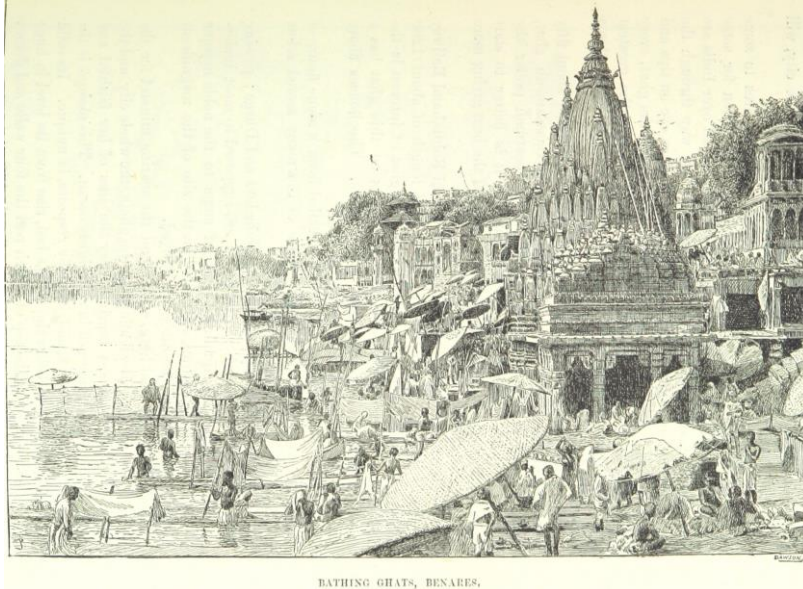


Places of Pilgrimage in India

by T. Subba Rao



BATHING GHATS, BENARES.
Bathing ghats in Benares, 1890 (Wikipedia)

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A masterful presentation of the inner, esoteric significance of sacred cities in India, and also the inner, spiritual meaning of dying in Benares, the heart chakra of India. T. Subba Row was a very eminent Theosophist in the early years of the Theosophical Society in India and highly regarded by H.P. Blavatsky and her Teachers. He had a group of esoteric students in Madras to which C. W. Leadbeater also belonged.]

THE following communication sent to me by a student of Occult Science will throw some light on the significance attached to the ancient Hindu religious symbology as illustrated in the various places of pilgrimage abounding in India, and account for the high veneration in which these places are held by the masses of the Hindu population. Speaking of “pilgrimage as a means of spiritual education” the said correspondent writes as follows:

“The insistence of the later Brahminical Scriptures on pilgrimages as a means of spiritual education is well known. At the present day there is hardly a pious Hindu, of whatever set and in whatever part of India, who considers his or her religious duties performed without visiting the principal places of pilgrimage. In this respect the modern Hindu differs so completely from his Christian contemporaries, that the latter would hardly credit what a vast number of pilgrims

annually circulate over the country to fulfil their religious obligations, and to what trouble and expense they put themselves for the purpose. With the social aspect of the question, the present paper is not concerned. It is proposed to examine what real good pilgrimage in India does produce in the spiritual education of the people, and what is the rationale of the institution. The places of pilgrimage are so numerous and their esoteric significance so deep, that anything like completeness must be disclaimed by the present writer. At the same time the hope is expressed that the lines of inquiry indicated herein may be followed up by competent scholars and mystics, so that the highly beneficial character of pilgrimages may be made apparent to all open-minded people, and the great wisdom of his ancestors shown to the Hindu of the present day.

“In the first place it is to be remarked that the sacred cities of the Hindus are well organised and powerful spiritual centres, and from them there radiates an elevating influence which is not the less active because unperceived by the ordinary Philistine. Places of pilgrimage are truly spiritual seminaries, which, though completely closed to the idler and the superstitious in selfish quest of personal holiness and personal salvation, are ever open to receive the earnest and devoted searcher after truth. The statement may be boldly made and the support of all true mystics confidently expected on its behalf, that there is no important place of pilgrimage in India which does not enjoy the presence, in most cases permanent, of some adept or initiate of a high order, who is ever ready to point the path to the higher life into which he himself has entered. It is a matter of common experience that people’s spiritual eyes have been opened in these holy cities under the benign influence of some great *sadhu* (sinless man). But, for reasons which will be readily understood, the pious hand must not seek to withdraw the veil of obscurity which shrouds the holy men and their work. The members of the silent brotherhood will but speak to those whose karma deserves it. Śankarācārya says:

“These three are difficult to attain and are due to the favor of the gods (*i.e.*, the good karma of previous births): humanity, desire for liberation, and contact with great spiritually-minded men.

