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Reclaiming & Decongesting Temples

Revisiting the History of Kashi Vishwanath Temple, Varanasi

by

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Abstract

This paper revisits the history of Varanasi with a focus on the ongoing reclamation and decongestion projects at one of India's most sacred and prominent temples. A unique transformation initiative has triggered debate about the renovation of prominent temples and the liberation of temple complexes from cluttered infrastructures that threaten temple structures as well as human life.

This paper argues that past intrusions and aberrant growth of new, relatively cluttered structures have seriously compromised temple architecture and aesthetics. Clutter hinders safe and convenient access to temple premises and compromises the process of darśana (visiting or seeing the deity). However, reclamation and rejuvenation projects have received furious criticism, resulting in biased narratives that have generated many questions. Therefore, it is essential to revisit and study the history of those prominent Hindu temples in India that have endured continuous invasion.

The series of iconoclastic attacks on the main temple in Varanasi resulted in the sometimes organic and occasionally deliberate formation of residential structures around many historic temples (with the initial intention of camouflage). The area around the Kashi Vishwanath temple witnessed unprecedented growth of new modern structures. Improper expansion and extension of residential and commercial buildings have jeopardised the temple complex and its approach roads. By reviewing the literature, particularly the *sthāna mātmya* (literature praising and venerating a sacred place) in Purāṇa-s and colonial accounts, this paper aims to revisit the history of the demolition, relocation, and reconsecration of the temples of Varanasi.

Keywords: Varanasi, Vishwanath temple, reclaiming temples, decongesting, sacred place

Introduction

On 8th March 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation for the ‘Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple Approach Road, Beautification and Strengthening Project’. The title reflects the central objective. The project began with the reclamation and decongestion of the spaces from the Vishwanath temple to the ghāṭa (masonry steps on the riverbank) and river Ganga. Planning focussed on the construction of a range of facilities for devotees, pilgrims and visitors to ensure smooth arrival and darśana (visiting or seeing the deity).

In his address at the gathering, Narendra Modi elucidated why the project was necessary and touched on a few landmark events. In his roughly 15-minute speech, the prime minister acknowledged the despotism and destruction the sacred place endured for several centuries. He mentioned Mahatma Gandhi’s visit to Kashi Vishwanath temple in 1916 and his speech at Banaras Hindu University:

I visited the Vishwanath temple last evening, and as I was walking through those lanes, these were the thoughts that touched me. If a stranger dropped from above on to this great temple, and he had to consider what we as Hindus were, would he not be justified in condemning us? Is not this great temple a reflection of our own character? I speak feelingly, as a Hindu. Is it right that the lanes of our sacred temple should be as dirty as they are? The houses round about are built anyhow. The lanes are tortuous and narrow. If even our temples are not models of roominess and cleanliness, what can our self-government be? Shall our temples be abodes of holiness, cleanliness and peace as soon as

the English have retired from India, either of their own pleasure or by compulsion, bag and baggage?

Soon after India’s independence, in 1951 the first grand restoration of historic Somnath temple took place. Vishwanath temple of Varanasi and Somnath temple located in the western coast of Gujarat both are listed in twelve jyotirlinga temples that are spread across India. Sukul (1977) in his meticulously researched book on Varanasi mentions the destruction of Somnath temple and highlights the resemblances between the series of attacks and destruction of both temples. Interestingly, both these temples were rebuilt by Ahilyabai Holkar. He also describes how this continuous attacks on the temple has forced it to relocate many times during the Muslim regime. Therefore, it is essential to not analyse the ongoing restoration of Vishwanath temple with short-sighted approach or in an isolation.

The main objective of this paper is to review the reclaiming and rejuvenation exercise into the historic period of continuous invasion and destruction of Varanasi city and temples that began in 1034. The ancient geography of Varanasi, particularly the surrounding landscapes of the Vishwanath temple, has consistently undergone massive modifications due to the destruction of temples and intrusion of alien structures.

The ongoing reclamation of the temple complex comes under the sacred territory known as Avimukta Kshetra. A total area of around 40,000 square meters has been designated for this project; the facilities will be built on 27,000 square meters. About 300 houses and 200 shops were identified in the area; during the demolition of these structures about 40 temples

emerged. Many of these temples were not easily recognised. Only a few people were aware of them and granted permission to enter and take darśana of a temple's presiding deity. Now, as the decongesting exercise reaches its final phase, many of these relatively small temples are newly accessible, and their architecture and remarkably detailed carvings can be appreciated.

