

DRAWN TO Kashi

Through Fire, Faith, and the Ganga

SHREYA CHINTAWAR



BlueRoseONE^{.com}
S t o r i e s M a t t e r

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

Copyright © Shreya Chintawar 2026

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

ISBN: 978-81-6744-322-9

First Edition: September 2026

करचरण कृतं वाक्कायजं कर्मजं वा
श्रवणनयनजं वा मानसं वापराधम्।
विहितमविहितं वा सर्वमेतत्क्षमस्व
जय जय करुणाब्धे श्रीमहादेव शम्भो॥

— Shiva Aparadha Kshamapana Stotram.

Karacharaṇa-kṛtaṁ vāk-kāyajaṁ karmajaṁ vā
Śravaṇa-nayanajaṁ vā mānasaṁ vāparādham
Vihitam-avihitaṁ vā sarvam-etat-kṣamasva
Jaya Jaya Karuṇābdhe Śrī Mahādeva Śambho

This shloka is a prayer of surrender to Shiva.

It says:

Whatever mistakes I have made—through my actions, my words, or my body...

Whatever I have done knowingly or unknowingly...

Whatever errors arose through my senses or even in my thoughts...

O Mahadeva, ocean of compassion,

Please forgive all of it.

It ends not in fear, but in devotion—calling out to Shiva as Shambho, the one who brings peace and auspiciousness.

CONTENTS

1. A City That Enters You.....	1
2. The One Who Is Everything.....	6
3. Avimukta: The City Shiva Never Leaves	11
4. Kashi Vishwanath – The Eternal Jyotirlinga.....	15
5. The Sacred Legends of Kashi – Where the Gods Chose to Stay	21
6. The Ghats of Kashi.....	30
7. Manikarnika – Where Death Becomes Liberation...	38
8. Destruction and Rebirth – The History of Kashi Vishwanath	46
9. Under the Gaze of Kala Bhairava	51
10. The Voices of Kashi.....	59
11. Where the Soul Finds Rest	63
Epilouge: Leaving Kashi	68



CHAPTER 1 –

A City That Enters You

Kashi is not a city you arrive in. It is a city that slowly enters you.

Long before the train comes to a halt at Varanasi, something begins to shift within you. It is subtle at first—almost unnoticeable, yet undeniable. The air feels different. Older. As if it has been breathing for thousands of years, carrying the weight of countless prayers, unspoken fears, and quiet hopes.

And then, as you finally step into the city, Kashi greets you—not with silence, but with sound.

A distant chant of *Har Har Mahadev* rises and falls like a heartbeat. Temple bells ring—not in rhythm, but in devotion. The narrow lanes seem alive, quietly carrying the footsteps and stories of pilgrims who walked them long before you.

This is your first introduction to Kashi—not through sight, but through feeling.

The very name of the city reflects that experience. The word *Kashi* comes from the ancient Sanskrit root *Kash*, meaning to shine. It is for this reason that Kashi has long been known as the *City of Light*.

But this is not the light seen with the eyes. It is something deeper—something inward. According to ancient belief, it is the light that dispels ignorance and reveals truth.

For centuries, people have come here not merely to pray, but to understand. To understand life, death, and ultimately, themselves.

Some cities are remembered for their history. Kashi is remembered for something far older. Often regarded as one of the oldest living cities in the world, Kashi has witnessed the passage of countless generations. Empires have risen and fallen. Kings have ruled and disappeared. The world beyond its ghats has changed again and again. Yet through every age, Kashi has remained—not unchanged, but unbroken.

It does not try to impress you, nor does it rush to explain itself. Instead, it waits quietly and patiently, as though it knows that understanding cannot be forced; it must unfold.

In most places, time moves forward.

In Kashi, time circles.

Morning does not begin with urgency. It unfolds gently along the ghats of the Ganga, where the first rays of sunlight touch the water and turn it into liquid gold. At Assi Ghat, the day quietly stirs to life with the soft rhythms of the Ganga aarti. Priests chant softly. Devotees step into the river with folded hands. The world awakens, not with noise, but with ritual.

Only a short distance away, however, another rhythm continues without pause. The sacred fires of Manikarnika Ghat burn through the day and into the night, where death is neither hidden behind walls nor shrouded in silence. It exists in the open—uncovered, unafraid, and undeniable.

In Kashi, life and death do not stand as opposites. They exist side by side, as though they have always belonged together.

At the heart of this ancient city stands the sacred Kashi Vishwanath Temple, where Lord Shiva is worshipped as Vishwanath—the Lord of the Universe.

Millions come here for a single glimpse and a single moment of connection. Yet Kashi is not defined by a temple alone. It is defined by a presence.

A presence that cannot be contained within temple walls or confined to sacred boundaries. It lingers in the air, in the echo of temple bells, and in the silence between chants. It lives in the smoke that rises gently into the sky, in the stillness of a sadhu immersed in meditation, and in the eyes of a pilgrim who has travelled countless miles simply to be here.

One begins to sense it without even realizing. And once it is felt, it rarely leaves.

In most places, we observe our surroundings. In Kashi, it often feels as if the city is quietly observing us.

It does not try to entertain. Nor does it make itself easy to understand. Instead, it reveals something far more uncomfortable—and far more truthful. It reveals us: our questions, fears, and our restlessness. And slowly, without explanation, it begins to quiet them.

People come to Kashi for many reasons. Some seek blessings, while others search for peace. Many also come to perform the sacred rites for those who came before them.

And some come for something deeper. They come here to face death—not as an end, but as a doorway.

It is believed that to die in Kashi is to attain *moksha*—liberation from the endless cycle of birth and death.

This ancient belief is reflected in a verse traditionally associated with the *Kashi Khanda*:

काशी क्षेत्रं तु यत् पुण्यं
मुक्तिदं सर्वदेहिनाम् ।

“Kashi is that sacred land which grants liberation to all beings.”

For countless generations, this verse has served as a reminder that Kashi is not merely a sacred city. It is believed to be a place where liberation itself becomes possible. Whether one accepts this belief or not, it changes the way the city is perceived. Here, death is not something to be feared or avoided. It is something to be understood.

At first, Kashi can feel overwhelming. The crowds press in. The streets seem impossibly narrow. The sounds grow louder from every direction. Everything seems to move at once, yet somehow the city never loses its rhythm.

But if you stay, something begins to shift. The noise starts to feel like a rhythm. The chaos begins to reveal its own quiet order. What once seemed unfamiliar slowly begins to feel strangely familiar.

You stop trying to understand Kashi. And you begin to feel it.

That is where its true meaning begins to reveal itself—not through explanations or definitions, but through quiet, fleeting moments when you are no longer just a visitor, but a part of something far older and greater than yourself.

People often believe that the mystery of Kashi lies in its temples, rituals, or ancient past.

But that is only part of its mystery.

Its deepest mystery is this—not that people come here to die, but that somewhere along the way, they begin to understand what it truly means to live.

CHAPTER 2 –

The One Who Is Everything

Some cities are defined by their places. Others are defined by a presence. In Kashi, that presence is not hidden in silence or distance. It is felt quietly and constantly, as though something unseen is always near, and slowly, almost without realising it, a question begins to take shape.

Who is Vishwanath?

The question seems simple. But here, very little remains simple for long.

You do not begin by understanding Vishwanath. You begin by hearing his name. It comes to you in fragments—in the echo of *Har Har Mahadev* drifting through the streets of Varanasi, in the quiet murmur of a priest, and in the call of a pilgrim who has waited for hours, hoping for a single glimpse of Vishwanath.

At first, it is only a name. Then, slowly, you begin to understand that he is Vishwanath—the Lord of the Universe. And almost without realizing it, his presence begins to settle within you, not as information to be learned, but as a feeling to be experienced.

The moment that realization begins to take shape, another question naturally arises: How can something so vast reside in a place so small?

How can the Lord of the Universe dwell within a single temple?

And yet, that is precisely what devotees have believed for centuries—the infinite accepts a form, and that form is Lord Shiva.

However, Shiva is not easy to understand. He cannot be confined to simple ideas of creation or destruction. He is both—and beyond both. He rests in perfect stillness, yet holds within himself the power to dissolve the universe. He is adorned with sacred ash, yet worshipped as the source of all life. He is a harmony of seeming contradictions, and within that harmony lies a profound completeness. This is the essence of Vishwanath—the Lord of the Universe.

Shiva is worshipped across the length and breadth of India, each sacred place revealing a different aspect of his boundless nature.

In Ujjain, he is Mahakal, the Lord of Time. In the Himalayas, he is the silent presence of Kedarnath, surrounded by snow and stillness. Elsewhere, he is revered in countless other forms, each revealing a different facet of the same eternal reality.

But here, he is Vishwanath, not bound to time like Mahakal, nor distant amidst the snow-clad heights of Kedarnath. Here, he is immediate. He is not encountered in the distance or at the end of a long journey, but felt in the very moment you stand, as though he has been waiting for you all along.

For many pilgrims, this realization comes even before they step inside the temple.

The crowds may be overwhelming. Time may not permit it. The doors may close before they arrive. Some may never enter the sanctum at all. And yet, people say that no one leaves empty-handed.

Vishwanath is not contained within the temple alone. His presence lingers in the sound of bells that never quite fade, in the steady rhythm of footsteps moving through the narrow lanes, and in the quiet stillness that suddenly finds you, even in the midst of noise.

