

Emergence of a Pilgrim Centre: The Context of Ancient City of Varanasi

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Today Varanasi is recounted among the most holy pilgrim centres of India described in the literary texts, as *Ānandakānana*, *Ānandavana*, *Avimukta*, *Mahāśmaśāna*. Varanasi is a city which every devout Hindu aspires to pay a visit at least once in the lifetime. We seek to look into the historical process of emergence of a pilgrim centre as opposed to the current and popular notion of Kashi - the city luminous - the early references are rather derogatory in nature. Mention may be made here of the first reference to Kashi in Pippalāda version of *Atharva Veda* (V.22.14) which refers to a person (a magician?) treating diseases, who implores the fevers and diseases go to Kashi. Another reference, also in the *Atharva Veda* (V.12.14) warns people against visiting Gandhara, Anga, Kashi, Magadha and Munjavanta saying that these are not suitable places for living. One should avoid visiting these places and should one go there he/she needed to be careful with ones' belongings. According to *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, dated generally to circa 800 BCE, the residents of Kashi refused to perform Vedic sacrifices and rituals (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 13.54.19 and 13.54.21). The historical significance of such phenomenon has yet to be enquired into. It is therefore indeed worth taking a closer look as to when and under what circumstances Kashi/Varanasi (as it has been interchangeably called till recently) came to be recognized as a sacred place. We have not looked closely at the evolution of Varanasi as a sacred city or association of Varanasi as a pilgrimage - a city of salvation. According to the traditional history, Kashi, which was a kingdom having Varanasi as its capital, was said to have been under the Brahmadata dynasty. Ajātaśatru was the first known historical figure in the line of this dynasty. He was said to be contemporary of one of the rulers in the line of the Janakas. During the period of the rise of the Mahājanapadas, Kashi was in regular conflict with Magadha and Kosala. At some stage of socio-political developments, Kashi formed part of the Kosala

Mahājanapada. When a marriage alliance took place between Magadha and Kosala, (during the reign of Mahā Kosala in the middle of the sixth century BCE) several affluent villages of Kashi Mahājanapada were gifted in dowry to King Bimbisāra of Magadha. Politically, thus Kashi Mahājanapada appears to be rather weak; it seems to be a bone of contention between Kosala and Magadha and was frequently being annexed into one or the other of its neighbouring kingdoms. In view of this, one may venture to hazard a guess that the place attracted its neighbours, firstly because of its location between these two powerful political seats and secondly because of the economic affluence of the ancient Varanasi. In view of such a religio-political temper of ancient Varanasi, it may be interesting to examine the changing status of the Kashi - from a despised city of the Later Vedic period against which the visitors were cautioned - to a cherished destination and its emergence as a pilgrim par excellence. In addition to the impressions one derives from textual evidence, it may be worthwhile taking a look at archaeological evidence coming forth as a consequence of excavations conducted in and around Varanasi over several decades. This has thrown welcome light on aspects of life of ancient Varanasi in course of centuries. As per the Buddhist texts Varanasi was famous for its craft specialization, production of exquisite products, and well organized and developed trade and commerce and was recognized as one of the most prosperous urban centres by 7th-6th century BCE. However, the process of growth of urban centres warrants a detailed discussion which may not be opportune to account for here as it will be a divergence from the present theme. Suffice it to state here that Varanasi had grown as an important and rich place of trade and commerce by Buddha's time; ancient Kashi specialized in production of variety of commodities which were not only admired and appreciated but were greatly in demand across the land. One of the questions that need to be addressed in course of the discussion here is as to when and under what conditions Varanasi came to be recognized as a pilgrim centre which is associated with the concept of *mokṣa* for every devout Hindu. To be able to answer this, we need to discuss albeit briefly, the archaeological evidence followed by the literary accounts to highlight the pattern of growth of the city - the cultural, economic and religious temper of Varanasi through the ages.

Located on the confluence of River Gaṅgā and Baranā (popularly known as Varuṇā), the mound of Rajghat, identified as the site of ancient Varanasi has been

archaeologically excavated for several field sessions. The present city of Varanasi is located along the meander on the bank of river Gaṅgā but the initial settlement came up at on the confluence of river Varuṇā and Gaṅgā at Adikeshava Ghat, the first *ghat* on the northernmost point of the present day city of Varanasi. The process of growth of Varanasi as revealed through excavations may be examined here to put things in perspective.

1. Kashi as revealed through Archaeology: Excavations have been conducted in and around Varanasi for decades. A good understanding of life in ancient Varanasi has been brought to light through these investigations. Archaeological evidence has brought to light human occupation from circa 1000 BCE to the medieval period (approximately up to 1100/1200 CE). The evidence from Rajghat (1976) is further corroborated from several other sites around Varanasi, such as Prahladpur (1968), Ramnagar (2006), Aktha (2009), Sarnath (1909, 1914-15) and the neighbouring areas like Agiabir (2004, 2006), Anai (2013), Hariharpur (2008:205-209), etc. A brief account of the nature of the deposits and the cultural remains being discussed below reveals that the earliest occupation at most of the sites started in a small area, more in the nature of a hamlet and grew in size as well as status over the centuries. The position of the site of occupation of ancient Varanasi is strategically important making accessible extensive flood plain lying on the banks of River Gaṅgā on one side and Varuṇā which joins it from an angle on the other.

