

BANARAS

BANARAS

OF GODS, HUMANS AND STORIES

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Photographs: Irfan Nabi

NIYOGI
BOOKS

Published by

NIYOGI BOOKS

Block D, Building No. 77

Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-I

New Delhi-110 020, INDIA

Tel: 91-11-26816301, 26818960

Email: niyogibooks@gmail.com

Website: www.niyogibooksindia.com

Text © Nilosree Biswas

Photographs © Irfan Nabi

Editor: Arunima Ghosh

Design: Nabanita Das

Cover Design: Trisha De Niyogi

ISBN: 978-93-89136-77-7

Publication: 2021

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Printed at: Niyogi Offset Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, India

*In memory of Arundhati Banerjee
&
For Ma who could never visit Banaras*

Nilosree Biswas



*Robert Booth (Auchterarder, Scotland) for sharing your eclectic insights
about arts and life, and for a most cherished friendship.*

*My mother Zaitoon Khan for teaching me dignity
in facing challenges and grace in triumph.*

*My Dad, Dr Ghulam Nabi Dar, a man of impeccable integrity,
whose spontaneous humour has made us smirk and smile.*

Irfan Nabi





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'In my imagination, there's a city full of flowers,
Where always lives spring—the most loveable city' (21)

'The city is a garden of grand peaceful greenery
Where springs always live—this is a story told throughout the world.
When Banaras views its reflection in the Ganga,
It becomes a symbol of beauty in itself.' (67)

– Mirza Ghalib, *Chiragh-e-Dair (The Lamp of the Temple)*, 1827

Preface

When did I first hear of the word 'Banaras', it is hard to recall now, but I suppose, it would be sometime in 1979 as an 8-year-old, sitting tight on a thick red rexine chair of a single screen movie theatre called Bashusree, somewhere in the south of Kolkata, erstwhile Calcutta. I do not recall who was next to me in the theatre, but in all likelihood, I would have been flanked by my grandparents with whom I was living those days. On screen, Ray's Marcello Mastroianni, a poised, drop dead gorgeous Soumitra Chatterjee was playing the sleuth who pins down the enigmatic upmarket villain, a smuggler, Maganlal Meghraj. That was *Joy Baba Felunath* aka *The Elephant God*, a pacey thriller that Satyajit Ray had made way back in 1979.

Much later in the early winter of 1996, as an assistant director for a documentary, I made my first trip to Banaras

as an adult. I realized how Ray had infused Banaras, the city, into his screenplay. In the film's running time of 112 minutes, the audience is never allowed to get disconnected; not for once does the director let them think that the onscreen happenings are occurring anywhere else other than in Banaras.

Banaras, in all its intrigue, appealed to me much like a fervent fascination, for all that was around, happening round the clock, and the city theatrically revealing itself from dawn to dusk on the long rows of stone steps, the *ghats*, within the lanes that meandered into the womb of the city.

Captivated by so many elements, I was curious about everything around, more so about those dense, numerous alleys, the overcrowded streets, where an old oxen visited a particular sweet shop in the daily lure of *jalebi*, the innumerable rickety stalls, which sold puja samagrihee or

religious wares required for offering rituals, leading to the Kashi Vishwanath Temple. I was attentive to the shapes and details of these items and recall having collected small black stone artifacts.

I realized my enthrallment had too many visual imageries plugged in my head, emerging from the ceaseless motion that some historians have termed as the 'unceasing earthly drama of life and death'¹. That struck a note hard and tender at the same time, much like both the contradictions and deep admirations that Banaras has offered to me in later years.

I remembered how Arundhati Banerjee had introduced me to the myriad 'theatrics' of human life as would be in Greco-Roman plays that she taught us in the class of Comparative Literature. How, inevitably, both gods and humans would be the actors in those larger-than-life narratives. There, in the plays of Euripides, Sophocles, and Aristophanes, lay the unintended drama of human life played out by the hands of destiny; intertwined fates of the protagonist's life, governed by the gods, getting revealed by the dramaturge in a histrionic storytelling.

