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Holy Sites in Neo-Liberal World: Indian-Banaras Model

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Abstract

There is a great connection between religious tolerance and holy sites due to this kind of holy places are regarded as sacred, securely and reliable by all human beings who belong to different religions. In this context, India is one of the most pertinent samples in neo-liberal world because of its various holy sites and different religious beliefs. Especially Banaras, the city of India, which is regarded as religious and cultural capital of India, is the center of religious freedom. With religious freedom comes a respect and tolerance for other religions, which is a value held in high esteem in both India and Banaras. This paper, therefore, aims to discuss the relationship between religious forbearance and holy sites by examining the Indian – Banaras sample. The first section mentions about the importance of Banaras in terms of religions and informs about holy places in this city. The second section deals with contributions of holy sites to religious peaces and tolerance under the example of Indian – Banaras model. Along with this, the paper has been supported by interesting photos which have been taken in original sacred places.

Keywords: India-Banaras (Varanasi, Benares), holy places, religious tolerance

1. Introduction

The demographics of India are inclusive of the second most populous country in the world, with over 1.21 billion people (2011 census),¹ more than a sixth of the world's population. A vast majority of Indians associate themselves with a religion. Hence, religion has been a significant part of the India's culture and tradition, throughout its history. Religious diversity and religious tolerance are both established in the country by custom and law.

India is the birthplace of Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism which are the four major world religions. Besides this, India is one of the most diverse nations in terms of religion. Even though Hindus form close to 80 percent of the population, the country also has large Muslim, Sikh, Christian and Zoroastrian followers. Among them, Islam is the largest minority religion in this country. According to some new data Hinduism is the majority religion with 78.5% of the population of India. Islam (15.4%), Christianity (2.3%), Sikhism (1.9%), Buddhism (0.8%) and Jainism (0.4%) are the other minor religions followed by the people of India.² This diversity of religious belief systems existing in India today is a result of, besides existence and birth of native religions, assimilation and social integration of religions brought to the region by traders, travelers, immigrants, and even invaders and

¹ Provisional Population Totals – Census 2011, Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner (Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India), <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/indiaatglance.html>. [accessed 17.11.2012].

² Justice Rajindar Sachar (Chairperson), *Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India* (Reported by Prime Minister's High Level Committee), (Cirrus Graphics Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2006), p. 28.

conquerors.³ All these religious belief systems have lived harmonizingly until today without any big problem.

2. Holy Sites of Banaras

Since Banaras is accepted a mini India and also cultural capital of India, the city was preferred for this study, which is one of the most proper model to this field. Banaras is the mosaic of Indian culture with respect to representing the diversity and the distinctiveness of the regional cultures of India. People from different parts of India, speaking different languages and carrying their own features, beliefs and customs have settled in this city. But in this process they inwardly have protected their own culture and outwardly have become a part of mosaic culture of the city. Banaras, therefore, is a living expression of Indian culture and traditions in all its multi-ethnic traditions, particular relationship with life and death, ancient educational methods and practices, multi-ethnic population architectural treasures, religious rituals and religious beliefs.⁴

The word “banaras” comes from the word “bana” which means “a place where always ready” and the word “ras” which means “juice of life”. It is the blending of these two words, which makes up the mosaic of culture known as Banaras. The natural setting, the spirit of place, and the continuity of cultural traditions have all blended together to create and preserve a unique lifestyle known as Banarasi. The life style of Banaras is an art of living, both passionate and carefree, both traditional and modern, both relaxed and concentrated, both intense and free.⁵ The city of Banaras, on the other hand, has different names such as Kaşı, Varanasi etc. The name Varanasi has its origin possibly from the names of the two rivers Varuna and Assi for the old city lies in the north shores of the Ganges bounded by its two tributaries, namely Varuna and Assi.⁶

The population of city of Varanasi is about two millions. It is unique in the architectural, artistic and religious expressions of traditional Indian culture and is, even today, a living sample of this style of life. The city, moreover, is an extraordinary testimony to living traditions in religious faith, rituals and various festivals, ancient forms of worship and belief that are still practised in the varied expressions of asceticism, spiritual and meditative exercises, education, music, dance, handicrafts and art forms, passing from one to other generations, from past to present.

Banaras is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. Banaras was a place of Aryan philosophy, religion and culture and was also a commercial and industrial center famous for its silk fabrics, ivory works, sculpture and perfumes by the 2nd millennium BCE. After that this historical city was the capital of the kingdom of Kashi during the time of the Buddha, about 6th century BCE.⁷ The city has remained a center of religious, educational, and artistic activities until today.