It is said that Shiva chose Kashi not to visit, but to remain forever. This is why the city is known as Avimukta—the Never Abandoned.

As described in the *Kashi Khanda* of the *Skanda Purana*, this sacred city rests upon Shiva's trident, beyond destruction and beyond time itself.

Even when everything else comes to an end, this presence remains. Within that enduring presence lies a moment every pilgrim carries back with them, one that is rarely spoken aloud, not described with excitement, but remembered quietly, almost as though putting it into words might disturb something sacred. It is the moment of darshan.

You move forward slowly, almost without realizing it. The line shifts, pauses, and moves again. Step by step, you find yourself walking alongside strangers who, in that moment, no longer feel like strangers at all.

There is no rush in your mind now, only a quiet anticipation. And then, before you are ready, before you can prepare yourself, you are there. There is no announcement,

no warning, only a brief glimpse of the sacred form of Vishwanath, adorned with offerings and surrounded by constant movement. And in that single moment, everything becomes still.

It lasts only a few seconds, but something about it remains—something that cannot be explained.

Because you did not just see Vishwanath.

You felt seen.

There is a verse from the Shiva Mahimna Stotra that beautifully reflects this truth:

**नमामीशमीशान निर्वाणरूपं
विभुं व्यापकं ब्रह्मवेदस्वरूपम् ।**

“I bow to the Lord of Lords, whose very nature is liberation, who pervades all creation, and who is the eternal essence of Brahman and sacred knowledge.”

These words seek to describe him. Here, words themselves begin to fall short. Vishwanath is not someone to be understood, but someone to be experienced, not only within the temple or before the sanctum, but wherever his presence quietly reveals itself.

This understanding finds expression in another profound truth:

सर्वं शिवमयं जगत् ।

A truth that echoes throughout the Shaivite tradition: “The entire universe is pervaded by Shiva.”

If that is so, then Vishwanath cannot be confined to a single place. His presence is not confined to the temple, nor is it absent from anywhere else. It is simply that here, one

becomes more aware of it. That is why something quietly begins to change within you.

In most places, people go to God carrying questions, requests, worries, and desires. But here, those questions slowly begin to fall away, not because they have all been answered, but because they no longer feel necessary.

You simply stand there, no longer asking or seeking, but simply being. And in that stillness, something within begins to loosen: the need to control, the fear of uncertainty, and the constant search for more.

And for a moment, just a moment, you feel complete.

Perhaps that is what Vishwanath truly represents—not merely the Lord of the Universe, but the one who gently reminds every soul that it was never separate from the universe it seeks.

As this understanding begins to settle within you, another question quietly emerges.

If Shiva is everywhere, present in every breath and every moment, then why does one city hold such a unique place in the hearts of millions? Why is it believed that here, unlike anywhere else, Shiva never departs?

The answer does not reveal itself through a single moment. It lies hidden within the ancient stories of the city, the faith carried across generations, and the belief that this land has always remained under Shiva's eternal presence.

This is the mystery of Kashi, not merely that Shiva is worshipped here, but that Shiva is believed to remain here.

CHAPTER 3 –

Avimukta: The City Shiva Never Leaves

The answer to why Shiva never leaves Kashi does not arrive as words. Nor does it come in a single moment of understanding. It unfolds slowly, like the city itself—in the quiet pauses between thoughts and in the feeling that something is present, even when nothing is seen. Kashi does not explain itself; it reveals. And what it reveals, over time, is a single truth—one that has been carried across centuries, spoken softly, almost like a sacred secret.

A single word. *Avimukta*.

Never abandoned. Forever cherished. A place that Shiva never leaves.

It is said that this is what Kashi truly is, not merely a city of temples and rituals, but a sacred space where the Divine does not come and go. It remains, always.

As described in the Kashi Khanda of the Skanda Purana, Kashi is not bound by the same laws as the rest of the world. It is held by Lord Shiva himself, resting upon his trident, suspended beyond the reach of time and beyond the endless cycle of creation and destruction.

Which means that even when everything else fades, this presence remains, and so does he.

Avimukta is not merely a place. It is a state, a state where nothing is truly lost, where nothing is ever completely separated, and where even in endings, something remains. There is nothing here that calls for departure.

This belief is reflected in another ancient story—quiet in its telling, yet profound in its meaning—a story that speaks not of power, but of release. It tells of a time when even Lord Shiva wandered, carrying a burden that could not be cast aside. The skull of Brahma remained bound to him, a symbol of the curse of *Brahmahatya*.

He journeyed through sacred lands, across realms, and beyond time itself. Yet the burden did not leave him until he entered Kashi. Here, without ritual and without struggle, the skull of Brahma fell away, as though the city itself had absorbed it—as though this sacred land did not hold on to what was meant to be released.

That is why this city is not merely a place of devotion, but a place of transformation—a place where even the heaviest burdens can fall away.

There was a time, it is said, when Shiva left Kashi, not by choice, but by circumstance. The city came under the rule of King Divodasa, a ruler so devoted to dharma that even the presence of the Divine stepped back.

And yet, something was missing.

The city stood. Life continued. Rituals were performed, and people lived as they always had. But without Shiva, Kashi was complete only in form, not in essence.

And so, in time, he returned—not as a visitor, but as the one who belongs.

Since then, the world around Kashi has changed countless times, yet the city has quietly remained itself. Temples have been built, destroyed, and built again. Names have changed. Rulers have come and gone.

Yet through every age, one belief has endured—that Shiva never truly leaves Kashi. For through all these changes, something has remained untouched. The presence has never faded, because what makes this city sacred does not depend upon what time can build or destroy. It is something deeper—something beyond the reach of time itself.

Time moves, but not everything moves with it. Some things remain. And in Kashi, that enduring presence is Shiva.

There is another belief, carried quietly across generations—that in this sacred city, at the moment when life reaches its final breath, Shiva himself draws near. Not in a form that can be seen, but in a presence that can be felt.

In that final moment, it is believed that he offers the Taraka Mantra, the sacred sound believed to carry the soul beyond fear, attachment, and the endless cycle of birth and death.

There is a verse in the Kashi Khanda of the Skanda Purana that beautifully reflects this timeless belief:

अविमुक्तं हि नामैतत् क्षेत्रं परमदुर्लभम् ।

यत्र साक्षात् स्वयं शम्भुः सदा तिष्ठति नित्यशः ॥

“This sacred place called Avimukta is supremely rare, for here, Lord Shiva himself resides eternally.”

These words do not seek to explain. They simply remain, just as the city itself has remained through the ages. And slowly, you begin to understand that while in most

places time carries you forward, in Kashi, it invites you to look beyond.

Here, Shiva is not merely the witness to life, but the one who stands at its final threshold—not to bring it to an end, but to guide it onward.

And perhaps the truth is not that Kashi became sacred because Shiva chose to remain here, but that Shiva remains here because this is where the eternal has always been felt most deeply.

When that thought begins to take root, something settles within you—a trust that asks for no explanation. A quiet assurance that, no matter where the journey leads, Shiva's presence remains.

CHAPTER 4 –

Kashi Vishwanath — The Eternal Jyotirlinga

What was once felt everywhere now draws into a single point—not to limit the infinite, but to make it approachable, to make it real.

In Kashi, the presence of Lord Shiva is no longer only something you sense. It is something you stand before—something you move toward, step by step, breath by breath, until the unseen begins to take shape.

This is where the meaning of the Jyotirlinga begins to unfold. *Jyoti* means light. *Linga* means a mark, a symbol, or a form. Yet it is not a form in the way the mind ordinarily understands. It is neither a figure nor a face, but a sacred presence, an expression of the infinite that cannot be contained, yet graciously allows itself to be experienced.

In ancient belief, the Jyotirlinga represents the infinite reality from which all creation emerges—a symbol not only of Shiva’s form, but also of that which exists beyond form itself. It is described as the eternal pillar, without beginning or end, stretching beyond what the mind can measure.

It is said that when even the gods could not comprehend the nature of Shiva, a fiery column of light

appeared—endless, without origin or conclusion. No highest point could be reached. No lowest end could be found.

That light was Shiva—not as a figure, but as existence itself.

The twelve Jyotirlingas are believed to mark the sacred places where this divine light revealed itself upon the earth. Each is revered as a unique manifestation of Lord Shiva. Yet among them, Kashi Vishwanath holds a place unlike any other.

Kashi is not merely a place where Shiva is worshipped, but a place where he is believed never to depart.

Among all the Jyotirlingas, each holds its own significance. Each is revered, and each is sacred. Yet Kashi Vishwanath is spoken of differently, here the divine presence is not believed to come and go. It remains—constant, unbroken, and eternal.

It is said that the Jyotirlinga of Kashi is not only a symbol of Shiva's divine light, but a place where that light continues to shine without interruption. Here, the distance between the seeker and the divine seems to grow thinner, and the journey feels less like a beginning than the quiet fulfilment of something long awaited.

For many, this is not merely another place of worship. It is the place they hope to reach at least once in their lifetime, it is believed that here, liberation is not merely a distant idea, but a living possibility, not promised, not claimed, but deeply felt.

And here, in Varanasi, that divine light rests quietly—unadorned, unassuming, and yet immeasurable.

