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+91 9940572462

+91 9940572462

ijarasem@gmail.com

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KASHI : THE SACRED LANDSCAPE OF LIFE, DEATH AND MOKSHA

Prof (Dr) Kum Kum Ray, Paramita Teckchandani

Professor & Director, Amity School of Languages, Amity University, Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow Campus, India

BA(H)- English, Amity School of Languages, Amity University, Lucknow Campus, U.P., India

ABSTRACT: Explore the Mystical Realm of Kashi: The Spiritual Capital of India. Discover the significance of the Ganges River, the beliefs around life, death, and reincarnation in Varanasi. Learn about the Aghoris and their practices. Uncover the concept of interconnectedness and the role of Panch Mahabhuti in Kashi's spiritual landscape. This article delves into the enigmatic ghats of Banaras and how they inspire a communion with the universe and the pursuit of moksha.

KEYWORDS : moksha, Varanasi, Kashi, Ganges River, Hindu mythology, life and death, Aghoris, Panch Mahabhuti, spiritual capital.

PURPOSE

This article aims to explore the spiritual significance of Varanasi, also known as Kashi, and its sacred relationship with the Ganges River. It delves into the beliefs surrounding life, death, and reincarnation, the practices of Aghoris, and the concept of interconnectedness. The article seeks to provide insights into the enigmatic ghats of Banaras and their profound impact on human spirituality.

INTRODUCTION

(The ever – flowing ghats of Ganga in Banaras)

*We love the body get attached to the soul as the body fades the attachment grows.
The years move on from childhood to youth to adulthood to old ageChances on*

Death:

'Dirt thou art to dirt returnest'

One's mind wonders through the lanes and by lanes of Varanasi....

Dead mingle with alive

Witnessing people carry dead bodies to the ghats of the Ganges to bathe them before putting them on their pyre to burn.

*'Ganga Mai' cleanses them all: both
living and the dead.*

Swami Vivekanand's words resonates in my being,

"Man will discover the day that he never truly dies; that his soul lives on after death; and he will have no fear of death."

'Atma': 'the true self': the imperishable : the free : eternal unchangeable element : subject neither to birth or death : ever existing

Annihilates the fear of death

pierces through layers of ignorance and lands us in bliss and divinity of humanity.

At the ghats of Ganges in 'Banaras';

The most ancient living city of the Planet, Earth

*In the light of the burning pyre; Is the
darkness of the night*

Creep out, the Aghori Sadhus clothed in smeared ashes; of the dead, the cannibals on the holy ghats: whom ordinary lot of people fear in disgust.

The Manikarnika ghat drives home so many school of thoughts that lead me to my quest.

*The 'Aghories' are Shaivites, devoted to Shiv; Ascetics dwelling
on and living off cremation ground;*

Embracing death, devoting their life using corpse as allies transcending the duality of life and death.

To carry the rituals around sexual rites;

Consumption of impure substance: Derived



from the death.

We see them in fantasy and exaggeration forgetting that their underlying principle, transcends laws of purity to realize ultimate non-duality.

A reality - - the ultimate far from distinction as 'Pure' or 'Impure', Objects of fascination of both the Inside and Outside.

John Lennon, Malcolm Foley referred in their book published in 1996 "death related tourism" In simple terms, places associated with death.

The Question lies ?

How can Varanasi a place of veneration be a place of voyeurism ?

May be for a mind set.....

Not mine

Varanasi:;

A holy city in India;

Along the Ganga River's banks is referred to as "Great Cremation Ground" (Eck 1983: 30) "Kashi, the luminous" Singh (2018),

The "Ancient Crossing" (Gaenszle & Jörg Gengnagel 2006), The "Microcosm of the Universe" (Parry 1994: 11)

Religious sites where life and death co-exist and where multiple feelings are interspersed in a sacred landscape. (Sharma 2016)

- Prof. (Dr.) Kum Kum Ray

Life and Death mingling freely: On the Ghats of Ganges in Banaras

Something beyond you, me, us and all

A place tangibly visible to your eyes and intangibility challenging one's soul Igniting every day the pyres of death and taking them far, off shore

