the interest of the student and teaches them accordingly. He has a lot of foreign students as well. Some students who are not financially able to pay the fee are also accommodated in his classes. He has travelled extensively creating fusion pieces, mixing Kathak style with Flamenco etc.

The Banaras Gharana footwork is very strong, he adds. It is said that the female dancers in this gharana also aim to look 'mardana' and incorporate masculinity in their dance style. In opposition to the Banaras Gharana, the Lucknow Gharana is more delicate; the men in fact absorb feminine grace in their movements as there is a lot of *lasya* in this gharana style. For example, the *ghunghat* to depict Radha Bhaav requires grace and feminine movements which are effortlessly carried out by even the male dancers in Lucknow Gharana. To represent Lord Shiva, the bhaav or style of expression changes completely. He fondly remembers late Guru Gopi Krishna ji, who danced in Tandav Bhaav on *Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baaje*, an old Bollywood movie.

The Lucknow Gharana is more prevalent all over the world. Very few exponents of the Banaras Gharana remain. No Kathak Kendras or academy has been established in Varanasi, unlike in the other two. Some lack of effort, he feels, has led to the downfall of Banaras Gharana.

He adds that learning the dance form is not a 2-3 year affair; it requires dedication and is a never ending process. He says that once involved in the dance form for a minimum of 6-7 years, the student develops clarity of path and a taste for the art form. Ideally in the Guru Shishya Parampara, the next step of the students is to create a relationship with the guru and his family and vice versa. It is a give and take relationship.

Thematic representation has always been an important aspect of Kathak. The *tode*, *tihai* and *laya* were added into Kathak later. The themes come from the epics like the Ramayana, Mahabharata etc. One section is selected and represented through dance, like the Sita-Haran or Jatayu Moksha and so on. Earlier, the performances went on for 4-5 hours at a stretch with one performer portraying different characters. Nowadays, due to shortage of time, the stories gradually started being encapsulated into small items using *Dadra*, *Thumri* etc. In Kathak, every gharana focuses on specific mythological characters. The Banaras Gharana has a lot of depiction of Lord Shiva, the Jaipur Gharana showcases more of Meera bhajans and the Lucknow Gharana uses Lord Krishna stories as themes.



A performance at the Tulsi Ghat

Changes have been seen in the Kathak dance form over the years. Many new Kathak artists are bringing in simplistic costumes and no makeup. He adds that to create something new one has to move away from tradition and break the link. As for the makeup, he recalls the drawing of big eyes for the purpose of a huge audience and a stage that is at a distance from the audience. Today, spectatorship is evolving and the makeup including the drawing of big eyes has been adjusted accordingly. The lighting and stage also becomes the deciding factor in finalizing the costume. The ladies of his house, especially his wife, Smt. Kanchan Mishra have not learnt music under any guru, but absorbed the basic knowledge by hearing and watching their daily practices and thus help in conducting the riyaz or practice sessions.

He states that the two main components of the Banaras Gharana are the Shiva-Tandav aspect and the Allhadpan of a Banarasi. Another important element is that even today the artists regularly do the darshan, go for Ganga Snaan and do the riyaz, irrespective of whether the artist has a programme lined up or not. The riyaz is done for the lord. In the Banarasi way of thinking music is a thing of pleasure and everything will fall happily in place in one's life without tension.

The Tabla Gharana of Banaras is known for its speed and power. The dancer's mood automatically syncs with the feel of the tabla being played. The bol and paran of the Tandav Ang is recurrent in Banaras Gharana. If the dance movements of the dancers are not done with power on those bols, the feel and mood of the dance will not be depicted, especially if the bol are related to the Shiva Tandav aspect, he adds.

The pakhawaj and the tabla both produce loud and powerful sounds. A vocalist accompanies on the harmonium during the performance. Earlier sarangi was used for the performances, but now flute also gets used either with or in place of the sarangi, according to the themes. For the depiction of Shiva themes, sarangi, sitar and sarod are used. Sarangi or shehnai is used to

depict Karuna Rasa and the mood of happiness is best depicted on a sitar or even a shehnai. Raudra Rasa is best shown with pakhawaj. Damroo is sometimes used for items based on Shiva themes. Similarly for themes related to Krishna, the flute is used for the performance. Nakkara was another instrument that was used earlier.

The Lost Tradition of Mehfilis

The tawaiifs or baijees as they were called, who lived in the Dal ki Mandi area (presently a spice market), played an important role in the music traditions of Varanasi. It was said that the evening time saw the Dalmandi area transforming into a cultural space and music was heard from various nooks and corners of this area and from the houses of the courtesans that inhabited the space. From the 18th century onwards, dancers of the city, especially the female dancers, enjoyed a great reputation and the 19th century witnessed the era of Banarasi Mehfilis. Banaras was known for the Kathak caste. Some well known baijees and dancers that find mention in a number of texts about the city were Gauhar Jaan, Daulat Bai, and Husna Bai.

The tradition is gone now and the baijees who were the custodians of musical and dance related knowledge have vanished from the city, taking with them a rich tradition of arts. The various accounts and stories about the dancers, singers and the glorious and lavish mehfilis are left in the journals of scholars and travelers of a bygone era.

Mrs. Colin Mackenzie's account of a visit (1847) to the house of Raja Pratap Singh, the ex-
raja of Satara recounts,

“..... Wreaths and bracelets of the double white Indian Jessamine were brought and thrown over our necks and arms, a pretty and poetical mode of welcome, then six trays of fruit, barley, sugar, & c., were laid at our feet, we ate a little, but did not take any fruit, not knowing what it might be proper or improper to do with the peel, as there were no plates. One of the door curtains was lowered, and a band stationed behind it; a singing woman, with stiff outstanding petticoats of red and gold, was introduced. Her singing was to me almost inaudible, and her dancing consisted of advancing and retreating a few steps, holding her left arm akimbo, and gently twirling her right hand in the air, as if on a pivot... pan, i.e., little green packets of leaves, inside which is a kind of seed mixed with powdered lime was brought to us with the spices. The natives chew this, leaf and all: it dyes the mouth a bright red colour, and has a very pungent taste”.⁶

Lord Valentia's account of a visit paid to the Ramnagar Palace around the 1800's:

“.... At the door I was met by our young conductor, who led me upstairs, where I was received by the Rajah (Uditnarain) who presented me with a large nazur of gold mohurs, which I touched, afterwards raising my hand to my head, but declined taking. I embraced him three times, and was led by him to the chief seat in his Dewan Khanah. I here found

assembled all his courts, and about fifty nautch girls of every age and description.... The Dewan Khanah was small; his garden-house would have made a better, and there, indeed, I should have been received, had not his illness prevented his moving so far. The room was white; the ornaments painted with green; lustres of the same colour were ranged down the middle, and on brackets at the sides. In compartments were English prints framed and glazed. We conversed but little, our attention being diverted by the nautching. Some of the Persian airs were pretty, and I was much amused with their singing, "I care for no body, no not I" and "Malbrook".⁷

Extract from John B. Ireland's account of a visit to the Rajah of Benaras. He was the only American traveler whom we know to have visited Varanasi and to have left an account of his stay during the 1800s. (American perspective...before Mark Twain and others)

"...Then for my special benefit the Rajah ordered in some nautch girls, who danced and sung; two of whom were from Peshawur. They sung one of Hafiz's songs while dancing. Part of the air was very pretty, but the style of singing not pleasing. The dancing was graceful, but not to my taste, although perfectly chaste, consisting entirely of graceful, gliding movements, the long dress quite covering the feet. After the women had finished, a man danced; then two musicians played for us, one on a very celebrated instrument, the "vina", a bar with two gourd-like bulbs and eight strings; one bulb resting on the lap, the other on the shoulder. The music is like the guitar, though not with as much depth of tone.."⁸

Drama/Theatre

Ramlila



A boy dressed as Sita for the Ramlila

The festival of Dussehra is celebrated all over India with the staging of the Ramlila, the story of Lord Ram, based on the *Ramcharitmanas* written by Tulsidas. No other Ramlila is equipped with as much history and grandeur as the Ramlila of Ramnagar in Varanasi. These

episodes of Rama's life are staged at many other places in and around Varanasi but the flavour and religiousness of the lila at Ramnagar is unmatched. The performance lasts for over a month and the preparations take almost a year. The Maharaja picks the svarupas or the young boys who play the characters, the suitability of whom is decided by their physical attributes, their voice, beauty, age, height, after a number of auditions.⁹

Sitting across Asi Ghat and on the opposite banks of the river is the small town of Ramnagar that boasts of its one of a kind Ramlila. The most essential and unique characteristic of this performance lies in its space and spectatorship. The audience moves along with the characters from one place to the other over time. The performance is sponsored by the Maharaja of Ramnagar and the performances never start without his presence. The most important scenes from Ram's life are enacted by young performers of a certain age group, who are chosen to play the deities after careful selection and are made to follow strict rules and regulations for that time period. As the evening draws closer, the neon lights take over the Ramlila grounds and thousands of viewers from in and around the villages gather to watch the lila.

Some of the locations of the Ramnagar Ramlila are constructed such as the Panchavati, some are the town's landmark areas like the Durga Mandir, Rambagh and others have simply been found appropriate and used.¹⁰ The timings and locations are circulated among the crowd for the staging of each scene of the Lila. Toys and trinkets are sold by local vendors and food stalls are set up around the grounds. A special kind of design is made on the forehead by local artists who carry little baskets of sindoor, sandalwood paste and other colors for the same. Young and old alike are seen sporting these designs on their foreheads during the mela. Children are introduced to the stories and epics through fairs like the Ramlila, which are most often than not treated as a playground for them.

Apart from the Ramnagar Lila, the other famous lilas include the episode of Bharat Milap at Nati Imli, near the Sanskrit university in Varanasi. This reunion of Ram with his brother, Bharat, is said to host the largest crowd among any of Varanasi's fairs and is emotionally stirring for the crowd. People jam the streets to watch this reunion which is a simple yet moving scene for many. For the devotees, it is a mere glimpse of the deities that brings them to these performances. This Darshan along with the recitation of the lines of *Ramacharitmanas* brings them closer to god, they feel. During all the scenes the pothis are always kept close for ready reference. If there is any record for the procedure of the performance, then it has to be these pothis or books that contain a modified form of the text which contain the samvada or the dialogues.¹¹

The Nakkataiya at Chetgunj is another popular episode of the lila, where Lakshman chops off the nose of the demonic Surpanakha. The procession begins at the Ramlila ground near Pisach Mochan and ends at Chetgunj where the act of chopping the nose is enacted and the festivities are brought to a close.

The Dhanush Yajna performed at Asi crossing is another famous scene from the lila enacted in the city, which brings a lot of viewers together to watch the marriage of Ram with Sita.



A scene from the Dhanush Yajna

The drama is set with the dhanush (bow) kept in the centre of the stage. Young actors are seen giggling and chatting while waiting for their respective scenes. Unlike the lila at Ramnagar, the child performers are simply portraying the characters and are not believed to personify the gods. The sanctity of the Ramnagar Lila and its characters is a level above this specific performance. This enactment is treated as a mere performance for the audience to enjoy. One of the lesser-known and low key performances that have been taking place for a while now, is the Ramlila enactment at the Manikarnika Ghat.



Characters from the Ramlila of Manikarnika Ghat

This raw yet devotional performance is organized by a committee that funds this performance and encourages the young and old actors to perform in the lila. Similar to the Ramnagar Lila, the scenes and its locations are shared via fliers, posters and by word of mouth and the performances begin as per schedule.

The verses from the epic are sung and instruments like the manjeera and dhol are used to add musicality to them. The environment isn't tense and the performance style is very informal and understated. The vyas or sutradhar reads out the dialogues to the characters in real time.

This lila in comparison may seem comical and casual, but the essence of reliving the life of Lord Ram, learning from it and sharing the episodes of this epic with hundreds of viewers and devotees, is the essence of not only this but all the lilas performed at any location in India.



The Musicians consult the text and recite verses from it.

Krishnalila

On similar lines of the Ramlila is the Krishnalila, the dramatization of the story of Lord Krishna. Both these elaborate theatrical performances differ from each other in terms of the costumes, characters, the themes and contexts.

The Krishnalila, a mythological tradition involving depiction of famous episodes in the life of Lord Krishna is held annually in the month of Kartik. The famous Nag Nathaiya festival of Varanasi is a part of this performance that takes place at the Tulsi Ghat. The Nag Nathaiya festival celebrates Krishna's conquest of the serpent Kaliya and people from in and around Varanasi gather at the Tulsi Ghat to witness this spectacle. The other days of the lila are quieter and a limited audience attends. The low key performance of the other days of the lila is without elaborate lights and sound systems, with the sutradhaar reading dialogues from the text for the characters to repeat. Like the Ramlilas, the characters are carefully chosen and a committee takes the responsibility to stage this performance. The start of the Krishnalila is marked by the Mukut Puja that takes place in the temple on Tulsi Ghat near the Swaminath Akhada. The crowns worn by the main characters are kept in the puja and the blessings to begin the lila are taken from Lord Krishna's idol at the temple.



Pandit Shyam Bihari Pandey, also known as Vyas ji at Tulsi Ghat and a member of the Krishnalila organizing committee explains his role as the director of the show. Krishnalila is an exclusive 20 days

oral tradition-based performing art associated with Tulsi Ghat since the 16th century when Tulsidas began the tradition of performing this lila which brings alive the tales from Lord Krishna's life – ranging from Krishna's birth to Ugrasena, Kansa's father, being crowned as the king of the Yadavas. The play begins on the Kartik Krishna Paksh Dwadashi with the last episode performed on the 20th day falling on Krishna Paksha Magh Sheesh. The duration of each day's performance ranges from 2-4 hours and is a form of theatre involving episodes of songs, dance and storytelling (the Chandra Prastav Lila involves story-telling). The dance performance happens only on one day when Raaslila is enacted showing Krishna playing Dandiya with the gopis and Radha. Apart from the actors who adopt the role of characters ranging from Krishna, Balram, Maa Yashoda, Baba Nand, Radha, Gopiyaan and Gwaal, there is a choir, singing in Ramayan Vaani, a peculiar style of singing, from a book called *Braj Vilas* written by Brajvaasi Das. A copy of the same book is held by Vyas ji, who plays multiple roles ranging from performing the Ganesh vandana (prayer) daily before the start of the play to speaking the dialogue of each character into their ears in a hushed manner, the same dialogue is then reproduced by the character/actor on stage. The book with him is in the form of dialogues called Samvad ki Pothi which uses pure Braj language. The language, at times becomes a mixture (khichadi as referred to by them) of Hindi, Awadhi, Khadi boli and Bhojpuri spoken/sung in the form of chaupai (a quatrain verse that uses a meter of four syllables), doha (rhyming couplet with long syllabic lines) and chhand. The training of the boys selected to play the lead roles begins almost a month in advance. There are also experienced people who have been associated with the lila for years and do not require much training or practice. People like Vyas ji or the shringariya are motivated by sheer passion and willingness to be a part of the celebration every year. Almost everyone is involved in other jobs and occupations but they devote time to fulfill their duty as a part of the team to ensure that the tradition lives on. They get dakshina in return for the effort and time invested by them. All roles are played by men and not a single female is a part of planning, organization or implementation.



Characters of the Krishnalila

On the first day of Krishnalila, a puja is performed of the 'mukut' (crown) of Krishna, Balram and Radha to instill the glory of god in it and when people bow down to pray and touch the actor's feet, it is not the boy, but his mukut which is believed to inhabit the true spirit of the lord. The mukut transforms a young brahmin boy into an object of high religious and cultural value – Krishna Swarup, meaning he becomes Krishna himself and not just the actor. The lead characters of Krishna, Balram and Sita have to be played by young brahmin boys who haven't stepped into adolescence as they are considered pious; a low-caste boy cannot be the deity, according to tradition. Mukhauta or masks are also a part of the play, used in certain scenes of the Lila. Bakasur, Kagasur, Ek-Chonch Wala Mukhauta (one-beaked mask) etc. are some of the masks used.



