

banaras holy city

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PRESTEL

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To my family Ana, Matei and Eve

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banaras a tribute to the “shining one”

Klaus K. Klostermaier

Christopher Roche’s masterful Varanasi photographs bring back many personal memories. They truly capture the spirit of this timeless Indian city on the Ganges. Many of the same scenes could have been witnessed a century ago – or a thousand years ago. There is true life and real beauty in Roche’s pictures as well as a feeling of sadness and a sense of transience. Over and above the earthly day-to-day reality that they depict there is an intimation of the beyond. Many of the millions of pilgrims who visit the “Shining One” come in the hope that it will be their last journey.

Varanasi – or Benares / Banaras – also called Kashi: “The Shining One” and Avimukta: “The Never Forsaken (by Shiva)” has received over the ages more eulogies than many other cities in the world.¹ From the most ancient to the most recent time, praise has been heaped on this “Holy City” – so unlike any other.² As the great Indian savant Pandurang Vaman Kane wrote: “There is hardly any city in the world that can claim greater antiquity, greater continuity and greater popular veneration than Banaras. Banaras has been a holy city for at least thirty centuries. No city in India arouses the religious emotions of Hindus as much as Kashi does. To the Hindu mind it represents great and unbroken traditions of religious sanctity and learning. It is a miniature of Hindu life through the ages in all its great complexities and contradictions.”³

Varanasi, “the place between Varuna and Assi” – two small rivers that flow here into the Ganges, one forming the northern boundary of the city, the other the southern – has not only been the Hindus’ most holy city, eulogised throughout the ages, but has also found its Western admirers. Diana Eck, who as a student spent some years

in Banaras, wrote: “From its commanding position on the River Ganges, Banaras has witnessed the entire history of Indian civilization as it evolved in North India. From the ancient Aryan Kingdoms and their rivalries, through the golden Mauryan and Gupta empires, to the thousand years of Muslim and then British domination, the historical currents of the times have passed through Banaras.”⁴

The area now occupied by the city of Varanasi was probably not the original site of the famous Kashi of ancient records. The old city was largely situated in Rajghat, a plateau on the northern edge of present Varanasi. Archaeological excavations of the site have yielded evidence of settlements going back to circa 1300 BCE. From then on the place was continually settled.⁵ As the capital of the Kashis – mentioned in early Indian literature, from the *Rigveda*⁶ to the *Mahabharata*, in Buddhist and Jain sources – it must have played a dominant role in the Gangetic plains. Ancient documents hail it as “the chief city of all of India.”

From early on the kingdom of Kashi lived in rivalry with the neighbouring kingdom of Koshala – the latter eventually prevailed and Banaras became part of Koshala. Koshala in turn was challenged by the more powerful neighbouring kingdom of Magadha, which eventually absorbed both Kashi and Koshala. While the primary goal of these conquerors was presumably the wealth and strategic importance of the place, Kashi retained and even strengthened its reputation as a place of traditional learning and became a centre not only for Hinduism but also for Buddhism and Jainism. It was a matter of prestige for every sect and religious school to have a presence in Kashi.

The Buddha is reported to have spent several rainy seasons in Varanasi. Nearby Sarnath – the place at which he had “set the wheel of the dharma in motion” and adorned by a stupa in Ashoka’s time – remained for fifteen hundred years an important Buddhist centre. The Jains maintain that two of their twenty-four *tirthankaras* (teachers) were born in Banaras and they consider it one of their holy places as well. A Jain temple stands even now in the city.

Varanasi was famous in ancient India for its ashrams, its temples and its places of learning. The grammarian Patanjali (2nd century CE) taught in Varanasi and Shankara (8th century CE), the great reformer of Hindu monasticism, began his work here. Also Ramanuja (11th century CE), the foremost Shrivaisnava *acarya*, visited Varanasi and established a centre. Followers of Madhva, of Gorakhnath and of Basava – heads of various Hindu sects – settled in Banaras as well. Guru Nanak (1496–1539), the founder of Sikhism, spent time here. Tulsidas (1543?–1623) is believed to have composed the *Ramcharitmanas* – one of the most popular modern religious classics – in Varanasi.

