

# CULTURAL ECOLOGY: A HISTORICAL STUDY OF BANARAS FROM 1500 BC TO 700 AD

A Summary submitted to the  
Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow  
in fulfilment of Requirement for the Award of Degree of

## Doctor of Philosophy in HISTORY



Submitted By

*Satyamev Bharteey*

Enrollment No. 1405/18

Under the Co-supervision of

*Prof. Anjan Chakrabarti*

University of North Bengal,  
Siliguri, West Bengal

Under the Supervision of

*Prof. S. Victor Babu*

BBAU, Lucknow

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY  
SCHOOL OF AMBEDKAR STUDIES FOR SOCIAL SCIENCES  
BABASAHEB BHIMRAO AMBEDKAR UNIVERSITY

(A Central University) (NAAC: A++ Accredited)  
VIDYA VIHAR, RAEBARELI ROAD, LUCKNOW-226025  
UTTAR PRADESH, INDIA

2024

# **SUMMARY**

---

---

## **INTRODUCTION**

This thesis focuses on the cultural attitudes and practices of the ancient states (Mahajanapada) in the Banaras region about ecology. The period under consideration is from 1500 BC to 700 AD, marked by rapid cultural and commercial developments due to the formation of different communities, kingdoms, and heightened religious activities. This study endeavours to shed light on the ecological sensibilities of the ancient Mahajanapadas, emphasising the relatively unexplored area of cultural ecology in the history of ancient India. Furthermore, the research posits that ecological narration was a prominent theme in the ideas expressed by European scholars, akin to the representation of American tribes in the USA. As such, the study seeks to trace the ecological history from the Vedic period to the time of Harshvardhana. This explorative study attempts to capture the ancient state's attitudes towards ecology with spiritual references to the ancient Banaras.

## **CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

Cultural ecology is based on the interaction of culture, man, and the environment. It is important to explain the origins of particular cultural patterns that characterise particular cultural areas instead of deriving general principles applicable to any cultural-environmental situation<sup>1</sup>. Emphasis is placed on studying the particulars of local environments rather than on unique cultures' histories<sup>2</sup>. Culture is the product of the interplay of human and natural resources. Ecology, the core of this study, attempts to explain the various cultural aspects of ancient Banaras from the Vedic to

---

<sup>1</sup> Gunn, M.C. (1980) Cultural Ecology: A Brief Overview. Nebraska Anthropologist, 149, p.20

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.

the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. The key purpose of this study is to analyse the historical framework of ancient Banaras from an ecological perspective. This study explores relevant periods in the history of Banaras with respect to contextualisation of ecological phenomena. I shall merely attempt to point out what kind of changes took place in the ecological environment of ancient Banaras during different political powers and the effect of those changes. There are several studies on modern India's environmental history of cultural-ecological aspects and their transformation of new concepts. The environmental history of ancient periods is still a less focused area; moreover, the region of ancient Banaras is yet to be explored from an ecological perspective. However, there are few studies on culture and ecology in the environmental history of ancient Indian history and their role in shaping their atmosphere. The research thus opens new doors of historical inquiry to understand ancient ideologies through the cultural ecology of Banaras. Most studies on religious and theological subjects assess only the ancient and modern periods; the study becomes significant as it explores the expansion and progress made by the contemporary period of Banaras in expanding ecology in the State.

### **AREA OF THE STUDY**

The area chosen for the study is the most significant spiritual and cultural center for Hindus. The term 'Banaras' is used here in place of Kashi, as in ancient times, Kashi was used for a region whose capital was Varanasi, currently is also. This term has been used in this study as a region in the ancient context, which played a vital role in making it culturally and commercially significant. The city is situated on the scale of latitudes extend over an area of 25° 10" N to 25° 37" N and 82° 39" E to 83° 10" E longitude. The kingdom of Kashi, an extravagant command in the pre-Buddhist period, was bounded by Vatsya Mahajanapada in the west, Koshal in the north, and Magadha

in the eastern region<sup>3</sup>. According to Jataka tales, the Kashi state covers an area of 300 Yojans, while the city of Varanasi spans about 12 Yojans.<sup>4</sup>

