

Banaras: City Of Light by Diana L. Eck, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, USA, 1982, ISBN: 0-394-51971-X, Pages-427.

Ashish Ranjan Tiwari*

‘Benaras is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together’
[Twain, 1897, p. 480]

This is the phrase that the famous American writer Mark Twain wrote in his book titled *Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World*, which describes the antiquity and historicity of the ancient city of Varanasi, also known as Kashi or Banaras. The statement suggests that the holy city of Varanasi has been seen, in popular Hindu tradition, as the creation point of the world. The book by Diana L Eck titled *Banaras: The City of Light* has the kind of value and promise that only a few books on India’s one of the most sacred cities, i.e., Banaras, enjoy. Without any fear of contradiction, it can be argued that the book can instruct and inform both Hindus and non-Hindus about the tradition and history of the city of Banaras in a way that has come to be perceived and imagined in the time in which we live. It needs to be emphasized that the book starts with an introduction to the city of Banaras’s sacred landscape and gives a detailed overview of various themes and concepts associated with the place, with special emphasis on Hindu religious institutions and sacred geography. At the same time, the reader is also given an idea of the concepts of Hindu religious tradition and the ritual landscape of the city. The book seems to attempt to produce an account of the city’s major pilgrimage destinations and sites within the boundary of the sacred landscape popularly known as *Kashikshetra*. All the major *Tirthas* [Pilgrimages] within the city have been studied and elaborated in detail, and their exact location within the city has been revealed with care and precision. The city of Banaras, also known as Kashi or Varanasi, is none other than Siva’s abode, the book informs, where he is said to be residing with his consort Parvati while the river Ganga, also known as goddess Ganga and worshipped in the Hindu religious tradition as a pious river, flows along the bank of the sacred city adding to the glory and magnanimity of the town. The author indicates during the course of her explanation that the city needs no elaboration as far as its holiness and importance within the Hindu pantheon are concerned.

The book attests to the fact that local people in Varanasi have a strong belief in stories and anecdotes about the city from ancient times and tend to associate those events with numerous places within the city that provide credence and popularity to these stories.

Looking at the book from another perspective suggests that the book seems to be directed at giving an outsider’s description of the sacred landscape of the city to Western readers who seem to have a great fascination to know more and more about one of the holiest pilgrimages of Hindu worship in India.

* Ph.D Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

© BML Munjal University, Journal of Business, Ethics and Society

Coming to the contents of the book, one is struck by the compartmentalization of the relevant parts into various sections, which deal with different themes and perspectives to cover a wide range of issues and concepts pertaining to the city's geography. The theme-based approach of the author appears to be driven by an urge to deal with unique themes relating to the town in different segments to give a vivid description of every relevant dimension of the place.

The first chapter, titled *Banaras: An Introduction*, offers a basic idea about the place called Banaras. The book begins with the introduction by providing an account of the city, emphasizing Varanasi's tradition, geography, spatial landscape, temples, and associated myths. The author, Diana L. Eck, advances her argument by making a comparison between Varanasi and other ancient cities of the world and attempts to demonstrate both perceptible similarities and

stark contrasts in various fields such as antiquity, tradition, customs and beliefs, myth, history, and the like. Then, she seems to take a turn in her discourse to approach the city from the point of view of Hindu tradition, through which she

underlines the importance of Varanasi in the larger Hindu culture and civilization through her focus on the essential religious and spiritual symbols of the city. Eck throws a glance at the city through Western eyes to understand how the city of Lord *Vishwanath*, the chief deity of Kashi, has been perceived by Western travellers and writers through the ages [Eck, 1982, p. 8]. Eck avers that to linger in Kashi is to linger in another era that is not dateable. She argues that the West has come to understand the basic Hindu tradition through the eyes of Varanasi [Eck, 1982, p. 9]. Then, she moves to adopt the perspective of a Hindu to delineate the nature of Varanasi [Eck, 1982, p. 19]. Since the city has many names, Eck provides an overview of the etymology and meaning of the different names associated with the town [Eck, 1982, pp. 25-35].

