WATER SYMBOLISM AND SACRED LANDSCAPE IN HINDUISM: A STUDY OF BENARES (VARANASI)

With 7 figures and 6 photos

RANA P. B. SINGH

In ancient Hindu mythology (about 800 BCE) water is described as the foundation of the whole world, the basis for life and the elixir of immortality (see SBr IV. 8.2.2; III. 6.1.7; and IV. 4.3, 15). The Atharva Veda (II. 3.6) prays: "May the waters bring us well-being!". There appear many such descriptions about the quality, use, sanctity and symbolism of water (ELIADE 1958, 188). In the later period water becomes a symbol of life, and the flow of water: life-world. In curative terms water is regarded as a healer (AIV.91.3). Metaphorically and metaphysically the ancient mythologies refer to water as the container of life, strength and eternity. More commonly water is perceived as a purifying medium. However, to reach the source and receive the merit of "living water" involves a series of consecrations, rituals and religious activities like pilgrimage and sacred baths. The cult of water is described in the vedic literature, and followed on vividly in the puranic literature.

The "wash away sins" quality of water is bound up with the power of sanctity and cosmological connotation in mythologies. Says ELIADE (1959, 131), "Everything that is form manifests itself above the waters, by detaching itself from the waters". The running water in general and the Gaṅga (Ganges) water in particular, and sacred ponds, too, are described as bestowers of sanctity and miracles. In this way a common chain of interrelationship between water-bodies and human society is maintained by the varieties of performances and rituals. The psychic attachment to a place and maintenance of cultural traditions reflect a realization of the divine manifestation at the place. The intensity of this manifest power varies from one place to another. Such specific places are known as tīrthas (holy sites, or sacred places). The three more generally identifiable factors for popularity and acceptance of sacred places are: unique natural landscape, unique body of water, and an association with some great sage. These characteristics are eulogized in Hindu mythology. Varanasi (Benares) in span of time acquired a distinct status among the holy sites in India. Its location between the two rivers and along the motherly flow of the Gangā, and its association with Lord Śiva are its unique characteristics.

The Gaṅga (Ganges) River

In Hindu mythology all the rivers are revered as remover of pollution, however, the Gaṅga is embodying the most prominent and purifying liquid power. No river in the world’s history has achieved such fame as the sacred river Gaṅga. At least from about the third century the Gaṅga has played a vital role in ceremonies and worship - in rituals of birth and initiation, of purification and religious merit, of marriage and death. The Gaṅga is known as Mother Gaṅga (Gaṅgā Mai) bringing life in the form of sacred water. The Gaṅga is a sacred fluid, an essential element for all the Hindu rites and rituals.

The Gaṅga is often described as the river flowing in heaven, on earth and also in the netherworlds (Tripathaga). That is how the Gaṅga is a "liquid axis mundi, a pathway connecting all spheres of reality, a presence at which or in which one may cross over to..."
another sphere of the cosmos, ascend to heavenly worlds, or transcend human limitations’ (Kinsley 1987, 193). Paraphrasing one of Carl Jung’s statements one could propose an ethics for the Gangā river and Hinduism: “People of India would never find true peace until they could come into harmonious relationship with and deep feelings of reverence to the Gangā river who is the cradle and identity of India’s culture and civilization since time immemorial” (Singh 1993, 301).

Only after walking along the Gangā’s bank one realizes that one’s great-great-grandfathers once walked that very bank and had certain experiences, manifestations and revelations. Revealing the Gangā as the living organism requires specific forms of communication, interaction and environmental sensitivity. That is how the Gangā is known as the *mother*.

Beyond the economic and physical milieu one reaches the point of realizing the true spiritual value of the power of the Gangā for what it really is: a sense of power. As natural place she has physical, mental, emotional and spiritual powers (energy) beyond her economic value. The stories of the Gangā may change, but the motherly river lives on. The Gangā is described as the soul of India.

There are many sacred sites and centres of pilgrimage along the Gangā river (2525 km), for example Gomukha, Gangotri, Devprayāga, Rṣikēśa, Haridvāra, Kāṅkhala, Soron, Biḥūrā, Prayāga/Allahābad, Vindyācala, Cunāra, Varanāsī, Patnā, Sultānganj.
Fig. 2: Varanasi: The 84 ghats along the Ganges riverfront
Varanasi: Die 84 ghats am Ufer des Ganges
and Gaṅgāśāgara – from source to mouth (Fig. 1). The most sacred place among all the holy places of India is Vārāṇasi, known as the microcosm of India.

