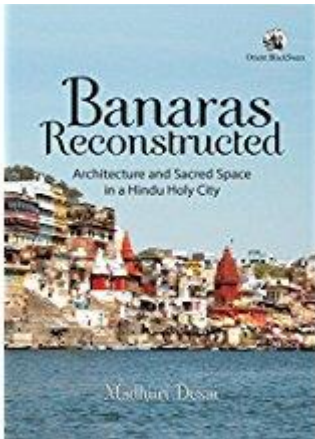


## Of The Apocryphal And The Authentic



Banaras, generally characterized as the longest continuously living city and as a microcosm of Hindu civilization, has long enjoyed epithets of an eternal, timeless, unchanging, and archetypal Hindu holy city. It has, perhaps, for a city of its size, attracted much more attention from scholars of repute, and many of them, in recent times, have forayed beyond the domain of the sacred, to unravelling the complexity that Banaras represents. The sacred and the profane are so intimately connected that seeing one without the other would ascribe or impute homogeneity to the context. Indeed, the idea of Banaras cannot be viewed in the singular. In the book under review, Desai seeks to understand how the network of political authority, regional and imperial politics, cultural and social

changes, urbanism, commercial imperatives and local indigenous agencies shaped the ideas and imagination of Banaras. Taking a long historical canvas, she traces how these imaginations took shape in the context of political shifts and the search for legitimacy by shifting power centres and accompanying class structures. Banaras, thus, underwent multiple reconstructions.

In fact, the frequent use of words with prefix re- such as renewed, refreshed, regenerated, reformulated, resurrected, reconceptualized, recreated, redefined, and so on, to name only a few used in the Introduction itself, not only highlights the author's idea of socio-religious sphere of Banaras being repeatedly 'reconstructed' but also indicates a continuity as well as focus on human agency in the process.

Deploying the prism of architecture and sacred spaces in her study of Banaras, Desai highlights diverse texts, sites and material expressions that evolved, altered, and transformed with time. The presence of both distinctive as well as stylistic fusion in architectural forms indicates diverse historical interventions. At the same time, she also highlights the historical imperatives and vicissitudes to conform and confirm Hindu-ness particularly in the context of the impact of Mughal decline and rise of colonial rule. Thus, 'Kashi may be an ancient site, but it is a reconstructed Banaras that contemporary pilgrims and visitors encounter' (p. 3). The reconstruction was an amalgam of elements from Indo-Islamic environment, archaic choices, and identity assertion and self-fashioning on the part of a diverse group of patrons. In exploring this Desai has raised several important questions: How has the image of an unchanging and eternal city evolved in spite of simultaneous strong narratives of severe disruptions caused by Islamic assaults? How are the two

reconciled? What explains its representation as a monolithic entity in spite of the diversity in its architectural contours? What were the political and cultural imperatives behind 'abstract ideas' about sacred spaces and routes that took different shape through history?

Presenting a refreshing and evocative account of Banaras, the book takes the reader through the city's changing social and cultural dynamics juxtaposed against temporally defined political shifts. The past is represented certainly with an eye on the present, which lends contemporaneity to the descriptions and explanations offered. In fact, the author appears to be very aware of the contemporary realities, beliefs, and practices in the city.

Comprising six chapters, linked together in a historical timeline, the book begins with the city's Indo-Islamic past, and the author carefully delineates the cultural exchanges as well as boundaries drawn from the Sultanate period onwards to the Mughal rulers. In the latter part of the book, the self-assertion of the rising regional powers and weakening of the Mughal empire, as well as new ideas and practices of 'improvement' and 'orderliness' of traditions introduced by the colonial modernity project, have been explored. This facilitates our comprehension of evolving socio-political context to the characteristic local spatial and architectural developments. In this long timeframe, a few major themes can be discerned around which the chapters cohere and give the book its organization.

First of all, the roles and motives of different actors are underlined. According to the author, 'there were several imaginations at play in the regeneration of the city' (p. 58): the patrons, both Hindu and Muslim; the Brahmin intellectuals who derived their privileges from each succeeding political authority; and the 'lived experience' of the pilgrims. The successive generations of Brahmin scholars, for example, produced a corpus of texts on 'tradition' of Banaras, each bringing its own regional flavour and concerns, and incorporating new and consolidating older traditions and practices in view of recent realities (p. 33). Beginning with the 12th century text, *Krtyakalpataru*, to the *Benaras and its Ghats* written in 1931 by the Kashi Tirth Sudhar Trust, each textual journey is fascinating and presents a vivid and powerful account.