Rajghat

The site of Rajghat was excavated by archaeologists of Banaras Hindu University from 1957 to 1958 and subsequently from 1960 to 1965 under the direction of Late Prof. A.K. Narain and more recently in 2015 under the aegis of Archaeological Survey of India. The results of the excavations at Rajghat have been published in four volumes (Narain et.al., 1978). The ancient settlement with a thickness of 2.87 m underlies the present day Krishna Murthy Foundation, Sarvodaya complex and the adjacent area near the present day Kashi station. The excavations unearthed a cultural sequence divided into six occupational periods

spanning over for nearly 3000 years (as the estimate of scholars before the advent of C¹⁴ dating methodology). The relative dating assigned to the deposit was from 1100 BCE to 800 BCE and then the medieval period (c.1600 CE). The dates have now been pushed back by several centuries by recent radiocarbon dates (B. R. Mani, personal communication). Briefly, the cultural sequence unearthed at the site may be described as under:

Period I at Rajghat has been divided into three sub-periods, viz. IA, IB and IC. IA is the earliest deposit which is confined to a very limited area of the mound. It is characterized by Black-and-Red Ware, Black Slipped Ware and Red Ware. Both painted and plain specimens have been found. Iron objects have been found towards the upper strata of the period IA. Copper, terracotta, stone and bone objects serving different purposes have been recovered during the course of the excavations.

The well known ceramic culture known as Northern Black Polished Ware appears at the stage Period IB, though the earlier potteries continue. Part of the earlier deposit was topped by wooden planks. The length of the plank was 34 m along the bank of river Gaṅgā (a wooden platform to facilitate movement of goods and people, in view of some scholars). There was also a clay embankment or bund with an extent height of 5.10 m and basal width of 19.80 m meant to stop flood water from entering the habitation. Drains and soak pits for discharging waste have also been found. These features manifest an advance level of settlement pattern developed by occupants of ancient Varanasi. Northern Black Polished Ware period is said to have heralded urbanization in the Gaṅgā plain; this fact is well testified by the cultural remains of Rajghat excavation.

Period IC is a phase of decline of the Northern Black Polished Ware. The pottery assemblage is dominated by a coarse variety of grey ware associated with the Northern Black Polished Ware. New shapes like pear shaped vase, *kaḍāhī* shaped vessels with loops, carinated *hāṇḍī* appear in Northern Black Polished Ware as well as associated Red ware during the period indicating new trends and traits in culture. Use of mould for terracotta human figurines was introduced at this level. Several un-inscribed copper cast coins were found from mid-level of period IC.

Period II is dominated by a new ceramic tradition which is characterized by a utilitarian Red Ware of unpainted variety, though appliqué pattern or stamped

decorations appear. The stamped decorations as well as pottery forms mark a departure from the earlier trends. Symbols like *triratna*, *cakra*, leaf, etc. make an appearance. These symbols are associated with Buddhism. Incised designs are common. Special mention may be made here of a stamped motif showing *triratna*, three *dharma cakras* and the hollow cross, all stamped in rectangular railing. The earliest occurrence of shapes with spouts in the form of *makara-mukha* is noted at this level. Other new forms are narrow necked, spouted jars, some of them with *makara-mukha* luted to the body. A few sherds of Grey ware of the previous period show that the earlier traditions were not discontinued altogether. Large sized utilitarian vessels, un-inscribed copper cast coins, terracotta seals in 2nd century Brāhmī characters are noteworthy findings. Animal and human figurines occur commonly. Moulded figures showing introduction of a new style in terracotta art appear for the first time during this stage. Introduction of a system of seals and sealings, coinage, etc. suggest rise in trade and commerce. Baked brick structures with sanitary arrangements have been unearthed. The period came to an end by the beginning of Common Era.

Period III has been assigned a date ranging from 150-300 CE. Burnt brick structures occur commonly at this stage. The houses exposed in excavation are big having complex design; wells, barns, etc. were lined with wedge shaped bricks. Clay modelling shows a marked improvement. Profusion of ornamentation as seen in elaborate headdress, necklaces, and ear ornaments of female figurines is characteristic of this period. Elephant figurines with auspicious symbols stamped on them appear frequently - (incidentally elephant figurines are associated with Buddhism). Other modelled animal figurines include bull, horse, bear, dog, etc. Occasionally one comes across animal figurines like monkey, mouse, camel and tortoise.

Pottery of this period has special features represented by sprinklers, narrow-necked jars, lids with V-shaped impression, lid-cum-bowl, *kaḍāhī* with handles and other handled vases. Such pot forms are suggestive of rising sophistication and changing life style of people of this period. Importantly enough there is a relative profusion of seal-sealings during this period. Nearly four hundred seals were recovered in excavations. Palaeographically, the Brāhmī

character belongs to 1st to 3rd century CE. One of them bears a humped bull figure with inscription *Puṣkarāṇa* assignable to 200 CE. *Harīṣeṇa* was the most frequent legend on seals. Die-struck coins appear for the first time. Also noteworthy findings is an Ayodhya coin bearing legend *Śivadatas* and from a later level a Kaushambi coin *Navasa* inscribed on it. All this indicates rising level of trade and commerce.

Period IV has been assigned to a period of 300-700 CE. Gupta gold coins belonging to *Candragupta*, *Kumāragupta I* and *Skandagupta* are special findings of the period. Tiny gold ornaments have also been found. Period V (700-1200 CE) was disturbed by pits dug during the succeeding period. Period VI belongs to medieval period, represented by structure remains of that period.

Sarai Mohana

A relatively smaller mound of Sarai Mohana, roughly contemporaneous to the main mound of Rajghat is located across the main mound on Varuṇā river. The site was simultaneously excavated by Banaras Hindu University while the main mound was being excavated by Late Dr. T.N. Roy. The report of Sarai Mohana excavations was subsequently published (Singh & Singh 2004). The cultural sequence of Sarai Mohana is more or less same as Rajghat. In view of recent investigations carried out at sites of the Gaṅgā plain, the report has followed the cultural pattern recovered in the latter excavations. It may be summarized as under:

Period I is represented by Black-and-Red Ware, Black Slipped Ware and Red Ware and a few sherds of Grey Ware. Painting has been found in black or white on Black-and-Red Ware. In general the culture corresponds with Period IA of Rajghat and the Chalcolithic period as revealed at the sites like Khairadih, Senuwar, Jhusi, Narhan, etc. On the basis of C¹⁴ characterization from sites mentioned above this period may be dated circa from 1300 BCE to 800/700 BCE till the advent of iron and Northern Black Polished Ware.