During the rule of the Gupta (4th to 6th centuries CE), who initiated a Hindu renaissance, Shaivism became the predominant religion in Varanasi, but the other religions continued to flourish. Under the successors of the Gupta, Varanasi became a stronghold of Brahmanic Hinduism.

Under the Gahadvalas, who came to power in CE 1094, Banaras became the capital of a prosperous Hindu kingdom whose rulers saw themselves as protectors of its sacred places. King Govindachandra made large donations to the temples in the city and generously supported Hindu learning. He appointed Lakshmidhara, a learned Brahmin, his chief minister. He is the author of the famous *Kriyakalpataru*, a kind of encyclopaedia of mediaeval Hinduism in fourteen volumes. He also compiled all available information on over 350 temples of Kashi. At the time he wrote this work, Muslim armies had already conquered large parts of northern India. After Jaichand, the king of Banaras – a Muslim historian calls him “the chief of idolatry and perdition”⁷ – had been killed, the Muslim general Qutb-ud-din Aibak sacked the city in 1194. He destroyed nearly a thousand temples and built mosques on top of many. Muslim historians report that 1,400 camel loads of gold and silver were carried away as loot.

Undaunted, Hindus began rebuilding and a century later Banaras shone again with the golden pinnacles of its temples. In the early decades of the fourteenth century the temples were again destroyed – only to be rebuilt once more. In 1376 Firuz Shah ordered the destruction of Hindu temples and the building of large mosques in their place. In 1496 Sikandar Lodi had all the remaining Hindu temples in Banaras

destroyed and renamed the city *Mohammadabad*. A century later, however, under the more enlightened rule of Akbar the Great (1542–1605), two large Hindu temples were built: Vishveshvara (Shiva) and Bindu Madhava (Vishnu).

With Aurangzeb’s accession to the throne, the short phase of Muslim toleration ended. In 1659 he ordered the demolition of the temple of Krittivaseshvara and the construction of a large mosque on its site. In 1669 he also had the Vishveshvara and Bindu Madhava temples – built under the auspices of his father Akbar – destroyed and mosques erected in their place. However, Hindu life and learning was given a boost through the immigration of six Maharashtrian Brahmins with their families. One of them, Narayana Bhatta, organised the reconstruction of the Vishvanatha temple and composed a work in praise of Banaras, Gaya and Prayag, the famous *Tristhalisetu*. During this time new Hindu orders such as the Ramanandis and the Gorakhpantis established themselves in Banaras.

With the death of Aurangzeb in 1708 the power of the Muslim rulers in Delhi declined. In 1737 the city of Varanasi was declared a kingdom under the rule of Maharaja Balwant Singh, a Hindu. The city and the temples were rebuilt, largely with the assistance and support of Rajput and Mahratta nobility. In the second half of the eighteenth century the British gained increasing influence. Banaras was the first major city outside Bengal, which came under the control of the British East India Company. The company built some major roads through the centre of Banaras and also gave support to Christian missions. Several missionary societies started schools and built churches and hospitals from 1816 onwards. Great expectations were connected with the conversion of this centre of Hinduism to Christianity. These hopes were not fulfilled and Banaras regained more and more its position as the leading centre of Hinduism.

The many millions of pilgrims who come to Banaras every year are drawn to this city by its famous temples and the Ganges. Varanasi is the location of one of twelve *vyotirlingams* in which Shiva is forever present and also of one of the fifty-four *shaktipithas*, where Devi permanently dwells. Today Varanasi has about 23,000 *mandirs* (temples) and over fifty ghats (bathing places). The most conspicuous temples are dedicated to Shiva, whose primary abode Banaras is believed to be. The Vishvanatha Mandir, dedicated to the Universal Lord Shiva, is also known as the Golden Temple (the dome is covered with real gold). It is the first destination of pilgrims. Besides the numerous Shiva temples, there are also major sanctuaries dedicated to Vishnu, Durga, Hanuman and Narasimha. The Gopal Mandir is dedicated to Krishna. Varanasi is also a Jain

tirtha and is believed to be the birthplace of Parshvanatha, one of the founders of Jainism. The Muslim presence also cannot be overlooked: there are about a dozen major mosques – one of these still prominently occupies part of the area originally dedicated to the Lord of Kashia.