The second portion of the book, titled *Banaras in Historical Perspective*, examines Banaras from the viewpoint of history and moves forward to throw light on the historical timeline of the city by using notes and references from a corpus of sacred Hindu texts such as *Kashi Rahasya*, *Kashi Khand*, *Kashi Kedar Mahatmya*, *Brahma Purana*, *Matsya Purana*, *Kurma Purana*, *Padma Purana*, and the like and examining them in light of vast archaeological and cartographic materials. Using various survey-based and historical sources, she weaves an interesting story about the history and tradition of Banaras and lucidly presents it to her readers. By presenting a purely historical narrative, she highlights the sanctity and history of the city. During her discourse, she is confronted with the issue of separating facts from fables, which she has been successful in addressing to a great extent. It should be mentioned that her extensive reading of historical sources, including books, texts, manuscripts, archeological data, and other materials relevant to the historical theme of Varanasi, allows her to weave a rich historical tapestry of the town. Her commendable knowledge of the Sanskrit language supports and substantiates her efforts to decipher Sanskrit-based sources [Eck, 1982, pp. xiii-xvi]. Besides, her engagement with noted historians, experts, priests, locals, and others on Varanasi's history, culture, and tradition enriches her understanding of the subject matter [Eck, 1982, p. xv]. Her description of Varanasi shows the city's geometry [Eck, 1982, pp. 46-47]. The book also attempts the cumbersome task of describing and delineating historical places such as temples, shrines, mutts, monuments, fortress-palaces, and the like and their location in different parts of the city, even if some of them do not exist at all at present, which goes on showing the antiquity of Banaras. It is important to note that the author takes us through the corridor of the city's history by pinpointing and emphasizing the distinction between Kashi and Banaras, which she demonstrates are two different zones. She argues that since prehistoric times, Kashi has been inhabited by humans who have continued to thrive and prosper under the patronage and protection of lord Shiva, giving a rich traditional colour to the antiquity of the city. She, at the same time, shows how Banaras was a very revered place for other Indic religions, such as Buddhism and Jainism, before the

establishment of Shaivism as a predominant religious tradition and how various other traditions and cults within the Hindu pantheon in complete harmony with Shaivism not only coexisted but also thrived through the channels of political patronage and support in the city [Eck, 1982, pp. 60-79].

In the next segment, which is the third chapter titled *The City of Shiva*, the book delves into the zone of *Shaiva* worship in the city, where Eck explains the mythical and historical processes that ultimately led to the emergence of Shaivism or worship of Shiva as a dominant form of veneration over other cults and religious traditions. Through her extensive reading of Sanskrit literature, she proposes the argument that Shaivism was established as the chief Hindu religious tradition in Banaras through various channels, including Puranic myths, priestly claims, narratives, strong Shaiva tendencies, pilgrimage practices, and political support. The author calls the city the abode of Shiva and contextualizes it within the vast Puranic tradition, shedding light on the importance given to the town in the Puranic literature and its saturation within the psyche and memory of the local populace. The chapter begins by giving a description of Shiva as an outsider to the city and how he is accommodated within the larger Indo-Aryan pantheon [Eck, 1982, pp. 95-96]. It also shows how Shiva, being an outsider, is persuaded to marry Parvati, thus reflecting a historical process of the integration of the non-Aryan cultural elements with the Indo-Aryan ones [Eck, 1982, p. 96]. This indicates the various layers of the city's historical evolution involving conflict and contestation through the ravages and vagaries of history. The author then moves to the various facets of the Shiva form of worship and describes the numerous forms and manifestations of Shiva being venerated in the city [Eck, 1982, pp. 100-116]. The author also shows the prevalence of the temples dedicated to Shiva dotting the vast expanse of the holy town. The Linga, which is the chief symbol of worship of Shiva, is also the subject of discussion around Shaivism in this chapter [Eck, 1982, p. 109].