Every day, the Vishwanath temple receives thousands of devotees, pilgrims and visitors travelling from different parts of India and the world. During festivals and holidays, the temple is flooded with devotees and pilgrims, which creates huge pressure on the temple's management and security personnel.

It is important to note that basic amenities such as resting spots, restrooms and drinking water points are not easily accessible for the visitors on any of the approach lanes to the main temple. The lanes are narrow, winding, poorly lit and overcrowded.

Describing the main temple and surrounding area, Diana Eck states:

The present Vishwanath temple is crowded into the interior of this tightly woven city, and its architectural features are hidden from proper perspective behind the compound wall.

Previous governments have tried to implement reform plans; however, they were shelved due to lack of commitment.

Literature review has been classified roughly into pre-colonial and colonial writings. Pre-colonial

literature includes the *sthāna mātmya* (literature praising and venerating a sacred place) section of 'Kāśī Khaṇḍa' from Skanda Purāṇa and 'Tristhalīsetu' composed by Narayan Bhatta. Both are considered authoritative texts. They contain the spatiotemporal information of the main temple as well as other temples and pilgrimage routes. This paper also explores Enugula Veeraswamy's journal 'Kashi Yatra Charitra' which follows the journey and observations of a pilgrim to Varanasi. To understand the impacts of the demolition of temples and other sacred structures (such as temple tanks), it is essential to review this pre-colonial literature and other texts describing the celestial and earthly features of the city.

Colonial accounts and travelogues refer to the western perception of the urban city and its patterns; for the most part they describe the temples. The accounts written by various travellers, explorers and missionaries reveal the transformation after the annexation of Varanasi by East India Company (and later by British rule).

The history of Varanasi and the nature of the city exemplify the cycle of creation, annihilation and recreation. For centuries, people from distant places journeyed to the city. Many people came to die, to attain the liberation that precisely evokes the notion of new beginnings. The present study assesses the transformation initiative in light of these juxtaposing notions embodying the innate nature of this ancient living city.

Brief history of Varanasi

This section explores the etymology of Varanasi and the significant events to emphasise how Varanasi has evolved since ancient times. The sacred landscape is described with various titles that underline the features of age-old living in this vibrant urban city.

Varanasi is one of the seven sacred cities (Saptapurī) spread across India . Kane in his section on Tristhalī endorses the remarkable place of Varanasi as a pilgrimage and in his opening paragraph writes:

There is hardly any city in the world that can claim greater antiquity and greater popular veneration than Banaras (Varanasi).

Chapter 26 of Kashi Khanda uses various names for Varanasi, such as Kashika, Kashi, Rudravasa (abode of Rudra), Avimukta (place never forsaken by Shiva), Anandakanana (forest of bliss), Mahasmashana (great cremation ground), etc.

The Purāṇa-s and other historical documents use Varanasi and Kashi titles synonymously. Altekar (1947), in his book on Varanasi and Sarnath, argues that the name 'Kashi' has an association with king Kasha of the Manu dynasty. He also names the kings Dhanvantari, Divodasa, and others of the Brahmadatta dynasty. However, Sukul (1974) calls attention to the fact that both names are used to represent the different territories and was not used as synonym before several centuries . Varanasi was the capital of the Kashi kingdom, and apparently a bigger territory.

The renowned traveller and scholar Hiuen Tsiang visited Varanasi at the beginning of the 7th century. He referred to Varanasi as 'Polonisse' and mentioned 100 temples with the principal deity called Maheshvara (Ta-tseu-tsai). He added that the place was surrounded by pure streams of water .

Literary textson Kashi Viswanath temple

The Kāśī Khaṇḍa of Skanda Purāṇa, Tristhalīsetu of Narayan Bhatta and Enugula Veeraswamy's Kashi Yatra Charitra were composed in different time periods, and reveal the transformation of Vishwanath temple as well as the topography of Varanasi.