Secondly, the role of state politics and shifts in political power in determining, impacting and formulating the city's socio-religious sphere is a continuous theme. Desai is, however, quick to emphasize that the combination of religion and politics is far more complex than usually subsumed under the rubric of 'holy' or 'Hindu'. Though the Banaras king, for example, established links through the title 'Kashi Naresh' with a mythical past, patronized Brahmins and sponsored religio-cultural activities, yet vestigial Mughal practices, suzerainty of the Nawabs of Oudh and, after 1774, the East India Company and, later, emerging nationalism made state politics contentious and multilayered. A distinct Mughal Banaras emerged in architectural style, urban structures and prominent mosques in 16th and 17th century. This was followed in the late Mughal era by the new regional powers whose identity assertion and consequent self-fashioning invoked elements of 'archaic' as well as 'innovative' features. The city's rise as a commercial centre in the 18th century brought forth many bankers and business communities who took interest determining Banaras's ritual and cultural traditions. New patrons also included Bengali landowners such as Krishnachandra Ghoshal and Rani Bhawani of Natore. The Peshwas in the first half of 18th century were inspired by their Brahmin mentor to invest in various ritualistic sites. By the late 19th century, both 'Indian agency' and 'colonial instigation' resulted in 'many architectural and spatial intervention'. At first the colonial government sought to preserve 'tradition' while elites wanted change. The ritual landscape thus was altered to meet the new political imperatives. Patrons reinforced sacred zones and routes, including the riverfront with buildings.

Third, the 'continued evolution and transformation' of the sacred landscape including the ritually significant *Panchkroshi* and the *Antargrih* pilgrimages are discussed as a part of each chapter. Their inclusion or exclusion in contemporary texts, such as *Kashikhand*, *Kashirahasya*, and several pilgrimage manuals, is highlighted to suggest that the making of the ritual landscape of Banaras was a continuous process. The construction of a 'new version' of the Vishveshwar temple by Ahilyabai Holkar around 1781 gave a new focus to the *Antargriha* (Inner sanctum) pilgrimage (p. 83). Desai also informs that although Annapurna was not mentioned in the *Kashikhand*, the patronage of the temple dedicated to the deity by the Peshwas brought it within the *Antargriha* zone. The sacred contours of Banaras were thus being refreshed and renewed with each patron. Related myths, rituals and sites found expression in temple building activity and by 20th century, temples came to dominate the city skyline. In the context of these discussions, she raises some pertinent questions: Why does the 14th century *Kashikhand* emerge as the basis for prescription and definition of city's sanctified sites down till the present? When did Vishweshwar assume central importance in the religious scenario of Banaras? How supportive were the Muslim rulers for Hindu ritual practices? What were the tensions and liabilities when modernity contested with tradition in the colonial period?

The chapters have interesting and meaningful titles such as 'Authenticity and Pilgrimage', 'Palimpsests and Authority', 'Expansion and Invention' that show the author's engagement with delineating the authentic from the superimposed or not naturally evolved and 'to unpack or demystify' Banaras. She draws special attention to anachronisms related to the question of Vishweshwar temple's 'repeated' destruction. In the chapter titled 'Visions and Embellishments' she highlights several 'picturesque' illustrations and travel narratives of colonial Banaras that consolidated the image of the riverfront or the Ghats as a 'theater of Hinduism' and 'pure' Hindu city (p. 193). A very brief concluding chapter brings the book to a recent visit of the author to Banaras. She draws attention to the recently introduced Ganga *Arati* performed simultaneously at multiple Ghats as an institutionalized display of the rapidly growing spiritual tourism in the city. As such, it appears as yet another example of how traditions are being imagined and continued. The promise of a 'smart city' by the present government may bring a new set of imagination into play! It is indeed a vivid and articulate book encompassing diverse source material and critical reflection. It includes valuable maps, figures and plates but a comprehensive list of these along with their page numbers is missing which makes it cumbersome for the reader. For example, Fig 5.3 referred on page 84 was found on page 163. Incidentally, the year of the Temple sketch by Prinsep mentioned on these two pages are a decade apart! Also missing are references to the esoteric and folk traditions existing within the broader Hindu framework ranging from the Aghor to the popular Bir worship that are embedded in the city's ritual and built environment.

This book is a welcome addition and is sure to enrich our comprehension of historically changing multi-faceted nature of Banaras. It also unravels sources for explanation of myriad myths and mysteries, 'tradition' and legends connected with the city. Madhuri Desai's analysis of the city's invention and reinvention of itself is an important conclusion that helps explain its continued significance from the ancient to the contemporary times.

**Ranjana Sheel** is Professor in the Department of History, Faculty of Social Sciences, Banaras Hindu University, Banaras.

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