

Ancient India – Some Sacred Sites

Varanasi

Lord Shiva is linked to the most ancient legends relating to Varanasi. In times beyond time, this was a vast jungle where the Lord Shiva manifested Himself as Lord VishvaNath - Lord of the whole world. At the confluence of the rivers Varan and Asi, a small town was created, centring its self around the ancient Linga of Lord VishvaNath. In times to come, this became a major temple town and a centre of great learning. Most monastic orders have at least a token temple or a monastery here. Students here can learn from ancient scriptures and compare the various philosophies of all the great masters of our past.

After the Muslim invasion of India, the great universities at Taxashila and Nalanda were destroyed by the Islamic zealots. They could not appreciate the beauty of the philosophical insights offered by a more ancient civilization than their own. Of the great ancient universities, Varanasi is the only one that has managed to survive the attack of both the Muslims and the Christian rulers. However, many of its temples suffered badly during the Islamic rule of India. Some of the more ancient and sacred sites & temples were cleared to make way for the main mosque that now stands on the highest hill in Varanasi. Lord VishvaNath's temple also migrated at this time and moved further down stream, nearer to the ManiKarnika ghat of the city.

The city has innumerable temples, monasteries and the world famous bathing ghats. There are practically thousands of small shrines - often just an alcove set in someone's home or in a niche above street level - and hundreds of temples, old and new. As this is one of the most sacred cities in all India, people have often built temples here as a way of earning merit for the "here-after". Kings, queens and rich merchants used to endow these monuments with lands to take care of them, but as the land laws have changed, many of these institutions have become very poor and some of the more ancient buildings are in a very dilapidated state. The newer buildings are often garishly studded with marble and the intimacy of the atmosphere is torn asunder by blaring music from various loud speakers, each competing with the others in a battle to exult its own brand of devotional music.

Monasteries are equally numerous as temples here. Once upon a time, they too were well looked after and well cared for. In the modern India where commercialism is the be all and end all of the masses, no one cares much for the monks and learned pundits of old. The state of some of these monasteries is very sorry indeed. A few have braved the modern world and are smiling in the face of adversity. The number of monks and students is not what it used to be at one time, but this is still a great city of learning.

The city has numerous ghats where the pilgrims can bathe and cleanse their mind and body of all sins. Celebrating the various historical and legendary achievements of the past, these ghats have witnessed the passage of time, as ceaseless as the Ganges. The various ghats and buildings along the river front are as indifferent to the lives of men as

the wind which blows across its vast banks. Ghats are a vast bank of steps, set along the right-hand side of the river (looking down stream), that lead to the water's edge and enter into the holy waters in a smooth, seamless fashion. The steps are generally a series of steps punctuated by broad terraces where pilgrims can rest after a bath.

Here, along the various ghats, seekers seek God; young students learn the sacred scriptures by heart; pundits muse on the nature of the Lord in silent contemplation; musicians practice their serene tunes (the likes of sitar maestro Pundit RaviShankar who call Kashi home and plays on the ghats and roof tops of the temples by the river side in the early morning); Brahmin priests ply their trade amongst throngs of pilgrims; guides - new and old - shout out their services to tourists and pilgrims alike; pilgrims pray and bath in an attitude of absolute reverence; locals bathe and rush up the wet steps to get to work; an occasional man sits alone and views the whole tamasha of this world as it floats past the great ghats of the Ganges at Varanasi.

Shri Vallabh passed much of his childhood in this ancient-most city. His father migrated here from South India and Shri Vallabh was taught by the various luminaries of his times in this great city of "Divine Light".

ManiKarnika Ghat

Manicarnika ghat is very central to the legend that is Varanasi. It is the oldest living city in the world and the most active cremation ground too. Shivaitis consider this entire world as a vast cremation ground where all of us are burning in one sort of fire or another - fire of desire, jealousy, envy, etc. Varanasi is the ideal place to be cremated in this vast complex as at least if you burn here, all that burns are your karmic bonds and eventually you are freed. Perhaps appropriately, the holy city is mainly situated between the two most famous burning ghats of Kashi, ManiKarnika ghat and the Harishchandra ghat.