Avimukteshvara and Vishwanath also appear in the book 'Shri Guru Charitra' composed in the 15th century. This book devotes an entire chapter to the pilgrimage to Varanasi city and provides the itineraries of both pilgrimages. The verses of chapter 41 mention the names Avimukteshvara and Vishwanath, and detail how to perform the two pilgrimages.

In Diana Eck's acclaimed book on Varanasi, she mentions the two-centuries-old Kashi Vishwanath temple as an archetype of the Shiva temples spread across India. However, this prominent temple lacks the grand architectural appearance of temples from the southern part of India . This observation reveals the volatile era of destruction and demolition of many temples in Varanasi and explains the constraints and challenges of reconstructing temples during Muslim rule. Furthermore, the revered Liṅga is not in the centre of the garbhagṛha (inner sanctum), but in the corner.

(1) Skanda Purāṇa - Kāśī Khaṇḍa

To the east of that well is the meritorious Liṅga named Viśvēśvara. (Viśveśa/Vishwanath)

To the east of Viśvēśvara is Hara (known as) Vridhakaleshwara.(Kāśī Khaṇḍa)

The Purāṇa-s descriptions of mountains, rivers, sacred and pilgrimage places across India are regarded as important sources in the study of its historical geography . In particular, Skanda Purāṇa, Padma Purāṇa and Bhaviṣya Purāṇa offer encyclopaedic descriptions of numerous sacred places. Almost all

Purāṇa-s reference Varanasi, with stories narrating its origin and celestial aspects. This paper reviews the sthāna mātmya section of Purāṇa-s composed in the last millennia. There are two prominent sthāna mātmya-s in Purāṇa-s section dedicated mainly to Varanasi: Skanda Purāṇa's 'Kashi Khanda' and 'Kashi Rahasya' of Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa.

Skanda Purāṇa comprises seven chapters (khanda). Chapter four, titled Kashi Khanda is split into two sections. Sukul (1977) suggests that the composition of Kashi Khanda occurred somewhere between the beginning and middle of the 14th century. The present-day Telugu translation confirms the authenticity of the text. According to Kashi Khanda, of 1099 temples, 513 are dedicated to Shiva.

As per Kāśī Khaṇḍa, the name of the Vishwanath temple was Moksha Lakshmi Vilas. Inside there were five maṇḍapa-s (halls or pavilions of the temple). The main maṇḍapa was the garbhagrha, where the Śivaliṅga of Vishwanath was revered.

There were four maṇḍapa-s on four sides of the temple: Jñāna maṇḍapa in the east; Śṛṅgāra (Raṅga) in the west; Aiśvarya maṇḍapa in the north; and Mukti maṇḍapa in the south (also the site of the idol of Vishnu svāmī, the main deity).

Altekar (1947) notes that the four maṇḍapa-s measured 16"x 16", and speculates that the height of the spire was around 128 feet. The main gate of the temple was on the west side near the Dvara Vinayaka. Kalabhairava was revered on the northwest side. At present, the garbhagrha, Mukti maṇḍapa and Aiśvarya maṇḍapa are part of the main building of the mosque. The other structures have been either converted or demolished.

(2) Tristhalīsetu of Narayan Bhatta

Narayan Bhatta composed his book 'Tristhalīsetu' in the middle of the 16th century. He describes the significance and basic guidelines of pilgrimage

and rituals at three prominent sacred cities: Prayag (Prayagraj), Kashi (Varanasi) and Gaya.

In the chapter dedicated to Varanasi, Bhatta discusses the continuous demolition of Vishwanath temple. According to Bhatta, if the revered Liṅga has been removed, the new Liṅga should be properly consecrated and revered. He also mentions circumambulation around the Liṅga. He mentions that if the temple has been razed by mlēccha (invaders) then the vacant place should be properly worshipped. This text confirms that the destruction of the temple probably took place before the composition of this book. Bhatta emphasizes that demolition of the temple shall not distract and reduce the relevance and sanctity of the place. Thus devotees continued worshipping at the sacred place in the absence of Liṅga for few decades.