Mukut Puja before the Krishnalila



A scene from Nag Nathaiya

Nag Nathaiya, the most famous lila is performed on the Kartik Shukla Paksha Chaturthi and begins at 3-4 pm, unlike the rest of the days when the performance begins only around 6-7 pm. The lila depicts the day when Krishna was playing with his friends (gwals or the herd boys) and his ball fell into the Kalia Lake, inhabited by the fearsome Kalia Nag (serpent). Krishna climbed the Kadamba tree and dove deep into the waters to retrieve the ball. An enraged Kalia transformed into his multi-hooded avatar and tried to crush Krishna by coiling around him. Krishna started dancing on Kalia's numerous heads and the powerful Kalia began to die under the weight of Krishna's feet. Seeing their husband die, Kalia's wives prayed to Krishna to forgive him and pleaded mercy. The soft-hearted lord desisted from his

terrific dance on the condition that Kalia would leave the lake and return to his original home in the island of Ramanaka. The entire episode is enacted and huge preparations are made in terms of installing a tree in the Ganga, creating platforms in the river to host the maha aarti, arrangement of police security to handle emergency situations as the crowd swells up to watch the play on this day.

There are two Krishnas for this day, one who enacts the play every day and the other who is trained to climb the tree artificially installed in the river and jump into the water. The act of Krishna jumping into the river becomes a popular performance, attracting crowds and being a source of much jubilation. People shout praises of Lord Krishna while watching the godly dominance over evil and bad forces. The main objective behind the play is to create social awareness on keeping the Ganga clean and pure, like the removal of Kalia Nag from the Yamuna had cleansed the river. People should watch the lila and remember the tales of good deeds, devotion and power of good over evil. The Maharaja of Varanasi also attends the grand performance of Nag Nathaiya. It is said that the Raja of Ramnagar had tried to initiate a tradition of his own Nag Nathaiya but when the Krishna statue was thrown into the river, it vanished and couldn't be found despite continuous efforts. It is believed that whoever has tried to replicate the performance of this day's lila has failed miserably and hence the Nag Nathaiya remains indisputably one of the most exclusive, world-famous oral traditions of Varanasi.

Shringar for Krishnalila



Makeup being applied on one of the characters

Pandit Shreedhan Sharma, the shringariya for Krishnalila has been associated with the lila for 37 years. He has played the role of Rama for 8 years in the Ramlila and Krishna for 9 years in the Krishnalila. He applies make-up for the characters of Krishnalila, with the help of one or two assistants. The makeup is called Vanvasi Shringar ('van' means forest and 'vasi' means resident, Vanvasi Shringar means the make-up required to attain the look of a forest dweller). Kachcha rang is used to paint the faces – chandan (sandalwood paste) is used to prepare yellow, gulali for pink and powder is mixed to lighten the colour shade. Zari burada, a fine

golden sparkly powder was used earlier to highlight and add glitter to the faces of gods which has now been replaced with Chinese burada (another kind of golden glittery powder – more like dry sparkle). The specialty of this zari burada powder which is used in design of silk sarees is its sheen and sticking ability but due to exclusivity, high price and non-availability, its use had to be discontinued. The shringariya confessed that the illumination effect created by zari burada is something that he misses but the change had to be incorporated.

The lead characters require makeup every day and since the lila is a 30-day celebration, they are strictly advised not to apply oil on their faces as it will not let the makeup stick and stay on their face. Since the lila is an exclusive oral tradition of Tulsi Ghat, the costumes and headgear are decided and designed by the shringariya, and not purchased readymade from the market.

Bowing in honor and reverence of the headgear (mukut) with folded hands is an important ritual before adorning the mukut. The symbol ‘U’ denoting ‘Sri’ is made on Krishna’s forehead. Religious sentiments are attached to these signs as it is believed that once these signs are made on the forehead, the actor starts to embody Krishna, Radha or Balram themselves. Upon the conclusion of each day’s performance, the shringariya erases the sign on the forehead first as a mark of respect and religious sentiment.

Bhand Mandalis, the Uluk Mahotsav

Jesters or comedians were a class of people in the old city of Banaras. They were popularly called Bhands and used amusing stories full of gestures, postures, songs and clowning techniques to provoke laughter from the audience and entertain them. Such performances were organized for the public mostly during weddings and festivals like Holi. The origin of the first Bhand Mandali is credited to a well known artist known by the stage name Ajuba. Consequently, his students and others formed more Bhand Mandalis. Even though these performances are not to be seen today, various hasya kavis (comic poets) gather and organize the Uluk Mahotsav to exchange poems and spread laughter and joy.

Ghat performances: Using ghats for a variety of performances

The ghats provide ample space for performances ranging from dances recitals, music concerts, poetry festivals, Nukkad Natakas and more. Recently a daily evening programme was initiated at the Rewa Ghat called the Ghat-Sandhya. Through this programme, the youth of Varanasi are given a chance to showcase their talents and perform for the public. The

performances range from dance recitals like Kathak, Bharatnatyam to music performances by young and experienced artists.



Performances are often conducted at the ghats

The Subah-e-Banaras programme to celebrate the morning of Varanasi also promotes a cultural programme after the morning aarti and the Vedic chanting performed at the Asi Ghat. Many street plays are also conducted at the ghats as these are always milling with people. Since the open space and calm atmosphere of the ghats serves as a perfect place for creative thinking and practice, a number of amateur artists flock to the ghats to practice their art, sit for hours, do their riyaz and meet friends over a cup of tea. Certain spots like the Rewa Kothi on the Rewa Ghat are always occupied by young enthusiastic musicians who are engrossed in jamming sessions and collaborations. The Rewa Kothi is also known to host music students of BHU and strains of music can always be heard if one crosses that area during their riyaz.

Endnotes

Oral Traditions and Performing Arts

- 1 Chaube P.K., Musical Heritage of Varanasi or Banarasi Sangeet Gharana, Varanasi, Pilgrims Publishing, 2014; pg. 14
- 2 Medhasananda Swami, Varanasi at the Crossroads, Kolkata, RamaKrishna Mission, Institute of Culture, 2002; pg. 663
- 3 Ibid; pg. 663
- 4 Ibid; pg. 672
- 5 Chaube P.K., Musical Heritage of Varanasi or Banarasi Sangeet Gharana, Varanasi, Pilgrims Publishing, 2014; pg. 26
- 6 Medhasananda Swami, Varanasi at the Crossroads, Kolkata, RamaKrishna Mission, Institute of Culture, 2002; pg. 828
- 7 Ibid; pg. 806
- 8 Ibid; pg. 969
- 9 Kapur Anuradha, Actors, Pilgrims, Kings and Gods: The Ramlila at Ramnagar, Calcutta, Seagulls Books, 1990; pg 6
- 10 Ibid; pg. 6
- 11 Ibid; pg. 18

Fairs and Festivals



Ganga Aarti during the Dev Deepavali

Varanasi, also considered a ‘Mini India’ as a perfect microcosm of Indian culture, amalgamates the diversity and distinctiveness of the various provincial regions of India. People with different languages and dialects, religions, caste, and traditions have settled in this city and have become part of its vibrant ethos while preserving and practicing their regional customs. The city finds mention in all the great Indian epics and ancient Hindu and Buddhist literature. It is said to be preferred by the gods, demi-gods, sages, kings and common men alike, who worshipped Shiva. That is the reason behind the city having more than 3,000 Shivalingas. With the belief in multiple gods, arise multiple celebrations in the form of festivals. Each festival and ritual is conducted on specially calculated days from the Hindu calendar (panchang). In the lunar calendar, there are 12 months like Phalguna (Jan-Feb), Chaitra (March-April), Ashwin (Sept-Oct), Kartik (Oct- Nov), etc. Each month is divided into 2 Pakshas: 15 days from the new moon day/Amavasya to the full moon day/Purnima is called the Shukla Paksha or the bright period and the other half of the month’s 15 days when the moon is waning is known as the Krishna Paksha or the dark half of the lunar month.

Most of the important rituals, rites and ceremonies are conducted during the Shukla Paksh as it is considered to be very auspicious by Hindu astrologers. Each day in the 30 day lunar month, which is of 27-29 days, unlike the solar month which extends to 30-31 days, is called a tithi. The first tithi or day is the new moon day and the 30th tithi is Amavasya or the

absence of moon. The new moon day in common usage is the first tithi of the Shukla Paksh and Purnima thus becomes its 15th day. The next day or the 16th day of the lunar month is called the first tithi of Krishna Paksh which goes on till the 15th day of Krishna Paksh, referred to as Amavasya. The tithis are prathama, dwitiya, tritiya, chaturthi, panchami and so on till the 15th day. The tithis play a very significant role as they have an auspicious significance during particular months.

A popular saying goes in Varanasi: “Saat Vaar, Nau Tyohar” (The city celebrates 9-11 festivals in a week). Some of these well-known and much celebrated fairs and festivals of the city were documented in this study. Residents and visitors participating in these festivals shared their experiences and stories regarding them.

Hindu Lunar Calendar (Months)

Vaisakha (Apr-May)
 Jyeshtha (May-June)
 Ashadha (June-July)
 Shravana (July-Aug)
 Bhadra (Aug-Sep)
 Ashwin (Sep-Oct)
 Kartik (Oct-Nov)
 Agahana (Nov-Dec)
 Pausha (Dec-Jan)
 Magha (Jan-Feb)
 Phalguna (Feb-Mar)
 Chaitra (Mar-Apr)

Tithis (Dates of the Lunar Calendar)

Krishna Paksh (Dark Fortnight)

Prathama
 Dwitiya
 Tritiya
 Chaturthi
 Panchami
 Shashtmi
 Saptami
 Ashthami
 Navami
 Dashami
 Ekadashi
 Dwadashi
 Thrayodashi
 Chaturdashi
 Amavasya (New Moon)

Shukla Paksh (Bright Fortnight)

Prathama
 Dwitiya
 Tritiya
 Chaturthi
 Panchami
 Shashtmi
 Saptami
 Ashthami
 Navami
 Dashami
 Ekadashi
 Dwadashi
 Thrayodashi
 Chaturdashi
 Purnima (Full Moon)

Makar Sankranti/ Uttarayan/ Pongal

The festival of Makar Sankranti is celebrated when the Sun enters the Makar (Capricorn sign of the zodiac). This is considered the most auspicious place for the Sun to be in, and it is celebrated every year on 14th January. In Varanasi, the celebration begins with people gathering along the ghats as early as 2:30 am in the morning to perform worship rituals and bathe in the Ganga. Just like Kartik Snaan, it is believed that bathing in the Ganga on this propitious day results in multiple blessings. Devotees believe that by simply bathing in the holy river, one is freed from one's past sins and thus eligible for liberation from the cycle of birth and death. In Varanasi, this festival is also called Khichadi, named after the food preparation made from the new harvest of rice, pulses and vegetables that is distributed on this day to the needy and even consumed in homes. It is believed that on the day of Makar Sankranti, taking bath and giving donation is considered significant and highly auspicious.

Sh. Mani Bhushan, who works at a brahmin ashram in the city and has been living in Varanasi with his wife for more than 2 years, says that from Makar Sankranti, the 'day' Uttarayanam—begins. Today is the last day of Dakshinayanam, the morning hours (day) of the Devta begin. This day is celebrated by taking a bath in the Ganga, and by performing 'tarpana' during the holy bathing. Water is offered during tarpana to departed relatives or family members. This is one of the main rituals performed during the day. After the bath, people return home and celebrate by preparing delicious foods and offering it to others.



Water is offered during tarpana

Pongal, a sweet dish is prepared using primarily rice, jaggery and milk, and ingredients like dry fruits are added. The basis of this celebration arises out of the need to celebrate the hard work of a farmer who cultivates for 6-7 months, and when the harvest season arrives, he reaps the crop. This rice comes to the farmer's house, which is cooked and also distributed to others. This underlines the spirit behind celebrating Sankranti.

Sh. B. Suresh Shastri gave an insight to the festival celebrations. He belongs to the Kannada community from Karnataka residing in Varanasi and follows the tradition of Kashi Tirtha Purohit (B. Subrahmanya Shastri & Sons). On the day of Makar Sankranti, they begin their day by bathing in the Ganga, after which they prepare Yeldu which comprises of til (sesame), batta (a form of grain/legume), peanut and coconut cut into tiny pieces, mixed together (as a dry mixture), and eaten by everyone in the house. It is also offered to other people on this day. Sweet khichadi is definitely prepared on this day, using jaggery. A puja is done, the khichadi is offered to the deity as a bhog, and later this khichadi is donated (daan) to the

needy and poor. Apart from this, donations are also made in the form of clothes, til, pulses, rice, and so on. In the early morning hours and/or during the evening hours, women decorate the house entrance and doorways with colourful rangoli to welcome Goddess Lakshmi.

The historical importance of the day (Pongal/ Makar Sankranti) is that the Sun leaves Dhanu Rashi and enters the Makar Rashi on this day. This highlights the vitality of this day and the Uttarayan begins from this day. Pongal is a word taken from the Dravidian dictionary, and it reflects a 'newness', which is celebrated in the context of the harvest. Pongal is a three-day festival. The first day is called Bhogi. On this day, houses are cleaned, all the waste is burnt, and then every member of the family applies oil and takes a bath, commemorates their forefathers and ancestors, visits temples and prays for the blessings of gods and ancestors. The second day is the day of Pongal, when the Sun enters the Makar Rashi. On the third day, domesticated animals like the cow, bullock and buffaloes, which are used in the field for agriculture, are readied for a puja and are worshipped.

Myth related to Uttarayan: When Bhishma Pitamah was lying on the bed of arrows, the Sun was in the Dakshinayam at that time, and he waited till the time it entered the Uttarayan to breathe his last. Hence those who die during this time are more likely to attain salvation because of the auspiciousness of this time period.

Daan or donation: Til (which is said to have emerged from the sweat of the gods) is donated, it is eaten, til ka tel (sesame oil) is massaged on the body before taking a bath in the Ganga. Jaggery, chiwda, khichadi and curd are consumed on this day.



Til and Jaggery items are sold in the markets

Celebration of Pongal in Varanasi

People bathe in the holy river Ganga, commemorate their forefathers and offer tarpana to them which in turn brings punya to them, and destroys the bad karma. Then, people go home, worship the Sun God and offer Gudh-Chawal (Pongal) to Him. The element of kite-flying for fun and competitions is a manifestation of the Banarasi-Andaaz of style.



Kite flying is a common sight on this day

Preparation of Pongal: Milk is boiled in a kansa (an alloy of 85% copper and 15% brass) utensil, to which jaggery and rice is added. This is cooked for at least 35-45 minutes until it is ready to be served. First, the Pongal is offered to the Sun God and then it is consumed and distributed as prasad.



Pongal is prepared as prasad on the day of Makarsankranti

Sh. Brahmanand Tiwari, a Tirtha Purohit who works at the Dashashvamedh Ghat and performs Karma Kand, puja and marriage-related rituals for the people, says that from this day the period of Uttarayan begins, which will continue for six months and all the days will belong to the gods, while the nights will belong to demons (asuras). It is believed that donations in terms of clothes, food items, khichadi and fruit made on this day guarantee the attainment of Akshay Phal (maximum rewards).

Holi

Holi, the colourful and joyous festival of spring time is celebrated in the month of Phalguna. Brightly coloured powders and other 'Holi merchandise' like the pichkaari (water guns) are available for sale in the neighbourhood bazaars weeks ahead of the festival. Since Kashi is the land of lord Shiva, the bhang which is consumed during this festival becomes a common yet key



ingredient of the celebrations, mostly offered in the form of milk based drinks known as thandai. This festival isn't complete without the sweet preparation of gujiya, which are often made at home. The roads, lanes, and even the ghats are layered in bright colours.

On the eve of Holi, the Holika fires spring up in different neighbourhoods, where people gather to perform religious rituals and pray to eradicate their internal evil. The celebration of playing with colours takes place on the next morning with people smearing each other with wet or dry colours and playing with pichkaris and water balloons.

