

Viswanath Jyothirlingam



JYOTIR LINGA AT KASHI VISHWANATH TEMPLE



Kashi Vishwanath Temple

Viswanath Jyothirlingam is the eighth Jyothirlingam of the Dwadasa Jyothirlingams of Lord Shiva. The temple for this Jyothirlingam is in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. Varanasi is also popularly known as Benares, and Kasi. It has been the cultural capital of India for centuries, and located on the western bank of the river Ganga, India's holiest river. The name Varanasi is derived from the names of two tributaries of Ganga, Varana (commonly called as Berna) and Asi which join Ganga at this place. It is one of the ancient cities of India, and referred in Puranas and Ramayana as Kashi and by many other names. It is the holiest city for all Hindus. There is abundant literature on the holiness of Kashi in Puranas. Viswanath Temple is the center of faith for Hinduism. Hindus believe that a simple glimpse of the Viswanath Jyothirlingam is a soul cleansing experience that transforms life and puts it on the path of knowledge to attain Moksha. This temple of Kashi Viswanath has been a living embodiment of timeless Hindu culture, traditions and spiritual values. The temple was visited by a great number of saints including Jagat Guru Adi Sankaracharya.

Kashi, the city of Shiva, is also known as Varanasi, or Benaras, and is regarded as a holy city by Hindus, Buddhists and Jains. Kashi is one of the most important pilgrimage destinations in India. It is located on the banks of holy River Ganga, in the state of Uttar Pradesh in India. It is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world and the oldest in India. It is said that Kashi was an established city 1200 years before the Christian era. Throughout its long history, the city has been known by a number of names--- Anandavana, the "Forest of Bliss," Kashi (*Kas*-to shine), the "City of Light," Avimuktaka, because it is free from sin (*avi*) and is never left by the Lord. Varanasi, a name derived from the rivers of the Varauana and Asi that flow into the Ganga there. Banaras and Benares are Muslim and British appellations. In the 1860s, a British civil servant, Norman Macleod, *Days in North India*, wrote; "Benares is to the Hindoos what Mecca is to the Mohammedans, and what Jerusalem was to the Jews of old. It is the 'holy' city of Hindostan. I have never seen anything approaching to it as a visible embodiment of religion; nor does anything like it exist on earth."

In the Rig Veda, the city is referred to as Kasi or Kashi, "the luminous one". The name Kashi alludes to the city's historical status as a center of learning, literature, art and culture. Many Hindu scriptures, including the Rig Veda, Skanda Purana, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata, mention the city. Kasi Khanda describes the glory of the city in Skanda Purana. "Lord Shiva says that the three worlds form one city of mine and Kasi is my Royal Palace therein." Kasi Khanda.

The Puranas say that a pilgrimage to Kashi gives undoubtedly liberation. The *Padma Purana* (*Shristi Khanda*, 65.14-20), a 7th century text, describes the sacred territory of Kashi at the center of which lies *Madhya-Meshvara*. This refers to Lord Shiva around whom the universe revolves; Shiva keeps the universe alive and energized through his dance of destruction and creation; *Madhya* is the center and *Ishvara* is his name. Lord Vishwanath is the presiding deity of Kashi. It is here that Ganga runs slightly north and that makes the place sacred.

Mark Twain wrote about Varanasi, "Older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together." Be it the Kashi Vishwanath temple, the legendary Ghats of Kashi, or the thousands of years of history and culture of this city, Kashi is referred to as "the holy city of India", "the religious capital of India", "the city of temples", "the city of lights", "the city of learning", and "the oldest living city on planet earth." Hindus yearn to do "*Kashi Yatra*" (pilgrimage to *Kashi Tirtha*) at least once in their life time. They also prefer that the mortal remains (ashes from cremation of the deceased) be scattered in the River Ganga at Kashi. The sacred city of Kashi, the City of Light, is a place of spiritual liberation, which is called *Moksha* or *Mukti*. '*Kashyam Maranam Mukti*', they say. "Death in Kashi is liberation." Pilgrims come to Kashi from all over India to live out their old age and die a good death there.

According to legend, the city was founded by the Hindu deity Lord Shiva, several thousand years ago. It is believed to be resting on Shiva's "*Trishul*" (Trident). The holy shrine of Kashi Vishwanath (a manifestation of Lord Shiva) is standing for thousands of years on the western banks of River Ganga. It is one of the twelve holy Jyotir lingas (pillars of light of Shiva) in India.

Varanasi is considered to be of the seven *Punya Kshetras* (sacred grounds or fields of active power), where *Moksha* can be obtained. The other Kshetras are Ayodhya, Maya, Mathura, Kanchi, Avantika and Dwaraka. A visit to the temple and a

bath in the river Ganga is believed to lead one on a path to *Moksha* (liberation). There is also a tradition that one should give up at least one desire after a pilgrimage to the temple, and the pilgrimage would also include a visit to the temple at Rameswaram in South India, where people take the water samples of the Ganga to perform prayer at the temple and bring back the sand from near that temple. Hindus believe that river Ganga is the Goddess Shakti. Kashi is also regarded as one of the *Shakti Pithas*, and the Vishalakshi Temple stands on the spot where Goddess Sati's earrings fell.

