

Kashi Vishvanatha Kshetra in Historic Context, a Narrative Landscape in Varanasi, India

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Abstract

This essay describes how the Kashi Vishvanatha temple and its holy grounds have changed since they were first mentioned in the sixth century BCE. The patron deity of Varanasi, Vishvanatha, also known as Vishveshvara, is a manifestation of Shiva, who is considered the Lord of the World (also called Kashi/Banaras). The temple faced destruction, demolition, reconstruction, contestation, and recent resurrection in its history spanning more than a millennium. In 1777 CE under the patronage of Ahilyabai, the present temple of Vishvanatha was re-constructed for the 4th time. By the 19th century CE, the area surrounding the temple became a sanctuary of gods associated with Shiva. Within this dense habitation, a unique circumambulation called the Antragrihi yatra, defined, connected and celebrated this sacred landscape. The renewal of this area was initiated in 2017, to create Kashi Vishvanatha Dham. The historic settlement was replaced with a huge complex that has been developed with tourist and recreational facilities. This ambitious plan for promoting heritage tourism under Smart City, where new developments are structured to superimpose “heritagization” under the umbrella of “Hindu Resurrection” through a model of Neo-modernism, are looked in the historical context of the site and its potential for the sustainable development of Varanasi.

Keywords: Vishvanatha sacred-scape, archetypal temples, Ahilya Bai, Todar Mal, Antragrihi Yatra, Kashi Vishvanatha corridor, inclusive heritage development

INTRODUCTION

“Kashi as Icon of Hinduism”

Kashi (Varanasi) from scriptural and Puranic sources, was conceived as one of the holy places for Hindus, as eulogized as a group of salvific holy cities (*Mokshadayini*) for Hindus like no other. Also, it is considered one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, recording the history of settlements since at least 2000 BCE.

While the city is considered pre-eminently a place of Hindu pilgrimage since the 7th century CE, but due to geopolitical conditions it faced several invasions from the mid-12th century CE onwards, resulting in the demolishing of most of its historic temples [1–16]. Most of the prominent temples glorified in puranic and other scriptures were thus lost and today no temple or religious building survives from its historical period, with the exception of Kandameshvara (11th–12th century CE) at Kandwa village, a short distance from Varanasi, which was also largely modified later. Several contemporary reconstructions of these were made when the city was influenced by the Maratha people in the 18th century CE.

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Most of the oldest buildings today in the city are in the form of mosques, tombs, and Muslim shrines created mainly during the Delhi Sultanate and

Mughal periods using the rubrics of the demolished temples. Thus, most of our information on Varanasi's historical past either comes from these buildings or the architectural and sculptural remains still scattered across the city or that have been found in excavations. Considering the sensitivities involved, except the study on mosques of Varanasi by Klaus in 1984 [17], there has been no proper research, stylistic study, or excavations done on these structures. Moreover, except for the excavations at the ancient sites of Rajghat and Akhta, no large-scale excavations have been done in the core city or under its present historical settlements (Jayaswal, 2016) [13]. The Kashi Vishvanatha Corridor (KVC) which offered this opportunity as it intervened within the core zone, unfortunately also lost this opportunity, due to the superimposition of modern structures in this zone without a proper archaeological impact study.

This has caused a significant void in our knowledge of the historic city of Varanasi. In this context, the mosque in Gyanwapi (Jñānavāpī) holds particular significance, as the structure standing holds remains from the 3rd Vishveshvara temple. This temple was built in 1585 CE under the patronage of Raja Todar Mal (1500–1589 CE), with the support of Raja Man Singh of Amber (1550–1614 CE), both were Rajput ministers under the Mughal emperor Akbar (1556–1605 CE). The temple was demolished under the orders of Aurangzeb (1618–1707 CE) in 1669 CE, along with two other temples of Bindu Madhav and Kritivasheshvara. But the Vishveshvara temple was only partially demolished, and the west traverse of the temple can be still seen at the rear of the Gyanavapi mosque, which was superimposed on the temple. This structure is unique archaeological evidence as it holds the embodied knowledge about two different eras in the history of Varanasi.

Even though it is difficult to determine the temple that Raja Man Singh and Raja Todar Mal constructed and the speculative restoration that was published by James Prinsep in 1833 CE [16], also doesn't seem convincing, this paper will attempt to look at the historical contexts of the Vishvanatha temple and conjecture what could have existed on the site in CE 11th century and 16th century. After studying the puranic and historical descriptions and temple remains incorporated within Sultanate and Mughal mosques, the ancient Vishveshvara temple can be speculated from an archaeological and visual perspective. It is expected that by comparing the architectural elements found in these structures with the surviving contemporaries, like those at Mathura, Vrindavan, Orchha, Prayagraj (Allahabad) fort, Rohtas, etc., it would be possible to hypothetically recreate the temple and its sacred-scapes or Kshetra (holy territory). Moreover, on orders of Allahabad High court, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), a department under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, has conducted a survey of the Gyanavapi mosque and submitted its report to the court in January 2024. However, the content of the report is not fully in public domain, except for a few excerpts that have been reported by the newspapers. All these sources will help in establishing their significance in present scenario of sustainable development.

EVOLVING VARANASI

Scriptural Narration and Spatial Context: Eulogy and Linkages

The scriptural narration of Kashi or Varanasi is generally found in genre of literature termed 'Mahatmayas' or Praise or glorification. These texts are found appended to several Puranas and have evolved over 1000 years as did the puranas from 7th to 18th century CE (Eck, 1993) [10].

As per Puranic mythology it is believed that the city of Kashi lies on the trident of Shiva symbolized as three sacred *kshetras* of Vishveshvara, Omkareshvara, and Kedareshvara, located on three highlands on the Ganga riverfront.

Most of the mythological places associated with Shiva and his retinues eventually become tirthas or sacred spots in form of temples, water bodies, wells, etc. creating a sacred landscape. The Avimukta Mahatmaya of Matsya Purana considered to be prior to 9th century CE, has a description of Avimukta as a grove Shiva has chosen to reside on earth. It also describes several tirthas of Kasi namely,

Vishveshvara, Kapalmochan, Dasasvamedha, Lolarka, Kesava, Bindu Mahadev and Manikarnika. As per the same Purana, the Avimukta kshetra measures two yojanas from east to west and half a yojana from south to north (Baker, 1993) [3]. Besides this as per the Matsya Purana, all the other tirthas of the universe were also summoned by Siva to Varanasi and are always present within the Avimukta kshetra. Yet the holiest place amongst all these as per the Puranas is the cremation grounds at Manikarnika.

Several similar descriptions of Kashi and its tirthas are also found in many other Puranas like Padma, Vamana, Linga, Narada, Shiva, Agni, Markandeya and Bhagavata Puranas too, but the most celebrated of these is the Kashi Khand of Skanda Purana going into 100 chapters (Eck, 1993) [10]. About 1188 temples in Varanasi are mentioned in the 15th-century CE Kashi Khanda, the majority of which are devoted to Shiva [18–22]. The various pilgrimage routes or yatras, delineate and link many of these temples, shrines water bodies, wells and other sacred symbols along a circumambulatory path (see Figure 1) (see Singh, 2022 15-31) [23].