Story behind the Holika celebrations

It is said that Hiranyakashipu, an asura from the Puranic scriptures of Hinduism never wanted

his son Prahalad to be a devotee of Lord Vishnu and gave multiple warnings to him and tried to harm him in every way possible. According to the story, Holika, Hiranyakashipu's demon sister, was made to sit on a pyre of burning wood built by him with Prahalad in her lap. She was given a special fire-proof shawl so that only Prahalad would burn to death. Prahalad prayed to Lord Vishnu while sitting amidst the leaping flames and was eventually saved by His grace, whereas Holika was burnt to death. This event is celebrated as Holika Dahan on the eve of Holi.

Budhwa Mangal

Budhwa Mangal, a very unique festival of Varanasi used to be celebrated a week after Holi in the month of Phalguna (March). In days gone by, the musicians would perform in decorated flatboats or barges on the river Ganga along the ghats. Budhwa Mangal or Burhwa Mangal literally means old Tuesday. The term 'budhwa' meaning old, is used to refer to the year gone by; 'mangal' refers to Tuesday, when the celebrations begin. During the period 1730-38, when Varanasi came under Awadh domination, Mir Rustam Ali was appointed as the administrator of the city. It is said that he was an 'aishpasand' or a lover of luxury, who began a festival which gave the royalty and aristocratic gentry of the city an outlet for their cultural spirit. The rajas and other nobleman would compete to decorate their boats with flags, carpets, flowers, even chandeliers and take their large boats—Bajras, out on the river Ganga. These would be converted into a stage where musicians and dancers performed for the noblemen and royalty.



Decorated flatboats or barges are converted into performance spaces

Those who were not invited aboard these large decorated boats could watch the celebrations from the ghats. The Ganga from Asi to Panchganga, became the setting for a floating music festival, it is said. Hundreds of smaller boats selling flowers, betel leaves, sweets, toys, etc. plied between the large boats.

A symbol of the spirit of Mauj-Masti (fun and frolic) that is characteristic of Varanasi, this river festival saw many ups and downs over the years. A perfect blend of festivity, boating, music and dance, it seems to have lost its grandeur and pomposity with the demise of royal patronage. 'Since the 1920s the Burhwa Mangal, an emblem of great days of Hindu princely culture, has disappeared', notes Diana Eck.¹ Sh. Vishwanath Mukherjee, a known writer also laments this loss. He says: "If expenses keep rising like this, all festivals will be a casualty like Burwa Mangal".²

Mahashivratri

The month of Phalguna brings with it the holy festival of Mahashivratri. This 'great night of Shiva' turns into a grand scale carnival of sorts and is celebrated annually. The fourteenth day of every waning fortnight is observed as Shivratri but Mahashivratri is considered one of the most important festivals in Varanasi. On Shivratri, a darshan of Lord Shiva in his symbolic form, the linga, is a must. The numerous lingas found all over the city are worshipped and tastefully decorated on this day. The Kashi Vishwanath temple attracts the most crowds, followed by other Shiva temples like Kedareshwara, Tilbhandeshwara, Bhrameshvar, and Mrityunjaya among others. Water, milk, dhatura, bel leaves, bhang, Akwan flowers are offered to Shiva's idol or Shivalinga by the worshippers. Unmarried girls and women pray for an ideal husband just like Lord Shiva. The wedding anniversary of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati is celebrated on this day and the devotees take out a special procession called Bhole ki Baraat in the evening. This is a spectacular sight as the devotees decked up like demons, animals, other gods and mythological characters along with saints, sadhus, residents and visitors alike can be seen marching towards the temple to celebrate the wedding anniversary. This procession starts from the Mahamrityunjay temple and ends at the Kashi Vishwanath temple.



Ganga Dussehra

According to Hindu scriptures, it is said that Rishi Bhagirath took many years meditating to convince the Goddess Ganga to descend upon earth. Ganga Dussehra, a 10-day celebration takes place to commemorate Ganga's descent, known as Gangavataram. It is celebrated in the month of Jyeshtha (May-June) as per the Hindu calendar.

The river is worshipped, with a belief that Goddess Ganga can wash away all sins of mankind. The term Dussehra comes from 'dus' which means ten and 'hara' which connotes



defeat. Thus, it is believed that bathing and praying on all ten days leading up to Ganga Dussehra, can destroy sins of ten lifetimes. It is celebrated at major ghats, and amidst hundreds and thousands of pilgrims, the priests perform aarti to the goddess. Devotees first take a bath in the river and string a garland of flowers across it to show their love for the river. This could be done by swimming, or taking a boat, while trailing the garland. Lastly, the devotees worship the shrine of Mother Ganga near the Dashashvamedh Ghat.

Pilgrims come from nearby far to bathe in the holy waters of Ganga

Ramadan



Varanasi, as a hub of different cultures and religions, celebrates festivals of different communities. One such festival is Ramadan or Ramzan, celebrated in the ninth month of the Islamic calendar by Muslims as the holiest month, a month of fasting (sawm). According to Islamic belief, the fasting is done to commemorate the first revelation of the Quran to Muhammad. This annual observance is regarded as one of the Five Pillars of Islam. A pre-fasting meal called Suhur is consumed before fasting begins from dawn until sunset. After sunset, Iftar,

the food to break the fast which usually comprises of dates and traditional sweets, is relished. Madanpura, the area inhabited by the silk weaver community, is predominantly a Muslim settlement and stalls and shops of sweets and Iftar food are laid out here during Ramadan. Located somewhere between Gowdoliya Chowk and Asi, this area comes alive as the sun sets, and the streets bustle with residents and visitors at various sweet shops and food stalls to break their fast.

Sawaan ka Mela

Adjacent to the Durga Kund a yearly fair, the Sawaan ka Mela at Durgaji, is staged to mark the arrival of the monsoon. This is one of the largest fairs today in Varanasi. Since the fair is located between Durga Kund and Sankat Mochan temple, it is believed to attract the largest crowds on tuesdays which is considered the most auspicious day to worship Durga and Hanuman. The open area behind the Durga Kund gets transformed into a fairground consisting of stalls and kiosks selling knick-knacks. From toy shops to ornament stalls, magic shows to rides like the giant Ferris wheel and merry-go rounds, this fair offers something for everyone.



Scenes from the Sawaan Mela near Durga Kund

The crowd is a healthy mix of rich and poor from all communities, enjoying the change of season and celebrating the onset of the monsoon. This season brings with it festivals like Teej that becomes a good excuse for women and girls to dress up. Little shops selling colourful bangles, sindoor, artificial jewellery and henna cones can be spotted at this mela. All along the road, stalls are set up which sell sweetmeats and snacks like samosas, chowmein, kachoris, gol gappas, jalebis and more. As the sun sets, the crowd doubles and the ground is lit with colourful neon lights, with sounds of the yelling shop keepers merging with the blaring music from the loudspeakers and the buzz of the crowd.

Teej

Teej is a generic name for a number of monsoon festivals like Haryali Teej, Kajari Teej and Hartalika Teej that celebrates nature, greenery, arrival of the rains with various social activities and practices. Goddess Parvati, the consort of Lord Shiva, who is sometimes referred to as Teej Mata, is worshipped during this festival.

Haryali Teej

Women adorn their hands and feet with henna, as they dance, sing and sway on swings (jhula) under the trees to celebrate this festival with zeal and enthusiasm. Red, yellow or green are the preferred colours to wear. The name 'haryali' comes from the change of visuals observed during the Shravana month, when the surroundings become green and the monsoon or rainy season begins.

Sindhara Teej

Sindhara Teej is also a part of the Haryali Teej celebrations. On this day, married daughters receive gifts like clothes, bangles, bindi, and mehendi called Sindhara from their mothers. A special sweet called Ghewar is also given to her on this day. The Marwadi community in Varanasi celebrates this festival at the Tridev temple near Durga Kund. Smt. Shyama Tulsiya, a resident of the city, describes the rituals and practices observed by married women on this day. The Tridev temple houses Salasar Hanuman, Shyam Baba from Khatu and Goddess Sati. During the celebrations of Sindhara Teej, the Goddess Sati, also called Dadi Rani Sati Devi, is treated like a bride and a Mangal-Path is done for her. Like any other north Indian marriage ritual, mehendi and haldi is applied on her by the women and bhajans are sung. The singing, dancing and merry making is mostly for married women and girls. Prasad consisting of fruit, puri-kachauri and different types of sweets is distributed.



Sindhara Teej Celebrations at the Tridev temple near Durga Kund

Kajri

Derived from the word 'kohl' meaning black, Kajri is another form of Teej (Bhadon ki Teej) that falls in the Krishna Paksh, which celebrates the monsoon season. With the arrival of dark clouds and the monsoon winds, the celebratory mood of men and women, rejoicing the season change, leads to singing of special folk songs called Kajri with distinct and peculiar tunes. This festival is celebrated two days after Rakshabandhan as an all-night long celebration in the form of ratjagga, and the third day of Bhadon being Kajri. The rituals would be celebrated in the city as well as the villages, but now are a rare sight in the city, and sporadic in the village areas.

Smt. Susheela Pandey, a resident of Chitapur, and Ms. Archana Rai, a young girl from the Bhatauliya village near Varanasi, gave an insight into the intricacies involved in the Kajri rituals. The Jarai Devi (symbolic of Goddess Parvati) made from mud and jyon (barley), which is considered auspicious, is planted by the young girls. They worship this Devi and people get together to celebrate and sing songs. This freshly planted barley is called aakha. It is kept for 15 days. One day before the Kajri, the Chhoti Devi Maa as they call it, is immersed in the river Ganga. The Badi Devi Maa is dipped in Ganga and brought back home and the jyon is placed on the ears of the elders. The elder male members of the house give



Representation of the Jarai Devi

gifts in the form of money and jalebis along with their blessings to the girls/women who perform this ritual. Songs sung during the festivities take inspiration from the themes of devotion love, Lord Krishna, old myths and stories. On the day of the ratjagga, the village women get together to celebrate and sing these songs all night, which are learned by the younger generation from their nani-dadis, and other older women. Apart from keeping the tradition of the old songs alive by singing and learning them, new songs with newer themes are also composed by the young women of the village for fun. Jalebi and Jaleba are consumed all night long during this festival.

The Chhoti Devi is immersed in the river one day before Kajri and its leaves are plucked and left at various temples of different gods and goddesses. The Badi Devi is worshipped after these rituals. Before the Chhoti Devi is about to be immersed in the waters, certain rituals and procedures are followed. The Chhoti Devi is laid down on the floor, its head facing (dakshin) south. Around 12 or 1 in the afternoon, the women gather and immerse the Devi in the river. Next morning the same process is followed for the Badi Devi. The dana (any form of grain) and sweets are sprinkled out on the chaughatta (square) as an offering to the devi. Instead of doing the ritual separately at different homes, the chaughatta implying 'group' is created and the celebrations are done together. The village women form this 'gutt' or a group and fix this place for the rituals and the celebrations.

Nag Panchami

The year's most important celebration of the ancient serpent deities is observed in the waxing fortnight of the month of Shravana, as Nag Panchami. This festival involves various rituals that are unique to the city of Varanasi. Snakes are both loved and feared, and on this day are worshipped and offered milk, sweets, flowers and lamps. The doorways or walls outside the house are painted with pictures of snakes and other auspicious mantras are also written on them as a sign of good omen for the family.

It is rare to find people continuing the tradition of hand painting these sacred symbols. The people earlier had no access to digital pictures and were compelled to draw these images by hand. The stickers that are available everywhere during such festivals have taken the place of



the traditional hand paintings. Smt. Susheela Pandey recalls certain social practices and rituals observed during the festival. Snake charmers used to come and show their Nag Devtas to every house hold and the people brought out milk and other offerings for the serpent gods. The Nag Devtas would be worshipped on this day and different types of festive cuisine would be prepared like kheer, bakheer, dal ki poori. Such traditions are almost fading and are not so prevalent, especially in the city.

Stickers such as these can be found outside houses

The Karkotak Nageshwar temple or Nag Kuan of Varanasi that is believed to be one of the deepest wells in Varanasi presents a busy picture during the Nag Panchami festival. This temple is situated in Jaitpura and on this auspicious occasion the area comes alive with the crowds thronging the temple. Here people bathe in the deep well, which is believed to have emerged from the netherworlds, the Patala Lok, which is the realm of the nags. Different kinds of merchandise related to nags and the festival can be seen around this area.



Snake charmers are spotted at various locations on this day

Young and old snake charmers from the Sapera community walk around the city carrying baskets with snakes, big and small, to bestow blessings in return for offerings. It is said that

snake fights used to be conducted between the snakes of these Saperas, who would come from remote areas of the city for this event. The Dharmashastra mentions that the mere sight of the snakes on this day is an auspicious omen. It states that if rituals are completed properly, and offerings are made, one will not only remain safe from snake bites but will also achieve wealth and happiness.

In Varanasi, another aspect of Nag Panchami celebrations includes decorating and cleaning of the akhadas, which hold annual wrestling matches. The crowds pour into these compact spaces and cheer for their favorite participant. Dangal/kushti competitions are organized at many important akhadas. One such competition is at the Swaminath Akhada situated at Tulsi Ghat. The akhadas are cleaned and a puja done before the competition. The young participants are encouraged and the constantly cheering spectators expect the older, more experienced boys to pull complicated and difficult moves on each other during the fight. Special guests are called in to judge the matches. The akhada gets transformed into a lively space with loud cheers of encouragement.



Special Kushtis are organised in various Akhadas on this day

Kavad Yatra

Devotees of Lord Shiva perform an annual pilgrimage called the Kavad Yatra. These devotees, who call themselves Kanvariyas, collect the sacred water from the Ganga in small containers and carry it across hundreds of miles to offer it at the Shiva temples and shrines in their respective homes and neighbourhoods. Dressed in saffron clothes, they walk miles carrying the water and around the time of their yatra, they come in thousands to Varanasi to take the blessings of Lord Shiva.



Kanvariyas resting at a Shivir

Raksha Bandhan

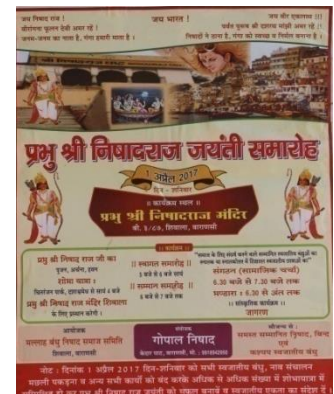


Rakhis sold in the market areas

The festival that celebrates and strengthens the bond between brothers and sisters is observed as Raksha Bandhan in India. Brightly coloured threads called rakhis are tied around the wrist of the brothers by the sisters, praying for their long life and good health. The brothers in return vow to protect them. Apart from the busy market places like Godowliya and Chowk, the road connecting Asi to BHU is full of street shops and stalls that start selling these rakhis a week before the festival. Apart from this, the Samagri used for the Puja is also packed and sold.

Nishadraj Jayanti

The boatmen and fishermen community who live along the river are popularly known as Nishad, Kevat or Mallah. They worship Nishadraj, who has a temple dedicated to him in Varanasi. The story of Nishadraj comes from the epic Ramayana. He was the chief of the fisher folk who lived on the banks of Sarayu, a mythical river. It is said that when Ram, Sita and Laxman were exiled to the forest, Nishadraj welcomed them and the fishermen community built a boat for them to cross the river. This community celebrates Nishadraj Jayanti around April, when they visit the Nishadraj temple and worship the deity, observing certain rituals. There is a rule set among the community that no boat is plied and no fisherman or boatman is allowed to take out his boat during this festival. Celebrations and merry making carry on till the evening.



Poster of the Nishadraj Jayanti (2017)

Janmashtami

Among the many gods that are worshipped, Lord Krishna's birthday is celebrated in India on the eighth day of the waning fortnight in the month of Bhadrapada, the last month of the rainy season (August/September). The celebrations at the Krishna Gopala Mandir in Varanasi on



this day are full of enthusiasm. The markets are flooded with decorated costumes, swings and jewelry for the idols of Lord Krishna. Devotional songs are sung and the birth of Krishna is celebrated by praying to the idol and occasionally swinging the jhula where Gopala is placed.