Seeing all the miseries of mankind, Lord Shiva, the eternally compassionate one, cried tears of supreme sorrow. Rudra (He who cries / is crying) decided to perform penance and ask the Lord Vishnu how to help the helpless of this world. Lord Madhava is the only one who can grant Moksha - nirvana/ liberation - hence Rudra decided to call upon Him to find an answer for the liberation of all the souls of this world.

So fierce was the penance of Yogishwara that Lord Narayana came in person to grant a boon to Ishwara. The Lord of Vaikuntha asked Lord Shiva to open His eyes, desist from this penance and ask for any boon He desired. Seeing the Lord before Him, Shiva bowed and asked for but one thing, "Please grant an easy route for salvation to all the creatures of this world. Their sorrows, caused by ceaseless cycles of birth, death and karmic entanglements this incurs, grieves me much. Please find an easy, fool proof route so that they may be liberated with ease from this cycle of constant rebirths."

Smiling His charming smile, Lord Hiranyagrba said, "Thou art the most compassionate being in this universe. It behooves you to think thus. This sacred land where you have

performed such severe penance for the good of the world, is so hallowed by your association, that from this day forth, anyone who comes here, will attain liberation. This I grant for your sake, and give you exclusive powers to liberate all creatures who come to you here."

Knowing the capricious nature of souls enmeshed in the quagmire of samsara, Lord Shiva desired to extend the terms of the boon. "Lord, please grant such a boon so that even if the creature that comes here is dead, their soul should attain nirvana."

Moved by Rudra's infinite compassion, the Lord Keshava shook His head in admiration and said, "Thou art compassion incarnate. I will grant you a boon so that anyone who comes here, dead or alive, will attain your grace. Even if a creature dies here; or is cremated here, having died elsewhere; thou hast the power to grant them liberation." When the Lord shook His head in admiration for PashuPatiNath's compassion for all jivas, one his gem encrusted earrings fell to the ground, near the kund (pond/ lake) where Lord Shiva was meditating. The hallowed spot where Lord Shiva performed his penance and where the Lord's jeweled earring fell, is the current ManiKarnika ghat (lit - mani = jewel / karnika = earring / ghat = bathing place).

Later, when the heavenly river Ganges descended to the earth and purified the souls of Sagar's sons, She decided to pay homage to Lord VishwaNath's penance and came to flow past this spot, transforming the ghat of a small kund (pond/ lake) into a ghat (bathing steps) on its own mighty banks.

From time immemorial, the burning ghat at ManiKarnika in Varanasi have attracted those seeking salvation. At a time when travel was neigh impossible and pilgrimage across the vast sub-continent a major achievement of its own, people used to commit ritual suicide at this ghat so that they may die and be liberated. In those days, travel was a dangerous adventure and having once achieved the goal of reaching Kashi, some visitors felt that it was best to seek salvation here and now, rather than risk being killed by bandits on the way back, or dying of illness back home.

Currently, this is the busiest burning ghat at Kashi, and indeed probably the whole world. As a result, most corpses do not get enough time to burn properly and are often unceremoniously dumped, half burnt into the sacred river. A constant stream of corpses come to this ghat to be burnt, day and night. Between this and the Harishchandra ghat, the other famous burning ghat in Kashi, the holy city hums with its own eternal life.

Nathadwar

Set amid idyllic hills, it provides a welcome respite from the searing heat of Rajasthan. The modest sized town is home to one the wealthiest temples in India. Town it self is famous for it's exuberant festivals, miniature paintings, jewelery and above all, it's sweets. Threat of cholesterol and calories have yet to deter the culinary experts of this town who add sugar and butter to almost all dishes!!