“The holy cities were built, or at all events completed, in the later epochs of Brahmanic history. When the spirituality of mankind began to be clouded by progressive materiality, consequent upon the desire of selfish enjoyment, the seclusion of the adepts became greater, and the sacred Samskrit language became daily less understood. As a remedy for this great cyclic evil, the holy ones of the earth left to the profane vulgar the symbolical architecture of the great temples, which yet serve as finger-posts to the mystical student. Very few persons are aware that as the pilgrim stands on the bridge of boats on the Ganges before Benares, he is face to face with a most sublime and awful mystery, the full import of which none but the higher initiates comprehend. This mystery is represented by the general aspect of the holy city, whose two Samskrit names — Kāśī and Vāranāśī — will yield a mine of truth to the earnest inquirer. It is not for us to elucidate the point; for the present it will suffice to suggest to the reader a fruitful field of inquiry, where each will be rewarded according to his earnestness and spiritual penetration.

“What is Kāśī?

“The question has been answered in a well-known treatise by a celebrated mystic, Satya Jñānānda Tirtha Yati. He says that Kāśi is the supreme power of the great God Śiva who is the undifferentiated Bliss, Consciousness, and Being.¹ Śiva or Peace here represents the fourth or unmanifested state of the universe. He is the Cidākāśa, his other name being Vyoma or space, the small circle or dot which is placed on the top of the Samskrt mystic symbol *Om* (ॐ). What relation it has to the force located in the human body above the eyebrows, and represented by the dot over the crescent moon, the Mystic knows very well. Kāśi is called the goddess who embodies Consciousness and Bliss, and is the same as the Śakti or Power to whom the sacred verses of Śankarācārya — *Ānandalahari* — are addressed. The great teacher says that if Śiva is not united to Śakti he cannot produce even a flutter of well-being. Śakti is adorable of Hari, Hara, and Viriñci. By once turning the key of the symbology here adopted we find that Hari or Visnu is the dreaming state of the universe, the first differentiated aspect of the darkness, the destroyer or remover Hara. Although Hara is usually taken as a loose synonym for Śiva, it is here used with the deliberate object of implying that the transcendental state of the universe, emblemized by Śiva, is beyond the state of the destroyer, as the *turīya* state is beyond the *susupti*. Śiva is Paranirvāna, while Hara is Nirvāna. It is easily intelligible how to the popular mind no distinction is observable between Nirvāna and Paranirvāna. Hari, we have said, is the first differentiated condition realized by the human ego. He is therefore the son represented by the sign Leo on the Zodiac (see Mr. Subba Row’s invaluable article on the ‘Twelve Signs of the Zodiac’ in *The Theosophist*, Vol. III). Viriñci or Brahma the Creator is the aggregation of the perceptible universe. Śakti is therefore above these three, and the consort of Śiva. This explains why Kāśi is called Tripurairadhavi [Tripuraravati?], the royal residence of the destroyer of the three cities, the undifferentiated synthetic condition of the three states mentioned above. With regard to the human ego the three cities are the three bodies, gross, subtle and causal, beyond which is the spirit. From this it also becomes clear that Kāśi is the eternal *Cinmātra* which has been well explained by Mr. Subba Row in his article on ‘Personal and Impersonal God’ — (*The Theosophist*, Vol. IV). It also becomes manifest from this that in one of its aspects Kāśi is *prajña*, in which is realized the great formula ‘*Thou art It*’. This *prajña* is the mother of *mukti* or liberation, as all Vedāntins know. The Tirthayati says: ‘I make salutation to that Kāśi by whose favor I am Śiva’, and I know Śiva to be the spirit of all that is. Kāśi is Prajña, Buddhi, Śakti or Maya, the different names of the divine Power which dominates throughout the universe; in fact, it is one aspect of the One Soul. The above quoted mystic states further: ‘This Kāśi is the power of Śiva, the supreme consciousness, but not different from him. Know Kāśi to be the same as Śiva and the supreme Bliss. . . Kāśi is that by which the supreme reality of the spirit is manifested or *in* which it is so manifested. She is also sung as the *Cinmātrā*; I make salutation to her, the supreme Knowledge. Elsewhere the same writer calls Kāśi the darkness (Śyāmā).’ This Darkness is the undifferentiated matter of the Cosmos, beyond which dwelleth the sun-colored one, the spirit. In the Psalms this Asat or Prakrti is referred to in the highly poetical passage: ‘There is darkness round his pavilion’.

¹ The word *Sat* has been roughly translated “being”, as the English language does not afford a better word; Be-ness if allowed in English would be a more adequate rendering.

“Kṛṣṇa, the supreme Spirit, is dark in his human form. No human eye can penetrate beyond this divine darkness. In some Vaiṣṇava work it is stated that on one occasion Kṛṣṇa transformed himself into Śyāmā in Kālī (darkness in its feminine aspect), thus hinting at the truth which reveals itself to the spiritual eye of intuition. Unconsciously guided by the higher light, the Christian Church believes that Jesus Christ was ‘black and comely’, although the passage in The Song of Solomon in which the expression occurs has no relation whatever to Christ.

