



## From a sacred place to a religious tourist destination: contribution of Bengali community of Varanasi in shaping the destination image

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### Abstract

Situated on the banks of River Ganga, Varanasi is an example of different communities migrated from different places settled here from ancient period. Bengali community, migrated from the erstwhile undivided Bengal, contributed in shaping the cultural identity of Varanasi. Employing qualitative research methods, this study is structured on a sociological perspective. The study used observations and in-depth interviews to gather the required data. Using purposive sampling, respondents were selected on the basis of their knowledge on the context of the study. Conclusions were drawn from the synthesis of observations by researchers and the content analysis of the interview transcripts. The findings present the interplay of historical events and its consequences on the socio-temporal-spatial dynamics which result in continuity of unique traditions amidst the social changes. Further, it presents the contributions of different generations of Bengali community of Varanasi in building up a pluralistic but religious identity which inspired devotees and tourists from the Eastern India to visit the city. The study helps in understanding the role of Bengali Community in enriching the cultural ethos and religious heritage of the city as a popular tourist destination.

**Keywords:** Community, cultural identity, cultural tourism, religious tourism, Varanasi

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## Introduction

Varanasi has been a favourite subject for researchers since several centuries. The historic, religious and cultural characteristics of the city provided immense opportunities to construct, relate and contrast the academic discourses on cultural geography of the city. Varanasi known as Kashi or Banaras manifested as a religious centre for three religions, Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. While religious importance highlighted the sacredness of the city, the urban area reflected the morphology of a cultural landscape that quickly absolved communities of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Known as Kashi Janpath, it was one of the 16 Mahajanapadas in ancient India (Singh, 2009). Varanasi is considered as an extremely important teerth sthan in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism (Sacred site of religious importance). Several ancient religious texts such as Skanda Purana, Brahadaranyaka Upanishad, Satapatha Brahmana extensively discussed about the religious importance of the city (Bhattacharya, 1999). The 14th-century Jain text Vividha Tirtha Kalpa by Jinaprabha Suri highlights its religious significance and its association with Jainism, while Mahaparinibbana Sutta mentions it as a prominent city visited during Buddha's travels. Kashi Khand of Skandapurana describes the significance of Kashi *Kshetra*, which also cites the important places where a pilgrim has to visit during the trip to Varanasi. According to Singh (2009), the sacred spatial system is embedded in the landscape of Varanasi.

The archaeological evidences established that Varanasi was a populated area and the city thrived with continuous living traditions (Motichandra, 2018). Various historical events reconciled with time and created shared memories. The layered history of the city narrates the temporal changes, synchronisation and assimilation of pluralistic lifestyle that strengthened the cultural image. Migrants settled here from different regions of India, created an impactful presence by contributing to the cultural ethos and spiritual sphere of Varanasi. Zara (2016) argued that the importance of spatial dimension in shaping a cultural understanding of Varanasi. The 'spatial factor' in construing the broad understanding of a shared culture is highly significant as the city belonged to the natives and the migrant settlers.

The period between 1000 CE to 1999 CE, demonstrates certain pattern of transformation of Varanasi featured by migrations, settlement pattern and fusion of cultural ethos. Connectivity through the river Ganga made journeys possible from Haridwar to Kolkata in the beginning of the millennium (Swamy, 2002), which resulted in developing Varanasi as a confluence of cultures. Known as Banaras or Kashi, the city accommodated people from different regions of India in the past. According to Gaenzle (p.303), settlers from Bengal, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan and from down south forming a cosmopolitan space. The elites and the rich mainly from Bengal

could afford long journeys to Varanasi by boat, though the journey could take several months. They patronised temples in the city and supported the establishment of maths and *dharmashalas*.

Among other communities, Bengali community migrated from erstwhile undivided Bengal, who retains distinct socio-cultural feature, although they are assimilated and aligned with other communities living here. In Bengali religious texts, Varanasi was given importance as a sacred city closely associated with Shiva and spiritual liberation. The late 18th-century Bengali text *Annada Mangal* by Bharatchandra Ray narrates the story of Shiva and parvati, including Parvati's stay in Varanasi as the goddess Annapurna.

Understanding the transformation of ancient cities to modern urban space from the sociological perspective deserve great importance in the modern times. Extant literature presents a scanty picture of migrant communities role in shaping destination image. While historians presents chronicles in a scholarly format, information about communities and their role in shaping the image of a place is often missing in the tourism literature.

