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## Religious Significance and Cultural Heritage of Varanasi City

**ShouvonikBala**

Assistant Professor

Vidyasagar College for Women

**Abstract:** Varanasi is among the oldest and holiest cities in India, characterized by a multifaceted religious identity deeply rooted in spiritual traditions. Over millennia, it has evolved as a centre for diverse religious beliefs, rituals, and pilgrimages. In Hinduism, Varanasi is known as "Kashi" or the "Indestructible City," where death is regarded as a path to salvation, granting the city a unique position in India's religious landscape. The city's religious identity revolves around the Ganges River and its ghats, where daily pilgrim activities include bathing, worship, and ritual performance. The belief that performing last rites at Manikarnika and Harishchandrighats leads to salvation further establishes Varanasi as a distinctive spiritual centre. The Kashi Vishwanath Temple, one of the twelve Jyotirlingas and a major Shiva shrine, attracts thousands of devotees daily. Surrounding temples, ashrams, and religious institutions enhance the city's sacred atmosphere. While primarily a Hindu centre, Varanasi also maintains significant historical connections to Buddhism and Jainism. Nearby Sarnath is the site of Gautama Buddha's first sermon, a pivotal event in Buddhist history. The region is also sacred as the birthplace of several Jain Tirthankaras. Consequently, Varanasi represents a living religious and cultural landscape where multiple traditions, rituals, and pilgrimages coexist. It remains one of the world's most important holy cities, integrating religious beliefs, spiritual practices, and historical heritage.

**Index Term:** Sacred Space, Religious Landscape, Cultural Pluralism, Religious harmony, Varanasi, Sarnath,

### INTRODUCTION:

India is a nation that believes in the ideal of unity in diversity. It is home to diverse religions, cultures, traditions, ethnic values, and customs. A vast majority of Indians identify themselves with a religion. Therefore, religion has been an integral part of India's culture and heritage throughout its history. According to the 2011 census, 79.8% of India's population follows Hinduism, 14.2% Islam, 2.3% Christianity, 1.7% Sikhism, 0.7% Buddhism, and 0.4% Jainism. Although Islamic political India embodies the ideal of unity in diversity, encompassing a wide range of religions, cultures, traditions, ethnic values, and customs. The majority of Indians identify with a religion, making religion an integral component of the nation's culture and heritage throughout history. According to the 2011 census, 79.8% of the population follows Hinduism, 14.2% Islam, 2.3% Christianity, 1.7% Sikhism, 0.7% Buddhism, and 0.4% Jainism. Islamic political and military expansion began with the conquest of Sindh in 712 CE under Muhammad bin Qasim. Subsequent campaigns by Mahmud of Ghazni in the 11th century focused on plunder, while Muhammad Ghori's 12th-century invasion established long-term Muslim rule, culminating in the Delhi Sultanate and the consolidation of Islam in India (Jha, R. 2018). Numerous holy sites exist across India, but Varanasi is particularly renowned for its principal religious sites. The city represents a mosaic of Indian culture, reflecting the diversity and uniqueness of regional cultures (Kutlutürk, C. 2013). As a living manifestation of Indian culture and heritage, Varanasi preserves its multi-ethnic heritage, ancient educational systems, religious