(3) Enugula Veeraswamy's Kashi Yatra Charitra

Enugula Veeraswamy worked as an interpreter in East India Company and spent more than one year travelling to different cities on his way to Varanasi. Based on his journey from May 1830 to September 1831, he wrote a travelogue in the Telugu language titled 'Kashi Yatra Charitra'. During his stay in Varanasi he described it as a famous, heavily populated city. He referred to various Purāṇa-s and other literature while describing his own experience in the sacred city. While describing the area, particularly the river Varana and the rivulet Asi, he wrote:

The area between the Asi and Varana is an 'avimukthakshetram' and a jivatma leaving its mortal coils is said to obtain Tarakopadesam' here according to the Puranas. Therefore the houses and bathing ghats have grown here like paddy-seedlings sown in a clump without even leaving a width of eight feet for streets. The land here is very expensive costing thousands of rupees; and houses are constructed storey by storey upto seven storeys for residential purposes.

More than two hundred years ago, Veeraswamy

visited Varanasi from today's Chennai city (previously Madras). In Varanasi, he travelled in his palanquin and had trouble getting from one place to another due to the narrow and inconvenient streets. While exploring the Vishwanath temple he witnessed new construction and reported hundreds of temples of Shiva in the city. He also added that most of the temples have ordinary spires of the form of 'Banana flower'.

Enugula Veeraswamy's observations (almost 200 years old) of the populous urban city and the intense concentration of residential, religious and commercial activities around the main temple underline its significance.

Transition of temple and the surrounding area

(1) Period of invasions, destructions and relocation of temples

The first known attack on Varanasi was in 1034 by a Muslim invader named Ahmad Niyaltigin (or Nialtagin), a general in the Mahmud Ghazni's army. Though the raiders were soon driven away, the attack revealed the vulnerability of king Ganageyadeva of the Chedi dynasty. His weakening regime caused disorder in the region. However, it was king Chandra deva, the founder of the Gahadavala dynasty, who finally brought peace to the region .

In 1194, more than 1000 temples were demolished by the Qutb al-Din Aibak (Kutb Al-Din Aybak) . Their sites remained untouched for almost 50 years. Eventually, Razia Sultana (1236-1240) constructed a mosque on the forsaken place of the Vishwanath temple.

Vishwanath temple was reconstructed in the area of Avimuktेशvara which again faced the partial destruction during the rule of Mahmud Shah Sharqi. In 1494, Sikandar Lodi invaded Varanasi and demolished many temples (including the Vishwanath temple). Almost 90 years later, in 1585, Vishwanath temple was rebuilt by famous scholar Narayan Bhatta with the

support of Raja Todar Mal and Maharaja of Amber.

Abul Fazl-I-Allami wrote 'Ain-I-Akbari' in the 16th century; it provides the administrative and statistical record of Akbar's regime. There is a mention of Varanasi city as part of the Subhā of Illahabad (province of Allahabad, now Prayagraj). The large document describes the city as the principal seat of learning from antiquity and refers to the former idol temple. Abul Fazl-I-Allami also mentions the attack by Mahmud Ghazni and the disruption of the temples in the city .

During the regime of Shah Jahan (1627-1658) about 76 partly (re) constructed temples were demolished . Shah Jahan gave the orders of demolition of the idol temples mainly because Varanasi city was considered as the 'stronghold of infidelity' .

In 1669 Aurangzeb ordered the demolition of the Kashi Vishwanath temple. A mosque called 'Jnana Vapi Masjid' (Gyan Vapi mosque) was then built on the site. Thus, a result of the destruction was Mukti maṇḍapa becoming a part of the mosque. Eventually, the remnants of this Vishnu Peetha were completely wiped out. Sarkar, in his book 'History of Aurangzeb' (1928), details the order issued by Aurangzeb:

Next, he took a step further, and in the 12th year of his reign (9th April 1669) he issued a general order 'to demolish all the schools and temples of the infidels and to put down their religious teaching and practices.'

Aurangzeb built four mosques, three of which were constructed after demolishing three famous temples. Like Vishwanath temple, Bindu Madhav and Kruttivaseshwar temples were razed, and two mosques were built in their places. Aurangzeb also tried to change Varanasi's name to Muhammadabad, but his efforts were unsuccessful .

Kane (1953) mentions that the destruction of the temples happened from the 12th century to the 17th century . According to Sukul (1977), during this period all prominent temples of Varanasi were destroyed five

times; many times the temples were restored in different locations. Sukul's book 'Varanasi-Vaibhav' devotes an entire chapter to the relocation and reconsecration of deities and tirtha-s. He notes that the areas of Vishwanath temple, Annapurna temple and Sakshi-Vinayak Kshetra have been significantly reconstructed, mainly because the temple of Vishwanath was consistently under attack (and often destroyed) by Muslim invaders.