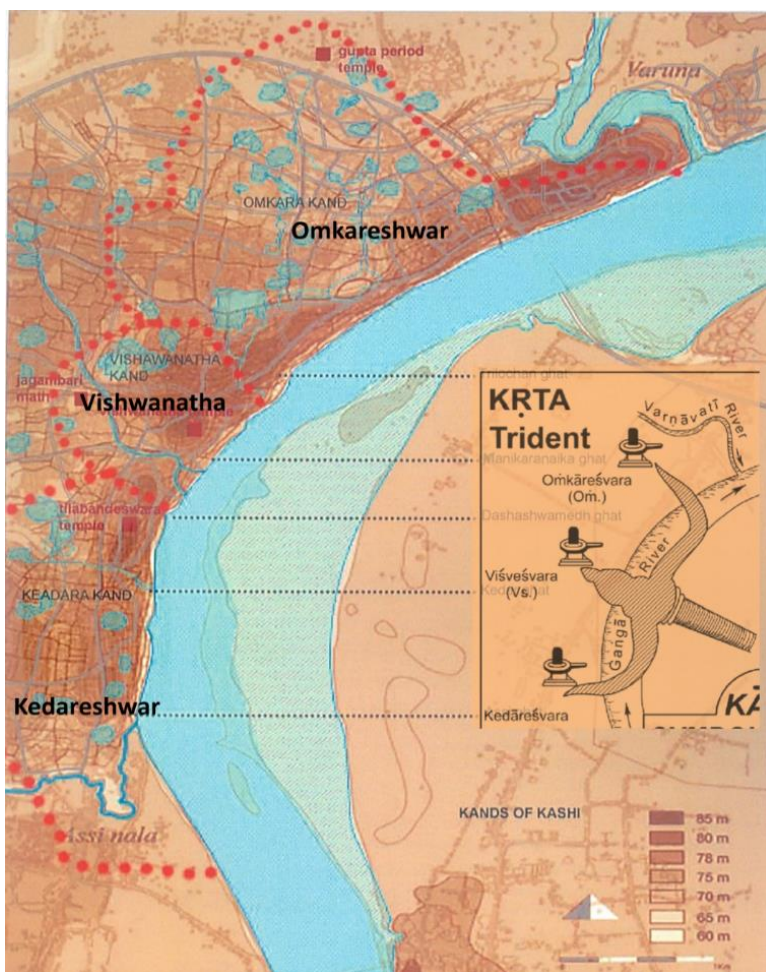


Figure 1. Varanasi: Three Khandas and Avimukta (after SPA Delhi, M. Arch Conservation Studio 2016).

Varanasi Mahatmaya in Kurma Purana, from 9th century CE calls Omkareshvara and Krttivasheshvara as the two great Lingas of Kashi. Vishveshvara Linga is also mentioned as a popular Linga [24–27]. The guardian of this *Linga* is the *Ganapati* Dandapani (law enforcer). A temple with the same name lies to the southwest corner of present Vishvanatha temple. An important aspect of Kashi Rahasya, considered to be part of the Brahmapurana, is the inclusion of rebuilding of old and ruined temples as a religious merit, pointing to the condition of the temples at that time. It also details the Panchkrosi yatra.

The oldest archaeological remains found in Varanasi at Rajghat are dated to 5th–6th century BCE. A seal called ‘Avimukteshvara seal’ dated to 6th–8th century CE has also been found in the excavation. (Singh, 2015) [21]. According to the ancient Puranic sources (e.g., the Matsya Purana 182.17, and the Mahabharata (Aranyaka Parva 84.78), Avimukteshvara was also called Devadeva and Vishveshvara Deva (Motichandra, 1985: 93) [15].

Historically eulogising Kashi as holy center for Hindus in India started in the 6th century CE during the Gupta period and reached its climax by the early 13th century CE, the end of Gahadavala period. Amongst the first detailed historical descriptions of the city is by Faxian who visited the city in 405 CE. At that time the city was largely Buddhist in nature and his descriptions are mainly of Sarnath near Varanasi. However, historic account of Varanasi by the Chinese traveller Xuan Zang, who visited the city during Harsha’s time (606–648 CE), described the city as densely populated with conglomeration of houses separated by narrow lanes, gardens and groves with water pools. He noted about thirty Buddhist monasteries with 3000 monks. He also mentioned presence of about 100 Deva temples honoring Maheśvara or Shiva, with towers and halls, which were sculptured in stone and carved wood. The foliage of trees combines to shade these temples, pointing to perhaps presence of forests or groves around these temples, whilst pure streams of water also encircled them (see Beal 1884 Ch1) [4]. When the city was expanded towards south between 11–12th century CE, many of these forests were cleared to make way for the habitations, and some of the smaller shrines were expanded as larger temples which over the time acquired much exaltation. Govindachandra who ruled the city between 1114–54 CE is credited with establishment of several Shiva temples in the city. It is these temples that became magnets for settlement and trade, which resulted in a major development of Kashi as an urban centre (Figure 2). It was also when settlement along the Ganga expanded, and many new habitations also came around the existing water ponds which were eventually adapted into Jal tirthas. This was also the time when Avimukteshvara came to be replaced with Vishveshvara and the Vishnu cult also started to flourish in Varanasi. His queen Kumari Devi also patronised Buddhism and took up the restoration at Sarnath and built hostels there for the monks. Around the same time, Lakshmidhara described more than 350 temples and several ghats in the city in his Tirthavivecana Kanda. He also described the main river port of the city near Asi ghat (Bakker, 1993) [3].



Figure 2. Sketch of hypothetical reconstruction of Vishveshwara temple and its environs in 11th–12th century CE (copyright author).

While Varanasi was invaded by Mohd. Ghazni in 1034 CE, and some of his military men under Malik Afzal also settled in the city’s peripheral area, the invasion did not seem to have had any major impact, and the destroyed temples seemed to have been quickly rebuilt. However, in 1194 CE, Qutbuddin Aibek under orders of Mohd Ghori, the Delhi Sultan, demolished the Raj Ghat and most of the city’s major temples. From the debris of these temples, he constructed the first Jami Mosque at Varanasi in Rajghat. Due to these attacks the inhabitants moved to the areas newly developed near present Dasasvamedha

ghat called Pakka Mahal. Razia Sultan in 1236 CE constructed a mosque in Varanasi on the plinth of the demolished Vishveshvara temple in the Chowk Area. During the Sultanate period several invasions and demolitions of the temples took place, pointing to the rebuilding activity in the gap periods. Buildings like Syeed Farukh din Tomb (Gazi peer) and Eidgah at Bakaria Kund, Causanth Khamba, Dargah Makhdoom Shah and Mosque by Firoz Tughlaq built during these times used the blocks from demolished temples. Blocks from several temples were also taken to Jaunpur to construct the Atala Mosque there (Dumper, 2020) [9]. However, under Mughal emperor Akbar, the area came under two of his senior Rajput ministers, Raja Man Singh of Amber and Raja Todarmal, who was also his finance minister. The tolerant view of the Mughal emperor made these two actively participate in restoring and establishing temples and ghats in the city. Besides Vishveshvara temple, many other temples were also rebuilt during that time, like Bindu Mahadev, Lal Bhairav and Kirtivasheshvara. All these temples were demolished, and mosques were built in their place under the orders of Aurangzeb between 1669–1705 CE. In place of Vishveshvara stands the Gyanwapi mosque, Bindu Mahadev was replaced with Dharara Mosque (Figure 3), the Lal Bhairav with the new Eidgah and Kirtivasheshvara with Alamgir mosque, locally called Fawwarey Wali masjid.