The fourth chapter of the book, titled *The Sacred Circle of All the Gods*, starts with a discussion of Varanasi's ritual landscape and sacred geography, which enumerates prominent pilgrimage places and their relative importance in the religious centre called *Kashikshetra*. The author argues that the holy area called *Kashikshetra* encircles the city, where numerous small and big temples are dedicated to a host of Hindu deities such as Vishnu, Ganesh, Durga, and others. The various *Mahatmyas*, including *Kashi hand*, *Kashi Mahatmya*, *Kashi Rahasya*, and many more, which attest to the religious and spiritual significance of the city by highlighting the sacredness of its geography and space, deal with the subject of the religious tradition of Kashi and mention two prominent Margas or Pathas that circumambulate the city and provide it with its credence and significance [Eck, 1982, Pp. 146-147]. These circles are known as *Antargriha Marg* and *Panchkroshi Marg*, on which pilgrims and devotees walk around Kashi's sacred landscape. Eck offers a rich treatment of the relative significance of these different circumambulatory paths. She then proceeds to explain the resulting religious merit and spiritual bliss accruing to the devotees as a consequence of their circumambulation of these sacred paths. Besides, the chapter also sheds light on the overall pantheon of Hinduism and deciphers the enigma of the presence of three hundred thirty million gods within the Hindu faith [Eck, 1982, p. 146]. The author also narrates another story in a lucid manner that reveals that after being banished from Kashi by Divodasa, a pious and just ruler, due to a consequential incident, Shiva hatches many conspiracies to retake the city and establish his rule over it and in the end, he enlists Vishnu's support to get Divodasa to leave the city which does materialize and Shiva succeeds in returning to the city of his choosing [Eck, 1982, pp. 148-156]. In addition to the predominant Shaiva tradition, this chapter also gives a vivid description of the other gods and goddesses, such as Vishnu, Ganesha, Annapurna, Durga, and other local demigods being worshiped in harmony with Shiva [Eck, 1982, pp. 157-208].

The fifth chapter, titled *The River Ganges and the Great Ghats*, deals with the river Ganga and the famous Ghats and extensively treats Banaras's spatial and ritual beauty. The mythical story of the river Ganga is retold in an eloquent manner [Eck, 1982, pp. 211-215], and the building of the Ghats in the recent centuries and their associated tradition have been summarized in an elegant way. The author delves into the philosophical debate regarding the nature of the Ganga water and its supposed quality to purify the soul and heart of human beings and delineates the complex question of what makes the river heavenly and divine to the normal Hindu mind [Eck, 1982, pp. 216-220]. She drives home this point by stating that “the Ganga is the liquid essence of the scriptures, the gods, and the wisdom of the Hindu tradition [Eck, 1982, pp. 157-208].” It needs to be pointed out that Varanasi is famed for its massive Ghats across the globe, and thousands of people from all over the world throng to the city to witness the splendor and magnanimity of these sacred spots. Eck highlights the story behind the construction and patronage of these Ghats by numerous royal families and their historical trajectory [Eck, 1982, pp. 222-238]. For this purpose, she compartmentalizes the entire set of Ghats into different spatial zones to explain their essence in accordance with the convention of Hindu custom and ethos. Through the flow of her writing, Eck gives a vivid treatment of every major Ghat and its associated myth. In this context, the two of the many notable Ghats, viz. *Manikarnika* and *Dashashvamedha* have been given adequate space to provide the reader with an idea of their importance within the Hindu religious tradition and their mythical and historical evolution [Eck, 1982, pp. 226-238].

