

# Dynamics of Economic-Cultural Transformation in Kashi during the Medieval Period

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## Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to examine the religious history of Kashi's origins and development, the textual and scriptural history of Kashi. Kashi has many names, including Anandkanan (the forest of bliss), Mahashamsan (the great cremation ground), and Avimukta (something that cannot be abandoned). There are multiple examples that support the claim that a city's nature, dynamics, and popularity have changed over time in response to the demands and needs of the time. Banaras is one of those ancient cities that has been associated with various religious beliefs and cultures since ancient times, but the city, while retaining its old features, established itself as a developed trade city by accepting new economic challenges, how Banaras provided a suitable environment to the changing cultural and economic challenges, and how it went through the pressure of different political powers from time to time and made them realise its importance. This paper aims to understand how the environment of Banaras and its dynamics in the mediaeval period transformed this city into a developed economic-cultural city.

**Keywords:** Kashi , Medieval period, Economic transformation, cultural transformation, religious history.

## Introduction

This study aims to explore the dynamics of economic-cultural transformation in Kashi (Varanasi), a prominent city in medieval India, during the medieval period. Kashi, with its rich history and diverse cultural heritage, played a significant role in shaping the economic and cultural landscape of the region. By analyzing historical records and scholarly research, this study seeks to provide insights into the economic activities, trade networks, socio-cultural exchanges, and urban development of Kashi during this period.

Kashi, today known as Varanasi, was once a holy city and is among the world's oldest continuously inhabited locations. People often use metaphors such as "a city bathed with divine light" or "a small world" to describe Kashi. "Rome, the Eternal City" (Sadguru, Kashi). Hindu deity Shiva, also known as Vishwanath, lives there in perpetuity. Because of its significance as a religious location for followers of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, it is a popular tourist attraction. Kashi has long been the overseer of old and modern Indian culture, which drew inspiration from a wide range of religious and philosophical views. Varanasi's history is more than simply a record on politics; it is also a record of a culture through which the full philosophy for Indianness is presented. This is because of the city's religious, academic, and commercial significance.

When looking at the existing histories of Banaras, it becomes clear that they are incomplete, as they reflect the uneven coverage of the sources with respect to each period. Banaras is portrayed in some literature as an unmovable bastion of sanctity that was repeatedly defiled and destroyed during the time of "foreign" Muslim rule.<sup>1</sup> The final recension of the Kasi Khanda, has summarised the cosmology of Banaras. Banaras saw periods of revival and destruction; Banaras developed greatly as a pilgrimage site under the Mughals; and many of the sites and structures now held in high regard were not even built during the Mughal era (M. A. Sherring; 1826-80).<sup>2</sup>

Summary of the later history will be given, but throughout the discussion, the focus will be on the city's development as a religious centre and as a civilization. This article's objective is to provide the background information needed to understand how Banaras' environment and dynamic throughout the mediaeval era changed this city into a flourishing economic and cultural centre. For a very long time, the area in Varanasi (Kashi) has served as the holiest of Hindu pilgrimage sites.

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<sup>1</sup> Motichand's Kasi ka Itihas (1985), Altekar's Banaras and Samath (1947), and Sukul's Varanasi Vaibhav (1977) and Varanasi through the Ages (1974) are good examples of this tendency.

<sup>2</sup> Sherring, M. A. 1975. Banaras: The Sacred City of the Hindus: An Account of Benares in Ancient and Modern times. Delhi: B. R. Publication.

Hindus believe that if they die in the holy city of Varanasi, they would be saved and released from the endless cycle of reincarnation. Varanasi, the Hindu holy city where Shiva and Parvati are believed to live, has mysterious origins. It is widely held that the waters of the Ganges River in Varanasi can cleanse one of their earthly transgressions. Hindus believe that if they die in the holy city of Varanasi, they would be saved and released from the endless cycle of reincarnation. Varanasi (or Benares, Banaras, Kashi), on the left bank of the Ganges, is one of the seven sacred cities of the Hindus. Among the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, its early history is that of the first Aryan settlement in the middle Ganges valley.

M. A. Sherring (1826–80), who wrote *Benares, the Sacred City of the Hindus in Ancient and Modern Times* in 1868, was the first scholarly study of Banaras. His research mostly concentrated on Banaras' religious and cultural life in the nineteenth century, with sporadic mentions of earlier periods. *Hindu Tribes and Castes as Represented in Benares*, Sherring's subsequent work on Banaras, was published in three volumes between 1872 and 1881. In this work, he attempts to provide a description of the Hindu castes and tribes who lived in Banaras throughout the nineteenth century. In *Benares, the Sacred City* (1905), E. B. Havell discussed the religious and intellectual practises of the ancient Banaras Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists. In addition to this, Havell presented a detailed picture of the temples, ghats, and ceremonies of Banaras in the nineteenth century. He has completely overlooked Banaras in the Medieval Era. *Kashi Ka Itihas*, written in 1962 by Motichandra (1985), described the political history of mediaeval Banaras. He describes the Muslim military takeover of Banaras and how the city's temples were demolished at this time. He is not supporting his claim, nevertheless, with the proper current primary sources. He didn't examine the causes of temple destruction; he just mentioned it. Because there are so few pertinent references in his writings, it is exceedingly difficult for a historian to accept his perspective. According to