To address this gap, the present study aims to investigate the cultural legacy of Bengali Community in Varanasi and their contributions in making the religious tourist destination image of the city. The study is premised on the evidence available from the existing literature and synthesising the expertise and knowledge of community experts. The present study addresses the following research questions; What are the factors motivated people of Bengali origin to settle in Varanasi? What are the main contributions of Bengali settlers to the cultural ethos of the city? How do the tangible and intangible cultural features contributed to the cultural milieu of Varanasi and it contributed to the touristic image of the city?

## **Background of the Study**

### *Historical roots*

The religious and spiritual significance of Varanasi has long attracted Yogis from Bengal, spiritual masters and devotees alike. Available records relate the connection of Bengal and Varanasi as early as 12<sup>th</sup> Century; the Gahadvala King Govindchandra married Kumara Devi, the niece of Pala King Rama Pala of Bengal in 1100 CE (Goshal, 1986). Though it was a marriage alliance, this resulted in extending the empire politically and establishing peace among two prominent regions of ancient India. The silk route connection and religious importance strengthened the destination image of the city. The Bhakti movement enshrined the place image of the city as a sacred place. Gained from the locational advantage, Banaras retained the image of holy city while River Ganga mediated the pilgrim and trade movements until the road or rail transport systems connect Eastern India with Northern India.

Spiritual masters draw nobles and pilgrims from Bengal to Varanasi. The ashrams of gurus and associated cultural institutions have been a pulling factor for frequent visits of devotees from the undivided Bengal.

Gita Govinda written by Jaidev in 12<sup>th</sup> century fostered the Krishna cult in Bengal. Varanasi, was one of halting points for the pilgrims proceeding to Mathura by river route. *Ashrams* exclusively for widows and elderly people were another notable feature of both Mathura and Varanasi. Visit of Chaitanya Maha Prabhu (Spiritual leader of Vaishnava sect, belonged to Bengal) in Varanasi in 14<sup>th</sup> century CE reinforced the religious significance of this city by paving way to the establishment of Krishna cult (Bhattacharya A. B., 1986).

The Bhakti period (medieval period in India) continued to attract saints to visit Varanasi along with pilgrims' flow to the city. River Ganga bridged the cultures of eastern and northern part of India. Later, Sher Shah Suri upgraded road connectivity 'Sadak e Azam' which was later known as Grand Trunk Road in the British period. Emergence of Marathas and deterioration of Mughal kingdom paved way to the next phase of revival of important Hindu pilgrimage sites in India, including Varanasi.

Varanasi was once referred to as the 'second Calcutta' due to its sizeable Bengali population. Queen Bhabani of Natore (in undivided Bengal) made significant contributions to the development of the city's religious infrastructure. She visited Varanasi with her daughter Tara and other family members. A large temple complex commissioned by Rani Bhabani in the Pande Haveli area continues to attract both devotees and tourists. The complex features several courtyards resembling *thakurdalans*, along with subsidiary temples dedicated to deities of the Shakta tradition, such as Durga, Tara, Kali, and Annapurna, as well as to Vaishnavism, with shrines dedicated to Krishna and Radha.

This complex attracts visitors' curiosity due to its distinctive architectural features. The structure incorporates local architectural elements, such as flat-roofed pillared pavilions in place of traditional *shikharas*, along with brickwork and arches that reflect both Bengali and British architectural styles. It is one of the largest religious buildings in Varanasi commissioned by the Bengali gentry, and it remains functional today, governed by a group of trustees nominated by the community.

The eastern part of India has always been inclined towards Shakti worship. The Mother Goddess, or Shakti, is revered in her folk forms as Manasa, Vishari, Shasthi, and Shitala, and in her classical forms as Durga, Yogini, Kali, Tara, and by several other names.

Varanasi has a tradition of housing the replicas of *tirthas* and the respective presiding deity. There are temples dedicated to Baidyanath, Kamakhya Devi

or Omkareshwar as the replicas. However, the cult of Kali became popular in Varanasi only with the arrival of Bengali settlers. One of the four images of Tara installed in the temples of Varanasi is was commissioned by Rani Bhawani in 1776 (Singh & Singh, 2006, p.59).

Several Zamindars of Bengal had established their second homes in Varanasi, during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. A plaque inscribed on one of the old houses in Deonathpura indicates, that the Durga Puja Festival started here as early as 1767. The cultural spots which dominate the Bengali community inhabited area of Varanasi are temples, *satras*, *ashrams*, *dharmshalas* and other public, private buildings and mansions. Private residential buildings and structures owned by princely states of undivided Bengal were erected in the narrow lanes with their peculiar features of modern architecture depicting the likeness of *bhadraloks* or nobles of Bengal. The architecture also features detailed woodwork on the façades, adorned with windows, reliefs, and beautiful cast-iron railings, gates, and fences, which also influenced the city's dwelling structures.