Period II is marked by use of Northern Black Polished Ware. It may be divided into two sub-periods corresponding with Rajghat IB and IC pertaining to

early and late phases of the Northern Black Polished Ware culture. The cultural material compares well with main mound of Rajghat but for the difference that it was a rural set up occupied by farmers, craftsmen or the other working class to support the urban centre of Rajghat across the river.

Period III belongs to the Kuṣāṇa period but there are material remains which correspond with Gupta period. According to the excavator it is a mixed cultural deposit (Singh and Singh 2004:10).

Two things are clear from the archaeological investigations carried out in different parts in and around Varanasi. Firstly, most of the important sites that came to be occupied were located on perennial rivers or similar water bodies. Secondly, an uninterrupted cultural sequence lasting over several centuries is testified by the archaeological excavations. The modern township of Varanasi on River Gaṅgā towards south of Rajghat is relatively a later development. Most of the existing temples of Varanasi are of later period datable to circa 16th-17th century CE. The earliest temple in Varanasi is the Kardameshwar temple datable to 12th century CE. It is on the well known *Pañcakrośī Parikramā Patha*. One may construe on this basis that image worship and temples are much later phenomena in religious history of Varanasi.

Ramnagar*

Ramnagar excavated in the year 2005-2006 (Jayaswal 2006:85-89) is located on River Gaṅgā on the other end of the city. It must have been an important satellite settlement of ancient Varanasi. The excavation yielded the following cultural sequence which closely corresponds with Rajghat:

Period I at Ramnagar belongs to Pre-Northern Black Polished Ware (Pre-NBPW) cultural period. It is dominated by Black Slipped Ware though Black and Red Ware, some of them with incised designs are also present, albeit in small numbers. Other finds include terracotta objects like balls, wheels, etc. A mud structure was noted. Period II has been divided into two sub-phases of Early and

* I have not been able to incorporate detailed evidence on other excavations conducted at the site due to non-availability of detailed reports to me. However, the picture remains the same there as well.

Late NBPW periods. The number of NBPW at the earlier stage is restricted but some beautifully painted sherds were recovered from some of the trenches. Black Slipped Ware, Grey Ware and Red wares are other wares of this period. Black Slipped Ware forms a distinct pottery tradition from layer 14 onward in some of the trenches. Structural activity increases during this period. The nature of deposit and finds are comparable to periods IB and C of Rajghat. During the later phase of the period II Grey ware dominates. Numbers of floors were noticed indicating a long duration of occupation and several repairs were undertaken during that phase. The noteworthy finds include beads of carnelian, bone points, terracotta wheels and iron objects. An evidence of pottery making at the site suggests that NBP (some inscribed sherds were also found) was made and traded from the site of Ramnagar. Period III belongs to post- NBPW period. Bright Red Ware is the important pottery of this period. Ring wells, soak pits and drains indicate better quality structural activity. On the basis of copper coins, and comparison with material remains from Rajghat, this period has been assigned a date bracket of 200 BCE to 200 CE.

In addition to the sites on the peripheries of Varanasi, there are several other sites which are located slightly away from the city. They must have been crucial to the growth of ancient Kāśī Mahājanapada. Some of them like Agiabir, Anai, Hariharpur, etc. have been excavated and are being briefly described here.

Agiabir

The site of Agiabir (District Mirzapur) is located near Katka railway station on river Gaṅgā just about 45 km from the city of Varanasi. It was excavated for several seasons by archaeologists of Banaras Hindu University under the direction of P. Singh and V. Tripathi, (Singh and Singh 2004; Tripathi et.al. 2006). The Archaeological investigations have revealed regular human occupation of the site from the Chalcolithic period to the Gupta period. There are sculptural evidences of later period lying scattered on the mound indicating occupation of the site till the medieval period.

Period I at the site of Agiabir belongs to the Chalcolithic period. The settlement during this period was confined to a limited area of the mound, mostly

on mound 1. The ceramic tradition was characterized by occurrence of Black and Red Ware (BRW). Red Ware of Chalcolithic period compares well with other sites of the region. Terracotta discs and beads are found in profusion.

Period II at Agiabir is distinguished by a change in ceramic tradition as well as introduction of iron. Instead of BRW Black Slipped Ware (BSW) takes centre stage at this time. BRW is found in negligible numbers. Other cultural features remain more or less similar to the previous period.

Period III heralds a new era with introduction of NBPW and its associated cultural assemblage. There is an expansion in size of settlement. Houses of larger size and made with baked bricks start appearing during this period though mud structures continued to be in use. A couple of noteworthy findings of the NBPW period deserve special mention here. A house complex of the NBPW yielded large-sized cooking vessels (*haṇḍās*), jars and *loṭās* of copper/bronze and a tall lamp-stand of iron along with swords - all kept together in a room. Occurrence of such large vessels from the mid-NBPW phase is rare finding indeed.

Period IV of Agiabir belongs to Śuṅga-Kuṣāṇa period. The ceramic trading compares closely with Rajghat and other sites. Noteworthy is exposure of an eleven room structure. There are platforms, wells lined with wedge shaped bricks. Another finding is that of a brick lined *havana-kuṇḍa* like structure. There are underground structures meant for storage of grains(?). Among the minor antiquities like beads, bangles, terracotta figurines, special mention may be made of a bronze mirror with a handle. All this suggests that Agiabir during this period had emerged as flourishing settlement on River Gaṅgā.

