

REAL AND SURREAL IN BANARAS: A STUDY OF BISWANATH GHOSH'S AIMLESS IN BANARAS

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Abstract—The research paper is an attempt to examine the representation of the real and the surreal in the travelogue *Aimless in Banaras* by Bishwanath Ghosh. The study analyses how the author portrays Banaras simultaneously as a physical urban space and a spiritual landscape. On one hand, the travelogue presents the realistic aspects of the city through descriptions of its ghats, narrow alleys, cremation grounds, pollution, changing infrastructure and the everyday lives of its inhabitants. On the other hand, the text explores the surreal dimensions of Banaras through myths, religious beliefs, rituals, philosophical acceptance of death and the city's timeless spiritual aura. The paper further studies how Bishwanath Ghosh blends fact, faith and personal experience to construct Banaras as a space where ordinary reality acquires metaphysical significance. Through close textual analysis, the study argues that the uniqueness of Banaras lies in the coexistence of material reality and spiritual imagination, making the city both a lived geographical entity and a symbolic center of self-discovery and transcendence.

Keywords: Fact, Light, Metaphysical, Myths, Surreal.

In Banares one knows death is as illusory as the mist in the morning.

- Raja Rao

Banaras is regarded as one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world and the oldest spiritually important city in India. Banaras, located on the bank of holy river Ganga, is known as City of Light which is scripturally known as Kashi literally meaning 'luminous' in Sanskrit. In India, Banaras occupies a unique position as a city where the boundaries between reality and mysticism constantly dissolve into one another. Simultaneously ancient and contemporary, sacred and ordinary, Banaras has long been represented in literature as more than a geographical space; it emerges as a living cultural and spiritual phenomenon shaped by mythology, ritual, faith and everyday human experience.

Banaras, also called Varanasi or Kashi, has attracted numerous writers, philosophers and travel authors who have portrayed the city through its spiritual, cultural and social dimensions. Raja Rao titles his short story collection as *On the Ganga Ghat*, where he presents Banaras as a metaphysical and philosophical space deeply connected with spiritual consciousness and the sacredness of the Ganga. Hindi writer Shivprasad Singh, particularly in *Gali Aage Mudti Hai*, captures the local culture, language and everyday life of Banaras. Foreign scholars such as Diana L. Eck in *Banaras: City of Light* and Richard Lannoy in *Benares: Seen from Within* examines the city as a sacred geography shaped by mythology, ritual and cultural traditions. Additionally, writers like Mark Twain and Kabir have penned down to the literary and spiritual imagination of the city, making it one of the most written-about cities in Indian literature and travel writing.

In *Aimless in Banaras*, Bishwanath Ghosh presents the city through the perspective of a wandering observer who encounters both the material and metaphysical dimensions of Banaras. The travelogue records the visible realities of the city—its ghats, cremation grounds, boatmen, crowded ghats and social life—while simultaneously exploring its surreal atmosphere created through myths of Shiva, sacred beliefs surrounding death and moksha, philosophical conversations and the timeless aura of the Ganga. Through the interplay of fact, faith and fiction, the text constructs Banaras as a space where the real and the surreal coexist harmoniously.

This paper attempts to examine how Biswanath Ghosh portrays Banaras not merely as a physical city in a travelogue but as a symbolic and spiritual landscape in which ordinary reality acquires metaphysical significance. However, he remarks that it is not possible for a person to understand the city at its fullest he aptly states in the very opening that,

BANARAS IS AN open book. You can turn its pages, go through the sentences and paragraphs over and over again, read between the lines if you like, and yet it is unlikely that you will fully grasp the city. (37)