Banaras has an important universal value, because of its architectural heritage is linked strongly, since centuries, to the living cultural and religious traditions of three of the major

³ Kenneth Pletcher, *The Geography of India Sacred and Historic Places*, (Britannica Educational Publishing, New York), 2011, p. 160.

⁴ See in detail, Rana P.B. Singh and Dar V. (2003). Varanasi as Heritage City (India) on the scale the UNESCO World Heritage List: From Contestation to Conservation. *International Conference on Communication for Development in the Information Age: Extending the Benefits of Technology for All*, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi (India), 2003, pp. 4-5.

⁵ Rana P.B. Singh, *Cultural Landscapes and Lifeworld. Literary Images of Banaras*, (Indica Books, Varanasi, 2004), p. 10.

⁶ Ibid, p. 11.

⁷ S. Pravin, *Banaras Region: A Spiritual and Cultural Guide*, (Indica Books, Varanasi, 2002), p. 7.

religions of the world which are Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism According to their followers the city is the most important religious pilgrimage destination. Traditional worship, religious rituals, beliefs and festivals are still practiced in here. Banaras is also considered to be a storehouse of religious festivals and ceremonies. The popular saying that more than ten festivals happen in a week, express this richness.⁸ In this respect, there are few cities in the world of greater antiquity and none have so uninterruptedly maintained their ancient celebrity and distinction.

In Banaras there are not only Indian religions but also other religions and their holy sites. It can be found over 3000 Hindu shrines and temples, about 1400 Muslim shrines and mosques, 12 churches, 3 Jain temples, 9 Buddhist temples, 3 Sikh temples (Gurudvaras) and several other sacred sites in this ancient city of India.⁹ It can be said that this is one of the rare places in the world where such a huge number of Hindu and Muslim sacred places co-exist. And the existence of these various holy places still until today demonstrates that religious tolerance is the main characteristic feature of people of this city.

In India, Banaras (or Varanasi) is a holy city for Indian religions especially for Hinduism and being one of the most sacred pilgrimage places for Hindus of all denominations. Banaras is to Hindus what Mecca is to Muslims or Vatican to Catholics. Because the holy sites such as *River Ganges, Ghats, Kashi Vishwanath Temple* and *Sarnath*, the place where Buddha preached his first sermon after enlightenment, are found in this city. On the other hand, it is one of seven Hindu holiest cities (*Sapta Puri*), considered the giver of liberation (*moksha*).¹⁰ Banaras also houses a community of more than 50,000 Brahmins who give religious services to devout. Some of them come on a traditional pilgrimage while others come to die. Besides these, the holy epic poem *Shri Ramcharitmanas* by Goswami Tulsidas was also written here.¹¹ All this makes Banaras a significantly holy place.

The culture of Banaras is closely associated with the River Ganges and the river's religious significance. It is believed that bathing in the River Ganges results in the remission of sins and dying in this holy city (Banaras) ensures release of a person's soul from the cycle of its transmigrations.¹² Thus, many Hindus come here for dying. These kinds of beliefs lead to increasing of religious tourism to Banaras from all over the India.

Banaras owes its existence to the Ganga River considered to be the most holy river for the Hindu people and especially sacred in Banaras where its course towards the Bay of Bengal suddenly turns north. Symbolically, the flow from south to north refers to the life cycle from death. This unique directional change of the river course brings about the development of the importance of the ancient city.¹³

The Ganges is the most sacred river to Hindus and is also a lifeline to millions of Indians who live along its course and depend on it for their daily needs. It is worshiped as the goddess

⁸ Rana P.B. Singh and Dar V, *Varanasi as Heritage City (India) on the scale the UNESCO World Heritage List: From Contestation to Conservation*, p. 3; B. Hans, *Construction and Reconstruction of Sacred Space in Varanasi*, *Numen*, Vol. 43, 1996, pp. 32-55.

⁹ Rana P.B. Singh, *Banaras (Varanasi): Cosmic Order, Sacred City, Hindu Traditions*, (Tara Book Agency, Varanasi, 1993), p. 24; Rana P.B. Singh and Dar V, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹⁰ The other holy cities are 1 Ayodhyā, 2 Mathurā, 3 Gayā, 4 Kaśī, 5 Kañchi, 6 Avantikā, 7 Dwārāvātī. These seven cities (including Banaras) should be known as the givers of liberation. See *Garuḍa Purāṇa*, XVI, 114. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/gpu/gpu18.htm>. [accessed 20.11.2012].