#### *The later period*

Modern architecture featured reinforced brick and concrete roofs. On the basis of height and spacious inside courtyards, these buildings closely resembled contemporary Britain. Similar influences are evident in the residential quarters, and religious architectures (*thakurdalans*) within the private mansions of Bengal. *Thakurdalans*, inherited by the Bengali Zamindar families, are single or double-storied structures characterized by fluted arched openings, ornate Corinthian pillars, chandeliers and fine marble floors.

The modern architectural style of *Thakurdalan* or *Durgadalan* became common in the late eighteenth century, following the example set by Nabakrishna Deb of Sobhabazar (Bhattacharya, 2007, p. 939) who commissioned a house with a *thakurdalan* where Durga Puja was performed to celebrate the East India Company's victory at the battle of Palassey (1757 CE), an event attended by Robert Clive himself.

While passing along the Banaras Hindu University–Godowlia Road, one can see such architecture lining the road toward Jangamabadi, just past Bhadaini, where the Bengali community resides. Several bylanes and meandering streets connect the main road to Shivala Ghat, Harishchandra Ghat, Pandey Ghat, Dighpatia Ghat, Dashashwamedh Ghat, and others, forming the Bengali Tola, where much of the community was originally concentrated. However, the Bengali community now resides in various parts of the city, extending from Pucca Mahal (the old city) and its surrounding areas to Gurudham, Behlupur, Luxa, Beniabagh, Kamcha, and other important localities.

Jaynarayan Goshal of Bhukailash Rajbari of Kiddherpore (Das, 1933, p. 218; Shukul, p. 36) came to Varanasi in the early late 1600's. Bhukailash Rajbari possessed immense area of land and the first modern school in Varanasi in the year 1814. (Sherring, 1817,p.333) Raja Jaynarayan Goshal also constructed a temple in a unique architectural style that was unfamiliar to this region at the time. The superstructure of the Gurudham temple, commissioned by him, was built in an octagonal form and surrounded by a colonnaded structure, making extensive use of bricks rather than the more common rubble masonry of undressed or dressed sandstone. This structure is also one of the earliest in the city to reflect both European influence and the traditional brick architecture of Bengal.(Desai, 2017, pp.106-107) A similar kind of circular/octagonal architecture has been unearthed during the construction work of Kashi Vishwanasth Corridor project, hints Bengali influence (Shukla, 2020).

In the 1830's, the British East India Company constructed a metalled road connecting Calcutta to Kabul. The train service between Calcutta and Mughal Sarai came into existence in 1862, which led to the increased connectivity between Calcutta and Banaras. Many Bengalis came to Banaras during this period were employed under the British administration; they were often educated and affluent. Many of them chose to settle in the city post retirement and built residences in areas like Luxa and Bengali Tola. They continued to celebrate Bengali festivals alongside local ones such as Shivratri, Diwali and others, thus contributing to the cultural milieu of Varanasi.

### *Religious tourism and destination Image*

Destination image is a widely discussed topic among tourism academia. The perceived image of a place is construed by different factors such as place attributes, individual factors and the role of service providers. Baloglu & McCleary (1999) proposed three type of destination image; cognitive, affective and global. Papadimitriou et al., (2015) proposed that destination personality plays a central role in destination image formation. In the words of Kim & Chen (2016) destination image formation is a continuous process and the role of information convergence having a crucial role. Seabra et al. (2020) identified six dimensions of destination image formation, ranging from authenticity to culture.

Scholars of religious tourism considers that the beliefs and lives of people linked with a destination deeply reflect the destination image of a religious place (Nyaupane et al., 2015; Poria et al., 2003). Kocigyt (2016) examined the role of cognitive and affective factors in predicting the image of religious tourist destinations. Chakrabarty & Sadhukhan (2020) argued that the religious features embedded in a site deeply influence the pilgrim which

result in the destination image of a religious site. While most of the scholars' explored the destination image formation process from the perspective of tourist (individual), literature explaining the geo-socio characteristics are insufficient. Further, places hold substantial value and significance in the context of religions originated in the Oriental World. Different ethnic communities have distinct role in shaping the identity of a place.