“To return to Kāśī in its aspect of Buddhi. It is to be remembered that Buddhi is the first differentiation of Prakṛti. According to Kapila, Buddhi is the determination (*adhyavasāya*) in nature of Prakṛti to evolve egotism. Buddhi has three conditions or aspects. Its own essentially pure condition is that in which it is identical with Prakṛti, in which the three substantive qualities of goodness (*sattva*), passionate activity (*rajas*) and delusion (*tamas*), are in a state of equilibrium and in that sense non-existent. This Buddhi is the mother of salvation; in fact it *is* salvation. When under the influence of *rajas* the quality of *sattva* predominates, four things are generated: the practice of virtue (*dharma*), dispassion (*vairāgya*), the spiritual powers (*aiśvarya*), and finally salvation, when by the excess of goodness Buddhi returns to its original state of purity. When under some influence *tamas* predominates, the four opposites of what is stated above are produced. *Tamas* by its enveloping power (*āvarana śakti*) makes the one reality in the Universe appear as the differentiated universe of matter, and then *rajas* by its expansive power (*viksepa śakti*) produces the passions which are the cause of bondage.

“These three conditions of Buddhi the Tirthayati gives as aspects of Kāśī: *Nirviśesa* (undifferentiated), *śuddha* (pure, when the *sāttvika* quality predominates) and *jada* (when *tamas* predominates). One under the domination of *tamas* looks upon the geographical Kāśī as the reality:

“The śuddha Kāśī is the abstract consciousness still limited by forms:

“One under the domination of the *sattva* quality practices virtue, still ascribing good and evil to nature around him.

“In her Nirviśesa condition, Kāśī is self-existent in her glory, and is the supreme God of Shiva and of all liberated souls:

“We shall now understand why it is generally believed that residence in Kāśī removes all sins committed elsewhere, but a sin committed in the temple of the Lord, Kāśī itself renders one incapable of receiving grace — the reference being to the spiritual evil, the sin against the Holy Ghost, for which there is no remission. The wretch who knows the truth and follows the left hand path is doomed to nameless misery in Avichi Nirvāna.

“The Tirthayati says: ‘Terrible indeed is the suffering of one who commits a sin in Kāśī. Alas! the state of a Rudra-piśāca that the sinner attains is more intolerable than the suffering of all the hells.’

“By the acquisition of true knowledge all sins are consumed by the fire kindled in the hearth of heart (*cidāgni kundam*), but there is no hope for the damned soul who murders his spirit, as far as that is possible, by the practice of black magic.

“Without prolonging the present paper, the student may be recommended to the *Skanda-purāna* for further information on this subject; and in conclusion, it may be stated that the practical Occultist will derive

great benefit from a proper study of the Tirthayati's treatise, which has here been so largely quoted.”

I will add a few remarks to the foregoing communication. It will be no exaggeration to say that the secrets of the ancient archaic science, for which an inquirer will search in vain the mystical books of the East, are often symbolically represented in some of the most celebrated places of pilgrimage in India. The mysterious ideas generally associated with the position of Benares (Kāśī), its past history and its innumerable gods and goddesses, contain clearer indications of the secrets of final initiation than a cart-load of books on Yoga philosophy. Look again at Chidambaram and examine carefully the plan on which its celebrated temple was built by Patanjali, by the light of the Kabalistic, the Chaldean, the Egyptian and the Hindu doctrines relating to the great mystery of the Logos. You are far more likely to penetrate this mystery by such a course of study than by examining all the obscure statements of the ancient initiates regarding the sacred voice of the great deep and the impenetrable veil of Isis. Masons are searching in vain for the lost golden delta of Enoch; but an earnest seeker of truth who has comprehended the rules of interpretation which are applicable to such subjects will not find it very difficult to discover this delta in Chidambaram. Similarly, various occult secrets find their true interpretation and explanation in Srishailam, Rameswaram, Jagannath, Allahabad and other places, justly considered as sacred, owing to their various associations, by the followers of the Hindu religion. It would require several volumes to explain at length the sacred symbols connected with these places and their mystic significance, and to interpret in a proper manner the Sthalapurānams relating thereto. As no writer was permitted in ancient times to divulge in clear language the secrets of occult science to the public, and as books and libraries could be easily destroyed either by the ravages of time or the vandalism of barbarous invaders, it was thought proper to preserve, for the benefit of posterity, in strong and lasting edifices of granite, some of the greatest secrets known to the designers of these buildings, in the form of signs and symbols. The very same necessity which brought into existence the Sphinx and the great pyramid led the ancient leaders of Hindu religious thought to construct these temples, and express in stone and metal the hidden meaning of their doctrines. A few explanations and suggestions will be sufficient to justify the foregoing statements, and indicate the manner in which these symbols should be interpreted.