DRAWN TO KASHI



At the heart of this ancient city stands the Kashi Vishwanath Temple, not merely as a monument, but as a sacred meeting point where the infinite and the human seem to draw close enough to be experienced in the same moment.

The temple seen today carries within it centuries of devotion, destruction, and rebirth. Over time, it was altered, damaged, rebuilt, and restored, yet never abandoned. The present structure was rebuilt in the eighteenth century by Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar of Indore, whose quiet devotion restored one of the most sacred centres of worship in India.

In later years, the temple's domes were covered in gold, giving rise to the name by which many know it today—the *Golden Temple of Kashi*. Yet its true radiance has never been the gold that crowns it, but the faith that has continued to flourish beneath it.

For centuries, seekers, pilgrims, saints, and wanderers have found their way here. Some arrive with prayers, some with grief, some in silence, and others carrying questions they cannot put into words.

They move through the narrow lanes and wait patiently, sometimes for hours. Yet they are carried forward not by urgency, but by a shared rhythm, a quiet understanding that needs no words. With every step, they draw closer not only to the temple, but to a moment that they have carried within themselves long before they arrived.

Then, almost without announcement, you are there. The space narrows, the sounds merge into a single hum, and every movement becomes brief and purposeful. Then, in that fleeting moment, you see it—not completely, not in every detail, but enough.

The Jyotirlinga remains before your eyes for only a few moments, yet it does not leave you. It is not meant to be fully seen. It is meant to be encountered.

There is a verse in the Lingashtakam that beautifully reflects this sacred form:

ब्रह्ममुरारि सुरार्चित लिङ्गम्
निर्मलभासित शोभित लिङ्गम् ॥

“The Linga worshipped by Brahma, Vishnu, and the gods, pure, radiant, and shining with divine light.”

These words speak of worship, yet standing before the Jyotirlinga, they no longer feel like words alone. They become an experience.

Unlike forms that resemble the human body, the Linga offers the mind nothing familiar to hold onto. It stands beyond likeness, without beginning, end, or boundary.

Standing before it, the urge to explain begins to fall away, and the need to define no longer feels necessary. Nothing is being understood, and yet nothing feels incomplete.

For what you encounter there is never confined to that sacred space. It simply becomes visible there—clear for a fleeting moment, before dissolving once again into everything around you.

It is believed that even a single moment before the Jyotirlinga—a single glimpse, a single prayer, a single offering—can become far more than an act of devotion. It can become an inner awakening, not through anything dramatic, but through a silence that gently settles within.

And even as you step away from the temple, as the sounds return, the movement resumes, and the world gathers around you once more, that stillness does not

disappear. It remains with you—not as a memory, but as a presence, something that no longer depends upon where you stand.

Not far from the temple, the waters of the Ganges continue to flow, just as they have for centuries, carrying with them the prayers, the faith, and the longing of those who come seeking more than a fleeting moment. Some arrive with questions, some with hope, and others without knowing why they have come at all.

Beyond the temple, the city begins to unfold differently—not only in stillness, but in movement, in rhythm, and in life as it is lived. Along the river, across the ghats, and through the endless flow of people, rituals, and time itself, the presence you encountered does not disappear. It simply changes its form.

In Kashi, the divine was never confined to a single shrine. It flows through the waters of the Ganges, lives upon the sacred ghats, dwells within the countless temples hidden among the narrow lanes, and continues to breathe through the stories that have been carried across generations.

They are stories of gods who arrived here and never truly left; stories of sages, rivers, flames, and prayers—stories carried not only in the scriptures, but in the very breath of the city itself.

Perhaps that is why Kashi never feels as it was built. It feels remembered, as though every corner holds the echo of something ancient, waiting patiently to be heard once again.

CHAPTER 5 –

The Sacred Legends of Kashi — Where the Gods Chose to Stay

There are some cities that become sacred through their temples. And then there is Kashi—a city believed to have become sacred through presence itself. Not the presence of one king, one kingdom, or one moment in history, but the abiding presence of the divine.

That is why Kashi has never been understood as an ordinary place. Its story is not held together by dates or dynasties alone. It lives through legends—stories carried through centuries, whispered through scriptures, spoken beside temple lamps, repeated by priests, pilgrims, and wandering ascetics alike.

And among all those stories, one belief rises again and again:

That Kashi was not merely visited by the gods.

They chose to remain here.

According to ancient Hindu tradition, Kashi is older even than the sacred Ganges River herself. The city is believed to have been founded by Lord Shiva, not as an

ordinary settlement, but as a place of bliss—a sacred realm beyond the restless movement of the world.

In ancient times, Kashi was known as *Anandavana*—the Forest of Bliss. According to ancient tradition, after the marriage of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati, they made their abode in the quiet solitude of the Himalayas. The mountains offered peace beyond measure, yet they were also removed from the rhythm of human life. Parvati longed for a place filled with life—a city where people lived, prayed, celebrated, suffered, and searched, a place where divinity could dwell among humanity.

And so Shiva chose Kashi, not because it was powerful or wealthy, but because something about the city already belonged to eternity. Long before pilgrims began arriving there, Shiva had already made it his home.

That is why Kashi came to be known as *Avimukta*—The never-forsaken.

अविमुक्तं परं ज्ञानम्
अविमुक्तं परं पदम् ।
अविमुक्तं परं तत्त्वम्
अविमुक्तं परं शिवम् ॥

As mentioned in the *Kashi Khanda* of the *Skanda Purana*:

“Avimukta is the highest knowledge.

Avimukta is the supreme state.

Avimukta is the ultimate truth.

Avimukta itself is Shiva.”

As described in the sacred texts, Kashi rests upon the trident of Lord Shiva himself, untouched even during the destruction of the universe. While worlds rise and disappear

through endless cosmic cycles, Kashi is believed to remain, held beyond time and protected from destruction.

Perhaps that is why the city feels less like something built, and more like something eternal.

Yet one of the most fascinating legends of Kashi begins not with Shiva remaining in the city, but with Shiva leaving it.

At that time, Kashi was ruled by the virtuous King Divodasa, also known as Ripunjaya. Renowned for his discipline, wisdom, and unwavering commitment to righteousness, he was entrusted by Lord Brahma with the responsibility of ruling Kashi under a single condition: The gods themselves would not interfere in earthly governance. To preserve the purity of his rule, the divine beings had to leave the city.

And so, even Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati departed from Kashi, taking up their abode at Mandara Mountain. Yet, despite leaving the city, Shiva could not forget it.

Though Shiva had left Kashi, his connection to it remained unbroken. The longing to return slowly grew within him, for Kashi was not merely a place he had once ruled—it was the city he loved. That longing soon gave rise to one of the most beautiful legends associated with Kashi.

One by one, divine beings were sent into the city, yet none of them returned. The moment they entered Kashi, they found themselves captivated by its presence, discovering a peace and bliss so profound that many chose to remain there forever. First came the divine energies, and then, one after another, the gods themselves followed, each becoming so deeply absorbed in the city's spiritual atmosphere that none wished to leave.

Among those who came was Surya himself. Enchanted by the radiance of Kashi, he too chose to remain. According to tradition, Surya settled in the city in twelve sacred forms, establishing the revered Aditya temples that remain part of Kashi's spiritual landscape even today. These forms came to symbolize the many dimensions of light, energy, protection, and cosmic order flowing through the city.

Then came Ganesha. Soon, other deities followed—Agni, Vayu, the sacred guardians, and celestial beings. Slowly, Kashi began filling with divine presence, not through conquest or command, but through an irresistible attraction. The city did not ask the gods to stay; something within it simply made them unwilling to leave.

Perhaps that is why Kashi feels unlike any other place in India. Every lane appears to hold a shrine, every corner seems connected to a legend, and every path eventually leads toward something sacred.

Kashi did not become the city of one god alone. It became a gathering place of divinity itself. It is often said that thirty-three million gods and goddesses reside in Kashi. Whether understood literally or symbolically, the belief reflects something profound—that the city is seen not merely as holy ground, but as a living cosmos of sacred presence.

This is why pilgrims often say that walking through Kashi feels like walking through the spiritual map of India itself. Many devotees believe that the sacred essence of all twelve Jyotirlingas can be experienced within Kashi through various ancient manifestations spread across the city.

DRAWN TO KASHI



The spirit of Somnath is worshipped here as Someshwar Mahadev near Man Mandir Ghat. Likewise, the presence of Kedarnath is believed to reside within the sacred Gauri Kedareshwar Temple, where many devotees feel that a single darshan is equal in spiritual merit to seven pilgrimages to the Himalayan shrine of Kedarnath.

The sacred presence of Mallikarjuna Jyotirlinga is reflected through Mallikarjun Mahadev in Kashi, while at the heart of the city stands Kashi Vishwanath Temple itself—the sacred Vishweshwar Jyotirlinga, worshipped as the eternal centre of Shiva's presence.

Similarly, devotees associate different shrines throughout Kashi with the remaining Jyotirlingas, believing that the sacred energies of all twelve forms of Shiva ultimately gather within this one city.

This sacred reflection extends even beyond the Jyotirlingas. Further along the banks of the Ganga rises the beautiful Pashupatinath Temple of Varanasi, reflecting the revered Pashupatinath Temple of Nepal. Built in traditional Nepali architecture, it stands quietly beside the river, as though another sacred land had found a home within Kashi.