beliefs, rituals, worship practices, architecture, and sacred sites. It stands as a remarkable testament to a living heritage of faith transmitted across generations (Singh, R. P., & Dar, V., 2008). orces Varanasi's role as a major centre of Hindu spiritual life and devotional practice. (Diana L. Eck, 1982). Similarly, Rana P. B. Singh (1993, 2016) analyses the sacred landscape of Varanasi through the lens of cultural geography, emphasising sacred space, ritual circuits, and pilgrimage routes that reinforce the city's religious identity. Studies focusing on social perception and cultural values indicate that sacred places carry deep emotional and symbolic meanings for both residents and visitors. R. P. Singh (2009) notes that Varanasi's sacredness is embedded not only in physical structures but also in collective memory, religious sentiments, and everyday practices. According to Richard W. Butler (1980), tourist destinations develop through different stages over time. Heritage cities like Varanasi attract global visitors through their rich cultural and spiritual heritage, while interactions between tourists and local communities promote cultural exchange and appreciation of sacred traditions. The religious landscape of Varanasi is not limited to Hindu traditions; it also reflects the presence of Islamic, Buddhist, Jain, and Christian communities that have contributed to the city's multicultural and sacred character. Rana P. B. Singh (2009) notes that Muslim settlements and religious institutions are an important part of the city's urban structure, particularly in traditional neighbourhoods known for Islamic architecture and weaving crafts. The coexistence of mosques and temples reflects the city's syncretic cultural landscape. Research on the Buddhist landscape mainly focuses on nearby Sarnath, where Gautama Buddha delivered his first sermon, known as the Dharmachakra Pravartana. Scholars such as Diana L. Eck (1982) and Singh (2016) note that Sarnath has become a major global pilgrimage centre, attracting Buddhist pilgrims from countries such as Sri Lanka, Japan, Thailand, and Tibet. The presence of monasteries, stupas, and international temples reflects the global Buddhist cultural landscape associated with Varanasi. Nolan Michael L. and Nolan Sidney (1992) discuss how pilgrimage destinations serve both spiritual and tourism purposes, attracting diverse groups with varying motivations. Their framework suggests that religious tourism creates opportunities for intercultural interaction between visitors and host communities. In Varanasi, this interaction often manifests through ritual participation. Historical and philosophical traditions have played an important role in fostering religious coexistence in Varanasi. The teachings of Kabir promoted universal spiritual values beyond Hindu-Muslim divisions. Scholars note that the Bhakti and Sufi traditions helped develop a syncretic culture in the city, encouraging dialogue, tolerance, and shared devotional practices among different communities (Singh, 2009). The cultural landscape of Sarnath highlights Buddhism's role in promoting pluralistic values in the region. The presence of Buddhist monuments, rituals, and pilgrimage activities has helped create a cultural environment that encourages intercultural dialogue and peaceful coexistence among different religious communities (Tiwari, 2024). Later Sikh history further strengthened the relationship between the Sikh community and the city. Studies note that Guru Tegh Bahadur visited Varanasi in the seventeenth century, and the site associated with his stay later became an important Sikh shrine in the Nichibagh area (McLeod, 2009).

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:**

This study examines the religious and cultural significance of Varanasi, one of India's oldest sacred cities. It analyses the spatial distribution and cultural roles of various religious institutions—including temples, mosques, monasteries, gurudwaras, and churches—in shaping the city's sacred landscape. The research also investigates the significance of the Ganges River and its network of ghats in the development of pilgrimage traditions and ritual practices. Furthermore, it highlights the historical and spiritual importance of nearby centres such as Sarnath in the dissemination of Buddhism. The overall objective is to understand how diverse religious traditions collectively contribute to Varanasi's pluralistic cultural landscape and religious harmony.

### **METHODOLOGY:**

The study utilises secondary data primarily from the Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, focusing on the 2011 Census. District- and city-level data on the religious composition of Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, Buddhists, and Sikhs were collected. Additional information was obtained from government reports, academic publications, and research studies addressing the cultural and religious geography of Varanasi.

The collected data were analysed within the frameworks of cultural and urban geography. This approach elucidates how religious diversity influences Varanasi's spatial organisation, social

interactions, and identity. The study further examines the impact of pilgrimage, religious institutions, and historical development on the city's religious landscape.

