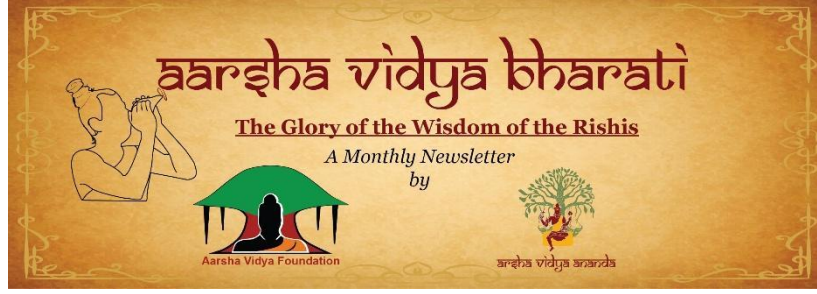

Aarsha Vidya Bharati – Sep 2023

Bhadrapada - Ashvina 2080

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A trip to Varanasi - The spiritual capital of India

By Sowmya Krishnan, Hyderabad

Considered to be the oldest city in India, Varanasi, also known as Benares, Banaras and Kashi, is situated on the banks of river Ganga, in the state of Uttar Pradesh. The name Varanasi was derived from Varuna and Assi, the two tributaries of the holy Ganga, by which the city is bound on its northern and southern borders. A cradle of Indian spiritual and Vedic culture, Kashi is constantly bustling with activities related to art, culture, religion, spiritualism, mysticism, yoga and philosophy. An abode of Lord Shiva and Parvati, legend has it that the city was founded by Lord Shiva himself.

Every aspect of the city has a very deep spiritual connotation, which is beautifully described in the *Kaśīpañcakam* of Śrī Śankarā. *Kaśī* denotes *Aṭman*, the absolute awareness in which everything shines. While describing each aspect of the city, the *pañcakam* states

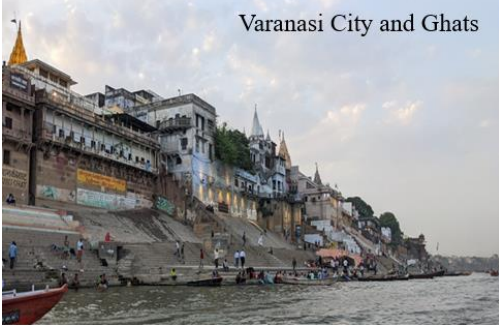
‘*sa’kaśīka’ham’nijabodharūpa’* meaning ‘I am that city of *Kaśī* in the form of pure awareness’. The supreme peace that is the quietude of the mind (*manonivṛttiḥ*) is equated to the



Manikarnika Ghat, the flow of the waking consciousness (*jñānapravaḥa*) with the divine Ganga, the all-pervading witness or *sakṣī* who is the inner ruler, with Lord Shiva, and the intellect which is shining as the presiding deity (*adhiraḥamaṇa*) in the five mistaken identities of every individual, as the consort of Shiva.

It is home to the Kashi Vishwanath temple, which is one of the twelve Jyotirlinga Shiva temples in India. A lingam represents the formless form of the Lord. It embodies the beginningless and the endless, symbolising the limitless and infinite nature of Shiva. Knowing oneself as *kaśī* and abstaining from every identification, one can decimate the sheaths, thus ending the apparent difference between the individual and the Supreme Being.

The other notable temples in Varanasi that draw pilgrims and tourists alike are



the Annapurna temple, Kalabhairav temple (Kotwal of Varanasi), New Vishwanath temple at Banaras Hindu University, Sankat Mochan Hanuman temple, Tulsi Manas Mandir, Durga temple, Kaudi Mata (Gavalamma), Bindhu Madhav, Dundi Ganapati, and the revered Kashi Vishalakshi temple. For the *upāsaka*-s, there are many more like the Batuk Bhairav and Kamakhya temples. The activating power and energies of the

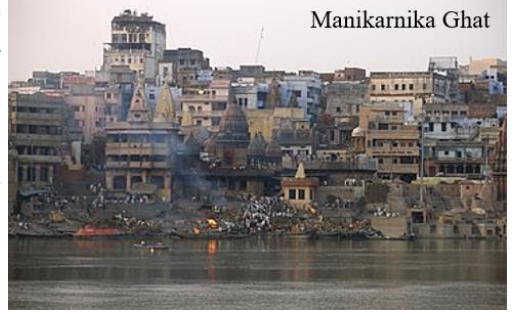
deities in these temples are unparalleled, leading to a state of exceptional joy, calmness and equanimity of the mind. It recharged me with dynamism, leaving behind a lingering sense of complete peace and tranquility, long after the visit. The first *śloka* of the *Kaśī Viśvanātha Suprabhātam* summarizes the must visit temples and places for a pilgrim.

विश्वेशं माधवं धुण्डिं दण्डपाणिं च भैरवम् ।

वन्दे काशीं गुहां गङ्गां भवानीं मणिकर्णिकाम् ॥

viśveśam mādhavam dhunḍim daṇḍapāṇim ca bhairavam |
vande kaśīm guhām gangām bhavanīm maṇikarṇikām ||

Varanasi has more than eighty-four Ghats which are world-renowned embankments along the river bank, used by pilgrims for ritual ablutions. Few of them are exclusively demarcated for cremation purposes. The most prominent Ghats are the Dashashwamedh Ghat, Assi Ghat, Kedar Ghat, Lalita Ghat, Manikarnika Ghat and Harishchandra Ghat, the last two being the significant ones known for conducting the crematory rituals.



We believe that if a deceased's ashes are immersed in the Ganges at Varanasi, the *jīva* is liberated from the cycle of rebirth. As a visitor to the crematory ghats, it is ironical to note an eerie feeling of serenity engulfing the mind, with no remnant of fear of physical death. This could be because one cannot but reflect on the philosophy that we are not the mortal bones and flesh, but the eternal indestructible *Ātmā*. As mentioned in the *Bhagavad Gītā*-verse 2.18, the material bodies have an end and are perishable (*antavantaḥ ime dehāḥ*), while the embodied *Ātmā* is immeasurable and indestructible.



The magnificent Ganga Aarti ceremony, performed at the Dashashwamedh Ghat every evening is an audio-visual treat to watch - the perfectly synchronized actions of the priests, against the backdrop of the majestic river.

The land of Varanasi through its several temples, Ghats and the Ganges, offers to every *mumuksū* an opportunity to further what they are working towards. The visit provides a platform to practice and continue on the journey towards *Īśvarapraṇidhāna*, a spiritual act of surrendering the self completely to the Divine, and trusting the wisdom of the Divine to guide every aspect of one's life. No wonder that every genuine seeker wants to visit this holy place atleast once during their birth. Once in a lifetime experience, indeed!

[Please click here to access the playlist of the teaching of Kashi Panchakam by Swamini Brahmaṇḍanandaji](#)



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