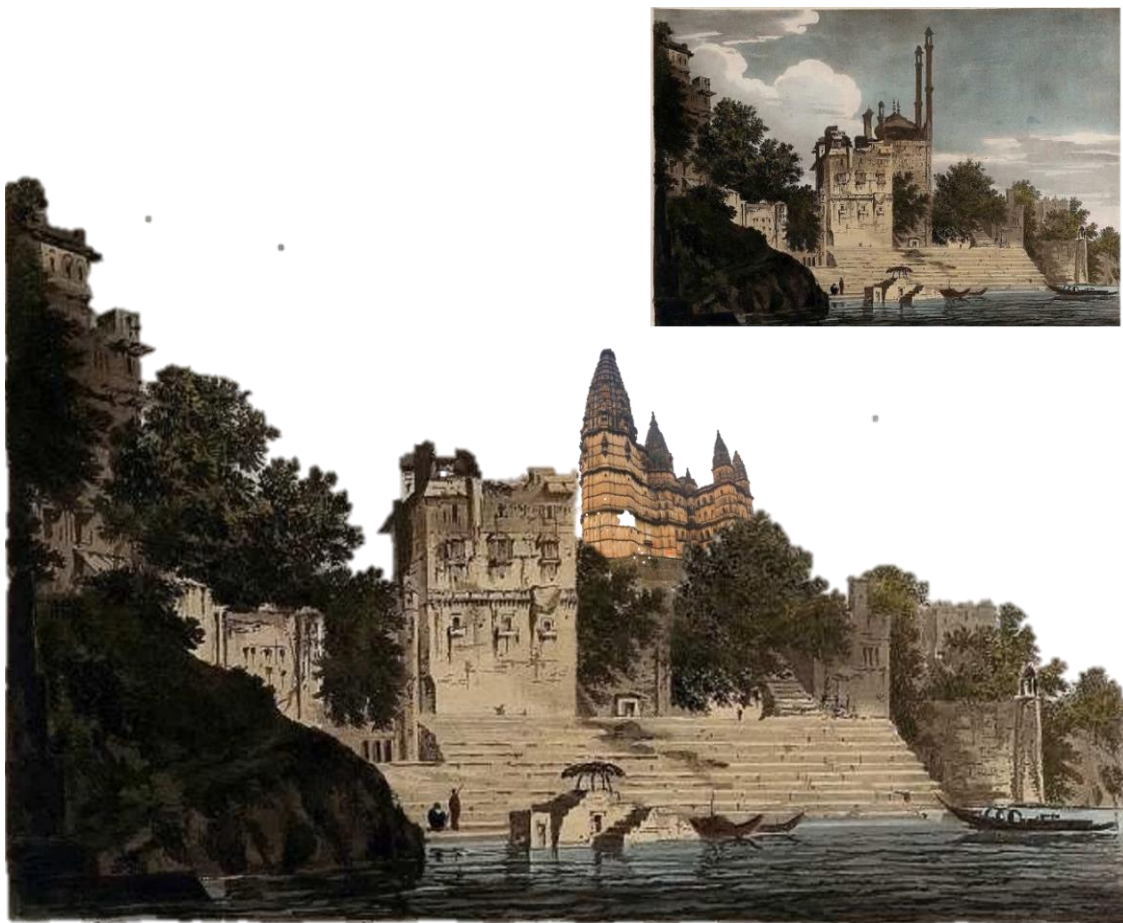


Figure 3. Artistic reconstruction of Bindu Mahadev temple, based on Chaturbuja Temple at Orchha by Bir Singh Deo, prior to it being replaced with Dharara Mosque during Aurangzeb's rule. Original painting by William Hoges 1783 CE (inset).

VISHVESHVARA/VISHVANATHA

The Sacred-Scapes and Other Shiva Lingams

Though according to the Purana, the major temple and patron deity of the city was called Avimukteshvara, however by the 12th century CE, Vishveshvara got prominence and superimposed it (Eck, 1999: 129) [1]. Over time it further transformed to Vishvanatha, as it is known today. However,

Vishveshavara, must have been an important temple or Linga even prior to the 12th century CE, considering the presence of the temples of Kashi Vishvanath-eshwar in other namesakes of Kashi like at Uttarkashi, Cuttack (which was called the Nava Kashi) and Kumbakonam (Dakshin Kashi). The Chaluykyan temples dedicated to Kashi Vishveshvara from 11th century CE are found at their capital at Pattadakal and in Lakundi, even when it may not have had early Puranic sanction in Varanasi (Gupta, 2021) [12].

Kashi Khanda of Skandh Puran (Chapter 99), describes the Kashi Vishvanatha temple as the Moksha Lakshmi Vilas Temple, containing five mandapas of which the main mandapa was the Garbha-Griha, where Shiva as Vishveshvara was worshipped. As per Puranic descriptions in Kashi Khand (Chapter 99), Shiva and Parvati visited the temple along with other *devas* and *ganas*, where both sat in the central mandapa facing east. The north mandapa was called the Aishwarya Mandapa, the east one Gyan Mandapa and the south as Mukti Mandapa and in the west was the Shingar Mandapa (Upadhyay, 2021) [25]. His entourage of the *devas*, *devis* and *ganas*, took their respective positions within the temple or around it. This is manifested in several temples spread around the Vishvanatha kshetra or Avimukteshvara kshetra. This delimits the sacred territory of the temple.

According to the description in Kashi Khand the four directional boundaries of the kshetra are fixed as: Ganga River in the east, Gokarneswara in the west, Bharabhuteshwara in the north and Brahmeshvara in the south. It describes the beginning point and the end point, which is the Gyanwapi kup, and the other 72 temples in sequence which are required to be visited enroute of this pilgrimage and prescribes the various rituals associated prior and during the yatra.

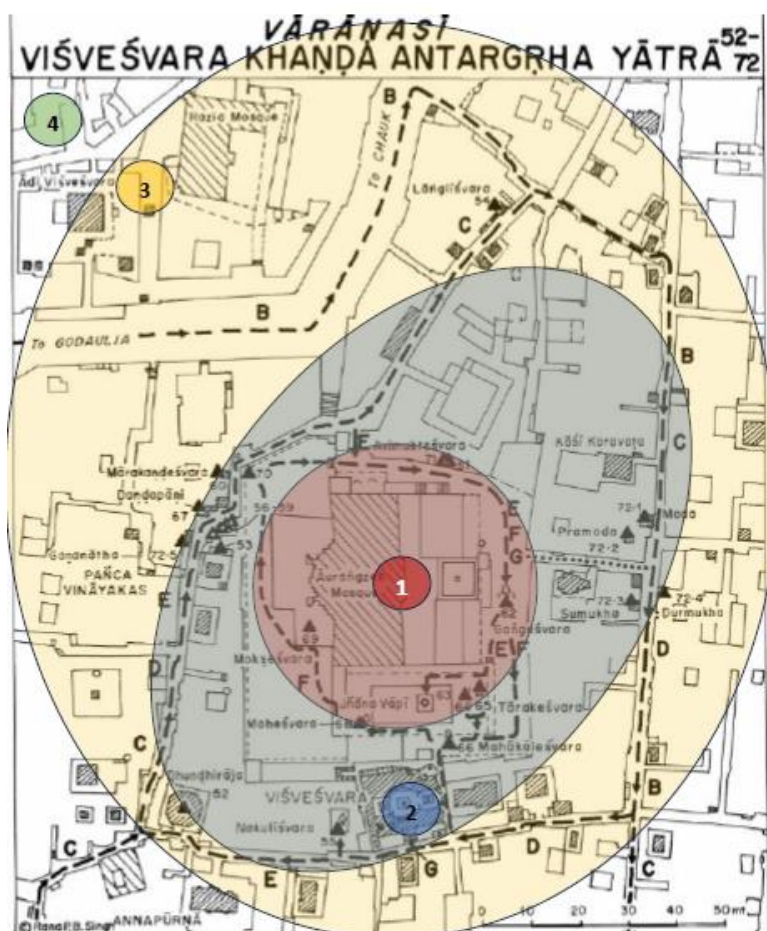


Figure 4. Vishwanath Temple and its Antargriha Yatra Varanasi: as existed till 2017 (Source: drawn over by author on Singh and Rana 2002, p. 120) [22].

