



Journal of Social Issues and Development (JSID)

(Himalayan Ecological Research Institute for Training and Grassroots Enhancement
(HERITAGE))

ISSN: 2583-6994 (Vol. 2, Issue 3, September-December, 2024. pp. 107-116)

Exploring the Influence of Kashi's Sacred Geography on Youth (Studying the sacred geography of Kashi, influencing the worldviews and religious beliefs of college students)

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ABSTRACT

The sacred city of Kashi, known colloquially as Varanasi, stands as a timeless bastion of spirituality and cultural heritage, beckoning seekers from across the globe to its hallowed banks. Nestled along the banks of the revered Ganges River, Kashi's sacred geography is adorned with innumerable temples, vibrant ghats, and an aura steeped in centuries of religious reverence and philosophical contemplation. Amidst this tapestry of faith and tradition, a unique phenomenon unfolds—one that captivates the hearts and minds of the countless college students who traverse its ancient streets.

Kashi is also famous in the world as a centre of knowledge. There are four universities and many colleges in which many students from all over the country come to study, who hold different cultures, religions and language. This study

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endeavours to delve into the profound influence wielded by Kashi's sacred geography upon the worldviews and religious beliefs of contemporary college students. By examining the intricate interplay between the physical environment of Kashi and the perceptual landscapes of its youthful visitors, we aim to unravel the multifaceted dynamics shaping their spiritual inclinations, philosophical perspectives, and cultural identities. Kashi's allure lies not merely in its architectural splendour or historical significance, but in the palpable essence of spirituality that permeates its very being. The labyrinthine alleyways teem with pilgrims and seekers, each imbued with a fervent quest for enlightenment amidst the cacophony of temple bells and the gentle lapping of the sacred river. Within this ethereal realm, the boundaries between the mundane and the transcendent blur, inviting contemplation and introspection upon the eternal mysteries of existence.

Through a comprehensive exploration of Kashi's sacred geography, we seek to uncover the transformative potential it holds for the impressionable minds of college students. From the solemn rituals of Ganga Aarti to the venerable sanctums of Kashi Vishwanath Temple, each facet of the city's spiritual tapestry leaves an indelible mark upon the consciousness of those who traverse its sacred precincts. In undertaking this study, we embark upon a journey of discovery—a journey that transcends the confines of academia to embrace the profound interconnectedness of human experience and spiritual inquiry. By shedding light upon the intricate nexus between place, perception, and belief, we endeavour to illuminate the timeless wisdom enshrined within the sacred heart of Kashi and its enduring resonance within the evolving worldviews of today's college students.

Keywords: Kashi, Varanasi, Sacred geography, College students, Worldviews, Religious beliefs, Temples, Ghats, Rituals, Ganga Aarti.

Literature Review

Geeta Kapur (2005) essays explore the intersections of tradition and modernity in Indian cultural practices, including religious rituals and pilgrimages, offering insights into the evolving dynamics of belief and identity in contemporary society. Harish Trivedi (1992) provides a

