



The spiritual and socio-economic dimensions of Kashi's traditional fairs

Arun Shukla

Research Scholar, Department of Ancient Indian History & Archaeology, University of Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

Kashi, one of the ancient Saptapuris, has long been a center of learning, spiritual discourse, and cultural dynamism. Historically renowned as a prosperous city, Kashi's vibrant fairs and festivals have been pivotal in shaping both its religious and economic life. Festivals such as Nakkataiya, Sorahiya, and Nag Nathaiya have played a significant role not only in reinforcing the spiritual ethos of Hindu society but also in contributing to the economic fabric of the region. Kashi's rich traditions in local industries—especially silk weaving, sculpture, and terracotta art—fueled a flourishing marketplace where artisans showcased their craftsmanship through haats, which gradually evolved into larger cultural festivals. This paper analyzes the landmark fairs of Kashi, focusing on their historical origins, cultural significance, and economic impact on the city. By examining these festivals as milestones in Kashi's development, the study highlights how they served as conduits for religious expression, social cohesion, and economic prosperity, sustaining the city's prominence both nationally and globally.

Keywords: Kashi, Saptapuri, Nakkataiya, Sorahiya, Nag Nathaiya, Festivals, Fairs

Introduction

Kashi, also known as Varanasi or Banaras, is celebrated as one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, located on the left bank of the sacred Ganges River. Its history dates back about 3,000 years, establishing it as a crucial center for Hindu culture and spirituality. Revered as the city of Lord Shiva, Kashi is believed to sit on his trident, symbolizing a lasting connection between the divine and its people. This spiritual significance is deeply felt by residents, who view their city as a sacred space.

Kashi is often called the "City of Temples and Ghats," known for its numerous sacred sites, including the famous Kashi Vishwanath, Kotwal Kaal Bhairav, and Ratneshwar Mahadev. These temples attract thousands of devotees each day, showcasing the city's importance in Hindu worship. It is said that Kashi was founded by Lord Shiva over 5,000 years ago, making it a key pilgrimage destination for those seeking liberation (moksha), particularly at the ghats of Manikarnika and Harishchandra.

The historical and spiritual significance of Kashi is documented in ancient texts such as the Rigveda, Atharvaveda, Skandapurana, Ramayana, and Mahabharata, along with accounts from the Mahajanapadas of the sixth century BCE. These texts highlight Kashi's long-standing importance as a spiritual hub, attracting numerous scholars, saints, and spiritual leaders throughout history, including Mahatma Buddha, Saint Kabir, Guru Nanak, and Adi Shankaracharya.

In addition to its religious importance, Kashi has been a thriving center for trade and craftsmanship. The city is known for its muslin, silk textiles, perfumes, and various artisanal products. This economic prosperity is reflected in ancient writings and accounts from travelers, showcasing Kashi as a vital commercial hub from ancient times to the present day.

The vibrant cultural landscape of Kashi is further illustrated by its numerous fairs and festivals, where local traditions, folk art, and religious practices converge. Events such as Nakkatiya, Sorahiya, Lakkha, Ganga Mahotsav, and the Dhrupad Fair highlight the community's dedication to

preserving and showcasing their cultural identity. These fairs are significant not only for their spiritual essence but also for the unity and joy they bring to the people of Kashi. Through these celebrations, Kashi continues to embody a diverse mix of cultural and religious expressions, rooted in ancient traditions that thrive in modern society. The city's enduring spirit reflects the deep connection between its past and present, making it a unique and beloved place for both locals and visitors.

Prosperity of Kashi: An Economic Venture

Kashi, known as the city of Lord Shiva, has been rich not only in religion and culture but also in economics for thousands of years. The city has witnessed the flourishing of trade and various industries alongside its vibrant cultural and religious life. Crafts such as woodwork, copper art, and textiles have maintained their prominence from ancient times to the present.

One key factor in Kashi's prosperity is its strategic location. Situated along the ancient highway and the banks of the Ganges River, Kashi was an important hub for trade activities. Historical texts and Buddhist literature indicate that Kashi had trade connections with places like Takshashila (now in Pakistan). For instance, the *Dhammapadatha Katha* describes a merchant from Varanasi traveling to Takshashila with mules loaded with utensils for trade.