The sacred route of Antargriha is a spiral journey which moves four times around the Vishveshvara (Vishvanatha) temple. The initiation and completion is at Gyanwapi Kup (well) and Vishveshvara Lingam. There are 72 hallowed shrines and locations in it, 56 of which are Shiva's forms. The Vishveshvara Antrargriha is widely eulogized in the Puranas, especially in Kashi Khand, as well as in the 15th century CE Marathi text called Guru Charitra. Though the most suitable day to perform this pilgrimage is the Maha Shivaratri (13th day of the dark-half fortnight of Hindu month of Phalgun), it can be done on any day of the year. It was very popular with the pilgrims till it was disturbed with the coming of the Kashi Vishvanatha Dham Corridor, because of which several of the 72 temples on its route have either disappeared or have been relocated.

It is interesting to note that till date at the core of this yatra is the Gyanwapi mosque and the well, while the Ahilyabai built temple falls within its second layer. The Adi Vishveshvara or Avimukteshvara, believed to have existed at the present site of Razia mosque falls within the third layer. Nevertheless, all the historical temples dedicated to exalted Vishveshvara fall within its historic kshetra, in spite of the upheaval it has seen for more than 1000 years in its historic evolution (Figure 4).

VISHVANATHA TEMPLE

Existence, Destruction and Contestation

The ancient temple of Vishvanatha, perhaps in its second form, stood at the highest point of the city, near the bend of Chauk Road close to the site of present Bibi Razia Mosque (1236–1240 CE), but nothing of it survives today. The mosque was erected over the dismantled Vishvanatha temple. This mosque was constructed using repurposed materials, specifically the pillars from an earlier Hindu temple. It has two chambers united by a three-arched doorway, and the four pillars in the center support a set of lintels that support the ceiling slabs, devoid of any dome (Rötzer, 2005: 53) [17]. The original 13th century CE mosque can be considered of smaller scale, as the structure measures about 12 meters square. This indicates that the original temple at its place was perhaps not of any grandiose scale. Moreover, the plan of the mosque, without any minarets or domes is not typical of the period but is rather like a *Sabha* mandap of a temple, like that of namesake of the temple it replaced, the 11th century CE Kashivishveshwara at Lakundi in Karnataka.

A Gujarati trader restored the Vishvanatha temple in the late 13th century CE, close to the grounds of the ancient Avimukteshvara. It remained standing until the subsequent destruction under the reign of the Sharqi monarchs of Jaunpur (1436–1458 CE). The temple seemed to have been repaired again, which was demolished by Sikandar Lodi in 1490 CE; with that the prominence of Avimukteshvara was lost forever. Only ninety-five years later, in 1585–1590 CE, with the help of Todar Mal (Raghunath Pandit), one of Akbar's top courtiers, and with Raja Man Singh of Amber's sponsorship, as well as the renowned theologian and author Narayana Bhatta (1514–1595 CE) the temple was re-built again, most likely on the structural plan of the previous temple of the 13th century CE (cf. Singh, 2009: 77) [20].

Vastusaukhyam, commissioned in 1580 CE by Raja Todar Mal forms part of large multivolume *Todarananda*. This work also called the *Samhitasaukhyam* includes an introduction to the idea of Vaastu, instruction on selection of site, materials, reusing materials from earlier buildings, layout plans for designing of both houses and temples (see M. Desai 2012: JSAH 472) [6]. Some of the buildings attributed to Todar Mal are Todarmal Baradari at Fatehpur Sikri, Todar Mal Sarai on Grand Trunk Road Punjab, Fort and Moti Mahal at Allahabad (Prayagraj), Rohtas fort now in Pakistan and also Ganesh temple in Varanasi. However, there is no evidence to suggest if they were directly constructed by him or named after him considering his acumen was in finance. Thus, treatise is clear indication of his interest and knowledge regarding the architectural practices of the times, including those of the temples. A small domed temple next to the mosque, dedicated to Adi Vishveshvara was built by Jaisingh in 1720 CE.

Ma'sûr-i-Nâm-gîrî states that on April 9, 1669, CE, Aurangzeb, the Mughal emperor, gave the governors of every province the command to destroy the infidels' schools and temples and firmly

suppress their religious teachings. Not long later, on April 18, 1669, CE, “it was reported that the emperor’s officers had demolished the temple of Vishvanatha at Kashi in accordance with his command” (Varanasi)” (cf. Sarkar, 1928: 186) [18]. Today Alamgir (Gyanavapi) mosque stands on this site. However, the temple was not fully demolished; traces of Raja Todar Mal’s temple can be seen even today in its western wall and cellars/ basements under the mosque. (see Figures 5 and 6). The 3 domed spaces of the mosque occupy the north-south transept of the temple and sits on the older raised platform of the temple. One can only conclude that this section at the back of the qibla wall was purposefully left undisturbed as a warning to the city’s Hindu population, as it would have only been little more work for Aurangzeb to order the demolition of the entire temple (Michell, 2005: 80) [14]. Today, two distinct mosques – one constructed in the 13th century CE by Razia and the other in the 17th century CE by Aurangzeb – sit atop the ruins of the ancient Vishvanatha Temples.

Regarding the ensuing temple destruction that occurred across the nation and continued until January 1705 CE, two years before Aurangzeb’s death, Jadunath Sarkar has quoted several sources (Sarkar, 1928: 186–89) [18]. By this decree, around a thousand temples were destroyed, their locations permanently blocked off from Hindu access by the erection of mosques, including the Keshav Dev in Mathura, the Govind Dev in Vrindavan, and the Krittivāsheshwara and Bindu Mādhava temples in Varanasi (Sukul, 1977: 29) [24]. However, the portrayal of Aurangzeb as a temple-breaker may not stand up to close examination because there is evidence that he continued to grant land grants (jagirs) to Hindu temples, including the Jangambadi Shiva temple in Banaras, the Someshvaranātha Mahadev temple in Allahabad, and the Umananda temple in Guwahati, just like his predecessor Mughals did (cf. Ali, 1968: 30–32) [1].



Figure 5. Ruins of the ancient Vishvanatha temple at the rear of Gyanwapi Mosque (after Asher) [2].



Figure 6. Reuse of the temple pillars to create a cellar to flatten the area at the front of Gyanwapi Mosque, to create a platform in 1792 CE (after India Today).

Architecture, Planning and Alignments of Vishvanatha Temple

The Temple was perhaps not a single large edifice but was rather a large complex with a cluster of temples, with the main temple larger than the other temples in the complex. The temple would have had

a direct access to the Cremation Ghat at Manikarnika. Within the complex there would have been large water bodies as well as some monasteries and other residential buildings for pilgrims. The setting would have been largely semi-urban within a dense foliage or garden. The Temple was located at the high point and would have been a prominent landmark for the area. During the monsoons (Sawan), the most auspicious month for Shiva worship as per the Hindu Calendar, the area would have been inundated with Ganga water, recreating the event of primordial flood of Puranas (Eck, 1993) [11], this would have made the Temple appear within Ganga in all its isolated glory. This temple was demolished in 1194 CE and Bibi Razia Mosque built in 1236 CE stands in its place today. The religious activity seems to have continued even after numerous invasions between 12th–15th century CE, as seen from the rebuilding of temples in that period. Vishveshvara Temple was re-built in 1585 CE by Raja Todermal and Mansingh. The region would have been developed, and the temple would have grown to become the city's main attraction. The Temple would have been grandiose and set within a large complex, with facilities, ancillary buildings and other minor temples. Perhaps it was for recreation of the annual flooding that the temple was raised on a 3-metre-high platform. Direct link with the river and the Cremation Ghat at Manikarnika would have been revived. This temple was demolished in 1699 CE and Alamgir (Gyanwapi) mosque was constructed over its ruins.