Period V pertains to the Gupta period. Though the mound has been disturbed by brick robbing by modern villagers, still a sizable part of the mound is intact which has yielded structures typical of the Gupta period. The houses are well planned with water disposal system, wells, platforms, and boundary walls. Seals and sealing in Gupta-Brāhmī character have been recovered. Some of them are closely comparable to Rajghat showing a close relationship between the two places. A noteworthy seal has a bull (*nandi*) depiction with a legend *Śrī Kumāra Dagdhalasya* inscribed on it. Terracotta Gaṇeśa in standing posture is another important finding of the Gupta period of the Agiabir excavation.

A noteworthy finding of Agiabir excavation has been bead-making workshop in a context datable to about 1000 BCE (Singh, P. and Singh, A.K. 2004). It shows that crafts like bead manufacturing were flourishing around Varanasi from ancient times. The Vindhyan ranges are just across the river which must have been the chief source for raw material. The debitage of bead-making has been found extensively scattered in and around the trench which has been identified as the workshop area used for lapidary. The activity continued during the succeeding period. Interestingly similar beads have been recovered from the excavations at Rajghat, the suggested site for city of ancient Varanasi. *Jātakas* refer to a professional group of *Maṇikāra* (bead-makers). Moreover, seals, sealings, pottery, terracotta figurines found at these two sites compare closely suggesting that the two were closely related from Chalcolithic period to the early historic/historic periods.

Anai

Anai is a rural site on Basuhi, a tributary of River Varuṇā located 37 kms away from Varanasi. It was excavated in 2005-06 by the present author (Tripathi 2013). The mound was almost destroyed by the present day villagers. A salvage excavation was planned at the site. The cultural remains have been divided into three periods, viz. Pre-NBPW period with BSW being a distinguishing ceramic tradition at this point of time. NBPW Cultural period has been divided into two sub-periods. The number of NBP sherds is rather limited as it is a rural settlement but beautiful specimens of the ware are found from fillings of the succeeding period. Also the deposit of this period at the site has been badly damaged by a canal that runs by the side of the mound. The site was deserted due to a fire during the Early NBPW period to be re-occupied after a short gap. There is a long desertion of the mound after NBPW period. It could be due to change in the river course which dried up or shifted. After a long gap the site was occupied once again during the medieval period. In brief we may say here that the site must have served as *Śākhā-nagarī* of ancient Varanasi.

Summing up the Archaeological evidence, we may observe that the mound at Rajghat started in the early centuries of the first millennium BCE and

continued up to the medieval times. The settlement expanded along river Gaṅgā in the subsequent centuries. This has earned the name of one of the earliest living cities the world. More importantly, the settlements like Ramnagar, Agiabir, Anai and Hariharpur, etc. are located within 40-45 kilometers of the city of Varanasi located on the banks of rivers Gaṅgā and Varuṇā, respectively. Closer to the settlements of ancient Varanasi, i.e. Rajghat and Sarnath, the latter has been described as *R̥ṣipattana* or *Iṣipātana* (Pāli) - the area occupied by saint scholars (*R̥ṣis*) or the *gurukulas*. There are many smaller settlements which must have come into existence for specific purposes at specific times, like Aktha, Kotwa, Tilmanpur and Ashapur (Jayaswal 2011:25-35). According to Jayaswal, who has conducted excavations at several small-sized satellite settlements around Varanasi, exposed craft villages at sites like Aktha, Ashapur and Kotwa mostly engaged in stone carving. Lowest stratum of Kotwa has been assigned to the Kuṣāṇa period. Aktha, however, had a highest antiquity. The earliest occupation is said to belong to Later Vedic period which expanded both in size and prosperity, during the 6th century BCE (the Mahājanapada period). During the subsequent centuries it evolved as a centre of commerce. All these excavations bear the fact out that initial settlement at these sites was limited to a small area of the mound, which expanded almost continuously over successive cultural periods and grew not only in size but also in other ways showing a gradual increase in richness of material remains indicating prosperity of people.

The main question here is – when and how did small settlements which dotted the Gaṅgā Plain assumed the status of 'city'? Such a question becomes all the more important due to the fact that we come across references like *Kāśīgrāma* or *Kāśīgāma* (Pāli). One may assume that it is likely that initially these terms were used rather loosely. The early Pāli text hardly made much distinction between the terms *grāma* and *nagara*, which subsequently stood for villages and cities, respectively. Or does it suggest that the Janapadas or settlements under occupation gradually emerged as cities by that time? If so, what was the pattern of growth of cities? Which were the contributory factors in emergence of richer and larger settlements to be classified as urbanized centres? In course of the present discussion we may find answer to some of these questions. Some suggestions are

already there in the archaeological evidences discussed above. The historical and literary accounts may also throw some light on those issues.

2. The Age of Mahājanapadas: Emergence of Prosperous Urban Centre: During the period of rise of sixteen Mahājanapadas, Kashi was in conflict with Kosala as well as Magadha. The ruler of that time was Brahmadata. During the time of Mahākosala (middle of 6th century BCE), Kashi formed integral part of Kosala Mahājanapada. King Mahākosala gave away in dowry to king Bimbisāra of Magadha those prosperous villages of Kashi fetching an income of over one lac *mudrās* (?). Both the archaeological and literary accounts suggest that over the period, Varanasi evolved into a prosperous city which excelled in variety of craft production. By sixth century BCE, the period of Mahājanapada and rise of Buddhism, Varanasi came to be recognized as one of the important cultural centres. We have seen above that crafts like bead-making had started right from the Pre-iron Age at Agiabir near Varanasi. In the succeeding period, ceramic and terracotta, metallurgy, ivory-carving not only started as specialized craft activities, but evolved into fine and famous productions exclusive to Kashi. The early Pāli texts dated roughly to the 6th-5th BCE and attributed to the age of the Buddha make frequent references to Kashi for its exquisite craft production, many of which like Kāśeya Kāśikā, Kāśeyaka were known after the place of their origin, that is, Kashi.