Diana L. Eck's *Banaras: City of Light* (1982) and Kubernath Sukul's *Varanasi Vaibhav* (1977), there were numerous conflicts and problems in Banaras during the Muslim reign, which were bad for Hindu institutions. *Luminous Kashi to Vibrant Varanasi* was written by K. Chandramouli in 2006. Briefly, he concentrated on the trade of Banaras, including silk, handicrafts, art, and music. The 1974 book *Subah of Allahabad under the great Mughals*, written by S. N. Sinha, gives us a few hints about the economic situation of Banaras. The historical evolution and technical facets of Banarasi saris were explored in Tarannum Fatma Lari's 2010 book *Textiles of Banaras: Yesterday and Today*. The 2014 publication *Woven Textiles of Varanasi* by Jaya Jaitlya provided insight into textiles. *Banaras Reconstructed: Architecture and Sacred Space in a Hindu Holy City*, written by Madhuri Desai, was published in 2017. It details the city's history, buildings, and architectural aspects from 1590 to 1930. Temples, monasteries, palaces, and ghats were added to Banaras, the famous Hindu centre in Northern India, throughout its physical and imaginative reconstruction. According to her, the Mughal era saw the building of several temples, monasteries, and ghats.

### **Cultural and Economic Dynamics and Response**

It was contemporary historian Mohammad Habib who introduced the idea of a "urban revolution" in northern India during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and started the academic discussion on mediaeval Indian urbanisation. He said that in pre-Turkish India, the elite classes only resided in cities and towns, while lower classes were restricted to the countryside or the outskirts of cities. The Thakurs were replaced as the local governing class by Turkish slave officials, who also eliminated all predetermined discrimination against employees regardless of their creed. Even the new governing classes were parasitic and urban by nature, allowing anybody to enter cities to satisfy their demands and purchase luxury goods as well as military camps and other military necessities that created jobs in cities. The artisans, workers, and independent contractors who had been restricted to the hamlet now began to migrate toward the industries, markets, and mandis of the cities. As a result, the Turkish invasion of India was really a "revolution of Indian city labour" under Turkish command. Irfan Habib, on the other hand, has critically analysed the urban revolution concept in context of more empirical findings and a stronger comprehension of modern social and economic issues. He does, however, concur with Mohammad Habib's assertion that the urban economy unquestionably grew in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, probably leading to an increase in the size and population of cities as well as in craft production and trade. Irfan Habib, however, disagrees with the claim that under the Turks, both urban workers and peasants in rural areas enjoyed high levels of liberation. It is true that during this time, considerable advances and improvements in technology took place, which resulted in high production, but it was only a change in power and not a change in the means of production.

Other well-known current historians, including W. H. Moreland, H. K. Naqvi, K. M. Ashraf, and C. A. Bayly, have carefully examined the process of urbanisation in mediaeval India based on important historical data. Thus, Moreland notes that modern Europeans were also significantly influenced by the number and size of cities in the Mughal Empire while emphasising the urbanisation under the Mughal Empire. H. K. Naqvi enlarged the study of Moreland and provided a detailed analysis of the urban and industrial hubs that grew up throughout the Mughal Empire. According to Naqvi, the pre-Mughal period itself created the framework for the fast growth of urban centres during the Mughal era because from the thirteenth century, cities like Delhi, Banaras, Patna, Lahore, Surat, Burhanpur, Thatta, etc. began to grow

as political and commercial hubs. Additionally, Naqvi offers a significant monograph titled "Urbanization and the Construction of Urban Centers Under the Great Mughals," in which she highlights essential information and slightly diverse viewpoints on the subject. Additionally, Naqvi is more clear about the functions of cities, including the value of their independence from the hinterland and their connections to one another, as well as the roles of water supply, trade, industry, population, and city planning. Even Naqvi agrees with this statement and points out that during the Mughal era, many major cities in northern India underwent a period of urban renewal, a few new ones were added, and an impressive array of monumental structures were built. The urban landscape of these cities today is a staggering testament to the magnificence of Mughal architecture.

The development of cities required agricultural surplus and migration of workers and artisans from rural areas to urban areas where employment opportunities, availability of raw materials, and facilities of local markets for manufactured goods were easily available. Therefore, Naqvi says that undoubtedly, the urban markets encouraged rural producers to increase their production.

According to Naqvi, the Mughal kings allowed and supported the capital cities to develop independently based on their own specialties. Another famous historian K. M. Ashraf writes about the role played by towns and cities in the growth of industries in northern India, that producers of goods in small towns made connections with dealers belonging to those goods in a big city for inland supply or export outside their manufactured goods. Naqvi outlines the development of urbanization in medieval India as a conscious policy of Muslim rulers and the result of affirmative action and policies of the state. There is no doubt that in the many cases Indian towns are an extension of the villages, it evolved with the same social uniformities and approaches, so 'village-based urbanization' is not a new feature in Indian history. It is true that large cities received more attention than towns, whether large or small, even among the large cities, provincial.