These are a few among the countless sacred forms scattered throughout the city. Perhaps that is why every walk through Kashi feels like a pilgrimage in itself, where every lane reveals another shrine, every turn uncovers another legend, and every temple becomes a reminder that the city's sacred presence cannot be contained within a single place.

Temples appear where one least expects them—within narrow lanes, beside ancient walls, and at the turn of forgotten corners. It is this presence, woven into every part of the city, that explains why Kashi has long been regarded

not as the abode of one deity, but as a meeting place of the divine itself.

Even Lord Vishnu eventually arrived in Kashi. By then, the city had become filled with gods, sages, and countless divine energies. King Divodasa understood that the time had come for Shiva to return, and recognizing the deeper will of the cosmos, he willingly relinquished his earthly rule.

And then Shiva returned—not as a wandering ascetic or a distant god, but as Vishwanath, the Lord of the Universe. Alongside him came Goddess Parvati, worshipped in Kashi as Annapurna, the eternal giver of nourishment and grace.

From that moment onward, Kashi was no longer regarded merely as a sacred city. It became the eternal dwelling of Lord Shiva. Protected by Kala Bhairava, revered as the city's divine protector, Kashi came to be seen as a place where liberation itself feels close enough to touch.

Yet among all the sacred presences that came to define Kashi, none feels more inseparable from the city than the Ganga herself. She does not simply flow beside Kashi; she flows through its very soul. In most places, a river becomes part of the landscape.

In Kashi, the Ganga feels aware.

She receives prayers at dawn, lamps at dusk, ashes at death, and countless whispered hopes in between. Every ritual eventually reaches her waters. Every ghat descends toward her. Every story seems to return to her flow.

And here, in Kashi, the river does something unusual.

She turns northward.

For centuries, devotees have regarded this northward flow as deeply sacred. According to local tradition, when the Ganga first descended with immense force toward Kashi,

Lord Shiva cast his trident (trishul) into the earth to soften her descent and gently guide her through the city. In doing so, the river turned northward—as though bowing before the city of Shiva itself.

Many believe that this northward flow symbolizes the soul's journey toward its ultimate destination—a movement not toward the world, but beyond it.

Others see in it a deeper message: that Kashi itself moves against the ordinary current of life, inviting us to look beyond attachment, fear, and the endless pull of time and death.

Perhaps that is why the city feels different from every other place—not because it escapes life, but because it gently teaches us how to see beyond it.

This reverence for Shiva and the sacred Ganga has echoed through countless prayers and hymns over the centuries. One such verse beautifully expresses their eternal bond:

गङ्गातरङ्गरमणीयजटाकलापं
गौरीनिरन्तरविभूषितवामभागम् ॥

From the *Shiva Tandava Stotram*:

“I bow to Shiva, whose matted locks are adorned by the beautiful waves of the Ganga, and whose left side is forever graced by Goddess Gauri.”

In these words, the Ganga is not portrayed as separate from Shiva, but as an inseparable part of his very being. She flows from him, rests upon him, and in Kashi, that eternal bond feels almost visible.

At sunrise, the city slowly awakens beside the river. Priests descend the ancient stone steps carrying brass lamps and fresh flowers. Pilgrims step into the cool waters with

folded hands, while the first chants of the morning rise gently into the air and boats drift silently across the softly glowing Ganga.

And somewhere within it all—the flowing river, the temple bells, the rising smoke, and the quiet prayers—a simple chant seems to arise almost on its own:

*“Ganga Dhara Shiva Ganga Dhara,
Har Har Bole Namah Shivaya...”*

It does not feel like a ritual or a performance, but like something the city itself gently awakens within you.

And yet, not far away, the funeral fires continue to burn, uninterrupted as they have for centuries. In Kashi, life and death do not move in opposite directions; they flow together.

This is the deepest truth Kashi quietly reveals—not merely that the gods once came here, but that something within this city dissolves the boundaries by which people ordinarily live.

The boundary between beginning and ending.

Between the sacred and the ordinary.

Between living and leaving.

The deeper one walks into Kashi, the more these stories begin to gather around them—not as distant myths preserved in ancient scriptures, but as something still alive in the stone steps, the temple bells, the flowing river, and the rising smoke.

Over time, those stories cease to feel like stories at all. They become the city itself.

And nowhere are these stories felt more deeply than along the ancient ghats of the Ganga, where Kashi continues to awaken, one sunrise at a time.

CHAPTER 6 –

The Ghats of Kashi

Before the sun rises over Kashi, the ghats already begin to breathe.

The Ganga still lies wrapped in darkness, while a thin veil of mist drifts silently across her waters. The ancient stone steps remain cool from the night, and a few flickering lamps continue to burn beside old temple walls, their gentle light trembling softly in the morning breeze.

Somewhere in the distance, a conch echoes through the silence.

Then another.

And slowly, almost imperceptibly, the city begins to awaken. Boatmen untie their wooden boats from the riverbanks. Priests descend the steps carrying brass lamps and marigold flowers, while pilgrims walk barefoot toward the water, whispering prayers beneath their breath. Nearby, tea sellers light small stoves beside the steps as the first chants of *Har Har Mahadev* begin drifting softly through the morning air.

No one speaks loudly, as though everyone already knows they are standing in the presence of something sacred.

And then the first light arrives.

Not upon the city, but upon the river. The Ganga slowly turns to gold as birds rise into the morning sky, temple bells begin ringing in the distance, and the fragrance of incense mingles with the cool air drifting from the water.

For a moment, Kashi no longer feels like a city. It feels like a living prayer.

There are many ways to understand Kashi—through its temples, its legends, and the quiet presence of Lord Shiva that seems to permeate every part of the city. Yet the ghats reveal something that none of them can fully express on their own. They are not merely stone steps descending into the river; they are the living edge of Kashi itself, where the city meets the Ganga, where prayer finds silence, and where the rhythms of everyday life seem to touch something eternal.

Stand there long enough, especially in the quiet hours before sunrise, and it begins to feel as though the very soul of Kashi rises gently from the river itself.

Among the first ghats where the city begins to stir is *Assi Ghat*. There is a quiet softness to it in the early morning. Students gather with books tucked beneath their arms, some sitting silently by the river while others practise yoga as the sky slowly brightens. Long-term travellers, researchers, musicians, and seekers from around the world gradually become part of its rhythm.

Unlike the constant movement found at many other ghats, *Assi* carries a gentler energy. It feels lived in, as though everyday life and quiet devotion have existed side by side for generations.

The mornings here are especially known for *Subah-e-Banaras*—a daily cultural and spiritual gathering where music,

Vedic chants, yoga, and prayer rise together with the morning sun. Sitting there as the first rays of light fall upon the river, one begins to understand why so many people come to Kashi intending to stay for only a few days, yet somehow remain for months.

It is believed that the ghat derives its name from the ancient Assi River, which once met the Ganga at this very spot. Though the river gradually disappeared over the centuries, its memory continues to live on in the name of the ghat itself.

But the calm of Assi is only the beginning. As the morning unfolds, Kashi gradually reveals another side of itself. The quiet serenity of Assi gives way to growing movement as the lanes become narrower, the sounds grow louder, and pilgrims carrying flowers and brass pots move steadily along the stone pathways while boats begin filling the river like drifting shadows upon the water.

Walking beside the ghats of Kashi never feels like moving from one place to another. It feels like entering deeper layers of the same ancient story, until that story finally unfolds into the immense energy of Dashashwamedh Ghat.

If Assi feels like the city's awakening, Dashashwamedh is its heartbeat.

Everything seems to gather here at once—priests calling devotees for rituals, flower sellers carrying baskets of fresh marigolds, children running across the broad stone steps, sadhus wrapped in saffron and sacred ash, pilgrims standing silently before the Ganga with folded hands, and boatmen calling travellers toward the waiting river.

Yet beneath this constant movement lives a legend that has flowed through Kashi for centuries. It is believed that when Lord Shiva returned to Kashi, Lord Brahma wished to honour that sacred moment through a grand act of worship. Upon these very riverbanks, he is said to have performed ten Ashwamedha Yagnas, giving the ghat the name by which it is known even today—*Dasha* meaning ten, *Ashwa* meaning horse, and *Medha* meaning sacrifice.

In the ancient Vedic world, the Ashwamedha Yagna was among the grandest and most sacred of rituals, performed not merely to affirm earthly authority, but to invoke spiritual harmony and divine sanctity. The legend of Dashashwamedh Ghat is rooted in this extraordinary act of worship, offered by Lord Brahma in honour of Lord Shiva's return to the city he loved beyond all others.

It is this enduring belief that gives Dashashwamedh a grandeur unlike any other place in Kashi. Even amidst the noise, the crowds, and the endless movement, there remains something deeply ceremonial about it, as though the sacred rituals once performed upon these riverbanks never truly came to an end. Nowhere is that feeling more vivid than during the evening Ganga Aarti.

As the sun slowly disappears behind the city, the ghats begin to transform once more. Lamps are carefully arranged upon raised platforms, while priests dressed in saffron and cream take their places facing the river. Across the broad stone steps and upon hundreds of boats floating gently on the Ganga, thousands of devotees gather in quiet anticipation.