After the fall of Mughal rule, in 1750 Raja Balwant Singh superseded the Mughal rule and thus it opened the ways to rebuild the demolished temples. The Queen of Indore state, Ahilyabai Holkar took the initiative and reconstruction of the present Vishwanath temple started around 1775. The temple was consecrated on 25th August 1777. Ahilyabai Holkar also reconstructed the small temple of Avimukteshvara (which was demolished by Aurangzeb) in the southeast corner.

The limited control on Varanasi and political instability likely blocked the grand reconstruction of the temple. The present Vishwanath temple and the maṇḍapa area is fairly small in size. Two spires of the temple are connected by a maṇḍapa and on the top there is a dome that illustrates the Islamic architecture influence on the Hindu temple construction. However this relatively small-scale temple is venerated as the principal temple of the sacred city and also regarded as one of the sacred place in the Hindu cosmogony.

(2) Consequences of the invasion and corruption of the original titles

The series of attacks and the demolition of sacred structures seriously altered the landscape of the city and corrupted many original titles. Some of the present titles of temple tanks highlight the impacts of the Islamic invasion. The demolition of temples is closely connected to these sacred water reservoirs.

The opening verses of chapter 47 of Kāśī Khaṇḍa describe the worship of the temple tank 'Arka kuṇḍa' near the temple of Uttarārk (Sun) in the north. The final

verses of the chapter mention that this praiseworthy temple tank is also known as Barkari kuṇḍa (popularly known as Bakariyā kuṇḍa). Tagare (1996; 1997) elucidates that these verses were probably introduced in a later period and demonstrates the Islamic influence on the addition of a new title.

(3) Resurgence of reconstructing temples and intrusion of new structures

If anyone repairs or rebuilds the old, dilapidated fallen or broken temples and reconstructs them with doors, etc. or if he repairs the mansion, platform, rampart or the ornamental gateway, he derives more benefit than even the original maker.

(The Liṅga-Purana: 24-28)

The series of iconoclastic attacks on historic temples resulted in both organic and intentional formations of surrounding residential structures (with the initial intention of camouflage). Sherring based on his study of the temples in Varanasi asserts that the rigorous restrictions of Muslim rulers prohibited the Hindu-s to reconstruct the temples in their original and large architectural structures. Consequently the minuscule temples 'of the size of cages' were built compromising with the artistic forms. After the breakdown of Muslim rule under the Maratha patronage, reconstruction and reconsecration of temples regained momentum. In contrast to the conventional argument of a temple construction was exclusively supported by royal patronage, Ray (2004) argues that it was the common people who were deeply involved with the founding, conservation and survival of temples in India .

Gutschow (2006) mentions that Varanasi witnessed the surge of building new temples especially between 1820 and 1860 . This period probably also witnessed the complex processes of expansion, modification and remodelling of old and new architecture around the new temples. It is likely that the process of converting temple complexes into extended house structures

increased during this time.

Colonial accounts of Varanasi

Most western travellers and colonial officers referred to the Vishwanath temple as either a Golden temple or a pagoda. Accounts of western visitors to Varanasi date the temple to the end of the 16th century, when Ralph Fitch visited Varanasi. Many of these travelogues are written by missionaries who either stayed in Varanasi for a few years or made short visits during longer journeys. Fitch found Varanasi as one of the prominent trading towns and also a famous pilgrimage places. He has described some of the rituals of the 'gentiles' who worship idols made of stone and wood .

Almost everyone who visited the city during the pre-colonial and colonial periods described the majestic view of Ghat and the temples on the western side of river Ganga with its narrow winding streets. Accounts reveal the mixture of emotions of visitors mesmerised by the architecture of this bustling urban city. They also allude to extreme idolatry practices by an unenlightened native population.

British merchant and traveller Peter Mundy visited Varanasi in 1632. He described the populous city's Hindu temples and noted that the roads, though paved, were narrow and twisted . He called the main deity as 'Cassibessua' (Vishveshwar of Kashi- Varanasi) and sketched (see fig. 1) of the inner sanctum of the temple.