The present Kashi Vishvanatha Temple was constructed in 1777 CE. The urbanization process of the area paced up with several other temples being rebuilt and facilities such as dharmshalas, riverfront palaces and retire houses coming up in the temple vicinity catering to the growing number of pilgrims to the city. Several of the temples built in 18th–19th century CE started to be associated with their Puranic counterparts reviving the Antragrahi yatra. By mid-20th century CE, the area became highly congested and lost its legibility as a sacred precinct and many associated temples started to be seen as separate temples or became redundant and got engulfed within the new development.

It is not easy to establish the original appearance of the temple that existed prior to the Razia mosque, but if compared with Kandameshwar, the only temple existing in Varanasi from that era, the temple would have followed similar pattern. Other surviving temples from the period can be found at Khajuraho, Bateshwar, Jageshwar, Chamba, Alampur, etc. As was typical of the times in the region, at each of these sites we find the main temple with a cluster of temples of varying sizes and typologies. The original site of Kashi Vishvanatha thus may have been a collection of many small shrines within a larger compound or complex, without being extraordinarily dominant in the city, unlike those in South India. (see Asher 2020, pg. 12) [2]. Also considering the small scale of the Razia mosque, the temple it replaced, though would have been exalted, but was perhaps of a modest scale. Not even the famed Kashi Vishvanatha temple reconstructed in the 16th century CE drew the attention of European travelers and even the 18th century CE reconstruction does not dominate Varanasi's skyline even today.

Kashi Vishvanatha was not the first temple constructed within the Mughal crown land, in 1580 CE Surjan Singh Hada of Bundi constructed the Bundi Parkota Ghat, with the replica of the Vishvanatha temple. Though the building is the earliest recorded standing building in Varanasi, it is in utter state of ruins and nothing of the Temple has survived. (Desai, 2017) [7]. Other structures were located within the Braj Region, mainly due to Akbar's inclination towards the Vaishnavas. Braj, a region around the Mathura city is considered as the birthplace of Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu. Even one of his Muslim Ministers, Khan e Khana, more famously known for his Bhakti poetry in name of Rahim, is said to have made donations to the temple activities in Braj. Sati Burj at Mathura Haridev at Govardhan was amongst the temples constructed in 1567 CE by Raja Bhagwant Kacchwaha ruler of Amber and the father of Mansingh (Asher, 2020) [2].

James Prinsep, an English scholar published in 1833 CE, a hypothetical plan of the temple. It was somewhat inspired by the Kashi Khaṇḍa's account of the temple. According to Prinsep's plan, the temple is envisioned as a mandala (Cosmo gram), a square grid with 15 chambers, the largest and most central of which is designated for Vishveshvara. Thus, his reconstructed plan is unconvincing since it

accords neither with the observable architectural evidence nor conforms with the temple building practice of the day (see Figure 8).

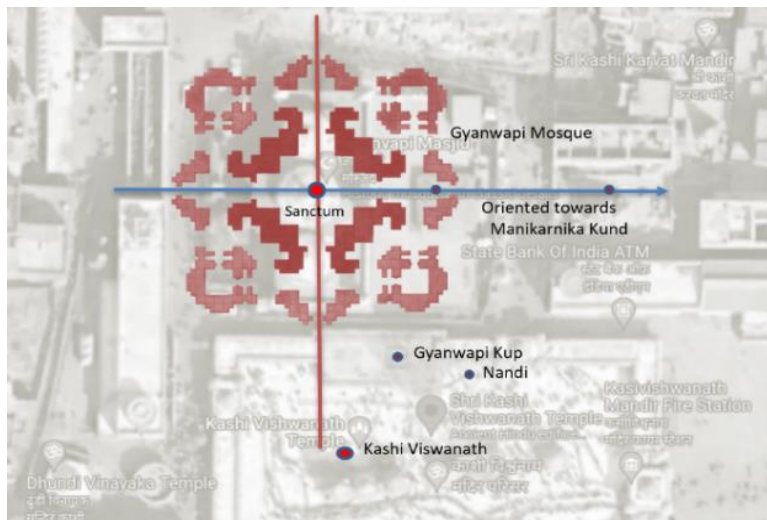


Figure 7. Prinsep's hypothetical plan of Kashi overlaid on present day Google map of the Gyanwapi Mosque area.

The closest match to the James Prinsep's hypothetical plan of Kashi Vishveshvara is that of the Nav Ratna temples of Bengal (see Figure 7). The most famous examples of this are the Dakshin Kali Temple of Kolkata and Kantaji Temple of Dinajpur. These temples developed there in 18th century CE. The temple rose in a pyramidal formation and typically had 9 spires. The square plan of the temple had an outer semi-covered gallery with corner rooms and a central garbhagriha. These temples were built mainly in bricks with decorative terracotta panels. Considering that these temples were popular in Bengal, Prinsep may have encountered these during his time there and would have been perhaps influenced while making his hypothetical plan for the Kashi Vishveshvara temple. Moreover, this temple typology had not yet evolved in the 16th century CE when Todarmal was getting the temple constructed in Kashi. There are also no other contemporary temples from that period matching Prinsep's plan of Kashi Vishveshvara. Moreover, the grid chosen of 1.5 metres for the temple by him also seems arbitrary, as the present mosque is clearly placed on the old platform of the temple, the length of the same is 36 metres, while the Prinsep plan suggests a much larger footprint of the temple.

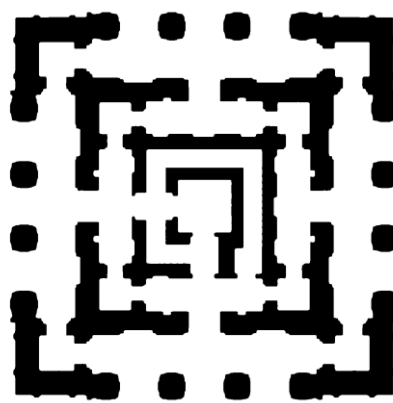
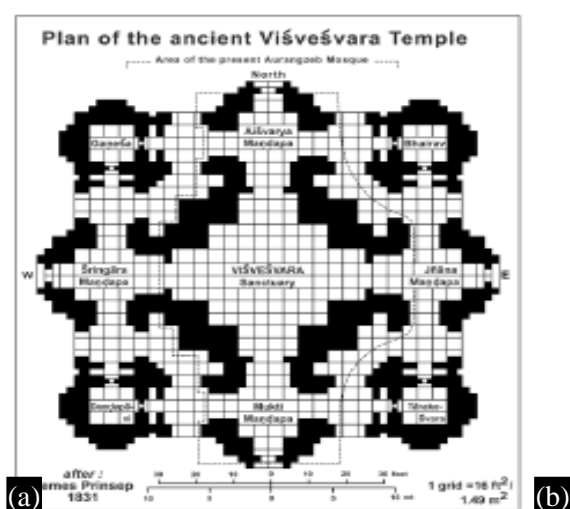


Figure 8. Prinsep's hypothetical plan of Kashi Vishveswara 1833 CE and Plan of 18th century CE Kantaji temple Dinajpur, Bangladesh.

In order to determine the original form of the architecture of the Vishveshvara temple, it is necessary to make comparisons with other contemporary monuments such as the Govindadeva, built in 1580 CE at Vrindāvan by Raja Man Singh of Amber, and the Chaturbhuj Temple, built by Bir Singh Bundela (r. 1592–1627 CE), a close friend and supporter of Emperor Jahangir, at Orchha in central India.

