



# HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE RELIGIOUS PILGRIMAGE OF KASHI VISHWANATH TEMPLE IN MODERN INDIA

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*Abstract:* Kashi (Varanasi) and its principal shrine, the Kashi Vishwanath Temple, occupy a singular place in the religious imagination of South Asia. As one of the twelve jyotirlinga shrines of Lord Shiva, Kashi is framed in scripture and practice as a locus of *moksha* (liberation). Over the centuries the temple has been repeatedly destroyed, relocated, rebuilt, and re-imagined, each cycle reshaping pilgrimage forms and meanings. This article traces the temple's trajectory into modern India, focusing on continuity and change in ritual practice, institutional management, urban infrastructure, and socio-political contestation. It argues that the contemporary pilgrimage to Kashi is best understood as an evolving assemblage: ancient sacral narratives and daily rites intermesh with state-led redevelopment, heritage narratives, tourism economies, and contested memory politics. The Kashi Vishwanath Corridor and recent visitor growth illustrate how material interventions and political projects have intensified pilgrimage flows while also generating new tensions around access, heritage, and plural social claims

**Keywords:** Kashi Vishwanath, Sacred, Pilgrimage, Ganga, Jyotirlinga, Worship, Moksha, Ritual, Darshan, Transformations, Tourism, Maha Shivaratri, SKVTC, Economy, Heritage & COVID-19.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Kashi/Varanasi is presented in textual tradition as the preeminent city of Shiva so powerful that dying there confers liberation.<sup>[1]</sup> For centuries pilgrims have visited the Kashi Vishwanath shrine to perform darshan, abhisheka (ritual bathing), and rites for the deceased along the Ganges' ghats. In modern India these practices coexist with mass tourism, civic redevelopment projects, and new forms of institutional governance. Situating contemporary pilgrimage requires attending simultaneously to the temple's long history, colonial-era transformations, post-Independence administration, and the 21st-century redevelopment projects that have physically and symbolically reconfigured the temple, river relationship. This study synthesizes historical records, recent governmental descriptions, scholarly studies of pilgrimage tourism, and contemporary reporting to present a rounded account of the shrine's modern evolution.

## II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: DESTRUCTION, REBUILDING, AND DEVOTIONAL CONTINUITY

The KashiVishwanath site has a layered history of construction and destruction. Sources indicate that early medieval temples at Kashi were damaged or demolished during successive invasions; Muslim rulers and later Mughal policies reshaped the urban religious skyline.<sup>[2]</sup> The extant temple complex is widely attributed to the Maratha patronage of *Ahilyabai Holkar*, who is credited with building the present temple structure in 1780 CE after earlier ruins and partial reconstructions. The shrine's gold plating, famously associated with *Maharaja Ranjit Singh's* donations in the 19th century, has contributed to the temple's popular epithet, the "*Golden Temple*" of Kashi. These historical episodes created both a durable devotional continuity and a recurring narrative of loss and restoration that colours modern pilgrimage discourse.

## III. PILGRIMAGE PRACTICES IN THE MODERN ERA

Pilgrims to Kashi engage in a dense repertoire of ritual acts layered across time and space: *darshan* of the Jyotirlinga, circumambulation, offerings at subsidiary shrines (e.g., Shringar Gauri), performance of shraddha rites for ancestors on the ghats, and bathing in the Ganga. The temple's rites, seasonal festivals like *Maha Shivaratri*, *Rangbhari Ekadashi*, and localized rituals associated with the Saptarishi and marriage of Shiva and Parvati, continue to structure the pilgrim calendar.<sup>[3]</sup> However, modernization has altered both who comes and how they travel: rail and road networks, organized tour packages, and digital booking systems now mediate the pilgrimage experience. Pilgrims increasingly include domestic tourists, youth, and international visitors whose motivations range from devotion to heritage interest to cultural tourism. The continuity of sacral practices alongside these changing demographics underscores the temple's adaptive resilience.

## IV. INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

Since the late 20th century the management of Kashi Vishwanath has been formalized through temple trusts and government oversight. Post-Independence legal frameworks and trustee boards have sought to regularize ritual schedules, income from offerings, and administration of temple property.<sup>[4]</sup> This institutionalization has important implications: it professionalizes upkeep and revenue administration, supports large-scale renovation projects, and shapes which narratives are foregrounded in public presentations of the temple. At the same time, governance choices—about access, who conducts rites, and how revenue is allocated, can become focal points for local disputes, caste and community negotiations, and larger political claims. These governance dynamics matter because modern pilgrimage is not solely a private devotional act but an organized social practice shaped through formal institutions.

## V. THE KASHI VISHWANATH CORRIDOR: ACCESSIBILITY, SPECTACLE, AND CONTROVERSY

A central development for contemporary pilgrimage has been the *Shri Kashi Vishwanath Corridor* (often shortened to KashiVishwanath Corridor or SKVTC), inaugurated in December 2021. The corridor created a direct, widened pathway from the *Ganga ghats* to the temple, covering several acres and incorporating amenities intended to manage crowding and improve the pilgrim experience.<sup>[5]</sup> The project was pitched as both practical (safer, easier movement between river and temple) and symbolic (reconnecting the temple with the life world of the Ganga). In governmental accounts the corridor is presented as a restoration of sacred sightlines and a salvage of small, concealed shrines that were "rediscover" during clearance and construction.

