

## ***Waiting for Shiva: Unearthing the Truth of Kashi's Gyan Vapi.***

***By Vikram Sampath (Ink Occam, 2024)***

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“Long years ago, we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge...A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance” (Bandyopadhyay, 2020, p. 473).

Anyone remotely acquainted with Indian history would recognize this memorable speech, which was made by India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, on the day the British Crown transferred power to the Government of a Free India- on 15 August 1947. However, given the trajectory of the Republic of India and its hostile relationship with India's ancient civilizational legacy over the past seven decades, one can legitimately ask whether the speech made by Mr. Nehru was a hollow one- one that paid rhetorical lip service to India's ancient past but simultaneously sought to cast it aside in the name of ideologies like secularism.

In his latest book *Waiting for Shiva: Unearthing the Truth of Kashi's Gyan Vapi*, Vikram Sampath raises this question in the context of the Indian State's stance vis-à-vis the importance of Hinduism to the ideological foundations of the nation in general, and with respect to the reclamation of their own sacred sites by the Hindus, lost during the invasions and plunders of a previous age, in particular. He does so by excavating the historical journey of one of the greatest pilgrimage sites of Hinduism- the shrine of *Kashi Vishwanath* in Varanasi- by highlighting how the sacred space was conceptualized and formed in the past, how did Hindus across the country interact (and continue to interact) with it, and how did Hindus show immense resilience and resistance in the face of continued depredations by the Islamic invaders who repeatedly desecrated the site and sought to stamp out the very identity of Kashi. He also uncovers the sheer apathy with which the independent Indian State dealt with the development of the shrine, and the hostility it showed towards the attempt by Hindus to reclaim the old site of the shrine located nearby- which is occupied by a mosque today, ironically and quite self-revealingly bearing the Sanskrit name '*Gyan Vapi*'.

In Chapter 1, titled *The City of Light*, Sampath outlines the geographical contours of the city of Kashi- its rivers, streams and tanks, its roads and surrounding countryside- and also reveals the language of the sacred that is embedded in such features, contributing to the creation of what Diana Eck described as a 'sacred geography' (Eck, 2012, p. 22). Culling evidence from Hindu texts such as *Kashi Khanda* of *Skanda Purana* and *Linga Purana*, Sampath sketches the process through which such a sacred space was conceived. It involved viewing Kashi as the premier site for attainment of *Mukti* or liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth (Sampath, 2024, pp.15-16), and recognition of the *Vishweshwar Linga* as a *Swayambhu Jyotirlinga* (Self-Manifested, Luminous *Linga*) (Sampath, 2024, p. 19). Hundreds of shrines grew up around the major shrine of *Kashi Vishweshwar*, and all such sites were connected through the *Pancha Kroshi*

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*Pradakshina* (Circumambulation) that is performed by devotees till this day (Sampath, 2024, p. 21).

Sampath also brings to light the presence of other Dharmic denominations in Kashi apart from Shaivism- like Buddhism, Jainism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism. The Buddha's preaching of *Dhamma* at Sarnath, and the Stupas built at that site, stand testimony to this legacy till this day. Institutions and traditions associated with the other sects are similarly present throughout Kashi (Sampath, 2024, pp. 21-24). Sampath also brings out the lively intellectual atmosphere of the city which was characterized by debates and discussions between different philosophical schools like *Nyaya*, *Vedanta*, *Mimamsa* and *Sankhya*- all of which had their institutions in Kashi and attracted students from far and wide (Sampath, 2024, pp. 25-26).

In Chapter 2, titled *The Historical City*, Sampath provides a broad outline of the historical trajectory of Kashi and its focal point- the shrine of Kashi Vishweshwar- from the Vedic times till late 18<sup>th</sup> century CE. He points out the importance of the city as far back as 500 BCE, when the Buddhist canon- the *Tripitaka*-mentions it as one of the 16 Kingdoms that dominated North India at that time. It was also a premier centre for trade and commerce, and ultimately became a point of contention between the rival powers of Magadha and Koshala (Sampath, 2024, pp. 28-29). The importance of the city continued in Maurya, Shunga, Kushana and Gupta times, as evident from the many inscriptions, coins and stupas found at or nearby the site. The *Puranas* composed during the Gupta era were particularly significant in terms of sanctifying and popularizing Kashi as one of the greatest sites of *Tirtha* (Sampath, 2024, p. 30).