In ancient times, Kashi was part of the *Uttarapath*, a major trade route established during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya. This route facilitated not only land trade but also waterway commerce. The *Baveru Jataka*, a Buddhist text, mentions merchants who sailed from Kashi to Babylon. Archaeological excavations at Rajghat have uncovered seals and coins that provide evidence of trade with western countries.

The wood industry in Kashi was significant, as noted in the *Jatakas*, which mention a village called Badhiki where around 500 artisans worked. The *Jataka* texts also refer to the ivory trade, including a street named Dantkar Veethi, known for its ivory products. Kashi was famous for its

textiles, with many Buddhist texts praising the quality of fabrics produced in the region.

Moreover, the *Tandanal Jataka* notes that horses, including those from the Indus Valley, were traded in Kashi's markets. These historical accounts illustrate that Kashi was economically prosperous and served as a central trade hub in India from ancient times.

Even today, Kashi remains well-known for its traditional industries. People from all over the world appreciate its silk, handicrafts, gold and silver wirework, and ivory and brass products. The city has also developed as a religious tourism center, attracting visitors who are interested in both the sacred sites and the local arts and crafts.

In recent years, initiatives like the inauguration of the Deen Dayal Handicraft Complex by Prime Minister Modi have revitalized Kashi's local industries, providing artisans with better opportunities and boosting their economic conditions. Kashi is a unique city full of joy and celebration. The fairs and festivals attract huge crowds, showcasing the talents of local artisans. For example, during festivals, you can see traders from villages and cities displaying their goods, allowing small artists to gain recognition on a global level. This not only improves their economic situation but also highlights the artistic heritage of Kashi.



Image courtesy- mytravaly.com

Chaitganj's Nakkatiya is the most famous Ram Leela in Varanasi, taking place a week after Vijayadashami during Kartik. This vibrant festival, known as "Lakshmi Mela," attracts millions of devotees who enjoy the colorful decorations and lively market atmosphere. The tradition began in 1887, initiated by Baba Fateh Ram, who organized the Chaitganj Ram Leela Committee to fund the event through small daily contributions from local shopkeepers.

The performance, based on the Tulsi Ramayana, features Lakshman cutting off Surpanakha's nose, leading to a grand display of Surpanakha and her brothers challenging Ram and Lakshman. The procession starts from Pishach Mochan and covers about 2 kilometers, typically reaching Chaitganj by 4 AM. Nakkatiya also addresses social issues through dramatizations of problems like police brutality and historical events. Participants portray various characters, and spectacular tricks enhance the excitement.

While originally focused on satire and spirituality, Nakkatiya has become more commercialized over the years. Other notable Ram Leela locations include Chitrakoot, Ayodhya, Delhi, and Khajhwa, each with unique traditions. The performance of Ram Katha extends beyond Hindi-

Through its festivals and fairs, Kashi presents the work of woodworkers, weavers, and clay craftsmen. These events offer opportunities for artists, such as toy makers, to display their creations. The saying "seven times nine festivals" reflects the abundance of celebrations in Kashi, which not only provides entertainment but also supports local artists.

As people engage in these festivities, they share their skills and products while fostering a sense of community and cooperation. In this way, Kashi feels like one big family, united in their love for Mahadev and their shared culture. The fairs and festivals not only enhance the spirit of togetherness but also contribute to the economic prosperity of the city.

Main Festivals and Fairs of Kashi

Kashi, also known as Varanasi, is renowned as the city of Shiva and is rich in religious, cultural, and historical significance. It attracts tourists and pilgrims from all over the world throughout the year. The festivals and fairs held in Kashi serve as vibrant showcases of its cultural heritage, customs, and communal harmony. Let's explore some of the prominent festivals and fairs celebrated in this ancient city:

1. Nakkatiya Fair

speaking regions, influencing Southeast Asian cultures with dance-dramas and puppetry. In Nepal, Ram Leela holds significant religious value, particularly at Janaki Temple.

Overall, while Ram Leela is celebrated widely, the Kashi Ram Leela stands out for its rich cultural heritage and national recognition.