Due to shifting at different ages, the Kashi neighbourhood's precise boundary may not be accurately demarcated. According to Mahapandit Rahul Sanskritiyan, Kashi is expended in modern Varanasi, Azamgarh, Jaunpur, Mirzapur, and parts of Gazipur. Separately from Kosala, Videha, Vaishali, Anga, and Kashi also existed in the middle Ganga plains during the 16 Mahajanapadas period. The expansion of the Mahajanapadas of the mid-Ganges region was probably 1500 BC.<sup>5</sup> During this period, Kashi dominated and controlled Magadha, Kosala, and Vatsa. Cunningham suggests that Kashi's boundaries extended from the Gomti river in the north to Allahabad, from Tons to Bilhari in the west, and from Bilhari to Sonhat in the south, including the Rihand, Karmanasha, and Ganga rivers in the east<sup>6</sup>. The Assaka Jataka suggests Kashi's kingdom possibly extended to the Godavari River in the south, indicated by Potali Nagar, the capital of Assaka state, being referred to as a city of Kashi state<sup>7</sup>. It's likely that when Kashi ruled over Magadha, Kosala, and Vatsa, its territorial expanse was similar. However, conflicts between the kingdoms led to Magadha emerging as the dominant power, followed by the Mauryas, Shugas, Kushanas, and Bharshivas, who successively held sway over the kingdom of Kashi.

## **IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY**

The importance of this study is to delve into the impact of Banaras's ancient topography on the city's cultural and ecological urban dynamics under various political

---

<sup>3</sup> Upadhyay, B. (1883). *Budhkalin Bhartiya Bhugol*. Hindi Sahitya Sammelan Prayag, p.362

<sup>4</sup> Kaushalyayan, B. (2006). *Jataka Attakatha*, Vol. 1-6, p.422, 533-4

<sup>5</sup> Sharma, R. S. (2017). *Prarambhik Bharat Ka Parichaya*, Orient Blackswan Pvt, p.5

<sup>6</sup> Cunningham, A. (1990). *The ancient geography of India*. M. K. Book, p.367

<sup>7</sup> Kawasaki, K., Kawasaki, V., & NAPG, D. (2011). *Jataka tales of the Buddha: an anthology*. Buddhist Publication Society Kandy Sri Lanka, p.86

reigns. While existing literature and references predominantly delve into religious, cultural, and theological conditions, there is a noticeable dearth of studies focusing on the ecological context. My innervation is to fill this void by meticulously documenting the ecological perspective of ancient Banaras. Historically, Banaras has been predominantly studied from modern and medieval vantage points, relegating the environmental context of ancient India to the background. Consequently, this study aims to meticulously document environmental challenges from ancient perspectives, seeking to rectify this scholarly gap.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

As a thematic field of environmental studies, the domain cultural ecology studies are based on the interaction of culture, man, and environment. This study attempts to concentrate on the interaction between cultural ecology and theological context. Steward defined cultural ecology as a methodological tool for ascertaining how the adaptation of culture to its environment may entail certain changes, or in a larger sense, to determine whether similar adjustments occur in similar environments<sup>8</sup>. The purpose of cultural ecology is to explain the origin of particular cultural pattern which characterized particular areas instead of deriving general principals applicable to any cultural-environmental situation<sup>9</sup>. Emphasized is placed on the study of the particular of level environmental. It also emphasizes on how culture is impacted by the environments as a whole, the natural resources on the one hand, technology, and population density, as well as how a traditional system of ideas and conducts enables people to adopt to their surroundings on the other<sup>10</sup>.

---

<sup>8</sup> Steward, J. H. (1972). *Theory of culture change: The methodology of multilineal evolution*. University of Illinois Press, p.42

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.36

<sup>10</sup> Gunn, M. C. (1980). *Cultural ecology: a brief overview*. Published by the Anthropology Student Group, Department of Anthropology, Vol. 5 University of Nebraska, Lincoln,

The study revolves around the ‘cultural core’<sup>11</sup> proposed by Julian Steward and Marvin Harris and the ‘sacred’<sup>12</sup> approach that Diana L. Eck proposed. The work is influenced by Steward and Marvin Harris's notion of methodological knowledge of cultural ecology. Steward proposed the methods of cultural ecology to explore the substance technology and material practices that define a given culture core, ranging from religious rituals to patterns of substance strategies. Harris suggested that “the whole complex needed to be understood in an ecological light, apart from its economic and religious significance. The probability that India’s cattle complex is a positively functioned part of a naturally selected ecosystem is at least as good as a negatively functioned expression of an irrational ideology. He believed that India’s cattle complex is a positively functioning part of the naturally selected ecosystem”<sup>13</sup>. Marvin Harris provides an insightful example of the materialist approach by examining the significance of sacred cows in Indian society<sup>14</sup>. Additionally, their dung is a valuable source of fertiliser and fuel, contributing to agricultural productivity. Furthermore, cows play a crucial role in maintaining cleanliness, as they feed on garbage and weeds while providing a sustainable milk source for human consumption. Eck also introduced the concept of ‘sacred’, which involves the connection between divine power and the physical world, often explained through religious mythologies and holy texts<sup>15</sup>. These texts also depict the intersection of the sacred and the material world with human

---

<sup>11</sup> J.H. Steward, 1980, p. 89

<sup>12</sup> Eck, D.L., (2015). *Banaras City of Light*. Penguin Book. India, p. 34, 98, 99;

Eck DL. *India: A Sacred Geography*. New York: Harmony, Random House; 2012. Eck, D. L. (2012). *India: A sacred geography*. Harmony. Random House, New York, p.2

<sup>13</sup> Harris, M., Bose, N. K., Klass, M., Mencher, J. P., Oberg, K., Opler, M. K., ... & Vayda, A. P. (1966). The cultural ecology of India's sacred cattle. *Current Anthropology*, 7(1), 51-66.