The Gaṅgā River in Vārāṇasi

In its whole course the Gaṅgā flows south to north in a crescent shape only in Vārāṇasi. On the other hand, the current has not shifted its water-edge along the left-bank cliff since the ancient past, while the other side is a flood-prone area. This natural condition has tended to support the natural beauty of Vārāṇasi.

The Gaṅgā, the patron deity Lord Śiva, and the sacred territory of Kāśi together form the Cosmic Trinity (Trīṁśat) of this great city says a 12th-century text, the KKh (35.10):

The Gaṅgā, Śiva, and Kāśi:
Where this Trinity is watchful,
No wonder where is found the grace,
That leads one on to perfect bliss.

With the realization of its highest mystic power of sanctity, especially in Vārāṇasi, people from all parts of India came and settled along the river – resulting in the development of a social space encompassing all of India (SINGH 1980, 1990, 125).

The Gaṅgā riverfront spreads over an arc of 6.4 km (4 miles) along which lie 84 ghāts (steps to the riverbank) between the confluence of the Asi in south and the Vārana in north (Fig. 2). In archetypal terms each ghāt represents one lakha (100,000) of organic species as described in Hindu mythologies; that is how in total all the 840,000 species are symbolized along the 84 ghāts in Vārāṇasi. Further, 12 zodiacs × 7 layers of atmosphere, or 7 cakrās (sheaths in the human body) also comes to 84. Thus the annual cycle of the cosmic journey is completed by taking a sacred bath at the 84 ghāts. At these sacred sites purānic texts identify 98 water-front sacred spots. The number 98 indicates the cosmic frame linking 14 bhuvana-kosa (sheaths in total) of the human body and 7 layers between earth and heaven (SINGH 1993, 68).

According to the Brahma Purāṇa (a 15th-century text), the mystic power of bestowing bliss increases ten times when the Gaṅgā enters the Vindhya region; where it follows a westerly flow it is increased by hundred times, and when it follows a northerly flow in Vārāṇasi the merit increases by a thousand times (SINGH 1987, 509). Following a common Hindu tradition in the early morning at sunrise, pilgrims or devout citizens gather on the ghāt to bathe in the Gaṅgā, drink at least a few drops of the sacred water, and take blessings or religious instructions from the ghātias ("priests" at the ghāts) who, while seated at the river's edge under a typical canopy, preside over various offerings, including ancestral offerings. Pilgrims then move into the narrow lanes to take a 'dārāna' (auspicious sight) of the Viśveśvara/ Viśvanātha temple and the other sacred entities.

Among the 84 ghāts five are considered as more auspicious (Pañcatīrtha); from the south to the north they are: Asi, Daśāśvamedha, Manikārṇikā, Pañcagāṅ, and Ādi Keśava. Says the KKh (84.107) that ‘having bathed in which a person shall never again be born’. These ghāts are the most commonly visited by pilgrims and devotees. These selective spots are prescribed and described in detail in the KKh (84.107-110), and are still very popularly visited places – either daily, or on auspicious occasions. The architectural beauty of the city is not completed without the ghāts. Vast beaches of stones, pavements and landings, ensure passage towards the waters of the Gaṅgā. They were developed during the construction of the palaces and the bank buildings and ensure a transition of space. The palatial building at Ranamahala Ghāt was made in late 17th century, and the Darbhanga Ghāt in early 20th century in Greek pillar style (Photo 1). This portion is the most scenic spot along the Gaṅgā.

Asi Ghāt

Marking the southern edge of the city at the confluence of the Asi, this ghāt was referred to in a 17th-century text. The palatial buildings were made by the king of Vārāṇasi in about 1830. This is one of the famous sites for celebrating the Sūrya Sasthi ("the Sixth day of the Sun" as mother goddess) festival held on the 5th and 6th day of the waxing fortnight of the month Karttika (October–November), when over ten thousand mothers perform this festival for the wellbeing of their sons.