Life in the town revolves around the "Haveli" term used for all the temples of the "Pushti Marga". This is one of the most colorful sects within the devotional side of Hinduism. It also happens to be one of the few that do not advocate renunciation for spiritual growth. It is this worldly, practical and realistic view of life that lends itself to the colorfulness of the sect.

Only 42 km. north of Udaipur, Nathadwara is easily reached by plane or car. Constant stream of pilgrims has resulted in plentiful supply of transport and accommodation at Nathadwara.

The Haveli is the centre of attraction in the Town. Its inner sanctum is opened only eight times a day when devotees throng to catch a glimpse of the sacred form of the Lord Shrinathji. Rest of the time, it is relatively free of crowds, ideal for those wanting to explore the beauty of Rajasthani art and architecture. The entire place seems to be in a time capsule, still living the regal life long abandoned by Maharajahs of India. Temple servants still wear the clothes and costumes of the bygone era, serving the Lord of Nathadwara as the beloved prince and darling of Nanadaraj and Yashodaji.

At regular intervals, classical music is played live in its many halls as pilgrims float through its perfumed marble halls and courtyards. Pankhwalas still manually pull on the large fans to cool the interior. Drums and trumpets are still played to announce the mid-day's "Royal Darshan". Like all rajput palaces/ mansions, the Haveli is built around several split level courtyards. The solid white exterior hides the airiness achieved by this device. All doorways are painted and are often flanked by drawings of elephants, horses, beautiful maidens and doorkeepers.

Shrinathji, the main deity of the sect, resides in regal splendor, always immaculately dressed and jeweled. Exquisitely worked jewels, some dating back to pre-Mogul India, are worn by Shrinathji on daily basis. Here at least the jewels are not kept behind glass, but used for what they were intended. Everything in the inner temple, from china to silver/ gold-ware, paintings, wall hangings, clothes and furniture, are of the finest quality. Haveli itself employs some 1000 people, while the rest of the town thrives on the business given directly or indirectly by the Haveli and the pilgrims.

The best thing about this place is its mystic tranquility. The feeling of peace and spirituality seems to rise above the humdrum of the town. Numerous groves, gardens, parks and fields outside the town provide perfect escape from the crowds, you can also cool off in the river Banas nearby. Town itself is small enough to be explored on foot. Rickshaws and horse carts are available for those who do not wish to brave the heat of Rajasthan.

Best time to Visit:

Nathadwara celebrates, on average, minimum of three festivals a week, providing plenty of interest to visitors throughout the year. Monsoon July-September, Indian New Year October-November, and Spring March-April provide some of the most colorful festivals.

Rajasthani summers are notoriously hot and winters are bitterly cold. Monsoon revives the earth and the country side bursts forth in to a riot of color. Spring is equally colorful and pleasant.

Dwarika

Dwarka, on the Western shore of India, was the golden capital of Shri Krshna during His Lifetime. Since than, it has been His spiritual residence in Western India.

After arriving in Mathura, the Lord decided to build a new city, more defensible than Mathura and one that would better reflect His vision of the new world order. The Lord ordered VishwaKarma, the heavenly architect, to create a unique city, made from precious and semi-precious materials.

It was a magnificent city of gold, well designed with well organized residential and commercial zones, wide roads, plazas, palaces and many public utilities. He also imported the heavenly hall called "Sudharma Sabha" - an intelligent hall of public meetings which could expand and contract itself according to the number of people in it - so that it never looks too empty or too full !! To accommodate His growing family, the Lord fashioned over 16108 golden palaces for his wives. Other magnificent palaces were also designed for His friends and family. A special palace was made for Shri Krshna, a sanctuary of peace and quite from the hubbub of the vast and powerful city of Dwarika.