- **Location:** Chetganj, near Kashi Railway Station
- **Origin:** Established in 1887 by Baba Fateh Ram, this fair is tied to an incident from the Indian epic Ramayana, where Lakshman cuts off the nose of Shurpanakha, Ravana's sister.
- **Significance:** During British rule, gatherings were restricted, and Baba Fateh Ram creatively associated the fair with religion to express the yearning for freedom. It became a platform to showcase social issues and nationalistic sentiments through tableaux.
- **Activities:** The fair features a procession from midnight to 3 am, displaying historical and religious events like the Shiva Tandav and social evils such as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. Local artisans sell clay toys, handicrafts, and metal crafts, contributing to the economic prosperity of the area.

2. Nag Nathaiya Festival



Image courtesy- Wikipedia

The festival commemorates the legend of Lord Krishna defeating Kaliya, the serpent.

- **Location:** Tulsi Ghat
- **Origin:** Believed to have started by the saint Tulsidas in the 16th century.
- **Story:** The festival commemorates the legend of Lord Krishna defeating Kaliya, the serpent.
- **Activities:** The festival includes a reenactment of the mythological event, with a child portraying Krishna in the Ganges, symbolizing the triumph of good over evil. The King of Kashi also participates, attracting crowds from far and wide.

- **Significance:** This festival marks the descent of the Ganges from heaven to earth, associated with the legend of King Bhagirath.
- **Activities:** People gather at the ghats to bathe, believing it absolves sins. Fairs and folk song performances occur at every ghat, and the evening is filled with the lighting of lamps and singing devotional songs, fostering community spirit.

3. Ganga Dussehra



Image courtesy- <https://www.optimatravel.com/>

Ganga Dussehra celebrates the Ganges River coming down from heaven, an important event in Hindu stories. Historically, this festival is about purification, with people believing that bathing in the Ganges during this time washes away sins. The festival lasts for ten days, and people gather at the ghats of Varanasi to take holy dips and perform rituals. Today, Ganga Dussehra has become a time to raise awareness about the importance of protecting the Ganges. Many initiatives focus on keeping the river clean and healthy. The festival attracts many pilgrims and tourists who want to witness the vibrant celebrations and enjoy the spiritual atmosphere. It reminds everyone of the river's significance in Indian culture.

- **Date:** Celebrated on the tenth day of the Shukla Paksha of Jyeshtha month.

4. Dev Diwali



Image courtesy- Aaj Tak

Started from Panch Ganga Ghat, Dev Deepawali is a beautiful festival in Varanasi that celebrates the victory of light over darkness. It takes place on the full moon night of the Kartik month, honoring Lord Shiva's victory over the demon Tripurasura. During this festival, the ghats are lit with thousands of oil lamps, creating a stunning sight. People gather to perform rituals, offer prayers, and enjoy cultural programs with music and dance. In modern times, Dev Deepawali has become a major tourist attraction, highlighting Varanasi's rich traditions. The festival encourages community spirit and pride while promoting environmental awareness. It serves as a reminder of hope and positivity, making it a special occasion for everyone involved.

- **Date:** Celebrated on Kartik Purnima, 15 days after Diwali.

- **Legend:** It commemorates Lord Shiva's victory over the demon Tripurasura, with deities lighting lamps to celebrate.
- **Activities:** Thousands of lamps are lit along the ghats, and in recent years, laser light shows have added a modern touch to the festivities.

5. Sorahiya Fair



Image courtesy-<https://ithappensinvaranasi.wordpress.com/>

Sorahiya Fair is a traditional fair held in Varanasi that celebrates local agriculture and crafts. It usually takes place in the winter months and serves as a marketplace for farmers and artisans. At the fair, visitors can find a variety of items, including textiles, handicrafts, and fresh produce. The atmosphere is lively, filled with music, dance performances, and displays of local art. Today, Sorahiya Fair continues to support local craftsmen and farmers, helping to sustain their livelihoods. It also brings the community together and promotes local culture. For visitors, it's a chance to experience the rich heritage of Varanasi and enjoy the vibrant community spirit. Sorahiya Fair is a major religious and cultural event of Kashi, which is held at Laxmi Kund for 16 days from Bhadra Shukla Ashtami to Kwar Krishna Ashtami. The main attraction of this fair is the worship of Goddess Mahalaxmi, in which women worship clay idols with devotion. It is believed that taking bath in Laxmi Kund and doing 16 parikrama of Mahalakshmi during the fair brings good luck, prosperity and blessings of having children. In the puja, different offerings and flowers are offered each day, and women a clay Lakshmi idol is bought and worshiped at home, which is immersed the next year and a new idol is bought. On the occasion of Jivitputrika Vrat, the last day of the fair, women observe a fast for the welfare of their sons and wear a garland of sacred threads. This fair is also a major source of income for local potters and other small industries.

