

THE BANARSI PRINSEP

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Jñāna-Pravāha paid its humble homage to James Prinsep in his bi-centenary year 1999. He was an illustrious Indologist, epigraphist, numismatist, archaeologist, writer, surveyer, geographer, astrologist, technologist, engineer, architect, artist, restorer, musicologist, assay master, census expert, administrator and above all an admirer and well wisher of the holy city. The sojourn of this young officer from 1820-1830 marked, with a number of herculean tasks and laudable achievements is the golden decade in the history of Varanasi.

काश्याः परमस्नेही च ब्राह्मीलिपेः प्रकाशकः ।
प्रिंसेप स्वावदानेन दीपस्तम्भ इव स्थितः ॥

After closely watching the laudable contribution and tremendous achievements of James Prinsep to the city of Benares, the famous contemporary French traveller Victor Jacquemont rightly addressed him as 'Mr. Benares Prinsep' in 1830. Prinsep did deserve this epithet as a result of his complete dedication and devotion to the holy place of the East. A page of his (*Victor's*) diary records as under '..... There is one man, however, who compensates for the unsocial disposition of his fellow countrymen- James Prinsep; he devotes his mornings to architectural plans and drawings, his days to assaying at the mint, and his evening to musical concerts'.¹

Born at Chelsea (England) on Aug. 20, 1799, James Prinsep landed at Calcutta on September 15, 1819 with his elder brother, Henry Thoby after a tiresome and tedious sea journey of four months from England. His assignment was to assist H.H. Wilson who was Assay Master at the Calcutta Mint and whom we know as an Indologist. Soon, the Government resolved to set up two more mints in the upper India, one at Sagar and other at Benares. While Wilson came to Benares, James was deputed to Sagar to help Captain Peregrave, an army officer who held the charge of Sagar Mint but knew nothing about the technology. Prinsep did everything and made the mint as the best unit in India.

When Wilson completed the establishment of the Benares Mint, he returned to Calcutta and James Prinsep was promoted to the post of Assay Master and came to Kāśī or Benares on November 26, 1820 at the young age of twentyone.

The maiden visit proved to be the love at the first sight and it did not take him long to become 'Banarsi'. A letter to his sister described the place as under:

'On the road hither I constantly meet elephants, camels and most picturesque hackeries, drawn by superb painted bullocks. The dress of the native here is far more elegant than in Bengal. Instead of the universal white muslin drapery, we have here the gaudiest colours and costumes displayed, especially when any great festival attracts thousands of pilgrims

from all the Hindoo world to bathe in our Ganges.² The use of the word our 'Ganges' is note worthy as this is the real essence of his sentiments. About the *ghats* of Benares he further adds in the same letter:

'This is glorious sight to see the *ghats* of Benares covered with a moving sea of heads, studded at small distances with temples of red and white stone, all minutely carved and adorned with flowers, while from a hundred places, cymbals and drums peel forth their strains of adoration. The time too is generally favourable to the exhibition, namely, at an eclipse of the sun or at the rising of the full moon. As soon as the signal is given by Brahmans, in plunge all the bathers rippling the holy waters for a mile and a half along the shore'.³ Here, the word 'holy' preceding Ganges suggests the respect which he had for Ganga and Benares from the very beginning of his career in the city.

Yet at another place he gives vent to his thoughts:

'There are few objects more lively and exhilarating than the scene from the edge of the opposite sands, on a fine afternoon, under the clear sky of January. The music and bells of a hundred temples strike the ear with magic melody from the distance, amidst the buzz of the human voices; and every now and then the flapping of the pigeons' wings is heard as they rise from their crates on the housetops, or whirl in close phalanx round the minarets, or alight with prisoners from a neighbour's flock. At the same time the eye rests on the vivid colours of different groups of male and female bathers with their sparkling brass water vessels, or follows the bulls as they wander in the crowds in proud exercise of the rights of citizenship, munching the chaplets of flowers liberally presented to them. Then, as the night steals on, the scene changes, and the twinkling of lamps along the water's edge, and the funeral fires and white curling smoke, and the stone buildings lit up by the moon.....'⁴

He watched the movements of stars and Jupiter's satellites and was able to fix the latitude and longitude of several cities like Benares, Jaunpur, Delhi, Karnal, Meerut, etc. He studied the functioning of the observatory (*vedhaśālā*) put up by Sawai Jaisingh in Man Mandir at Benares for fixing the site of the monument itself. He contributed an interesting paper with the help of William Cracroft in the Asiatic Researches under the title 'Latitude of the Hindoo Observatory at Benares'. With great zeal and skill he prepared a detailed map of Benares and it being first of kind and authentic is still sought for and consulted despite a lapse of about two centuries.

