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Kashi as Sacred City: Understanding its Religious, Cosmological and Cultural Significance

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ABSTRACT

Kashi, also known as Varanasi and Banaras, occupies a distinctive position in the religious and cultural landscape of India. For centuries, the city has been regarded as a sacred center, particularly within Hindu traditions, where its religious significance is associated with Lord Shiva, the Ganga, pilgrimage, ritual practices and the belief in liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth. This paper adopts a descriptive and interpretative methodology, drawing on secondary scholarly literature, to provide an account of the multiple dimensions through which Kashi has acquired and continues to sustain its sacred character. It examines the significance of the city's names, its historical antiquity, its cosmological representation, and its sacred geography of temples, pilgrimage routes, ghats and rivers. Drawing on the work of scholars, the paper discusses Kashi as a sacred cosmogram in which geographical space is closely connected with religious meanings and practices. Particular attention is given to the Ganga, the major ghats, the Kashi Vishwanath Temple, and the belief that death in Kashi can lead to moksha. Institutions such as Kashi Labh Mukti Bhawan and Mumukshu Bhawan are discussed to illustrate how religious beliefs concerning death and liberation are translated into social and institutional practices. The paper also considers the Buddhist and Jain associations of the wider Kashi-Varanasi region and examines some of the tensions between sacred belief, everyday life and the pilgrimage economy. Overall, the paper argues that Kashi's sacredness cannot be understood through a single temple, deity or religious belief; rather, it emerges from the interconnected relationship between sacred geography, mythology, ritual, pilgrimage, religious memory and lived practice.

1. INTRODUCTION

No other city in the world holds the multi-layered significance of Kashi for the Hindus. The city is situated on the west bank of the river Ganga, in the crescent shape of the riverbank, in the current state of Uttar Pradesh, India, and is a modern urban hub, with more than a million inhabitants, a UNESCO recognized historic riverfront and, from a religious perspective, a cosmic axis where the normal rules of birth, death and rebirth are believed to be put on hold. It is known by three names, Kashi, Banaras, and Varanasi, each with a slightly different register of meaning, historical, colloquial and administrative, respectively, but all referring to the same place. This paper attempts to describe what makes Kashi sacred: its name, its multiple identities, its great age and continuity, its role in Hindu cosmology as the seat of Shiva, its special architecture of its ghats and temples and most of all the belief, unique in its intensity, that to die within its boundaries ensures liberation from the endless cycle of rebirth. It also looks into why, even at present, elderly and terminally ill people make a pilgrimage from all over India to spend their last days in Kashi, preferring to die there rather than in their homes.

The paper builds on the cultural geographic scholarship of Rana and Singh to consider Kashi as a case of a deliberately structured cosmogram, that is a spatial model of the universe worked out through pilgrimage routes and temple geometry and follows Kutlutürk in demonstrating that this sacredness is shared by Hindu, Buddhist and Jain tradition [1–5]. The objective of this paper is to examine the major religious, cosmological, geographical, ritual and cultural dimensions through which Kashi is understood and experienced as a sacred city. Rather than treating sacredness as a fixed quality attached to a particular temple or place, the paper understands Kashi's sacred character as emerging from the interconnected relationship between its sacred landscape, religious narratives, divine associations, pilgrimage, ritual practices, cultural traditions and beliefs surrounding death and liberation. The paper proceeds by first situating Kashi's names and historical antiquity, before turning to its cosmological structure and sacred pantheon, the Ganga and its ghats, the belief in death as liberation, its role as a center of learning and culture and finally its contemporary and contested dimensions as a lived sacred city.

2. METHOD AND SOURCES

This paper adopts a descriptive and interpretive approach based primarily on secondary literature on Kashi's religious geography, pilgrimage, cosmology and cultural history. Scholarly works by Diana Eck, Rana P. B. Singh, Singh and Rana, Gesler and Pierce, and Kutlutürk provide the principal conceptual and descriptive foundation. Additional institutional and contemporary sources are used to contextualize current religious practices and institutions. The paper does not claim to provide an ethnographic account of contemporary Kashi; rather, it synthesizes existing scholarship to examine the major dimensions through which Kashi is understood as a sacred city.