Daśāśvamedha Ghāt

This ghāt (Fig. 3, Photo 2) is presumed to be the first historically recorded site associated with the myth of the horse-sacrifice performed by the Bhāra Śiva Nāga kings around the 2nd century CE. Throughout the year this is the busiest ghāt. On the 10th day of the waxing fortnight of Jyeṣṭha (May–June) worship of the Gaṅgā is celebrated on a grand scale in the Gaṅgā temple at the top of the ghāt. The sacred bath
Photo 1: Vārāṇasi: A scene of Ranāmahala Ghat and Darbhanga Ghat, showing the architectural beauty (courtesy Niels Gutschow)

Vārāṇasi: Blick auf die architektonische Vielfalt von Ranāmahala Ghat und Darbhanga Ghat
on the occasions of solar and lunar eclipses and in the month of Magha (December-January) is also important.

**Manikarnika Ghat**

Mythologically known as "the great cremation ground", this ghat (Fig. 4, Photo 3) is mentioned in the Gupta inscriptions of the 4th century. The ghat has two parts – one for cremation, and the other for bathing and rituals. After cremating corpses, the mourner and attendants take a bath at this site. Pilgrims and devotees perform ancestral rites at this ghat, more commonly in the special period of the waning fortnight of Asvina (September-October).

**Pançagāṅga Ghat**

In 11th century mythologies this ghat (Fig. 5, Photo 4) is referred to frequently. It was famous for the grand temple of Veni Mādhava, one representation of Viṣṇu, which was demolished and converted into a mosque in 1670 by the Mughal king Aurangzeb. That mosque still serves as a landmark along the arc of the river. The Gāngā-arati ("offering oil lamps to the goddess Gāṅgā") at the time of sunrise and sunset is the most attractive scene at this ghat. In the month of Kārttikeya (October-November) the ritual of offering oil lamps to ancestors, hung up in the air on bamboo poles, is performed by the ghatias (ghat-priests) on behalf of the devotees who patronize the cost or materials involved. Additional payment is also made for service of hoisting the lamps (daksinā) every night. A ghatia tells many such stories of the families which by doing this ritual had received blessings from their ancestors resulting in prosperity.

**Adi Kesava Ghat**

Since the Gahadavala period (11th century), this ghat is famous for the temple of Viṣṇu as Keśava – assumed to be the oldest in the region. For Vaiṣṇavī-
Fig. 3: Vārānasi: Daśāvamedha and nearby ghāṭīs, the busiest places. Numbers 1 to 8 show the notable shrines and temples.

Vārānasi: Daśāvamedha und die umliegenden, am häufigsten besuchten ghāṭīs. Die Nummern 1 bis 8 markieren die Lage der bedeutenden Schreine und Tempel.
tes (devotees of Viṣṇu) this is the most attractive site. In practice, most of the pilgrims take a bath at the closeby confluence of the Varana and the Ganga, followed by a visit and rituals in the Adi Keśava temple.

The five ghāts in perspective

These five ghāts symbolize the microcosmic body of Lord Viṣṇu: Asi is the head, Daśāśvamedha is the chest, Manikarnikā is the navel, Pañcagangā is the thighs, and Adi Keśava is the feet. This recalls the myth that Viṣṇu first placed his holy feet in Varanasi. Thus the area along the Ganga river is symbolized as Viṣṇu’s body. Says the KKh (84.114) that “having bathed in the five ghāts a person never again receives a body of five elements; rather he becomes the five-faced Śiva in Kaśi.”

The two most important occasions for bathing in the Gaṅgā at Vārānasi are makara-saṃkrānti (winter solstice; 14th of January), and mesa-saṃkrānti (vernal equinox; 14th of April). The other important occasions are the full-moon days (especially of October–November), eclipses, and the new-moon days. On any of these occasions over a hundred thousand visitors take a holy bath in the Ganga.

It is obvious from the participatory survey on the occasion of the winter solstice (14th of January 1993, Thursday) that a little less than half of the visitors belonged to higher castes (Brāhmīns, Rājputs and Bhūmihārs) – reflecting the sense of faith and better economic affordability. Age (50 and above), low education and nearness to the city are among the factors for the intensity of participation. Similar results were also found on the occasion of the new-moon day that fell on the 26th February 1993 (Saturday). If the new-moon day falls on Monday it increases the power of bestowing merit, e. g. on the 18th of January 1988. Most of the visitors belong to the middle-class income group.