Both the temples graphically demonstrate how Mughal building techniques were used for constructing Hindu temples under Mughal rule. In these temples, transepts that lead to side porches with outside colonnades almost perfectly create a cruciform. Even though Govindadeva's octagonal spired shrine was eventually destroyed, its majestic mandapa still stands, roofed with a dome which raises for more than 14-metres high on lofty pointed arches.

The temples constructed under Rajput noblemen within Mughal territory though followed the typical temple plan, but the architectural idioms, style and elements in their construction were Mughal in nature. The remains of doorways, balconies, arches and brackets as seen in ruins of the 16th century CE temple behind Gyanwapi are like those seen at Fatehpur Sikri, Jahangir Mahal at Agra, buildings attributed to Todar Mal at Allahabad fort and even in the Takhte Badshahi constructed by Mansingh at Rohtas.

The Chaturbhuj, with its octagonal spired temple still intact, displays a complete rendition of the Govindadeva plan. (cf. Michell, 2005) (see Figure 9) [14]. While both these temples had a separate *garbhagriha* attached to them, there are other examples of cross plan temples with a central *garbhagriha*. The earliest of the cross plan is that of the Das-Avtar Temple at Deogarh M.P. Thereafter similar planning is seen in the 11th century CE Chandramauleshwar Temple in Unkal Karnataka, as well as in Rohiteshwar Temple within Rohtas fort.

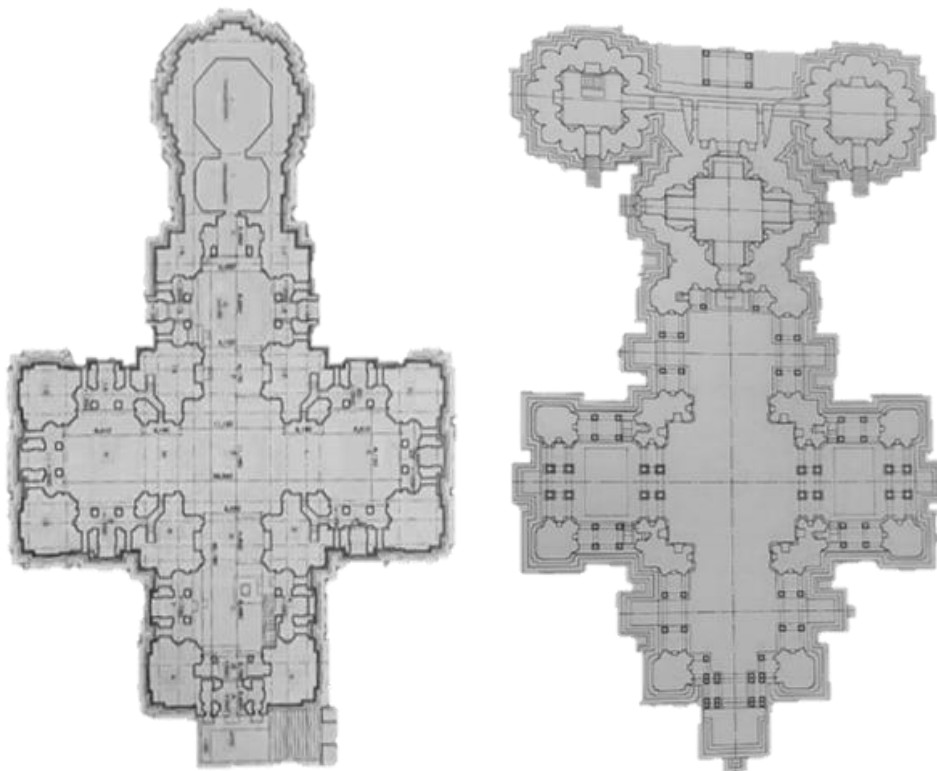


Figure 9. Plans of Govindadev Temple Vrindavan and Chaturbhuj Temple Orchha. (After Case 1996, IGNCA [5] & INTACH, respectively).

Since the Govindadeva Temple at Brindavan and Raja Todar Mal's monument in Banaras were virtually contemporaneous constructions, we would anticipate seeing a similar arrangement of

architectural components in both. The famous Bindu Madhava Temple in Banaras, which Raja Man Singh built over Pancha Ganga Ghat at the beginning of the 17th century CE, may have likewise been like this (Michell, 2005: 81) [14]. It is also hypothesized that Bir Singh Bundela contributed to the building of the Vishvanatha temple, most likely during Jahangir's reign in 1623 CE. Regretfully, there is currently no proof to back it up. However, the 'Torana' entrance seen in the ruined temple wall of Gyanwapi mosque has an uncanny resemblance to the Torana arch he created at Vishram ghat in Mathura. Moreover, the historical descriptions of Tavernier and Bernier of the Bindu Mahadev at Varanasi and that of the Keshavdev built by him in Mathura, also suggest a similar cross plan with a central dome with large balconies and interiors embellished with sculptures. His Chaturbhuj temple in Orchha is also similar in plan and decorations (Figure 10).

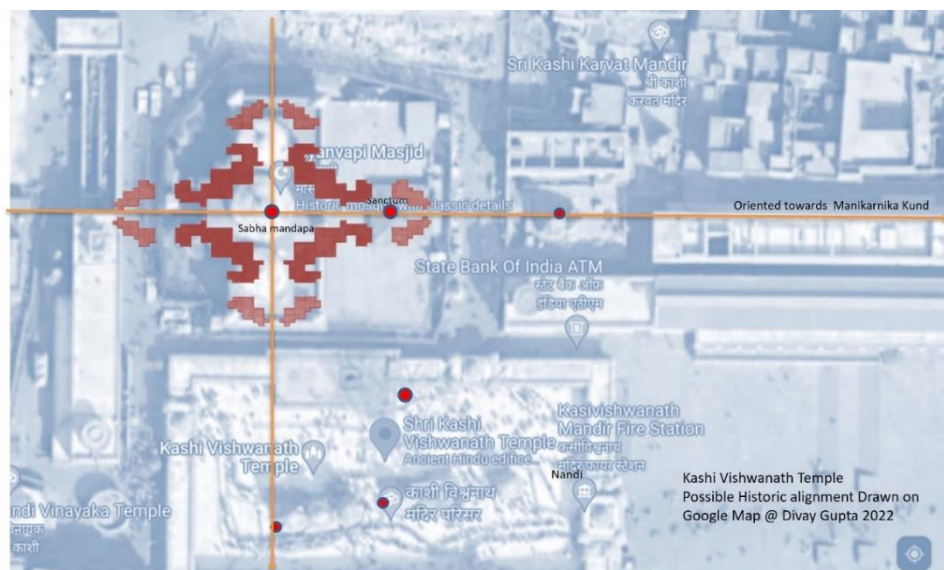


Figure 10. Hypothetical plan of the 16th century CE Vishveshvara temple by author, overlaid on present day Google plan of Gyanwapi mosque area (Copyright: Divay Gupta).

The historical and puranic descriptions of the Vishveshvara temple also points to a cross plan with 4 protruding mandapas from a central mandapa, generally called the *sandhara* or *panchratna* plan, literary the five jewels temple. The temple would have been essentially based upon these concepts, considering the involvement of theologian Narayan Bhatt in the endeavour. This is also how both Tavernier and Baptise, who visited Varanasi describe Bindu Mahadev temple there which was a contemporary of the Kashi Vishvanatha temple and built under similar patronage. By examining the existing remains of the temple wall both in elevation and plan, it can be determined that the temple followed a cross plan, with a central shikhara and corner domes (see Figure 11).