comprehensive overview of Hindu religious practices, beliefs, and philosophical tenets, offering contextual understanding of the significance of sacred sites like Kashi in shaping individuals' spiritual outlooks. Sumanta Banerjee's (2001) study on elite and popular culture in colonial Calcutta provides insights into the social, cultural, and religious dynamics that influence individuals' worldviews and behaviors within urban spaces. Akhil Gupta's (2012) ethnographic study explores the socio-political dynamics of bureaucracy and poverty in India, shedding light on how institutional structures intersect with individuals' lived experiences and ideological perspectives, which could be relevant to understanding how students' worldviews are influenced by their encounters with Kashi's sacred geography. Gyanendra Pandey's (1983) historical analysis delves into the construction of communal identities in colonial India, offering insights into how religious narratives and spatial configurations shape individuals' ideological leanings and intergroup relations, which could be pertinent to examining students' worldview formation vis-à-vis Kashi's sacred landscape. Baidyanath Saraswati's (1999) study explores representations of Varanasi in literary texts, investigating how cultural imaginaries of the sacred city influence readers' perceptions and ideological orientations, which could inform research on how students' worldview is shaped by their encounters with Kashi's sacred geography through literary and cultural narratives. Lucinda Ramberg's (2015) anthropological research examines the intersection of sexuality, religion, and gender among devadasis (women dedicated to temple service) in South India, offering insights into how embodied experiences within religious spaces influence individuals' worldview and ideological frameworks, which could be relevant to understanding the impact of Kashi's sacred geography on students' perceptions and beliefs. This article by Diana Eck (1983) provides an overview of sacred geography in India, with a focus on Kashi (Varanasi) as a pivotal site in Hindu religious life. Eck explores how Kashi's sacred spaces, such as temples and ghats, are integral to Hindu cosmology and practice. The article emphasizes the city's central role in pilgrimage, ritual practices, and its status as a symbolic center of the divine in Hinduism. This work helps contextualize the importance of sacred geography in shaping religious and cultural practices. Christopher Fuller's (2004) book analyzes popular Hindu practices and their impact on social structures and cultural practices in India. The second edition expands on how sacred spaces like Kashi influence various aspects of society, including social organization, cultural norms, and communal identities. Fuller examines how practices associated with Kashi

contribute to broader patterns of popular Hinduism and their role in reinforcing societal values and religious traditions. Steven Vertovec's (2000) work explores how sacred geography, including significant sites like Kashi, is maintained and reinterpreted within the Hindu diaspora. The book provides insights into how the cultural and religious significance of sacred sites is adapted and expressed by Hindu communities outside India. Vertovec's analysis highlights the global cultural capital of sacred sites and their role in preserving and transforming Hindu religious practices across different contexts. Peter Van der Veer's (1989) study examines the influence of sacred geography on religious experience and identity in North Indian pilgrimage centers, including Kashi. The book offers a sociological perspective on how sacred sites are managed and experienced by pilgrims. Van der Veer's analysis provides a detailed look at how pilgrimage to places like Kashi shapes individual and collective religious identities, reflecting the broader significance of sacred spaces in Hindu practice.

Research Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research methodology to explore the impact of Kashi's sacred geography on college students' ideology and worldview. A structured questionnaire was developed using Google Forms, incorporating Likert scale, multiple-choice, and close-ended questions to capture participants' experiences and perceptions. Prior to data collection, the survey was pilot tested and refined for clarity and effectiveness. The survey link was distributed online, and data was collected from final-year undergraduate and postgraduate students of the Social Science Faculty at Arya Mahila PG College (BHU) during the 2023-24 academic session. The collected data was analyzed and findings were presented using tables, charts, and graphs, providing insights into the influence of Kashi's sacred geography on students' worldviews. As per the enrollment data, several key insights into departmental preferences and trends within the institution. Across all departments, undergraduate and postgraduate enrollment resulting in a combined total of 653 candidates. The sample size is determined by using Morgan's table and the data from 243 candidates have been fetched.

Ethical Considerations: All necessary permissions and approvals will be obtained from relevant authorities at Arya Mahila PG College prior to conducting the research. Ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects, including confidentiality and informed consent, will be strictly adhered to throughout the study.

Objectives

1. To examine youth's perceptions of Kashi's sacred geography
2. To investigate the extent to which exposure to Kashi's sacred geography influences the religious beliefs.
3. To explore the relationship between students' interactions with Kashi's sacred geography and their ideological orientations.
4. To identify any differences in the perceptions and experiences of youth regarding the impact of Kashi's sacred geography.

Hypotheses

1. H1: Students who have visited Kashi will demonstrate a higher level of awareness and appreciation of its sacred geography compared to those who have not visited.
2. H2: Exposure to Kashi's sacred geography will positively correlate with an increase in students' religious beliefs and spiritual inclinations.
3. H3: Students who have engaged in rituals and activities at Kashi's sacred sites will exhibit a greater inclination towards traditional religious practices compared to those who have not participated in such activities.
4. H4: Students' perceptions of Kashi's sacred geography will significantly influence their academic interests and research pursuits in the field of sociology of religion.