A Shiva temple has been mentioned in the Puranas including the Kashi Khanda (section) of Skanda Purana. It is in the heart of Varanasi that there stands in its fullest majesty the Kashi Vishwanath Temple in which is enshrined the Jyotir linga of Shiva, Vishweshwara or Vishwanatha. A simple glimpse of the Jyotir linga is a soul-cleansing experience that transforms life and puts it on the path of knowledge and *Bhakti*. Vishweshwara Jyotir linga has a very special and unique significance in the spiritual history of India. Tradition has it that the merits earned by the *Darshan* of other jyotir linga scattered in various parts of India accrue to devotee by a single visit to Kashi Vishwanath Temple. Deeply and intimately implanted in the Hindu mind, the Kashi Vishwanath Temple has been a living embodiment of our timeless cultural traditions and highest spiritual values. The temple has been visited by all great saints---Adi Shankaracharya, Goswami Tulsidas, Ramkrishna Paramhansa, Swami Vivekanand, Maharshi Dayanand Saraswati, Gurunanak Dev ji, and several other spiritual personalities. It is believed that Ramakrishna Paramhansa went into an ecstatic trance while watching a cremation at the Manikaran Ghat, and had a vision of Shiva breathing the famous *Taraka Mantra* into ears of dead and releasing them from this endless cycle of births. *Taraka Mantra* or the ferry-boat *Mantra* is believed to carry one over the sea of *Samsara* to libration. The Kashi Vishwanath Temple attracts visitors not only from India but abroad as well and thereby symbolises man's desire to live in peace and harmony with one another.

The greatest tirthas are often a combination of a number of sacred elements. The supreme Kashi tirtha offers the combination of a holy river, a temple and the Ganga. It is here that Ganga runs slightly north and that makes the place sacred. Kashi Vishwanath Temple and the presence of Shiva Jyotir Linga, is believed to go back to the very beginning of Epic and Puranic period. The sacred zone of Kashi is said to have a radius of five *krosas*, about ten miles, and this zone is circled by a famous five-day pilgrimage called the *panchakrosi*, with five stops along the way.

Kashi was originally an independent Bhumihar Brahmin state and became an independent "Kingdom of Kashi", a British territory in 1775 AD, during 1911AD it was declared as an independent State. It is the site of the Ramnagar Fort, which is the repository of the history, of the kings of Kashi. Since the 18th century, it has been the home of the Kashi Naresh (King of Kashi). Even today the Kashi Naresh is deeply revered by the people of Varanasi.

The first Kashi temple was demolished by invading armies of Qutub Din Aibak in 1194 AD. In that raid almost 1000 temples of Varanasi were destroyed and the city fell into ruins. After that temples were demolished on at least five more occasions. Sikandar Lodhi completely destroyed the Vishwanath temple during 1494 AD. In 1569 AD, the temple was rebuilt. The last demolitions of temples in Varanasi were in the reign of Aurangzeb and included the Kashi Vishwanath Temple. Aurangzeb ordered its

demolition in 1669AD and constructed Gyanvapi Mosque there, which still exist alongside the temple. Traces of the old temple can be seen behind the mosque. It is said that the chief priest of the temple jumped into the well with the Shiva Linga, to escape its desecration. The temple in the present shape was built way back in 1783 AD by Late Maharani Ahilya Bai Holkar of Indore. Maharaja Ranjit Singh donated gold for the temple. Later, during 1833-1840 AD, the Rajmata constructed the boundary of Gyanvapi Well, and other structures including *Ghats* and temples were also reconstructed. On January 28, 1983 the temple was taken over by the Govt. of Uttar Pradesh and its management ever since stands entrusted to a Trust with former Kashi Naresh as President, and an Executive Committee with Div. Com. as Chairman.

The famous Viswanath temple, which was the scene of repeated desecration by fanatical invaders, is one of the *Jyotir Lingas*. The domes made of thick sheets of gold that glisten in the sunlight have been endowed by Maharaja Ranjit Singh, King of Punjab. In the vestibule of the temple, on one side is the image of Gouri and Vinayaka on the other. Smaller shrines are there dedicated to the Lord who has taken multitudes of forms to delight his devotees. In and around this temple there are about 150 Lingas. There are also a number of images of Vinayaka in his different aspects as Moda Vinayaka, Pramoda, Sumukh and Gananat Vinayak.

Kashi, a wonderful city, which is the ancient seat of learning, is the meeting place of all orders. People from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, from Bengal to Kutch are represented here with all barriers of race, caste, province and language dissolved. It has been the centre of Sanskrit studies, and the *Pandits* from here are unquestionably acknowledged for their erudition and scholarship. It is also the abode of the one among the twelve *Jyotir Lingas* found scattered in different parts of India. Indians flock from every part to this holy city. Wealthy or poor they come here to receive blessings. The ailing come to eke out their last days, for death here (they believe) will take them straight to the abode of God. Varanasi has become an important political hub of the country, after Sh. Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, won his parliamentary elections from this place during 2014.

The bathing ghats of Kashi;

Kashi has nearly 100 *Ghats*, steps leading to the banks of River Ganga. Many of the *Ghats* were built by Marathas. Shindes (Scindias), Holkars, Bhonsles, and Peshwas stand out as patrons of present-day Varanasi. Most of the *Ghats* are bathing *Ghats*, while others are used as cremation sites. Many *Ghats* are associated with legends or mythologies while many *Ghats* are privately owned. The former Kashi Naresh owns *Shivala* or *Kali Ghat*.

Kashi has a number of bathing *Ghats* of which five are considered most important; (i) Varuna Sangam Ghat (ii) Pancha Ganga Ghat (iii) Mani-Karnika Ghat (iv) Dasa-Aswamedha Ghat (v) Asi Sangam Ghat. Pilgrims usually choose the Mani-Karnika or Dasa-Asvarnedha Ghat for their bath, as it is situated near the Viswanath temple and Anna Poorna shrine. A German thinker Count Herman Keyserling says: "It is glorious when the sun rises above the horizon and the faithful on the Ghats bend towards the giver of life, in their thousands in one single gesture of adoration. The atmosphere of devotion which hangs above the river is incomparable in strength, stronger than any place I have visited."

(EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK HINDU SANSKRITI BY CHAMAN LAL GADOO)