Varanasi was among the first places to have been classified as city (against smaller rural settlements which dominated the scene). *Dīgha Nikāya* (II.146) in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sutta* (Rhys Davids 1890-1911:146) refers to six great cities at the time of Buddha. They were Pataliputra, Vaishali, Varanasi, Kausambi, Sravasti and Ujjaini. In the subsequent times number of urban centres grew. Mention has been made of Taxila, Pushkalavati, Mathura, Vaishali, Bhrikukachchha, Mahishmati and Pratisthana, which grew as cities in the subsequent stage (*Mahāparinirvāṇa Sutta and Mahāsudassana Sutta, Sacred Books of the East, Vol.XI, pp.99 and 247*). Interestingly, all these cities were located on the important trade routes of ancient India. It goes without saying that trade and commerce played a vital role in the rise of these cities. Many business relationships were established

between traders of Kashi and the cities of that time mentioned here. Talking in the specific context of Varanasi, we have already seen that it has been classified in the ancient Pāli texts as one of the six earliest urban centres which emerged in the Gaṅgā plain.

Many of these sites have been associated with some craft activity or the other. Pāli texts refer to Kammāragrāma or Śilpagāma, a fact that is further reiterated by *Arthaśāstra*. The primary centres had several satellite settlements – production centres of variety of commodities. The tradition of crafts and craft-specialization is indeed deep seated in Indian society as may be clearly discerned in the following statement which was made by Siddhārtha Gautama's (the Buddha's) prospective father-in-law at the time of negotiations of his marriage to Yaśodharā. He is skeptical about Siddhārth's proficiency in any craft as is clear from the following verse of *Lalitavistara* (143):

अस्माकम् चायं कुलधर्मः शिल्पज्ञस्य कन्यादातव्या नाशिल्पज्ञस्येति ।
कुमारश्च न शिल्पज्ञो तत्कथतशिल्पज्ञायाहम् दुहितरम् दास्यामि ॥

City dwellers, it may be discerned from this reference had to be proficient in craft (*Prathita Śilpah*). It was believed that an adroit citizen having competence in 'śilpa' could earn a livelihood and be economically well off and his/her aesthetic senses also had a finesse befitting of a well developed personality. There are innumerable stories of potters, carpenters, bead-makers, weavers of Varanasi, sailing to distant lands with their goods; *kāśikā*, the cloth woven at Varanasi was famous. The eminence of Varanasi in production of exquisite products of different varieties gave rise to competition among the centres involved in production of commodities. The evidences of *Jātakas* and *Aṣṭādhyāyī* together classify 18 kinds of crafts organizations (guilds?). Pāli texts like *Jātakas* (*Jātaka* no.2:448) and *Aṅguttaranikāya* recognized Varanasi as one of the flourishing cities of Buddha's time. *Aṅguttaranikāya* and some of the *Jātakas* (2.248) state that the traders of Ujjaini had commercial rivalry with merchants of Varanasi. Varanasi excelled in weaving, wood-carving, lapidary, ivory-work (having *dantakāra vithi*), pottery-making, jewelry-making (*Suvarṇakāra vithi*), terracotta and several minor crafts.

Pāṇini (II.313.4.3.84) says that traders call Varanasi as *Jitavari*. *Therigāthā* mentions about flourishing goldsmiths of Kashi - *suvannakāroham bahudhano*. The *Jātakas* make very frequent references to commercial activities of Kashi. According to Altekar (1937: 15-16) *Jātaka* nos.86, 546, 539 mention about rich, fashionable people who lived a luxurious life and used to wear clothes prepared at Kashi. Cloth woven at Kashi was being supplied all over the place (*Kāmaṅkilāpa Jātaka* no.297). Kashi was well known as weaving centre for exquisite variety of cloth - cotton as well as silk (*Jātaka* 6.577) and also woolen items like blankets. The *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (3.29) mentions that after the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* of Buddha, his body was wrapped in a cloth prepared at Kasi. It was described to be so dense that it did not soak even oil. There is a reference that the king of Kashi presented Jīvaka a blanket as he was pleased with his services (*Mahāvagga* 8.1.4; 8.2). The needle-work of Kashi was also famous (*Jātaka* 6.144, 145,154). Perfumes prepared at Kashi were other commodity of trade (*Jātaka* 1.331; 5.302; *Aṅguttaranikāya* 3.391). There is an interesting reference to a trader who visited Pratyanta *deśa* and brought five hundred cart-loads of sandalwood (*Suttanipāta* A.523). Moti Chandra (2010:38) mentions about sandalwood groves along river Baranā. May be sandalwood was procured from outside and was also grown locally as it might have been required for perfumery as well as wood-carving; both the businesses seem to have flourished in Kashi during the *Jātaka* period. In words of Altekar (1937:15-16), 'the queen of King Vessantara is described to be wearing Benaras robes', the queen expressed her desire to wear the fragrant Kashi clothes in the following words: "I will wear finest Banaras robes thee with crimsoned sandalwood perfumed".