## **RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE AND CULTURAL HERITAGE OF VARANASI**

Varanasi's religious composition is predominantly Hindu, reflecting its longstanding identity as a major sacred centre in the Hindu world. Recent demographic estimates indicate that Hindus constitute approximately 84.52% to 85.7% of the population, shaping the cultural landscape through temples, rituals, festivals, and pilgrimage activities along the Ganges riverfront. Muslims form the second-largest religious community, comprising about 13.9% to 14.88% of the population, and contribute significantly to the city's socio-economic and cultural life, particularly through traditional crafts such as the Banarasi silk industry. Other religious groups, including Christians (0.21%), Jains (0.05%), Buddhists (0.03%), and Sikhs (0.09%), represent smaller proportions but enhance the city's pluralistic and multi-religious character. Overall, Varanasi exemplifies a predominantly Hindu sacred city that accommodates diverse religious traditions within its historical urban fabric. The city contains approximately 3,300 Hindu temples, 1,388 Muslim places of worship, 45 Sikh sites, 11 Buddhist sites, 4 Jain places of worship, and numerous relics of folk deities, forming a comprehensive sacred landscape (Singh, 2009). Its ancient temples, riverside ghats, traditional buildings, narrow alleys, unplanned residential and commercial growth, sacred wetlands, parks, and educational institutions collectively create a mosaic of land use. Varanasi is also famous for its classical music, dance, and art forms, as well as its rich tradition of learning and philosophy. The city's unique rituals, festivals, and crafts, such as Banarasi silk weaving, contribute to its distinct cultural identity, making Varanasi a living symbol of India's diverse and enduring heritage (Suman.p, etal.2014).

## **HINDU SACRED GEOGRAPHY AND THE SPIRITUAL IMPORTANCE OF VARANASI:**

In Hindu sacred geography, Varanasi is regarded as a cosmic city and celestial archetype symbolising the spiritual centre of the universe. Its sacred landscape—comprising temples, ghats along the Ganges River, and pilgrimage routes—reflects the divine order described in texts such as the Skanda Purana. The Kashi Vishwanath Temple serves as the symbolic spiritual axis connecting the earthly and divine realms. Tradition holds that Lord Shiva, a principal deity in Hinduism, founded the city, rendering it a significant site for spiritual liberation (moksha). According to the Puranas, particularly the Skanda Purana, death in Varanasi guarantees moksha, which accounts for the large number of pilgrims visiting annually (Singh, 2009). Among the most important Shiva temples in Varanasi are the Kashi Vishwanath Temple, one of the twelve Jyotirlingas in India; the Vishwanath Temple in central Benares; the Omkareshwar Temple in the north; and the Kedareshwar Temple in the south. These three temples—the Omkareshwar, Vishwanath, and Kedareshwar—are considered the three prongs of Lord Shiva's trident upon which the city of Kashi stands.

Kashi is famous for the replicas of the pan-Indian sacred space. Saptapuri, Chardham, and the replica of the twelve Jyotirlingas are in Varanasi. Varanasi is not only the city of Shiva but also the city of both Shiva and Shakti (feminine power). The twelve Aditya forms of Surn God, the Ashtabhairava (Bhairava, a terrifying form of Lord Shiva), the temples of Vishnu, the temples of the 64 Yoginis, and the 56 forms of Ganesha are located and worshipped here. The centuries-old pilgrimages, such as Panchakroshi, Nagar Pradakshina, Abhimukyatra, and Antahgrihayatra, have given this place its unique character. This place has become a cultural place of Indian civilisation. Therefore, the residents of Varanasi do not need to visit any pilgrimage site, as all the gods and goddesses reside in the sacred city.

The Ganges flows north here. Symbolically, the flow from south (Yamdura) to north (Himalayas, Kailash, the place of Shiva) represents the flow from death to life. This unique directional change in the river's course led to the development of the city's significance. Varanasi has 84 important ghats and 96 holy pilgrimage sites, from the confluence of the Ganges-Varna in the north to the confluence of the Ashi-Ganga in the south. According to Hindu mythology, these 84 ghats are compared to 8.4 million biological species (yonis). It is believed that each ghat frees people from the pain of the birth of one million biological species (yonis), helps wash away people's sins, and helps attain salvation (Singh 2009). Of the 84 ghats, five are considered the most sacred - Assi Ghat, Dashashwamedh

Ghat, Adi Keshava Ghat, Panchganga Ghat, and Manikarnika Ghat. Together they are called the Panchatirth.

Varanasi has a large number of sacred ponds (kunds or sarovars) that are an important element of its traditional sacred landscape. These sacred water bodies are closely associated with Hindu mythology, religious purification, and pilgrimage. Durga Kund, Laxmikund, Lolar Kund, Ramkund, Kapildhara, Manikarnika Kund, Bakaria Kund. Traditionally, these kunds were an integral part of the sacred water bodies of Varanasi, complementing the ghats along the Ganges River. Today, they represent important cultural heritage sites that reflect the city's historical relationship between religion, water, and urban space.