The construction of a bridge on river Karmanāśā about forty kilometers east of Benares was a local requirement. But due to several factors like technical, financial and religious it could not be done. The religious consideration was that people did not want to come in contact with the river water for if they touched it all their merits (*punyas*) were likely to be destroyed since the name of the river itself spoke- Karmanāśā i.e., which destructs the mer-

its. The efforts were made earlier by Ahalyabai Holkar and she even spent a huge amount but the foundation sank and the four piers were taken away by the swift current of flood.

A wealthy trader *Putnee Mal* who was a philanthropist aspired for being recognised by the British Government. Despite the recommendation of the Lt. Governor, the title of 'Rai' was refused to be conferred. He then thought of doing something great and impossible for his recognition. He approached James Prinsep to take up the assignment and the latter gladly agreed to meet the challenge. To a great surprise, the bridge was constructed with full satisfaction and that too at a lower cost than anticipated. The people and the Government were wonder-struck. The day came when the then Governor General, Lord William Bentinck himself visited and admired the accomplishment of the marvellous job. It is not known whether the builder, James Prinsep was benefitted or not but *Putnee Mal* was certainly conferred even the bigger title 'Raja' although he longed for the 'Raiship' only.

The Memoir on the subject reports-'.....The whole work was thus executed according to James Prinsep's working plans and under his general direction but in all other respects under the personal supervision of *Putnee Mal* himself, for not a rupee of the money expended on the work passed through any other hands than the Rai's or his sons. The arches (of the bridge) are segments of an exact circle, instead of being of an elliptical form, the circle being preferred for the benefit of uniformity. The bridge upon its completion, was universally allowed to be the most complete, substantial, and beautiful edifice of the kind that had been executed in the British possessions on this side of India'.⁵

The bridge on Karmanāśā bespeaks not only of the great architectural and engineering calibre of James but also of his firm decision and determination *sankalpaśakti* (will power). It was really a big challenge in those days. This also indicates his genuine love for the region and its people whose sufferings were removed when their dream was fulfilled. The construction and completion of the bridge at a lower cost than estimated, highlights his character and integrity. He was frequently doing up and down to supervise the construction of the bridge and his main job at Mint at Benares was not to be adversely effected. Several other civil works were executed with the same spirit and passion.

Benares can boast of having one of the earliest drainage systems in India and the credit of the grand architectural and engineering project of those days goes solely to James Prinsep. To conceive, plan and execute the civil work of that dimension and that too in the ancient and congested town was really a difficult task. It was ofcourse a dire need if the city was to be kept clean. Every year the floods caused havoc and a number of important places, temples, shrines, streets and even some market places looked pools of muddy water for long.

Prinsep prepared a huge plan, got sanction and started execution soon. The big tunnel

of 9' ht and 7' breadth was laid under the houses of which some were of four or five stories. Proposed on April 30, 1825, commenced on 1st Jan. 1826 the herculean work was completed on July 31, 1827. The city got rid of deposits of filth and became really Holy' *pavitra*' - an adjective which precedes Benares, Varanasi or Kāśī. The long sufferings were removed by the young Bodhisattva, Prinsep. This resulted in opening the new horizons for expansion, buildings and comforts as the base area which remained dirty and neglected was reclaimed and put to multi-purpose use.

Another small but important and serious issue which attracted the attention of Prinsep was the strengthening of Aurangzeb mosque, standing on the river bank. Its foundation had started sinking and the minarets were likely to fall. He took down the entire structure and restored it piece by piece after strengthening the foundation. This work of archaeological conservation was undertaken meticulously and successfully in the early twenties of the 19th century when the Archaeological survey of India was not even born. This was again done at a moderate expenditure.

This and other similar civil works and archaeological conservation at Benares and later decipherment/restoration of Brāhmī script remind us of the passion of James, right from his childhood. Once as a boy he prepared a model of a carriage as a toy for his younger brother Augustus. Made of fragile material it broke into several pieces when it fell on the floor. James picked up each and every piece and restored the object in its original shape and for this he had to spend a sleepless night⁶. This was James Prinsep as restorer.