The ISKCON temple and Shree Dharmasangh Shikshamandal near Durgakund are among the many places where jhankis (tableaus) are set and elaborate celebrations are organized for this festival. At the Shikshamandal or school for young boys enrolled for studies in Sanskrit, Vedas and Dharmashastras, the preparations for the celebration are elaborate. At midnight, they ring in the birth day of lord Krishna by decorating his idol and offering him bhog, before the prasad can be distributed. A puja is organized with an aarti for Lord Krishna. The idol is placed in a paalna (baby cot) and episodes of Krishna's life are performed as Raaslila in the area. Since the ISKCON society promotes Krishna consciousness, this festival is one of the most awaited festivals for them. The devotees, who are mostly volunteers or members of this society, gather in large numbers for the celebrations. Offerings are brought for the lord and Krishna bhajans are sung with utmost devotion. The pundits religiously perform the rituals and the bhakts celebrate by singing and dancing. The prasad is distributed and the event becomes a festive veneration full of energy and positivity.



Krishna swinging on a jhula/swing

Lolarka Shashti

The Sun festival called the Lolarka Shashti is celebrated on the sixth day of the waxing fortnight of Bhadrapada. This annual mela held at the Lolarka Kund near the Tulsi Ghat, attracts millions of devotees and followers, mainly young couples and married women who come from far and wide to wish for a child. It is believed that a dip in this kund guarantees the birth of a child.



Lolarka Kund

Sorahiya Mela

Lakshmi Kund hosts a sixteen day mela on the eighth day of the waxing fortnight of Bhadrapada, the Sorahiya Mela. This fair is celebrated to honor the goddess of wealth Lakshmi or Mahalakshmi. A vrat (fasting) is observed to honor her during these sixteen days and those who observe this vrat are supposed to bathe in the kund, hear the stories of the vrat, worship the goddess and offer her sixteen kinds of grain and flowers. The devotees, mostly women, set up Lakshmi idols at home and pray to them. The last day of this mela is known as Jivitputrika, that brings the celebrations to a close.

Jivitiya Vrat

The last day of the fasting done during the Sorahiya Mela, often called the Jivitputrika or Jiutiya is a festival in which nirjala (without water) fasting is done by mothers for the wellbeing and the long life of their children. This three-day-long festival is celebrated from seventh to ninth lunar day of Krishna Paksha in Ashwin month. It is celebrated in Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh.



Women perform rituals of Jiutiya at the ghat

A Jiutiya is braided into red and yellow coloured threads. Black, pink, silver, blue and golden threads are also used to make a colourful Jiutiya. One Jiutiya is strung for each child. The market place is full of women and men spreading mats along the roads and selling the paraphernalia related to the rituals associated with Jiutiya. Ghats are crowded as women gather in groups to perform these rituals. Most of the women sit in circular groups and gather all the items in the center, and each woman performs her set of rituals. The story or katha of Sonchiraiyya is narrated by a woman from the group. Ghats are full of people including children and other members of the family accompanying the fasting women.



A jiutiya is strung into colourful threads



Sugarcane branches are arranged to form a mandap like structure, inside which the puja is performed. Before beginning the rituals at the ghat, women take a dip in the Ganges, and then begin arranging their puja samagri.

Smt. Shanti Rai, a woman performing the rituals at Asi Ghat shared that this fast is observed to pray for longevity of a son's life. A 36-hour long nirjala fast, Jiutiya is observed for daughters too. The Sun God is worshipped during this time, which is also called Jiut Bhagwan. In a family, if there are five daughters-in-law, then the mother-in-law will give her traditional Jiutiya to just one daughter-in-law, and the rest will have to make new ones when they have their own children.

Mandap like structure made of Sugarcane created to perform rituals

Vrat story

It is believed that an eagle and a female fox that lived in the jungle near the Narmada River were friends. Both of them saw some ladies performing the puja and fasting, and wished to observe it themselves too. They observed the fast but the fox started feeling dizzy and sick because of hunger and ate some food secretly. On the other hand, the eagle observed the fast with full dedication and completed it. As a result, all the children born to the fox used to die a few days after birth while the eagle's offspring were blessed with a long life.³

Karva Chauth

Celebrated as a one-day festival by Hindu women, Karva Chauth is an annual celebration in which married women fast from sunrise to moonrise for the well-being of their husbands.

Smt. Radha Rastogi, 35, a teacher by profession, originally from Faizabad and now settled in Varanasi after marriage, shares the rituals practised in her family during Karva Chauth. The Karva Mata is worshipped on this day and the festival attaches special significance to the number 7, with folklore about 7 siblings (6 brothers and 1 sister, who was dearly loved by all her brothers) and what the brothers did for their only sister out of immense love and concern. This festival is observed in the form of a day-long fast which begins at sunrise when the woman consumes her meal in 'Taron ki Chhau' (moonlight just before the sunrise). The fast is observed as a Nirjala fast with not a drop of water or a morsel of food being consumed until the full moon appears. Sanghada flour puri, rice flour laddoo and dal puri is consumed as the prasad for this festival. People may cook other things that they wish to but these are certain basic preparations that should be consumed upon ending the fast.

Married women wear their wedding attire and apply aalta and mehendi to signify their marital status, thereby highlighting the essence of this day – a fast which is observed to pray for longevity of the husband's life and for their safety. The hand-drawn characters that help in the katha or the story recitation of this festival play a very important role and are part of the traditions that are transmitted orally to the younger generation which learns this craft and the stories attached with it by simply observing them, remembering them and narrating them to the next generation.



Women performing the Karva Chauth rituals

The rituals performed by a Bhojpuri family which has been residing in Varanasi for over 70 years, were also observed and documented at their terrace. Three generations of women were observing the fast on this day, with the eldest being Smt. Indu Bala Devi, an 80-year old who remembers keeping this fast for the last 69 years, after getting married at a very young age. A mixture of Hindi, Bhojpuri and Khadi boli is spoken in the house. Smt. Indu Devi was taught the rituals associated with the day by her mother-in-law. The women dressed in their best attire, kept the fast and sat in a circle to follow the rituals of passing the puja thalis to each other while listening to and sharing the stories of Karva Chauth. The fast can only be broken with the sighting of the moon.

Govardhan Puja/ Annakut

The head priest of the Shree Gopal Mandir in Chowkhambha area of Varanasi narrates the story behind Govardhan and Annakut and its relevance today. The myth goes that when Indra got to know that Indra Raj is over and Giri Raj has begun in Braj, he was furious. Indra was envious of the mountains because the mountains had wings and could fly. He chopped off the wings of the mountains and made them sthir (stationary) to stop people from worshipping them. Later, when he realized that the mountains were being worshipped by the people again,



he was enraged, and summoned all the 9 Meghs or Meghadipatis (clouds), instructing them to flood the lands of Braj with heavy rains and storms. With the entire village submerged in water, the villagers began to run around looking for shelter and safety. This was when a seven-year old Krishna lifted the Giriraj Parvat on his small finger (kanishthika) and everyone (all humans, cattle, other animals) took refuge under this mountain.

Ritual of Govardhan Puja

The rain and storm continued for 7 days, at the end of which all the Meghadipatis after having saturated their powers returned to Indra in a defeated state. In response, Indra meditated and realized that his own Isht Dev (cherished deity), Lord Krishna, had been the saviour of the people of Braj. Engulfed by fear, Indra decided to go to the Lord and admit his mistake. As a tradition, whenever kings visited someone more superior, they would take exquisite presents to express gratitude and reverence. As Krishna was the Isht Dev, Arya Dev or Guruvat to Indra, he took the 14 Ratnas (jewels awarded by the gods to Indra) with him to offer to the lord. Kamdhenu, (the first jewel awarded to Indra by the gods) lead the way towards Lord Krishna, and all the other jewels followed. During the journey, Indra realized that Krishna had assumed his Govardhan Swaroop (transformed into the Govardhan avatar); Indra hurriedly jumped off his vehicle (Airavat) to see Lord Krishna, and performed the Shashtang Naman at the Lord's feet.

Ashta-chap poets have described this lyrically in a wonderful manner. Indra says:

“Ab na chhano charan kamal ko mahima main na jaani”

(O Lord, I am at your feet now for you to decide as I was not able to recognize your greatness in this form)

Indra introduces himself to the Lord: “Surpati mero naam kahave, sakal lok abhimani”

(My name is Indra. I considered my pride to be the highest in all the worlds)

Heeding Indra's submission, Lord Krishna accepted his plea and granted him forgiveness. This lila was designed by Krishna to teach Indra a lesson in compassion by attacking his self-pride, which became known as Indra Maan Bhang (the crushing of Indra's self-pride). Upon attaining forgiveness of the supreme lord, Indra ordered Kamdhenu to perform Dugdha-Abhishek of the Govardhan Dharan, and this abhishek came to be known as Govinda Abhishek, thereby conferring the title of Govind upon Lord Krishna.

Mt. Giriraj attained sanctity and began to be worshipped by devotees from various communities and sects, as the Lord dictated no rules, restrictions or discrimination in his worship. On the day of Govardhan, the rituals begin with people making a Mt. Giriraj-like structure using cow dung. The Govardhan Puja is celebrated in temples and at the household level. The puja at the Radha Raman ji ka Mandir at Sher Waali Kothi in Thatheri Bazaar is one such. The head priest says that on the day of Govardhan Puja, if one visits any Pushtimargi temple for darshan, one gets the blessings of Lord Krishna as the Mt. Giri made of cow dung imbibes the Lord's presence. In the center of the mountain, a kandra is made, a seat that houses the idol. In the Dvapara Yuga, cow dung was considered the greatest wealth and hence cow dung was used to make the mountain. Poets write:

“Godhan, Gajdhan, Baajdhan aur Ratandhan khaan”

(Cow, elephant, grain and jewels – A man's wealth was measured in the descending order of these possessions).

The idol is bathed with milk, curd and Panchamrit, followed by a snaan with Ganga Jal. People take rounds around the mountain with a belief that this parikrama is as pious and sacred as the one done around the original Mt. Giri in Braj. Upon completion of this ritual, the cow dung is put into a field or under a tree on the next day.

Annakut

(‘anna’ meaning food and ‘kut’ meaning mountain) Shastri Ashvin Kumar Tripathi, has been the Mukhyapujari (head priest) at the Radha Raman ji Mandir, Sher Wali Kothi for 15 years.

The temple is managed by Madhav Lal Trust. Annakut, is an important festival of the Pushtimargi Vallabh Sampraday and the Gaudiya Sampraday. It is celebrated on the subsequent day of Diwali after the Govardhan Puja to feed Thakur ji (another name for Lord Krishna). Enthralled by the greatness of Bal Krishna in lifting up Mt. Govardhan to save them, the villagers prepared all sorts of food, sweets, and milk preparations to feed Krishna. Platters full of a variety of vegetarian food from each house were brought to feed the lord who hadn't eaten for 7 days.

The number 56 (56 bhog) has its significance in the following myth – Lord Krishna loved food and used to eat 8-times in a day. When he did not eat for 7 days, the villagers prepared a combination of 8 meals per day to compensate for those 7 days. This is the story behind the idea of '56-bhog', and at places like the Gopal Mandir of Varanasi, an even greater (in number and variety) platter is prepared as bhog for Bal Krishna.

Poori, kachori, dal-kadhi, rice (saada, meetha and rai rice), curd, bundiya, 4 types of vegetables and namkeen, sweets (shakarpara, laddu, gujiya, halwa, sev bundi, kheer), 4 types of chutney and achar, papad, pakora etc., adorn the flavour-rich platter prepared for Annakut. The food preparation begins from the day of Ashtami with the preparation of Sakdi Anaaj (food) like laddu, gujiya, matthhi etc., and Dudhghar (Phalhaari or milk and fruit materials), which is prepared in advance, and the Ansakdi Anaaj (rice, pulses, grains etc.) which are cooked on the day of Annakut. Tomato, cauliflower, cabbage, eggplant and garlic are not used while cooking because it is considered impure. This is a very strict rule while cooking and eggplant is not used in the temple for 4 months beginning from the Saawan month (monsoon season). It can be used again after Tulsi Vivah, which marks the conclusion of these 4 months. Ideally, the food should be cooked on coal to retain its purity (a rule which is followed in the Gopal temple), but some changes have been accommodated too, like the food in the Radha Raman ji ka Mandir (Sher Waali Kothi) is cooked on gas stove. The Sewaks of the temple cook the food for Annakut. They strictly have to be Brahmins (male or female). Women are debarred from any form of participation (even entering the temple complex) during their monthly cycle. An aarti is performed, accompanied by beating of bells and chants in praise of Lord Krishna. After the aarti, the bhog is offered to Lord Krishna in a silver utensil. It is believed that the food is now blessed by the Lord himself, ready to be served and relished by the devotees in a Pattal (a plate made from the Banyan tree leaf). Kaaji, an accompanying drink made of sugarcane water, salt, hing and jeera, is served with the food. The festival of Annakut is popular among the community (the Pushtimargi Vallabh Sampraday and the Gaudiya Sampraday), and those who are settled in Varanasi put in a collective effort to celebrate it together. The services offered in the preparation of bhog for Annakut is considered to be one of the greatest services within this community.

Bhai Dooj

The festival is celebrated by women and girls on the second lunar day on the bright fortnight of the month of Kartik, to pray for longevity and good health of their brothers. Dooj comes every year on the fifth and last day of Diwali, which falls on a new moon night. The term 'dooj' denotes the second day after the new moon, the day of the festival. The sisters wake up in the morning and observe a fast until the rituals are performed. The Govardhan prepared on the previous day is again worshipped on this day but with different resources, puja and beliefs. Idols and images of Ganga, snakes and scorpions are made using cow dung because there are myths and stories that involve these animals, which are read out in the form of

songs, chants and katha. Women gather and perform the rituals at the Govardhan which makes it more of a social event than being celebrated individually at home. Every girl who has a brother performs the rituals of Bhai Dooj. Bhadhehar, (a small earthen pot) is to be used for puja on Bhai Dooj. A garland is made of string-like cotton stacked over five times if you have one brother, and ten times for two brothers and so on. Turmeric paste (considered auspicious) is applied without uttering a word.



A Musar being worshipped as part of Bhai Dooj rituals

A big Musar is mounted on a brick, hand-held in the middle of the Govardhan and worshipped as the deity. Vermillion, turmeric paste is applied and milk is poured over the Musar during the puja.

Women sing songs in which they curse their brothers but in order to punish themselves, they later prick their tongues 5-7 times with the thorn of regani plant known as Bhoom Bhatkaiyya. There are songs related to this day which are recited by the women after ensuring that there are no men around, as these tales are not to be heard by men. chana (chickpea) and supari (areca nut) are placed under the Musar and cracked into pieces by its force, which is collected by all the females to be used as prasad while applying tilak on the brother's forehead, followed by feeding him sweet from the earthen pot. 4-5 rounds (parikrama) are taken around the Musar.

Myth related to the origin of Bhai Dooj or Yama Dwitiya

Yamraj, the god of death, visited his sister Yami on this particular day. She put the auspicious tilak on his forehead, garlanded him and fed him with special dishes. While parting, he gave her a special gift as a token of love and, in return, Yami also gave him a lovely gift which she had made with her own hands. That day Yamraj announced that anyone who receives tilak from his sister would never see bad days.

Chhath (Puja)



Chhat rituals by the ghats

The festival of Chhath celebrated mostly by the Bihari community, witnesses hoards of women performing rituals associated with this it at the ghats of Varanasi. This festival celebrates the god of energy known as Dala Chhath or Surya Shasht. It is believed that proximity to Bihar is a reason for the popularity of the festival in recent times.

Smt. Rekha Kapoor, a resident of the city for the last 24 years and observing Chhath for 15 years has imbibed the traditions and rituals related to this four-day festival from her mother-in-law. The celebrations of Chhath are spread over three days of fasting, Sandhya and Bihaniya Arghya (evening and morning offerings), and praying for wellness of family members. Songs in Bhojpuri language are sung while the women prepare for arghya. Though mostly observed and celebrated by women, the fasts and rituals can be observed by the male members also, the only condition being strict and dedicated adherence to the spirit and beliefs.