After a purificatory bath in the Gaṅgā and worshipping her, pilgrims head for an auspicious glimpse

Photo 3: Vārānasi: A scene of Manikarnikā Ghāt. The ritual of offering oil lamps hung up in the air on bamboo poles marks an ancestral rite (courtesy Niels Gutschow)

Vārānasi: Eine Szenerie von Manikarnikā Ghāt. Das Ritual der Darbietung von Öllampen an Bambusstöcken beinhaltet die Verehrung der Ahnen
Fig. 4: Varanasi: Manikarnika and nearby ghats, known for cremation and ancestral rites. Numbers 1 to 8 show the important shrines and temples

Varanasi: Manikarnika und die umliegenden ghäts, bekannt für Einäscherungen und Rituale, die den Ahnen gewidmet sind. Die Nummern 1 bis 8 markieren die Lage der bedeutenden Schreine und Tempel

(darâna) of the patron deity, Viśvēśvara/Viśvanatha and the ancillary shrines in and around the temple compound, Kāla Bhairava (the protector of the city and controller of Death), Sānkātāmocana, Durgā, and others.

The birth of the Gaṅgā, referring to her coming on earth from heaven, is celebrated on the 10th of the waxing fortnight of Jyeṣṭha (May–June). In 1992 it fell on June 10. Devotees believe that to bathe in the Gaṅgā in the morning of this day bestows high merit and relief from the sins committed earlier. This day is followed by another auspicious day, ekādaśī, associated with the worship of Viṣṇu, the protector. Those who take a religious vow (sankalpa) to worship the Gaṅgā start the bathing and associated rituals from the first day of Jyeṣṭha and complete the cycle on the 11th day (ekādaśī).

Kundas/Sacred Ponds

The sacred territory of Varanasi is dramatically associated with water bodies. The eastern edge is determined by the Gaṅgā river, north by the Varanā river, and south by the Asi. The whole city has hundreds of water ponds (Hindi: talāh, Sanskrit: kundā) which even as late as the mid-nineteenth century formed a series of streams dividing the city into five forest tracts (vana) – from north to south these were Mahā Vana, Dāru Vana, Ananda Vana, Harikesa Vana and Bhādra Vana (Fig. 6) Many of the water ponds were interlinked during heavy rains (July–September), draining the area. In a way the sacred topography of the city thus followed a seasonal rhythm of nature. The map of Varanasi made by the British scholar Prinsep in 1822 clearly shows how
numerous these ponds and tanks were (Fig. 6). His drawing shows how in the north Mahā Vana and Dāru Vana were divided by the stream linking Maṇḍakini and Matsyodari, further meeting Rinamocana and finally flowing into the Varana river. One part of this stream, during heavy rains, met the Gangā river near Manikarnika Ghat. The overflow of the water connected Bhulotana Garhā, Benia Talāb, Sūrāja Kunda Misira Pokharā and finally met the Gangā at Daśāśvamedha Ghat. Of course, these water bodies are filled up, however, only during heavy rains or floods, when the channels come again to the surface, reminding us of the old water bodies and their routes, as in the years 1948, 1978 and 1992.

In spite of such changes in landscape, the importance of sacred ponds (kundas) is not lost. On auspicious occasions at the bank of these sacred ponds many religious activities are performed, and fairs (melās) and bathing rituals held. These are eulogized in the mythological literature and maintained by continuing tradition.

The mythological literature mentions sixty sacred ponds, six bigger wells (vapis) and thirty-one sacred wells (kupas) in Varanasi. With the increase of population and spread of settlements, many of the water sites were either filled up, or were encroached upon within the residential quarters. However, the famous sites are still alive. The notable ones are described below.

Jñānavāpi ("Well of Wisdom")

This well symbolizes the primordial water associated with the story of Ṣāna (Śiva’s form controlling...
the northeast realm of the universe), who dug the earth at this site with his trident and offered the water to Avimukteśvara, the most ancient form of Śiva in Vārānasi (KKh 33.17, 18). Says the KKh (33.50) that Śiva, on becoming acquainted with the circumstance, promised to take up his abode in the well in liquid form, and to reside there for destroying ignorance and to give wisdom (jñāna). According to local tradition, after the temple was demolished in 1669 by the Mughal king Aurangzeb, Viśvanātha-Śiva took refuge in the well and since then resides there. Jñānavaipi is the highest among all the pilgrimage centres, and a direct manifestation of wisdom, giver of all sorts of knowledge, preserver of merits of all the liṅgas, the most auspicious and direct manifestation of Śiva, and was in Vārānasi long before the Gāṅga came to earth (KKh 34.123).