He also took up the work of census of Benares on authentic ground. The earlier census was undertaken in 1803 but it proved to be baseless and unreliable. Accordingly, thirty thousand houses were counted and the number of inhabitants was calculated to be six lakhs. Thus in every house twenty persons were supposed to reside. Proving its absurdity, Prinsep prepared the fresh registers, supervised the work himself and produced the accurate census of the city for the first time. The figure came to be two lakhs exceeding Edinburgh or Bristol and the city (Benares) was almost double than Rotterdam or Brussels in the first quarter of the 19th century. Several other interesting details were also furnished beside counting of heads. These include kind of houses, gardens, tanks, temples, mosques, ruins, castes, trade, etc. Even the annual consumption of eatables from the year 1824 to 1827 was given.

Prinsep did not rest there, instead he prepared a figure of the influx of people during the special occasions like an eclipse. On May 21, 1826 *chaprasis* were posted at the main approaches of the city like Nadesar, Beniabagh, Jagatganj, Ousanganj and Hanuman Phatak. The pilgrims were counted through pebbles i.e., one stone bit was dropped into a bag when a visitor passed by. The same device was adopted at important *ghats* like Rajghat, Gaighat, Kalighat, Man Mandir, Sivala, Ramghat, etc. The figure of this moving population came out

to be 55,000. This must not have been very accurate as there was a chance of slipping of passengers from other *ghats* and places. Although the best precautions were taken we can still leave a margin of about 10,000. These were the results of the first census of the city of Benares.

James Prinsep remained in contact with the Pandits and scholars of Benares. The census work helped him a lot in locating such persons and knowing their status. Even earlier he had founded the Benares Literary Society in 1822. In 1825 he started a journal with views and illustrations of Benares. For augmenting the literary activities in the city he established a printing press which was probably designed by him as the Memoir reveals - 'He set up also a printing of his own entire manufacture, at which papers of local interest, including some of the proceedings of this Literary Society, were printed under his personal supervision and the sheets were turned out with very credible neatness & typographical skill.'⁷ This was the high standard of printing and proof reading in the first quarter of the 19th century at Varanasi but now the correct English proof reading has become a rare commodity in the local presses and the author has to go through the proofs several times before final printing.

His involvement in multifarious activities did not allow the Mint to suffer. The Mint building was repaired and renovated and several improvements were effected. The functioning was also geared up. His experiments in the Calcutta Mint found a fertile land for further fructification at Benares and he wrote an article on the measurement of heat and furnace. This was responsible for manufacturing of a pyro-meter, heat measuring instrument. The paper and invention were much appreciated by the Royal Asiatic Society and he was soon elected as Fellow in 1827 at the young age of twentyeight only. This '*Banarsi Babu*' was probably the youngest to receive this honour.⁸ Prinsep also introduced a new balance for the Mint and this weighed upto three thousandth part of a grain. The new balance was used in the Calcutta Mint also.

One of the most celebrated tasks of James at Benares was to prepare sketches of his dear 'holy city' during his ten years domicile. This brilliant monograph was later published in 1831 and 1833 in lithograph by the Baptist Mission, Calcutta under the caption of *Benares Illustrated* in a series of Drawings. The same has luckily been reproduced by Dr. O.P. Kejariwal in 1996 with an excellent introduction about the life and works of James Prinsep and published by the Vishwavidyalaya Prakashan Varanasi.

Another nice publication brought out in the bi-centenary year and released on the 200th birth day of James Prinsep (Aug. 20, 1999) at the Indian Museum, Calcutta is '*James Prinsep - Life and Work*' Volume I by Sri P. Thankappan Nair and published by Firma KLM, Calcutta. This is a real storehouse of informations about James Prinsep.