A Daliya adorned with offerings

Day 1 – The day begins with a morning bath, preferably in the river and fasting. This day’s fast bans the consumption of garlic and onion. Prasad is cooked at home and Chhath Maiyya, the Sun God and Ganga Maiyya are worshipped during the puja which takes place at home.

Day 2 – The day is marked with a nirjala fast (not a drop of water can be consumed) and offering of the Sandhya Arghya to the Sun God. This offering is performed in the Ganga river with women purchasing new and pure daliya (a small basket), paan-supari, dry fruits, coconut, and a host of fruits with the puja samagri (tilak, diyas, dhoop, turmeric powder etc.). The daliya is adorned and decorated with offerings as per one’s financial capacity and varies in its weight accordingly but bananas, coconut, and apples are mostly common in every basket. Soop, a type of basket made of brass or bamboo is also purchased in pairs, which means each woman will have two soops for herself. A paste of rice and turmeric called ‘Chaawal Haldi ka Laepan’ and vermilion (symbolizing a married woman) is put on each and every item to symbolize the purity and worship of each. The items are taken from the daliya and arranged in the soop and an arghya is offered by rotating 6 times while holding the soop. A variation noticed in this ritual as performed by the people from Bihar is the use of a kalash (a brass pot) filled with water from Gangaji and Aam ka Tal (mango tree leaves) arranged around a coconut. During the 6 rotations, water from the kalash will be poured on to one hand each time the Chhath Vrati (woman observing the fast) stops. This means that apart from the soop offerings, pure water is also being offered to the lord. The arghya is offered facing the east. Orange vermilion signifying the colour of the sun or ‘Surya ki Laali’ is applied on the forehead stretched up till the nose. Sugarcane is inserted into the river making a mandap and an orange cloth is tied around it. This sugarcane is taken home and kept with the daliya.

Day 3 – While the setting sun is worshipped on the 2nd day, the 3rd day begins early with the morning offering or the Bihaniya Arghya where the same process of worship is repeated for the rising sun using the same daliya and other material. After the offering is completed, orange vermilion is applied on the forehead of five wedded women. An addition is the

soaked chickpeas included in the soop, five pieces of which are eaten to end the fast. Chhath puja demands extra measures to maintain cleanliness of self, home, deeds and thoughts. The colours, yellow and red, attain higher importance on this day as they are the colours of the sun.

New clothes have to be worn by the Chhath Vrati and red/yellow sarees, bangles, sweets etc. become a common sight during Chhath. It is believed that only married people (woman or man) and/or the head of family should observe the Chhath Vrat.

Aakashdeep



Aakashdeep - Sky lamps hung on bamboo poles

People in Varanasi celebrate the Akashdeep festival in remembrance of their ancestors by lighting earthen lamps on the banks of the holy river Ganga. Hundreds of these sky lamps are hung on tall bamboo poles and lit up every evening. This practice is observed in the auspicious month of Kartik, and is believed to light the path for the gods and for the departed souls to return to the world of their ancestors. This yearly visit to earth by the ancestors is also commemorated as the Pitra Paksh. Apart from the little bamboo/cane baskets containing the wicks that are lit up, the ghats are decorated with earthen diyas or lamps on this occasion. The sight of the tall bamboo poles holding these baskets is very common on the ghat.

Kartik Purnima

Kartik Purnima, the full moon day of the Kartik month, is celebrated as a holy festival and is considered to be one of the most auspicious months in the Hindu lunar calendar. It is

described in the scriptures as one of the best months for performing austerities. It usually overlaps with the months of October and November. Out of the 365 days, and the 12 purnimas, the most significant is that of Kartik Purnima, where the morning begins with the Ganga bathing ritual and evenings see the Ganga Maha Aarti being performed, with the celebrations of Dev Deepawali.

Kartik Purnima also coincides with the Jain light festival and Guru Nanak Jayanti. It is also known as Tripurari Purnima and Deva Diwali or Dev Deepawali – the festival of lights of the gods. According to the story behind the name Tripurari Purnima, Lord Shiva, who is also known as Tripurari, killed the demon Tripurasura on this day. After the death of the demon, the gods rejoiced and declared the day as a festival of lights to celebrate the victory of Tripurari over the demon. Kartik Purnima is also the last day to perform the Tulsi Vivah ceremony that is performed by many married women as a marriage celebration between the



tulsi plant (holy basil) and Lord Vishnu in his Krishna avatar. This day is said to be very auspicious for weddings and it is believed that unlike other days, no lagna is required for two people to marry on this day. Numerous newly married couples flock to the ghats and temples on this day for the blessings of the gods and the holy river. Brahmin panditayan narrate the Tulsi Katha and conclude the marriage ceremony between Tulsi and Krishna on this day which is also called the Prabodhini Ekadashi or the 11th lunar day during the Shukla Paksh. This day marks the end of the four month period called Chaturmas, when Lord Vishnu is believed to be

sleeping. As this period indicates the awakening of the god, a lot of festivities and ceremonies take place, and prayers are offered to the gods.

Newly married couples flock to the ghats for the blessings from the holy river during this time

Kartik Snaan

Kartik Snaan means to have a bath in the lunar month of Kartik, specifically in a river or in the sea. This biggest bathing festival begins with thousands of Hindu devotees rushing to the ghats for a holy dip in the Ganga. This holy dip is believed to end their troubles, and wash away their sins by purifying them. From as early as 4-5 am in the morning, people start the bathing rituals at the ghat. During the Kartik Purnima the holy dip or bath is considered to be exceptionally sacred and pure. Pandit Bharat Pandey asserts that the most important bathing rituals are done in the Kartik month.



A holy bath is a must during the month of Kartik

Sh. Sikander Prasad Singh, a teacher in Gaya, who with his family came from Gaya especially for the Kartik Snaan, believes that according to the Hindu dharma, people through the Ganga Snaan perform prayers (aaradhana) for their family, their ancestors (purvaj), the various gods and their clan (kul-khandaan). Some follow the bathing rituals religiously praying to Ganga to wash away their sins and shelter them so that they do not return to this world. He narrates the story of Ganga and her descent to earth. According to legend, Ganga resided in the heavens and after deep meditation (tapasya) of Bhagirath to invoke her she agreed to come down to earth but warned that the earth would not be able to handle her force. It is said that the saint then convinced Lord Shiva, who agreed to carry Ganga in his dreadlocks. It is believed that the flow of Ganga happens from the locks of Lord Shiva, flowing through the Himalayas to the various cities including Varanasi.

There are many procedures to follow for the Ganga Snaan. The standard practice begins with the chanting of a shloka, followed by a dip in the river. After this a little water is put in the mouth and the body is deemed purified. Another dip is then taken after which the adoration or worship of Lord Ganesh (first to be worshipped always), followed by the rest of the gods and goddesses is done.



The crowd performing the holy bath during Kartik Snaan

The pronunciation of names (uccharan) of the Nav-Graha Devi Devtas, Kul Devi Devtas is followed by that of the mother and father, seeking their blessings and offering them the holy water. Some people, like the family of Sh. Gopal Krishna who came all the way from Karnataka for the holy dip and for Pind Pradaan (offerings to the ancestors), follow an easier procedure. This includes 3 dips (complete with submersion of head) in the holy water, followed by an offering of water to the rising Sun God and chanting of the Gayatri Japa. Few women were seen constructing mounds of sand at the shores of the river and near the ghats.

These mounds are said to be Mahadev and Bheema idols made with sand, decorated with flowers and worshipped using incense sticks and diyas, which are later immersed in the Ganga. Idols of Bheem can be seen at the ghats as well. By the late morning and early afternoon, the bathing rituals draw to a close as the preparations of the most awaited festival of lights for the gods or Dev Deepawali begin. Thousands of lamps or diyas are lit at sunset on the steps of the ghats of Varanasi. Kartik Snaan and Deepdaan (offering of diyas) are the main rituals performed during Dev Deepawali.

The sholka recited during the Ganga Snaan

“Ganga Cha Yamuna Chaiva Godavari Saraswati, Narmada Sindhu Kaveri Jalesmin Sannidhim Kuru” The literal meaning of this mantra is: “In this water, I invoke the presence of divine waters from the rivers Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri. These rivers are considered as goddesses and I pray to them for considering me for their blessings”.⁴

Significance: God has given us a beautiful life to live and has created this beautiful world. There are massive rivers and oceans in it. Many rivers like Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati etc have their own significance. Taking bath in these rivers is considered auspicious. So, reciting this sloka with a sincere heart brings you the benefit of taking bath in these rivers.

Dev Deepawali

Dev Deepawali is celebrated every year at Varanasi, exactly 15 days after Diwali, on the auspicious day of Kartik Purnima when the moon is at its fullest. According to Hindu belief, Gods descend to earth to celebrate this grand occasion, along the banks of river Ganga in Varanasi and other such sacred sites. Varanasi also celebrates a four day cultural fiesta, the ‘Ganga Mahotsav’, at this time, where many reputed artists and performers gather to perform and celebrate the occasion.



Illuminated ghats during the Dev Deepawali

While illuminated diyas dot the stairs of various ghats, many of these tiny earthen lamps are seen floating serenely on the Ganga. The sight of the bright ghats and the full moon shining in all its glory in the background is truly magical. The mesmerizing sound of mantras and the special Ganga Aarti add to the enchantment. Large crowds gather at the ghats to watch and be a part of this spectacle. The Maha Ganga Aarti and the programmes following the aarti take place at many ghats simultaneously.



Pandit Dinesh Shankar Dubey is the secretary of the Gangotri Seva Samiti, which conducts this event annually at the Dashashvamedh Ghat. The procedure, importance, historical significance, objects required, relevance of the ghats and many such crucial questions are readily answered by him. He informs us of the formation of the Gangotri Seva Samiti at the Pracheen Dashashvamedh Ghat in 1990 by his father Pandit Kishori Raman Dubey Babu Maharaj, who started the rituals of Dev Deepawali at the ghats in 1989. At that time, the rituals were done by him alone, unlike the group of pundits swarming the ghats now. In the

city, the Dashashvamedh Ghat, also called Pracheen Rudra Sarovar, falls right in the middle of the Chandrakaal Shrinkla (crescent formation) of all the ghats. It is believed that many gods, bathed here including Lord Shiva, bathed here. The first one to bathe was Lord Brahma and the last was Dashrath, who was said to have performed the Ashwamedh Yajna 10 times on this ghat, which gives the ghat its historical significance and its name. He adds that bathing on this specific ghat by itself cleanses a man of his sins.

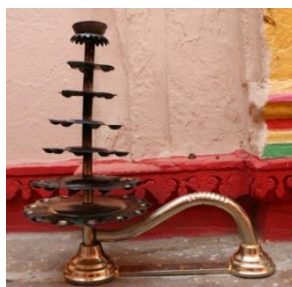
Dev Deepawali, he mentions has taken the form of Kashi's 'Maha Parva' in the past 3 decades. The Maha Aarti is done for Ganga and the gods, since they are believed to come down to earth at this time. The reasons behind the celebration of Dev Deepawali on this day include the death of Tripurasur demon at the hands of Lord Shiva, which made the gods celebrate by lighting up the sky with the Chaturdik Deepak; the return of Lord Ram to Ayodhya after his van-gaman to begin his rule; the birth of Guru Nanak, celebrated as Guru Nanak Jayanti and the celebration of Buddha Purnima on this date. It is an amalgam of many celebrations.



The Maha Ganga Aarti during Dev Deepawali

The preparations for the event start two months in advance. From the training of the boys and girls for the Maha Aarti, arranging the flower decorations and the diyas, to building the massive stage on the Ganga for the programme, requires this time frame. During the Maha Aarti the gods are welcomed, bathed, offered food, and finally made to sleep. Before commencing the aarti, the Brahmins in their saffron and white clothes, begin by sipping the water from Ganga using their palms (achaman) and offering salutation to the river hoping that the ritual they perform is performed smoothly without any hindrance (vighna). Like any sacred ritual, the Dev Deepawali programme starts with the prayer to Lord Ganesha by presenting Ganpati Vandana. The ceremony is presented by 21 young brahmins (batuks) and 42 girls (kanyas representing Lord Ganesh's daughters Riddhi-Siddi) chanting the Vedic mantras and waving the holy fans called chawars.

The Ganga puja is then conducted by the chief guest and offerings to the gods and river Ganga are presented. These include 251 litres of milk, offering of diyas, fruits and flowers and a cloth piece (vastra daan). The aarti begins with the blowing of the Shankh-Nad (conch shells) which is then washed so that it doesn't remain impure. The first aarti is done using dhoop (incense offering) which is followed by the Gugul Aarti (done using a mixture of sandalwood powder, Gugul herb and cow dung burnt in vishuddh agni or pure fire). The next aarti involves the use of an ornate lamp with 56 lit up diyas. Offering of coconut in the form of bali (sacrifice) for the gods, is done after the Kapur Aarti (done using camphor). The use of sacrifice in these rituals is an age old tradition and is believed to please the gods. The next step is to cool and calm the fire ignited in the gods from the previous aartis, by simply offering water to them (sheetal-karan). A handkerchief is the next item used (Roomal ki Aarti), which is believed to clean the soot or burnt remains from the Kapur aarti. Subsequently, an aura is created around the gods for their purification using the conch shell containing water. The gods are then made to sleep and the holy morpankh (fan made of peacock feathers) and chawar are waved to help them fall asleep. Lastly, the conch shells are played again (Shankh Dhvani) and a 5 minute Sankirtan (call-and-response chanting performed in India's bhakti/devotional traditions) is performed. (Sankirtan for the Ganga Maha Aarti: *Har Har Mahadev Shambho Kashi Vishwanath Gange*)



Puja samagri for the Maha Ganga Aarti

Each of the above steps is performed with reverence. The audience is spellbound by the sight and elaborate performance of the aarti. Each one feels some connection with this ritualistic performance, whether as a spiritual connect or purely an enjoyment of a staged synchronized performance. Pandit Dinesh Shankar Dubey explains about the specific objects used for the aarti and their relevance. The fans used for the aarti are morpankh and the chawar. Since Lord Krishna adorns the peacock feather on his forehead, it is considered pure and sacred, and hence to fan the gods, the fan is made from peacock feathers. For the aarti, this item is acquired by the samiti from Mathura. The chawar on the other hand is made from the hair of the hippopotamus which is obtained from Malaysia, Burma or Indonesia and gets processed (it is cleansed and a silver handle is attached to it, creating a fan like object) in Kolkata. There are different types of diyas used for the aarti. The first diya to be lit up is the Hazara Deepak (with a thousand diyas) at the Panchganga Ghat, he adds. This is after the Hazaardeep was established by Kashi Naresh and Maharani Ahilya Bai (the Holker queen of the Maratha ruled Malwa kingdom). The lighting of the diyas at the rest of the ghats follows. Different diyas are used for gods, rakshas (demons), pitras (ancestors) and so on. Oil, ghee and wax are used to burn the wick in these earthen lamps. The ghee or oil diyas are used for the puja whereas the wax diyas are used for decoration of the ghats. Offering diyas to the river Ganga holds a special significance on the day of Dev Deepawali. Different diyas are lit throughout the Kartik month for different purposes and the concluding day for the illuminations during the month of Kartik is Dev Deepawali.



Multiple diyas at the ghats



The Ganga Aarti has special meaning for the batuk (brahmin youth) attached to it, says Pandit Dubey. These are young brahmin men falling in the age bracket of 15-30 years, who are trained over a period of time to perform the Ganga Aarti. During the time of his father, the aarti was single-handedly performed by his father. The number of brahmins increased from 1 to 3 over the years and has been set at 5 now. He agrees that musicality has been added to the mantras to give it a fresh feel. He feels that technology has aided the aarti so that it can reach out to millions. As soon as evening draws close, the people of Varanasi and the hundreds of tourists who visit the city are seen flocking down to the ghats to be a part of this magical performance.