A place which will remind one of being just a microcosm in the macro cosmos A place that promises one, the naked truths

A place which brings out the larger than life and humanly possible zeals Where watching the cremating skulls will cleanse ones reprehensible flaws

All the pilgrimages combined in the world are lesser than the power this place offers Where pain, sorrow, joy, ecstasy, passion, desire, and all extreme emotions come together to glorify the human in you

Forgetting the world and body tangibly, is the place and its end goal Insects, liberation, sex, drugs, alcohol, flesh, blood, death

And everything worldly vulgar find, in this place, its universal abode A human is everyone

Everyone is everything

Everything is something At least anything,

Or nothing, to candour)

- Paramita Teckchandani

"Cosmos or the creation is made to order, that is, it is moving by a plan, it is not moving random" This concept suggests that the cosmos is not a chaotic random creation, but rather a structured, intentional one. Further, the creation is in a constant state of evolution from within itself, as seen in the Hindu concept of Panch Mahabhuti or The five fundamental components of the cosmos are thought to be earth, water, fire, air, and ether. These elements are also present in the human body, and their balance is necessary for physical and spiritual wellbeing. As the quote suggests, "Something which... that is beyond Panch Mahabhuti, could be related as cosmos, we call it brahmaand." (Sadhguru 2018)

"Everything is a seamless extension of everything else, and ultimately even the implicate and explicate orders blend into each other." (Talbot 1991). This idea of interconnectedness extends beyond the cosmos to the microcosm and macrocosm. In the city of Kashi, or Varanasi, this idea of interconnectedness is evident in the daily rituals and



practices. Kashi is one of the earliest continuously an inhabited town in the history of mankind, and it possesses a long tradition of spiritual and religious practices. According to Hindu mythology, Kashi is located on tip of Lord Shiva's Trident, thus considered as the center of the universe, and it is believed to be the place where the material and spiritual worlds meet. In Kashi, the Ganges River is considered a symbol of the macrocosm, representing the vastness of the universe. At the sametime, the individual worshipper is seen as a microcosm of the universe. This concept is captured in the following quote: In Kashi, the devotee experiences the macrocosm in the microcosm and the microcosm in the macrocosm.

Furthermore, the idea of Panch Mahabhuti, or the five elements, is also significant in Kashi. The five elements - earth, water, fire, air, and ether - are believed to be the building blocks of the universe. These elements are present in the human body, and their balance is necessary for physical and spiritual well-being. As the quote suggests, "Something which... that is beyond Panch Mahabhuti, could be related as cosmos, we call it brahmaand." (Sadhguru, 2018) Everything in creation, one way or the other is a micro-replica of the cosmos itself that goes for the human body too. Dhyalinga, the innovative creation of Sadh Guru, itself is just a manifestation of a small capsule of the cosmos.

"Kashi is the whole world, they say. Everything on earth that is powerful and auspicious is here, in this microcosm. All of the sacred places of India and all of her sacred waters are here. All of the gods reside here, attracted by the brilliance of the City of Light. All of the ten directions of the nature originated here, receiving jurisdiction over the sectors of the universe. And all of time is here, they say, for the lords of the heavenly bodies which govern time are grounded in Kashi and have received their jurisdiction over the days and months right here. Thus all the organizing forces of space and time begin here, and are present here, within the sacred boundaries of Kashi. (Eck 2013)

"And yet Kashi is not of this earth, they say. While it is in the world and at the very centre of the world, it is not attached to the earth. It sits above the earth on the top of the trident of its lord and protector, Shiva. Kashi is not subject to the relentless movement of the great cycles of time, the eras of universal creation and dissolution. It is the still centre which anchors the perpetual movement of time and space, without participating in the everturning world of Samsara."(Eck 2013)

"Kashi is the permanent home of Shiva, they say. Here he dwells in order to bestow the enlightening wisdom of liberation. Although Shiva is omnipresent, there are a few places that are especially transparent to his luminous presence. And of these few, the City of Light is the most brilliant of all." (Eck 2013)