Not only the sketches are important but the Introduction given by Prinsep is also of extraordinary significance. It surveys the history of Benares from the legendary period to 1830 with authentic details shedding new light on several incidents and episodes. He does so as a historian and at the same time expresses his sentiments as an admirer and devotee of Kasi when he writes:

'Religion, however, may be regarded as the permanent source of supply, the staple article of commerce through which the Holy City flourishes and is enriched. There need be no fear of this trade declining, so long as the pious have the faith in the efficacy of a pilgrimage to Kāśī, and in purifying virtues of the Ganges there - nor while they deem admittance into Shiva's Heaven to be secured to them if they die within the limits of the Punch-kosee (five koss) circle about the town.....'⁹

The vision and forecast of Prinsep are very true. Due to several factors the faith has started shaking as we ourselves have polluted the place and the holy river Gaṅgā. There are three basic elements i.e., Kāśī, Viśvanātha and Gaṅgā and the three are interwoven. If we neglect or disregard one, the others will also fade. While faith in Lord Śiva and the holy city may be treated as religious, spiritual or metaphysical, no body can deny the fact that Gaṅgā has been known for containing the purest water with lot of medicinal values. But due to our own utter negligence and ignorance we are attacking its natural virtues. This has to be taken care of if not for religion at least for the national health, better agricultural yield and cultural sanctity. If these objectives are achieved the net result will be the promotion of domestic and international tourism to a large extent. Prinsep's forecast should be taken as a warning to save our heritage and cultural ethos.

In his descriptive catalogue (monograph) of sketches he does not forget to take notice of local proverbs like-

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| ' <i>Kasi hunde</i> ' - | Keep on moving at Kasi to see the city, temples, <i>ghats</i> going around the holy town - <i>pradakshina</i> . |
| ' <i>Prayag munde</i> ' - | Shaving on the confluence of the two most important and sacred rivers - Ganga and Yamuna at Allahabad. |
| ' <i>Gaya dunde</i> ' - | Extortion by the priests at Gaya (Gayalees). ¹⁰ |

Whether true or not one has to be reminded while making preparations for a pilgrimage. Unfortunately, for Kāśī word '*hunde*' has been replaced by '*gunde*' by some cunning person or a traveller who had some unpleasant experience at the hands of '*thugs*' - cheaters. We are aware of the facts that '*thugee*' - cheating became a big menace in the large part of the country in the 19th century and we come across some portraits of '*thugs*' or robbers in the company style of paintings and has to be careful even today.

On the historical front about Benares, James writes: 'Of the political state of Kashi nothing further is known until the 11th century. According to some of the Mohammadan accounts, it was governed by Raja Bunar at the time of one of Mahmood's invasion, or in A.D. 1017, one of his generals penetrated to the province, and defeated the Raja. The Ayeene Akburee asserts, that Mahmood himself advanced to Benares and made some converts. On the other hand, no mention of the conquest of Benares by Mahmood or his officers occurs in Farishta, nor in the authorities consulted by Colonel Steward.....'¹¹

This account suggests that Prinsep was very analytical while writing the history although he had a great regard for the city. The name of the king Bunar may perhaps suggest the etymology of Benares which was sometimes written as 'Bunarus' as seen in the first sketch of Prinsep's album. About the *ghats* for which Benares is particularly known, he observes:

'Let it be born in mind, that upon ghats are passed the busiest and happiest hours of every Hindoo's day: bathing, dressing, praying, preaching, lounging, gossiping, or sleeping, there will he be found. Escaping from the dirty, unwholesome and confined streets, it is a luxury for him to sit upon the open steps and taste the fresh air of the river, so that on the *ghats* are concentrated the pastimes of the idler, the duties of the devout, and much of the necessary intercourse of business. In no city of the world is the population invited to a single street or place of recreation by so many attractions, and the inhabitants of Benares are justly proud of the beauty and spaciousness of the accommodation, provided for them at the river's side. A native proverb sums up the attractions of Kasi in three words: '*Ranr, sana, aur seerhee*' which may be aptly translated, 'Belles, Bulls and Broad Stairs'.¹²

The *ghats* and temples have been attracting the pilgrims, tourists and the local citizens since their foundation or beginning. These have also invited the artists, sketch makers, painters and photographers for their presentation and appreciation. Even before Prinsep's sketches were drawn by Daniels and others. There, however, appears the basic difference between Prinsep's and of others. The presentation of others seem to follow the style of landscaping while Prinsep is quite meticulous and almost exact in furnishing the architectural details blended with the life of the city. It is for this reason that his work is considered more authentic and appealing. This was indeed very great service rendered by James to the city. He was conversant with each street, temple, shrine, monument and places of interest. His vast knowledge, experience, dedication and devotion have been well reflected in his wonderful illustrations. He actually knew the pulsating valve of the place and this fact has been splendidly displayed in his drawings. It is not only an album of pictures but it really unfolds several known and unknown layers of Benares at the mundane and supermundane planes.

