

CULTURE IN BANARAS

Banaras is known as one of the oldest, and most sacred holy cities in the world. Most scholars date Banaras to be approximately three thousand years old, while others have dated important structures in Banaras to the eight century BC (Justice 15). This holy city is most widely known as Banaras, but has many names representing its different cultural aspects. The oldest name is Kashi, which is most commonly said to be a derivation from the Sanskrit root *kash*, “to shine, to look brilliant, or beautiful” (Eck 26). Banaras is also known as the City of Light, which has many different connotations, one of which is that the light implies enlightenment, for it is said that to die in Banaras is to attain enlightenment or liberation. Another name, which is said to be the official name by its residents, is Varanasi, which comes from the names of the two rivers that flow by it. From this name came the Pali version, Banarasi, which eventually became anglicized as Banaras or Benares in British and Muslim India (Eck 26).

Geographically, Banaras only occupies a strip of land along the banks of the Ganges approximately three miles long, but has millions visiting the holy site annually, making it an extremely densely populated area. It is situated on the west side of the Ganges where the Varana (on the north) and Asi (on the south) rivers join. The river flows north to south at this location, back towards its source in the Himalayas, placing Banaras in a very auspicious location. Banaras’ location near the Ganges also makes it an incredibly beautiful site, especially while the sun rises over the river at dawn. It was this incredible beauty that captivated Siva’s imagination and drew him to Banaras to make it his home (Eck 95). Other relations the city has to Siva is that the area is roughly shaped like the crescent moon that is placed over Siva’s head, and in the cosmological frame the city lies on the Trident of Siva [On the cosmological frame, see Singh and Rana (2002)].

While many famous cities around the world are known for their incredible architecture, Banaras is not what you would call architecturally interesting with its narrow lanes and dilapidated buildings. To most observers the most attractive buildings are the few palaces that were built by past princes. During the Ganges' flooding season the basements of these palaces are flooded and many pilgrims will come there to bathe in the Ganges' water before death. There are eighty-four *ghats* (stairs leading into the water) in Banaras forming a symbolic chain of holy sites (Singh and Rana 85). Some of the more popular *ghats* include Asi, Dasasvamedha, Adi Kesava, Pancaganga, and Manikarnika that are visited during the Pancatirthi pilgrimage to the "Five *Tirthas*", or five crossing places (Eck 220). Manikarnika is one of the more visited *ghats* in Banaras, placed at the center of the city's riverfront. In Banaras it is said that Manikarnika is the place of the earth's creation and destruction, hence this *ghat* is used for cremation and to perform the proper death rituals and thus attain *moksa* [For more on cremation ghats, see Parry (1994)]. Besides *ghats*, there are also thousands of Hindu temples, and innumerable smaller shrines, nearly all dedicated to Siva, while the others are dedicated to family deities (*kula-devatas*) or personal deities (*ista-devatas*) (Eck 94). Along with the multiple Hindu temples, you can also find many Muslim mosques. While the majority of the population of Banaras is Hindu, it is a multicultural and multireligious city with a small percentage of its population being Muslim.

Another title that Banaras has come to achieve is "Rudravasa: The City of Siva" (Eck 31). The worship of Siva is predominant in Banaras culture. Siva has been the principal deity of Banaras since the first half of the seventh century, most likely earlier, but also shares the city with the whole pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses (Eck 146). It is a belief to many who live in Banaras that the Divine, or the pantheon of gods, can be visualized in Siva (Eck 41).

Similarly, the sacred river, the Ganges, can be visualized as a “prototype for other sacred waters,” and Banaras can be seen as encompassing all other pilgrimage places in India (Eck 40). Many making a pilgrimage to Banaras are on the verge of death because there is a belief that if they die in the city they will undergo a final release and union with Shiva (Lannoy 143). It is here that they will be liberated from *samsara*, the cycle of birth and rebirth, and attain *moksa*.

Hindus believe there are three fundamental states of the cosmos, each represented or controlled by a god, forming a sort of Trinity known as the Trimurti (Singh and Rana 61). Brahma is “the creator”, Visnu is “the preserver”, while Siva is “the destroyer” (Singh and Rana 61). Siva being seen as this element of death or endings fits accordingly with the idea of Banaras being a place of death. It is a place to move out of the human realm and leave one’s physical body. Pilgrims at Banaras believe that Siva is Mahadeva, the great god, or Isvara, the Self, and he represents all the powers of the Trimurti (Havell 39).

Siva is almost always connected with the tradition of yoga, and is represented and associated with phallic worship in the form of a *linga* (Lannoy 139). As one enters into Banaras, a first observance would be the multitude of *lingas* in the city found under and around every corner. It is a common saying among the residents of Banaras that “The very stones of Kashi are Siva” (Eck 110). A *linga*, meaning “phallus” and “emblem”, is a rounded vertical shaft of stone implanted in a circular base (Eck 103). This is a symbol of Siva’s reproductive and creative power. One may point out that the *linga* is also a way for Siva to be represented in bisexual form, with the erect shaft representing the male Siva, and the seat in which it is placed personifying the female half of Siva known as Sakti. While Banaras is most well known for being a place of pilgrimage and worship of Siva, it is also a place of education and art industry.