The corridor has had measurable impacts: millions more visitors now pass through the temple complex, infrastructure for pilgrims has expanded, and the shrine's visibility (nationally and internationally) has increased. Governmental tourist statistics and media reporting indicate record visitor numbers in recent years, reflecting both improved access and a broader political focus on sacred heritage as a national asset.<sup>[6]</sup> Yet the project also produced controversy: concerns over demolition of old houses capes, displacement of marginal vendors and residents, archaeological questions, and debates about the appropriation of public urban space for monumental religious presentation. Scholars of pilgrimage tourism have emphasized that such infrastructural projects inevitably reshape the rhythms of devotion, speeding up flows, co-modifying certain aspects of the sacred, and producing curated experiences that favor staged visibility over spontaneous neighbourhood rituals.

## **VI. PILGRIMAGE, TOURISM, AND THE YOUTH RESURGENCE**

A striking recent trend is the growing proportion of younger pilgrims and visitors to Varanasi. Media reports and government statistics for 2024–2025 indicate unprecedented visitor counts, with a significant share reported to be youth, suggesting a revival or reappropriation of pilgrimage by younger cohorts for spiritual, cultural, or identity reasons.<sup>[7]</sup> This youth engagement often intersects with social media representation: pilgrimage is performed as both devotional practice and cultural display. The result is a hybrid economy in which religious festivals, ritual experiences, and heritage tourism reinforce one another. For planners and temple authorities this creates the dual challenge of preserving ritual integrity while accommodating high footfall and new expectations for amenities and safety.

## **VII. SACRED SPACE AND CONTESTED MEMORY**

Kashi's modern pilgrimage landscape cannot be discussed without acknowledging contested memory and legal-political claims that have arisen around adjacent sites such as the Gyanvapi precinct. Historical narratives that stress episodes of destruction and reclamation shape contemporary politics and demands for access. While many devotees experience pilgrimage as a private encounter with the divine, others see the temple and surrounding precinct as emblematic of broader historical redress or cultural reassertion. Judicial, archaeological, and civic arenas become sites where competing histories—religious, colonial, and nationalist, are argued and sometimes litigated. These contestations can intensify pilgrim emotions and alter everyday practice: restrictions on certain shrine access, legal petitions for worship rights, and periodic media attention all affect how pilgrims plan and experience visits. Handling these sensitivities requires careful governance that protects freedom of worship, respects plural claims, and maintains urban harmony.

## **VIII. ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS: LIVELIHOODS, MARKETS, AND HERITAGE COMODIFICATION**

Pilgrimage to Kashi sustains a vast local economy: priests and ritual specialists, boatmen, hoteliers, shopkeepers selling ritual paraphernalia, and numerous informal vendors. The corridor's redevelopment, and the broader boost in visitorship, have intensified commercial activity, benefiting many but also reshaping patterns of livelihood. Formalization (e.g., designated shops, entry fees for managed areas) has professionalized some incomes while displacing informal earners. Heritage commodification, where rituals and sacred objects become packaged tourist experiences, raises ethical questions about the commercialization of devotion. Scholars suggest balancing economic opportunity with protection for traditional ritual specialists whose livelihoods depend on continuity of practice rather than commodified spectacle.

## **IX. PILGRIMAGE EXPERIENCE IN THE PANDEMIC AND POST-PANDEMIC MOMENT**

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted pilgrimage flows worldwide, including to Kashi. Temporary closures, restrictions on mass gatherings, and travel constraints forced ritual adaptations: digital darshan options, scheduling of limited in-person rituals, and sanitation protocols. Post-pandemic recovery has been rapid in some metrics: crowd management technologies, parking and queuing systems, and health protocols have been integrated into pilgrimage planning. The crisis also accelerated digital mediation of devotion, pilgrims now sometimes combine physical visits with online rituals for relatives unable to travel. The pandemic thus catalyzed both vulnerability and innovation in pilgrimage practice.

## **X. CONCLUSION: CONTINUITY, ADAPTATION, AND THE POLITICS OF SACRED URBANISM**

The Kashi Vishwanath pilgrimage in modern India demonstrates the interplay between enduring religious imagination and dynamic socio-political forces. The shrine remains an axis of devotion, anchored in textual claims about liberation and lived experience of ritual, yet it is also embedded in contemporary processes of urban redevelopment, heritage management, tourism economies, and contested memory politics. Projects such as the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor materially reconfigure devotional pathways while amplifying debates about access, displacement, and representation. Pilgrimage in Kashi today is therefore an assemblage where ancient rites, modern infrastructures, youthful aspirations, and political narratives converge.

For scholars and policymakers, attending to pilgrimage's layered nature means protecting ritual pluralism, ensuring inclusive economic gains, and designing urban interventions that respect both sacred geography and the everyday life of residents. For pilgrims, Kashi continues to offer the same promise that drew seekers for centuries, an encounter with the divine and a hope for spiritual transformation, even as the city's modern surface keeps changing.

### **Footnotes**

- [1] On Kashi's religious significance as a place of liberation and the value of darshan: Kashi official portal, "Shri KashiVishwanath" (kashi.gov.in).
- [2] Historical overview of temple demolitions, rebuilding, and Maratha/Ahilyabai patronage: Kashi Vishwanath Temple entry, Wikipedia.
- [3] Ritual calendar and local festivals associated with the temple (Rangabhari Ekadashi, Shivaratri, etc.): Kashi Vishwanath Temple summary and local tradition notes.
- [4] Temple governance and post-Independence administration: historical notes from the Kashi Vishwanath entry and scholarly overviews.
- [5] Kashi Vishwanath Corridor project details and inauguration (December 13, 2021), including project scope and aims: Press Information Bureau (PIB) release.
- [6] Recent visitor statistics and tourism growth in Varanasi (2025): media reports (The Economic Times; India Times).
- [7] Scholarship analyzing the corridor's impact on pilgrimage tourism, urban form, and heritage (case studies and SSRN/ResearchGate working papers).