

By the holy ghats

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January 18, 2014



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- JAN 18 2014, 18:27 IST
- UPDATED: JAN 18 2014, 21:08 IST

The land of Benaras has as much history as it has piety, writes Shefali Tripathi Mehta, adding that the place enables introspection and peace amid the din

My favourite mythological tale as a child was one about the river Narmada that flows through my native state of Madhya Pradesh. The story said that the holy Ganga, once a year, dressed in dark robes and covering her face, comes to bathe in the Narmada. So sullied she is by the sins that people wash into her, she needs to cleanse herself.

And indeed, when you see the Ganga in Kashi, you will want to ask why the one so revered is shown such disrespect that it flows so murky. For all the prayers, the ethereal aartis, the lovely leaf-bowl diyas that float on it carrying our mortal wishes, we seem to have done little to keep the holy waters clean. I asked Kallu, the mallah, our boatman, who rowed us up and down the eighty ghats morning and evening, and he was appalled. “Who can clean Ganga maiyya? She is the one that cleanses,” he almost chided me.

I was visiting my ancestral home after two decades. The family that went with me and the one that lived there then have since moved on, and it was time to forge new bonds on my own terms, for my lifetime. It was a journey back to the city where the roots lay, a homecoming of sorts.

Cousin Mahesh, who lives in same house where six generations have lived, was full of fascinating stories. Did I know that the Ganga that flows north to south from the Himalayas into the plains actually flows south to north in Kashi? How is that for the phrase, ‘ulti Ganga behna’, to go contrary to the flow? Did I know that the Ganga is restrained on Shiva’s kamandal, his trident here? That he controlled her fury thus? Such tales abound in this the oldest inhabited, surviving city of the world, one that has a documented history of over 3,500 years. The famed Kashi Vishwanath Temple, the abode of the Lord of the Universe, was visited at night to avoid long queues — on an average, 3,000 faithful visit the temple each day. The narrow street leading up to it is lined with wondrous wares — Benarsi saris, wooden toys and idols of gods and goddesses, quaint charms and trinkets. The temple is under heavy security and mobiles, cameras and bags are banned.

Most shopkeepers in the galli will gladly lend a 'locker' for these and keep your footwear for a token charge. There is no grand entrance, no spectacular view of gold spires and dome. Quite unexpectedly one is at the garbhagriha, a silver plinth that enshrines the Shivling, one of the 12 holiest jyotirlings. Inside too there is no opulence, just an overwhelming sense of piety.

Temple beside a mosque

Coming out of the sanctum sanctorum on the other side, one comes face to face with the imposing Gyanvyapi mosque. High spike shafts and wire mesh separate the two. The heavy military guard is disconcerting and not a great advertisement for our religious tolerance. Between the temple and the mosque lies the Gyanvyapi well, the well of knowledge into which the main priest of the temple had apparently jumped with the Shivling to save it when the temple was invaded and razed by Emperor Aurangzeb. The temple was rebuilt a hundred years later, in 1780, by Ahilya Bai Holkar next to the mosque, which is believed to be the site of the original temple. The other famous temple next door is that of the goddess of Kashi, the consort of Shiva, Devi Annapoorna, the provider of anna, food.

There is as much history as spirituality all around — the Tulsi Manas, the Durga and the Sankat Mochan are other famous temples there. The Banaras Hindu University has a new Vishwanath temple within its premises, as also the Bharat Kala Bhawan, an art and archaeological museum, which has one of the greatest collections of miniature paintings besides textiles, costumes, art, literary and archival material. The Bharat Mata Mandir, dedicated to Mother India, showcases a unique marble map of undivided India, its mountains and plateaus in relief.

Sarnath, where the Buddha preached his first sermon, is 10 kilometres by road from Benaras. The magnificent lion capital of Ashoka, our national emblem, can be seen at the Sarnath Museum among other remarkable sculptures. Ramnagar Palace Fort, a sandstone edifice, the residence of Kashi Naresh, the former Maharaja of Varanasi across the Ganga, has a museum that offers a glimpse of the royal collection — armoury, costumes, jewellery, cars and palanquins. Rare manuscripts on display include one handwritten by Tulsidas.

However, the most surreal experience in Benaras is that of gliding in a boat on the Ganga as the sun rises, and the city waiting in anticipation, prayer on its lips, pays obeisance, palms folded, heads bowed, lighting diyas, offering flowers while hundreds of temple bells resonate the faith believers bring in their hearts. The evening aartis on the ghats are equally therapeutic and have become very elaborate and illustrative. Devotees and tourists from around the world come in early to get a good perch to watch this spectacle. They are best viewed from the boats facing the ghats.

A spiritual journey