A Samskrit verse is often repeated by Hindus, which says that journeys to seven places of pilgrimage will secure Moksha to the devotee. The places are enumerated thus: (1) Ayodhya, (2) Mathura, (3) Māya, (4) Kāśī (Benares), (5) Kañci, (Conjeeveram), (6) Avantika (Ujjain) and (7) Dvāraka. Now, these places are intended to represent the seven centers of occult energy in the human body, known as (1) Sahasrāram, (2) Ājñā, (3) Viśuddhi, (4) Anāhatam, (5) Svādhishthānam, (6) Manipūrakam and (7) Mūlādhāram respectively. The ideas associated with these places will become intelligible when examined by the light of the doctrines connected with these force-centres recognized by Yogis.

It is generally believed by the Hindus that death in Benares secures final emancipation from the necessity of a rebirth. This belief is so strong in the minds of the ordinary people as to lead a considerable number to resort to this place every year for the purpose of remaining there till they die.

This certainly appears to be a ridiculous superstition. But a great spiritual truth is lurking behind this strange belief. This truth will become apparent when we ascertain what death at Benares is really intended to mean. From the foregoing arrangement of the seven sacred places alluded to, it will be seen that Benares corresponds to the heart in the human body, in the center of which the *Anāhatachakram* of

the Yogis is located; and the truth of this inference is further strengthened by the manner in which Kāśī is described in the *sankalpam* (preliminary recitation before bathing or commencing any worship). It is therein said that Benares is between Asi and Varuna; that it is situated in Ānandavana; that it is in Mahāśmasāna (or the great crematorium or burial ground); that it stands in front of Gauri; that it is held up by the three points of the trident of Shiva; that it is in the midst of Brahmanalam (the narrow passage of Brahman), going now northwards, and that it is at the end of Mani (Manikarnika means Pranavakarnika). It may be easily seen now how far this is a figurative representation of the *Anahata chakra* of the Yogis. This *cakra* is between the two Nādis, Idā and Piṅgalā in the human body, which are represented by the two small streams Asi and Varuna named in the foregoing description. The state of ecstasy is realized when consciousness is centered in the germ of *prajñā*, which is placed in this *cakra*, and hence Benares is an Anandavana, which literally means a pleasure garden. When this centralization of consciousness in the germ of *prajñā* is secured, the objective consciousness realized in the physical body and in the astral body entirely ceases; consequently before the spiritual consciousness of the regenerated Spirit (the Christ after resurrection) is awakened, the condition realized may be compared to that of sound sleep or *susupti* — the death of the incarnated Christ, the death of the individual man. This is the time of the great peace and calm after the tempest. Hence Kashi or *Anahata chakra*, wherein this condition is realized, is the great burial ground or burning ground, as everything — the ego and the non-ego — seems to be dead and buried for the time being. Gauri is the Sophia of the Gnostics and the Isis of the Egyptians. When this condition — that of *prajñā* — is reached, the Spirit is in front of the Divine Light and Wisdom, and ready to behold the mysterious Goddess without the veil as soon as its spiritual eyes are opened on the other side of the Cosmos.

Hence Benares is in Gaurimukham. This condition again marks the termination of the three conditions of consciousness experienced by the incarnated spirit, *viz.*, the ordinary, the clairvoyant and the Devachanic conditions. These three states of differentiated *prajñā* are the three points of Śiva's trident. Again Anāhatachakra is in the Susumnā-nādi — a mysterious and narrow passage running through the spinal cord to the crown of the head, and through which vital electricity flows, and Benares is therefore said to be in Brahma-nālam, which is another name for Susumnā-nādi. Further, the condition above alluded to is represented by the dot over Pranava, as our correspondent says, and hence Benares is described as Manikarnika.

It will thus be seen that Benares is an external symbolical representation of the *Anāhatachakra* of the Yogis. Death in Benares therefore means the concentration of *prajñā*, in the original germ consciousness, which constitutes the real individuality of the man. It must further be noticed that *Sahasrara* represents the positive pole and Mūladharam the negative pole in the body. From the mysterious union of their energies in the heart the sacred and irrepressible (*anāhata*) voice is generated in the Anāhatachakra. This voice is heard when the tempestuous activity of conscious existence terminates in the death of Susupti, and out of the ashes of the individual man the regenerated man springs into existence electrified by this “song of life”. Hence it is stated that when a man dies at Benares, Rudra (a form or manifestation of Thoth, the Initiator), communicates to him the secret of the Logos and secures Moksa for him. It will be clear now that the popular belief is full of meaning to a student of occult science. Similarly the traditions connected with every other important place of pilgrimage will yield much valuable information when properly interpreted.