The four principal scholarly sources underpinning this synthesis, and the distinct analytical lens each contributes, are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Principal Scholarly Sources and Their Analytical Contribution to this paper.

Sources	Core Concept/ Framework	Contribution to this paper
Diana Eck (1981,1982)	Kashi as “City of Light”, tirtha as a sacred crossing point	Historical antiquity, comparative sacred cities, the tirtha concept applied to death and cremation
Rana P. B. Singh (1993,1994,1997,2015)	Kashi as a cosmogram/mesocosmos; sacred mandala geometry	The five pilgrimage circuits, the axis mundi, shrine counts and cosmological numerology
Gesler & Pierce (2000)	Kashi as a mandala with embedded contradictions (sacred/profane)	Body-city correspondence, the panda system and the paradoxes of pilgrimage economics
Kutlutürk (2013)	Varanasi as a shared, cross-sectarian religious space	Buddhist and Jain associations of the wider Kashi-Varanasi region

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 What Is in a Name: Kashi Banaras, Varanasi

The name Kashi is believed to have originated from the Sanskrit word ‘kāś’ which translates to ‘to shine’ or ‘to be luminous’, and therefore, the city is referred to as the City of Light [6]. This isn’t just a poetical flourish, but, in Hindu theology, the name is interpreted as a lesson about the nature of the city, the closest place for humans to learn about the light of Brahman, the ultimate, formless reality. By contrast, the administrative name Varanasi is geographical, having come from the two rivers, the Varuna and the Assi, which have historically been the boundaries of the sacred city to the north and south. Banaras, the colloquial and everyday form of the name Varanasi, is common in speech, literature and popular culture.

The difference between these two names and Kashi is that Kashi has a theological weight. The name Kashi is by far the more common name for the city when the city's spiritual importance is described in the Puranas, the Upanishads and the Sanskrit commentaries on the city's sacred geography and it has continued to be used despite the city being formally renamed Varanasi in 1956. It also has a cross-sectarian authority that is unusual among place names in India.

According to the Jain tradition Parsvanatha, the 23rd Tirthankara, was born in this city and this city is also consistently referred to in early Jain writings. The Buddha also was intimately associated with the region: his first sermon was given at nearby Sarnath, where tradition says he turned the Wheel of Law. The founder of Sikhism Guru Nanak did two visits to the city centuries later. Kashi identity, that is, is not limited to one religion, but rather a name and a sacred site shared by Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, in

which all three make Varanasi more than a city of one religion, more of a shared, subcontinental holy city [5].

3.2 A City Older Than Memory: Historical Antiquity and Continuity

Vedic religion, philosophy and learning flourished in the Varanasi region since at least the second millennium BCE, and archaeological evidence suggests that it is one of the oldest cities on earth to have been continuously settled since around 1800 BCE. Famous visitors of Banaras in the nineteenth century, such as Mark Twain, used to say that the city was "older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend. Comparative religionists such as Diana Eck, author of *Banaras: City of Light*, which describes the city as one of the oldest continuous urban settlements in the world, have placed Kashi among the four cities of light, alongside Jerusalem, Athens, and Peking, all of which have a continuous history of pilgrimage, ritual, and religious teaching of more than 2,500 years [7]. Singh is right in his observation on Varanasi's political history: the sanctity of the city never relied on royal patronage or sacred kingship, and Eck noticed that the city had never been a pivotal political center and that the city's long history of succession of kings has had little impact on the record of its sanctity as narrated by the locals [2].

Kashi's significance lies not merely in its antiquity but in the continuity of its religious life. The cities of Babylon, or Thebes, would be left as ruins, and visited for what they were in the past. The continued performance of religious rituals, pilgrimage and devotional practices has contributed to Kashi's identity as a living sacred center. The continuous and uninterrupted practice is a reason why the riverbank of Varanasi has been put on the UNESCO's tentative list of World Heritage sites and is not only designated for ruins but also for its living cultural and religious traditions [8].