¹¹ Myra Shackley, *Managing Sacred Sites: Service Provision and Visitor Experience*. (Cengage Learning, 2001), p. 121.

¹² Wilder-Smith, E. Schwartz and M. Shaw, *Travel Medicine Tales Behind the Science*, (Elsevier Linacre House, UK, 2007), p. 273.

¹³ B. Hans, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

Ganga in Hinduism.¹⁴ Hindus consider the waters of the Ganges to be both pure and purifying. Nothing reclaims order from disorder more than the waters of the Ganges. Moving water, as in a river, is considered purifying in Hindu culture because it is thought to both absorb impurities and take them away.¹⁵

The Ganges is a sacred river along every fragment of her length. All along her course, Hindus bathe in her waters. All along her course, they pay homage to their ancestors and to their gods by cupping her water in their hands, lifting it and letting it fall back into her; they offer flowers and rose petals. On the journey back home from the Ganges, they carry small quantities of her water with them for use in rituals. When a loved one dies, they return to the Ganges to consign the ashes to her custody. The Ganges is invoked whenever water is used in Hindu ritual, and is therefore present in all sacred waters.¹⁶

In Banaras, several festivals and religious rituals have been held in the name of Ganga. For instance, *Ganga Mahotsav* is a five-day music festival organized by the Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department, held in November–December culminating a day before Kartik Purnima (Dev Deepawali). In this time the Ganges is venerated by “arti” offered by thousands of pilgrims who also release lighted lamps to float in the river from the ghats.¹⁷

Varanasi has at least 84 ghats which are embankments made in steps of stone slabs along the river bank where pilgrims perform ritual ablutions. Steps in the ghats lead to the banks of River Ganges, including the Dashashwamedh Ghat, the Manikarnika Ghat, the Panchganga Ghat and the Harishchandra Ghat where Hindus cremate their dead. Many ghats are associated with some legends and most of them have their own features. The Dashashwamedh Ghat is the main and probably the oldest ghat of Varanasi located on the Ganges. It is believed that the god Brahma created it to welcome Shiva and he also sacrificed ten horses during *Dasa -Ashwamedha yajna* performed here.¹⁸

¹⁴ Sukumari Bhattacharji, *Legends of Devi*, (Orient Longman Limited, Calcutta, 1995), p. 56.

¹⁵ Diana L. Eck, *Banaras, city of light*, (Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 217.

¹⁶ See in detail, op. cit., p. 212-214.

¹⁷ Kisanlal Sharma, *Why? Hindu Customs, Rituals and Rites*, Manoj Publications, Delhi, 2010, p. 168; Rana Singh, *Water Symbolism and Sacred Landscape in Hinduism: A Study of Benares (Varanasi)*, Erdkunde, Vol. 48, 1994, pp. 212-214.

¹⁸ Bansal Sunita Pant, *Hindu Pilgrimage: A Journey Through the Holy Places of Hindus All Over India*, (Pustak Mahal, 2008), pp. 34–35.

Picture 1: People performing Hindu ceremony at Ganga River and Ghats of Varanasi



Source: Author's own, October-2012

Kashi Vishwanath temple is another holy place for Hindus. It is most important temple in Varanasi and located on the outskirts of the Ganges. Kashi Vishwanath Temple dedicated to lord Shiva. The name of Vishwanath means “Lord of the world”. Besides this temple, in Banaras there are two other significant temples named “Durga”. The first one is Durga Mandir which built about 500 years ago and other one is Durga Kund which built in the 18th century. Thousands of Hindu devotees visit Durga Kund during Navratri to worship the goddess Durga. The temple has multi-tiered spires and is stained red with ochre, representing the red colour of Durga. The building has a rectangular tank of water called the Durga Kund. The meaning of "Kund" is a pond or pool. Every year on the occasion of Nag Panchami, the act of depicting the god Vishnu reclining on the serpent Shesha is recreated in the Kund.¹⁹

¹⁹ Alexander Cunningham, *Ancient Geography of India*, (Munshiram Manoharlal, 2002), pp. 132-136; Rana P.B. Singh, *Banaras (Varanasi): Cosmic Order, Sacred City, Hindu Traditions*, p. 53.

Picture 2: Durga Kund is one of the most important Hindu temples in Varanasi



Source: Author's own, April-2012.

The sacred city, on the other hand, is bounded by a holy road known as Panchakosi. Every devout Hindu wishes to walk this road, visits the city once in a lifetime and hopes to die there in old age. All these kinds of grounds make to Banaras holy for Hindus and therefore, more than a million pilgrims visit this sacred city each year.