Banaras to me was very akin to how life panned out in those plays.

Whichever be the rationale, I could not shrug Banaras off me. I went back again and again, every time admitting to myself that some of it still needs to be understood, sensed, and savoured.

Finally, in October 2017, when this book was decided upon, I drew my breath deep, deciding to plunge again, knowing fully well that I may come out totally scathed or oblivious, that I still may want more of it, and then it may also happen that I would never want to visit Banaras again. That was my moment of grabbing Banaras by the horns like a maverick matador willingly taking up the challenge head on.

The challenge was more to myself than any imaginary tussle with the existing literature on Banaras; it was more about whether I could perceive my Banaras the way I thought it is, or if this long tryst with the city would leave me overwhelmed once again, pining for more, or reveal itself to me as a complex protagonist as many have perceived earlier.

This book is about sensing of Banaras, its various facets that make it so phenomenally interesting and impactful to all those who choose to visit it once or more, and also to those who dwell in the maze called Banaras.

Introduction

There is a river, and there is a city, constructed over centuries. In that built-in environment, there are temples, shrines, mosques, monasteries, ghats, and cremation grounds.

There are also long rows of stone steps on the riverfront, that lead upwards into alleys narrow and winding, never in 90 degrees to each other, laced with temples new and old, crumbling houses, shops, half-broken balconies, more temples, cows, cow dung, cheap and fine saree shops, looms weaving unreal fabrics, tea stalls, dargahs, and schools rickety and old with peeled off signboards. And there are people, hundreds, thousands, and more, and the invisible divine who is supposedly governing this space, the omnipresent. With the omnipresent lies endless stories, told, untold, as well as repeatedly told.

This is Banaras, a city, imagined, real, and fluid, written about so many times, and yet invigorating and complex enough to probe again.

Banaras is a living landscape, with elements of antiquity, symbolism, and built-in environments, created and recreated by agencies who have made it the city of today where millions throng. It bears and carries urban lores like any other old city of the world. However, there is a tangible present to it that has been constructed in the last few hundred years, giving it the form as it appears and feels today.

Adjectives like 'ethereal', 'eternal', and 'timeless' are epithets that the city has been imprinted with, which has been further reinforced through visual mediums, various travelogues, and other accounts. How did these interlinking groups of words get attached to Banaras?

Or is it just a way of 'seeing' the city? Banaras has been perceived and interpreted over many centuries by different actors and agencies while they invested in it. No other city of significant religious, social, and cultural past has entangled itself among these varied acronyms like Banaras has.

When do we first find a reference of Kashi or Banaras in the vast corpus of Sanskrit literature? The textual references dating back to 6th century BCE describe a vibrant city life that is claimed to have remained uninterrupted by 2500 years of continuous habitation. But then, the informed imagination of millions has more to it. Banaras or Kashi is the city that Shiva created, while he was creating the universe itself; it is his chosen abode on earth. This is the primary narrative that hundreds and thousands believe in, as does a scholastic discourse.

So, there is abundant mythology, antiquity, informed imagination, and a contemporary understanding of Banaras. It is of interest to me in exploring the interplay of these mythologies, the texts, the history, the politics of social groups, and the patronage that concurrently worked towards making Banaras. What we see in this lived-in space of the people and the monuments, including what is apparent and what can be deciphered, and finally, of what meets more than the eyes, could be the very threads to mesh with.