3.3 The Cosmic City: Kashi in Hindu Cosmology

3.3.1 The Mesocosmos Concept and the Pilgrimage Mandala

The term 'tirtha' is the basis of the Hindu pilgrimages across India, signifying the convergence of human and divine domains. The other tirthas are not so well organized as Kashi. Singh uses the term 'mesocosmos' for Varanasi, a term coined by the historian of religion Mircea Eliade [1, 2]. This is a middle order of space that falls between macrocosmos (heaven) and microcosmos (the individual body or temple). The city territory is not an incidental space, but rather a space which has been intentionally cosmicised, organized by a pilgrimage path mandala, a matrix of concentric sacred paths, that can be mapped as a space and found to be walkable today for the pilgrim [1, 4].

These five circuits, their sacred meaning and significance are summarized in Table 2.

This mandala has five pilgrimage circuits, each of which is associated with an element of the cosmos and part of the body [1, 4]. The Chaurashikroshi, the outmost path is approximately circular, about 296 km in circumference, and the path of space and head, and is not generally walked completely today but has been mythologically linked to 144 shrines and deities of space and time. It includes Panchakroshi (88.5 kilometers walk) which is divided into five 'overnight stages' corresponding to the earth and legs and is the most popular of the five journeys and is still made by tens of thousands of pilgrims during the auspicious intercalary lunar month [4]. The third pathway, Nagar Pradakshina, is the city boundary itself, about 25kms and 72 shrines, air and the face. In that is Avimukta, the 'Never forsaken' land sacred to Shiva, also 72 shrines, water and blood. There is a central circuit called Antargriha, with seven loops around the temple of Vishveshvara (fire/heart); there are 72 shrines of which 56 are dedicated to various forms of Shiva. Singh also lists 468 shrines along these five routes, which he interprets as symbolically corresponding to the nine planets, the thirteen lunar months and the four cardinal directions in classical Hindu cosmology [1].

3.3.2 The Axis Mundi and Cosmic Numerology

This nested structure is based on a single point which Hindu cosmology considers as the axis mundi, a pivot point linking heaven and earth. Singh places this center as the Jnanavapi Kupa, the "Well of Wisdom" and suggests that it is here that Shiva struck the earth with his trident and poured out water and promised to stay in the well forever; by the medieval period the original shrine of the trident was damaged, and the water was transferred to the neighboring Vishveshvara temple [2]. Consistent with this, in Puranic literature Kashi is described to have four symbolic shapes that have been linked to the four ages of the Hindu cosmic time, the trident in the Krita age, the disc in the Treta age, the chariot in the Dvapara age and the conch shell in the present Kali age, with each shape a constellation of shrines along the riverbank marking the before-and-after edges of the age [2]. In all, there are 56 Ganesha shrines known as

Vinayaka's which execute the same cosmogram at a smaller scale, guarding in the 8 directions at each of the 7 concentric circles, a number (56) that Singh interprets as the product of 7 layers of the atmosphere and 8 cardinal directions, such that a pilgrim can walk from one circle of divine guardians to the other through the city center [1, 3].

3.3.3 The City as Mandala: Body and Cosmos in Correspondence

Gesler and Pierce, summarizing this scholarship for an English-language geography readership, reduce the concept of the underlying mandala as distils its essence into the most basic terms possible: A mandala is a sacred circle, a representation of the whole universe, its powers, its interrelationships, and its own grounding center [9]. They note that the mandala of Kashi was never an abstract geometric plan; rather, the sacred sites developed naturally over time, and were later superimposed with an abstract pattern of 8 compass lines and concentric circles. Gesler & Pierce point out that there's another variation of the correspondence between the body and the city, apart from the head-legs-face-blood-heart mapping above: in this one, the head and feet of the city are at the Asi and Varuna rivers respectively, with the loins at the Manikarnika Ghat [9, 10]. Kashi is sacred not simply because sacred places exist within it, but because its geography itself is interpreted as a sacred representation of the cosmos (Table 2).

Table 2. The Five Pilgrimage Circuits of Kashi's Sacred Mandala.