During most of the sacred journeys and rituals pilgrims first come here to sip the water and take a vow (sāndhyā) of initiation and completion of their ritual journeys. At the end of the journey they return to sip the sacred water again as a mark of completion. Presently the well is well equipped with iron bars across the top, and a cloth is spread over the iron grill to prevent coins, flowers and ritual items of pilgrims from plunging into it. The well is surrounded by a low-roofed colonnade, the stone pillars of which are arranged in four rows.

**Manikarnikā, or Cakrapukarini Kunda**

The mythology given in the KKh (60.137-138; 61.83-85) tells us that for the benefit of the three worlds the mythic king Bhagiratha brought the Gāṅga to the place where Manikarnikā is – to Śiva’s Forest of Bliss, to Viṣṇu’s Lotus Pool. This is eulogized as the “Door of Heaven”, located close to the Ghat, around which the cremation ground is situated. The tank, surrounded today by a cast-iron railing, is some sixty feet square at the top, narrowing to about twenty feet square at the water’s edge (Photo 5). The well is said “to spring from a square independent of the Gāṅga – an underground river that flows directly
from Gomukha, the “Cow’s mouth” in the Himalaya, the place where the River Gangā emerges from a mountain glacier” (Eck 1983, 239f). The KKh (chapter 26) says:

> During the cosmic flood of dissolution, there was nothing at all. . . . There was only Pure Reality, a Brahmana. . . . Then that One pure form, Lord Śiva [“spirit”] was the form of that Formless One, and with him was the goddess Śakti, called Prakṛti [“Matter”] as well as Maya [“Illusion”]. And the two of them, Śiva and Śakti, created this place. . . . Thereafter they created a Divine Man (Viṣṇu) for the creation of world. . . . At this site Viṣṇu made a beautiful lotus pond and filled it up with water from the sweat of his own limbs, and performed fierce austerities for 500,000 years (KKh 26.8, 15, 28, 43, 52).

This kunda was the world’s first pool. It was the first holy spot dug out at the dawn of time and filled with the sacred water of Lord Viṣṇu’s perspiration. As a testimony to that story Viṣṇu’s footprints are visible there. Before purifying themselves in the pond, Hindu pilgrims first pray at the marble slab which bears Viṣṇu’s footprints. Millions of Hindus have sprinkled it with holy water and adorned it with flowers. Whenever a Mahārājā (king) of Benares dies, it is alongside the footprints that he is cremated.

Each year when the Gangā recedes the water leaves a huge mass of alluvial silt in the tank. Moreover, during the peak floods the kunda is completely inundated and often disappears from view, as in August 1993. When floods and waters recede, gradually the excavation and reclamation of the silt begins and is completed by sivaratri (the new-moon day of February–March). On this occasion a grand celebration takes place. The pilgrims passing along this route perform special rituals in honour of their ancestors; additionally as a completion rite pilgrims also come here and perform the rituals of thanksgiving.

*Durga Kunda*

The temple of the goddess Durgā is located in the southern extremity of Vārānasi and associated with
Fig. 6: Vārānasi: Ancient water bodies and five forest tracts (after James Prinsep 1822)
Vārānasi: Uralte Gewässer und fünf Waldgebiete
a sacred pond (Fig. 7). According to mythology Durga protects the city from the south. She is said to have rested at Durga Kunda after slaying the mythic demon. Durga here is called Kusmanda (“Pumpkin Gourd”), one among the nine manifestations. On every Tuesday, and more frequently in the month of Sravana (July-August) worshippers perform rituals at this site. Presently the water of the pond is so polluted that only a few pilgrims dare to bathe; in fact most of them put only some drops of this water upon their head as a mark of the purificatory rite. Pilgrims performing sacred journeys like the Nagara Pradaksina (“Pilgrimage around the City”), Kedara Khanda (“Sacred segment of Kedara”) and Pancakroshi (the outer sacred circuit) pass through this site and perform rituals. During the month of Sravana (July-August) a religious fair is held — attended by an enormous multitude of people. Both sides of the road are decorated by shops for sweets and ritual items. The other two periods of
mass visitation are the 1st to 9th day of the waxing fortnight of Caitra (March–April) and Aśvina (September–October).