The travelogue *Aimless in Banaras* is based on the author's several visits to Banaras, particularly two prolonged stays that form the narrative structure of Part One and Part Two. The text begins with the prologue titled "*Banaras Beckons*" and concludes with the epilogue "*Being Banaras*," both of which symbolically reflect the author's real as well as surreal experiences in the city. In the prologue, Ghosh recounts his first visit to Banaras in 2009 to perform the last rites of his mother at Manikarnika Ghat. The word "beckons" signifies a call or invitation, suggesting not only the city's attraction towards the author but also the emotional and spiritual impulse that later inspired him to write the travelogue. The experience becomes surreal when the author confronts one of his deepest fears—the death of his mother—which gradually appears natural and philosophically acceptable amidst the continuous sight of burning pyres at Manikarnika Ghat. Thus, the terrifying reality of death transforms into a metaphysical experience shaped by the sacred atmosphere of Banaras. As he notes,

The loss of a loved one ceased to be a personal loss the moment you emerged from the narrow streets onto the ghat, where you found many other bodies awaiting cremation – and many others already burning. (5)

Similarly, the epilogue titled "*Being Banaras*" reflects the author's deeper assimilation into the cultural and philosophical ethos of the city after his prolonged wanderings through its ghats and galis. He criticizes several changes, for instance, the arrangement of plastic chairs at Dashashwamedha ghat instead of sitting on its steps to watch the Ganga aarti. He notes, by sitting on the steps of the ghat to watch the aarti, the tourists adjusted to Banaras, but by providing them with chairs, Banaras is adjusting to tourists. (248)

By the end of the travelogue, Ghosh appears to internalize the wisdom commonly associated with Banarasis, particularly their acceptance of mortality. His statement, "...death is certain. We are all born with labels that bear an expiry date..."(244) symbolizes his philosophical transformation and suggests his gradual "becoming Banarasi." The surreal dimension of the city is further reflected in his spiritual experience at the Vishwanath Temple, where he emotionally describes touching and feeling the lingam with his own palms without paying the demanded sum of money. The moment transcends ordinary religious ritual and becomes a deeply personal and mystical encounter with faith. Through such experiences, Ghosh presents Banaras as a city where the real and the surreal coexist continuously.

Further in the travelogue, Ghosh portrays Banaras from two distinct yet interconnected perspectives: the geographical and the cultural. Geographically, the city is presented as India's holiest urban center located in Uttar Pradesh, widely recognized for its ghats, narrow alleys, temples and the constant presence of pilgrims and tourists. The author records the material and visible reality of Banaras through detailed descriptions of its crowded riverfronts, cremation grounds, boat rides and everyday urban life.

Simultaneously, the author presents Banaras as a cultural and metaphysical space shaped by spiritual consciousness and philosophical acceptance of life and death. The inhabitants of the city perceive death not as a tragic end but as a natural and inevitable part of existence, particularly in the sacred surroundings of the Ganga and Manikarnika Ghat. The author's surreal experience of the city echoes Raja Rao's words. As he depicts in *the Serpent and the Rope* as,

Banaras is eternal. There the dead do not die nor the living live. The dead come down to play on the banks of the Ganges, and the living who move about, and even offer rice-balls to the manes, live in the illusion of a vast night and a bright city. (22)

The city's spiritual atmosphere encourages pilgrims and visitors to detach themselves from material pursuits and seek inner peace and self-realisation. Through this dual representation, Banaras emerges not merely as a geographical location but as a surreal cultural landscape where ordinary reality acquires spiritual and metaphysical significance. The research scholar, Prof. Rana P. B. Singh explains the metaphysical connection of ghats with Hindu Mythologies as he notes...

There are 84 ghats (cf. Fig. 8 and 9), forming a symbolic chain of holy sites. In archetypal terms each of the ghats represents 100,000 organic species (yonis) as described in Hindu mythologies. Thus, by taking holy dips in the Ganga at all the ghats the individual soul can get purified in all the 8,400,000 species. This number also refers to the annual cosmic journey, i.e. 12 zodiacs X 7 layers of the atmosphere, or 7 chakras (sheaths). Among the 84 ghats the 5 described as the most merit-giving and sacred, called the Panchatirthis, from the south to the north are Asi (Assi), Dashashwamedha,