Jātaka (6:47 and 6:500) also talk highly of special type of cloth woven at Kashi. One of the finest varieties has been called *Kancanapaṭṭa* - (brocade?) cloth which had gold thread woven into it. Thus, Varanasi has ever since been famous for the beautiful brocade work. Even Tevernier (1665) mentions about the brocade work of Varanasi which was exported all over the world. It may be somewhat out of the chronological context here but all the same an interesting fact which may be narrated here. Macaule, though a critic of India, wrote to Warren Hastings about 'Benaras' in following words: "Commerce had as many pilgrims as religion. All along the shores of the venerable stream lay flocks of vessels laden with rich

merchandise. From looms of Benaras went forth the most delicate silk that adorn belles of St James and Versailles." (Kubernath Sukul 1974; 34).

Thus, right for the Pāli texts to the British administrators' the accounts, the weaves of Varanasi have been recorded and admired. The tradition has survived the ups and down the millennia despite odds. No doubt such tenacity of the traders of the city bought them name, fame and riches. This has indeed a high antiquity. Seals of many *Nigamas* were recovered in excavations. Thus we see that the traders of Varanasi were not only rich, well organized and prosperous but also adventurous.

Excavations at RGT have yielded large number of seals pertaining to different business organizations. Six of these seals have been identified to be those of traders' guilds. These were rich organizations perhaps dealing with crafts productions of different kinds. One of these is said to have one crore gold *niṣkas* in its possession. These 'guilds' were trading overland as well as through water ways as clear by words like *Jalakammika* (जलकम्मिक) and *Thalakammika* (थलकम्मिक). River Gaṅgā must have been great assets in promoting trade to distant lands. The *Baveru Jātaka* mentions trade through sea up to Srilanka, Malasia and parts of China. The Vindhyan range, south of Varanasi, while being a rich source of minerals also was a passage to southern parts of the country. Presence of an Aśokan rock edict at Ahraura is evidence of the importance of this region right from 4th-3rd century BCE onwards if not earlier. In recent years our discoveries of rock paintings and rock edicts at Ghurahapur (district Chandauli), south of Varanasi and the surrounding areas further corroborates the cultural and politico-economic significance of this area. This was the route being followed by travelers or caravans of the traders going south (*dakṣiṇāpatha*).

3. Settlement Pattern: The Pāli texts datable to 5th-4th century BCE refer to variety of craft activities going on in Varanasi. The settlements during early India were laid down to facilitate social as well as economic interactions within communities which must have been conducive also to production mechanism. The *Śilpa Śāstras*, Pāṇini, *Arthaśāstra*, etc. have indicated such a basis for laying down of settlements. Separate areas of settlements were earmarked for different specialized

professions. We hear of 'Dantakāra' (Jātaka 2.139)', 'Suvarṇakāra', 'Maṇikāra' and 'Lauhakāra' vithi-mohallās or lanes pertaining to separate traditional crafts in Varanasi in many ancient texts (Jātaka VI.144,145,165). Baḍḍhakī grāma (Jātaka 2.11) had a population of 500 carpenters who were engaged in variety of crafts related to carpentry. One such organization of carpenters, according to Jātaka stories is said to be in possession of one thousand gold niṣkas. At least six Nigamas bearing legends like 'Bharata', 'Śrīdatta', 'Śauraghya' have left behind their seals which were found in excavations at Rajghat. These Nigamas were associations of flourishing traders who lived in ancient Varanasi and facilitated by their ambience conducted commercial activities from here.

In keeping with the trend noted by us in course of our field investigations, we observed that most of the ancient settlements are located on the confluence of rivers – major or minor. The significance of the feature is not hard to visualize. These navigable water bodies must have facilitated communication and transportation of people and goods which otherwise was difficult terrain to commute. Varanasi has a strategically important location. The minerally rich Vindhya-Kaimur hills are located at the southern side while River Gaṅgā and several smaller tributaries provide rich alluvial soil ensuring high agricultural yield as well as easy transportation of goods and effective means of communication. The location was thus conducive to economic affluence. The supportive ecological setting appears to have been fully utilized to its advantage by occupants of the region.

The early settlers must have been attracted with the favourable topography - fertile soil and perennial source of water. The neighbouring hilly and forested zones provided necessary minerals, stone - precious and semi-precious raw material and metal ores while being a rich source of game which was necessary for subsistence economies. Varanasi, therefore, seem to have had an ideal ecological setting conducive to growth as a big centre of ancient times with major river system - like rivers Gaṅgā, Gomatī and scores of minor tributaries like Asī, Varuṇā, Basuhī, Morwā, Karmanāśā and large number of smaller streams or 'nālās', many of these formed due to river courses changes taking place over the centuries. There are numerous ancient settlements on the palaeo-channels of these

rivers. These settlements vary in size, shape, age and perhaps purpose that they served in larger scheme of the *Mahājanapada* of Kashi. It has been worth examining the role and function of these sites on the basis of archaeological evidence brought to light from time to time.

Excavations at Rajghat have yielded valuable evidences about changing dimensions of life in Varanasi. The settlement at Rajghat had a humble beginning occupying only small area of the present day mound at Adikeshava Ghat on which the Krishnamurti Foundation is located. The site has a strategic location with the river confluence connecting it with two directions as well as the Vindhya-Kaimur hill located on its south. These hill ranges are rich in variety of minerals including the ores of different metals. The material remains exhibit an elementary subsistence economy at the earliest level which was confined to a small part of the mound. By 7th-6th century BCE, not only the area expands due to demographic reasons, the nature of material evidence also undergoes remarkable changes. There may have been a transformation in the nature and status of the settlement as is evident from references to Varanasi as *Kāśīgrāma* in the early texts.