Closeby to this sacred pond lies Kuruksetra Kundā, which is famous for the bath taken there on the occasion of a solar eclipse. This tank was constructed by Queen Rani Bhavāni of Bengal in about 1775, in commemoration of the war fought at Kurukṣetra described in the epic Mahābhārata. This tank is square, and is built with stone stairs, leading down to the water.

Lolārka Kundā (“Well of the Trembling Sun”)

Of the twelve sun shrines of the city, the one called Lolārka is the most famous and marks the southern edge of the city. Its first reference is made in a 8th century BC text, the ŚBr (VI. I.28), which describes the twelve Sun shrines associated with twelve solar months. Long before the formation of Hinduism, Lolārka was famous for sun and snake worship during Buddha’s time. Historically it became more famous during the Gahadavala kings in the 11th century. Presently, Lolārka Kundā is a Sun and Śaivite site of worship that reflects a complex history of gradual mythological fusion, and it remains a powerful place that draws thousands of Hindus. Eulogizing this mythological fusion, and it remains a powerful place that draws thousands of Hindus.

As is customary since the early 19th century, after vow-taking and thanksgiving rites are performed on this occasion. Most pilgrims come here to perform thanksgiving who have earlier received an offspring, and finally they perform the tonsure of small children (mundana) as a rite of passage at the same spot. As is customary since the early 19th century, after taking baths and performing rituals at this site pilgrims proceed to Kṛnga Kundā, about half a kilometre northwest, associated with the Tantric sage Kīnā Rāma. They again take baths in the latter tank and sing religious songs.

Lakṣmī Kundā

Lying in the central part of the city the tank is associated with Lakṣmī, the goddess of “wealth” (see KKh 70.63). On the 8th of the waxing fortnight of Bhādrapada (August–September) the goddess moves from the sanctum to the foreground. And, on the 16th day a religious fair is held there. Those who perform fasting and austerity for Lakṣmī bathe in the tank, listen to purānic stories, enjoy the glimpse of Lakṣmī, and honour her with sixteen kinds of grains and sixteen kinds of flowers. The sixteen-day period is called “Sorahi Melā”. On the final day of this period – the eighth day of the waning fortnight of Aśvina (September–October) – the festival of Jivita Pottiṅkā, or popularly known as Jiūtiā is celebrated on a great scale. In 1993 this period started on 23rd September and was completed on 8th October. This festival is mostly observed by women for a long and prosperous life of their children. At the embankments of Lakṣmī Kundā ladies make yaṭiras (sacred designs) under the guidance of a priest with vermillion and wheat and rice flour. While performing thanksgiving both husband and wife together take an active part in rituals.

Piṣacamoana Kundā

This sacred tank is one among the three sites for ancestral worship and rituals; the others are Manikarnika Kundā and Kapiladhāra Kundā. The waning fortnight of Aśvina (September–October) is the most auspicious period of worship at these sites. The ancient name of this pond was Vimalāḍaka Kundā, but after its association with providing liberation (moṣaka) to a departed soul that took the form of a goblin (Piṣaka), the present name became popular (see KKh 54.74; KP 32, 62). For those departed souls fated to become a goblin, by baths and doing rituals here they are “set free”. After a passage of time there also developed exorcism to get relief from the evil spirit. Most commonly on every Sunday and Tuesday victims pay a visit and by the complicated rituals under the guidance of oracles obtain liberation from the evil spirits. On the 14th day of the waxing fortnight of Mārgaśīrṣa (November–December), a sacred journey in the form of a circumambulation of the tank is done. A huge crowd of visitors stop on this occasion and cook wheat-flour balls and fry eggplants on the open fire made of pats of cow dung. This food is called “pure food” (sattika), the one inclined towards tranquillity and quietism (PARRY
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1983, 613). This fair is called Loṭā-Bhaṇṭā Mela. The ritual performed here is meant to remember the Piśāca’s soul finally was set free. The majority of the attendants are women from nearby villages.