"Kashi is Light, they say. This city illuminates truth and reveals reality. It does not bring new wonders into the scope of vision, but enables one to see what is already there. People have called this Light the Eternal Shiva (Sada Shiva) or Para Brahma or Maha Kaal. Where this Light intersects the earth, it is known as Kashi."(Eck 2013)

"Kashi is famous for Death, they say. People come to this place from all over India to die here, for "Death in Kashi is Liberation". Kashi is the final destination of a long pilgrimage through many lives. From Kashi one makes the great "crossing" to the "far shore". Death in Kashi is not a death feared, for here the ordinary God of Death, frightful Yama, has no jurisdiction. Death in Kashi is death known and faced, transformed and transcended." (Eck 2013)

"When Athens was not even thought of, Kashi was

*When Rome did not even exist in people's minds, Kashi was
When Egypt did not exist,
Kashi was.*

The city was built as an instrument,

Which brought about the union between the Microcosm and Macrocosm"(Sadhguru 2018)

MYTHS AND REALITIES AROUND KASHI

Mystifying & Demystifying Kashi

Once, there was a power struggle between Vishnu, the universe's sustainer, and Brahma, the ruler of creation. When other Gods begged Shiva to end this argument, Shiva manifested as a massive column of light. The blazing column burned far into the sky and rose into the heavens after piercing through the Earth. Vishnu and Brahma made the decision to choose the height and location of this pillar of light. Brahma transformed into a goose and ascended very far into the sky. In the shape of a boar, Vishnu dug down far into the Earth. They spent ages looking



for the pillar's end.

Vishnu returned with his hands clasped in submission to Shiva's eternal nature, humiliated and defeated. But Brahma chose to lie because he didn't want to concede defeat. He claimed to have seen the pillar's crown, and the Ketaki flower provided false evidence in support of his assertion. Shiva enraged at Brahma's lie, cursed him saying that he would never be worshipped and

“One of his heads was torn off by Shiva. As was the custom, the victor carried the slain adversary's head in his hand and let it hang down from his hand as an act of ignominy, and a sign of his own bravery. A bridle was also put into the mouth. Shiva thus dishonoured Brahma's head, and kept it with him at all times. When he came to the city of Varanasi in this state, the hanging head of Brahma dropped from Shiva's hand and disappeared in the ground.”(Perishable, 13 Dec. 2019: 5)

अर्धनारीश्वर (SHIVA AND SHAKTI)

In Kashi one is seen as a human and not in terms of gender. Male and female is irrelevant when it comes to Kashi.

“What is his lineage and what is his clan? What place does he belong to and what is his nature? What does he do for a living and how does he behave, this fellow who drinks poison and rides a bull? He is not an ascetic, for how can one who carries a weapon be an ascetic? He is not a householder, for he lives in the cremation ground. He is not a celibate student, for he has a wife. And he cannot be a forest-dweller, for he is drunk with the conceit of his lordship. He is not a Brahmin, for the Vedas do not know him as one. Since he carries a spear and a trident, he might be Kshatriya, but he is not. Since he delights in destruction of the world, he cannot be a Kshatriya, who protects the world from harm. And how can he be a vaishya, for he never has any wealth? He is not even a shudra, for he wears the snake as a sacred thread. So he is beyond castes [varna] and the stages of life [ashrama]. Everything is known by its original source [prakriti], but Shiva the immovable has no original source. *He is not a man, because half his body is female. And yet he is not a woman, because he has a beard. He is not even a eunuch, because his phallus (linga) is worshipped.* He is not a boy, for he is great in years, that fearsome one, and he is proclaimed in the worlds as beginningless and ageless. How can he be young when he is so ancient? And yet he is not old, for he is without old age and death.” (Eck 2013: 99- 100)

LINGA OF SHIVA A bisexual symbol

Shiva is called the ardhnareshvara, the “Half- Women Lord” and is sometimes depicted as “one breasted deity, clad half in sari and half in dhoti.” (Eck, 2013; 103-104)