The sixth chapter, titled *Seasons and Times*, has been devoted to examining the seasons and times of the city throughout the year. The author exhorts that every day is a great festival day in Kashi [Eck, 1982, p. 252]. She further stresses that the tradition of the city is such that every day is unique and auspicious because it entails the performance of a set of rituals and rites by Brahmins and the worship of different deities [Eck, 1982, p. 252]. The book delves into the origin and evolution of the Hindu religious calendar and the observance of its numerous associated customs and beliefs [Eck, 1982, pp. 253-257]. The book further discusses the Hindu calendar's many aspects and dimensions and their respective features and characteristics. The book then proceeds to discuss the fairs and festivals held in the city throughout the year. It is shown how these events, which constitute an essential part of the city's religious life, trace their origin to various mythical stories from the Puranas and how they have been perpetuated in the ritual tradition through religious discourses and narratives [Eck, 1982, pp. 257-278]. *Dev Deepavali*, *Budhawa Mangal*, and *Ramlila* are some of the most cherished events to be celebrated with enthusiasm and excitement. The analysis of seasons and the essential festivities celebrated therein are also discussed in an informative manner [Eck, 1982, pp. 257-278]. The chapter also argues that despite Kashi being decorated with these many seasons and cycles of time, it is regarded to be apart from the great cycles of cosmic time called *Yugas* or ages [Eck, 1982, pp. 279-282]. It is so because the four ages in Hindu belief, including *Krita*, *Treta*, *Dwapar*, and *Kalayuga*, run their course time and again and bring with them their cycle of destruction and reconstruction, but Kashi remains untouched by such cosmological process due to its timelessness [Eck, 1982, pp. 279-282].

The following section, in the form of the seventh chapter titled *City of All India*, is informative because it shows the importance of Kashi to all of India through the construction of a narrative that posits Banaras as a center associated with numerous Hindu cults and beliefs. It further argues that Banaras is one such city that possesses all the prominent pilgrimages within its fold [Eck, 1982, p. 283] because the imaginary replicas of all the Hindu temples [*Tirthas*] of national importance are found in the sacred landscape of the city [Eck, 1982, pp. 283-284]. At the same time, there is a perception among the people that a pilgrimage to Kashi is equivalent to touring all the pilgrimages in India, as the city itself holds a corresponding place for every major pilgrimage in the whole country. Eck argues that Varanasi happens to be unique due to its ability to

possess an all-India character because all the relevant features of India are accommodated within its sacred geography. Being one of the seven cities collectively known as *Saptapuri* in sacred Hindu ethos, Varanasi assumes greater significance due to its sacred geography [Eck, 1982, pp. 284-288]. Through various Puranic anecdotes and *Sthan Mahatmya*, the city has been portrayed as a place of liberation [*Moksha*] and spiritual bliss. According to one *Kashi Khand* couplet, the land of Kashi is so sacred that just chanting the name of Kashi would ensure liberation or freedom from the cycle of birth and death to the devotee. Since the concept of *Moksha* is regarded as the supreme aim or stage of a life cycle, Kashi becomes more important to the common Hindu mind. Besides, Eck argues that the sacred topography of Kashi is such that all prominent Hindu *Tirthas* and *Kshetras*, including *Char Dhams*, *Barah Jyotirlingas*, and *Aath Disha*, are situated in it [Eck, 1982, pp. 288-296]. Another factor that sets Kashi apart is its celestial and cosmological positioning. As per the *Kashi Khand* of the *Skanda Purana*, Parvati, wife of Shiva, explains that the city is not earthly, and the *Kashirahasya* echoes a similar sentiment by stating that the city is not made of earth [Eck, 1982, p. 296]. This leads to the inference that Kashi is placed at the tip of Shiva's trident, and therefore, it is immortal and exempt from great deluge [*Pralay*] [Eck, 1982, pp. 296-298]. All this helps perpetuate the notion that every practicing Hindu should visit Varanasi once in their life to seek the supreme blessing of Shiva.