<sup>14</sup> Basic Concepts: Nature, Ecology, Environment. [https://archive.mu.ac.in > myweb\\_test](https://archive.mu.ac.in/myweb_test).

<sup>15</sup> Plante, T. G., Schwartz, G. E., Exline, J. J., Park, C. L., Paloutzian, R. F., Seitz, R. J., & Angel, H. F. (2023). Human interaction with the divine, the sacred, and the deceased: Topics that warrant increased attention by psychologists. *Current Psychology*, 42(36), 31961-31975.

culture and try to interweave with natural ecology<sup>16</sup>. Banaras, which stands on the Ganga River, is considered a pilgrimage site among the seven sacred cities of India. It is believed to be one of the oldest holy cities in the world. Its sacred spaces began to take shape in the first millennium AD. The sacred image of Banaras presents the culture and life of Banaras of the mid-Ganga valley in the ancient period (12th century BCE - 4th century CE). Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Puranic literature are abundant sources of Banaras's image and are narrated as a sacred form of geographical city pictures. This study analyses the geographical structure's role in establishing pilgrimage sites and promoting ecology and nature as sacred, particularly Banaras, known from ancient times to today as considered Tirtha of Hindus and Buddhists. The sacred phenomena and cultural-ecological adaptations propose ethical illustrations in people's minds about the surrounding environment. This in-depth study aims to highlight how environmental ethics play a crucial role in Varanasi. Varanasi's geographical entities are deeply intertwined with the philosophical ideas of Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Lord Shiva. These beliefs have significantly shaped the way people interact with and perceive the environment in this region, making it a fascinating area for environmental and cultural studies.

## **ASSUMPTIONS/HYPOTHESIS**

1. The ecological makeup of the Banaras is intricately linked to the fabric of Indian civilization and Hindu heritage.
2. Geography and ecological set up of ancient Banaras facilitated thriving agricultural practices, vibrant trade networks, and bustling commercial activities.

---

<sup>16</sup> Alley, K. D. (2002). On the banks of the Gaṅgā: When wastewater meets a sacred river. University of Michigan Press, p.55

3. The city's cultural landscape was significantly influenced by the ebb and flow of different ruling dynasties, which managed resource management, and the patterns of urban development during their reigns.

## **OBJECTIVES**

- To study the growth of Banaras and thoroughly analyze the city's geographical features, climate variations, and population dynamics and ecological settings;
- To explore the cultural history of Banaras from an ecological standpoint;
- To examine Banaras's diverse ecological livelihood patterns and meticulously analyse the agricultural, trade, and commerce activities from ecological perspectives;
- To trace the ecological emblems reflected as sacred symbols and seek their linkages with India's cultural and religious practices.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The present research is based on historical research methods and a cultural-ecological approach to comprehensively understand the subject matter. It also encompasses an in-depth analytical study that emphasises the significance of ancient texts and archaeological reports. Through a meticulous process, both primary and secondary sources have been thoroughly examined and incorporated into this study.

## **CONCLUSION**

The first chapter delves into the foundational themes and structural concepts of the study. It provides a detailed account and analysis of the context, goals, hypothesis, scope, methodology, conceptual framework, an extensive review of the relevant literature, and a concise summary of the study's chapters. Furthermore, this chapter

elucidates the central elements of the study and its intended objectives. It seeks to shed light on the intricate concept of cultural ecology, along with its underlying theoretical and conceptual framework, which is the focus of this study's documentation and emphasis.

In the second chapter of the study, extensive efforts were undertaken to meticulously trace the precise geographical conditions of ancient Banaras. As previously indicated, the region's favorable geographical conditions played a pivotal role in driving the urbanization of most Janapadas. The city of ancient Banaras was particularly fortunate to benefit from a strategically advantageous geographical location, which made it a prime area for settlements. Furthermore, the profound geographical settings of the region portrayed a rich tapestry of diverse environmental characteristics, reflecting its unique natural landscape.

These intricate geographical and demographic conditions also wielded a significant impact on the ecological landscape of ancient Banaras, shaping its environmental and societal makeup. Additionally, it is noteworthy that the surplus economy served as a key catalyst in the development of urban centers in the region. This surplus economy led to the establishment of labor divisions in lower caste society, thereby shaping the social and economic dynamics of ancient Banaras in a nuanced and complex manner.