Various auspicious and wonderful beings and people came to dwell in the city of the Lord. Along with various trees and bushes from the celestial gardens, came the bush of the heavenly parijat flowers; along with numerous the divine gems, came the celebrated Kaustbh mani; along with a host of great sages, came the great Narada, Gautama and Durvasa; great dancers and singers like Chitraratha came to perform for the Lord; great demi-gods like the Surya, Agni and Indra came to meet and consult the Lord of Yadavas. All these great beings and things were guarded by the Sudarshan Chakra, Lord Vishnu's own weapon.

When the Lord decided to leave the Earth and return to His divine abode, He ordered all the divine objects to return to heaven and asked the ocean to swallow the city, least anyone tried to misuse the wealth of His Dwarika. All citizens were asked to leave the city and Dwarika was submerged by the sea.

The only area the sea did not submerge, was the private palace of the Lord Shri Dwarikadhish. Even after the Lord left, the power of His association to that sacred place was so strong, that the ocean could not drown the private apartments of the Lord. Later, a temple was created in its place and the icon found there was installed as the most original form of the Lord Shri Dwarikadhishji.

The form of Lord Dwarikadhishji is that of the Lord Vishnu with four arms. As is usual with Lord Vishnu, He bears the conch, lotus, discus and the mace in His hands. The

image is around 5 feet tall and made from a very hard black stone. The amazing fact is, those of us who have been fortunate enough to touch the wonderful feet of this deity, have found them to be as soft as any human feet !! The presence of the Lord fills the inner temple and spills out into the temple complex in general.

Tales speak of how the Lord at GuruVayur in Kerala (Southwest India) is another icon rescued from the drowning Dwarika and the Lord at Uddupi (South India) is also an image that arrived there from Dwarika. Shri Adi Shankaracharyaji saw it as an essential centre of spiritual power and founded his Western Math here. A number of other religious orders have founded their offices and temples here.

Shri Vallabhacharyaji also saw this as an important pilgrimage site and was very partial to it. Gosaiji also came to it on a regular basis and to reflect this, an important baethak has been founded here. One of the nine Nidhies is called Shri Dwarikadhishji, and many sons of Vallabh-kula are given the name of the Lord of Dwarika as a way of reminding us all of this important association between the Lord and the Vallabh-kula.

The original icon at Dwarika migrated to Dakor in Gujarat in the early part of the 13th Century. With the Lord's order, a new icon was installed at the shrine in Dwarika and so, the original Dwarikadhishji is now known as Ranchodrai of Dakor.

Shri Vallabhacharyaji was a frequent visitor to both, Dwarika and Dakor and the baethak there faces the temple across the main lake. [Click here](#) to get a darshan of Shri Ranchodraiji.

The Dwarika of today is very different from the ancient Dwarka. The main temple town is situated on the small island called the Bet Dwaraka. The town on the mainland houses the main body of temples, monasteries, pilgrim houses, hotels and the residents of the town. Located on the banks of the sacred river Gomati, it is a typical pilgrimage town of many temples, ranging from the small house/ shrine on the wayside, to major temples complexes constructed by wealthy institutions through the centuries. Many kings, merchants and monastic orders have built religious edifices to the glory of God in this town.

One of the more important places to visit, apart from the main temple, is a small lake called "Gopi talave". It is said that the Gopies of Vraj came to see their beloved Krsna for the last time at this grove outside the city. Unable to bear the pain of a second separation from their beloved Madhav, the gopies merged with the Lord and the lake near that spot became sacred by their association. Till this day, the clay from that lake is considered to be very holy and is often used as a holy sacrament.

Baethaks of Shri Vallabhacharyaji

From a young age, Shri Vallabhacharyaji felt that traveling and visiting the various pilgrimage sites around India was an essential part of His life mission. Indeed, to this end,

He circumbulated India 3 and a half times and made many smaller visits when time permitted.

