

My visit to Kashi

I had the opportunity to visit Kashi, recognized as the spiritual and cultural heart of India, and one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. Known in ancient times as Kashi, this city was once part of a great kingdom, approximately 2,500 years ago. Adi Shankara played a pivotal role in establishing the worship of Shiva as a prominent sect in Varanasi. Notably, Tulsidas composed the Ramcharitmanas, a devotional remake of the Sanskrit Ramayana, in this city, alongside other influential figures of the Bhakti movement, such as Kabir and Ravidas. In the 20th century, Kashi was also associated with renowned individuals like the Hindu-Urdu writer Premchand and the esteemed shehnai maestro Bismillah Khan. Additionally, Annie Besant founded the Central Hindu College in 1898 and later co-established Banaras Hindu University with Madan Mohan Malaviya in 1916.

Kashi is a place that has preserved its ancient essence amid modernization. Its narrow lanes, often beyond the reach of GPS, create a maze that may bewilder newcomers, yet they all lead to the ghats along the Ganges, with around 70 in total. A ritual bath in the Ganga is believed to purify one's sins.

As I embarked on a motorboat journey along the riverbanks, I marveled at the historic architecture and numerous ghats inviting pilgrims for a dip. Among these, the Manikarnika Ghat stands out, serving as a continuous cremation site, operating 24/7. Hindus believe that dying in Kashi grants liberation from the cycle of birth and death, with "Liberation" being a fundamental goal for all.

As we passed Manikarnika Ghat, I observed at least ten pyres ablaze, with more flames soon to be lit. On one side lay the active burning ghat, framed by aged structures, while on the other, the expansive Ganges flowed before me. Sitting there, surrounded by the sounds of the motorboat, I felt a wave of humility wash over me. Any sense of ego dissolved as I contemplated the vastness of life on one side and, on the other, the ultimate destination for all of us. Time seemed to halt as I connected with my "Existential Aloneness."

In the space between life and death, we often make a great show of our concerns, forgetting how precious our lives truly are and how much goodness we can create during our brief time here. The Earth has existed for over four billion years, while our individual lifespans are, at most, a mere century. We should recognize the inevitability of death and focus on the preciousness of life. With limited time, we must prioritize our purpose. Acknowledging death heightens our gratitude for existence and encourages reflections on our values.

Death imbues life with meaning; it is not the opposite but an intrinsic part of it. If we fear death, we also fear life itself. Ultimately, "Death is the ultimate equalizer."

Humbled by this profound experience and my place in the grand scheme of life, I returned to Chennai with a renewed commitment to live meaningfully and contribute to society to the fullest extent possible.