Understanding Banaras is not simple. There are many ways of sensing the city—one of them is,

of course, by acquainting oneself with the earliest textual foundations of Sanskrit scholarship, including the Puranas. Of the prime texts are *Kashi Khanda* in *Skanda Purana*, *Kashi Rahasya*, *Brahma Purana*, *Matsya Purana*, and *Kurma Purana*, all of which mention Kashi or Varanasi in vivid details. Many of them are eulogies (*mahatyas*) of Banaras written in volumes. They narrate Hindu mythology, various cosmic components of Hinduism, and religious essays covering all aspects of an ideal Hindu life. Interestingly, different versions of them have minute yet noticeable adaptations from the times when they were written in even adopting elements of regional or vernacular understanding of theology as well as including local, folk components. In sum, they remain manuals of religious formulations of a particular world order, within which Banaras is situated.

Another mode of perceiving Banaras would be through the engagements of Mughals and their grandees, experiences of Western travellers, merchants, missionaries, chroniclers, officials of the East India Company, and civil servants of the British Government in India, who visited and lived in the city in various eras starting from the 15th century. Their accounts of the city are laced with personal interpretations, like that of Tavernier, who visited India six times in 33 years between 1636 and 1668. Tavernier depicted in great detail what he saw of the daily life and ritual practices in Banaras.

His was a record of bewilderment mostly, a descriptive narrative of culture that was unknown to him.

Prior to François Bernier, it was a British traveller, Ralph Fitch, one of the most adventurous Elizabethan citizens, who travelled from Aleppo in Syria, and then finally to India, where he found a connect at Emperor Akbar's court. He landed in Banaras from Allahabad and then continued his journey to Patna and further east. He writes: 'From thence we went to Bannaras [Banaras] which is a great towne, and a great store of cloth is made there of cotton, and shashes [turban-clothes] for the Moores.'²

While Tavernier's observation was more cultural, François Bernier's travel accounts reflected the economic power of India. Bernier mentions how Hindu and Muslim traders both possessed wealth and had thriving businesses. If we were to make an impression of this remark, befitting for the important trading cities of India, then Banaras would be quite much on top of the list implying trade and wealth access.³

Another significant discourse for perceiving Banaras can be drawn from sociopolitical activities, happenings during the regimes of Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb, until the Mughal Empire died a slow death. Banaras was opulently gifted with the support of land holdings for constructing temples and monasteries or *muths*, donations for charities, pujas, well-being of brahmin groups. Till Shah Jahan's reign, the imperial

court also provided a thorough patronage for Sanskrit scholarship. While Humayun started the practice of granting land with issuing royal *farman* or order allotting 300 acres of land to *Jangamwadi Muth*, a Shaivite monastery, Akbar added to the allowance by gifting 100 *bighas* (land measure).

These are evidences how Banaras was always on the radar of not only the promoters of its primary environment, but also of the highest state machinery. And then, of course, it had innumerable visitors, whose accounts of writing carry interesting descriptions of the local life, which, in contemporary times, has a term for itself—'Banarasi'. What's more noticeable is the enthusiasm, which gets reflected in these travel accounts, clearly hinting that they were welcomed to observe the majoritarian life of the city from close quarters. These accounts, mostly tinted with an oriental gaze, nevertheless revealed some amazingly intriguing, complex details of the living experiences of Banaras.

From the sacred texts to the maps of all scales, including survey maps used by local and national administration, travel diaries, and pre-colonial and colonial paintings and photographs, Banaras emerges to be a place of many colours and hues, deeply immersed in a particular way of life. These tools, by which Banaras can be lensed, have in them layers of pluralism, inclusiveness, authoritarian responses, religious orthodoxy, patronage,

and political interest. They also reveal a growing interconnection and relationship between competing and, sometimes, overlapping social groups, who made pacts by remaining tolerant to each other in their larger interest.

By accepting that Banaras always had patronage of various natures, each having their own motif, mostly political, cultural, and social, one acknowledges the 'plural' in Banaras. This plurality is the primary designer of the Banaras that we see today, and in this lies not only the interests of investing stake holders like the state, the brahmin Sanskrit scholars and activists, but also the people who were the everyday actors including pilgrims.