Among the ghats, the most famous are the Dashashwamedh and the Manikarnika. *Dashashwamedh* means “ten horse sacrifices”: Brahma, the Creator, performed at this place ten of these royal Vedic rituals. The benefits flowing from such sacrifices are immeasurable, and a pilgrim who takes a dip at this place – after giving a fee to a Brahmin – gains untold merit. Manikarnika Ghat – the “Diamond Ford” – is one of the *shaktipithas* sacred to the goddess and also the place where formerly *satis* – young women whose husbands had died – were submerged in the Ganges. It has also been for thousands of years a cremation ground. A person whose ashes are thrown into the Ganges from this place is sure to reach final liberation. There is also a Varuna Ghat, the place where the Varuna flows into the Ganges, and Assi Ghat, where the river Assi meets the Mother Ganga. At the Tulsi Ghat, Tulsidas is said to have composed his *Ramcharitmanas*. A statue of his patron deity Hanuman, the monkey-god, keeps guard over it.

According to traditional belief, a person who dies in Varanasi instantly attains *mukti*, final liberation from rebirth. Among the crowds of pilgrims, one can see many old people who hope to die here. Often they are carried on chairs or on stretchers by their relatives – too feeble to walk by themselves. At the Manikarnika Ghat one can always see smouldering pyres. The ashes are thrown into the Ganges. Since wood for cremation is expensive, incineration is often incomplete. One can see dead bodies of humans and cows floating down the holy river. The Ganges – India’s longest and holiest river – is also India’s most polluted. For decades efforts have been made to clean it up.

Today’s Banaras is also a modern metropolis with a population of 1.5 million people, with an airport, a railway station and several bus depots. It is home to many academic, administrative and cultural institutions and the location of important publishers of Hindu literature. It is famous for its silk and other textile industries. Every major Hindu religious order has its Banaras branch, and the adherents of contemporary celebrity gurus such as Anandamayi Ma and Sathya Sai Baba have centres here as well. Banaras attracted famous ascetics and yogis, such as Trailanga Swami and Chote Paramahansa, reputed to have lived 270 and 300 years, respectively.⁸ The great twentieth-century scholar Mahamahopadhyaya Pandit Gopinath Kaviraj settled in Varanasi, adding to its fame as a place of higher Hindu learning.

Foreigners have also felt the peculiar attraction of Banaras. E. B. Havell, who revived Indian painting and founded the Government School of Art, was charmed by Varanasi, “one of the extraordinary cities of the East.”⁹ The irreverent American writer Mark Twain found it exceptional: “Benares” he wrote “is older than history, older than tradition, older than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together.”¹⁰ Count Hermann Keyserling devoted a large part of his *Indian Travel Diary* to Banaras. He wrote: “Benares is holy. Europe, grown superficial, hardly understands such truths anymore.” And: “I feel nearer here than I have ever done to the heart of the world; here I feel every day as if soon, perhaps even today, I would receive the grace of supreme revelation.”¹¹

It is to this tradition that Christopher Roche – renowned photographer of faith traditions – belongs, attracted by the colours and sights of timeless Banaras. In his photographs he captures the intense belief that is living in the city and the variety and beauty of its sacred architecture. His work is a fitting tribute to the “Shining One.”