Religious and Cultural Exposure Built Familiarity and Awareness of Sacred Geography

Sl.no.	Acquaintance Level (1=Most Familiar, 5=Least Familiar)	Number of Responses	Percentage of Total Responses (%)
1.	Most familiar	58	23.8
2.	Familiar	69	28.39
3.	Moderately Familiar	73	30
4.	Less Familiar	32	13.16
5.	Least Familiar	11	4.52
6.	Total	243	100%

High Familiarity and awareness (1-2): A combined total of 127 respondents indicate that nearly half of the participants possess a strong familiarity with Kashi's sacred geography and 73 respondents agree to have Moderate Familiarity and awareness (3), suggesting a general awareness but less engagement. And A total of 43 responses indicate Low Familiarity and awareness (4-5) reflecting a smaller segment of the population who may not prioritize or have access to understanding Kashi's significance. The sociological analysis of the Likert scale data on familiarity with Kashi's sacred geography highlights the complex interplay between religious socialization, modernization, and cultural diversity in contemporary Indian society. The significant number of respondents indicating high familiarity (ratings of 1 and 2) reflects the enduring influence of religious upbringing and cultural capital, where knowledge and reverence for sacred spaces are transmitted through generations. The largest portion of responses falls in the "Moderately Familiar" category indicating that most participants have a general awareness of Kashi's sacred geography but may not have an in-depth understanding. This familiarity is also shaped by access to religious knowledge and cultural exposure. In contrast, individuals with low familiarity may represent the impact of secularization and urbanization, where modern education, career priorities, and global connectivity weaken traditional religious engagement. Geographical proximity to Kashi and socio-economic class further influence one's ability to engage with the city's sacred landscape. Overall, the data reveals a spectrum of engagement with Kashi that underscores the coexistence of tradition and modernity, reflecting the diverse ways individuals navigate their religious identities in a rapidly changing world.

Social Cohesion Accelerating Spiritual Devotion

The responses to the Likert scale question regarding Kashi's significance in Hinduism reveal a strong consensus among participants. The majority of respondents (rated 1) believe that Kashi holds special significance in Hinduism, reflecting a deep-rooted reverence and acknowledgment of the city as a sacred space. Specifically, the overwhelming number of responses indicating high significance (ratings of 1) suggests that Kashi is perceived as a vital spiritual center for many Hindus. Conversely, the responses reflecting lower significance (ratings of 4 and 5) are minimal, indicating that few participants view Kashi as less important. This pattern illustrates a shared cultural understanding of Kashi's role in Hindu spirituality, as well as its

historical and religious significance as a pilgrimage site. The data suggests that Kashi continues to be a focal point of devotion and identity within the Hindu community.

The strong consensus among respondents regarding Kashi's significance in Hinduism highlights its profound sociological relevance, reflecting shared cultural values and communal identity within the Hindu community. The overwhelming belief in Kashi as a sacred space underscores the importance of pilgrimage and religious practice, serving as a focal point for spiritual devotion and social cohesion. This collective acknowledgment not only reinforces individual connections to cultural heritage but also strengthens community bonds, emphasizing Kashi's role in shaping a shared identity among Hindus. Furthermore, the interplay between tradition and modernity in Kashi illustrates how historical religious significance continues to influence contemporary social dynamics, including migration and economic activities related to religious tourism, thereby impacting the local community and its socio-economic landscape.

Materialistic Culture Influencing Youth more than Non-materialistic Understanding

The Ghat/River Ganga and the temples of Kashi (Varanasi) dominate as the most influential elements of sacred geography among the respondents, with repeated references emphasizing its spiritual and cultural significance. Sociologically, the initial response to ghat / river ganga among youth is an effect of its glorified aura which later on impacts their spirituality hence connecting a deeper connection religious rituals in Hinduism, especially in Kashi. The temples of Kashi, known for their religious sanctity, are also frequently mentioned, though slightly less than the Ghat. Temples, often embodying the religious heart of the city, serve as the focal points of worship and community gathering, representing a structured, institutional form of devotion. the lanes/ galis represent the daily, lived experiences of locals, the historical continuity, and the intricate social fabric of the city. The lanes also awakens a spiritual connectivity among the youth, as they serve as a backbone of the city supporting the everyday rhythm of life. This suggests that while the historical and cultural aspects of the city's lanes are acknowledged, the natural and divine landscapes hold greater spiritual influence.