### **ISLAMIC LANDSCAPE: THE SPIRITUAL IMPORTANCE OF VARANASI:**

Although Varanasi is primarily recognised as a major centre of Hinduism, Islam has significantly influenced the city's cultural and social landscape. Muslim communities have been present since the medieval period, particularly during the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal eras. Islam's notable contribution includes fostering cultural syncretism and interreligious dialogue. The teachings of saints such as Kabir emphasised unity beyond religious boundaries, bridging Hindu and Muslim communities. Bhakti and Sufi traditions promoted tolerance, devotion, and shared spiritual values. Additionally, Islam has contributed to the city's economic and cultural life; Muslim artisans and weavers have historically played a vital role in producing the renowned Banarasi silk sarees, which are globally recognised as an important cultural heritage product of Varanasi.

The period of Muslim rule in Varanasi was marked by significant conflict. Due to religious fanaticism and the transformation of "Darul Harb" into "Darul Islam," numerous Hindu and Buddhist temples were destroyed, and many members of these communities were forcibly converted to Islam. In many instances, mosques were constructed on the sites of demolished Hindu temples. For example, the Gyanvapi Mosque was built after the destruction of the Bishwanath temple in 1669, and the Masjid-e-Ajamgiri replaced the Krittivasheshvara temple, also known as Haratirath, in the same year. The Masjid-e-Firoz Shahi near Bakariakunda, the Dhair Kangoora mosque (likely the oldest mosque in the city, built in 1071), was constructed after demolishing the Vishnu temple, and the Bindumadhab temple was destroyed. The Aurangzeb Mosque, or Dharohar Mosque, was built in 1673. Additionally, some Buddhist shrines were demolished, with mosques erected in various parts of the city. Two mosques near Rajghat fort and Telianala were probably built on the sites of a Buddhist temple and a temple-monastery complex (Medhasananda Swami, 2002, "Varanasi at the crossing roads", Vol-1). Nevertheless, the history of Hindu-Muslim relations in Varanasi is not solely defined by conflict, conversions, and temple destruction. The coexistence of these communities remains a significant aspect, with Hindu and Muslim populations living in fraternal harmony.

The coexistence and interdependence of Hindu and Muslim communities in Varanasi can be metaphorically compared to the Ganges and Yamuna rivers. Despite their distinct origins and courses, these rivers merge and flow as one, symbolising the unity of these communities (Mishra, R. C., et.al 2017).

Almost the entire old heritage of Varanasi was destroyed forever during the rule of Aurangzeb. Later, after Aurangzeb's death in 1707, the revival of Benares began, mainly at the hands of the Maratha kings, landlords, and nobles. Later, wealthy people from across India built temples, monasteries, and ghats, and Varanasi regained its lost glory.

### **BUDDHIST SACRED LANDSCAPE: THE SPIRITUAL IMPORTANCE OF VARANASI:**

Buddhism has a very ancient and important connection with Varanasi. The Buddhist holy site of Sarnath, a large park located just 13 km northeast of Varanasi, is considered the birthplace of Buddhism. Sarnath is believed to be the place where Gautama Buddha first preached Buddhism to his five disciples. According to Buddhist tradition, he came to Sarnath after attaining enlightenment in Bodh Gaya, and it was here that he preached his first sermon in the Deer Park, setting the "wheel of Dharma" in motion. Buddhist pilgrims flock to the region every year. The earliest archaeological remains at Sarnath date to around 300 BCE during the reign of Ashoka. Archaeological evidence suggests the existence of three major stupas from the Mauryan period. The oldest, the Dharmarajika Stupa, once contained a relic of Gautama Buddha, though today only its foundations remain after it was demolished in the eighteenth century. The Dhamek Stupa, standing about 39 m high, marks the place where the Buddha delivered his first sermon, while the Chaukhandi Stupa commemorates the

Buddha's meeting with his first disciples. Excavations have also revealed several monasteries and temples, including the ancient Mulagandhakuti Vihara, near which the famous Sarnath Buddha statue depicting the Dharmachakra Pravartana Mudra was discovered. The nearby Ashokan Pillar, whose lion capital is now India's national emblem, was also found here (Sinha, A., 1991).

