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Myths and reality: An Ethnographic study of Varanasi as a south Asian city

Satyajeet Dey

Research Scholar,

Department of English and Modern European Languages

University of Lucknow, U.P., India

Email: [satyjeetdey21@gmail.com](mailto:satyajeetdey21@gmail.com)

Prof. Mirza Sibtain Beg

Shia P.G. College, Lucknow

Affiliated to University of Lucknow, U.P., India

Email: 14sibtain@gmail.com

Abstract

This research paper explores the various cultural aspects of Varanasi that have made Varanasi, the cultural capital of India. Varanasi has always been known for its diversity and Culture plays a very crucial role in its diversification. Varanasi also popularly known as Benaras has been popular across the world for being the ancient most city in the world. Varanasi is the city of Gods and Goddesses and thus is a sacred and a holy city in South Asia. Kashi or Varanasi is a prominent city describing the beauty of Indian culture and it's multidimensional aspects. Varanasi which is a combination of conventional and modern culture has revived the forms of culture representing the culture of India. Even the transgenders rejoice their lives in Varanasi believing that they are a part of lord Shiva and goddess Durga. Men, women and transgenders all have adapted the culture of Varanasi and have together proved it to be the cultural capital of India. Varanasi depicts the definition of culture and ways to practise it. Varanasi though a small city is a prominent city and stands different from other cities in the world. Varanasi defines culture and culture defines Varanasi. Banaras in India represents the unification of Indian traditional and western culture both practised in their pure forms and together. This research emphasizes the ethnicity and cultural diversity of Varanasi. Varanasi is a South Asian City which has been frequently used in literature in many languages like Hindi, Bangla, Tamil, English, Sanskrit and other languages. Kashi is

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directly connected with Culture and it's several aspects and is highly marked for its significance in literature

Keywords - Ancient, Culture, Ethnicity, Spirituality, Salvation.

Introduction

Varanasi is a city that is believed to have been existing since life evolved on earth and it has witnessed ideas, beliefs, rituals, traditions and customs that have become the reflection of mankind on earth, so it has emerged as the centre of ideas and believes of human beings who lived or are living on earth thus it explains how people and their cultural practices describe the cultural background of a city. Culture is the social behaviour of a particular person or society and cultural studies is the study of all such social behaviours and practices including language, habits, customs, rituals and traditions. Cultural studies has a broader meaning in English literature where it includes Religions, caste, feminism language, literacy and social practices. Varanasi (The cultural capital of India) is the ancient most surviving city in the world and it comprises of multiple cultures that have changed over years.

Varanasi is the cultural heritage of India from where Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism have originated and thus this sacred city consists of multiple cultures. The name 'Varanasi' has been derived from two different names combined together 'Varuna' and 'Assi'. Varanasi is discussed as the ancient most city in the world but apart from it Varanasi is even more significant and glorious. Benaras has been beautifully presented in the novel of Pankaj Mishra 'The Romantics' describing the desires and cultural relativity with Varanasi. In his recent work 'Revolution 2020'. Chetan Bhagat writes about the practices and beliefs, popularly practised as an identity in Kashi the cultural centre. Samar the main protagonist in the novel visits Varanasi for studies but gets lost eventually in the beauty of the city also he gets influenced by the western culture present in Varanasi. Varanasi or Kashi is popularly known as the cultural capital of India Varanasi, also known as Kashi or Banaras with different significance for each name, is one of the oldest living cities in the world. Located on the banks of the holy river Ganga in Uttar Pradesh, it holds a special place in the religious, cultural, and spiritual life of India. For centuries, people from different parts of the country have come to Varanasi in search of faith, learning, and peace. The city is considered sacred in Hinduism. It is believed that Lord Shiva himself founded Varanasi, and that dying here brings liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

The ghats of Varanasi are its most striking features. These long stretches of steps leading down to the river are used for bathing, prayers, cremation, and daily rituals. The sight of devotees offering lamps to the Ganga during the evening Ganga Aarti creates a powerful and unforgettable atmosphere. Varanasi is also an important center of learning and culture. It has been home to scholars, philosophers, poets, and musicians for generations. The Banaras Hindu University is one

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of the largest and most respected universities in Asia. The city is famous for its contribution to Indian classical music, especially through legendary musicians who have carried its traditions from Varanasi and its cultural diversity, apart from religion and education, Varanasi is known for its rich handicrafts. Banarasi silk sarees, with their fine weaving and intricate designs, are admired all over the world. The narrow lanes of the city are filled with small shops selling sweets, wooden toys, brassware, and religious items, giving Varanasi its unique charm. Despite its ancient roots, Varanasi continues to grow and adapt with time.