Manikarnika, Panchaganga, and Adi Keshava. These five ghats symbolise the microcosmic body of Vishnu, respectively as the head, chest, navel, thighs, and the feet, and most of major rituals performed there. Thus, the area along the ghat is eulogised as Vishnu's body. Any festival and ritual start from sacred bathe in the Ganga and followed up rituals like worshipping the river, oblation to the sun-god and preparatory rites for continuing the sacred performances. (19-20)

Bishwanath Ghosh presents the inhabitants of Banaras as embodying both the real and the surreal dimensions of the city. The frequent use of cusswords and informal language reflects the realistic and unrefined everyday culture of Banaras, grounding the narrative in lived social reality. As he notices one of the residents discussing how the people of younger generation don't allow them to use cusswords but according to him, "...this is Banaras! Cusswords are a way of life for us" (41)

However, the same individuals often express profound philosophical insights regarding life, death, detachment and spiritual peace. This unexpected coexistence of vulgarity and wisdom creates a surreal atmosphere in which ordinary conversations acquire metaphysical significance. Through such paradoxical representations, Ghosh portrays Banaras as a city where the mundane and the spiritual naturally coexist. Kashinath Singh, the author of *Kashi Ka Assi* portrays the people of Banaras with their real nature when Ghosh meets him in Banaras. He says,

People here regard attachment and detachment equally. They look happy and carefree, as if they have unraveled the mystery of life. If a man wearing nothing but a ghamchha runs into a wealthy, well-dressed man, he does not feel inferior in any way. He remains just as happy. (148)

Despite experiencing the surreal and spiritual dimensions of Banaras, Bishwanath Ghosh does not ignore the environmental issues associated with the city, particularly the polluted condition of the river Ganga. The author critically observes the contradiction between the sacred status accorded to the river and the neglect it suffers in everyday life. He refers to a picture circulated on social media that contrasted the clean waters of the River Thames with the polluted condition of the Ganga. The image ironically suggested that the Thames remains clean because it is treated merely as a river, whereas the Ganga suffers because it is worshipped as a mother. A similar observation is made by Julian Crandall Hollick, who argues that Indian rivers will continue to deteriorate unless people learn to separate environmental responsibility from excessive religious idealisation. Ghosh further highlights the irony embedded in the ritual practices surrounding the Ganga, particularly the grandeur of the Ganga Aarti, where devotees ceremonially worship the river in the evening despite polluting the same waters throughout the day by washing clothes, bathing cattle and disposing waste into it. Through such observations, the author presents the contrast between spiritual reverence and environmental negligence, thereby grounding the surreal image of Banaras within the realities of urban and ecological decay.

While exploring Banaras, Bishwanath Ghosh closely observes both the real and the surreal dimensions associated with cremation rituals in the city. In *Aimless in Banaras*, the author records the physical reality of the cremation ghats, burning pyres and the continuous presence of death as an integral part of everyday life in Banaras. Simultaneously, these rituals acquire a surreal and metaphysical significance through the religious beliefs attached to the city. According to Hindu mythology, it is believed that a person cremated in Banaras attains liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth and directly achieves moksha. Ghosh encounters similar beliefs while performing the last rites of his mother in the city. A related observation is noted Dr. Rai, a Banarasi, who refers to the ancient saying, "Kashiyam maranam mukti," meaning that death in Kashi leads to spiritual liberation. The author further records the existence of Mukti Bhawan, an ashram in Banaras where elderly people come to spend their final days with the hope of attaining salvation through death in the sacred city.

During his exploration of Banaras, Bishwanath Ghosh also examines the practical and economic realities associated with cremation at Manikarnika Ghat. The author enquires about the expenses involved in the cremation process through conversations with a wood seller and a member of the Dom Raja family. The Dom Raja occupies a significant position in the cremation rituals of Banaras, as the family traditionally holds the hereditary right to provide the sacred fire used for cremations. Through the wood seller Dubey, Ghosh learns that one mann (approximately forty kilograms) of wood costs around four hundred rupees and that a well-built adult body generally requires at least nine mann (around three hundred and sixty kilograms) of wood for complete cremation, amounting to nearly three thousand six hundred rupees. When the fees of the priest performing the rituals and the charges of the Dom Raja are included, the total expense of cremation in Banaras may exceed five thousand rupees. Through these observations, Ghosh presents the realistic and material aspects of death rituals, thereby grounding the sacred and surreal beliefs associated with moksha within the economic realities of everyday life in Banaras.