Idol of Goddess Ganga worshipped during the Maha Ganga Aarti of Dev Deepawali

Pitra Paksh (Pind Daan)

Pitra Paksh is a 15 lunar days period when Hindus pay homage to their ancestors, especially through food offerings. According to the North Indian calendar this period falls in the lunar month of Ashwin beginning with the full moon day in Bhadrapada or next day after full moon. While this practice is observed widely in India, Kashi, Prayag and Gaya are said to be the most auspicious sites to perform these rites. The ritual also involves bathing in the Ganga to purify the body and soul. Pilgrims can also be seen performing Pind Daan at the ghats on other auspicious days of the year, like on the day of Makar Sankranti.



Pind Daan rituals at the ghats



Tri Pindi Pind Daan at the Pishach Mochan Temple

During the month of Pitra Paksh, the performance of Pind Daan rituals can be witnessed at the ghats in large numbers, as well as at the Pishach Mochan temple. Tri Pindi is a unique Pind Daan performed at the Pishach Mochan, which involves offerings in the memory of the departed souls. It is believed that if for three years the offerings are not made, then the souls get angry and such offerings are required to calm them. Pishach Mochan temple is mostly for the departed souls that meet with an accidental death or for various reasons become pishach or spirits. The meaning of Pishach Mochan is a space “where the spirits are liberated”.

He says that during these 15 days of the Pitra Paksh, the souls of one’s ancestors walk on the earth and are assured that their families will feed them, provide them with water and other necessities of life through these Pind Daan rituals. The souls of three preceding generations of one’s ancestor reside in Pitra Lok, a mythical realm between heaven and earth governed by Yama, the god of death, according to the Hindu scriptures. At the beginning of Pitra Paksh,

it is believed that the spirits leave Pitra Lok and reside in their descendants' homes for a month.

Sh. Jai Prakash Pandey, a mahapandit who resides at Manikarnika Ghat, shares the rituals involved in performing Pind Daan and the rites performed post death. He conducts and performs the Pind Daan rituals which involve many forms of daan, like “the Shaiya Daan, Ann Daan, Gau Daan, sona-chandi, rupaya-paisa, kapda, bistar, odhna chadar, charpai” and more. The six Pind Daan are performed on the day of the death, and the 10th, 11th, and 12th days post death also witness different kinds of Pind Daan that are required to be performed.



Scene from Pind Daan rituals

Karna Legend

According to legends, when Karna died in the epic Mahabharata war, his soul transcended to heaven, where he was offered gold and jewels as food. When he asked Indra, the lord of heaven, the reason for serving gold and jewels as food, Indra told him that he had donated gold all his life to his ancestors in shraddha, but had never donated real food. To make amends, Karna was permitted to return to earth for a 15-day period, so that he could re-perform shraddha and donate real food and water in the memory of his ancestors. This period is now known as Pitru/Pitra Paksh.

Contemplation and Impressions

India is a land of festivals where people following different religions coexist harmoniously. The array and variety of festivals celebrated in Varanasi are truly a manifestation of its rich composite culture.



Dr. Maruti Nandan P. Tiwari, an emeritus professor of History of Art at the BHU, discusses the relevance of these festivals in Varanasi. He has served the university for over 35 years and is a permanent resident of Varanasi. It is a city where all the religious streams harmoniously converge and it is believed that all the deities reside here. People belonging to all religions, castes, sects and regions are found here and their cultures can be evidently studied in the form of the various festivals and fairs they observe. This is another reason why Varanasi is said to celebrate 9/11 festivals a week, as the cultural mix in the form of its people and their observances in the city is vast.

The presence of the entire country can be felt at the ghats of Varanasi in the form of its architectural and social environment, he says. The role of faith in uniting India has been important and forms an integral part of the atmosphere of this city in the form of its cultural activities. The dimensions of the festivals may not be of a national level, it may be a local festival or a local fair but the essence remains the same. He mentions the ‘Lakkha Mela’ of Varanasi, where lakhs of people assemble to celebrate the festival. These include the Rath Yatra, the Bharat Milap of Ramnagar Ramlila, Nag Nathaiya and more. Emotions play a key role in bringing hoards of people together. As for the distinction and difference between fairs and festivals, he says that “festivals are time bound and fairs are place bound.” For example, Diwali, Raksha Bandhan etc are festivals that are celebrated all over India at a certain time but a fair like Nag Nathaiya or Bharat Milap are space bound apart from being time bound and are associated with the Tulsi Ghat or Chetgunj respectively.

So many traditions and practices are lost and this loss is inevitable. He compares the situation today to that of 15 years back. The hand-drawn symbols and images relevant to the festivals are now available in the markets as stickers. The whole process of understanding the meaning of each symbol that was drawn is now lost in the ready-to-stick images. The time devoted to understanding each ritual earlier made the observance of the festival meaningful rather than the short cuts that are adopted now, to ‘celebrate’ a certain festival. The festivals are gradually losing their essence and meaning in the fast-paced world and are transforming rapidly with the times. With the growing number of nuclear families, the seniors of the house who would ideally explain and conduct the festival rituals are not present. Yet, irrespective of the changes and transitions of the rituals and practices, the numerous festivals and celebrations in Varanasi that are celebrated throughout the year are continuing with enthusiasm and fervor. These festivities are tied to the seasons, to key moments in the solar

and lunar calendar celebrating the passage of sun and the waxing and waning moon, and to the harvest cycle. The myths and stories of the Hindu scriptures and religion are enacted here, celebrations related to births, marriages, various gods and goddesses are all kept alive in the form of these rituals and social practices observed diligently. The traditions are being re-invented keeping pace with the moving times.

The Kashi Khand mentions that “Here in the ashram of Vishveshvara it is always the Perfect Age. Here it is always a great festival day, and here one is never troubled by unfavorable conjunctions of the stars. Here where Vishveshvara abides it is always the blessed half of the year, always lucky, always auspicious”.⁵

Endnotes: Fairs and Festivals

1 Eck Diana L., *Banaras: City of Light*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1993; pg. 278

2 Sinha Kunal, *A Banarasi on Varanasi*, New Delhi, Bluejay Books, 2004; pg. 216

3 Wikipedia.com

4 iloveindia.com

5 Eck Diana L., *Banaras: City of Light*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1993; pg. 279

Ghat and Ganga



View of the ghats from a boat

“..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.”

Mark Twain

Being a vital part of the local society, economy, religion and culture of Varanasi, the 84 prime ghats along the riverside assume many roles. They allow the users to perform functions ranging from early morning bathing rituals, washing activities (which include washing clothes and buffaloes), swimming and recreational activities, spontaneous and choreographed rituals, to praying, preaching, lounging and sleeping. The pluralistic and accommodative character inseparable from the life and traditions of the city comes together, both individually and collectively at the ghats. In terms of time, one can say that the ghats are used all day long, which further augments the centrality of this space. The stone-built ghats and their

embankments have protected the city from the strong current of the river, especially during the rainy season.¹

The ghats have been named after deities, tirthas, mythological characters, confluence of rivers, monks and saints, Muslim chiefs and so on. Girvanapadamanjari (written in Sanskrit by Varadaraja 1600-1660) is the first available work that presents a list of ghats.² The palaces and temples built on the ghats are historical evidence to the popularity of a belief that made people want to stay or spend the last days of their lives in the holy city. Hence, royalty and nobility from different parts of India constructed palaces where elderly family members could peacefully, stay close to the Ganga. In the eighteenth century, palaces were built at the ghats by Maratha rulers, and in the nineteenth century, by Raja Dipatiya of Champaran in 1830, by Jiyajirao Sindhia, ruler of Gwalior in 1864, and by the Vijayanagar ruler on Kedar Ghat in 1890. Prabhunarayan Singh, the Raja of Banaras, constructed Ganga Mahal on Asi Ghat in 1830. Palaces continued to be built at the ghats until the beginning of twentieth century, like the one built by industrialist Baldev Prasad Birla on Tulsi Ghat.

These palaces, temples and activities that celebrate the confluence of this divine architecture, the holy river and years of unfaltering faith, contribute to the stupendous view of the ghats of Varanasi. There are a number of important shrines present along the stretch that runs north of Manikarnika. It is called the Siddha Kshetra, or field of fulfillment.



Malviya Bridge

The Malviya Bridge was built on Rajghat in 1887, known as Lord Dufferin Bridge at that time.³ The Ganga River becomes Uttarvahini in its course of flow in Varanasi. A Himalayan-fed river, in most parts of the Indian mainland the Ganga flows from North to South, but it uniquely reverses its course in Varanasi. This wondrous reversal has many interpretations from the geological, spiritual, and religious viewpoint. Amitabh Bhattacharaya, a Banarasi who has spent years of his life studying diverse aspects of the city through the lens of philosophy, says that the Ganga changing its course of flow in this city symbolizes an act of introspection. Taking inspiration from the river, one must take a journey 'within', a journey into one's own self, which he calls chidakasha (the sky inside us, in our self). He says that Varanasi is all about chidakasha.



A View of the Ganga River

Rivers all over the world have sustained many civilizations, Kashi or Varanasi being one of them. Ganga has been many things for the city, over centuries accommodating several forms of human interaction, at times acceptable, at time not so acceptable. From idolization to victimization, the river has swallowed almost all possible forms of utilization and exploitation, and has an ever-reflective persona of tolerance. Perhaps the abstract patience and profundity of the river, since it made an eternal promise to Shiva to forever grace the banks of Kashi, is an indispensable element entwined in the unique outlook found here.

Uniqueness of Ganga in Kashi, as believed, lies in its physical form: Uttaravahini (her flow from south to north) and ardhachandrakar (her crescent formation) that symbolises the moon brightening the jata (matted locks) of the lord Shiva.

Reverence for the Ganga

Aditya Kumar Gupta, an entrepreneur in Varanasi, reminisced that during his time growing up almost everyone would learn swimming in Ganga ji. Swimming in Ganga ji was like walking, absolutely effortless and dissolved any kind of responsibility on the person. It was mutually understood and accepted that no one would drown while swimming in this river, because swimming would come as naturally as walking to every person in its waters. While Aditya learnt his first swimming lessons in the resplendent waters of the river Ganga, his 8-year old son learnt his at a school; the reason being the polluted water of the river, and the lurking fear of diseases. He feels that the inherent sentiments of respect and fondness for the river have undergone evident changes in the past years. Earlier, consumption of alcohol was considered taboo at the ghats, but consuming bhang, charas and gaanja was always acceptable and regarded as ‘bhole ka prasad’.

While taking a dip in the holy river, one silently commemorates the name(s) of a deceased person, or the names of those for whom blessings are sought. That person is assumed to reap the benefits of this holy dip by being abstractly present in the thoughts of the person who is actually taking the dip in Ganga ji. People chant “Har Har Mahadev” while taking a dip and the chants multiply with the number of people, creating an atmosphere of divine reverence towards the river – the nurturer, the curer and the redeemer. This heartfelt respect for the river is also reflected in bowing and offering pranam to the river before entering its sacred water.

As Amitabh Bhattacharaya puts it, “People say that I should live next to the river and forsake false vanities. This brings out the mystic beauty of Kashi.” Banarasis call the river Ganga Maiyya and her waters are called amrita – the nectar of immortality. There is a tradition called ‘Aar Paar ki Mala’, following which a newly married couple garlands the river. In order to seek the holy river’s blessings for a wonderful wedded life as well for an offspring, a string of flowers is woven right across the width of the river. This tradition is performed with the help of a ghaatiya, who first applies sandalwood and turmeric on the foreheads of the newly married couple. A puja of Gauri-Ganesh is performed (necessarily performed by a boatman), after which the couple rides in a boat to the opposite bank, stringing a garland.⁴ Hari Ram Dwivedi, a poet who has been studying the city for several years says that the tradition of ‘Aar Paar ki Mala’ is not as visible as it used to be some years ago. Though not highly prevalent, it is one among the many rituals performed in the river, and it reflects the identity of this city.

The sentiment towards the river is such that the people who earn their livelihood by performing rituals at the ghats call themselves Gangaputra or the sons of the river Ganga. Even the boatmen who ply boats in the Ganga regard themselves as Gangaputras.

The painters of the British Company School presented a magnificent panorama of the riverfront 500 years ago. There are postcards easily available throughout the city which portray these images of the ghats, the sadhus, the Ganga and the Ganga Aarti, the cremation ghats, the temple spires and palaces built on the ghats, the celebrations that take place at the ghats and the boats that adorn the riverfront. Spanning a long and rich history in Hindu mythology, the Vedas describe river Ganga as a celestial stream that descended from the heavens to earth. There are numerous myths attached to the descent of the Ganga in Kashi.

Gangavataran

The legend goes that king Sagara, who was a just and powerful king, undertook an Ashwamedh or horse sacrifice to fulfill his status as a great king. A horse was allowed to wander freely for a year and any kingdom that the horse wandered into, became King Sagara’s territory unless he was challenged to war. The gods became fearful that the wandering horse would soon approach heaven, as he had already got many monarchs to give up their kingdoms. The gods stole the horse and hid it away in Sage Kapila’s hermitage. The king sent his sons to find the horse. They searched for many days and nights and found the horse at the sage’s hermitage. They charged at the sage disturbing his austerities. In reaction to this, the sage burnt them to ashes with one fiery glance. Kapila sent a message to Sagara, saying that his sons would find a place in heaven only when their ashes would be purified by Ganga’s celestial waters. Sagara failed in his attempts to call Ganga down from heaven.

Many years later, one of his descendants, Bhagiratha managed to bring the Ganga to earth through years of penance. Ganga agreed to descend to earth but since it was the river of heavens, her tumultuous gush would have ravaged the earth. This is when Shiva promised to control her flow by allowing her to descend on earth through his matted locks. Bhagirath led it to the netherworld beginning from the plains of north India where Ganga purified the ashes of Sagara’s sons.

Ritual Practices Performed at the Ghats

For a lot of rituals which are performed on the ghats, both the concrete space offered by the ghats, and the fluid space offered by the river are comprehensively utilized to successfully complete the ritualistic performance. For the purpose of better understanding, the rituals performed on the ghats can be categorised as under:

- Ganga Aarti
- Festivals celebrated at the ghats
- Other Practises

Ganga Aarti



The Ganga Aarti at the Dashashvamedh Ghat



The tradition of worshipping the Ganga in the form of performing an aarti is done at the Dashashvamedh Ghat, Dr. Rajendra Prasad Ghat, Tulsi Ghat, Asi Ghat, and many other ghats throughout the river crescent from Asi to Varuna. The performance at the Dashashvamedh Ghat and Dr. Rajendra Prasad Ghat attracts the maximum number of people as it offers ample space to accommodate large crowds of people gathered to watch the organized spectacle. The choreography in terms of the synchronized hand movements of the young brahmin boys maneuvering the heavy diyas, the selection of bhajans and the accompanying music, the marvellous clanking of bells and cymbals, the shankhnad, offering of flower petals to the holy river, and the enraptured viewers, lends an amazing appeal to these performances. The enthusiastic viewers gather and scatter around the ghats to witness the aarti. A large numbers of people sit in the boats to get a better view. In this way, the aarti also ensures an income source for the boatmen as they charge either group or individual boat fare. The Ganga Aarti is a daily spectacle. The evening Ganga Aarti performed at Tulsi Ghat and Asi Ghat also attracts a large number of viewers.



The Idol of Goddess Ganga being worshipped during the Ganga Aarti

Festivals celebrated at the ghats

Since the city is popular for the exhaustive list of festivals observed and celebrated here, the ghats very naturally become a preferred ground for conducting the performances related to a certain festival, fair, or celebration. Undoubtedly, the ghats offer unabridged access to space for such rituals, which may not be possible at other areas in the city. The sentiment of a mass-scale social celebration (including the participants and the spectators) attaches a distinctive fervor to any festival when celebrated at the ghats. The invincible and undying faith in the eternal purity of the river heightens the centrality of ghats as the preferred space for performing various rituals, be it sacred or secular, traditional or contemporary, mythical or scientific.