Then, almost in an instant, the conch resounds through the evening air. Flames rise against the darkening sky as

massive brass lamps move in slow, synchronized circles. Chants echo across the riverfront, incense drifts upward like prayer itself, and the continuous ringing of temple bells blends with the shimmering reflections of fire dancing upon the waters of the Ganga.

Some close their eyes in prayer. Others simply watch in silence. And there are those who, without fully understanding why, find tears quietly gathering in their eyes. The Ganga Aarti is not something that is experienced through sight alone. It reaches the heart through sound, fire, devotion, smoke, rhythm, and faith, until the boundary between ritual and emotion quietly disappears.

As the final lamps are lowered and the echoes of the chants slowly fade into the night, the riverfront gradually begins to quieten once again. The crowds grow thinner, the voices soften, and the restless energy of Dashashwamedh gently gives way to a different kind of silence.

Further along the river, the stone steps of Kedar Ghat begin to appear. There is something deeply intimate about Kedar Ghat. It maybe the sound of temple bells echoing through its narrow surroundings. Perhaps it is the devotion that seems quieter and more inward there.

The atmosphere around Kedar Ghat carries a strong South Indian influence. The chants, rituals, temple traditions, and even the fragrance of food offered near the temples create the feeling that distant sacred worlds have somehow found their place within Kashi.

That is what Kashi has always done—gathered countless traditions and forms of devotion into one eternal city.

Further along the river stands Lalita Ghat, quieter and more secluded than the great ceremonial ghats. Here stands

the beautifully carved Pashupatinath Temple of Varanasi, often known as the Nepali Mandir.

Built in traditional Nepali architecture with intricate wooden carvings, the temple feels unlike anything else along the riverfront. Its silence has a different character. Even the air seems to move more slowly there.

Standing beside the temple, watching the river flow gently past its dark wooden walls, one begins to understand something essential about Kashi. The city does not reject differences; it absorbs them and, over time, makes them part of its own sacred identity.

As the river continues northward, the atmosphere begins to change once again. The movement grows calmer, and the noise of the larger ghats gradually fades into the distance. Eventually, one arrives at Panchganga Ghat—one of the oldest and most spiritually revered ghats of Kashi.

Ancient tradition holds that five sacred rivers meet here spiritually—the Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Dhutapapa, and Kirana. Though only the Ganga remains visible today, Panchganga Ghat continues to be revered as the sacred confluence of these divine waters.

For centuries, Panchganga Ghat has drawn saints, scholars, ascetics, and seekers of knowledge. Ancient texts describe it as one of the most sacred ghats of Kashi, second only to Dashashwamedh in spiritual significance. It is believed that great sages once gathered here, spending long hours in discussions on scripture, philosophy, meditation, and the path to liberation as lamps flickered softly beside the river.

That quiet spirit has never entirely left the ghat. Even today, elderly men sit silently upon its steps watching the

slow movement of the Ganga, young students recite Sanskrit verses beside weathered temple walls, wandering musicians fill the air with gentle melodies, and saffron-clad sadhus remain motionless beneath the afternoon sun.

The ghats are never truly silent.

And yet they carry a silence within them.

Women release small diyas into the waters at dusk. Pilgrims whisper the names of loved ones in prayer. Boatmen speak of the river as though it were an old companion that has witnessed their entire lives.

Everything feels temporary, and yet strangely eternal.

Among the newer additions to the riverfront is Namoo Ghat. With its broad walkways and modern public spaces, it reflects a more contemporary face of Kashi.

And yet, the contrast does not feel out of place.

Kashi has never remained frozen in time. It continues to evolve, and yet beneath every transformation, the city somehow preserves the same ancient stillness at its heart.

There is a verse often recited in praise of the sacred Ganga:

देवि सुरेश्वरि भगवति गङ्गे
त्रिभुवनतारिणि तरलतरङ्गे ॥

From the *Ganga Stotram*:

“O Divine Ganga, goddess worshipped by the gods, savior of the three worlds, whose flowing waves carry liberation.”

And standing beside the river in Kashi, those words no longer feel symbolic.

They feel visible.

Because the river here does not merely flow beside the city.

She watches it.

She has witnessed kings disappear into history, temples rise and fall, pilgrims arrive carrying hope and grief, saints meditate upon her banks, and countless souls whisper their prayers into her waters before returning once more to silence.

And still she flows.

Patient and endless, as though carrying the memory of everything she has ever witnessed.

As night slowly descends upon Kashi, the ghats begin to change once again. The crowds grow thinner, and the chants become softer.

Small lamps drift quietly upon the dark waters like floating stars, while the river reflects fragments of temple light beneath the night sky and distant bells continue to echo softly across the ancient city.

And somewhere farther along the river, beyond the music, beyond the prayers, beyond the living rhythm of the ghats, smoke continues to rise steadily into the darkness.

In Kashi, there is one ghat where the fire never truly sleeps.

A place where endings are not feared, but understood.

A place where death is not seen as darkness, but as the soul's final freedom.

That place is Manikarnika.

CHAPTER 7 –

Manikarnika — Where Death Becomes Liberation

There are places in Kashi where the city seems to come alive in sound.

Temple bells echo through ancient lanes. Priests chant beside the river while lamps move like fire across the darkness during the evening Ganga Aarti. Pilgrims gather along the ghats carrying flowers, incense, and prayers. Somewhere, a conch is blown. Somewhere, a sadhu sits in silence watching the sacred Ganga flow gently past the ancient stone steps.

But Manikarnika is different. Here, the city grows quieter.

The closer one walks toward the ghat, the more the city seems to slow down. The lanes grow narrower, winding between old buildings darkened by smoke and time. The scent of burning wood begins to drift through the air long before the river itself comes into view.

And yet, life continues. Tea sellers call out to passing pilgrims. Small shops remain open beside ancient walls. Cows wander unhurriedly through the crowded lanes. Life carries on exactly as it does across the rest of Kashi.

But something feels different here. Voices grow softer, footsteps slow, and even those visiting for the first time instinctively begin walking more quietly, as if silence itself belongs to this place.

And then, suddenly, through the narrow lanes, the ghat appears.

Smoke rises endlessly beside the river as flames burn upon the stone platforms near the water. Stacks of wood stand waiting for the next cremation. Boats drift quietly across the Ganga while priests move silently between the fires. Families sit beside their loved ones, speaking little, as the final rites unfold before them.

And through it all, the river continues to flow with the same quiet calm it has carried for centuries. At first, one struggles to understand the place, because nowhere else in Kashi feels quite like Manikarnika.

The fires here never truly stop burning. They continue through the day and the deepest hours of the night, through rain, winter fog, summer heat, festivals, silence, and centuries of changing kingdoms and generations. Yet, despite the constant presence of death, the place does not feel frightening. Instead, it carries a strange stillness—not empty, not sorrowful, but deeply accepting—as though it has moved beyond fear itself into a silence understood by Kashi for ages.

People often imagine cremation grounds as places defined only by grief. Yet Manikarnika reveals something more.

There is sorrow here, certainly. Families arrive carrying the weight of loss in their eyes. Some sit silently beside the pyres, while others gaze into the flames as though trying to

hold on to one final memory before it disappears into smoke and ash.

Yet alongside that sorrow, there is also acceptance—a quiet understanding that is difficult to describe. Standing beside Manikarnika for long enough changes the way one begins to look at life itself. Here, death is not separated from existence as something distant or hidden away; life and death simply exist side by side, each giving meaning to the other.

It is reflected in everything around the ghat. A child runs through the lane carrying flowers for worship while, nearby, smoke rises slowly into the evening sky. Pilgrims walk toward the temples chanting the name of Shiva while, only a few steps away, another funeral procession reaches the ghat.

Around Manikarnika, ordinary life never comes to a halt. Prayers continue, funeral fires burn, and the Ganga flows through it all with the same quiet calm.

Perhaps that is why Kashi changes the meaning of death itself.

In many places, death is feared because it is seen as an ending. People avoid speaking about it. They push it to the edges of their thoughts until, one day, it stands before them without warning.

But standing beside Manikarnika, one slowly begins to understand why countless people across generations wished for their final journey to end here.

In Kashi, death is not seen as destruction, but as release.

DRAWN TO KASHI



For centuries, devotees have believed that those who leave their bodies here attain moksha—freedom from the endless cycle of birth and rebirth. According to sacred tradition, Lord Shiva himself whispers the *Taraka Mantra* into the ears of the departing soul, guiding it beyond fear, attachment, and the cycle of existence itself.

It is this timeless belief that gives Manikarnika its extraordinary peace. The fires continue to burn, yet the atmosphere is not one of despair. Instead, it carries the quiet assurance that what appears to be an ending may, in truth, be the beginning of the soul's final freedom.

It is neither happiness nor despair, but a quiet peace that comes from accepting that everything born into this world must one day return to silence.

Even today, people in Kashi speak softly of how the ghat received its name. According to ancient tradition, Lord Vishnu created the sacred Chakra-Pushkarini Kund through his divine power and deep tapas. In time, this sacred pond came to be known as the Manikarnika Kund.

It is believed that later, while Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati were bathing there, one of Goddess Parvati's jewelled earrings slipped quietly into the sacred waters below.

Shiva immediately asked his attendants and the divine guardians of Kashi to search for it. They searched the waters, the stone steps, and the surrounding earth with great care, yet the ornament remained unfound.