Coming to the Early Medieval Period, Sampath sketches the emergence of powers like the Gurjara-Pratiharas, Kalachuris and Gahadavalas- who not just maintained the city of Kashi but protected it from recurring invasions by the Islamic forces. Many such attempts by Ghaznavi, Salar Masud and Malik Alavi were defeated (Sampath, 2024, pp. 30-34). However, in 1193 CE, the Gahadavalas succumbed to the hordes of Qutubuddin Aibak, who unleashed a reign of terror and plunder in Kashi (Sampath, 2024, pp. 37-41). This began a long saga of temples being desecrated and then being rebuilt elsewhere, and the cycle continued to recur throughout the period of Muslim rule in North India. The Kashi Vishwanath shrine was no exception- and Sampath rescues from obscurity the evidence of the "flight of deity" in Varanasi (Sampath, 2024, pp. 41-44). Despite repeated assaults, Sampath extols the resilience of the Hindu community. Beginning from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, we see migration of Brahmin families from the South to Kashi, and composition of several texts- like *Kashi Khanda*, *Kashi Rahasya*, *Tirtha Chintamani*, etc.- which praised the city of Kashi and its presiding deity, Vishwanath. Through the efforts of remarkable individuals who led this cultural renaissance, like Narayana Bhatta, the Hindus were able to reconstruct the Kashi Vishweshwar or Kashi Vishwanath Temple at the site of the present Gyan Vapi Mosque by late 16<sup>th</sup> century (Sampath, 2024, pp. 44-54).

However, even this revival didn't go unchallenged. As the pluralistic atmosphere of Akbar's reign gave way to Islamic bigotry and tyranny under Aurangzeb, Kashi again came under attack. In 1669 CE, as the *Masir-i-Alamgiri* tells us, the Kashi Vishwanath temple was destroyed again (Sampath, 2024, p. 59). A small temple then came up south of the original site, which was rebuilt into the present temple by the Maratha Queen Ahilyabai Holkar around 1770s (Sampath, 2024, pp. 69-71). Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as Sampath highlights in his work, the Marathas were trying to revive Hindu pilgrimage sites across the country- and Kashi was a major part of this mission. Even though the attempt to wrest control of the city failed, the perusal of Maratha letters by Sampath reveals the enormous patronage that the Marathas extended to the building of temples and Vedic learning in the city- excluding their most important contribution, which was

rebuilding the shrine of Kashi Vishwanath (Sampath, 2024, pp. 63-67).

In Chapter 3, titled *Amidst a Multitude of Lingas*, Sampath continues the narrative from where he left it in Chapter 1. He makes a brief detour from his story by explaining the etymological meaning of the Sanskrit word 'Linga' as a sign or symbol, and then goes on to describe its esoteric significance as a representation of the Atma or Mahadev himself (Sampath, 2024, pp. 77-83). In his words, "the oft-repeated argument that the Linga is the phallus is proven wrong" with this study (Sampath, 2024, p. 77). He then goes on to describe the many Shiva-Lingas that exist in Kashi and the ways in which they are worshipped- like *Krittivaseshwar*, *Chandreshwar*, *Omkareshwar*, *Avimukteshwar*, *Manikarnikeshwar*, *Vishweshwar* and many others. He also describes the different sacred walks that have grown around each of these sites- individually or taken together- like *Antargriha Yatra*, *Avimukta Keshtra Yatra*, etc. (Sampath, 2024, pp. 83-87).

An interesting information that Sampath reveals in this chapter is the fact that at one time, the shrine of *Avimukteshwar* was considered more important than that of *Vishweshwar*. For example, both the *Skanda Purana* and *Linga Purana* refer to *Avimukteshwar* as the *Guru* of *Vishweshwar*, and condemn those who fail to worship the former along with the latter (Sampath, 2024, p. 89). However, as Sampath argues, "shifting prominence and relative importance of shrines and deities was inevitable in Kashi through the centuries, where waves and waves of iconoclasm shattered to pieces everything that the Hindu devout had held sacred" (Sampath, 2024, p. 93). It is this process, Sampath presumes, which might have caused *Vishweshwar* to become more prominent over a period of time and ultimately reign above all.