KASHI AS HALF MALE AND HALF FEMALE

“The city is divided into two parts, the northern part being identified with Shiva and the southern with Shakti, the goddess. These two halves are symbolically united in the central temple of Kashi Vishwanath, where Shiva and Shakti are worshipped together.” (Eck, 2013; 36) Cristiana Zara, in her study further elaborates on the division of the city and its connection to the Ardhanarishwara concept. She writes, “The city is divided into two parts: the masculine, solar, and purifying northern part, linked to the god Shiva, and the feminine, lunar, and polluting southern part, linked to the goddess Shakti.” (Zara 2015:13)

Zara also notes that the division of the city is not only symbolic but also has practical implications for the inhabitants. She explains,

“The division of the city into male and female zones is not only symbolic but also translates into everyday practices. For example, women are not allowed to enter some of the main Shiva temples, located in the northern part of the city, as they are considered too pure and powerful to be exposed to the male deity.” (Zara 2015:14)

DHARM, ARTH, KAMA, MOKSHA, YOGA (PILLARS OF KASHI) (LIVELINESS OF AGHORA AND DORMS OF KASHI)

The city built in the shape of a cosmic mandala defining the universe in its geography and structure, is one of the places on Earth, where travellers have experienced an out of the world communion. Kashi drives home the element



of Purushartha - Dharma, Karma, Kama and Moksha.

Kashi, “the religious capital of India” (Martechadmin 2015), preaches the dharma, that protects and sustains the cosmic order of the universe. (“Dharma is sometimes translated as ‘religion’ but that is not exactly the meaning. Dharma actually means ‘that which one cannot give up’ and ‘that which is inseparable from oneself.’”) (Sanatana Dharma – Heart of Hinduism, n.d.)

Kashi dwells itself according to the Sanatana Dharma which talks of the “duties which take into account the person’s spiritual (constitutional) identify as atman and are thus the same for everyone”. (Anon) Sanatana means ‘having no middle or end’ and the followers of Sanatana dharma experience freedoms and divine connection in its laws. Allen Ginsberg who travelled Indian mainland to find his “guru”, wrote his work Howl, which defines his spiritual growth,

“The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy!
The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy! Everything is
holy! Everybody’s holy! Everywhere is holy!
Everyday is an eternity! Everyman’s an angel!” (Ginsberg
1954)

The Atharva Veda quotes

“O, departed soul, your lifeless body is offered so that the two fires may unite for your salvation. I set the body of fire. Through those two fires you may go in your best state of Yama, who controls death.” (Anon)

“I am saddened by the death of Varanasi’s Dorm Raja Jagdish Chaudhary Ji. He carried forward the tradition of Sanatana Dharma. He was the keeper of the culture of Varanasi. He worked for the welfare of the society and social harmony during his entire life...” (Mehriishi 2023) (The esteemed Prime Minister tweeted on the demise of Dom Raja, full coverage on Hindustan times)

“In Dom Raja’s demise, Kashi has lost an enthusiastic stalwart of Sanatan harmony and tradition.” (Mehriishi 2023)

“Plethora of paths within the ambit of Sanatana Dharma exists because no two individuals are exactly similar (Pragyata 2017)” and this gave birth to the Aghoris, who “make the dispassion permanent, by ensuring that we constantly remember the inevitable end of our lives so that we seek that which is changeless” (Pragyata 2017). Aghoris have been misunderstood because of their faith in the tantric vamachara where meat, alcohol, and sex are used to achieve their goals and hence, the established social norms suspiciously view them as morbid and barbarians. In the movie “Life of Pi”, the main protagonist of the story became the practitioner of all possible faiths in search of the divine communion. He finally finds the communion when he becomes one with the nature, living with a giant beast in the midst of an ocean, fighting for his survival and feeding on flesh and salt water. In a nutshell, Aghoris and their ways of life intermingle with the supreme realities of death and do not find their altercation in the temporary illusionary desires life has to offer, and this for them is knowledge and salvation.