Bishwanath Ghosh reflects upon both the physical and metaphysical image of Banaras while travelling towards the opposite bank of the Ganga from Assi Ghat before sunrise in the travelogue. The author admits that there is "nothing to

see” on the other side of the river, yet he continues the journey, suggesting the city’s strange spiritual attraction. He presents the real image of Banaras by observing that the city lacks the natural beauty of mountains or the sea. Its narrow alleys can create a feeling of claustrophobia, and the constant sight of burning pyres at the cremation ghats reminds one continuously of death. However, despite these harsh realities, the city gives visitors a deep sense of peace and spiritual fulfilment. The author remarks, “People who think they’re lost come here to find themselves because there is light here.” This statement presents Banaras as a place of self-discovery and inner enlightenment. Ghosh also notes that many foreign tourists feel stress-free in Banaras even though they already possess material comforts and luxuries in their own countries. The spiritual charm of the city is further emphasized through a line quoted from fellow Banarasi writer Kashinath Singh in *Kashi Ka Assi*: “Jo mazza Banaras mein; na Paris mein na Faras mein,” suggesting that the joy experienced in Banaras cannot be found even in places like Paris or Persia. Through such observations, Ghosh portrays Banaras as a city where physical realities and spiritual experiences coexist together.

Bishwanath Ghosh makes four visits to Banaras in order to explore and understand the city, with gaps of several years between each visit. His two major visits, made with the purpose of gathering material for *Aimless in Banaras*, are separated by a gap of three years. During these visits, the author notices several physical and infrastructural changes in the city. For instance, during his first visit in 2009, the road connecting the airport to the city appeared largely rural and undeveloped, whereas by 2018 he observes hospitals, hotels and shopping malls emerging along the same route. He also records the large-scale redevelopment taking place around the Vishwanath Temple, where nearly three hundred structures were planned to be demolished for the construction of a corridor connecting the temple with Manikarnika Ghat for the convenience of pilgrims and tourists.

Despite these visible transformations, Ghosh feels that the cultural and spiritual essence of Banaras remains unchanged. He observes that although rulers, invaders and political systems have changed over centuries, the spiritual aura of the city has continued uninterrupted. Reflecting upon this timelessness, he writes that “...this riverside settlement has remained the one stop shop for seekers of salvation longer than time” (70). During his later visits as well, while wandering through the same ghats and narrow alleys, he experiences a similar feeling of eternity and familiarity. He describes his return to Banaras not as a new beginning but as the continuation of a brief pause, as if he had never truly left the city. Through these observations, the author presents Banaras as a city where physical modernization takes place alongside an enduring spiritual and metaphysical identity. In the concluding part of the travelogue, he personifies the city with a grandfather who carries the present learnings and the old wisdom together as he notes,

Banaras may be ancient, but it has also changed with times without losing its halo of ancientness, and that could be one of the reasons for its longevity. It is like that erudite, ageless grandfather who flaunts an exquisite collection of fountain pens but relies on the laptop and phone to stay in touch. Such men always make for interesting company. (231)

Thus, *Aimless in Banaras* presents Banaras as a city where the real and the surreal exist simultaneously. Through his observations of the ghats, cremation rituals, narrow alleys, changing infrastructure and everyday life of the people, Bishwanath Ghosh portrays the physical reality of the city. At the same time, the myths, spiritual beliefs, philosophical outlook towards death and the timeless aura of Banaras create its surreal and metaphysical identity. The travelogue ultimately suggests that the uniqueness of Banaras lies in its ability to transform ordinary human experiences into moments of spiritual reflection and self-discovery.

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