Other contemporary historians and academics have provided focused attention on the religious, cultural, economic, and political facets of the city of Benares, including Motichandra, Audrey, C.A. Bayly, and Diana L. Eck. There is a degree of agreement among all those academics on this subject that the city of Benares was significant for both its religious and economic activities throughout history. Bayly examines the relationship between social and political life in Banaras and claims that it is a result of commercial activity rather than economic growth or increased commerce or production. Even more evidence points to the fact that Banaras' inclusion in the extensive market-networking system of the Mughals improved the degree of secondary output, sped up the division of labour in the city, and significantly advanced the banks and money markets. But Bayly also shows how the Gangetic Valley's cities, rural markets, and merchant groups responded to the British in the eighteenth century, paving the path for indigenizing colonial trade and politics. However, the city's cultural landscape has always maintained its status as the centre of other populations' religions and their importance. However, during the mediaeval era, Banaras had immense spiritual significance for both the people of North India and South India, and its political control not only ensured easy access to the country's trade and commercial resources. Banaras experienced great pressure to uphold the cultural identities of the diverse communities as well as violent conflict between the Mughals and the Marathas to stake out their claim at various points in history.

### **Economic Structure of Banaras from Medieval Period**

In the absence of authentic records before the mid-eighteenth century C.E., it is impossible to assess accurately Banaras' contribution to the dynamics of trade and commerce, whereas historian Naqvi concluded on the basis of available records between 1777 and 1784 A.D. that primarily the trade of spices, grains, betel nuts, and coconuts between Bengal, Patna, and Banaras through the rivers was continuing in very good condition. Furthermore, based on records from 1784 A.D., she claims that the Chauki (check - post) was established in Banaras to regulate and tax the trade of food grains. Both of these evidence suggest that Banaras' economic structure did not emerge overnight; rather, the city would have reached this sophisticated stage in the eighteenth century only after a prolonged period of economic development and prospects.

Apart from the food-grain trade, Banaras remained successful even after 1764 A.D., particularly in the trade of silk, sugar, and opium, which became a magnet for the British firm. Furthermore, Banaras was immediately connected by waterway to significant commercial centres such as Patna, and the same route was also connected to Murshidabad, Hooghly, Calcutta, Dacca, and Satgaon in the eastern region. The same stream was also linked to the western Indian cities of Agra and Delhi. As a result, Banaras, as a commercial centre located on the canals, was also connected to other major trade centres via easy routes.

Historian H. K. Naqvi has effectively emphasized the significance of commercial roadways connected to the city of Banaras, how this main route went from Banaras to Lucknow, and how the same route took a south-west direction from Lucknow and reaches Agravia Kannauj, whose maintenance and condition was very good because it was given great attention by the Nawabs of Lucknow and Hindu merchants. Following the Allahabad Treaty in 1765 A.D., the British Company gained direct control of Banaras' trade, which was critical to their strategic and economic outlook. Banaras became the main importer trading centre of raw silk, cotton, copper, and brimstone, etc. in the late eighteenth century, and the extensive usage of copper in this city formed a local company for works like as silk goods, brass, utensils, and coin minting. Even though Banaras did not produce much cotton, cotton was imported from the Deccan region and exported to Calcutta and other regions of eastern India. The British firm did not limit itself to the metal and fibre trade, since British documents show that the corporation, through its designated agents, exported food grains, saltpetre, sugar, jaggery, opium, and indigo from Benares to overseas markets via Calcutta. This was the era when saltpetre and opium were mass-produced in Benares and the surrounding region. Because Banaras did not produce a considerable amount of cotton, large quantities were imported from the Deccan regions to supply industries, which were then shipped to Bengal via Banaras. Even by the end of the eighteenth century, various industries were established in Banaras, the most prominent and flourishing of which was the cotton-textile business. Banaras was primarily recognised for the production of high-quality cotton cloth and embroidery abilities, which drew not just Indian merchants but also international merchants who invested heavily in the production of textile products on a big scale. Tavernier also notes the presence of a significant number of textile weavers and traders in Banaras, who used to buy and sell silk and cotton textiles and cloths in the local clothes market. Throughout the British period, these industries and the commercial environment provided enormous prosperity in Banaras and its surrounding territories.

## Conclusion

As a result, it would be more accurate to state that Banaras built itself as a developed commerce centre in the mediaeval period, in addition to presenting itself as a centre of many religious and cultural ideas. Banaras' geographical landscape has long been associated with the religious allegiances of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and other religious sects. However, as a result of these distinctions, the city, although preserving the image of its ecclesiastical centre, evolved into an important industrial centre under the patronage of other mediaeval monarchs as well as Britishers. Though this city has different meanings for them depending on the needs of the major political powers of the mediaeval period, for example, the importance of Banaras city as a religious and economic centre for the Turks and especially the Mughals, while it was important as a religious centre for the revival of Hinduism like the Marathas, Banaras has always remained a city of purely economic and commercial importance for the British. It is a marvel of Banaras that it has always kept these two identities so perfectly.

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