### *Theoretical background*

According to Low & Alman (1992) place attachment includes multiple dimensions. This theory delineates the role of the emotional social and psychological bonding of an individual to a place. This theory underlines how individuals relate their cognitive thinking and social factors with a place. Giuliani & Feldman (1993) explored the cultural and developmental context of Place Attachment Theory. It is an undeniable fact that prolonged interactions contribute to emotional bonds and the authors emphasised the fact that place attachment is deeply rooted in emotional connections with a place than its physical attributes. Relating the findings of the proposed theoretical lens, it is imperative to understand how the communities play a significant role in shaping of identities that reflect in the destination images of a place in the long term. Scannell & Gifford (2010) proposed that person dimension, psychological process dimension and place dimension result into place attachment. The present study situates in the underlying principles of place attachment theory.

### **Methodology**

The present study adopted qualitative research technique to conduct the research inquiry. The study used primary data collected through observations and in-depth interviews. A semi structured interview schedule was prepared to collect the required data. A list of twenty-five prominent persons belonging to Bengali Community, whose family migrated to the city long back (as early as 200 years) were prepared. All respondents were aged above 65 years and attention was paid to select respondents from diverse professions they engaged with. The respondents were contacted by the authors at their place of residence for conducting the interview. After briefing the objectives of this research, with the consent of the respondents, interviews were recorded for data analysis purpose. Each interview lasted for more than an hour and research notes were made in the field diary. Handwritten notes were also taken which could help authors to compile and corroborate with the textual references. Places which have contextual importance were visited repeatedly, photographs were taken and interviews were done purposefully to gather specific information required for the present study. Applying the principles of theoretical sampling, interviews of fifteen respondents were used for the present study as there was no new information and the saturation level reached.

## **Findings & Discussion**

### *Driving forces of migration*

Pilgrimage locally called as *teerthyatra* was one of the main driving force of people to take up travel in the past in India. While pilgrims visited other places of religious importance, Varanasi emerged as a permanent home for many of them. In the words of Amitabh Bhattacharya,

“the landscape of Varanasi attracted people here. River Ganga connected Varanasi and Calcutta. While some Bengalis settled in Chapra in Bihar (another city on the banks of river Ganga), but many people found Varanasi as the right place to settle in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Varanasi was called as second Bengal once up on a time because of the dominant presence of Bengalis in various areas in Varanasi.”

Many pilgrims who were at their older age prefer to stay in the city rather than returning to their native place. As *sati pratha* was prevailed in the ancient and medieval India this social custom was also prevalent in the eastern part of India especially Bengal region. From the interactions the researchers come to an understanding that some families of Bengal did not want their women to commit Sati and they were sent to Varanasi or Mathura Vrindavan as these places accommodated those widows (Child or Old) and provided a purpose to their remaining life. Palatial buildings, *dharmashalas* and temples at the pilgrimage sites built by the rulers, Zamindars of Bengal and other rich people facilitated the pilgrims of all class. This further motivated people of Bengal region to take up their pilgrimage to Varanasi as slowly the city had sizable number of Bangla speaking community.

“Three to four decades before there were more than 20 welfare religious institutions like *satras* constructed by Zamindars and Princely states of undivided Bengal in Varanasi. It provided free food and shelter for pilgrims for three days in a stretch. If a Bengali visits Varanasi, he/she could easily stay here for more than one month without spending any money”(Nithai Bhattacharya).



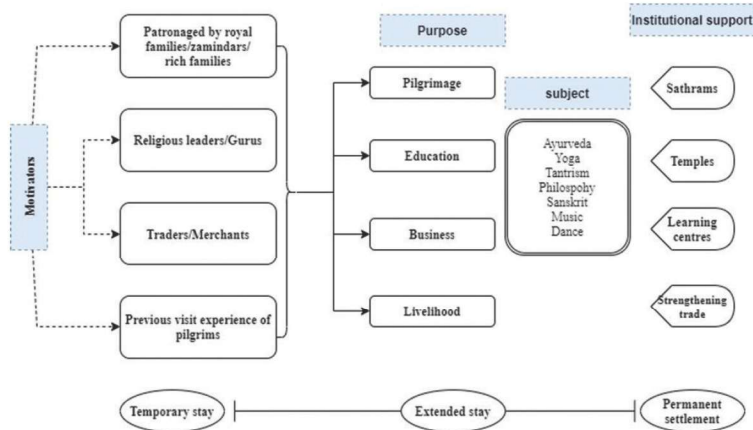


Figure 1: Phases of cultural assimilation

According to Goshal, (1986), “the migration and settlement of Bengalis happened in four phases. 7<sup>th</sup> Century AD to 12 Century AD, 13<sup>th</sup> century AD to 18<sup>th</sup> Century AD, migrations in 20<sup>th</sup> Century and after migrations held after 1947”. The sequence of events in the history demonstrates that in the first phase there was a dominance of Pala Dynasty in Kashi region. Pala Kings initiated the construction of temples in the ancient Kashi. The rulers of Pala Kingdom maintained good relationship with Varanasi which initiated the first phase of migration to Varanasi. It could be assumed that the movement between Kashi and Bengal was through River Ganga which must have restricted access to rich people or the royal family members, but many willing pilgrims could not take a trip to Varanasi. Followers of Vaishnavism started visiting Varanasi and settled here from various places though Varanasi was a city known for Lord Shiv.