The northern outskirts of Benares was developing in the western fashion in the

vicinity of Secrole, housing the courts, treasury and mint but Prinsep was not appreciative of these buildings. He thought them just the 'plain modern structures of brick and mortar. On the other hand, the building material used in the *ghats* and temples is a fine compact sandstone, quarried in the hills behind Chunar and Mirzapur-' The sharpness and delicacy of the carving on many of the temples is deservedly admired.....'¹³

At the same time he cautions for unplanned construction of *ghats* which may lead to the 'incurable injury. The depth of water in front of the town, in the dry season, is more than 50 feet, and the freshes of September add 42 feet to this level. The breadth of the Ganges is 600 yards at low water level and a little more than half a mile in the rains. The splendid stream forms a bay, indenting the front of the town, so as to display its picturesque beauties to great advantage.'¹⁴

Prinsep prepared a Directory of Benares with an introduction to the city and description of important Hindu and Muslim places of worship. This also included the names of notable citizens and a list of Pundits and spiritual guides.¹⁵

Despite his occasional annoyances over negligence of people and unplanned construction by builders, Prinsep always paid tributes to the grandeur of Kāśī:

'Benares is a real town, extensive and of stone. The *ghats* on the banks of the sacred Ganges are really superb. A few sketches will however, do much more in the way of description than all I could say of the narrow streets and painted houses and picturesque walks; and equipages, *dhoolies*, camels and elephants, things you never see in Calcutta and utterly beyond your powers of correct imagination.'¹⁶

This was the outburst of his emotions about Kasi so dear and loving to him. No individual person has done so much for Benares in different fields as Prinsep. This he did at the cost of his service career. When he was overwhelmingly involved in multifarious works of public utility, some of his colleagues were trying to play mischief against him. Unmindful of all these bickerings the young James continued his mission with great success and remarkable achievements.

When Government of India decided to close the Benares Mint in 1830 James had to return to Calcutta where he engaged himself in the study of Indian coinage, Oriental studies and on top of all the decipherment of old Brahmi script which brought further laurels to this super genius, Banarsi Prince. The life span of this true *Karmayogī* was cut short due to overwork on April 22, 1840 at the age of forty only. Not only Benares and Calcutta but the entire country is indebted to him. James has been the shining gem in cultural history of India. The best homage will be to restore the early glory of Kāśī for which Prinsep sacrificed everything.

REFERENCES

1. 'Review of Jacquemont's Travels in India', *Calcutta Review* Vol. IV, 1845 (July-Dec.), p. XIX.
2. *Family Memoir* probably written by Evelyn Siegfried and Miss Audrey Prinsep but unpublished. Quoted by O.P. Kejariwal in his monograph *Benares Illustrated*, James Prinsep, Vishwavidyalaya Prakashan, Varanasi 1996, p. 33.
3. *Ibid.* p. 9.
4. Kejariwal, O.P., *op. cit.*, p. 7.
5. *Family Memoir*, p. 30.
6. *Ibid.* p. 16.
7. *Ibid.* p. 24.
8. The *Family Memoir* records this event as:

'Of the Principle of this Pyrometer it will be sufficient here to say that it was based on the melting point of different metals and assuming ten degrees of difference between silver and gold, and 100 degrees between gold and platina, the intermediate stages were marked by decimal and centesimal admixtures of the two metals. Thus by inserting in the furnace to be tested, cuples with beads of several proximate degrees, the intensity of heat was determined by the number of these reduced fusion. But the most original and ingenious part of the essay was that detailing the experiments by which the relative melting points of the four metals and of their graduated mixtures, were composed of the scale of ordinary thermometers and settled in degrees of Fahrenheit. The calculations for this purpose are based on the expansion of atmospheric air under different temperatures, and by their result an important correction was made in the deductions of Wedgwood and Daniel, and the scale of James Prinsep has not been impugned or improved.'

9. *Benares Illustrated*, 1996 ed. p. 15.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.* p. 10.
12. *Ibid.* p. 18.
13. *Ibid.* pp. 16-17.
14. *Ibid.* pp. 17-18.
15. Nair, P.T., *James Prinsep- Life and Works* Vol. I, 1999, Calcutta, p. 119.
16. *Family Memoir*, p. 46.