According to ancient tradition, when every effort proved unsuccessful, Shiva declared that this place would no longer remain an ordinary spot upon the banks of the Ganga. The loss of the divine ornament transformed the land itself into a sacred space, forever associated with the

soul's final freedom. From that moment onward, it came to be known as the *Mahashmashana*—the Great Cremation Ground, where the sacred fires would never truly be extinguished.

Even today, standing beside Manikarnika at night and watching the flames continue beside the river, one can almost understand why this story still lives so deeply within the city. The fire seems ancient, as though it has been burning far longer than memory itself.

There is something about Manikarnika that cannot be fully explained through stories alone. It must be felt.

It may be the sight of flames rising endlessly beside the river. Or the silence reflected in the eyes of those sitting beside the pyres. Or it may simply be the realization that everything human beings spend their lives chasing eventually yields to time.

Standing there beside the burning ghats, one begins to understand how temporary everything truly is. Lives once filled with ambition, pride, love, anger, memory, and identity eventually return to ash. Empires that once believed themselves eternal disappear into history. Names fade and faces are gradually forgotten. And yet the river continues to flow, the fire continues to burn, and Kashi continues to stand.

It is this enduring spirit that has given rise to another belief—that the sacred flame of Manikarnika has never truly gone out. Generation after generation, the fire continues to burn beside the river, becoming a symbol of Kashi itself.

The city, too, has endured the passing of countless ages. Generations have come and gone, civilizations have changed, and time has continued its endless course. Yet the sacred

flame is believed to have burned through it all, becoming a symbol of the city's own endurance.

Standing beside Manikarnika for long enough, one slowly realizes how fragile human life truly is. The things people spend lifetimes chasing—wealth, pride, recognition, and power—begin to feel strangely distant before the burning fire. Kings and ordinary men, the rich and the poor, all eventually arrive at the same destination. Beside the flames of Manikarnika, every worldly identity slowly fades into ash carried away by the winds of Kashi.

This is why Manikarnika leaves behind a silence that lingers long after one has walked away, not because it fills the heart with fear, but because it quietly strips away illusion.

A sacred verse, deeply associated with Kashi, expresses this belief in just a few words:

काश्यां मरणान्मुक्तिः ॥

“Death in Kashi grants release.”

For centuries, this belief has drawn countless souls to the city—not because they wished for death, but because they longed for freedom: freedom from fear, from the endless cycle of birth and rebirth, and from the burdens carried across lifetimes.

And that is perhaps the deepest mystery of Manikarnika. A place filled with fire and endings, yet strangely free of despair. It does not speak only about death. It speaks about what remains after everything else disappears.

As night slowly settles over Kashi, the flames continue to rise beside the river while the Ganga flows silently through the darkness. Temple bells echo faintly through distant lanes, and boats drift quietly upon the sacred waters beneath the smoke-filled sky.

And above it all, the ancient city continues to stand beneath the silent gaze of Shiva—the Lord of both creation and dissolution.

Kashi has never turned away from death. It has watched generations arrive and depart, witnessed kingdoms rise and disappear, and carried the weight of countless moments of loss, sorrow, and renewal.

And yet, nothing here feels final.

Because in Kashi, every ending is understood as a passage.

Not into darkness.

But into freedom.

CHAPTER 8 –

Destruction and Rebirth — The History of Kashi Vishwanath

Standing before Kashi Vishwanath today, it is difficult to imagine how many times this sacred shrine disappeared—only to rise again.

The temple stands peacefully as devotees continue to arrive throughout the day. Temple bells echo through the courtyard, and flowers gather before the Jyotirlinga as they have for generations. Nothing about the place suggests that its story was ever interrupted.

And yet, behind the peace of the sacred site lies another story—not only of devotion, but also of loss.

Kashi has long taught that death is not always an ending, and that destruction is not always the end either. If death cannot destroy the soul, can destruction truly destroy Kashi?

For centuries, the sacred shrine at the heart of Kashi stood as one of the most revered places in the Hindu world. Pilgrims came from distant lands to bow before Vishwanath, carrying with them prayers, gratitude, hope, and grief. But history rarely leaves sacred places untouched. As kingdoms

changed and new powers rose across the Indian subcontinent, Kashi found itself caught in the path of conflict.

Again and again, the sacred shrine was brought down, only to rise once more through the devotion of those who refused to let it be forgotten. Each generation witnessed a different chapter of uncertainty, yet each carried the same determination—to return, to worship, and to rebuild.

That is what makes the story of Kashi Vishwanath unlike that of an ordinary monument. It is not simply the history of a building, but the history of a faith that refused to disappear.

Among the many trials Kashi has endured, one remains especially painful.

During the reign of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, the ancient Kashi Vishwanath Temple was demolished, and the Gyanvapi Mosque was built beside the sacred site.

For countless devotees, it was far more than the loss of a temple; it was the loss of a place where generations had prayed, celebrated, mourned, and sought the presence of Lord Shiva.

The stones had fallen, but the pilgrimage did not end. People continued to come to Kashi. They continued to bathe in the Ganga before sunrise, walk through its narrow lanes, and whisper, *Har Har Mahadev*.

The temple had never been the only home of their faith. A temple could be brought down, but faith did not disappear with its walls. It continued to live through memory, prayer, and the quiet hope that one day the bells would ring there once again.

Years passed. The city continued to breathe as it always had. The Ganga flowed on, pilgrims continued to arrive, but the hope of seeing Vishwanath rise again never faded.

Then, in the eighteenth century, that hope found its guardian.

Ahilyabai Holkar, the queen of the Malwa kingdom, was renowned for her deep devotion and for restoring sacred temples across India. When she turned her attention to Kashi, she did not come seeking glory or remembrance. She came as a devotee.

Understanding what Kashi Vishwanath meant to millions, she chose to build a new shrine beside the ancient sacred site. It was not the largest temple in India, nor was it built to display the power of a kingdom.

It was built for a single purpose—to ensure that the prayers offered to Vishwanath would never fall silent.

Once again, temple bells echoed through Kashi. Lamps were lit before the Jyotirlinga, and devotees stood with folded hands where they had long wished to stand.

It is difficult to measure what Ahilyabai Holkar truly gave back to Kashi. She rebuilt more than walls; she restored a place where generations could once again celebrate, mourn, pray, and place their deepest hopes before Vishwanath. For countless pilgrims, the temple became a reminder that while history may wound a sacred place, devotion can help heal it.

That is why the shrine built by Ahilyabai Holkar is remembered with such deep affection. She did more than rebuild a shrine—she restored hope. She reminded generations of devotees that faith does not measure its

strength by what has been lost, but by the courage to begin again.

And in doing so, she became part of Kashi's own story—not as a conqueror or a ruler, but as a devotee who quietly gave the city back a piece of its heart.

But the story did not end there. Generations that followed continued to express their devotion to the Vishwanath. Among them was Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who donated gold for the temple's shikhara, giving the shrine the golden crown that still catches the first light of dawn above Kashi.

As the centuries passed, the city continued to grow. Its lanes grew busier, and pilgrims arrived in greater numbers than ever before.

In recent years, the surroundings of the temple have changed once again. Wider pathways now welcome millions of devotees from every corner of the world, making access to the shrine easier while opening its doors to a new generation of pilgrims.

Much has changed over the centuries. The skyline is different. The pathways have changed. Yet when the bells begin to ring and the first prayers rise before Vishwanath, one realizes that the heart of Kashi has remained exactly where it has always been.

That is the most extraordinary part of Kashi's story. The greatest miracle was never the survival of the shrine itself. The real miracle was that faith returned before the dust had settled—every time.

Someone came back.

Someone lit the first lamp again.

Someone placed the first flower before Vishwanath.

Someone rang the first bell once more.

That is why Kashi cannot be understood through its history alone. Behind every chapter of its past lives the devotion of countless people who refused to let it be forgotten. And that is the greatest miracle of Kashi—not that its temple stood for centuries,

but that every time it fell,
someone returned to build it again.

CHAPTER 9 –

Under the Gaze of Kala Bhairava

There is something curious about the way Kashi introduces you to its greatest truths.

It never does so immediately.

The city allows you to wander first. It lets you lose yourself within its ancient lanes, stand before Vishwanath with folded hands, sit quietly beside the Ganga, and slowly absorb a rhythm that cannot be understood in a single day. Just when you begin to feel that you have started to understand Kashi, the city gently reminds you that there is still more waiting to be discovered.

One such discovery is Kala Bhairava.

Few pilgrims arrive in Kashi intending to visit him first. Most come for the darshan of Shri Kashi Vishwanath. Many come to take a holy dip in the Ganga or perform the sacred rites for their ancestors. Others come simply because they have long dreamt of setting foot in the city that has drawn seekers for thousands of years.

Somewhere along that journey, almost every pilgrim hears the same gentle reminder: “Do not leave Kashi without visiting Kala Bhairava.”

The suggestion is never made with insistence, nor does anyone feel the need to explain it. It simply finds its way into conversations. A priest mentions it while offering blessings, a local resident speaks of it while giving directions, and a fellow pilgrim quietly asks whether you have already sought his darshan. Before long, you begin to notice that the name of Kala Bhairava has quietly become a part of your journey.

At first, it feels like just another recommendation among the countless temples that fill the city. Kashi is, after all, a place where every lane seems to lead to another shrine and every deity carries centuries of devotion. Why then does the name of Kala Bhairava continue returning?