Another important site in Varanasi is Bakariya Kund, an ancient archaeological location containing remains of a Buddhist vihara, shrine pillars, and other ruins. Historical accounts suggest that it once had temples dedicated to the Sun God (Uttararka) and later functioned as a Buddhist monastery. The site was reportedly destroyed during the reign of Firoz Shah Tughlaq in 1375 CE. Later surveys by scholars such as Shering (1863) and Edwin Greaves (1901) documented the presence of ruins, mosques, and tombs in the area.

### **JAINISM IN VARANASI AND THE SPIRITUAL IMPORTANCE OF VARANASI:**

Varanasi occupies a prominent position in the sacred geography of Jainism, recognised as the birthplace of four Tirthankaras, including the 23rd Tirthankara, Parshvanatha (Jaini, 1998). The city hosts several key pilgrimage sites that reflect its enduring religious significance. The Parshvanath Jain Temple, traditionally identified as Parshvanatha's birthplace, serves as a central locus of devotion (Kumar, 2010). Additional important sites include temples dedicated to Suparshvanatha (7th Tirthankara) at Bhadaini, Chandraprabha (8th Tirthankara) at Chandrapuri, and Shreyansanath (11th Tirthankara) at Sarnath. Collectively, these sacred spaces underscore the historical depth and spiritual centrality of Varanasi within Jain religious practice and its broader cultural landscape. These associations anchor a distinct strand of Jain devotional geography within the broader multi-religious landscape of the city. Varanasi's Jain heritage is manifested through a constellation of temples — such as those at Bhelupur, Bhadaini, Chandravati (near Varanasi), and Sarnath — which commemorate the birthplaces and kalyāṇakas of these Tirthankaras and continue to draw pilgrims.

### **SHIKHISM AND THE SPIRITUAL IMPORTANCE OF VARANASI:**

Guru Nanak visited Varanasi on two significant occasions. His first visit is believed to have occurred around 1502, when he arrived as a young pilgrim. Later, in 1506, he returned to the city to engage in spiritual discussions with the scholars and sages of Banaras. During this visit, particularly on the occasion of the Maha Shivaratri festival, Guru Nanak preached his teachings, emphasising devotion to one God, equality, and the rejection of ritualistic practices.

The connection between Sikhism and Varanasi continued in later years. The ninth Sikh Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur, visited the city in 1666 and stayed at Asu Bhairava Sangat (Nichibagh). The same location is also associated with the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, who is believed to have stayed there during his time in Varanasi. Guru Gobind Singh also encouraged the study of Sanskrit among his followers and sent five of his disciples to the city to study. This tradition continues today through the Guru Nanak Sanskrit Vidyalaya located in Bisheshvarganj.

Varanasi also contains several important Sikh religious sites, including three sacred congregational centres known as *Sangats*, a monastery in Ramnagar that is believed to preserve an original copy of the Guru Granth Sahib, and a prominent gurudwara near Augharnath-ka-Takia. In the modern period, the Sikh community in Varanasi largely consists of families who migrated from West Punjab (now in Pakistan) after the Partition of India. Today, the Sikh population of the city is estimated at around 5,000, contributing to the city's diverse religious and cultural fabric (Singh, R. 2009).

### **CHRISTIANITY AND THE SPIRITUAL IMPORTANCE OF VARANASI:**

The Christian cultural landscape of Varanasi is expressed through churches, missionary institutions, and religious organisations. The first Christian shrine on the city's religious map was built by local Christians under the East India Company; most of whom were British people, British soldiers, government officials and some European businessmen. One of the earliest Christian establishments was St. Mary's Church, constructed in 1812 to serve British troops and residents of the cantonment area.