One of the most important thing He did, was to recite the Shrimad Bhagvatam at a suitable spot at each of the pilgrimage sites. The spot chosen was usually a quite grove outside of the main town, on the banks of a river or a lake. Aside from reciting the original sholkas from the scriptures, He gave His commentaries on the text and thus imparted valuable knowledge / wisdom to those present. Later, this was compiled in the AnuBhashya and Subodhiniji written as His commentaries on the Brahma Sutra and Bhagvatam of Maharshi Vedam Vyasa.

The 84 most sacred spots where Shri Vallabhacharyaji recited the sacred text are hallowed as seats of spiritual power and divine grace. These are revered amongst followers of Pushti Marg as "baethak" - literally "a place to seat". Later, small shrines were erected on these sites to honour the event.

To this day, followers of the sect go to these sites for worship and contemplation. As Acharyashri abstained from taking any food during his sacred recitals and only drank water to sustain Himself, devotees offer fresh drinking water to the "sacred seat" (baethakji).

Reflecting on His visits around India, there are baethaks from the Southern most tip of India - Rameshwara - to the Northern most outpost - BadriNath. Other main baethaks are at Dwarka on the Western coast, Puri on the Eastern coast, Tirupati - at the shrine of the family's tutelary deity, Varanasi - the most sacred and longest living city in India, Champaranya - His birthplace, Prayag - at the confluence of the three most sacred rivers of India and at several holy sites in Vraj.

Following Shri Vallabhacharyaji's excellent lead, GopiNathji and VitthalNathji also gave religious discourses at sacred sites and established baethaks around India. Ever since then, this tradition has been carried on by other learned descendants of Shri Vallabhacharyaji.

A baethak usually contains a sacred (hand-written) text and personal artifact(s) of the great Acharya. It is these relics of great men that make the spot even more sacred and hallowed to the members of the Pushti Marg. Unlike a haveli, no image of the great Acharya sits on the main throne / seat (gadi). Dhoti and uparna are usually offered to the gadi. Gadiji is offered Shringar and when expertly done, it evokes the image of a great teacher sitting there, just waiting to talk ! Like a haveli, there are usually darshans at seven times a day and various rich foods are offered to the gadiji.

The Temple in Puri

There is a very good historic reason for the name Juggernaut being linked to the Lord Jaggan-Nathji.

The temple in Puri does not allow non-Hindus into the sacred precinct. As a result, the only times a foreigner could "see" the deity was during the chariot festival. The British / French and Portuguese who first came to the Eastern shore of India were fascinated by the culture there, but found it impossible to get admission into the temples. The only times they could see the sacred deities was during their "festival trips". Special platforms were sometimes created by the foreigners to facilitate a "view" of the sacred precinct. But of course, the best time to get a real and close up view of the Gods and their exotic rituals was during the biggest "outing" - the Chariot festival.

Since that time, the Lord of Puri and his chariot festival have become synonymous with each other - the British had no concept of the Lord and his festival and his chariot being different entities. They found the heathen names "unpronounceable" and their rituals fascinatingly pagan - hence they saw no reason to dwell deep enough to find the details. To them, the chariot of the Lord JagganNath was the Juggernaut - the biggest thing on wheels they (British / Europeans) had encountered. Hence all large moving vehicles came to be called Juggernaut.

The Deity of JagganNathji is also a very large deity (physically) and compared to many other temple deities they encountered, this was the biggest - one more reason for them to assume that JagganNath was the biggest deity in the country.

Bigger deities had their "Uttasav Swarupas" that went out on the "outings" and as a consequence, these special icons were smaller represententes of their bigger versions in the inner sanctum. Having never seen the original deity, the British could only assume that the deity in the festival parade was "THE" deity of the inner sanctum.

In the case of the Lord of Puri, this was not the case - at least not at the summer festival when he went on his annual holiday. Hence the association of all large religious objects - temples, chariots, deities, number of temple servants, wealth/ income of the temple etc was associated with Lord JagganNathji.

