

Medieval Banaras: A City of Cultural and Economic Dynamics and Response

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to understand the cultural and economic importance of the city of Banarast various medieval political powers. As there are many examples on the basis of which it can be said that the nature, dynamics, and popularity of a city have changed at different times according to the demands and needs of the time. Banaras is one of those ancient cities which 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 the Banaras provided a suitable environment to the changing cultural and economic challenges, whereas it went through the pressure of different political powers from time to time and made them realize its importance. This paper attempts to understand those suitable environments on how the landscape of Banaras and its dynamics in the medieval period transformed this city into a developed economic-cultural city.

Keywords: Banaras, Religious, Economic, Urbanization, Mughal, Market, Landscape.

Wide-ranging literary works have been written on Banaras by scholars of various subject backgrounds, in which they highlight the socio-economic life of different religious and cultural ideals of the inhabitants of Banaras. It is very important for scholars studying regional history to understand what challenges a city has to face in different historical periods to maintain its identity. The name Banaras is found as the present name Varanasi in the Buddhist Jataka and Hindu epic Mahabharata. Therefore, this city is known as Banaras, Kashi and Varanasi, which is situated on the bank of a famous holy river Ganga in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Although Banaras has been seen as a sacred religious city in most academic works, there are many other aspects of its history that highlights the landscape of the city, the economic-social and political policies behind the dynamics of that city, and efforts and objectives of community settlements during different historical periods etc. Banaras is first mentioned in the Rigveda by the name of Kashi. Banaras is often known as the city of temples and the centre of Hindu learning which was also popular for the Banaras School of Hindu Law during the pre-medieval time. Also, it is a famous centre of music, arts, crafts and education.

The eighty-four Ghats of the river Ganga along the city of Banaras are a sign of divinity endured in the physical, metaphysical and supernatural elements. However, Banaras is known mainly for its ghats because the local culture of Banaras has a deep connection with the river Ganga and the its religious values so Banaras was popular as a 'Tritha' among the Hindus. There is a common religious belief that the boon of life starts with the Dashashamedham Ghat of Banaras and it ends at Manikarnika Ghat, that is a unique combination of life and death attracts pilgrims to the desire of salvation. However, the importance of the Ghats built in Banaras has been studied only in religious perspective, but there is also a political perspective behind the construction of these Ghats which provide a broad meaning to the history of this city. Because it can be studied on the basis of Persian and Sanskrit and other vernacular literary and archaeological sources that apart from the Rajput kings like Man Singh and Sawai Jai Singh II, the Maratha chieftains like Peshwas and Sindhiyas contributed to the development of the city along with the construction of the Ghats in Banaras during the medieval period. Banaras was also continuously reshaped from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries, while the city has been witnessed to the socio-economic and cultural challenges posed by the Mughals, Marathas and other bhakti saints.

As far as the landscape and settlement of Banaras, an ancient religious centre, is concerned, first of all we need to know that the meaning of the town and the city cannot be known with a single perspective, rather it can be well understood in many different historical and regional contexts as well as its importance and feature depend on contemporary society, communities, societal purposes and chronological period. Besides, even all cities are not equally developed, but their rate of development depends on many factors such as topography, hinterland, state interest and the level of urban development in the surrounding area. Usually, a

city is formed after a long effort to fulfil the function or combinations of these functions such as administrative centres, religious centres, military centres, market centres, cultural centres. 'The historical novelty of city, its uniqueness and concentration of diverse economic, social, religious and political activities led to the emergence of many nuances and mutually contradictory sets of experiences in urban settlements.' Banaras, which flourished as a major city in ancient times for pilgrimage and Hindu rituals, but in the medieval period there was a development of mutual pragmatism and dynamism in the urban process which was largely based on the reasonable changes in the nature of local human processes and the nature of its physical landscape and labour process.

Modern historian Mohammad Habib who initiated the academic debate on medieval Indian urbanization and brought forth the concept of 'urban revolution' in northern India during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. According to him, in pre-Turkish India, the upper classes lived exclusively in cities and towns, while workers were confined in villages or to the outer periphery of cities. Turkish slave officials replaced the Thakurs as the local ruling class, and removed all pre-determined discrimination against workers regardless of their creed. Even the new ruling classes were parasitic and urban by nature, opening the doors of cities for all to fulfil their needs and luxury commodities, as well as military camps and military necessities in cities that generated employment in the cities. Now the artisans, laborers and self-employed who were confined in the village started turning towards the factories, markets and mandis of the cities. Hence the Turkish conquest of India was actually a 'revolution of Indian city labour' under the leadership of the Turks.¹ On the other hand, the hypothesis of urban revolution has been critically examined by Irfan Habib in light of more empirical evidence and better understanding of contemporary social and economic understanding. However, he supports Mohammad Habib's view that the urban economy undoubtedly expanded during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, possibly increasing the size and number of cities as well as an increase in craft production and commerce. But Irfan Habib does not agree with the argument that the city workers or the peasants in the rural areas were enjoying great level of emancipation under the Turks.² It was merely a change of power and not a change in the means of production, but it is true that during this period in fact significant changes and improvements in technology occurred which led to large production.³