Pilgrimage Circuit	Sacred Meaning	Significance of this Circuit
Chaurashikroshi	Outer sacred territory	Encompasses the wider sacred landscape
Panchkroshi	Major pilgrimage circuit	Connects numerous sacred sites
Nagar Pradakshina	Sacred city boundary	Defines the ritual territory of Kashi
Avimukta	Sacred Shiva territory	Represents the protected/never-forsaken space
Antargriha	Inner sacred territory	Concentrated around Vishveshvara

3.4 Kashi as Microcosm of India: Spatial Transposition

In addition to its own internal cosmogram, Kashi is also said to symbolically embody the rest of sacred India, as Singh puts it, in a kind of 'spatial transposition', a process of re-placing, at a smaller scale, in a different place, a religious pattern that is properly located elsewhere [3]. It is believed that all seven sacred cities of India those whose names confer liberation are recreated in miniature form within the geographical boundaries of Varanasi, a pilgrim who walks the shrines of the city has effectively walked the shrines of Dvaraka, Kanchi, Ujjain, Haridvar, Mathura and Ayodhya [3]. The same applies to the twelve Jyotirlingas (The most sacred Shiva shrines spread across the Indian subcontinent) each of which has its counterpart in Varanasi, with the same name, where the devotees, who cannot make the trip across the length of India can, in principle, complete the full pilgrimage to the twelve Jyotirlingas without leaving the city [3]. Underlying these ideas succinctly is the words of Varanasi which are quoted approvingly by Singh "Varanasi is said to be present in a thousand places across India, each replicating a piece of it, and the reverse is also true, for one in Varanasi is, in effect, already standing in every other sacred place in the country [3]. It is this "folding" of the macrocosm within the microcosm that makes Kashi, in the Hindu pilgrimage tradition, a sort of "short-cut" to the sacred geography of India.

This microcosmic logic is not just embedded in the meta cosmic logic of the city, but also in the geographical structure of the everyday homes in the city, Gesler and Pierce point out [9]. The built environment here can be informally distinguished between two sections: the pucca mahal - the solidly built masonry core of the older city and the kachcha mahal - houses, the majority of which are more precariously constructed, which are concentrated in low lying interior areas and which comprise great linguistic communities from all over the country [9]. Kashi's assertion that it has everything that India has, in this regard, extends beyond its shrines and mythological geography to the daily geography of the residents of the city.

3.5 The Abode of Shiva and the Sacred Pantheon

The sanctity of Kashi is bound up in its role as the abode of Lord Shiva and his wife Parvati who resides on earth. As per the legends Shiva decided to make Kashi his eternal abode and brought his presence to this city in a manner which is not found anywhere else. The sacredness of Kashi is closely associated with the belief that Shiva is permanently present within the city. This belief is most clearly reflected in the Kashi Vishwanath Temple devoted to Shiva as Vishwanath, "Lord of the Universe," and one of the twelve Jyotirlingas, the most sacred shrines of Shiva in India. Rebuilt and re-endowed over the years in the wake of changing political conditions, the present structure of the temple, with its gold-plated spire, donated in the 19th century by Maharaja Ranjit Singh, is a symbol of the city itself. Shiva and Parvati are not the only

deities in Kashi's pantheon. Kaal Bhairav is a fierce form of Shiva and is traditionally considered to be the kotwal or divine magistrate of the city, whose duty is to ensure the sacred order of the city and to bestow spiritual punishment on those who violate it. The city of Kashi is also included among the seven cities of India (Sapta Puri), whose names, according to tradition, when recited with devotion, can provide liberation. The spread of deities, shrines and protective deities over the geography of the city is one of the reasons why it has such an unusual religious density: this is not about a single temple or a single myth, but about an interconnected whole of sacred sites, each of which reinforces the sacredness of the whole [11].

3.6 The Ganga and the Ghats: A Sacred Riverfront

3.6.1 The Sacred River Ganga

The river which is the essence of Kashi cannot be omitted from any description of it. The Ganges is considered by the Hindus to be the purest of all rivers, and they see her as a goddess who cleanses the soul of sin and impurity when one bathes in her waters. The Ganges has been called India's river by many and often, to the extent that Jawaharlal Nehru himself stated that it transports the memories, hopes and history of India in its flow.