Sacred Ponds along the Paṇcakroṣi Route

The route which delimits the sacred territory (Kāśi), called paṇcakroṣi-yātra, passes by eight sacred ponds and wells; from east to west (clockwise) they are: Lolārka, Durgā, Kardama, Gandharva, Bhairava, Śindhusarovara, Yūpa and Kapiladhāra. In these ponds pilgrims take baths and receive merit; however, at present Śindhusarovara and Yūpa have lost their existence due to lack of water, while the rest have polluted water. Kapiladhāra Kunda represents the holy spot of Gāṅgāsagara, the meeting point of the Śanga to the Bay of Bengal, and is famous for ancestral rites. To avoid pollution, pilgrims bathe at the closeby wells and perform an abstract form of bathing at these sites by pouring a few drops of water from these ponds upon their heads.

The other important sacred ponds are: Śūraja (“sun”) Kunda, specially visited on every Sunday of Cātra (March–April) to get relief from skin diseases (see KKh 48.53); Dharma Kūpa (Photo 6), visited during the 11th-15th of the waxing days of Kārttika (October–November) to receive blessing from Yama, or Dharmarāja (Lord of Death; see KKh 97.58); Nāga (“snake”) Kūpa, visited on the 3rd of the waxing day of Śrāvana (July–August) to be safe from snakes (see KKh 66.10); and Candresvara Kūpa visited on the full-moon day of Cātra (March–April) to honour the Moon (see KKh 68.51).

There are still many lakes, pools and wells in Vārānasi today. In addition to their mundane use they serve as places of ritual bathing. Most of them still remain as natural, clay-banked pools; however, some of them have been converted into tanks with stone steps leading to the water along all four sides. These pools in the ancient past served as popular religious sites for Hindus, and the city was famous as a place of abundant waters. But nowadays the visitor to the city would hardly notice this unusual geography. Eck (1983, 51) has rightly remarked that “Its many tanks and pools are hidden in crowded sections of the city, accessible only by very narrow lanes. The basins that were once lakes have become city parks, and the running streams have become streets”.

Towards Sacred Ecology

Concerning environmental problems, ethics of land use is suggested as a philosophical legacy. The
Gangā river is symbolized as the liquid divine energy nourishing the inhabitants and purifying them. The mythologies recall that the water of the Gangā meets various water bodies (ponds and wells) on auspicious occasions through legendary underground connections. This refers to the idea of transferring energy at various spots. The sacred bath and astronomically defined sacred time suitable for it are described in conjunction with the position of the sun and its association with various constellations. The sun symbolizes the male (awakened, jagratha) and water the female (sleep, susupta) modes of existence. The sense of divine landscape (e.g. of land or water) is either the direct product of inherent qualities of living organisms or else has been greatly modified by their presence.

The efficacy of the water spots for bathing is often eulogized to be equal to or many times greater than one of the standard vedic sacrifices. They were thus prescribed as a simpler means of obtaining the kind of benefits acquired by those who could not afford to support expensive, elaborate, and archaic rituals or extensive journeys. The mythic stories tell us how a sinner restored to a particular bathing place and attained salvation or spiritual blessing. In most of the cases the names of the ponds and ghats recall this mythology.

In comparison to other sacred sites, the water-spot places are charged with more liminality. They are places that were in the past, and still are on the margins of a structured world. In time these places began to assume an ambiguity, each used in a transformed form from their original motive; however, they maintain their basic essence. But the minor spots, mythologically less important, have lost their identity in the physical milieu - being replaced by a replicated version like a well. However, of these remain memorable spots. Pilgrims pay their reverence to them. These water-spots are liminal places, "thresholds" – interconnecting the physical realm of the present earth and the divine realm of the past heaven.

The nature is serene, beautiful, and hospitable to life if we maintain the counter-balance with it. We need to revitalize the spiritual sense of ecology, a worldview of harmonic relationship between man and nature. It is a sad irony that somehow we are on the verge of losing that relationship, resulting in water logging, opening of old channels and blocking of drain lines during heavy rains or heavy floods in Varanasi. This results from our present poverty of awareness and realization. The ecological mind never interprets its habitat in human terms only, but also in terms of divine and natural landscape. Above all, we are part of the cosmos where the order and unity of the whole world is maintained.

References

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