Some other prominent modern historians like W. H. Moreland, H.K. Naqvi, K. M. Ashraf and C. A. Bayly have thoroughly analysed the process of urbanization in medieval India based on valuable contemporary evidences. Thus, Moreland, highlighting the urbanization under the Mughal Empire, mentions that contemporary Europeans were also strongly influenced by the number and size of cities in the Mughal Empire.⁴ H. K. Naqvi further expanded the study of Moreland and analysed in detail the urban centres and industrial centres developed under the Mughal Empire. Naqvi states that the background of rapid development in urban centres during the Mughal period was provided in the pre-Mughal period itself, because after the thirteenth century, cities like Delhi, Banaras, Patna, Lahore, Surat, Burhanpur, Thatta, etc. started to develop as political and trade centres.⁵ Further, Naqvi presents important monograph 'Urbanization and the construction of urban centres under the great Mughals', in which she brings out slightly different perspectives and relevant aspects related to the subject.⁶ Also, Naqvi is more explicit about the roles of cities such as the importance of their independence on Hinterland and their links with each other, water supply, commerce, industry, population, and city planning. Even Naqvi supports this fact and mentions that the Mughal period saw the revival of the old established cities, the addition of a few new cities and the construction of an impressive array of monumental structures in almost every major city in northern India, whose urban landscape today bears unimaginable testimony to the grandeur of Mughal architecture.⁷

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.⁸ According to Naqvi, the Mughal kings allowed and supported the capital cities to develop independently on the basis of their own specialties.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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

capitals, trading centres and political and military subdivisional centres have received more attention. Thus, on the basis of the available evidence it can be said that Banaras was an important commercial centre along with the religious-cultural centre as the city was an important centre of trade related to the river Ganges apart from being situated on the trade route hence the state given considerable attention on this city in medieval period. Even before the Turkish rule, Banaras existed as a famous trade centre, which is confirmed by contemporary historian Baihaqi that the first Turks invasion on Banarès was during the reign of Mahmood Ghazni when his army invaded Banaras in 1033 AD. and looted the local market that was full of precious metals like gold and silver.¹² Banaras was connected to the main inland route from Bengal in the east to Lahore in the west and was also located on the trade route going from north to south India which served as an important commercial halt.

There are some other modern historians and scholars like Motichandra, A.S. Altekar, C. A. Bayly, and Diana L. Eck., who have especially thrown significant light on the religious, cultural, economic and political aspects of the city of Benares. There is a certain uniformity in the opinion of all those scholars on this issue that the city of Benares was as important for economic activity in every historical period as it was for its religious activities. Bayly analyses the social and political correlation of Banaras and saying that it derives from economic activities and not with economic development or expansion of trade and production. Even evidences also suggest that the incorporation of Banaras into the large market-networking system of Mughals increased the level of secondary production as well as accelerated the pace of division of labour in the city and greatly developed the banks and money markets. But Bayly also presents how the existing resilient network and responses of the Gangetic Valley's cities, rural markets and merchant communities in the eighteenth century paved the way for the British as well as indigenized the colonial trade and politics.¹³ Nevertheless, the cultural landscape of the city always retained its existence as the religious centre and significance of different communities. However, the political control of Banaras not only ensured easy access to trade and commercial resources of the country, but Banaras had great spiritual importance for the people of North India as well as South India during medieval period. Banaras was not only pressured to maintain the cultural identity of the various communities rather the city also faced intense pressure from fierce competition between the Mughals and the Marathas to establish their claim at different times.

Banaras, being settled on the banks of the river, was not only a developed hub of an agricultural production rather it was also a part of dynamic agrarian commercialism under the extensive trading networks during medieval period. Although, some contemporary traveller's accounts provide a comparative perspective by assessing the dynamics and vibrancy of the region very well. According to Bernier and Fitch the area around Banaras was a very prosperous, fertile and densely populated city.¹⁴ The fertile land in Banaras and adjoining areas suggests that both Rabi and Kharif grains were produced on a large scale. The accounts of another contemporary foreign traveller Manucci also mentions that there are many types of grains, vegetables and fruits were cultivated around Banaras and the local grain market was very rich.¹⁵ In the medieval period, efforts to make agricultural revenue more efficient under a centralized and well channelized administration placed greater emphasis on local agriculture. The Mughal ruler Akbar divided the entire empire into twelve *Subah* (provinces) after more scientific and systematic analysis of the land revenue system in 1580 AD., in which Allahabad was also a *Subah*.¹⁶ Allahabad *Subah* was further divided into ten '*Sarkars*' and Banaras was one of them, even these '*Sarkars*' were divided into many parganas, under which the Banaras '*Sarkar*' was divided into total seven parganas for.¹⁷ Abul Fazl in his *Ain-i-Akbari* mentions about forty-one crops grown in Allahabad *Subah* during Akbar's reign, of which the number of edible cereal crops was ten and the other thirty-one were either commercial or other crops.¹⁸ It is very interesting that according to the contemporary sources of two related periods 1594 A.D and 1720 A.D, the agricultural land of Banaras increased but its revenue collection declined.¹⁹ The decline in land revenue of these two *Sarkars* Banaras and Chunar may be due to the increase in their shares by the local shareholders i.e. zamindars and they would have established their monopoly on revenue administration by taking advantage of the weak policies and governance of the successors of Aurangzeb. It is not logical to assume that agricultural production in the Banaras region decreased because the contemporary source of 1720 A.D has recorded an increase in agricultural land than before.