Fig. 1. Sketch by Peter Mundy. 1632.

In 1632, when Mundy visited the Vishwanath temple, he saw the Linga on the elevated place in the centre of the main temple building. His description of the temple (along with the sketch of the deity inside) was written before its demolition by Aurangzeb in 1669.

The British obtained control over the city in 1775. In 1794, after a brief transition period, Varanasi came under the direct rule of the British colonial administration. Swami Medhasananda (2002) discussed this transitional period of Varanasi and argued that the British administration did nothing aside from implementing a few minor development plans (such as building public latrines [Gazetteer 1909] to improve the conditions of the city and imposing a house tax to cover administrative costs in 1810 . Interestingly, during this period Varanasi attained the status of a commercial city. Its population was growing due to the decline of Murshidabad (the former capital of Bengal) around 1757 and the expansion of the trade route .

Later, in 1822, British scholar James Prinsep published his map of Varanasi and also carried out the census exercise of the city. His census provides a list of 1,000 Hindu temples, 333 mosques and 174 gardens . James Prinsep along with the detailed sketch of the Vishwanath temple (see fig. 2), described the architecture and engravings on the temple. Prinsep writes,

The temple of Vishveshvar consists of two dewuls connected by a portico or subha-mundup. The principal dewul, which contains the lingam of Mahadeo, is more lofty to mark its superiority over the other, which is called the DUNDPAN or "the staff bearer's," as before explained. It is also more minutely carved; and the scrolls flowers upon the janghee, koombha, and morha, are of singular delicacy and elegance.

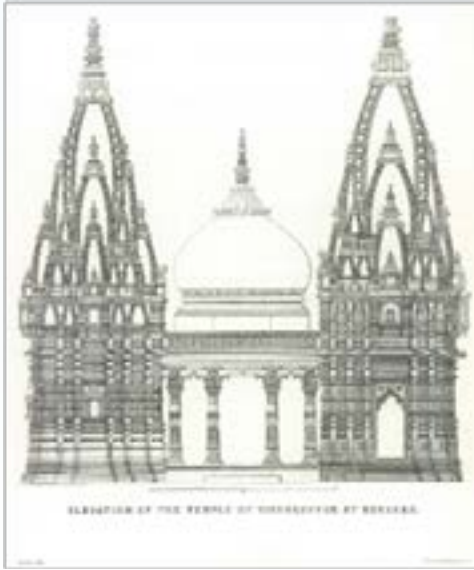


Figure.2. Elevation of the Temple of Vishveshvar (Vishwanath) at Benares

Reginald Heber who was the bishop of Calcutta visited Varanasi when James Prinsep was staying in Varanasi and accompanied Heber in his local visits to famous places of Varanasi. Heber found Varanasi representing the eastern features and different from cities in Bengal. Heber in his accounts praised the architecture of numerous temples which overshadowed by the lofty houses. Heber also visited Vishwanath temple and wrote the destruction of the temple and building a mosque by Aurangzeb .

Matthew Atmore Sherring was a missionary who lived in Varanasi for many years . He wrote a book titled ‘The Sacred City of the Hindus: An Account of Benares in Ancient and Modern Times’ which was published in 1868 . This book has been referred extensively by many authors and researchers who explored and studied Varanasi .

Sherring referred to the unspecified estimate of temples and mosques in Varanasi after the first census of James Prinsep and clarified that even though he does not verify these numbers(see table no. 1) confirmed that numbers are almost accurate .

Table no. 1. Temples and mosques in Varanasi city		
Districts of the City	Temples	Mosques
Kotwali	261	19
Kal Bhairo (Kal Bhairav)	216	20
Adhampura (Adampura)	48	54
Jaitpura	30	97
Chetganj	53	32
Bhelapura (Bhelupur)	154	16
D a s a s a m e d h (Dashashwamedh)	692	34
	1454	272

Sherring in his description on the temples of Varanasi mentioned about the demolition of the Vishwanath temple by Aurangzeb. Based on the ruins of the demolished temple Sherring argued that the previous temple must have been lofty structure with spacious area compared it with the rebuilt temple in late eighteenth century.