A similar process is evident in the tussle between *Adi Vishweshwar* shrine, located near Raziya Mosque, and the present temple complex- with regards to which was the original site. Through the perusal of historical evidence, Sampath concludes that the site of *Adi Vishweshwar* could have been the original spot at one time. However, "with the transposition of Holy spots"- particularly the *Gyan Vapi* (Well of Knowledge), said to be located to the south of the *Jyotirlinga* as per the *Padma Purana* and extolled by *Mahadev* in the *Skanda Purana* as a source of water which, if consumed, bestows upon the devotee knowledge and *Mukti*- the present site of the *Gyan Vapi* mosque became prominent as the site of *Kashi Vishweshwar* (Sampath, 2024, p. 121).

In Chapter 4, titled *Sparks in the Tinderbox*, Sampath talks about the *Lat Bhairo* Riots of 1809 in Varanasi. The riots broke out between Hindus and Muslims as a result of conflicting claims over the space between the *Gyan Vapi* Mosque which was built by Aurangzeb, and the *Kashi Vishwanath* Temple which had been recently rebuilt (Sampath, 2024, p. 104-111). The newly established British Government tried to broker an agreement between the two communities, but failed; owing to which, the Government decided to procure the land around the Mosque (including the Mosque courtyard) and keep it open for use of both communities. The Hindus were allowed to perform rituals in this space but no new construction was allowed, and Muslims were similarly forbidden from using this space for construction and even their mosque prayers (Sampath, 2024, pp. 111-114). This decision was repeatedly challenged by the Muslims in law suits filed in British courts, which Sampath discusses at length. Claims and counter-claims over every inch of this contested space consumed much time of the British administration and courts (Sampath, 2024, pp. 114-121). The Muslims, on one occasion in 1935, started conducting their daily prayers or *Namaz* in the common space between the mosque and the temple- which was forbidden by the British Government. As a gathering of Muslims was evicted

from this place by the police citing the existing order, the Muslim side decided to challenge it in the court (Sampath, 2024, pp. 121-124). The court cases and state decisions regarding this contested space, which occurred between 1810-1935, have been covered at length by Sampath by using the judicial archive and government gazetteers and reports.

In Chapter 5, titled *Legal Contestations Begin*, Sampath extensively covers the Civil Suit No.62 of 1936, which was filed in the court of Subordinate Judge of Benares. The plaintiffs were Muslims who argued that the land surrounding the Mosque was *Waqf* property, and hence, was owned by the Muslims. The Government, they argued, had no right to own the land and restrict Muslim activities on it (Sampath, 2024, pp. 126-128). The Government, in its defence, produced expert testimony based on historical, legal and scriptural evidence to argue how the site in dispute was occupied by a pre-existing temple, which was then destroyed to make way for a Mosque; and how the Hindu community had the right of access and usage of this land (Sampath, 2024, pp. 128-137). The Subordinate Court and subsequently the Allahabad High Court accepted the Government's argument and ruled that the land surrounding the Mosque was public and not *Waqf* property (Sampath, 2024, pp. 161-165). Since the case serves as a foundation for the Hindu side's logic for reclaiming the site of *Gyan Vapi* Mosque for the *Kashi Vishwanath* Temple, Sampath dwells intensely on its different aspects.

In Chapter 6, titled *In Independent India*, Sampath begins by critiquing the policy of secularism pursued by Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, after independence. For example, Sampath highlights the intolerance that Nehru showed to the project aimed at reconstructing the Somnath Temple in Gujarat, and how the project nevertheless went ahead because of the support it received from leaders like Sardar Patel, KM Munshi and Rajendra Prasad (Sampath, 2024, pp. 166-170). Sampath then connects this warped logic of secularism, which came to imbue anything associated with Hinduism with a negative connotation and glorified Islam in the quest for a mythical communal harmony, with the attempt at falsifying the history of the desecration of *Kashi Vishwanath* in the hands of Aurangzeb. Through use of hearsay evidence, personalities like P Sitharamayya and B Pande argued that it was an incident involving the rape of a Hindu *Rani* inside the temple which made Aurangzeb take such a decision as an act of justice. Such stories were then circulated by dishonest historians using the "citation loop" and marked with "authenticity" (Sampath, 2024, pp. 170-173). Sampath, through his incisive logic and survey of primary sources, demonstrates the falsity of such assumptions.