3.6.2 The Ghats: Number, Function and History

On the riverbank of Kashi are a series of stone ghats, which are stepped embankments that lead down to the river, numbering approximately eighty in most current accounts, but slightly different in earlier ones, as the riverfront has been extended and rebuilt over the years. Singh puts this figure more precisely at eighty-four ghats spanning roughly 6.8 kilometers of the crescent-shaped riverbank, from the confluence of the Asi drain in the south to that of the Varana River in the north and notes that despite this stretch's inclusion on UNESCO's tentative list, its nomination for full World Heritage status had, as of his writing, stalled amid political complexity and a lack of sustained advocacy from local stakeholders [12]. Most of them are used as bathing and ritual ghats where the pilgrims come down every morning to bathe, pray to the rising sun and pour the Ganga water into a ritual offering [8]. There are two special ghats specializing in cremation, Manikarnika and Harishchandra, which are also covered in detail in the next section, which are reserved for cremation [13]. Every ghat has its own story, some relating to a Puranic mythology, others to the support of kings, queens, and more recently colonial benefactors, and thus it is possible to stroll along the riverbank and venture into the centuries of religious and political history that lie stacked on top of each other in a single line of ghat steps.

3.6.3 Ritual Life on the Riverfront: The Ganga Aarti

The ghats are also the backdrop of the Ganga Aarti, a tradition of night-time worship that involves burning flame and incense, and chanting to the river, which is watched by groups of pilgrims and visitors every night. The floating oil lamps that float on the water in festivals like Dev Diwali and the echoing sound of bells and chants every evening are often mentioned as the most prominent symbol of the City of Light: the light, literally, brings life to the riverfront after dark, and theologically brings life to the city's inner spiritual character. The sacredness of Kashi is therefore produced through an interaction between natural and built environments. The Ganga provides the sacred river, while the ghats provide spaces through which bathing, prayer, offerings, cremation and other ritual practices are performed.

3.7 Death as Liberation: Moksha and the Practice of Dying in Kashi

3.7.1 The Belief in Liberation Through Death

The most unique and to an outsider most memorable dimension of the sacredness of Kashi is its connection to a good death. Hindu belief holds that the soul is trapped in samsara, the eternal cycle of birth, death and rebirth, and bound by the law of karma until it reaches a point of liberation, or moksha, from all of these cycles. Empirical research on death attitudes across Indian religious communities has found that Hindu respondents, more than adherents of other faiths, tend to fear and avoid the subject of death, an anxiety rooted in the puranic depiction of a long and uncertain post-mortem journey of the soul [14]. Kashi's promise of certain and immediate liberation through death within its boundaries can be read as a direct answer to this widely documented anxiety, which may partly explain the intensity with which pilgrims seek to die inside the city. According to widely held Hindu beliefs associated with Kashi, death within the sacred boundaries of the city is believed to facilitate or ensure liberation from the cycle of rebirth [15]. The most popular explanation for this is that Lord Shiva himself visits at the time of death, and recites the liberating mantra Taraka Mantra into the dying person's ear, thereby releasing him/her. This belief is most

evident in the city's main cremation ground, Manikarnika Ghat, where all year-round cremations take place round the clock every day. Hindu mythology has been connected with the site and the cremation fires on the ghat are traditionally described as not being ordinary flames, but extensions of Shiva's own transformative fire which is thought never to have been extinguished for several centuries.

3.7.2 Institutions of Dying: Mukti Bhawan and Mumukshu Bhawan

The belief is that you are purified in the fire which is divine and the water which purifies the body is being given to the Ganga to reach final liberation. This faith has resulted in unique institutions that are not seen anywhere else in India. Kashi Labh Mukti Bhawan, which was built in early 20th century near the city's center, serves as a home for the terminally ill who come to Kashi to die. Traditionally, the families are allowed to stay for about a period of 15 days and it is assumed that a person who comes to them with a sincere devotion will get liberated during that period; a small fee is taken and prayers, chanting and readings are conducted daily under the guidance of a resident priest, along with teachings based on the three classical paths as explained in Hindu philosophy, the Path of Knowledge, the Path of Devotion, and the Path of Selfless Action [16]. The related institution, Mumukshu Bhawan, was started in 1920 with the help of the Birla family near Assi Ghat, and serves rather differently; it does not admit only the terminally ill and may have a stay of many years or decades, and when these people are there, they are not expected to leave the city, but are instead expected to take part in its life of bathing, chanting and evening prayer, and awaiting their death in a mind-altering environment rather than in their own homes [17]. They illustrate a point that is important about Kashi's religious character, namely that belief in liberation through death is not just an abstract doctrine, but creates concrete social practices, which have been maintained for over a hundred years and in which individuals purposely move to Kashi, often leaving their families and homes elsewhere in India, to spend their last days or years in Kashi. This pattern is corroborated by recent ethnographic accounts of the city, which similarly describe elderly devotees registering at Mumukshu Bhawan with the explicit intention of remaining until death and attaining moksha, treating the institution as a defining feature of Varanasi's contemporary religious culture [18, 19].