Duration: 16 days from Bhadra Shukla Ashtami to Kwar Krishna Ashtami at Laxmi Kund.

- **Significance:** The fair centers on the worship of Goddess Mahalaxmi, where women perform rituals for prosperity and good fortune.
- **Activities:** Women participate by purchasing and worshipping clay idols, with various offerings made each day. The fair supports local potters and artisans economically.

Other Notable Festivals and Fairs

Kashi hosts several other festivals and fairs, each contributing to its vibrant cultural landscape:

- **Navratri Fair:** Celebrating the goddess Durga with processions and dances.
- **Buddh Mahotsav:** Honoring the teachings of Buddhism.
- **Durga Puja:** Celebrating the victory of the goddess Durga.
- **Dhrupad Fair:** Showcasing traditional Dhrupad music.
- **Ramleela of Ramnagar:** A dramatic retelling of the Ramayana.
- **Bharat Milap of Nati Imli:** Celebrating the reunion of Lord Rama and Bharat.
- **Panchkoshi Fair:** A pilgrimage fair along the Panchkoshi route.
- **Ganga Mahotsav:** A festival celebrating the Ganges River.

The Imprint of Hinduism in Festivals and Fairs of Kashi

Kashi has long been revered as a center of Hindu culture and religion, drawing countless devotees and scholars such as Shankaracharya, Vallabhacharya, and Tulsidas. Known as the city of salvation, every street is adorned with temples dedicated to Lord Shiva, with prominent ones including Sankatmochan, Durgakund, Kashi Vishwanath, Kaal Bhairav, and Gauri Kedar. These sacred sites attract millions of devotees year-round, who come to honor their ancestors and seek peace for their souls. The daily Ganga Aarti, where devotees' light lamps along the ghats, is a significant ritual that further cements Kashi's status as the heart of Indian culture and Hindu religious traditions.

The festivals and fairs of Kashi are deeply intertwined with Hindu beliefs and mythology. Events like Diwali, Holi, Mahashivratri, Dev Diwali, Ganga Dussehra, and the Sorahiya Mela all reflect this connection. For instance, the Nag Nathaiya Festival at Tulsi Ghat commemorates the episode where Lord Krishna defeats the evil Kaliya Naag, symbolizing the triumph of good over evil. Through these celebrations, Kashi preserves its rich spiritual identity.

During festivals like Ganga Dussehra and occasions such as Purnmasi and Amavasya, devotees flock to the sacred Ganges for purification rituals. On the sixth day of Bhadrpada Shukla Paksha, thousands gather at Lolark Kund, also known as Surya Kund, to bathe and pray for sons. The entire city is beautifully decorated, with fairs held along the ghats and streets. Elaborate tableaux showcasing various deities are paraded, while devotional songs fill the air, delighting both locals and visitors.

Mahashivratri is another spectacular event, featuring grand processions in honor of Lord Shiva. Temples and intersections are adorned with images of Bholenath, and prasad is generously distributed, drawing large crowds and creating a festive atmosphere.

The festivals and fairs of Kashi are not merely events; they are vibrant expressions of Hindu mythology, showcasing deities and symbols that reflect the essence of Sanatan culture. Kashi, recognized as one of the Saptapuris and Sapt Mokshadayini cities, stands as a holy pilgrimage site for Hindus across India, embodying the profound imprint of Hinduism in its rich tapestry of celebrations.