The same is also confirmed by the recently conducted survey of the Gyanwapi Mosque by ASI. As reported in the Times of India newspaper on 27th January 2024, the ASI report has confirmed existence of a Hindu temple in the past over which the mosque has been constructed using the northern, southern and the central chamber of the pre-existing temple on the site. As is visually evident, the mosque also utilises one of the main walls of the temple as the western wall of the mosque by blocking the entrances in the wall with stone masonry. Many pillars and pilasters of the temple were also reused within the central hall, as well as for creating a cellar to flatten the east part of the mosque to make a platform in the courtyard. The central chamber of the mosque seems to have remained unchanged, and as evident from an old photograph, may even be using the domical ceiling of the earlier temple (Figure 12). The eastern part of the western chamber is still intact, according to the report, while the western superstructure has been destroyed. It appears that a hallway connected this room to the north and south chambers as well. During the ASI study, remnants of this passage in the northwest were discovered. Besides these, the survey has also found inscriptions as well as sculptural remains. The inscriptions are

in Devanagari, Grantha, Telugu Kannada and Arabic scripts. The names of deities like Janardhana, Rudra, Umesvara, and Maha-muktimandapa are among the survey's noteworthy discoveries. The Arabic inscription records the construction of the mosque in 1676-77 CE, and repairs to it in 1792-93 CE.

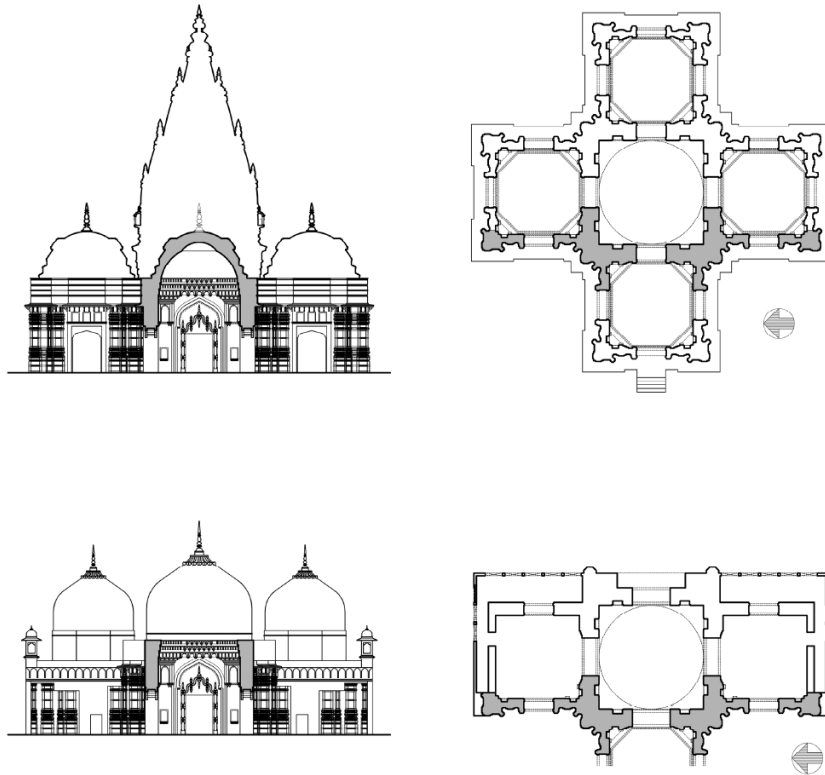


Figure 11. Hypothetical reconstruction of the 16th century CE Vishveshvara temple, plan and elevation. (Copyright: Author Divay Gupta).



Figure 12. Old undated picture of Interior of Gyanwapi Mosque.

All the reconstructed temples dedicated to Vishveshvara in Varanasi were always located within the Avimukteshvara kshetra and in the vicinity of Manikarnika ghat. A shrine dedicated to Avimukteshvara was also incorporated within the re-built temple of Ahilya Bai. It is perhaps during the same time that Manikarnika ghat also started to be associated as a Shakti peetha as mentioned in Dakshayaga, a Shaivite literature from 18th century CE. As the 18th century CE temple moved further

south from its original position, it was perhaps due to this reason the Kashi Vishvanatha temple was tilted to about 20 degrees towards north, so as to align it with the Manikarnika Ghat. The new path that developed between the temple and the ghat was also similarly oriented. These can also be seen as attempts in reclaiming the larger sacred landscape of Kashi Vishvanatha by inter-linkages and network of other existing or ancient sites of this Kshetra of Varanasi (Figure 13). “The grid street pattern around the Vishvanatha temple is regarded as the traces of an ancient urban plan of Varanasi.” (Yanagisawa, 2018, pg. 394) [27]. Unfortunately, this sacred urban design has been lost in the newly constructed KVC.

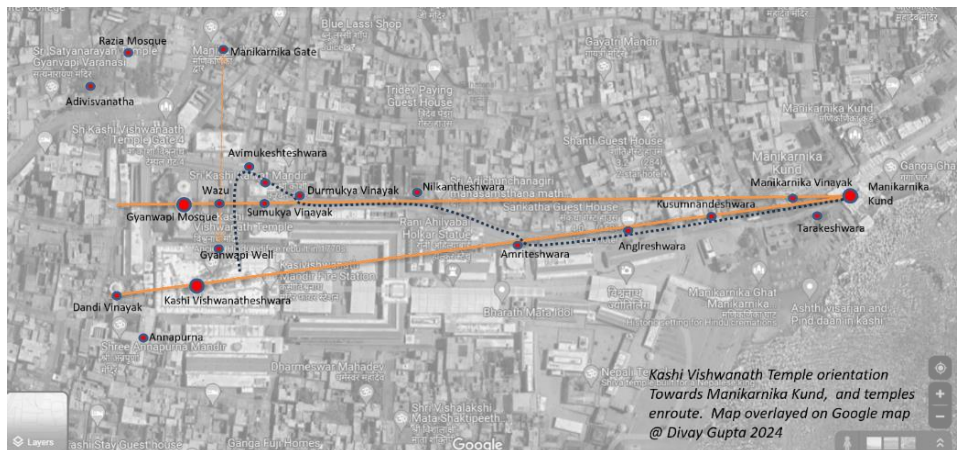


Figure 13. Merging of Axis of Gyanwapi mosque and Kashi Vishvanatha Temple towards Manikarnika Kund (© the author).

RECLAMATION AND RECONSTRUCTION Revival, Memory, Faith, And Symbolism

Though a smaller Adi Vishveshvara was rebuilt next to the Razia Mosque in 1720 CE by Jaisingh of Jaipur, it was a small endeavor, with a simple square structure with a dome on the top. The idea perhaps was only to revive the memory of the site and not an attempt to bring back its ancient glory – unlike Queen Ahilyabai Holkar (1725–1795 CE) of Indore, under whose patronage the present temple of Vishvanatha was initiated. On August 25, 1777, CE, the temple was dedicated on the joyous event of Maha Shivaratri, which commemorates Shiva’s marriage. Located in the southeast corner of the quadrilateral, the main temple of Vishvanatha was surrounded by domes on each corner. Towards the north, just outside the temple complex was the pavilion with Gyanwapi Kup and a tree with a Nandi under it. This area has been recently modified to create a large plaza merging the temple area with that of the Gyanwapi area, thereby redefining the immediate precinct of the temple. The main temple complex is divided into three sections: the giant gilded dome, the spire of Mahadeva Temple, and the gilded tower of Vishvanatha. The central dome demonstrates an affinity to the domes in Mughal buildings and is like the one atop the nearby Adi Vishveshvara built by Jaisingh. In 1835 CE, the roofs of the two spires were plated in gold by the Sikh king Ranjit Singh of Lahore. The main tower is 51 feet (15.5 metres) high. Up to nine bells are beneath the dome between the temples of Vishvanatha and Mahadeva. This temple's main entryway is coated in silver plates (see Singh 2022) [23].