Likewise, Singh and Rana identify pilgrims in Varanasi as ordinary sightseers, pilgrims who are motivated by a sense of social duty or any other need in this world and pilgrims of union, who are those who follow the path of moksha dharma, who finally make the journey to final liberation from the material world and the cycle of rebirth [4]. For many it is not a morbid prostration, it is a spiritual life, a final, meaningful act of devotion, a devotion with the same seriousness with which one conducts a pilgrimage. It is this practice that makes Kashi unique more of a temple than a myth, and more than death that causes anxiety, calmness or even optimism is the ideal approach towards death in this city. The presence of the institutions brings the idea of death as salvation beyond the theological narratives, and makes it manifest in social and institutional practices. This is borne out by recent qualitative interviews with elderly residents of Kashi's institutions for the dying, who most often describe their decision to relocate in terms of economic independence from family obligations, a pre-existing spiritual inclination and a firm belief that the historical and mythological status of the city guarantees moksha upon death there [20].

3.7.3 Death as Tirtha: Crossing and the Cremation Economy

These factors of geographical and ritual specificity introduced by Gesler and Pierce complicate this picture [9]. They write about crossing the Ganges at Varanasi in terms of the Sanskrit word for crossing point, tirtha, which is used throughout Hindu sacred geography to refer to places where pilgrims' cross water, either literally to get on the other side, or as a symbolic transition into a new existence [7, 9]. In this reading, the act of cremation itself represents the cosmic austerities of Vishnu: cosmetics, cosmic austerities, are cremation and individual body, which are, in a certain sense, recreated at the same time, in the same ritual act, as the macrocosm at the end of time and as the cosmic austerities of Vishnu [9]. Not all bodies are burned, though, as those that died of smallpox or cholera were traditionally weighted down and immersed in the river, who report that about eighty corpses are burned every day at the two main cremation ghat sites in Varanasi, Manikarnika and Harishchandra, with a type of chain migration of the dead building up over time from certain parts of India [9, 21].

In part, the city's pilgrimage economy is organized by a class of hereditary pilgrim priests called pandas, whose community is compared by Gesler & Pierce with the mutawifs who serve pilgrims who arrive at Mecca [9]. Much of this work involves knowing exactly when pilgrims from a given territory are expected to arrive; indeed, Gesler and Pierce suggest that one of the more important parts of a panda's job is to memories the train schedules [9]. Rival pandas have at times fought for control of station platforms, sometimes to the point of violence [9, 10]. Far from being a corollary to the sanctity of the city, this system

of pilgrims and priests maintains the practical communication between the holy city and the client families that are dispersed throughout India that each panda serves. The socio-economic standing of such hereditary service groups can be compared using standardised Indian status scales [22].

3.8 Kashi as a Centre of Learning, Art and Culture

The sanctity of Kashi has always been inseparable from intellectual and cultural activities. The city is also associated with the teaching of the philosopher Adi Shankaracharya, one of the most important in the history of Vedanta, and Sarnath, which is nearby, is a place where the Buddha gave his first sermon, making the region important to both Buddhist and Hindu traditions. Kutlutürk elaborates on this Buddhist significance: Buddha was propelled to the deer park in Sarnath, where he delivered his first sermon and kick-started what is known in tradition as the Wheel of the Dharma, by his search for his five former companions who had come to find him at Bodh Gaya after he attained nirvana there [5]. In the Pali sources Isipatana is the name of Sarnath and the Buddha is recorded as referring to it as one of the four places his followers should visit as pilgrims. The only other monument left is the Dhamekh Stupa, which was originally built by the emperor Ashoka's edicts of the 3rd century BCE and rebuilt in its current form in the 5th century CE, and is still circumambulated by pilgrims, including Tibetan monks who recite the mantra *om mani padme hum* [5]. The poet-saint Tulsidas, who retold the Ramayana in Awadhi language, composed his Awadhi retelling of the Ramayana on the ghats of the city; the mystic poets Kabir and Ravidas, who were associated with devotional movement known as Bhakti movement, are counted among Kashi's spiritual sons. In the modern times, the city hosted Banaras Hindu University, established by Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, which is the biggest residential university of Asia, thus Banaras' position as a religious hub was continued with another one that is education. The same area is also of great importance to the Jains.