Rituals related to various festivals are observed at the ghats

Dr. Rajeev Upadhyay, conducts Karma-Kand (ritual services proffered by swamis or religious brahmins in exchange for bhiksha), and is a knowledge holder of jyotish vidya. He shared that Deepawali is celebrated since the Vedic age. It is considered immensely auspicious to donate deep or diyas in the month of Kartik. Lord Shiva killed a demon named Tripur, which made the gods rejoice and they donated diyas. The light of these diyas illuminated the entire city of Kashi, and since then the celebration of Dev Deepawali in the month of Kartik Purnima became a tradition here.



Diyas illuminate the ghats during Dev Deepawali



Aakashdeep bamboo basket with a diya

Aakashdeep is observed since the Uttar Vedic times. The first Ashvin Paksh is the time of forefathers and the spirits of forefathers are believed to visit the Prithvi Lok around this time. Lamps are lit inside a small bamboo basket which is hung on a tall surmounted pole, in order to illuminate their path. One can find these illuminated bamboo baskets across the riverfront, spanning from Asi Ghat up to the Dr. Rajendra Prasad Ghat and continuing much beyond it towards the other ghats.

In the Hindu month of Kartik, the land water interface is celebrated in a spectacular manner in the form of Ganga Mahotsav. The entire stretch from Panchganga to Rajghat is lit up with earthen oil lamps. This is a highly auspicious period in the Hindu calendar and devotees gather to embrace the divinity of the ghats and the Ganga. For Kartik Snaan one can see thousands of Hindu devotees rushing to the ghats for a holy dip in the Ganga to wash away their sins. For Makar Sankranti, the celebration begins with people gathering along the ghats as early as 2:30 am to perform worship rituals and bathe in the Ganga. Just like Kartik Snaan, it is believed that bathing in the Ganga on this propitious day results in multiple blessings and liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

The festivals of Jiutiya and Chhath attain a religious fervour when celebrated at the ghats, with hoards of women performing the colourful rituals associated with these festivals. The make-shift stalls and people selling items specifically used for these rituals, line up the lanes leading to the ghats. At Asi Ghat, one can see little wooden tables or just a sheet of plastic or cloth spread out to sell diyas, incense sticks, colourful bangles, vermilion, flowers, and even hand-made toys, little kitchen-sets, balloons and other such recreational objects for children. The ghats during these festivals become almost a fair-ground where different age-groups utilize the space in their individual ways.



Chhath celebrations at the ghats

During the month of Sawan (July-August), the city sees an influx of pilgrims eager to perform religious rituals in the Ganga (including the dip), because this month is considered supremely auspicious to visit the Kashi Vishwanath temple and seek the blessings of Lord Shiva. The ghats are filled with people pouring in from different parts of the country to bathe in the Ganga. Despite the heavy rains creating flood-like situations, the frenzied pilgrims perform all the rituals at the ghat and in the river. Ganga Dussehra is celebrated in the month of Jyeshtha (May-June) as per the Hindu calendar. It is 10-day celebration that takes place to commemorate Ganga's descent to earth, known as Gangavataran. This river is worshipped as King Bhagirath had performed penance for many years to bring Ganga to Earth. Devotees take a bath in the river and worship the shrine of Mother Ganga near the Dashashvamedh Ghat.⁵

Budhwamangal or Burhwa Mangal which literally means old Tuesday is a unique cultural celebration that used to take place on the river. A symbol of the spirit of Mauj-Masti that is characteristic of Varanasi, this celebration has almost disappeared although there seems to have been some attempt to revive it in recent times.

Krishnalila is an exclusive 20 days oral tradition based performing art related to Tulsi Ghat since the 16th century. Tulsidas began the tradition of performing this lila which brings alive

the tales from Lord Krishna's life. Nag Nathaiya, the most famous lila is performed on the Kartik Shukla Paksha Chaturthi. The entire episode is enhanced and huge preparations are



made in terms of installing a tree in the Ganga at Tulsi Ghat. Three platforms are made in the river and the steps of Tulsi Ghat serve as the fourth cardinal on which the maha aarti is performed. The act of Krishna jumping into the river becomes a highly popular event with people singing praises of Lord Krishna. This festival is attended by the Kashi Naresh sitting in his royal boat.

Characters from the festival celebration of Krishnalila

Other Practices

At the river front, other activities include tarpan (a ritual to pay obeisance to one's forefathers), arghya (offering water or jal to the Sun God), recitation of prayers and offering of flowers or diyas. Then there are those who take their first ever swimming lessons in the river, rejoicing with their group of friends and simply reflecting a reverence towards the river which is experientially very unique. For a devotee, someone who offers flowers and diyas to the Ganga, it becomes the right way to worship the river, and he would hardly ever allow this act to be categorised as one that pollutes the river.



A devotee offering prayers to the Holy River Ganga

The ghats also double up as performance stages to showcase art forms like a Kathak recital or a programme of vocal music, as well as to organize other formal events. For some residents, the river is too polluted to think about taking a dip here. The relationship that the people share with the river varies across age-groups, knowledge and experience – a pilgrim, a devotee, a tourist or a Banarasi who has a scientific outlook may not approve of bathing in the Ganga due to its polluted water, but for others, faith overrides all doubts. These activities celebrate the glory of the river which validates them for the believers. There are also those Banarasis who reminiscence about the days when the river water was cleaner – the days of their childhood when swimming in the river was done without a single worry about it being polluted. Such people see the sewage waste and other kinds of refuse being dumped in the river, and now believe that the river is not suitable for bathing. They believe in the Ganga being a mother (Ganga Maiyya), and in all its sacred powers, but their way of interacting with the river has changed over time. They, mostly in their 60s or above, can be seen sitting at the ghats, either alone or in a group, discussing the years gone by or politics.



Swimming lessons in the river

An eye-catching array of cafes and restaurants offering world cuisine and local delights, as well as guest houses and hotels offering rooms with a breath-taking view of the Ganga can be spotted all along the stretch of the ghats. Colourful graffiti reflecting a rather universal form of art with messages of peace, 'one world', unanimous renditions of Om, Shiva and his trident adorn the ghat walls and steps. At some of the ghats, the steps house shrines and small temple compounds which are also visited for worship. There are countless tea stops offering biscuits, peanuts and lemon tea at the ghats.

A street vendor selling lemon tea at the ghat



Sanctity of the River

There can be some acts performed unknowingly by a tourist or a pilgrim that might offend the sentiments of those who inherently believe that they own and safeguard the sanctity of the river. One such incident occurred when a tourist during his boat ride, had outstretched his legs and immersed his feet into the river, while the boatman continued his stories about the ghats. There was a group of young boys bathing towards the ghat side of the river who saw that the tourist had not removed his shoes and his feet were in the Ganga. This was not acceptable for them. They began shouting and making gestures, directing the tourist to remove his shoes because to touch the Ganga with shoes is disrespectful. The boatman explained the displeasure of the boys and urged the tourist to desist, for if he wouldn't follow what he was being asked to do, the boys would later trouble the boatman, as they knew him.

The washermen community (dhobi), who dwell on and around the ghats, and pilgrims also use the river to wash clothes. Another common use of the river is by the community of boatmen (Nishad or Kewat). From fishing to transferring pilgrims from one ghat to another and rowing them around the entire stretch from Asi Ghat to the Malviya Bridge; from fulfilling requests for shorter boat rides to ferrying people to the opposite bank of the river, the boatmen with their boats are an inseparable feature of the Ganga.



The washermen community use the river to wash clothes

The boatmen mostly belong to the Mallah or Nishad caste and trace their origin to the story of the Khevat in Ramayan who ferries lord Rama, Laxman and Sita across the river Ganga. Within their community, an owner of the boat would be known as Majhi and the driver is called Sahani. Various forms of boats are plied on the river such as the Bajra, Ghatar, Dingi and Katar that vary in sizes and seats a specific number of people.

The spectacle of the evening Ganga Aarti performed at the Dashashvamedh Ghat and the Rajendra Prasad Ghat becomes additionally dazzling when viewed from a boat. These boatmen perform a very crucial function of sharing, revealing and promoting the cultural tourism of the city. Every boatman is versed in the stories and myths related to the ghats, the narration of which underlines a boat journey. Their unique perspective introduces Varanasi to



the visitors. They are seen narrating myths, singing local songs or folk tunes, and allowing glimpses into the cultural ethos of Varanasi. Some boatmen bring their children along, who in turn get versed in the skill of storytelling, rowing as well as guiding the guest. With their own remarkable way of sharing myths and folklore of the city, especially the ones related to the social, mythical and cultural architecture of the ghats, and the Ganga, these boatmen have a massive responsibility as cultural representatives.

The boatmen share multiple stories and myths with the visitors while taking them on a boat ride

Some of the rituals and practises of the boatmen community are the Nao Puja, Nishad raj Jayanti and more. During the Nao Puja, that is famous in Varanasi, the seat of the boatman is purified with Ganga, the chants are done by the pandas, and the boatmen purify themselves by taking Ganga jal in their hands and touching the initial part of the boat with their right hand five times. Flowers, flower rings and other things are added to the rope of the boat after which they row the boat to the opposite side where they worship a sand statue of Lord Shiva. Shitala mata and Kevatraj are also worshipped.⁶

There are also practices and rituals which are performed by, and/or with the help of ghaatias (priests at the ghats). They sit under the shade of bamboo umbrellas and help the pilgrims with bathing rituals. The rituals performed (such as pind daan) with the help of a ghaatia are paid in cash or kind by the pilgrim. The ghaatias receive dakshina (fee given to a brahmin for performing a religious ritual) from the pilgrims who seek their services.

Ralph Fitch, the first Englishman to visit Varanasi (1584) wrote:

“And by the breake of the day and before, there are men and women which come out of the towne and wash themselves in Ganges. And there are divers old men which upon places of earth made for the purpose, sit praying, and they give the people three or foure straws, which they take and hold them betweene their fingers when they wash themselves; and some sit to marke them in the forehead, and they have in a cloth a litle rice, barlie, or money, which when they have washed themselves, they give to the old men which sit there praying. Afterwards they go to divers of their images, and give them of their sacrifices. And when they give, the old men say certaine prayers, and then all is holy.”⁷

The chhatris (bamboo umbrellas) are an almost inimitable element in the visual and functional appeal of the ghats. Primarily utilised by the ghaatias to assure smooth functioning of their works throughout the day, these umbrellas double up as a resting space for anyone who seeks relief from the glaring sun.



Bamboo Umbrellas form an integral part of the ghat scene

Professor Kalyan Krishna taught History of Arts at the BHU. In the year 2012/13, he took an initiative of distributing the bamboo umbrellas used at the ghats for free. He collected money from various people and arranged for 80 umbrellas to be distributed. These umbrellas at the ghats, he recalls, are a 200 year-old concept with one of the earliest mentions found in Prinsep's drawings. Earlier, he recalls, every Banarasi would take a dip in the Ganga and the ghats were a microcosm of religious and cultural activities, performances as well as recreation.

People would gather, perform rituals, look forward to and engage in interactions and other exchanges which lent a certain character and identity to the ghats. He also points out that earlier the pilgrims used to respect the ghaatias and maintain the cleanliness of the ghats after their rituals and holy dip had been performed. People visited and settled in the city to wait for death near the Ganga, and be as close as possible to the peaceful embrace of the holy river.

Subah-e-Banaras

The programme of Subah-e-Banaras has created a unique record of being ritualistically performed every single day since its inception. Even during the monsoon season, when a few years ago the Ganga had flooded the ghats as well as the 'dedicated space' for this performance, the traditional aarti was performed. The point where the land-water interface temporarily shifts during the monsoon season, is where the aarti is performed. During this time, the river water gets exponentially polluted. Even then, the holy Ganga is worshipped with the same ceaseless faith. This form of faith and belief is unparalleled in its moral composition, mutual forbearance and the associated, subsequent socio-religious ritualistic enactments. Subah-e-Banaras, an early morning collective ceremony before dawn, started on 24th November, 2014 at Asi Ghat. It begins with the performance of Ganga Aarti, followed by music and yoga sessions. The time for Subah-e-Banaras is 5:00 am to 7:00 am during summer, and 5:40 am to 7:30 am in winter. The duration is approximately 2 hours, beginning with ahwan, stawan, aarti, yajna, pushpanjali, arghya, music, yoga and some other functions towards the end.⁸



The Subah-e-Banaras Aarti

Boat Making



Boat construction at the Ghats

A major tourist attraction in the city is a boat ride on the Ganga, which is one of the finest ways to experience and feel the ambience of Varanasi. Watching the daily activities along the ghats while sitting on a boat that slowly meanders downstream is an experience in itself. The ghats are lined with boats of all shapes and sizes and buzzing with tourists being ushered by boat men for a ride on the river. These boatmen also become proxy tourist guides as they share facts, stories and tidbits about the city and its ghats with their passengers. Most of the boatmen are believed to be from the Mallah community, whose occupation is said to revolve around boating and fishing. They also identify themselves as Nishad, Kewat, Malso or Mallahi. It is said that the boatman who had his own boat, would be known as “Majhi” and the driver of the boat was known as “Sahani” in their community. Each Ghat has approximately 2-3 boat owners who employ other boatmen who cannot afford to buy boats to work for them on the basis of sharing half their earnings from each boat ride with these owners.⁹

Boat-making requires a minimum of a month. After which it is painted with a mixture of black paint, cow dung and Tar, which hardens the wood and protects it from water.¹⁰ The painted boats are left in the sun to completely dry before being used. Locals and hired labour from nearby towns on a daily wage basis are hired to construct these boats.

According to the boatmen, the various kinds of boats can be identified as Bajra or house boat, Ghatar or the large wooden boat, Dingi or the middle-sized boat made with wood and Katar or the smallest hand-pulled boat. The total manufacturing cost of the small to big sized boats could range from 20 thousand to 2.5 lakh rupees respectively.¹¹

The Bajra/Bazra/House boats: The House boats resemble the look of a house with windows and doors. This 80-foot-long hand-pulled boat can accommodate 70-80 people. This wooden boat was plied on the Ganga during celebratory occasions like the Budwamangal festival. In the olden times, during the Budwamangal celebrations, these boats were decorated with flowers and the musicians and performers were made to perform on these Bajras. The use of the Bajra is being explored again for shows and revival of Budwamangal festival.

The Ghatar: The size of this large boat is approximately 50 feet long and it can carry the load of 50 people. The boats are used as transportation across the river and by large groups of pilgrims that collectively hire a boat.

The Dingi: This middle-sized boat can carry around 30-40 people and is approximately 40 feet long. These are commonly hired by group of pilgrims and tourists.

The Katar: This smallest hand-pulled boat can up to 15 people. The wood used to construct these boats is called Sakur. The boat makers buy this specific wood from the Kalrimandi in Chowki Ghat. Around 25 wooden slabs or patris of the Sakur wood are used to create a base for the Katar. Additionally, 12-13 more slabs are needed to construct the walls of this boat.

The boats are more than just a means of livelihood for the boatmen. They have a personal connection with the river and their boats. They also help the pilgrims conduct various important rituals like the *Aar paar ki mala* and the post-death rituals of immersion of ashes, among other significant practices.

Last Rites at the Burning Ghat



Manikarnika Ghat

The city possesses the undisputable title of being the only one where even death is celebrated. Often perceived as the ultimate end of movement and ‘being’, and associated with grief, pain and lament, death is inevitable. Even in this, Kashi rebelliously celebrates the culmination of life. At the Manikarnika and the Harish Chandra Ghats, also known as the burning ghats, the site of numerous funeral pyres assume an absolute normalcy. While these two ghats continue their primary role of serving as a cremation site, one can also observe the daily activities carried out by other users of the ghats and the Ganga.

Certainly, each ghat has its own social climate, the burning ghats miraculously perform their role, and at the same time become one of the only places where death-related rites are conducted simultaneously with other social activities. Dead bodies from other parts of the country are also brought to Varanasi to be burnt at the Manikarnika Ghat or the Harish Chandra Ghat. Manikarnika Ghat is associated with both Shiva and Vishnu. It is believed that here moksha or liberation from the cycle of rebirths is promised to the one who dies in Kashi. The Ganga washes away the pollution of death. If the last rite of a person who dies elsewhere is performed in Kashi, it is said that his or her soul attains salvation.