After three decades, in 1897 John Murdoch visited the Vishwanath temple and noticed the ancient remains of the old temple of Vishwanath. He additionally referred the temple as golden temple and calculated the height of the tower of 51 feet.

James Fergusson (1899) was one of the earliest colonial visitor who criticised on the ancientness of the Vishwanath temple. He was perplexed like other Western visitors with the well-established recognition of the temple as ‘ancient’ despite the temple was rebuilt on the present site merely before 100 years.

If you ask a Brahman of Benares to point out to you the most ancient temple of his city, he inevitably leads you to the Vishveshwar, as not only the most holy, but the oldest of its sacred edifices. Yet it is known, and cannot be disputed, that the temple, as it now stands, was erected from the foundation in the last century, to replace one that had been thrown down and desecrated by the bigot Aurungzebe.

Based upon the surviving material evidences he saw in Varanasi, Fergusson concluded that the remaining buildings are not older than 16th century. His interpretation highly influenced majority researchers who also endorsed his views on the antiquity of the city entirely based on the remaining structures in the late 19th century.

Later many European officers and travellers (Parker 1901, Greaves 1909, etc.) visited Vishwanath temple and described about the architecture of the temple and highlighted the history of destructions.

Concluding remarks

This paper has explored the history of demolition, relocation and reconstruction of temples in one of the Hindu sacred cities. And it also examines the literary texts and accounts that have documented the events and changes that has considerably shaped and defined the contemporary city. Through the study of spatial descriptive texts and other literatures it demonstrated how the sacred place evolves and continually stirs the notions of sanctity that remains the fundamental feature of the city. Additionally, not only the abiding piety of devotees and pilgrims but the spatial descriptive literatures with its detailed narrative are pivotal in the process of understanding the notions of sacredness of the Hindu temple.

Literary texts such as Purāṇa-s and other spatial texts apparently reveals the significance of the temple and its sacred territory in Hindu cosmology. Kāśī Khaṇḍa of Skanda Purāṇa offers a list of the temples and their detailed spatial descriptions to navigate into the sacred territory. The descriptive texts aptly epitomise the sanctity of the worshipping place and how it that place is located in the long tradition of pilgrimage. The Tristhalīsetu text composed by Narayan Bhatta reveals the demolition of the temple and offers the healing solution in the form of worshipping the vacant space even in the absence of the presiding deity. The

compelling clarification presented by Bhatta has manifested the importance of sacred place.

Probably the same emotions were resurfaced in the speech of independent India's first president Dr Rajendra Prasad when he was invited to perform the reinstallation ceremony of Somnath temple. In his speech Dr Rajendra Prasad invoked the notions of strong faith and devotion. He asserted that the demolition of temples was an assault on external icons of nations faith however it did not shake the fountainhead of the eternal faith.

After the demolition of Vishwanath temple in 1669, the present temple of Kashi Vishwanath was rebuilt after one century. The authoritative records during this time are inaccessible. However, the rebuilding of main temple certainly articulates the endurance of the faith and devotion that constantly churned and emerged despite of the resistance. However Western visitors like James Fergusson raised the suspicion on the antiquity of the main temple. Juxtapose to the notions of Narayan Bhatta Fergusson mainly argued on the basis of surviving physical structures and ignored the long tradition of pilgrimage, piety of devotees and oral histories abiding with the sacred places in India.

The colonial accounts sufficiently reveal how the city and area particularly around the main temple was heavily crowded because of its sacred significance. These accounts implicitly hint the surge of creating relatively small temples to establish the existence by various rulers from different states. It also extended an opportunity to the people to construct their houses that subsequently blurred the boundaries between temple and residential structure. This probably led to the congested and cluttered landscape.

The landscape of Varanasi has significantly transformed in the last millennia. Varanasi is continually changing though these changes hardly overshadow or successfully erase the innate traits of that place.

Varanasi is arguably one of such cities which landscape was sometime forcefully altered in the past and rebuilt again and again. However, the city with its long history and its deep enchantment has successfully preserved its core traits which are clearly apparent in the spatial descriptive texts composed in different time period.

After 1780, the major ongoing restoration project has started reclaiming the sacred place of the temple premises now. Though, the final result of the restoration of temple complex is still unclear and largely on the paper, it will surely bring huge transformation of the apparatus of the temples and sacred cities in India.

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