Modern development exists alongside age-old traditions, creating a city where the past and present live together. Varanasi is not just a place; it is an experience that reflects the soul of India. Kashi describes the beauty and importance of the Ganges as Rao writes “There is always Mother Ganga for the orphan” (Rao,17). Varanasi in India represents the unification of Indian and western culture both practised together. Kashi because of its cultural diversity, geographical location and history has gained popularity across the world. Varanasi as a city though not big represents the culture of India and South Asia in a bigger perspective. Banaras also describes Lord Shiva as a symbol of harmony and victory “To the drummer night is like a drum. One hears the beats. You know that’s why Lord Shiva has the drum in his hand. He dances in the crematorium, you remember” (Rao,6). Varanasi is a historic city which deals with spirituality and religious aspects. Varanasi is called as the city of Gods because it is believed that even the holy figures and Gods have lived in this holy land of Varanasi, thus making it a spiritual and religious city and more diversified in terms of culture. Novels on Varanasi that describe the cultural beauty of Kashi are some clear examples where Varanasi has been described as the City of spirituality, City of pilgrimage and City of Salvation. Varanasi or Benaras has an important role in literature when it comes to cultural connection with people in this world.”Virtue does not grow easily in Benares. And vice has no better place” (Rao,17).

Material and Methods:

This research deals with the facts related to Varanasi that prove Varanasi as the cultural City in South Asia. The Ganges is the longest river in India and a major part of the river captures the holiest city ‘Varanasi’. People from the across the world come to Varanasi for holy dip in the Ganges in Varanasi and attain salvation. Many writers have described Varanasi as the centre of attraction for many western people who after witnessing Kashi have decided to adapt the culture of India. In “Aimless in Banaras: wanderins in the holiest city of India” the novel describes the rituals and traditions of Varanasi as they are practised in Kashi. The Ganges represents the culture of Varanasi as It flows through five states in India but it has a special significance in Varanasi. Varanasi has three different names in three different contexts. First one is Varanasi the name is derived for the two names ‘Varuna’ and ‘Assi’ of two rivers flowing through the city. The other name is ‘Kashi’ which is named as such to represent spirituality, knowledge and learning as the name ‘Kashi’ itself means ‘to shine’.

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The third name of the city is Benaras as because the Name is comprised of two word 'Bana' which means 'Always ready' and 'Rasa' which means 'the juice of life'. Thus the cultural capital of India has three different names in three different contexts with different significance each. Raja Rao in his 'On the Ganga Ghats' has emphasized literature as 'Sadhna' and a way to spirituality thus literature and Spirituality are the aspects of Culture and ethnicity. In his novel Raja Rao has described the geographical, historical and religious aspects of Varanasi as the cultural capital of India. Varanasi is the ancient most city in the world and has a good significance across the world. People from across the world come to Varanasi for pilgrimage popularly known as 'Tirth Yatra'. Lord Shiva is in the centre of Kashi and Kashi is believed to be fixed on the trident of Lord Shiva.

The stories of 'On the Ganga Ghats' by Raja Rao more commonly present the dimensions of Benaras in terms of Spirituality, ethnicity and cultural unification. People from across the world visit Varanasi for salvation commonly called as 'Moksha'. Raja Rao has defined the Ganges as 'Mother Ganga' in his novel 'On the Ganga Ghats' according to him the river which flows through five states becomes more prestigious and holy in the holy city of Benaras. A dip in mother Ganga can purify any person from all the sins committed. Culture is more of religious practices and rituals that are practiced by the people. Varanasi is the cultural capital of India and is the ancient most city in the world as Salvation is only possible in Varanasi. People of different religions, countries and parts of the world visit Varanasi and adapt the culture of Benaras as it leads to salvation and purification. 'Mumukshu Bhawan' in Varanasi is another prominent example of Benaras as the centre of culture. Mumukshu Bhawan is a place in Varanasi where the elderly people get registered and visit for some time with an intention of dying in the city and attaining salvation. People from different parts of the world specially from Hinduism religion visit Benaras with the desire of salvation. Both men and women equally believe in salvation in the holy city Kashi. Benaras also assures that anyone who dies in Varanasi will attain salvation or Moksha and will be free from the cycle of birth and death. Mumukshu Bhawan presents the culture of Varanasi and the culture of India. Salvation and spirituality are the important aspects of culture of Varanasi and Mumukshu Bhawan is a good example of ethnicity in Varanasi the cultural capital of India. Similarly the Jyotirlinga in Kashi is considered as the most powerful Jyotirlinga of lord Shiva as it is said that Kashi Vishwanath darshan is itself equivalent to all other important eleven Jyotirlingas.