Moving forward, one comes across the eighth chapter, titled *City of the Good Life*, dealing with the idea of life in the city, which is shown to be beaming with happiness, spirituality, and bliss. This section deals with the nature of the agency of life and how it works within the ambit of Banaras [Eck, 1982, pp. 304-306]. At the same time, it shows the meaning of life and how it is perceived by the common people from the city, which goes on to show that despite the many difficulties and challenges faced by the public, everyone faces the vagaries of life with a broad smile on their face. One peculiar thing that comes from the conversations held by the people among themselves is that many of the people, irrespective of their immediate identities based on caste, creed, religion, and ethnicity, seem to be content and hopeful and hold a very high opinion of the city and this happens to be true for others from different parts of the country. Three themes, including *Kama*, *Artha*, and *Dharma*, are used to study the nature of life and how people's potentialities and possibilities work hand in hand to give a new meaning to life [Eck, 1982, pp. 306-316]. The concept of sin and how it is seen in the city are also explained to the reader. The town, known to be a destroyer of sins, also acts as a nodal centre for those who visit the city to absolve their sins [Eck, 1982, pp. 316-318]. The author also examines the critical question of what happens to those who commit sins in Kashi and how these sins can be expunged [Eck, 1982, pp. 319-320].

The last chapter, titled *City of Death and Liberation*, engages with the quintessential questions of death and liberation with interesting points and notes about the city. The book explains that in Hindu tradition, death is polluting and ignoble, and thus, it is seen to be a very bad incident or omen [Eck, 1982, pp. 324-325], but here in Banaras, death has a very different meaning and is celebrated with pomp and contentment [Eck, 1982, pp. 327-331]. This interesting precedent has a story to it that gives it credence and legitimacy. It is said that death in this city leads to salvation and means release from cycles of birth, the highest attainment or accomplishment in the Hindu religion. This salvation is believed to be coming from the idea that when somebody dies in the city, it is none other than Shiva who whispers the holy liberating *mantras* [*Taraka mantra*] into the ear of the dead, which purges the latter of all his/her sins [Eck, 1982, pp. 332-324]. So, the book engages in a theoretical and philosophical discussion about the meaning of two of the important aspects of life, including death and liberation. The book further contextualizes these ideals of death and liberation within the sacred geography of the city in a bid to posit them into the orthodox Hindu tradition [Eck, 1982, pp. 334-344].

It must be noted that this book is of great value and information for anyone who wishes to understand not just Banaras, one of the most celebrated Hindu cities, but also the idea of Hinduism in its crude form. The book is replete with details about a host of subjects such as Hindu customs and beliefs, tradition, myth, history, rituals and rites, priestly classes, temples and shrines, and the geography of Banaras. While examining the crux of the book, it becomes clear that Eck has, in a distinct sense, tried to present an argument that the history of Varanasi can be studied to gain an overview of the history of India. This appears to be in consonance with what M. A. Sherring said in his book '*The Sacred City of the Hindus: An Account of Banaras*' in 1868 that in some instances, the history of a country can be exemplified by the history of one of its major cities and in that context, Banaras or Varanasi can be argued to represent the religious and intellectual history of India as much as Paris represents the political sentiments of France [Sherring, 1868, p. v]. This presents a compelling narrative with which an attempt can be made to write and explain the significance of a country's history with the help of understanding the significant cultural, social, economic, religious, and political dimensions of one of its many important cities. In that context, the book by Diana L. Eck posits Varanasi as a major historical site of Hindu culture and civilization with its many forms and features. The placing of Varanasi within the larger Hindu religious tradition emphasizes its vital place in Indian culture and society.

REFERENCES

- . Twain, Mark [1897]. *Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World*. New York, USA: American Publishing Company.
- . Sherring, M. A. [1868]. *The Sacred City of the Hindus: An Account of Banaras in Ancient and Modern Times*. London, England: Trubner & Co.
- . Eck, Diana L. [1982]. *Banaras: City of Light*. New York, USA: Alfred A. Knopf.