Sampath then connects this anti-Hindu academic and Government discourse, which premised itself upon the sacred goals of communal harmony and secularism, to the neglect of *Kashi Vishwanath* in the years following independence. It was only in 1983, following a case of theft at the temple, that the Government enacted proper measures for management of the shrine (Sampath, 2024, pp. 173-176). Meanwhile, the Hindu community woke up from its deep slumber and apathy to again press forward its claims to its ancient sacred sites, following the *Ram Janmabhoomi* Movement of late 1980s-90s. The Government passed the Places of Worship Act, 1991 and erected barricades around the *Gyan Vapi* Mosque in 1993 with the objective of making the Mosque avoid the fate of the *Babri* Mosque in Ayodhya, which was demolished in 1992 (Sampath, 2024, pp. 176-183). This move, ironically enough, was itself a violation of the Places of Worship Act of 1991- as Hindus had been using the land around the Mosque for Hindu rituals, as per precedents laid down by British courts, even as late as 1990.

In Chapter 7, titled *The Legal Fight Intensifies*, Sampath connects recent developments- like the Supreme Court Judgement in the *Ayodhya Ram Janmabhoomi* Case of 2019, and the

Government's decision to build a Kashi Corridor which was inaugurated in 2021- to the renewed interest in the *Kashi Vishwanath-Gyan Vapi* Dispute. A case filed in 2019 by Vijay Rastogi, and another case filed in 2021 by five women seeking to worship *Maa Shringar Gouri* in the *Gyan Vapi* Complex (which was allowed till 1990), opened the floodgates for the Hindu community in its age-old quest for reclaiming its ancient sacred sites from the clutches of encroachments made by imperialistic ideologies (Sampath, 2024, pp. 187-196). The Allahabad High Court ordered an ASI survey of the site, whose findings in a report conclusively proves the Hindu character of the site prior to its occupation by the present Mosque (attached by Sampath in the appendix). The case is still a matter of ongoing dispute.

Sampath concludes his story by hoping that the site is reclaimed by the Hindus, and invokes the image of Shiva's Bull, *Nandi*, to signify the eternal wait of the devotee for his God (Sampath, 2024, pp. 223-224). He argues that temple reclamations are a way of rectifying historical injustices if Hindus and Muslims have to live with each other in peace and in harmony (Sampath, 2024, pp. 221-223).

One of the achievements of Sampath has been his ability to draw upon an extensive range of source materials for this intensive study. This includes Hindu *Puranas* and *Kavyas*, Buddhist *Jatakas* and *Tripitaka* and Jaina accounts written in Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit in order to delineate the making of a sacred space in Kashi. In addition to this, he utilizes copper plate inscriptions and Sanskrit *Agamas* or *Nibandhas*, as well as Persian chronicles and accounts of the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire to highlight the historical transformation of both Kashi as a city in general and the shrine of *Kashi Vishwanath* in particular. For the modern period, Sampath makes intensive use of the colonial archives- comprising of court documents, gazetteers and survey reports- to understand the engagement of the colonial state with the site in dispute. For the contemporary events, he relies on court documents and media reports. The accounts of foreign travellers- like Tavernier, Niccolo Manucci, Peter Mundy etc.- also add to the enormous amounts of factual details that Sampath has brought together to bear upon this topic.

Another achievement of Sampath is to bring into focus the importance of Hinduism in formation of a pan-Indic civilizational consciousness, which forms the basis of Indian nationhood. Through several examples, Sampath harps upon the theme of the Indian nation existing long before 1947 by demonstrating the cross-cultural and cross-geographical currents that congregated around the shrine of Kashi Vishwanath. This includes the Sena ruler of Bengal named Vishwarupa, who, in 1212 CE, erected a sacrificial post and a victory pillar right in the middle of Varanasi- and inscribed on it his assertion that this was the city of *Shiva Vishweshwar*. This was a clear political statement at a time when much of North India had fell to Muslim rule, including Varanasi (Sampath, 2024, p. 90). Another instance comes from 1279 CE, when the Hoysala ruler of today's Karnataka, Vira Narasimha III, donated a village for funding the pilgrimage of his subjects to Kashi (Sampath, 2024, p. 90). The Maratha quest for wresting control over Varanasi, and migration of Southern Brahmins to Kashi which led to the cultural renaissance of 16<sup>th</sup> century under Narayan Bhatta- were all testimonies to the attachment that people from across India felt towards the shrine of Kashi Vishwanath in Varanasi. According to Sampath, it was this 'Idea of India', defined by a sense of shared belonging to a common territory and culture, characterized by unique civilizational metaphors and paradigms, which made India's national ethos, in its broad underpinnings, fundamentally Hindu (Sampath, 2024, p. 3).