Banaras is primarily a people's narrative, a story that also has a built-in city space consisting of a sacred landscape, an imagined topography, designed and created through the combination of reconstructed symbolism, political and cultural stakes, shaping its most noted temples, venerated sites, shrines, fort-palaces, ghats, and private houses on the riverfront, around which the city exists till date.

In this book, my attempt would be to keep the conversation going between the current experiences of the urban space and those of antiquity. Sometimes, these narratives may intersect with the present as the binding cement, but many times, there may be two parallel running tracks that move together alongside each other.

Sacred Geography – Of Informed Imagination and Real Creation

The concept of sacred geography encompasses the ritual landscapes of Banaras, its inception, cartographic boundaries including various veneration sites and their affiliated practices, buildings that stand on this route, including fort-palaces and mansions. The key public spaces that govern the city today had also let the formation of newer maps of religious and everyday movement. In the last few centuries, the perceptible sacred space has got added and edited, affirming the trait of fluidity to the very nature of pious geography, although deeply connected to its religious core, as summed up in the texts.

After 1600, Banaras decidedly became a point of interest for the Mughal court and its allied trading network across the subcontinent, fostering new patronages for the city. It resulted in major investments at religious sites, rituals, and practices, which trickled over in the form of patronizing significant architecture that would become the markers of new authority. Urbanization, motivations, and aspirations of individuals and power groups would reflect on the built environment. Around this pattern of power play, would surface the rejuvenated pilgrimage routes, new temples, dharmashalas, wells, and tanks dedicated to gods or goddess.

The sacred landscape that has surfaced in the last five to six centuries was overlaid on the older ritual geography,

often reinforcing the archaic tradition. The core religious narrative of Banaras as the epitome of Shivaism and all things divinely paramount remained the same—non-negotiable, but the nature of its execution became slightly adaptable. Over the years, this newer sacred geography under the Mughal court, its Rajput *mansabdars*, other Hindu royalties, like Peshwas and Marathas, grew, enabling the making of Banaras as it is today.

The current understanding of the sacred landscape has a complex mix-up of temples old and new, small and big, dharmashalas, *muths*, houses, eateries, sweet shops, *dashakarma bhandars* (shops selling ritual wares required for most Hindu rituals), and even computer centres that only dish out garish looking posters of all sizes of known gods and goddesses. These are both traditional and altered agencies behind the making of Banaras, adorning the role of new cartographers of the city.

Desai defines this in her book *Banaras Reconstructed*, 'It is a story of patrons, priest and pilgrims who created a city based on an imagination of the past and connected it to their immediate political and cultural realities.'³ Extending the definition and taking it further, the city's sacred zone includes these new players and involves their participation. No city becomes what it is without its patronage. Patronage is not necessarily about a defined social group, but includes a large demographic mix of players from different strata, often with overlapping or

intersecting interests. In this redesigned and informed display of archaic tradition through the altered geography, the recent architecture, recreation of revered sites like temples, tanks, and wells, along with personal palaces, summer houses of the powerful, mostly on the edge of the river as well as planted within the pilgrim routes, the impressions of the divine and the projection of divinity have been reinforced time and again.

When generally asked about what Banaras meant to people, the answers were varied. While some said that Banaras was a representation of the whole world, the Hindu worldview incarnate, and the most compelling and powerful of the *tirthas*, many others were quick to say, cryptically so, that it is Shiva's earthly home, a medley of all things good, or that there's no other city like it, the only place where one can live in *ananda* or spiritual happiness.

These answers consist of ingredients of informed imagination as well as the living experiences. Per faith, the Divine is believed to be in every nook and corner of Banaras, in the temples and outside, on the tiny shrines in the roadside, on the walls, on the ghats, on the old edifices of the river, on the windows of fallen-apart houses, and at the entrance of shops and homes. Literally, from innocuous tea shops to saree-weaving units and *paan* shops, everywhere there is a visual representation of God, in a tangible form of the religious imagination, extending the omnipresent notion of sacred geography.