The second phase of migration happened in the last part of medieval period. Pratapaditya, the ruler of Jassore constructed he Chausatthi Ghat consecrated the Bhadra Kali temple during the reign of Emperor Akbar. Rise of Shakta/Shakti worship, tantric rituals establish the fact that Shakti worship getting considerable acceptance among Zamindars from Bengal. Bhabanada Mazumdar built the Annapurna Temple during 1555-1570. The fourth King of Cooch Bihar renovated the Lolark Temple and the Kund during 1587-1621. An architectural complex commissioned by the Raja of Cooch Behar houses several buildings and temples within a sprawling campus located along the Assi-Godowlia Road, near Bengali Tola. The complex is entered through a double-storied gateway that bears the emblem of the erstwhile kingdom. The campus includes numerous temples dedicated to Lord Shiva, constructed in the Banarasi style. These temples feature curvilinear *garbha-grihas* adorned with *urhasringas* (miniature *shikharas*) and flat-roofed *mandapas* supported by two fluted pillars. Notably, the complex also includes a flat-roofed

*thakurdalan*-style structure with a central courtyard. This structure houses a sculpture of Goddess Kali and is one of several Kali-baris established in the city by Rajas and zamindars from Bengal.

The Shiva temples constructed by Bengali Zamindars or princely estates from different parts of India were based on the local architectural style. In contrast, the Kali-baris, which introduced a new kind of religious space, followed a different idiom that reflected elements of native Bengali architecture. This could have been with an intention to facilitate pilgrims and annual ceremonies associated with the temple and the community, in a way it created an enhanced space for socialization and cultural gatherings.

Many ghats were renovated and newly constructed by the donations given by Bengali land-owning families. A large palatial structure, flanked by massive bastions facing the Ganga, was built by Raja Sitaram Ray, king of Muhammadpur in South Bengal. This site is presently known as Digpatiya Ghat (Singh, 2022, p.78).

It is evident that during 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Varanasi continued to attract the royal families of different states. *Dharmashalas* and *satras* in the city hosted pilgrims and offered lodging and boarding at free/minimal cost. The Hindu sanyasis (sages) popularly known as 'Guru' or 'Guru Dev' or 'Baba' had a dominant role in bringing people to Varanasi. Their trip last for several months and this later resulted in the establishment of *maths* or *dharmashalas*. The names of Rani Bhavani and Jai Narayan Goshal were known for their contributions to the city in varied ways and creating a mini-Bengal in Varanasi. Bengali Tola the place name refers to the concentration of Bengali people settled in between Kalitala to Kedar ghat and the road connecting Sonar Pura to Godowlia.

The Queen of Nattore, 'Rani Bhavani' is one of the founders of modern Kashi. Rani Bhavani renovated/constructed Omkareshwar Temple, Lat Bhairav Temple, Kapal Mochan, Pisach Mochan, Adikeshav temple, Shankudhara Temple and tank, and Kardameshwar Tank (kund). During the time of Rani Bhavani, a number of permanent structures were built in the city which caters to the need of the pilgrims. There was a steady movement of pilgrims, traders and other visitors to Varanasi as the connectivity improved between Calcutta and Varanasi.

The beginning of 16<sup>th</sup> century to the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century shows concentration of settlement of Bengalis between Dashaswamedh and Kedar Ghat area which later known Bengali Tola. During the rule of the English East India Company, educated Bengalis found opportunities in government and other prominent jobs in private sector. The free movement of travelling within India ceased with the division of Bengal in 1907. Many people settled in Varanasi or contributed for the development of the infrastructure of Varanasi were originally belonged to East Bengal. With the division of

Bengal on the basis of religion caused chaos and riots, which in turn resulted in a reverse flow. Some Bengalis lived in Varanasi returned to Bengal as they found their properties and wealth were at risk.