- 1 As a source for the historical information regarding the importance of Banaras for Hindus and details on ghats and *mandirs* I have mainly used *Tirtha-Angka*, a publication of *Kalyan* (Hindi), Gorakhpur 1957. Information on the history and the present state of Banaras can also be found on the Internet.
- 2 There are a number of *Mahatmyas* (eulogies) of Varanasi in Sanskrit literature. The *Kashi Khanda* of the *Skanda Purana* – a lengthy work from the fourteenth century – describes numerous holy spots.
- 3 Pandurang Vaman Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*, vol. 4, Pune 1953, p. 618.
- 4 Diana L. Eck, *Banaras: City of Light*, New York 1982, p. 43. See also “Banaras” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York 1987, vol. 2, pp. 57–59.
- 5 A. K. Narain and T. N. Roy, *Excavations at Rajghat, 1957–58; 1960–1965*, Varanasi 1976.
- 6 Kuber Nath Sukul, author of *Varanasi Down the Ages*, Patna 1974, thinks that the Kashis were a non-Aryan people who were subdued by the Vedic Aryans.
- 7 Hasan Nizami, *Taju-I Ma-asir*, in H. M. Elliot and John Dowson, *The History of India: As Told by Its Own Historians*, vol. 2, London 1869, p. 223.
- 8 See Sukul, *Varanasi Down the Ages*, pp. 217–22.
- 9 E. B. Havell, *Benares: The Sacred City; Sketches of Hindu Life and Religion*, 2nd. ed., London 1900.
- 10 Mark Twain, *Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World*, Hartford 1897, p. 36.
- 11 Count Hermann A. Keyserling, *Indian Travel Diary of a Philosopher*, trans. J. Holroyd-Reece, 2nd ed., Mumbai and New Delhi 1999, pp. 130, 133, 135. Count Keyserling undertook his Indian travels between 1911 and 1914. Varanasi occupies 88 pages of the 251-page work.

banaras light of devotion

*Are there not many holy places on this earth?
Yet which of them would equal in the balance one speck of Kashi's dust?*

– Kashi Khanda

Christopher Roche

I first travelled to Banaras, or Varanasi as it is referred to today, in 1989, halfway through a four-month trip across India that stretched from Kashmir to Kerala. Although my stay in the city was brief I came away with the abiding impression that all the chaos and colour of the subcontinent was condensed in this one place. Little did I know then that this impression would draw me back to Banaras several times and inspire a book of photographs.

Since that first trip the modern city has grown rapidly; new hotels have sprung up to cater to the tour groups around the Cantonment area and the streets have become ever more choked with cars, rickshaws and tourist buses.

However, along the banks of the Ganges and down the *galis* of the old quarter little has changed. It is true that many hospices for the sick and elderly have been replaced by backpackers' hotels, but the *sadhus*, cows and pilgrims still all compete for space through the narrow maze of alleys as they always have and life along the ghats thrives in all its chaotic splendour.

It is this chaotic splendour in both daily and devotional life that forms the focus of this book. I say both daily and devotional life yet it is quite impossible to separate the two in Banaras. This is the holiest city in India and it lies alongside its holiest river, the Ganges. Devotional life infuses every aspect of daily life, with the pilgrims following strict rituals and the Brahmins, boatmen and shopkeepers fulfilling their every need.

More than a million pilgrims visit each year and over 50,000 Brahmins live in the city. Every devout Hindu hopes to visit Banaras at least once in a lifetime. To bathe in the Ganges, which is especially auspicious, is to cleanse one's sins. To die here automatically guarantees *moksha*, an escape from *samsara*, the greatest spiritual goal of any believer. For Banaras is believed to be Hinduism's greatest *tirtha*, crossing place or ford, from this world, with its endless cycle of rebirth, to one of liberation. So the devout, the sick and the elderly all make their way to this ancient place and for many this will be their final journey. Kashi, as the city is more fondly known by the locals, is also the home of Shiva, the Auspicious One. He is the "Bearer of the Ganga," his

matted hair breaking the fall of her waters which would have otherwise shattered the earth as she descended from the heavens. Having left his meditative home on Mount Kailash he founded Banaras, where he is Lord of All, dwelling everywhere and in everything.

The city is a kaleidoscope, a place where all the clichés of India ring true but do not come close to unveiling the whole truth. Each time I returned to it over the years I hoped to gain a deeper understanding of the place and its people, to decipher some of its rituals and traditions, but each time Kashi simply showed me yet another of its endless faces whilst keeping its beating heart a mystery.