Banaras is home to three universities with one of them being a Sanskrit university. At any one time in the city you may also find many researchers among the pilgrims studying the culture and the “microcosm” that Banaras is (Justice 19). Indian life, customs, and popular beliefs are what some would say strained and concentrated in this city, making it a popular place for anyone studying anthropology, language (especially Sanskrit), or religious studies. Some famous sages, such as the Buddha, Mahavir, and Sankara, have come to Banaras to teach as well (Eck 4). Besides the educational aspect of the city, there is also a strong art industry found in Banaras. The city is well known for the weaving of silks, brocades, and saris, as well as metal work. The manufacturing of brass and copper idols, lamps, sacrificial utensils, and all sorts of native cooking drinking vessels, is a popular art form in the city (Havell 49-50).

Festivals and performances in the city are another prominent part of the culture in Banaras as well as an attracting force for visitors. Nearly every day in Banaras some kind of festival is taking place (whether it is Hindu or Muslim), with some of them lasting longer than one day. Many of the rituals and ceremonies (daily and seasonal, individual and public) have remained outwardly similar for the nearly three thousand years Banaras has said to be in existence (Lannoy 27). Nearly all the fairs and festivals in Banaras are religious with different cultural and social perspectives. The festivals serve as a means to gather for rejoicing, public worship, and cultural interaction. It is through these festivals that Hindus and other religious sects in the city have grown together just by attending each other’s popular religious festivals. The festivals also serve as a growth of community within their own religion as the role of the *srota* (hearer) in these festivities is more active than passive (Freitag 37). Popular forms of festivals are *katha* (oral explanation of a story) and Vedic chanting mainly organized and put on

by the Banaras Sanskrit University [For further reading on *Manas-katha* festivals, see Freitag (1989)].

The yearly cycle in Hindu is divided into 12 months, similar, but not the same as the months known in the West. Each year will begin in the middle of the month, for example, Chaitra is the month beginning in the middle of March, and ending in the middle of April (Eck 258). As well, an extra month is added into the Hindu calendar whenever it is needed to match the solar calendar. During the month of Sravana (July/August), as well as Mondays, is when there is a special focus on Siva; hence it is a spectacular time in Banaras (Eck 262). For each month a specific holy city is mythologized as the sacred abode, or *puri*, where festivals and religious ceremonies are to be performed. In Banaras, all the *puris* are established making the city known as the “city of all seasons” (Singh and Rana 68). While many festivals are held annually in Banaras, the more popular festivals are Divali (Festival of Lights), Ram Lila, Sivaratri, Holi, and the Nakkatayya festivals [For a list of all Hindu festivals, and explanations of many, see Singh and Rana (2002)]. During many of these festivals there are retelling of the epics (the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*), or reenactments of parts of the stories such as during the Rama Lila and Nakkatayya. These festivals are celebrated in *Asvina* (September/October), and they reenact different parts of the story of the *Ramayana*. Other festivals are mainly ceremonial where the major component is bathing in the Ganges River. The largest bathing festival is Karttika Purnima, which is celebrated in October/November (*Karttika*). Other smaller ceremonies take place in the Ganges for couples who are recently married, celebrating anniversaries, anyone who has recovered from an illness, or many other reasons (Havell 59). Many of the festivals include grand decorations and offerings. Sivaratri, celebrated in February/March (*Phalguna*), is a festival celebrating the marriage of Siva to Parvati. All of

Siva's temples are majestically decorated in *sringara* and celebrations are held where Ganges water and red powder is sprinkled on the Siva *linga*. The Divali festival, or festival of lamps and lights, is another that greatly relies on the use of decorations. Rows of oil lamps and candles are put out in the streets or on the Ganges, and clay images of Ganesa and Laksmi are sold. In festivals such as the Holi festival (also known as the Festival of Colors), offerings of flowers, dry colored powders, and sweets are given to the participants and the temples (Singh and Rana 70-77).

Culture in Banaras has remained relatively similar since its existence as far as scholars can see. This is quite an accomplishment for the holy city, as many other cities of other religious merit have become quite secularized. There is some evidence of Banaras becoming more materialistic, and although it is deemed as one of the holiest cities it does have a portion of the population who live there to attract tourists, and devout pilgrims, and make money off them. While this is true, Banaras still contains its main aspects of the worship of Siva, religious festivals, and rituals in the Ganges, and will remain a highly religion-centered culture.

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<http://www.indiantemples.com/Ganga/varanasi.html>

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