The locational evaluation of sites in relation to the specific purpose they must have served has been done by geographers like Christaller who proposed a very apt theory known in the parlance of settlement studies as 'Centre Place Theory'. This theory assumes that a homogenous plain having an even distribution of natural resources, population, consumer preference and production technique of goods (Christaller, 1933). He proposed a three tier system of development of an urban centre. The first and foremost is a centre with fertile land having perennial water supply and communication network (through rivers). As the population of this primary centre grew and the size expanded, its requirements also increased. The ever increasing needs of an emerging parent centre could be fulfilled by what has been turned as 'offspring settlements' coming up in the vicinity. In the case of ancient Varanasi that is Rajghat, settlements like Sarai Mohana (just across the river on the other bank), Ramnagar on Gaṅgā have been excavated (Singh and Singh, 2004; Jayaswal et. al., 2006, 85-91). A good number of smaller satellite settlements have been located along River Gaṅgā, Varuṇā and their tributaries around Rajghat and Sarnath. We may name here sites

like Kamauli, Aktha, Kotwa, Tilmanpur, etc. Explorations and excavations have yielded many more such sites like Chiurpur, Umdi, Murdaha, Sirsi, Muchiyan, Matigaon, just to name a few. In the ancient Indian texts on settlements we come across terms like *Mūlanagarī* (मूलनगरी), the primary centre, and the satellite settlements - *Śākhānagarī* (शाखानगरी). This may be testified by the smaller settlements mentioned above in the neighbourhood of Ancient Varanasi. These satellite settlements served specific functions contributing to the growth of an urban culture.

The question we propose to address here is: at what point of time Kashi attained the status of a religious centre? For answering this, we first need to go into the history of city of Varanasi and Kashi *Mahājanapada*. When and how it gained respect or religious primacy is a subject of enquiry. The residents of Kashi had also refused to observe sacrifices and other Vedic rituals as per *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (*op.cit.*). However, as amply demonstrated above, Kashi attained the distinction of being an affluent city by 6th century BCE. By the times of Emperor Aśoka, Kashi had become famous not only as a Buddhist centre but also as an economically flourishing city. The Ahraura Rock Edict of Emperor Aśoka bears out the importance that Kashi and its environs held for the Mauryan Empire. During the succeeding Kuṣāṇa and Gupta rules, Kashi continued to hold an important position, culturally, religiously as well as economically. The important *stūpas*, initially constructed by Aśoka, were further elaborated upon; the monastic setup at Sarnath was added during the Śuṅga-Kuṣāṇa and Gupta age. Though the Gupta rulers were Vaiṣṇavite in their personal belief, but the monastic settlement at Sarnath gained further impetus during their rule. It is also likely that the Brāhmanical concepts were also strengthened during this age.

4. Concept of Pilgrimage and Making of Varanasi as a Centre of Pilgrim: The question which deserves attention at this juncture is whether Varanasi first became a famous pilgrim centre and then made a name for itself as an affluent urban centre, which produced exquisite goods? Or alternatively, it grew as a city first which attracted people with diverse specializations, diverse virtues and diverse scholastic inclinations. All this contributed to unique personality of Varanasi, including its growth as a sacred city.

Concept of pilgrimage or sacred spaces appears to be historically a relatively later phenomenon. It is still more so in the context of Middle Gaṅgā Plain which was outside the pale of the Vedic social structure till the eastward movement by the Later Vedic Āryans. At the initial stages, it seems sanctity was associated with water bodies-rivers, lakes, ponds, etc. This is seen in *Nadīstuti* of *R̥gveda*. The sacred river Sarasvatī is eulogized in the R̥gvedic hymns as goddess who bestows grace and riches on people. The River *Sarasvatī*, *Sarayū* and *Sindhu* have been mentioned as divine Mothers. It is clear that River Gaṅgā which was little known to the R̥gvedic Āryans has not been incorporated in the list of sacred rivers at that stage. However hills, rivers, ponds etc. have been treated as places of special importance. Even *Manusmṛti* and *Yājñavalkya Smṛiti* do not show any clear concept of 'Tīrtha' or pilgrim places, especially in the region beyond Brahmavarta. However, *Mahābhārata* and the Purāṇas do seem to have a clearer concept of *tīrthas* associated with sacred places.

“इमं मे गंगे यमुने सरस्वती शुतुद्री शतोमं सचता परुष्ण्या । असिक्न्या वितस्तयाऽर्जीकीये शृणुह्य सुषोमया ।।”

The *Tīrthayātrā* section of *Āraṇyaparva* of *Mahābhārata* describes even small places as sacred but there are only two passing references to Kashi. These are in the context of worship of *Vṛṣabhadhvaja* and about bathing in *Kapilahṛda* (*Kapiladhārā*) (*Āraṇyaparva* 82.69-70). *Anuśāsanaparva* of *Mahābhārata* (108.9), *Vāyupurāṇa* (77.125 and 127), *Skandapurāṇa* (*Kāśī Khaṇḍa* 7.3), etc. underline the importance of sacred places or *tīrthas*. *Padmapurāṇa* also talks about importance of certain places and regard them as *tīrthas*. However, most of the early texts have treated Kurukshetra and Pushkara as *tīrthas*. *Manusmṛti* (8.92) regards Kurukshetra and Gaṅgā River as pious (even in this reference no mention of Varanasi or Kashi may be seen).