Religious practices in Kashi are examples of culture in Varanasi. Anita Ganeri in her novel "Benaras" has presented the spiritual side of India, different from the western culture in Varanasi. Maa Annapurna is a popular Goddess temple in Varanasi where everyone can have their food free. Annapurna temple is the second most big temple in Varanasi after Kashi Vishwanath temple where people visit for pilgrimage. Kaal Bhairav in Varanasi is another form of lord Shiva in Kashi who is popularly known as 'Kotwaal' of Kashi it is believed that Kashi Darshan starts with the permission of Kashi Kotwaal 'Kaal Bhairav' and continues to other temples in Varanasi.

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Varanasi, also known the city of Gods, is one of the oldest, cultural, religious and prominent continuously inhabited cities in the world. Situated on the banks of the sacred river Ganga in Uttar Pradesh, the city has been a center of faith, culture, and learning for thousands of years. Varanasi is often described as the spiritual capital of India because of its deep connection with Hindu beliefs, rituals, and philosophy. According to Hindu tradition, Varanasi was founded by Lord Shiva, making it one of the most sacred places for devotees. It is believed that a person who dies in Varanasi attains moksha, or freedom from the cycle of birth and rebirth. This belief draws pilgrims from across the country who come to bathe in the Ganga, perform religious ceremonies, and offer prayers. The river is not just a water body here but a symbol of purity, life, and spiritual renewal. “Man is never more a pilgrim than when silence carries him from darkness into light. Mother Ganga bends as a moon, as a Crescent Moon, by Benares. Look at that still string of electric lights, a string through the awake night which seems to deepen the river’s truth” (Rao,17).

The ghats of Varanasi form the heart of the city. There are more than eighty ghats lining the riverbank, each with its own history and purpose. Some ghats are used for daily bathing and worship, while others, such as Manikarnika and Harishchandra ghats, are used for cremation. Every evening, the Ganga Aarti is performed with lamps, chants, and music, creating a scene filled with devotion and energy. This ritual attracts both pilgrims and visitors from around the world. Varanasi has long been a center of education and intellectual growth. Ancient texts, philosophy, and Sanskrit learning flourished here. In modern times, Banaras Hindu University has continued this tradition by offering education in various fields. The city has also played an important role in the development of Indian classical music, especially Hindustani music. Many renowned musicians, poets, and artists have emerged from Varanasi, adding to its cultural richness.

The city is equally famous for its art and craftsmanship. Banarasi silk sarees are known for their fine texture, detailed patterns, and use of gold and silver threads. These sarees are worn on special occasions and are valued as symbols of elegance and tradition. Local markets also offer handicrafts, metalwork, wooden toys, and traditional sweets, reflecting the creativity of the city’s people. Culture in Varanasi is very diversified as Varanasi presents material culture, non- material culture where objects of price and value are prioritised in the society at the same time Varanasi also presents non- material culture which is solely based on ideas beliefs and customs, unlikely material culture. Varanasi also presents popular culture, sub culture, counter culture, high culture and low culture. High culture in Varanasi represents the elite class like ‘Kashi Naresh’ (the king of Kashi) and his hierarchy whereas the lower class like servants represent the low culture in Varanasi, popular culture and sub culture are another forms of culture prestigiously available in Kashi. Cult culture which is found nowhere else is again a prominent and promising culture in Varanasi representing culture of India and South Asia.

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Life in Varanasi moves at its own pace. Narrow lanes, ancient temples, cows resting by the roadside, and the sound of bells and prayers create a unique atmosphere. At the same time, modern roads, educational institutions, and growing tourism show how the city continues to change with time. Varanasi successfully blends ancient traditions with modern life. All the important forms of culture are present in Varanasi which are showcased as the culture of India and South Asia proving Kashi as India's cultural capital. Kashi blends all the important forms of culture in its land with the western culture with a significant and glorious borderline in between. Thus, Varanasi again proves India as the carrier of cultural heritage in South Asia where Varanasi acts as the centre of attraction for people across the world from different countries and cultural backgrounds.

In addition, Varanasi is the cultural heritage of India and the centre of attraction for western county men. Varanasi as the oldest city promises a combination of Indian culture and western culture, thus, evolving as a cultural centre. Varanasi as a city of culture inculcates the paths to popular culture, sub culture, and other forms of culture. People from the western countries come to visit Varanasi adapting its culture and leaving behind the shades of western culture thus, both Asian and western men get an opportunity to understand and practise the culture of different types living in a common city Varanasi. Varanasi is more than just a city. It is a living expression of India's spiritual depth, cultural heritage, and historical continuity. Its timeless presence reminds people of the values of faith, knowledge, and coexistence, making it one of the most meaningful places in the country.