Dr Vyas Mishra, the Head of Department of Dharmashastra at Sampurnanand Sanskrit University (SSU) shares his experience of having known people who came to Kashi to die, but they got cured of their ailment or illness, and returned to their native lands. These were the people who were not fortunate enough to attain a death in Kashi. Only a person who has done good deeds (sukarm) during his life time gets to die in Kashi. Everyone does not get this supreme blessing.



Manikarnika Ghat scenes

It is said that Manikarnika was the world's first pool and first tirtha, which was dug out and filled with water by Vishnu himself.¹² The cremation ground on this ghat is exclusively managed and supervised by the Doms. They dominate the professional organization of the cremation ground performing activities like selling wood, collecting tax for each corpse, and tending to the ever-burning sacred fire. Fire from this sacred fire is used to light every pyre. There are large stacks of wood stored for the purpose of burning. There the amount of wood required is decided according to the size of the burning pyre, weighed appropriately and sold as per the quality.

The enthusiasm reflected on the faces of the pilgrims who visit the city resonates with the supremacy of Kashi that has been experienced through the ages; a belief that gets transferred to generations of people who have lived here, and also those who have not lived in the city, but have other inclinations and connections with its uncontested sanctity. The sight of dead bodies being carried towards the burning ghats is common, and so is the unloading of dead bodies from vehicles that have travelled from far off places to cremate the dead in Kashi. Women are usually not seen accompanying the group that carries the dead body to the cremation site. The unequivocal chanting of 'Ram Naam Satya Hai' follows the procession, and people around acknowledge the procession by folding their hands and bowing their heads towards the procession.

Manikarnika Kund



The holiest of the sacred ghats at Varanasi, is the Manikarnika ghat. The Kashi Khanda says that the Manikarnika Kund, located at Manikarnika Ghat has been present in Kashi for eons. Originally believed to be a very large lake, today it is present in the form of a sacred well or tank. It is believed that Lord Vishnu carved the manikarnika kund with his chakra or discus during his long penance for over thousands of years. Another myth goes on to say that once when lord Shiva and his consort Parvati were said to have bathed here, Shiva lost a precious stone or mani and Parvati her karn-phool earring, so the area got its present name, Manikarnika. Since mythological times, this pond has been associated with Vishnu-Shiva-Parvati.

This ghat is the main ghat where the cremations happen and the fire has been believed to be lit for thousands and thousands of years. Death in Banaras, and being cremated at the Manikarnika, guarantees attainment of moksha. It is also believed to be one of the shakti peeth shrines, adressed as Vishalakshi and Manikarni. It is at this site that a dead person's soul, if cremated, breaks the cycle of rebirth.



Sh. Jai Prakash Pandey (a maha brahmin at Manikarnika Ghat), conducts the Pind Daan rituals. He explains that when a person dies, the dead body is first bathed and new set of clothes are put on to the body, which is then laid out on a bamboo ladder (baans ki seedhi/taadhi). The body is tied to this bamboo ladder with small pieces of rope. Garlands are put on the body and oil or itr is added. This is followed by 6 pinds performed from the place of death to the place of final cremation. When the dead body is brought to the cremation site, it is first immersed in the Ganga, then it is untied from the bamboo ladder or arthi and family members offer water to the body 5 times. This represents an act of bathing and purifying the body in the river. At the cremation site, family members purchase wood which is used by the Doms to prepare the death beds. The body is put on the chitaa (death bed), after which a family member performs the Agni Sanskar. After the Agni Sanskar, the Doms take charge of burning the whole body.

The Dom Community at Varanasi

Raja Harishchandra Ghat and the Manikarnika Ghat, the two burning ghats at Varanasi are always seen swarming with Doms. The Manikarnika Ghat occupies an elevated status and is considered holier than Raja Harishchandra Chat. It is also said that the Doms at Manikarnika charge extremely high prices for their services. The Doms are predominantly the caretakers of the cremation grounds/ghats and the keepers of the sacred fire that lights the pyres. Considered outcasts in the society, they engage in professions such as agricultural labourers, weavers, and cremation services. The Doms in Varanasi are believed to be rich. It is said that no matchstick is ever lit on these ghats and the fire to burn the bodies has to be taken from and with the permission of the Dom king whose duty is to make sure that the sacred fire keeps burning and doesn't die out. This fire, it is said has been burning from centuries. It is also the duty of the Dom king to provide the first set of five logs of wood required for the funeral pyre. According to a story in the Hindu mythology, Kallu Dom a member of the community, tried to steal the earring of Goddess Parvati. This led to Lord Shiva cursing the Doms for Kallu Dom's actions. It is believed that to gain forgiveness from Lord Shiva, the doms agreed to take charge of being the keeper of the flame. To this date, the doms begin their funeral duties by offering a prayer to Kallu Dom. The funeral pyre are built methodically and the bodies are poked with long poles from time to time to make sure that they keep burning.

Seen at the bottom of the Hindu caste system, the Doms belong to the lowest ranks of the "Dalits". The main source of income for their livelihood is through the business of death. Ironically, their position in the Hindu faith system is the highest when it comes to the ceremonies associated with death. Some even believe that if the bodies are not cremated in the presence of a Dom, one cannot enter the gates of heaven.

When someone dies young, the body is covered in white cloth; whereas an elderly person's dead body is covered in colourful cloth. People of different faiths and religious beliefs have their separate ways of selecting the material of cloth which is used to cover the dead body. If death happens due to insect or snake bite, or due to chicken pox, measles, small pox, leprosy, and if the dead body is of saints and mahatmas (sages), it is not to be burnt but immersed in the Ganga. Once the body is completely burnt, the asthi (leftover ashes from the burning of the body) and whatever little remains of the bones is collected by the family and immersed in the Ganga. This is done to seek moksha for the soul. After this, the family members take a bath in the Ganga and return home. Those members who have shaved their heads, offer jal and light a lamp every evening for a period of 10 days. Another Pind Daan is performed on the 10th day.

Dr. Bipin Chandra Pandey, a teacher at the Department of Dharmashastra in SSU, says that Dharmashastra contains the gist of sanatan dharma, with lessons on aachaar, vyahvaar and prashchit. A person, who is born in Kashi and also dies in Kashi, is blessed never to be born again. If he has always done good deeds (satkarmi), he will attain moksha if he dies here.

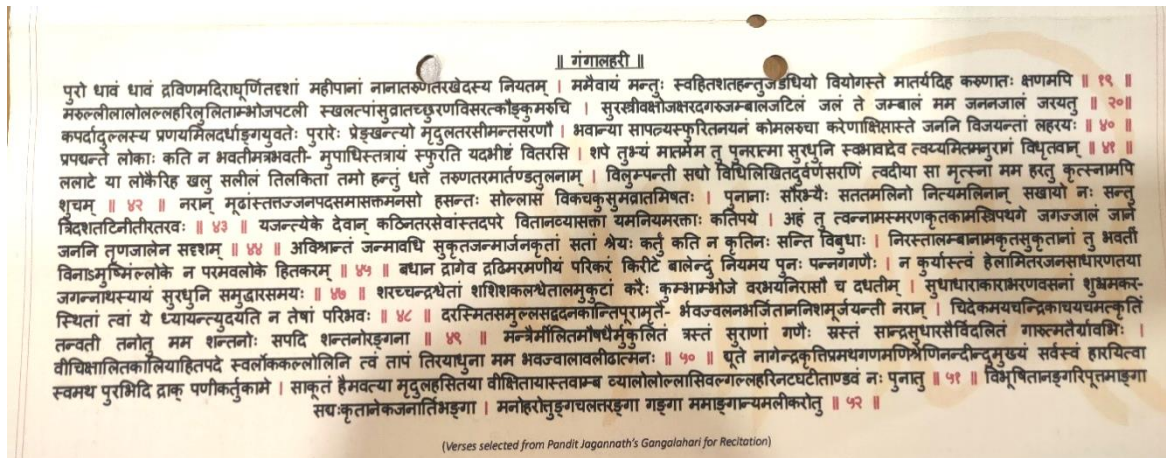
Those who do not die here, bring the asthi to be immersed in the Ganga, in order to seek salvation. During the month of Pitra Paksh, the performance of Pind Daan rituals can be witnessed at the ghats, as well at the Pishach Mochan temple. The ritual also involves bathing in the Ganga as a form of purifying the body and soul. Pilgrims are also seen performing Pind Daan at the ghats during other auspicious days of the year, like Makar Sankranti.

Ganga Lahiri by Pandit Jagannath

A famous poet and literary critic of the 17th century, Pandit Jagannatha, also known as Jagannātha/Jagannātha Paṇḍitarāja or Jagannatha Pandita Rayalu wrote some important poetic works like the Rasa Gangadhar, Ganga Lahari (also known as Piyush lahari) Kawita kamini, Yamuna lahari, Bhamini Vilas, Vishnu Lahari, Asaph-Lahari etc.

Pandit Jagannath, a poet and a Sanskrit scholar from the court of Shah Jahan came to Varanasi along with his lover, Lavangi. They sat down at the bathing ghat of river Ganga, where he started rendering the Ganga Lahari in heart touching manner instantly. The Ganga Lahiri is considered to be a devotional poem in 52 shlokas dedicated to the goddess Ganga by him. Legend has it that he wrote one shloka for each step on the ghat of the Ganga where he was fasting. It is said that on completion of every shloka the waters rose by a step for 52 days and at the completion of the last shloka, Pandit Raj offered himself into the river and ended his life nobly with the river claiming Jagannath for her own. This lyrical imagination is a deliberate work of art where the poem is an outburst of his devout heart and not a laboured repetition of sounds, praying to the Goddess Ganga fervently to remove his internal agony as well as his sins.

Some verses translated below:



Verses selected from Pandit Jagannath's Ganga Lahari (With translation below)

Times when I ran after kings intoxicated with wealth drunkenly rolling their eyes, I found nothing but ever new distress. I, unthinking Idiot, my own impediment, foiling a hundred

things good for me. Your grace; if it abandons me for even a moment, I alone am to blame. (19)

Your waves, aroused by gusts of wind, dance around the lush lotus flowers, shedding masses of pollen: a sheen of fine red on your waters. Entangled with weeds, your waters are cloudy with agar washed off from the breasts of the wives of gods. Let your waters dissolve the entanglements of my birth. (20)

Springing from the fine parting of hairs on Shiva's head – Shiva who out of love for Parvati made half his body hers – your waves ripple down his locks. Delicate-skinned Parvati flashes her eyes at you with rage, her hands wrenching Shiva's locks, for she has been reduced to a mere co-wife. Victory to your waves, O Mother! (40)

Innumerable people seek shelter in you. The reason is clear: you grant them their wishes. I am not like them, O Mother, for unlike them my heart is artlessly filled with endless love for you. I give you my word. (41)

Quite nonchalantly do people mark their brow with your sacred clay. It removes fate's dark lines etched on foreheads, dispelling all darkness with the power of the mid-day sun. Let it also clear my sorrows! (42)

The trees growing on your banks, O River of the gods, are pleased with themselves. With an abundance of blooming flowers, they laugh at foolish men whose attachment is limited to their own petty homesteads. The fragrance of your flowers forever purifies the ever-stained bees. Let your trees be our friends! (43)

Some serve gods that make extravagant demands; others are preoccupied with sacrifices, still others, with the disciplines of yoga. I, however, O Mother – flowing on three paths – find fulfillment in remembering your name. I have come to see this deceptive world as nothing but a clump of grass. (44)

There are numerous gods who redeem the virtuous who have striven lifelong for a rebirth promised to the meritorious. But I can see no one besides you who delivers the deplorable. (45)

Gird up yourself quickly with your charming belt tightly around your waist and tie the crescent moon to your crown with its curling snakes. Do not mistake me for a common mortal and ignore me! River of the gods, it is time for Jagannatha's rescue! (47)

You are white like the autumn moon. Your crown is bedecked with the crescent moon and white curling snakes. Two of your hands bear the pot and the lotus. The other two signal the giving of boons and freedom from fear. You stand on a white makara. Your garments and your ornaments surge like a stream of nectar. Those who meditate on you will be saved from ignominy. (48)

Glowing with a soft smile, her blooming face filled with nectar, she tirelessly redeems those who are scorched by the flames of existence. Ganga, the wife of Shantanu, who can bestow well-being on anybody, may she, spreading transcendent wonder from the luminescence of the highest spirit, grant well-being to my body. (49)

Mantras are averse to it, drugs are noxious, gods are scared of it, the taste of the oily-flowing nectar has oozed away, even the good-luck emerald is shattered – such is my incurable pain.

O River of the gods, you cleansed the feet of Krishna when he had trodden on the head of Kaliya, Pray, take away my suffering now! My soul is ablaze with the fire of existence. (50)

As you played dice with Shiva, he lost his best possessions: his elephant skin, his jewels, his retinue of goblins, the bull Nandi, the moon and the lord of the snakes. And then, rashly, he wished to put his own self to the stake. Parvati, daughter of the Himalayas, glared at you ominously with a slight smile. Your rolling waves began a dance; a Tandava danced with a pot. May this dance cleanse me. (51)

She adorns the head of Shiva. Every moment she frees many from their misery. May Ganga cleanse my limbs. (52)

(Translation by Professor Monika Horstmann)

Endnotes: Ghat and Ganga

1 Medhasananda Swami, *Varanasi at the Crossroads*, Kolkata, RamaKrishna Mission, Institute of Culture, 2002; p. 350

2 Ibid; p. 331

3 Majumdar Nandini, *Banaras: Walks through India's Sacred City*, New Delhi, Roli Books Pvt. Ltd, 2014; p. 153

4 Sinha Kunal, *A Banarasi on Varanasi*, New Delhi, Bluejay Books, 2004; p. 94

5 Ibid, p. 209

6 Patra Subhandu, *Life At The Ghats: An Anthropological Study On The Boatman Of Banaras*, IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 21, Issue 1, Ver.III (Jan. 2016) PP 32-35 e-ISSN: 2279-0837, p-ISS, p. 32-35

7 Eck Diana L., *Banaras: City of Light*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1993; p. 11

8 Subah-e-Banaras, *Kashi ki Sanskriti, Sangeet aur Yog ke Apratim Samanvay*, Pilgrims Publishing, Varanasi (Booklet)

9 Patra Subhandu, *Life At The Ghats: An Anthropological Study On The Boatman Of Banaras*, IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 21, Issue 1, Ver.III (Jan. 2016) PP 32-35 e-ISSN: 2279-0837, p-ISS, Pg.33

10 Ibid, p.34

11 Ibid, p.34

12 Eck Diana L., *Banaras: City of Light*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1993; p. 242

Calendar of Events

* Exact dates may vary according to the Hindu Lunar Calendar/Panchang

January

- Makar Sankranti/Pongal
- Ganga Mahotsava

February

- Basant Panchami
- Dhruvad Mela

March

- Maha Shivratri
- Rangbhari Ekadashi
- Holi

April

- Mahamurkh Mela
- Budhwa Mangal
- Sankat Mochan Sangeet Samaroh
- Akshya tritiya
- Ramnavami
- Hanuman Jayanti
- Nishadraj Jayanti
- Ramadan

May

- Buddha Purnima

June

- Vat Savitri Puja
- Ganga Dussera
- Kabir Jayanti

July

- Jagannath Rathayatra
- Saawan Melas
- Hariyali Teej
- Kaanvad Yatra

August

- Kajri Teej
- Nag Panchami
- Janmashtami
- Raksha Bandhan

September

- Lolarka Chhat/Shashti
- Jivitputrika Vrat
- Ramlila (Ramnagar and rest of the city)
- Oman
- Navratri
- Ganesh Chaturthi
- Muharram
- Pitra Paksha

October

- Nakkataiya (Part of Ramlila)
- Bharat Milap (Part of Ramlila)
- Govardhan Puja/Annakut
- Diwali
- Karva Chauth
- Durga Puja

November

- Kartik Poornima
- Dev Diwali/Deepawali
- Nag Nathaiya (Krishnalila)
- Chhat Puja
- Bhai Dooj
- Tulsi Vivah

December

- Christmas

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