The third chapter of the study attempts to trace cultural and religious images of ancient Banaras and reveals that many ecological features are associated with the religious myth. This chapter firstly reveals many names of Banaras their names reflect the cultural-ecological significance like Anandavana (forest bliss). Other ecological settings are associated with religious faith, like the Ganga River, which is assumed to

be descended from heaven. Other rivers flowed in ancient Banaras like Varuna, indicate the first settlement of Kashi. Gomati, Banganga, Asi, Matsyodari, Brahmanala, and Chandraprabha were perennial rivers in ancient times. Apart from rivers ponds, lakes, Ghats, and forests, are also used to determine the religious myths and narrations of the Kashi region. The Important thing is that Lord Shiva was the outsider of Kashi's historically known non-Aryan Lord, but after some time, the main deity of Banaras became an iconic symbol of ecology because people offered many natural things like leaves, fruit, vegetables, and water. The chapter explores the Vedic age to Mahajanapada's religious and cultural history and after many kingdoms that constructed many ecological structures linked with the myth of Dharmasastra.

The fourth chapter of the study highlights the trade and commerce activities of the Kashi shaped the 'city's cultural ecology. Strategic geographical conditions were favourable for the economy of Banaras and communicated trade networks and transportation. Its industrial center grew to a formidable size. Ganga and Varuna are located in many cities like Rajghat, Anai, Oriaghat, Aktha, and Saraimohana; that area remains many things to encourage trade and economy of Banaras and is where found wood, Glass, ivory, pottery, iron, copper, and bead industries and bones tools. Kashi is located on the bank of the Ganga River and near the ancient Uttarapatha route, which is important in trade and commerce. This chapter also demonstrates that ancient Banaras was an important centre of import-export activities. This chapter also advocated that during the Mahajanapada period, Kashi was renowned for its excellence in crafts, textiles, carpentry, blacksmiths, pottery makers, weavers, other milkmen, and meat cutters were the main occupations in rural areas. But continuous pilgrimage and dense population transformed into an urban area after some time.

The fifth chapter of the study discovers the sacred geography with particular references to Banaras. Thus, the chapter advocated that ecological features composed of a river (the Ganga) stream and pools, well Kunds people believed to be holy in Varanasi. This chapter delves into the significance of geographical features in the creation of pilgrimage destinations and the reverence of nature as sacred. The study of cultural ecology explores the interrelationship between human culture and the environment. For instance, Varanasi is a holy city with signs and symbols that reflect its cosmic significance, making it a "cosmos sacred city." The revered depiction of Banaras offers a profound glimpse into the rich culture and daily life of Banaras in the heart of the mid-Ganga valley during the ancient period, spanning from the 12th century BCE to the 4th century CE.

Finally, the sixth chapter is the conclusion of the study, and presents the major findings and outcome of the proposed study. This chapter attempted to highlight the broad observations, findings, and further likelihood of research in this area. An overview of the study is provided in this chapter, along with analytical tools and conceptual framework for the conduct of the study.

This conclusion highlights some key findings;

- The study of cultural ecology revealed that most sacred symbols emerged as symbols of Indian civilization and Hindu culture.
- Banaras emerged as an emblem of Hindu cultural ecology which represents the cultural ethics of the conservation of nature from a spiritual perspective.
- Banaras, with its strategic location, fertile land, lush grasslands, dense forests, and meandering rivers, has developed a diverse and rich ecosystem that has transformed it into a bustling trade and commercial hub.

- The rich religious and economic conditions have influenced the culture of Banaras, making it a sacred space for Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains and transforming it into a pilgrimage site and cultural image of India.
- With the founding of the state, the commercial center and trade activities flourished in ancient Banaras, significantly influencing and shaping its cultural identity.
- The diverse cultural environment has led to the emergence of unique cultural identities like Banarasipani, reflecting the impact of cultural diversity on societal norms and individual expressions within the community.

The research findings emphasize the significance of examining ancient cities with cultural and political importance from an ecological standpoint. The study of cultural ecology has provided valuable insights into the origins of sacred symbols as representative of Indian civilization and Hindu culture. Specifically, the city of Banaras has been identified as a pivotal hub of Hindu cultural ecology, epitomizing the cultural values associated with the reverence for nature from a spiritual perspective. The strategic geographical positioning of Banaras has exerted a profound influence on human settlement patterns, resulting in transformative changes in urban habitation and the intricate interplay between ecological and demographic factors. Furthermore, the convergence of rich religious and economic conditions has indelibly shaped the cultural landscape of Banaras, elevating its status as a revered destination for Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains, and cementing its reputation as a significant pilgrimage site and a cultural emblem of India.