Habitually during my stays I woke before dawn to witness the sun rising above the plains on the far side of the Ganges, colouring the morning mist as it did so. I walked the ghats or took a boat ride and watched the rituals that started with the awakening day: morning *puja* on Assi Ghat, young Vedic students being led through a thorough regime of yoga and, of course, the pilgrims taking their first dip in Ganga Maa for the day.

This book opens with images from these early morning wanderings, and then moves into scenes from the *galis*, the labyrinth of narrow alleyways that run through the old quarter of the city, too narrow for cars but not for the motorbikes, mules, cows, shopkeepers and pilgrims that crowd them. Part of the old city is taken over by the silk-weaving industry, traditionally run by Muslims who sit peacefully alongside their Hindu neighbours.

On certain days I employed the services of Vikki, who occasionally acted as my guide, translator and friend. He would explain the significance of some of the more mystifying rituals I witnessed. Whenever I asked him what I owed for his time, his reply would always be “Whatever your heart tells you.” Like everything else in Banaras, this was fluid, open to interpretation and intangible.

The major part of this book captures scenes from the ghats, the long stretch of steps along the west bank of the Ganges. Here we visit private and intimate moments of prayer alongside great public and chaotic spectacles of devotion in festivals such as Chhath Puja and Usha Arghya. We encounter several resident *sadhus* who have, to varied extents, given up the material life and made Kashi their home. We glimpse the symbols and murals of Shiva that act as shrines throughout the city.

Through all these scenes flows the inescapable presence of Ganga Maa, the holy river winding its way through Banaras, having flowed down from the Himalayas to the plains. The Ganges offers a means of transport to the pilgrims, a livelihood to the boatmen, a bathing place to the locals, a playground for the kids, an outlet for the

city’s effluence and, of course, a source of purification to the devoted. It is said to cleanse away the sins, not only of this life but also of all previous lives.

Inevitably we are led to the great cremation ground alongside Manikarnika Ghat. No city is more famous than Banaras for death. The funeral pyres here burn all day and night, throughout the year. Death has even become a marketing tool with guesthouses advertising that they are close to the cremation site. It is common to hear guides touting for business mention that “burning is learning” or “cremation is education.” Locals, tourists, pilgrims and Doms, the caste of untouchables who manage the cremation ground, all watch this great stage on which the final journey takes place. Endless piles of wood are brought in by land and by river, each piece is carefully weighed before being priced and traded. Here finally the devotees may escape the endless cycle of rebirth and *samsara*, crossing the *tirtha* to *moksha*, a final formless liberation.

Banaras is a photographer’s dream, with the great human drama of life and death played out daily along the ghats. There is a great paradox here, however. Although this drama is played out so publically and is so matter-of-fact, at the same time it appears so impenetrable. I have made an attempt in this book to capture a sense of the great human drama that is Kashi: the fragrance of incense, the chanting of devotional hymns, the swirl of colourful saris, the heat glaring off the ghats, the light shimmering on the Ganges, the stillness, the crowds, the teeming life and the burning bodies. Of course, photography cannot come close to capturing or unwrapping all of this, but perhaps it can give a taste. For ultimately Banaras cannot be understood, it can only be experienced.

Having photographed many ancient faith traditions in other parts of the world and seen them suffer from the forces of globalisation, mass tourism and political oppression, I found that, in contrast, the devotional life in Banaras appears capable of absorbing all that comes its way.

Slipping into a boat and drifting silently downriver and into the cloak of night after photographing the cremation ground at Manikarnika Ghat, with the funeral pyres still burning in my eyes, a line from Joseph Conrad came to mind: “This land, this river, this jungle, the very arch of this blazing sky, appear to me so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thought...”

“Impenetrable to human thought” indeed, but unlike Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, my experience of Kashi, as I hope these photographs show, was of a land and river blazing in the strength of its faith and illuminating everything with its own mysterious and ancient light.

banaras holy city