According to Kutlutürk, Jain literature states that Varanasi is the birthplace of Parsvanatha, the 23rd of the 24 Tirthankaras, who was born in the 8th century BCE near Bhelupur in the city, and that Mahavira himself visited Varanasi during his teaching period [5]. The seventh Tirthankara, Suparshvanatha is also identified with the wider Varanasi region in Jain literature, and one Jain temple near the Dhamekh Stupa at Sarnath is dedicated to celebrating the eleventh Tirthankara, Shreyanshanatha, as being born on this location. It is an active pilgrimage site for the Jains to the Ghat of Bachraj, popularly known as Jain Ghat, on the banks of Ganga even today; three temples are to be visited in sequence, where the Jain pilgrims bathe and pray [5]. The city's reputation is not just in the fields of culture; it also has a touch in music and craft. This complex Jain legacy, combined with the Hindu and Buddhist affiliations, is responsible for the fact that, as Kutlutürk calls it, Varanasi is a rare case of long-sustained religious pluralism, where three major Indian religions have coexisted around the same sacred geography, not in competition for a single set of sites [5]. Kashi has given birth to some of the most well-known classical musicians of India such as sitar player Ravi Shankar and shehnai master Bismillah Khan and is renowned for Banarasi silk sarees known for their complex brocade work and are popular across the country. Ayurveda too has traditionally been associated with the city, and many notable individuals are associated with its early development, including Patanjali. When examined together, these ideas, philosophy, poetry, music, textile craft and traditional medicine indicate that the identity of Kashi as a sacred city is always been in conjunction with its identity as a centre of learning and artistic production sacred and intellectual have never been separated from one another, but have developed side by side.

3.9 Sacredness in Contemporary Kashi

The cosmogram mentioned above is far more than a historical relic found in old books; it still organizes the pilgrim movements of masses of people. As per Singh and Rana alone saw approximately 5.66 million domestic visitors and nearly 299,000 international visitors to Varanasi, with the number of domestic visitors increasing by around eight to nine per cent annually since early 1990s, and the majority of them being religious pilgrims [4]. The Panchakroshi Yatra has increased from an estimated 44,000 participants in 1985 to approximately 69,000 in the 2015 observance, with nearly 50% of the participants walking the entire 88.5-kilometre length of the yatra, instead of using vehicles [4]. Some of these longer circuits, such as the outer-most Chaurashikroshi Yatra, did not function for most of the 20th century but were re-activated during the late 1990s and later by the monk, Svami Shivananda Sarasvati, and his pilgrimage association in the 20th century which arranges the journey on the Sundays of the Hindu festival calendar [4]. For Singh and Rana this is the confluence of a cosmological design that is ancient with an active and organized and still-growing pilgrimage traffic that keeps Kashi's cosmogram a practice that is not just historical [4]. This is consistent with earlier survey-based research on visitor perceptions of the city, which

found that Kashi's identity as the sacred abode of Shiva was the single most common association named by domestic pilgrims, ahead even of the river Ganga itself [23].