As the population of Bengali settlers increased over a period of time, demand for house hold items, and other ritualistic materials increased over time. Traders brought such materials available in Bengal and sold it in the lanes. There are exclusive shops owned by Bengalis selling materials used in rituals and other religious ceremonies along the Kedar Ghat to Dashashwamedh Lane. The sweet dishes of Bengal also made available locally by Bengalis settled in Varanasi. Sudhir Sweets situated at Bengali Tola was once very renowned sweet shop in Varanasi, which continues its legacy and people who know about the uniqueness of the sweet shop still visit the place.

A road that turns to the right when one is coming from Lanka-BHU towards Harishandra Ghat, a well-known cremation site, features several double or triple- storied buildings with colonial-era architectural elements. Just before the steps leading down to the ghat, a lane on the left heads toward Bengali Tola, which also marks the boundary of Kedar Khand (of famous Gauri-Kedareshwar Mahadev temple). This long, meandering lane ends at the Dashaswamedh ghat, where a Bengali community owned Kamrupa *math* and a Kali Mandir stand flanking its end. Primarily established to serve cater the needs of Bengali pilgrims, the area also hosts shops selling ritual items for the Bengali community residing in the city.

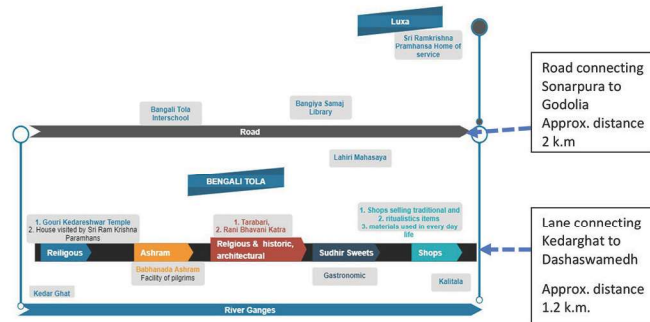


Figure 2

The figure 2 shows two main area of Bengali settlements in Varanasi. Bengali Tola became a major centre of movements and activity. The geographical location in the figure represents the religious-cultural-social sphere of Bengali settlers in Varanasi that weaved over a period of two hundred years. Lodging establishments, *maths*, eateries, textile shops, multi-purpose shops situated here once up on a time were mostly managed and used by the people of Bengali origin. Several residential units along the lane led to

the area becoming densely populated by Bengalis. Interactions with experts indicate that, after the 1980s, many residents from this locality returned to Bengal or migrated to other cities, often selling their properties before leaving.

### **Impact of Bengali settlement on the cultural and social image of Varanasi**

The Bengali settlement in Varanasi was able to integrate easily with the local population. Figure 3 illustrates the impact of Bengali Community on the destination image building of Varanasi as a cultural and spiritual destination. Bengali physicians were particularly well-regarded in the city, and the title Kaviraj was conferred upon those who were experts in various branches of medicine. There were several renowned Bengali physicians lived in Varanasi during the 19th and early 20th centuries. According to Rai Chowdhury,

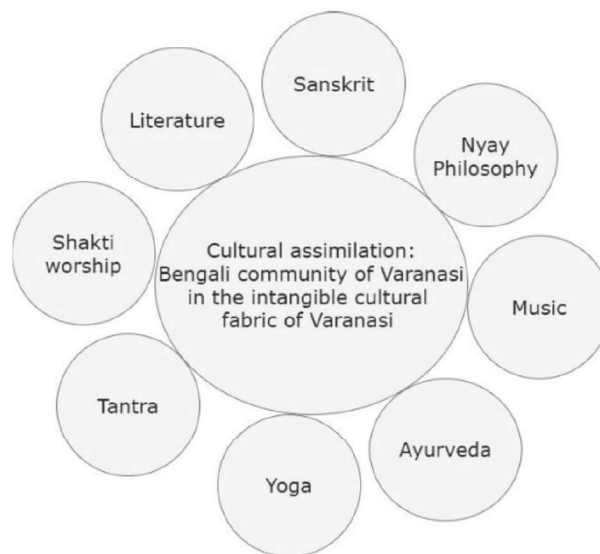
“Kavirajs were experts of all branches of medicines, though they preferred Ayurveda as a main treatment option and some of them used a combination of Ayurveda, modern medicine and homeopathy’. The practice was to understand the nature of disease first and then treat the patient with the appropriate medicines. Kaviraj had expertise in Ayurveda, Modern Medicine, Homeopath and even black magic”.