Lord Shri JagganNathji of Orrisa, on the coast of Bay of Bengal, is one of the most ancient deities in India. Pre-Aryan origins of His icon and cult are well commented on. Over the centuries, specific historical and legendary events have been celebrated as "festivals" at this Eastern spiritual centre of India. Lord JagganNath wears special "shringars" at such festivals.

Festival shringars include special masks, hands and feet, which are appended to the great icon of the Lord. This allows the devotees to "view" the Lord's lilas as described by the scriptures. This was particularly important at a time when literacy was confined to a privileged minority and the visual medium was essential for educating the masses. The clever and often ingenious ways of transforming the Lord from one svarup to another, bears testimony to the ingeniousness of the priests of Puri.

- By Bhagwat Shah

Bodh Gaya (Bihar)

Before his death, the Buddha enjoined his followers to make pilgrimages to four sites: Lumbini, where he was born; Uruvela (modern Bodh Gaya), the site of his enlightenment; Sarnath, the place of his first sermon; and Kushinara, where he died. Each of these sites may be visited today, and Bodh Gaya remains the most sacred of the four.

After the decline of Indian Buddhism in the 12th century, most Buddhist sites were destroyed or fell into disrepair. In 1891 the Sri Lankan Anagarika Dharmapala founded the Mahabodhi Society, which set out to reclaim Bodh Gaya for Buddhism; this was achieved in 1949. Bodh Gaya today is a busy centre of pilgrimage with monasteries and meditation centers run by Tibetan, Burmese, Thai and Vietnamese communities. Visitors will see a remote descendant of the Bodhi tree, the magnificent but greatly restored 7th-century Mahabodhi temple, the Buddha's stone seat (vajra-asana) and a museum of Buddhist and Hindu materials.

Sarnath (Uttar Pradesh)

The Deer Park at Sarnath just north of Varanasi was the site of the Buddha's first discourse and today contains some of the most impressive Buddhist monuments in India. The beautiful park is dominated by the 5th-century Dhamekh stupa: one of two stupas marking the spot where the Buddha is said to have first taught the Dharma. The remains of smaller stupas, shrines, five monasteries and the lower half of an inscribed Ashokan column are among other monuments to have been excavated since the 19th century.

Sarnath's archeological museum contains the Ashokan column's famous lion capital (emblem of the modern Indian state) and many other important works in stone, including a sublime figure of the teaching Buddha from the Gupta period (5th century). Like Bodh Gaya, Sarnath has a thriving international Buddhist community.

Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh)

Perhaps the finest and most complete Buddhist monument in India is Sanchi's great stupa with its four magnificent free standing gates (toranas). The vast brick stupa itself dates from around the 3rd century BC, but its carved gates and railings were probably executed two centuries later during the Satavahana dynasty. Sanchi was excavated in the early 19th century, and the restoration of the site by British and French archeologists was initiated in 1912.

Visitors today, like traditional Buddhist worshippers, can circumambulate the stupa in a clockwise direction and contemplate the teeming sculptural forms that fill the gate posts and their lofty architraves. Jataka narratives, hieratic elephants and royal lions, Hindu-Buddhist deities and exquisite female nature spirits crowd every part of the four toranas.

The small archeological museum houses excavated sculptures; other important Sanchi pieces are in museums in Delhi, London and Los Angeles.

Ajanta (Maharashtra)

The wild, crescent-shaped ravine pierced with more than twenty Buddhist cave temples makes this one of India's most spectacular sites. Many genres of early medieval sacred art, from elaborately carved monastic halls, to sculptures and wall paintings, are represented here, and prominent among Ajanta's glories are murals painted in glowing reds, blues and greens. Unique to Indian Buddhist tradition, the paintings, in high Gupta style, furnish a vision of Mahayana generosity: a mingling of human, divine and natural forms in a suspension of warm and life-enhancing interplay.

Most sublime in grace, compassion and serenity is the incomparable figure of Padmapani, the lotus carrying aspect of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (cave 1). Scenes from Jataka narratives adorn the walls of several other monasteries in the complex.