Development and Importance of Fairs: In India, the literal meaning of fair is 'meeting' or 'gathering'. Fairs are organized every month on some occasion or the other in India. In these fairs, people come from far and wide and gather at one place to exchange various goods among themselves, celebrate festivals, and enjoy dances, songs and tricks performed by skilled artists from different regions. These fairs are very important from social, religious and economic point of view. In India, craft fair, animal fair, book fair, trade fair, and religious fairs of gods and goddesses are organized. Fairs like Surajkund Crafts Fair of Haryana, Animal Fair in Pushkar, Rajasthan and India International Trade Fair in Delhi are very famous. Despite the diversity of fairs, social, religious and economic elements are seen in all of them, which promote unity and solidarity in the cultural diversity of India. Paying attention to the history of fairs, it appears that they started from the haats held in rural areas in ancient times. market or place The initial form of these markets was when farmers and artisans gathered in rural areas to exchange their products. The purpose of these haats was not only trade, but also to promote collectivity and cultural exchange among the people. Probably these haats were often organized near religious places, due to which their religious importance also increased. People come from far and wide, worship the gods and goddesses of local traditions, and buy and sell their essential commodities from nearby shops. Were. Fairs also facilitated exchange of different cultures, which promoted social harmony and stimulated the local economy. Thus, the haats expanded into fairs and became major centers of religious and cultural events. During the British period, a more organized form of these fairs and haats emerged. Trading activities were regulated and opportunities for large-scale trade developed. In modern times, markets and fairs have become an integral part of Indian society. Technical improvements in fairs Due to their good and better systems, they have got national and international recognition. Even today, when we look at the roadside shops in fairs, we see that small traders and artisans from nearby villages set up their shops and sell in these fairs, which gives them economic benefits. Thus, the development of markets and fairs is linked to the economic, social and cultural needs of human society. These fairs are symbols of our cultural heritage, which present a glimpse of traditional Indian society. Presently the market And the form of fairs has changed, but their basic role still remains as the backbone of the regional economy.

Conclusion

Kashi, also known as Varanasi or Banaras, is one of the world's most ancient and sacred cities, beautifully situated on the crescent-shaped banks of the River Ganges. Revered as the "City of Lord Shiva," Kashi holds a profound place in Hindu culture and beliefs, attracting pilgrims and seekers of spirituality for thousands of years. With a history that extends over 3000 years, Kashi is mentioned in ancient texts like the Rigveda and Atharvaveda, reflecting its rich cultural and religious heritage.

The city's significance lies in its deep spirituality, believed to be situated on the trident of Lord Shiva, symbolizing divine protection. The devotion to Lord Shiva permeates daily life, manifesting in the numerous temples and ghats that adorn the city. The Kashi Vishwanath Jyotirlinga stands as a major religious site, drawing countless devotees. The

ghats, particularly Manikarnika and Harishchandra, serve as sacred cremation sites, embodying the belief in attaining salvation after death.

Beyond its religious importance, Kashi is a vibrant center of art, culture, and crafts. The long-standing tradition of producing exquisite silk sarees, coral, ivory, and wood crafts continues to thrive, with Kashi's handiwork celebrated worldwide. Religious tourism plays a crucial role in the local economy, attracting visitors globally and showcasing the city's cultural richness through colorful festivals and fairs.

Fairs in Kashi, such as the Nakataiya fair in Chetganj, which commemorates Lakshman's act in the Ramayana, and the Nag Nathaiya fair at Tulsi Ghat, depicting Lord Krishna's triumph over the serpent Kaliya, are vital expressions of the city's spiritual and cultural identity. Celebrations like Ganga Dussehra and Dev Diwali further highlight Kashi's deep connection to its traditions, transforming the ghats into breathtaking spectacles filled with thousands of lights.

These festivals not only reflect Kashi's devotional spirit but also serve as economic lifelines for local artisans and small traders, providing opportunities to showcase and sell their crafts, thus promoting economic growth and preserving traditional skills. Each celebration—be it Diwali, Holi, or Mahashivratri—reinforces the city's bond with its ancient heritage.

Kashi is a timeless witness to history, culture, and devotion. It is not merely a place of worship but also the cultural capital of India, where every ghat, temple, and festival revives the teachings of ancient saints and sages, connecting the past with the present. The essence of Kashi lies in its vibrant celebrations of Hindu culture and spirituality, making it a unique and cherished destination for millions.

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