The tragically astounding ghats of Banaras are frightening to the human eye, but are the greatest symbols of mortality of human lives. The burning skulls followed by the ‘kapaal kriya’ (Bajrangi) wants to ensure that the humans die and attain ‘nirvana’, not followed by a series of after lives. The human brain contains the cerebral spinal fluid, which acts “as an intermediary in the movement of Divine intelligence, a channelling of creation into embryological segments and irrigating them with life, giving form and function and order and intelligence to our existence” (www.youtube.com. (n.d.)) and this liquid in the brain is activated through Yogic practices taught on the ghats of Ganges in Banaras.

ETHEREAL GHATS

Burning the impurities of their mind and soul with the incessants and diyas

Calming yourself and purifying yourself

Just as the impression of diyas can be seen clearly in the Ganges Similarly all your sins come on your
forefront

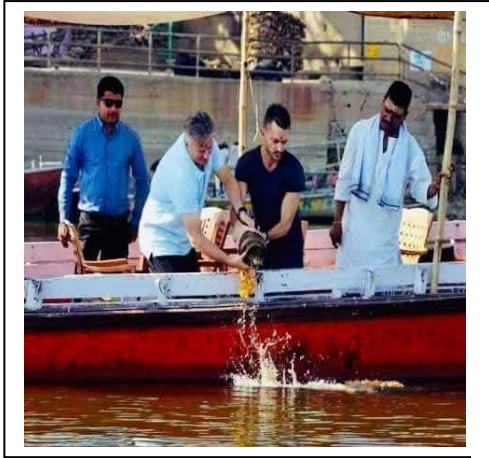
Diving in the Ganges and meeting your own self

Every chant, Every musical instrument, Every word sang

Goes deep within the intricacies of your soul

Where the definition of manmade-God may not be very clear

But communion with the universe is sure to happen



अपने मित्र ब्रायन की अस्थियां विसर्जित करने मोक्ष की नगरी काशी पहुंचे आस्ट्रेलिया के पूर्व क्रिकेट कप्तान स्टीव ।

अब ऐसी एक बड़ी आबादी विश्व भर में हो गई है जो जन्म से तो हिंदू नहीं हैं, पर हिंदू धर्म और भारत की संस्कृति ने उन्हें प्रभावित कर लिया है क्योंकि सत्य ही सनातन है।

ब्रायन का कोई परिवार नहीं था ओर उनकी अंतिम इच्छा थी कि उनकी अस्थियाँ गंगा में प्रवाहित की जाये ।

Why do you want to dip yourself into Ganges? Or do you feel enlightened by being naked?
Because it takes lives and understandings, heartbreaks and traumas, forgiveness and acceptance for being naked!
But nobody around you seems like that!
What do you think people keep washing off in that holy river?
Were they getting rid of their animalistic realities, holy crap or creating illusionary dualities? How can this water be so undaunted by the shit left within?
Can't it learn from humans to take grudges on their death beds! How can this flowing river welcome sinful strangers with grace? How can we feel a close association already, from this place!
Why everyone feels like a known face, with same skin and same fate? Did you look at that mad- man dancing on his own tunes?
Did anyone hear what's playing in his head, a tune of being happy or freaking sad? Or what, did he just reach beyond our limits, and touched the divinity of oblivion? Did bathing in this water made him achieve the unachievable?
Let's go, both you and I and chill our bones in his fast flowing bourn! Where are you lost, why are you so numb?
Were you just reminded of your ignored sinful terms? Were you able to caress your dreadful thoughts?
Did you stop thinking about what all didn't matter at all!
Did you get the reason I brought you, here with me! O you dear! My inner self, an inevitable part of me! Don't you think too much of the world!
Think of this moment, the water, the horizon and the peace that sets me free!

CONCLUSION

The mesmerization of one's soul articulates Kashi's ethnic and aesthetic values.
Ginsberg arrived in his "Promised Land": India from modern day Israel; the historically acclaimed Promised Land.
"I am deliriously happy", "it's my Promised Land".
Kashi: the Spiritual Land
In Varanasi, there evolved a shift in his attitude towards death.
Sitting for hours observing cremation at the Kanika ghat in Varanasi: To witness & smell the mortal flesh and see "the inside of the human body to see the face cracked and torn fallen off, the brains bubbling and burning".

- (Dr. Ray)



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