Sacred Geography Impacts the Mindset Formation

The data suggests that visits to sacred sites in Kashi have

predominantly increased individuals' inclination toward traditional religious practices. The highest frequency is observed indicates that a large portion of people have felt a significant impact in terms of growing devotion and adherence to traditional practices, visits to sacred sites seem to have positively influenced religious engagement for most participants. These sacred spaces provide not just a connection to the divine but also a deep-rooted sense of identity and belonging within a religious community. It also reflects that sacred places like Kashi have a significant role in shaping individuals' ideological orientations. Kashi is a hub of Hindu rituals, religious discourse, and cultural continuity, creating a powerful atmosphere that fosters reflection on personal beliefs and practices. The sacred geography, rituals, and spiritual environment not only reinforce traditional values but also serve as a space for individuals to connect with a larger sense of purpose and community.

Sacred Spaces Evoking Interest to Pursue Religious Studies

Sl no.	Importance Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1.	Very Important	120	49.3
2.	Important	94	38.6
3.	Neutral	23	9.4
4.	Not Important	5	2
5.	Not at all Important	1	0.4
6.	Total	243	100%

The data indicates that a majority of respondents rate the study of Kashi's sacred geography as "very important" or "important" in academia. Out of the responses, a significant proportion consider that it is very important, while another substantial portion deems it important. A smaller group (a minority) rated it as neutral, with very few stating it is not important or not at all important. This suggests a broad consensus on the significance of studying Kashi's sacred geography, reflecting the importance attributed to such a subject in academic research, cultural preservation, and understanding religious and social dynamics.

From a sociological standpoint, the data highlights that Kashi's

sacred geography is not merely a spiritual or religious concept but holds substantial academic and cultural value. The emphasis placed on its importance by the majority of respondents suggests that sacred spaces like Kashi serve as key cultural and educational sites that offer insights into religious practices, social structures, and geographical interactions. The high rating of “very important” could reflect the interdisciplinary nature of studying sacred geographies, which touches upon areas such as anthropology, religious studies, sociology, history, and urban planning. Those who rated it as neutral or not important may indicate a divergence in academic interests, perhaps focusing on more secular or non-geographical studies, showing how individual academic pursuits influence the perceived importance of such topics.

Conclusion

Kashi’s sacred geography provides valuable insights into the multifaceted relationship between religious socialization, modernization, and cultural diversity within contemporary Indian society. The high level of familiarity among many respondents underscores the enduring cultural and religious influence of Kashi as a spiritual hub, where traditional practices continue to hold sway over individual and community identities. The general awareness of Kashi’s sacred geography, particularly among those with moderate familiarity, reflects the city’s broader cultural resonance, even among those who may not engage deeply with its religious aspects.

The sociological significance of Kashi extends beyond mere geographical awareness, symbolizing the complex interplay of tradition and modernity in shaping religious identity and social cohesion. While secularization and urbanization have weakened traditional religious engagement, the overall data highlights Kashi’s continuing importance in preserving cultural values and fostering a sense of belonging. The consensus on Kashi’s spiritual significance, coupled with the deep-rooted reverence for its ghats, temples, and historical lanes, reinforces the city’s role as both a pilgrimage site and a focal point of communal identity.

Moreover, the influence of Kashi’s sacred geography on religious practices and ideological orientations reveals the city’s power to shape individuals’ spiritual journeys and connections to Hinduism. In academia, the strong support for studying Kashi’s sacred geography points to its broader relevance in understanding India’s religious, social, and cultural fabric. As a living testament to India’s spiritual heritage,

Kashi remains central to both scholarly inquiry and the lived experiences of those who seek to connect with its rich religious tradition.

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