Like so many things in Kashi, the answer is not found in explanation. It is found in experience.

Only when one finally stands before the temple does the answer begin to reveal itself. There is no overwhelming grandeur demanding attention, nor any magnificent architecture seeking admiration. Instead there is an unmistakable feeling that generations before you have stood at this very place with the same folded hands and the same quiet faith.

It is not unusual to see an elderly devotee approach the shrine carrying nothing more than a few flowers and folded hands. There are no elaborate prayers, no hurried requests. After a few quiet moments before the deity, the devotee bows, gently touches the threshold with reverence, and walks away with the quiet contentment of someone who has left behind a burden too heavy to carry alone.

Standing there, one begins to feel that time itself has little meaning. Faces have changed, and centuries have passed, yet the devotion remains exactly as it always has.

That is because the people of Kashi have never regarded Kala Bhairava as merely another deity. To them, he is the city's eternal guardian—a protector whose silent presence has watched over Kashi for centuries.

Among the people of Kashi, a saying has been passed down through generations: “One enters Kashi through Vishwanath’s grace, but remains in Kashi under Bhairava’s protection.”

These words may be simple, but they reflect a belief that has lived in Kashi for centuries. They reveal the unique place that Kala Bhairava holds in the spiritual life of the city. While Lord Vishwanath is revered as the Lord of Kashi, Kala Bhairava is lovingly worshipped as its Kotwal—the divine guardian entrusted by Lord Shiva himself with protecting the sacred city and every soul that enters it.

For this reason, many devotees first seek the blessings of Kala Bhairava before proceeding for the darshan of Vishwanath. Before leaving Kashi, they often return once again, offering their gratitude to the guardian who has silently watched over their pilgrimage from beginning to end.

This tradition is rooted in an ancient legend preserved in the sacred traditions of Shaivism.

According to the Puranas, there came a time when Lord Brahma became consumed by pride. As the creator of the universe, he gradually came to believe that no one was greater than himself. Seeing that the balance of creation had begun to waver, Lord Shiva manifested himself as Bhairava—not out of anger, but to restore humility where arrogance had taken root.

With effortless ease, Bhairava severed Brahma's fifth head, bringing an end to his pride. But the act carried its own consequence. Bhairava incurred the burden of Brahmahatya, and Brahma's skull remained attached to his hand.

Carrying the skull, Bhairava wandered across the sacred land in search of release. He visited countless holy places, yet nowhere did the burden leave him.

It was only when he entered Kashi that the impossible happened. The skull fell from his hand, freeing him from the burden he had carried for so long. The place where this occurred came to be known as Kapala Mochana, and it continues to be revered as one of the sacred tirthas of Kashi.

It was here that Lord Shiva entrusted Bhairava with an extraordinary responsibility. He would remain in Kashi forever—not as a ruler, not as a conqueror, but as its eternal guardian.

Since then, devotees have worshipped him as the Kotwal of Kashi—the vigilant protector who watches over the city, preserving its sacred order and safeguarding all who enter its sacred boundaries.

For this reason, the people of Kashi have never looked upon Kala Bhairava with fear. His appearance may seem formidable, yet his presence is deeply reassuring. To the devotee, he inspires not fear, but trust.

The intensity of his form is not directed towards those who come with devotion. It is directed towards everything that pulls a person away from truth—ego, arrogance, ignorance, and attachment. Just as he once humbled the pride of Brahma, Bhairava continues to remind every pilgrim

that the greatest obstacles on the spiritual path are not outside us, but within.

There is another reason why Kala Bhairava occupies such a special place in the hearts of the people of Kashi. Even his name reflects the role he continues to play in the spiritual life of the city.

The word *Kala* means time—not the time measured by clocks or calendars, but the eternal force that governs all existence. It is time that creates, time that transforms, and, in the end, time that claims everything. No kingdom has endured forever. No empire has escaped its passage. Every life, every achievement, and every possession eventually yields to it.

Bhairava is revered as the one who stands beyond that endless flow of time. He reminds us that while everything around us is constantly changing, there exists a truth that remains unchanged. Understanding this, one slowly begins to see Bhairava in an entirely different light.

At first glance, his form may seem intimidating. His expression is stern, his gaze unwavering, and every aspect of his presence radiates immense power. Yet the people of Kashi worship him not out of fear, but out of trust.

To them, his formidable appearance is not a symbol of anger, but a promise that the sacred city remains under the protection of one who never sleeps, never turns away, and never abandons his duty. His gaze is fierce only towards falsehood, while his compassion is reserved for those who approach with sincerity.

That is why countless devotees leave his temple with a sense of reassurance rather than fear. They do not feel judged; they feel protected.

It is this quiet sense of protection that slowly changes the way one begins to experience Kashi. With time, another realization quietly begins to emerge. Bhairava's presence is no longer felt only within the temple or the sacred boundaries of the city. It seems to extend into the life of the pilgrim, gently reminding them that every sacred journey is also an inward one.

Every journey to Kashi begins as an outward pilgrimage. One travels across cities, crosses rivers, walks through ancient lanes, and stands before sacred temples and without realizing it, another journey begins alongside it.

A journey inward.

Slowly, the questions that once seemed so important begin to lose their urgency. The restless mind grows quieter, and the need to control every outcome begins to soften. One gradually comes to understand that the greatest pilgrimage is not measured by the distance travelled, but by the transformation that takes place within.

This is the unseen blessing of Kala Bhairava. He silently reminds every pilgrim to leave behind more than footprints in the sacred city—to leave behind pride, fear, and the burdens carried for far too long.

For what is the true purpose of a pilgrimage if one returns exactly as one arrived?

That is also what one begins to notice after visiting the temple. People rarely speak of what they prayed for as they leave the temple.

There is no excitement, no celebration, and no urge to tell others what they asked of the deity. Most simply bow once more before departing. Some close their eyes for a few

quiet moments, while others stand in silence before turning back towards the ancient lanes of Kashi.

It is a silence that feels complete—as though certain prayers no longer require words.

That is why the people of Kashi have never felt the need to explain Kala Bhairava in great detail. Some relationships cannot be understood through stories alone. They must be lived.

One may know the ancient legend of Bhairava. One may understand why he became the Kotwal of Kashi and even learn every tradition associated with his temple. Yet none of these, by themselves, truly explain why generation after generation continues to bow before him with the same unwavering faith.

The answer is found not in knowledge, but in experience.

Every pilgrim who comes to Kashi carries something unseen. Some carry grief that has remained hidden for years. Others carry questions that life has left unanswered, while many come burdened by guilt or fear. And some carry nothing more than a quiet longing for peace.

Standing before Kala Bhairava, many discover that their prayers become surprisingly simple—not for wealth or success, but for strength. Strength to accept what cannot be changed, wisdom to recognise what truly matters, and the courage to walk the path of truth with humility.

That is the greatest protection a guardian can offer—not merely the protection of a city, but the protection of the hearts of those who seek refuge.

As one steps away from the temple and returns once more to the familiar lanes of Kashi, the city appears exactly

as it did before. The same streets, the same temples, and the same eternal flow of pilgrims. Nothing outside has changed. Yet something within has.

That is the blessing of Kala Bhairava.

It is not that he removes every burden, but that he teaches us we were never meant to carry them alone.

For while many come to Kashi seeking the grace of Vishwanath, they leave carrying something they had never expected—the quiet assurance that somewhere between their first step into the city and their final glance back, they were never walking alone.

CHAPTER 10 –

The Voices of Kashi

There are many ways to remember a city.

Some are remembered for the monuments they leave behind. Some for the stories that continue to be told. And some because of the people who become a part of their history.

Kashi is remembered differently. Its greatest stories are often told not by kings or scholars, but by people whose names no one knows—a boatman who has spent his life upon the Ganga, a flower seller arranging fresh marigolds before the first rays of dawn, a priest offering blessings to strangers he may never see again, or a tea seller whose small shop has witnessed countless conversations between pilgrims from every corner of the country.

None of them imagine themselves to be the guardians of Kashi. None speak as philosophers or claim to possess great wisdom. Yet somewhere in the simplicity of their words and the quiet dignity of their lives, they reveal something that no guidebook can ever fully explain.

That is because Kashi has never belonged only to its temples. It has always belonged to its people.

One arrives expecting to admire its ancient shrines, to witness the Ganga, and to stand before Vishwanath. Yet it is often not the temples alone that remain with you. Slowly, the city begins to speak—not through its temples, but through the familiar voices of the people who call it home.

A pilgrim, uncertain of the road ahead, pauses to ask for directions. An old shopkeeper smiles before pointing towards a narrow lane. “There are many ways through Kashi,” he says gently, “but if your intention is sincere, you will always reach where you are meant to.” It sounds like nothing more than simple directions. Yet somehow, the words remain long after the destination has been found.

On another morning, a traveller sits beside the river, speaking with a boatman while waiting for the sun to rise.

“The river must look different every day,” the traveller remarks. The boatman smiles as he looks towards the flowing Ganga. “The river changes every moment,” he replies, “but she never forgets where she is going.”

Nothing more is said. The boat drifts gently into the morning light, yet the sentence continues its journey long after the conversation has ended.