In 1902 Swami Vivekananda laid the foundation stone for the Sri Rama Krishna Home of Service (also known as Kaudiya hospital) at Luxa, which turned up as one of the advanced medicare in Varanasi since its establishment. As there were very limited medical facilities in Varanasi till late 1990's, Sri Ram Krishna Home of Service helped people of all classes, especially poor to get medical aid. Several reputed doctors served this hospital as consultants without any remuneration and helped patients in recovering from their illness. Establishment of this hospital also marked an invaluable contribution by the Bengali community to the city.

Yoga gained popularity in the city after Lahiri Mahasaya introduced Kriya Yoga, attracting disciples from different parts of the world who followed his path. Swamy Yogananda, disciple of Lahiri Mahasaya popularised Kriya Yoga worldwide. During Guru Poornima followers visit the samadhi of Sri Lahiri Mahasaya every year. Gopinath Kaviraj, who was the disciple of Swami Vishudhananda was another exponent of Yoga, who was also popular in the field of Philosophy. Maa Anand Mai, Sri Ram Krishna Paramhansa, and Swamy Pranavananda contributed immensely to the cultural and spiritual scape of the city.

Several eminent scholars of Bengali community in Varanasi contributed to the growth of 'Nyaya Darshana' a branch of Indian Philosophy. Balabhadra Mishra was a member of the Emperor Akbar's Rajsabha.

Padbhanabha Mishra, Ramkrishna Bhattacharya, Raghunath Vidyalkara (all belonged to Varanasi) were some renowned experts of Nyay Darshana. The Bengali settlers also contributed to Sanskrit education in Varanasi. There are accounts of Sanskrit scholars from Bengal residing in Varanasi during the 17<sup>th</sup> century and contributed to the literary tradition of the city (Kaviraj, 2015, pp.65-67). Some of the exponents of Sanskrit literature were awarded the title 'Mahamahopadhyaya', a designation given to the highest level of intellectual capability.



**Figure 3:** Contribution of Bengali Community in the Destination Image of Varanasi

The Bengali Community in Varanasi was highly influenced by the intellectual and literary traditions of Bengal. Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Prize winner of Literature was the patron of 'Uttara', a Bengali journal published from Varanasi (Gupta, 1986). The legacy of printed magazines in Varanasi dates back to 1849 with the publication of a weekly titled Varanasi Chandrodya. The first standard journal, Sudhakar, was published in 1850 and edited by Taramohan Mitra.

Established in 1866, the Bangiya Sahtiya Samaj is an initiative by the Bengali community of Varanasi. It houses a library with a collection of rare books and periodicals, numbering around seventeen thousand, according to Prof. Subrato Bhattacharaya of Banaras Hindu University, who daily volunteers his time at the library. The organization has no permanent staff and is managed entirely by community volunteers. The current premises were once the residence of renowned Sanskrit scholar Tarachanran Bhattacharaya Sahityacharya. The house was later donated to the organization by his son, Prof. Biswanath Bhattacharya, himself a distinguished Sanskrit scholar.

The reputation of Varanasi as a centre of learning inspired people from all intellectual backgrounds, but the pursuit of scholarly wisdom and the deeper meanings of ancient Indian knowledge systems particularly attracted individuals from the upper strata of society.

Durga Puja, a festival observed by Bengalis with great devotion and involvement, was introduced in Varanasi by the Mitra family in the first quarter of the 18th century. The Mitra Kothi (also known as Bengali Deodhi) in the Chaukhamba area of Tatheri Bazar was built in the late 18th century by a Bengali zamindar family and displays a blend of architectural styles, ranging from local to Mughal and European influences introduced by the British.

The principal courtyard was designed as a Durgadalan for the annual Durga Puja, which the family began celebrating shortly after the building's completion. A silver image of the goddess, along with the entire pantheon, is permanently installed on a pedestal in the dalan (Desai, pp.99-100). Temples dedicated to Shiva and Radha-Krishna, which are also part of the Deodhi, are fashioned in the local style and might have been intended to create a balance between indigenous and borrowed architectural elements.