There is another aspect of Varanasi culture as widows from the world mainly from India's southern areas and eastern areas visit Varanasi and start living there in widow houses and old age homes so that they can attain salvation. Anita Ganeri has talked about the cultural settlement in this regard in "Benaras". Widows believe that only Lord Shiva in Kashi can free them from their problems and can let them live a peaceful life in Benaras. Widow women from Hindu families frequently visit Kashi and settle in Varanasi doing some household work believing that if they abstain themselves from their family relations then God will forgive their sins and will let them have a happy and serene life, eventually attaining salvation. Widows from Bengal and southern states of India believe that only Kashi has the capacity to purify their sins which they have committed knowingly or unknowingly.

Thus, widows in Varanasi can be seen wearing white dress with Tulsi mala, calling out the name of lord Shiva and Vishnu, seeking salvation. Varanasi thus shows that it has the capability to purify the souls and bodies of the people who have somehow committed some sins in their lives. Kashi and its widows have been depicted in many novels and movies describing their suffering and agony. Thus this tradition and practice shows that culture in very vividly and widely practiced in Kashi. Which makes Kashi the cultural capital of India and different from other cities. "The Panchkoshi Yatra" is a pilgrimage in Kashi that starts and ends at Manikarnika ghat in Varanasi.

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The circumambulation is a pilgrimage in the sacred city Benaras. It is 88 kms or 55 miles, five days pilgrimage, circling the holy city Kashi, it symbolises a pilgrimage of spirituality and purification traditionally taken clockwise. It is believed to clean mind, body and soul which ultimately provides wisdom and prosperity to the devotees. The Panchkoshi Yatra includes five major halts namely 'Kardameshwar' First Pandav, 'Bheemchandi' Second pandav, 'Rameshwar' Third Pandav, 'Shivpur' Fourth Pandav, 'Kapildhara' Fifth Pandav each signifying panch tatwa of life and leads to salvation.

The pilgrimage covers in total 108 shrines including 56 Shiva temples, 11 Vinayaka and other important temples. The pilgrimage is done mainly during the months of Falgun, Baisakh, Chaitra and during MahaShivraatri. Hindus from the across the world visit Varanasi to participate in this pilgrimage and achive moksha or salvation through strength, determination and endurance. This is a pilgrimage that takes strength and courage leaving to Moksha or Salvation through purification and spiritual learning. 'Masan holi' is another prominent cultural practice in Kashi in which the Naga Sadhus, common men and the transgenders gather and play Holi with ashes from the cremation ground hence named as Masan Holi. This is a celebration found nowhere in the world except Varanasi. People forget the boundary between death and life and enjoy their lives with the ashes seeking prosperity, harmony and blessings from lord Shiva.

Lord Shiva during this festival is popularly worshipped as Mahashamshan Nath or Masan Kali. People during this time rub ashes from the cremation ground on their body believing that they will get closer to Shiva and his companions. Masan Holi is both religious and cultural practice that is more evidently and effectively practised in Kashi. People during this time forget their worries and rejoice their lives. This Holi in Varanasi is practised during Holi in March. Similarly the transgenders who strive for an identity enjoy their lives during this time irrespective of their gender, appearance and other characteristics. Masan Holi is a very popular cultural practice in Kashi people from across the world visit Varanasi during this period to witness this very special event and the rituals associated with it. Similarly, the transgenders worship lord Shiva during this time for a better life in the next birth, seeking forgiveness and blessings which is the essence of the festival popularly occurs in Varanasi. Thus this proves that all the religious, spiritual and ethnic practises in Kashi represent the culture of Varanasi in multiple dimensions as a South Asian City proving it as the cultural capital of India.

Result and Discussion

Culture is the customs, ideas and beliefs of a society practised by majority of people. Culture is a representation of the society and a city. All the ideas, customs and beliefs practised in Varanasi make Varanasi, the cultural capital of India and a representing city of South Asian culture. Cult culture of the 'Aghoris' in Varanasi is something found nowhere else except Kashi, Naga Sadhus are found in Benaras practising cult culture. Varanasi as a cultural city provides western culture to merge with Asian culture in the city. From ancient mythological hooks to recent

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time books all have proved Varanasi as departing a special side of Asian culture. Varanasi is the cultural capital of India and it has been widely accepted by majority of the countries that Varanasi as the ancient most city existing in the world has given dimensions to culture and it's ethnographic studies have also proved that it owns the title of 'The cultural capital of India' culture and city are interconnected and each represent one another. The variations and varieties of practises in Kashi prove that Varanasi does not practice just one culture but different types of culture. Popular culture, sub culture and cult culture are all inclusively practised in Varanasi. Varanasi as a City with historical, geographical and literary importance has proved to be a cultural centre in the world and people learn and practise every aspect of its culture and enjoy the sweetness of it. Thus, this research discusses and showcases how Varanasi and the culture of Varanasi are so interconnected that each define one another and the rituals, customs, ideas and beliefs in the form of culture prove Varanasi as the cultural capital of India, proving Varanasi as the centre of cultural diversity in the world.

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