



The river Ganges at Varanasi, India. Photo by Brian Hogarth, 1999.

WHAT IS THIS SCENE?

The photograph shows a section of the waterfront in the heart of Varanasi (Banaras), an important religious and cultural center, in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Boaters ply the sacred waters of the Ganges (Ganga) river. Pilgrims and other tourists descend to bathe in the river along the many steps and platforms called *ghats*. Umbrellas shade brahmins, or priests, who administer to the religious needs of the pilgrims. On the edge of the river are many temples and buildings housing religious associations.

WHY IS VARANASI AN IMPORTANT RELIGIOUS CENTER?

Varanasi was once known as “Kashi,” the city of light. During the Muslim and British periods, it was known as Banaras. It is believed to be one of the oldest cities in the world. The Hindu god Shiva was attracted by the beauty of the city and took up residence here. Hence there is a local saying that “the very stones of Kashi are Shiva.” Shiva, along with many other deities, is worshiped throughout the city in countless temples.

Pilgrims bathe in the river here because it is considered sacred. The waters are believed to cleanse and purify. The river is also known as the goddess Ganga. She threatened to flood the land with her waters, but the god Shiva caught her descent in his matted locks of hair, thus preventing the deluge.

The embankment is a meeting place of several rivers (Varana and Asi) but in a more religious sense it is a crossing place between this world and the transcendent realm. It is one of several sacred cities in India where heaven and earth meet, and where the gods have descended.

Varanasi is also a sacred place for Hindus to come and die. Cremations take place here on two main burning ghats. It is believed that Shiva whispers in the ear of the dead the magical phrase (*mantra*) that will allow the

deceased to make the final crossing to liberation (*moksha*). Relatives spread the ashes in the river (even from deceased that were not cremated here). In the epic text, the Mahabharata, it is said that “if only the bone of a person should touch the water of the Ganges, that person shall dwell, honored, in heaven.”

WHAT ELSE IS VARANASI FAMOUS FOR?

Varanasi is also known as a center for scholarship, in particular the study of India’s classical language, Sanskrit. It is also famous for its production of brocade silks.

On the outskirts of Varanasi is Sarnath, a park area enclosing a museum, temples, scattered ruins of stupas and monastic buildings. It was here that the Buddha preached his first sermon in the deer park.

The modern city of Varanasi is a blend of ghats, temples, hotels, and narrow lanes. It is peopled with pedestrians, pilgrims, and a mixture of cars, scooters and rickshaws. Like many cities, it must balance the needs of its long history and traditions with modern conveniences and concerns over pollution and overcrowding.