Perhaps that is the way wisdom lives in Kashi. It does not always arrive through scriptures, nor is it announced as a lesson. More often, it appears unexpectedly in the middle of an ordinary conversation, spoken by someone who has no intention of becoming anyone’s teacher.

There is something deeply humbling about that. In many places, people search for wisdom by seeking extraordinary individuals. In Kashi, one sometimes discovers it in the simplest encounters—a sentence spoken without

ceremony, a smile offered without expectation, or a blessing given without asking who stands before them.

Slowly, one begins to understand that the voices of Kashi are remarkable not because they offer answers, but because they speak from lives deeply shaped by faith. Spend a little longer in the city, and it becomes easier to see where that quiet faith comes from. It is not something people speak about often. It is simply the way they live.

A shopkeeper notices the uncertainty on a pilgrim's face and smiles before saying, "Mahadev dekh lenge."

There is no attempt to explain how, nor any promise that every difficulty will disappear. Only the quiet assurance that one need not carry every burden alone.

Nearby, an elderly woman patiently strings fresh marigolds into garlands outside a small shrine. Someone asks whether business has been slow. She looks up with a gentle smile and replies, "Whatever Mahadev sends is enough."

The words are spoken without hesitation—not because life has always been easy, but because gratitude has gradually become stronger than expectation.

Listening to such conversations, one slowly begins to realise that the greatest wisdom of Kashi is rarely found on a stage or only within the pages of ancient scriptures. More often, it is found in ordinary lives—lives deeply shaped by a faith that asks for no guarantees, does not deny hardship, and yet never lets go of hope.

It is a quiet faith, rarely expressed through long explanations or philosophical discussions, but revealed instead through a simple conviction that somehow the path will reveal itself, doors will open when the time is right, and

what is meant to come will come. All that is asked is to keep walking with faith.

That is why the people of Kashi leave such a lasting impression. One arrives expecting to remember the temples, the Ganga, the ancient lanes, and the countless shrines that fill the city.

Yet long after the journey is over, it is often difficult to remember the exact words that were spoken. What remains instead is the feeling—a stranger's kindness, a blessing offered without reason, or a smile that arrived at exactly the right moment.

Perhaps that is the quiet miracle of Kashi. The city does not ask its people to become extraordinary. It simply teaches ordinary people to leave an extraordinary mark upon those who pass through.

That is why the voices of Kashi are never truly left behind. They become a part of the silence with which every pilgrim returns home.

CHAPTER 11 –

Where the Soul Finds Rest

After spending time in Kashi, one slowly begins to realise that the city was never trying to impress. It had been quietly teaching all along.

Many arrive believing they have come to visit a city. They come to see the temple of Vishwanath, to walk along the ghats, to witness the Ganga, and to experience a place spoken of with reverence for thousands of years. Yet somewhere along the journey, it becomes clear that Kashi is not merely a destination. It is a teacher.

Its lessons are never offered all at once. They reveal themselves slowly—through its temples, its ghats, its people, its silences, and the countless moments that seem ordinary until long after they have passed.

Perhaps that is why Kashi stays with us not because of what it shows, but because of what it reveals. It leaves us with questions, and if one stays long enough, it gradually begins to reveal the answers.

What begins as a pilgrimage gradually becomes something more—not merely a journey across a sacred city, but a journey inward. And like every true teacher, Kashi

rarely speaks directly. Instead, it teaches through experience, silence, observation, and through life itself.

One does not have to look far to find those lessons. They begin to reveal themselves in every corner of the city. Standing at Manikarnika Ghat, where the funeral fires burn day and night, one cannot escape a simple truth: everything changes.

The city does not present this reality with fear. It presents it with quiet acceptance, gently reminding us that just as seasons pass, generations come and go, and time moves ever onward, every human life has its own beginning, its own journey, and its own end.

That is one of Kashi's greatest lessons: not to fear this truth, but to find peace with it.

In most places, death is hidden from sight. In Kashi, it exists beside everyday life. Pilgrims offer prayers while funeral processions move through the very same streets. Temple bells continue to ring while the cremation fires burn. The Ganga receives flowers from worshippers and the ashes of the departed with the same quiet grace.

And yet, none of it feels contradictory. Kashi gently reminds us that life and death are not opposites. They are simply different moments of the same journey, each giving meaning to the other.

From this understanding, many of Kashi's deepest lessons slowly begin to unfold. Modern life constantly urges us to keep striving—for success, possessions, recognition, and certainty. Yet some of the most peaceful faces in Kashi seem to possess very little.

A sadhu sitting quietly beside the river. An elderly priest lighting lamps before dawn. A pilgrim who has

travelled hundreds of miles for a single glimpse of Vishwanath.

Watching them, one begins to wonder whether peace comes from gaining more, or from needing less. Kashi never answers that question directly. It simply invites every visitor to ask it.

The world continues to change, yet the questions that matter most remain the same. In Kashi, where so much feels timeless, the Ganga continues her eternal flow, prayers rise with the same quiet devotion, and temple bells still echo through the ancient lanes, just as they have for generations. Without ever insisting, the city gently invites each generation to seek its own answers.

Standing beside the Ganga, one begins to realise how small a single human life truly is. Yet, in the very same moment, one also realises how meaningful that life can become when it is lived with awareness.

Strangely, that realisation does not feel unsettling. It feels liberating, for it reminds us that we are part of something far greater than ourselves.

Faith, too, begins to look different in Kashi. It is not merely faith expressed through rituals or preserved through tradition, but faith as trust—the quiet trust that there is meaning beyond what can immediately be understood, that not every step of life must be controlled, and that some truths reveal themselves only with time.

Every day, countless people arrive carrying burdens they cannot explain. And every day, many leave feeling lighter—not always because their problems have disappeared, but because the way they see them has gradually changed.

That is what faith truly does. It does not always change our circumstances. Sometimes, it simply changes the heart with which we meet them.

And with that, even the meaning of surrender begins to change. It no longer feels like weakness or resignation, but becomes the quiet understanding that not every answer can be forced, not every outcome can be controlled, and not every burden has to be carried alone. In Kashi, surrender is not the end of effort. It is the beginning of trust.

Kashi never promises that life will unfold without hardship. It simply reminds us that even the longest night eventually gives way to dawn, and that faith is often strongest not when every answer is known, but when certainty is absent.

Much of human suffering comes from holding too tightly—to success, identity, expectations, fears, and the belief that life must unfold according to carefully made plans. Yet Kashi offers another way. The river continues to flow whether anyone resists it or not. Time moves forward whether anyone is ready or not. Change arrives whether it is welcomed or not. Peace begins not by resisting these truths, but by accepting them, and in that acceptance, learning to let go.

Perhaps this is the quiet liberation Kashi offers—not an escape from life, but release from the fears that keep us from living it fully.

That is why the presence of Lord Shiva feels so alive in Kashi. He is not merely the destroyer, but the one who dissolves illusion, teaches detachment, and stands beyond fear, beyond time, and even beyond death.

Slowly, almost without realising it, the city begins to awaken that same understanding within those who walk its ancient lanes. By the time the journey draws to a close, Kashi often feels very different from the city that first appeared.

The lanes are still crowded. The temple bells still ring. The Ganga continues her timeless flow. At first glance, nothing has changed. Yet something is unmistakably different—not the city itself, but the person who came to see it.

Perhaps that is Kashi's greatest teaching. It does not seek to change the world around us. It quietly changes the way we see it.

And that is the greatest transformation any pilgrimage can offer.

It is there—in the sound of temple bells at dawn, in the glow of lamps floating upon the Ganga, in the smoke rising above Manikarnika, and in the quiet presence of Vishwanath—that Kashi reveals its deepest lesson.

That has always been Kashi's greatest gift—not that it asks us to become someone else, but that it gently reveals who we have been all along.

EPILOGUE

Leaving Kashi

Eventually, every journey through Kashi comes to an end. The train departs, the ghats slowly fade from sight, and the waters of the Ganga disappear into the distance.

And yet, the strange thing about Kashi is that no one truly leaves it. Even after the journey ends, something remains within—a silence that was not there before, a memory that returns unexpectedly, and questions that continue to unfold long after the city itself has disappeared from view.

Years may pass. The sound of temple bells may be replaced by the rhythm of everyday life. The sight of the Ganga may become distant. The narrow lanes, the morning chants, and the evening lamps may slowly fade into memory. Yet somewhere within, Kashi remains.

Perhaps it returns in unexpected moments—a temple bell heard from afar, the quiet flame of a lamp, the sight of a river flowing without haste, or the simple words of a stranger offered with kindness. Suddenly, the city feels close again.

That is because Kashi was never contained only within its temples or its sacred places. It always lived in something greater—in the faith of its people, in the wisdom carried by

ordinary voices, and in the countless moments that quietly revealed what words alone never could.

One remembers the old shopkeeper who spoke of sincerity, the boatman who watched the Ganga without hurry, the priest who offered blessings without asking who stood before him, and the countless faces that never imagined they were teaching anyone at all. Yet somehow, they became a part of the journey.

Long after the journey is over, when life once again becomes hurried and loud, those voices return—not as memories alone, but as gentle reminders of another way to live.

Perhaps that is why people never truly say goodbye to Kashi. They simply carry it with them.

For some places are visited.

Kashi is lived.

And once it enters the soul...

It remains forever.

ॐ नमः पार्वतीपतये हर हर महादेव ॥