The third positive aspect about Sampath's work is the deep ethical foundation that it springs from, and the ethical aspirations that it articulates. The author argues how the fight for reclaiming the site of one of the holiest shrines of Hinduism is not a matter of political opportunism, rather, it is about ensuring social justice for a community that has lost its sacred sites to the ravages of imperialistic plunder and fanaticism over the centuries (Sampath, 2024, pp. 8-9). It is also about initiating a process of truth and reconciliation between the two communities, which allows them to understand the injustices of the past and strive to create a better future based upon honesty and mutual faith. As the author rightly cautions, a false sense of "peace"- fostered through dishonesty about history and suppression of injustice- can never be a durable one. Communal harmony and secularism are based on mutual relationships, and it cannot be unilateral or a one-way street (Sampath, 2024, p. 11).

Sampath also highlights the need for academic integrity as part of ethics in historical research. He calls out the fabrication of history which was perpetrated by Pattabhi Sitaramayya and others who cited him, who argued that Aurangzeb destroyed the temple as an act of justice and not out of religious bigotry. As Sampath demonstrates, this story was concocted and based on hearsay. There was no primary evidence to back up this claim (Sampath, 2024, pp. 170-173). On the contrary, Sampath points out to primary sources of unimpeachable credentials- like Masir-i-Alamgiri of Saqi Mustaid Khan (Sampath, 2024, p. 59) and Storia Do Mogor of Niccolo Manucci (Sampath, 2024, p. 57)- which do point out to the fact that Aurangzeb destroyed the temple out of sheer religious intolerance, and the act had nothing to do with any economic or political motivations.

The book, despite its laudable achievements, suffers from certain limitations. Chapters 5 and 7, though important from the point of view of narrative, has been written more like a lawyer's brief or a journalist's report- rather than the work of a historian. There are portions where the reader might feel that Sampath could have summarized the court proceedings, or the media reports, more briefly. Perhaps the need to write a book of some considerable length could have prompted the author to adopt such a strategy. One also feels that Chapters 6 and 7 could have been combined, given that Chapter 7 is mostly about current events that are still under development and need a more long-term hindsight perspective for their proper analysis. One could also argue that Chapter 3 could have been combined with Chapter 1 to give a better understanding of how the sacred space emerged in Kashi- instead of dedicating a separate chapter on the *Shiva Linga*. One feels as if the detour taken to explain the meaning and significance of the *Linga*, as well as vehemently denying its association with phallus worship, was unnecessary. As the author himself admits- "This is a metaphysical and philosophical question, much beyond the scope of this book" (Sampath, 2024, p. 74). Some of the chapters in the book, therefore, could have been written and arranged in a better manner.

Apart from this major limitation, there is one factual error in the book. For example, in Chapter 1, Sampath describes Kumarila Bhatta as Adi Shankaracharya's disciple (Sampath, 2024, p. 25). This is untrue, as Kumarila Bhatta was a proponent of the *Purva Mimamsa* philosophy, based on Vedic *Karma-Kand*, which was opposed to Shankaracharya's *Advaita Vedanta* (based on *Gyan-Kand*).

Nevertheless, the book is an important contribution to the historiography on the city of Kashi and the shrine of *Kashi Vishwanath*. The book also makes a strong case for indigenous communities trying to reclaim their sacred sites from the ravages of history, and the need for ethical history and social justice to serve as foundation for any project of communal harmony.

Therefore, the book is an essential reading for both scholars and general readers who are interested in the history of the city of Kashi, the history of the shrine of *Kashi Vishwanath*, and the issues of ethics and social justice involved in reclamation of ancient sacred sites.

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