3.10 Contradictions and Paradoxes of a Sacred City

But not all accounts of Varanasi's sacredness are celebratory and Gesler and Pierce argue that the fact that some of the meaning of the city is inconsistent, that is, the competing and even secular meanings that take place in pilgrimage itself, is what makes it interesting to the scholars of religion [9]. They refer, for instance, to the historical situation of widows, driven to Varanasi to die, some of whose widows were forced from their homes on the assumption that they had caused the death of their husbands; or, others who were young and waited for several decades, often living in poverty and sometimes begging or prostitute for their livelihood, one observer summarizing the situation as that Kashi can be a heaven for some believers, for the poor and abandoned widow, something more like a hell on earth [9]. There is another tension that exists in the character of Shiva: he is both terrible and benevolent, both connected to the Forest of Bliss and the Great Cremation Ground, and both pure and impure, auspicious and inauspicious [9]. Another material paradox runs through the same rituals as Gesler and Pierce point out [9]. In blunt economic terms, pilgrimage to Varanasi is a big local industry: about three-quarters of the city's residents, it is said, depend on the pilgrims for their livelihood; and funeral priests have at times been reported to haggle or even coerce the grieving families over payment during a cremation ritual [9, 10]. This is not interpreted as an ominous sign that the sacredness of the city is being jeopardized, but rather as a means in which the self-interest of profit becomes part of the religious life of the city; in which the boundary between sacred and profane is understood as inherently fuzzy and not very precisely demarcated; and finally in which there is no experience of the presence of material self-interest as a threat to the significance of the ritual, but rather, material self-interest is itself experienced as a part of the meaning of the ritual. In this sense, Varanasi's contradictions are not its failings, but a synthesis of opposites that Varanasi's cosmology has always been concerned with: the life/death, wealth/renunciation and sacred/ordinary. Scholarship attentive to marginalized voices within the city complicates the picture further still: the boatmen of the Nishad/Mallah community, whose labor has long been central to the city's pilgrimage and cremation economy, remain a subaltern group with limited access to education and political representation, and the continued presence of the Gyanvapi and Alamgir mosque alongside the Kashi Vishwanath temple troubles any singular image of Varanasi as an exclusively Hindu sacred space [24]. Such cases show how overt and covert injustices can persist inside institutions that claim moral authority [25].

4. CONCLUSION

The sanctity of Kashi can't be linked to any one temple, God, or ritual or religion. Instead, it flows from a series of interwoven aspects of the city. Its sacred geography connects the Ganga, ghats, temples, pilgrimage routes and sacred territories as a geography that is interpreted religiously and cosmologically. The association of Kashi with Lord Shiva gives a theological basis for the sacredness of Kashi and practices of bathing, worship, pilgrimage and cremation are continuously re-creations of this sacred character in daily life.

Kashi is a place of a very special significance in the Hindu sacred geography because of their belief that death is a redemptive act. The existence of cremation ghats and social and institutional arrangements like Mukti Bhawan and Mumukshu Bhawan illustrate how ideas about death and moksha are manifested in social and institutional practices. In this aspect, Kashi is not only a place of memory of sacred narratives but a living environment where the narratives continue to influence the motion, the ritual and the religious practice.

Whilst at the same time Kashi is sacred, yet the regular social and economic life co-exists. The pilgrimage, ritual services, profession of life, poverty and other social realities coexist with religious devotion. The apparent paradoxes do not suggest that the sacred in the city is reduced but rather that sacred life is complicated in a city setting.

Kashi may thus be seen as a city alive with multiple histories, mythologies, cosmologies, and rituals. It is not only because of its historical age, but because generations of pilgrims and residents continue to re-create its sacred meaning through its ongoing practices. It is a city of pilgrimage and religious imagination, as its sacred landscape bridges the gap between the mundane and the wider notion of divine presence, transformation and liberation.

This paper's account of Kashi's sacredness is consistent with Kanungo's more recent framing of the city's religious landscape or 'Hinduscape,' as the product of a long and continuing process spanning three

millennia, built up through myth, ritual, patronage, power and contestation rather than fixed at any single historical moment. Kanungo further stresses that this landscape is multi-layered rather than uniform, encompassing not only the Brahminical mega-temple and ghats discussed above but also wayside shrines, subaltern religious traditions and contested Hindu-Muslim sites, a plurality that this paper's discussion of Varanasi's paradoxes (Section 3.10) has likewise sought to acknowledge.

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USE OF AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES

AI tools were used only for language refinement and formatting. Specifically, Claude AI was used to review grammar, improve sentence structure and readability, and assist with general editing of the text.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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