यमो वैवस्वतो देवो यस्तवैष हृदिस्थितः । तेन चेदविवादस्ते मा गंगा मा कुरुन्मः ।। (*Manusmṛti* 8.92)

One may construe on this basis that places located along river Gaṅgā came to be treated as pious. Prayag has been designated as *Tīrthrāja* because it is located on the confluence of Gaṅgā-Yamunā and the mythical Sarasvatī. Later, Hardwar, Kankhal, Kashi also came to be regarded as important pilgrim places because of their location along River Gaṅgā. *Brahmapurāṇa* (86.1-2.45, 46) says that by visits of important persons a place becomes *tīrtha*. It is during the time of Purāṇas (dated to

the early centuries of Common Era) that Varanasi received an important place as pilgrimage. Even in the Purāṇas there are large number of references of worship of *Gandharvas*, *Yakṣas* and *Nāgas* in Kashi (*Matsyapurāṇa* 180.6-20). There are also references to *Gaṇas* of Lord Śiva suggesting the non-Āryan or non-Vedic temper of pre-Puraṇic Kashi. During the 6th Century BCE, Varanasi was recognized as a birth place of Jaina Tīrthaṅkaras and the place where Gautama the Buddha delivered his first sermon. These may have been the important landmarks of religious significance and the developments taking place at Kashi.

In keeping with the belief that an educational centre should be located away from the cities, Varanasi with Sarnath in its neighbourhood must have been an important centre of learning. It is fully testified by the simple fact that Gautama the Buddha after attaining enlightenment chose to deliver his first sermon at Sarnath, which must have been an important centre for scholars and philosophers of the age. Kashi/Varanasi must have been a centre of Brahmanical learning as is clear from (1) was known as *Ṛṣipattana* and (2) Buddha, after gaining enlightenment came to Sarnath to deliver his first sermon. He could locate his old companions/disciples who had deserted him during the phase of his penance when he was struggling towards enlightenment. Besides this, we rarely come across contexts which suggest sacred nature of the place. On the contrary, there are number of references which amply describe the prosperity of the place as a busy business centre and a well known productive centre for variety of craft products which were in great demand.

The Puraṇās which are generally dated to the early centuries of the Common Era start recognizing Varanasi or Kashi as sacred place. Special mention may be made here of *Matsyapurāṇa* (411 ślokas: 180-185), *Kūrmapurāṇa* (226 ślokas: 1.31-35), *Liṅgapurāṇa* (92.190), *Padmapurāṇa* (170 verses: 33-37), *Agnipurāṇa* (112), *Skandapurāṇa* (Ch.VI as *Kāśī Khaṇḍa* with 15000 verses). Kashi has been derived from the route *Kāśa*, to shine (with presence of Lord Śiva?). Mahādeva Śiva is said to have designated Varanasi as *Ānandakānana*, *Ānandavana*, *Mahāsmāśāna*. It has also been called *Avimukta* (as lord Śiva never deserts this city - विमुक्तं हि शिवाम्याम् यद विमुक्तम्).

5. Discussion:

Concluding the discussion, we may observe that –

(1) Kashi, during the Later Vedic period was supposed to be an undesirable destination for people. It was presumably under influence of the non-Vedic culture. The anecdotes of animosity between Kṛṣṇa and Jarāsandha and burning of Kashi under the instigation of Kṛṣṇa (*Udyoga Parva* 40:47) substantiate the ill feelings nurtured against Kashi during the *Mahābhārata* period. Likewise, the fact that people of Kashi had refused to observe the Vedic rituals is another pointer to a defiance of residents of Kashi against the Vedic rituals and beliefs. Even Manu (4th-3rd century BCE) has treated Kurukshetra as a *Tīrtha* but he did not give credence to Kashi as a sacred place.

(2) Before Varanasi became sacred city with her association with Gaṅgā and a centre of learning, it had become famous as an economically affluent and commercially active place. It was a production centre specializing in variety of exquisite commodities with craft-specialization in weaving, metal crafts, jewelry-making, lapidary, ceramics, carpentry and variety of other minor crafts. It was a busy port (*pattana*) with traders making efficient use of River Gaṅgā and scores of her tributaries. Some were venturing as far as oceans through these waterways. There are innumerable references in Pāli and Sanskrit texts to rich traders of Varanasi who travelled far and wide both by land and sea routes; some had the reputation of possessing crores of gold coins. Traders' guilds whose seals and sealings were recovered from excavations at Rajghat, Agiabir, Ramnagar, etc. were dealing in variety of commodities on an organized basis. They have frequently been mentioned in different literary accounts (mentioned above).

(3) Simultaneously, Kashi was also emerging as a centre of learning by the time of Buddha. It must have attracted scholars from different parts of the land. The growing efficacy of waterways, traders and scholars converged at Varanasi and Sarnath. Making use of such facilities, and attracted by River Gaṅgā which after drying up of the Holiest of the Holy Vedic Sarasvatī gradually came to be recognized as a sacred river, visitations by different sectors of society from different regions must have gained frequency. Because of this, Sarnath, an *āśrama* slightly away from the main city, in keeping with the norm of the day, gained the

reputation as *Rṣipattana* or port resided by scholars. This assumption is further corroborated by the fact that Buddha first chose to visit and deliver his first sermon at Sarnath to test (?) his newly acquired knowledge as did Śaṅkarācārya several centuries later.

Looking through the prism of history, it seems logical to argue that Varanasi, the capital city of ancient Kashi *Mahājanapada*, came into prominence as an affluent trading city specializing in various exquisite crafts. The flourishing trade and commerce at Varanasi brought together here people from diverse areas and with diverse interest and inclinations. Simultaneously, the religio-spiritual temper of Kashi also acquired new dimensions with spread of the Vedic religion. River Gaṅgā became the Mother who nurtured; a goddess to be worshipped and eulogized. Though Lord Śiva is the presiding deity of Kashi who promised never to quit the place, Lord Viṣṇu, in his various forms also got associated with sacred Kashi. Gaṅgā the holy Mother, is believed to purge all the sins committed knowingly or unwittingly. One who dies at Kashi attains *mokṣa*, the ultimate goal of life for one initiated in the *Sanātana Dharma*.

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