The establishment of churches such as St. Mary's and St. Thomas introduced new architectural forms and religious spaces into the city's sacred urban morphology. These churches, generally located in the cantonment and civil lines areas, reflected the spatial segregation typical of colonial urban planning. Besides St. Thomas Church at Girijaghar crossing, near Godoulia; Assembly of Believers Church at Teliyabagh; St. Paul Church at Sigra; Bethlehem Gospel at Mahmoorganj; St. Joseph at Lohta; and

St. John Church (D.L.W.), other well-known churches in Varanasi include St. Thomas Church at Girijaghar crossing, near Godoulia; Assembly of Believers Church at Teliyabagh; St. Paul Church at Sigra; Bethlehem Gospel at Mahmoorganj; St. Joseph at Lohta; and St. John Church (D.L.W.). Although Christians constitute a small minority in Varanasi, their churches, schools, and missionary activities have played a meaningful role in shaping the city's pluralistic cultural landscape and in promoting social service traditions.

### **FINDINGS:**

The analysis of Varanasi's religious landscape highlights the city as one of the most significant sacred urban centres in South Asia, where religion plays a fundamental role in shaping spatial organisation, cultural practices, and socio-economic life. The study demonstrates that the religious geography of Varanasi is predominantly structured around Hindu sacred traditions, particularly through the ritual landscape associated with the River Ganga, the network of ghats, and major temples such as Kashi Vishwanath Temple. These sacred spaces function not only as centres of worship but also as focal points of pilgrimage activities that sustain the city's spiritual identity.

At the same time, the research reveals that the religious landscape of Varanasi is not exclusively Hindu but reflects a long history of religious plurality. The presence of Buddhist heritage sites in Sarnath, Jain pilgrimage centres, Islamic mosques and settlements, Sikh gurudwaras, and Christian churches illustrates the city's complex multicultural character. These religious institutions contribute to a diverse cultural environment where different faith communities coexist and interact within the same urban space.

From a geographical perspective, the distribution of these sacred sites demonstrates how historical processes, pilgrimage networks, and cultural traditions have collectively shaped the city's spatial structure. Religious diversity has also influenced the socio-economic dynamics of Varanasi, particularly through pilgrimage tourism, religious services, craft production, and educational institutions. Thus, Varanasi can be understood as a dynamic sacred landscape where religious traditions, historical continuity, and cultural interaction collectively sustain its identity as one of the world's most important spiritual cities.

Hinduism has historically been the dominant religious tradition in Varanasi, and its philosophical emphasis on pluralism and spiritual inclusiveness has often allowed the city to accommodate diverse religious communities within its sacred landscape. Over different historical periods, however, the city experienced episodes of political conflict and transformation, particularly during certain phases of medieval rule when some temples and religious institutions were damaged or replaced by other structures. Despite these disruptions, Varanasi repeatedly demonstrated remarkable resilience. The sacred city was revitalised through continuous patronage by regional rulers, merchants, and religious communities, especially during the eighteenth century, when many temples and ghats were reconstructed. This long historical process illustrates Varanasi's capacity to regenerate its religious and cultural identity over time. Much like a phoenix rising from adversity, the city has continually renewed its spiritual significance and continues to function today as one of the most important centres of pilgrimage and sacred geography in South Asia.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS:**

Varanasi represents one of the most remarkable examples of a living sacred landscape where multiple religious traditions coexist within a shared urban space. Although the city is primarily recognised as the spiritual centre of Hinduism, its historical development has also been shaped by Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity. Sacred sites such as Kashi Vishwanath Temple, the Buddhist pilgrimage centre of Sarnath, Jain temples, mosques, gurudwaras, and churches collectively contribute to the city's diverse religious landscape. These religious institutions not only represent different belief systems but also influence the city's spatial organisation, cultural practices, and socio-economic activities. The coexistence of these traditions has created a unique cultural environment characterised by dialogue, interaction, and shared heritage. From a geographical perspective, Varanasi demonstrates how sacred spaces, pilgrimage networks, and historical processes shape a city's identity. Thus, Varanasi can be understood as a dynamic spiritual and cultural landscape where religious diversity and historical continuity continue to sustain its global significance.

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