Ahilyabai’s temple epitomizes the revivalist style that proliferated in 18th-century CE north India (Michell, 2005: 81) [14]. An area where “building fabric was being gradually dismantled and replaced with speculative multistorey apartment blocks; [here] the clientele is affluent retirees, seeking absolution as well as modern amenities in Kashi” developed around the temple in the late 18th century CE [Varanasi] (Desai, 2019: 75) [8]. Due to spatial transposition, numerous shrines and temples have been established or rebuilt nearby, and several older ones have also been rehabilitated with the support of monarchs and landowners. As a result, a large-scale settlement and structures emerged in the name of worshipping Vishvanatha. Shrine construction and the overlaying of folktales within the homes

elevated the image under upward mobility (see Singh, 2009: 78) [20]. Over the period, networks of sacred sites, some historical, some modern started to be associated with temples or *tirthas* mentioned in the Puranas and were thereby included within the various yatras or pilgrimages associated with Kashi.

HERITAGIZATION

New Paradigm, Politics, Patronage, And Shared Heritage

The Kacchawahas and Maratha lords made multiple attempts in the early to mid-18th century CE to demolish the Aurangzeb's Mosque and re-establish the Vishveshvara temple, but all these attempts failed due to Mughal persecution. (Desai, 2017: 81) [7]. Accounts by mid-nineteenth century Indian visitors, such as Jadunath Sarvadhikari, who visited the city in or around 1854 CE, reveal an affinity for exclusionary identities based in religious polarization. Later in the British colonial rule, "the policy of divide and rule also had wide-reaching implications." (Desai, 2019: 74) [8]. In According to Sarvadhikari, the colonial authorities assisted in reclaiming the Jnanavapi precinct and other religious places in Varanasi from "Muslims" because they had previously belonged to "Hindus." (Sarvadhikari, 1915: 441) [19]. A case in point is the fanatical violence between Hindus and Muslims in 1809 CE called the 'Lat Bhairo riots', which can be seen as eventually evolving into a common agitation to 'liberate' Hindu sites especially Gyanwapi from Muslim control. (see Visuvalingam 2002) [26]. On April 8, 2021, the lower court ordered the Archaeological Survey of India to conduct a thorough survey to gather evidence of the old temple and related shrines that existed at the mosque site and its environs. This came after numerous attempts by courts to get involved in the matter since 1936 CE.

ASI submitted its report in Jan 2024, confirming the existence of an older temple prior to the construction of the mosque over it.

KASHI VISHVANATHA CORRIDOR (KSHETRA)

Resurrection, Reconstruction, and Prospects

Following the demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992, the Vishvanatha temple garnered attention to clean up its surroundings and regain its status in the religious sphere. Hindu nationalism and cultural diplomacy provided great backing for this. Similarly, after removing the crowded streets and "haphazard" dwellings, the current administration developed the Vishvanatha temple region, also known as the Kashi Vishvanatha Corridor (KVC), as a distinct location with contemporary amenities and open spaces. With the backing of the state and federal governments, this massive project worth Rs 6 billion (or US\$770 million) to promote heritage tourism in place of pilgrimage tourism got underway on March 8, 2019. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has referred to this as his "dream project" and it is part of the Varanasi Smart City and Heritage-Making program.

Under this project 350 houses and shops were razed and rehabilitated elsewhere resulting in loss of identity, social interaction, and cultural harmony of this historic kshetra. In its place a huge complex of more than 50,000 sq mts is connected to the river through a series of European style plazas (see Figure 14).

Unfortunately, this development has been adopted as a model of modernised Neo-Hinduism and has become a template to similar developments at other holy-heritage cities, like Puri, Vrindavan Ujjain, etc.

While KVC was initiated with an objective to bring back the ancient glory of the temple and improve access and experience of the pilgrims, the large-scale renewal after clearing of the historic settlement there to construct modern facilities for the pilgrims and visitors has completely changed its historic and sacred cultural landscape. The compound of the temple was enlarged and included the Gyanwapi kup and Nandi. Several sacred sites associated with Antargrihi Yatra were either shifted or have been lost, making this Yatra redundant in its original form (Figure 15). Moreover, the re-settlement of the deserted icons and images are marginally befitted to the cosmic frame of alignment and correspondences as it were earlier. Today Ahilya Bai's temple, now called the Kashi Vishvanatha Dham, stands in its isolated splendour within European-styled plazas.

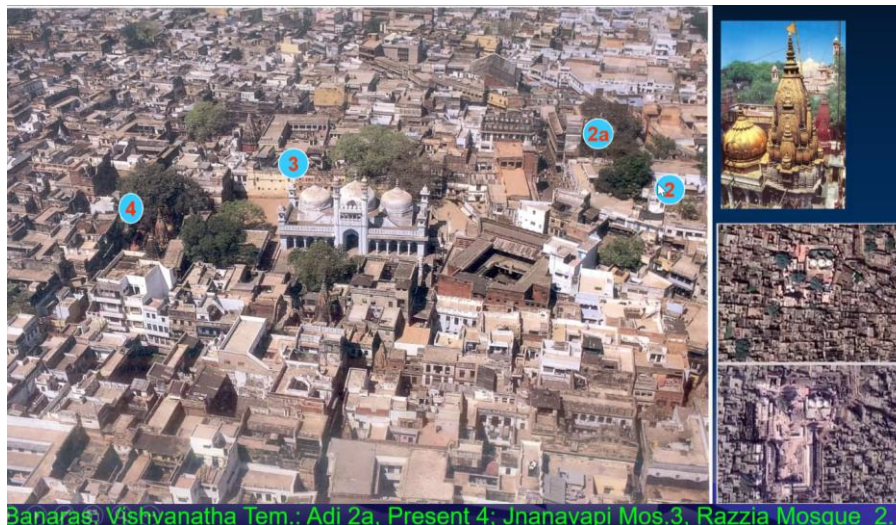


Figure 14. The historic & sacred Vishveshvara Kshetra prior to 2019 implementation of KVC (after Singh 2022) [23].



Figure 15. Impact of Kashi Vishwanath Dham Corridor (KVC), on historic & sacred Vishveshvara Kshetra.

CONCLUSION

Religious Heritage and Inclusive Heritage Development

The Alamgir mosque at Dara Nagar, another mosque constructed in 1673 CE by Aurangzeb using the older blocks taken from the destroyed temple of Kirtivasheshvara at the site, has an interesting practice. Every year on Maha Shivaratri, Shiva is worshiped in the fountain area of the mosque. On this day many Hindu devotees visit the place for this ritual within the mosque.

The site of Gyanwapi mosque should thus ideally be seen as an important cultural and religious asset of the city, with immense educational and tourism potential. The building is unique showing two different typologies and styles in its construction, historical evidence of the past, with no other building in India having such a distinction. Perhaps awareness of this aspect will help in reconciliation amongst communities contesting the site.

Thus, there is a need to relook at our heritage as cultural assets, by examining them in their wider historical and environmental context. This will enable us to develop recommendations for policy makers and raise public awareness for their community-based conservation and development. It is hoped that the site of Kashi Vishvanatha, which has seen an evolution for more than 1000 years and is now in its much-altered state can demonstrate how heritage revival can reduce the climate and environmental footprint in the city and can be a shining example of sustainable development and tourism. The conservation of historic assets of the site including the ones at contested site of Gyanwapi mosque will help India meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

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