As far as the contribution of Banaras to the dynamics of trade and commerce is concerned, it is impossible to assess correctly in the absence of authentic records before mid-eighteen century C.E. whereas historian Naqvi has concluded on the basis of available records of 1777 and 1784 A.D that mainly the trade of spices, grains, betel nuts and coconuts between Bengal, Patna, and Banaras through the rivers, was continuing in very good condition. Further, on the basis of the records of 1784 A.D., she also presents that the *Chauki* (check-post) was set up in Banaras to supervise and duty-tax on the trade of food grains.²⁰ Both these

evidences confirm that the commercial network of Banaras would not have developed suddenly rather, the city would have reached this developed stage in the eighteenth century only after long economic development and prospects. However, apart from the food-grain trade, Banaras maintained its prosperity even after 1764 A.D., especially in the trade of silk, sugar and opium which became the center of attraction for the British company. Besides, Banaras was directly connected to the important commercial centre like Patna by waterway, and the same route was further connected to Murshidabad, Hooghly, Calcutta, Dacca and Satgaon in the eastern region. Also, same waterway was connected to the capital city of Agra and Delhi in western India. Therefore, Banaras as being a commercial centre situated on the waterways, the city was also connected to other major trade centres by convenient roadways.

Historian H. K. Naqvi has very well underlined the importance of commercial roadways connected to the city of Banaras, how did this main route go from Banaras to Lucknow and the same route took a south-west direction from Lucknow and reaches Agra via Kannauj, whose maintenance and condition was very good because it was given great attention by the Nababs of Lucknow and Hindu merchants.²¹ After the Allahabad Treaty of 1765 A.D., the trade of Banaras went under the direct control of the British Company which was very essential for the strategic and economic perspective of them. In the late eighteenth century, Banaras became the main importer trading centre of raw silk, cotton, copper and brimstone etc. and the use of copper extensively in this city organized a local business for works like silk goods, brass, utensils and coins minting. Although Banaras did not produce much cotton, rather cotton was imported from the Deccan region in Banaras, from where it was exported to Calcutta and other parts of eastern India.

It was not that the British company focused itself only on the metal and fibre trade whereas British records show that the company, with the help of its appointed agents, was exporting food grains, saltpetre, sugar, jaggery, opium and indigo from the Benares to foreign market by ship via Calcutta.²² It was the period when saltpetre and opium were produced on a large scale in Benares and its adjoining region.²³ Banaras did not produce a large amount of cotton, therefore large quantities of cotton were imported from the Deccan regions to supply industries, which were sent to Bengal via Banaras. Even, at the end of the eighteenth century, several industries were set up in Banaras, of which the cotton-textile industry was the most important and flourishing. Banaras was mainly known for the manufacture of finest quality of cotton cloth and embroidery skills, which not only attracted the Indian merchants, but also the foreign merchants invested their capitals in manufactured textile products on a large scale.²⁴ Tavernier also mentions the presence of a large number of textile weavers and vendors in Banaras, who used to come to the local clothing market to buy and sell silk and cotton fabrics and cloths.²⁵ These industries and the trade environment provided immense prosperity in Banaras and its adjoining areas even throughout the British period.

Therefore, it would be more appropriate to say that Banaras was not only presenting itself as a centre of various religious and cultural beliefs, but also established itself as a developed trading centre in the medieval period. The geographical landscape of Banaras has associated the city with the religious allegiance of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and other religious sects since ancient times. On the other hand, due to these specialities, the city, while retaining the image of its religious centre, transformed itself into an important economic city under the patronage of other medieval rulers as well as Britishers. Though, this city has different meanings for them according to the need of the major political powers of medieval period, for example, the importance of the Banaras city as a religious and economic centre for the Turks and especially the Mughals while it was important as a religious center for the revival of Hinduism like the Marathas, but Banaras always remained a city of purely economics and commercial importance for the British. It is a wonder of the Banaras which always maintained these two identities very well.

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