In the beginning, Durga Puja programmes were confined to residences, which slowly spread over to other places in the city. Several cultural clubs and social organisations brought the traditions associated with Durga Puja in Varanasi. These clubs played an important role in nurturing the cultural traditions of Bengal. According to R.N. Banerjee, (Trust Member, Rani Bhavani Trust)

“there were cultural programmes locally known as jatras (theatres) and festivities taken up during Durga Puja festival time. The artists used to spend a month or more. The puja festivities encouraged even people from Bengal to visit Varanasi and attend Puja here. Though many over 250 Puja pandals conduct Durga Puja ceremonies in Varanasi, old traditions such as jatras have been lost acceptance among the new generation”

### **Destination image: Significance of the intangible components**

Destination image of place is construed up on tangible and intangible features of a place. The socio-cultural characteristics of a place is evolved from the legacy of resident's way of life. These intangible attributes significantly build the narratives and create an overall image of a destination. While a tourist destination retains the popular image, the visitors do contribute by sharing their visit experience in various platforms. The perceived image of Varanasi as a sacred site for Hindus can be considered as an external layer of this numerous intangible cultural characteristics ranging from multi-dialect speaking floating crowd in the bylanes, the religious symbols echoed

at different points, celebration of festivals and traditions. The formation of destination image according scholars have been divided into three. A close examination of how these images activate in the context of Varanasi as a cultural tourist destination is presented below. Agapito (2013) classify the destination image as cognitive, affective and conative. The destination image formation process takes place during pre visit, post visit or during the visit (Martin-Santana, 2017).

According to Crompton (1979), tourists form destination image from beliefs and ideas and mental representation. This is further explained as cognitive image. The cognitive image has an overall impact on the tourist's emotional sphere. Prior researches reported a significant influence of destination image on place attachment and place identity (Ninomiya et al, 2019), behavioural intention and revisit (Ham and Severt, 2018; Soiden et al., 2017).

The affective image of Varanasi is formed from the emotional connect of people towards the destination. As mentioned earlier, the religious sentiment attached to a destination is found stronger with people who have association with the same place in some way. It has been observed that the Bengali community exhibits stronger social bonding compared to other communities. The community also instills a sense of pride in its cultural values and lineage of intellectual traditions.

The conative image refers to the behavioural reflections of the tourist about the future intentions (Arabadzhyan et al., 2021). Varanasi, being a favourite destination for all type of tourists because of its tourist friendly image. The presence of Bengali community in the city inspires people from Bangla speaking area, it certainly influence the cognitive, affective and conative spheres.

The migration of people of Bengali origin and the formation of a significant diaspora in Varanasi is a multifaceted phenomenon rooted in religious, educational, and cultural motivations. The early settlements of Bengali communities were often facilitated by the patronage of zamindars, princely estates, and affluent families who established temples, *maths*, and *dharmashalas*, thereby marking their presence in the sacred geography of the city. One of the defining contributions of Bengali settlers lies in the realm of education and scholarship in supporting and popularizing modern education while maintaining a strong connection to Sanskrit and traditional Hindu philosophy, thus creating a unique synthesis of tradition and modernity.

Bengali influence is evident in both the tangible and intangible aspects of Varanasi's cultural ethos, whether through architectural styles, the annual celebration of Durga Puja, or the continued presence of neighbourhoods like Bengali Tola, which still retain a strong Bengali cultural imprint. Moreover, these contributions have not remained isolated; they have significantly

shaped the touristic image of Varanasi. The Bengali presence adds a unique regional flavour to the city's spiritual landscape, attracting pilgrims and cultural tourists from Bengal and beyond. Bengali-owned temples, *ghats*, and cultural institutions further enhance Varanasi's appeal as a multi-layered cultural destination.

However, a critical perspective must also consider the evolving dynamics of cultural identity in the city. While Bengali influence has historically enriched Varanasi's pluralism, recent decades have witnessed a decline in the visibility and cohesion of the community due to both outward and reverse migration, as well as shifting urban priorities.

## Conclusion

The present study has explored the chronology of historical migration, cultural integration and religious contributions of the Bengali community in Varanasi, emphasizing their pivotal role in shaping the city's pluralistic religious identity and destination image. This research illustrates how tangible heritage structures and intangible cultural practices of the Bengali community have contributed to a unique pattern of cultural assimilation within the urban fabric of Varanasi. Tangible structures bear witness to the passage of time, while the intangible cultural forms expressed through language, knowledge systems and traditions distinguish the community from the rest of the population in Varanasi. This study, viewed through the lens of sociological perspectives and place attachment theory, presents the societal attributes that have significantly contributed to the destination image-making process.

One limitation of this research is that the findings are based on a relatively small sample which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences within the entire Bengali community living in Varanasi. In addition, the reliability of oral histories, myths, legends and personal narratives, though valuable, may be effected by memory biases or selective recollection. This study lays the groundwork for comprehending the patterns of social fabric, diversity and inclusivity in a dynamic society shaped by social harmony. It provides insights into how migration driven by religious motivations can foster inclusivity and create vibrant urban spaces, thereby contributing to broader discussions on cultural assimilation.

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