Banaras is also important for Buddhism because of Sarnath where Gautama Buddha first taught the Dharma, and where the Buddhist Sangha came into existence. Sarnath is located 13 kilometres north-east of Banaras. It is a place of Buddhist pilgrimage and the site of the deer park where Siddhartha Gautama is said to have given his first sermon about the basic principles of Buddhism.²⁰

According to Buddhist tradition, after attaining enlightenment at Bodh Gaya the Buddha went to Sarnath; and it was here that he preached his first discourse in the deer park to set in motion the “Wheel of the Dharma”. Therefore, it is one of the most holy sites as in this place the stream of the Buddha’s teaching first flowed.²¹

A Monastic tradition flourished for over 1,500 years on the site of the deer park at Sarnath. In the third century BC Ashoka erected a column 15.24 m in height which had four lions as its capital which is now treasured in the archaeology museum. The lion symbolizes both Ashoka’s imperial rule and the kingship of the Buddha. The four-lion capital was adopted as the emblem of the modern Indian republic. The largest monastery constructed was Dharma-Chakar-Jina Vihar, erected by Kumardevi, who ruled over Benares during 1114 to 1154. In due course Sarnath became a forest of debris below which the historical ruins remained buried. Of the two great stupas which adorned the city only the Dhamekha remained which is of the 6th century.²²

The Dhamekha Stupa is the most conspicuous structure at Sarnath. Dhamekha seems to be a distorted form of Dharma Chakra which means turning the wheel of the Dharma. The

²⁰ Shobhna Gupta, *Monuments of India*, (Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi, 2003), p. 11.

²¹ V.S. Bhaskar, *Faith and Philosophy of Buddhism*, Kalpaz Publications, Delhi, 2009, p.169; S. Gupta, op. Cit., p. 12.

²² W. Joanna, *Sarnath Gupta Steles of the Buddha’s Life*, *Ars Orientalis*, Vol. 10, 1975, p. 175.

original stupa was constructed by Ashoka. The present size of the stupa is 31.3 m high and 28.3 m in diameter. The lower portion of the stupa is covered completely with beautifully carved stones. The Dhamekha stupa is considered to be the sacred place where the voice of Buddhism was first heard. Most of Buddhist who are from different countries, visit this place for circumambulation of this sacred stupa and to worship the Buddha. Some Buddhists, especially Tibetan Buddhists repeat a mantra -Om mani padme hum- when they circle of this structure.²³

Picture 3: Dhamekha Stupa at Sarnath



Source: Author's own, Augus-2011.

At Sarnath, on the other hand, there are ruins of ancient Buddhist monasteries and temples as well as temples built by the Maha Bodhi Society and by the Chinese, Burmese, and Tibetan Buddhists.²⁴ These kinds of places are regarded as holy by Buddhist and they come to this place, Sarnath, from different countries for visiting the temples and worshipping to Buddha.

Banaras is also one of the most important religious centers of Jainism. Jainism is one of the oldest religions identified today. It's not just a religion; it's thought way to live a happy life. Its principals, way of life and philosophies emphasize the essential of self-effort to progress the soul towards heavenly realization and freedom.

The Jain literature refers to Banaras as a Jain holy place because here were born 4 of the Jain Tirthankaras (the ford-makers). In the 8th century BCE Parshvanatha was born around Bhelupur in Varanasi. He was followed in the 6th century BCE by Mahavira, who also visited Varanasi during his 42nd year of teaching. The birthplace of Suparshvanatha, the 7th Tirthankara, is also mentioned in the Jain literature, but its location and identification have still not been verified. It is believed that the present Jain temple in Sarnath, near the Dhamekha Stupa, was built to commemorate the birthplace of 11th Tirthankara, Shreyamshanatha. The birthplace of the 8th Tirthankara Chandraprabhu, is identified with Chandravati, an ancient village lying on the Varanasi-Ghazipur road at 23 km northeast from Banaras at the western bank of Ganga River.²⁵

²³ V.S. Bhaskar, op. cit., p. 170.

²⁴ See in detail, W. Joanna, op. Cit., pp. 177-184.

²⁵ Bharat S. Shah, *An Introduction to Jainism*, (Setubandh Publications, New York, 2002), p. 104; L. M. Singhvi, *Jain Temples in India and Around the World*, (Himalayan Publishers, 2002), p. 42.

There are also different holy sites for Jains in Banaras. For instance, Bachraj Ghat also known as Jain ghat, is located at the bank of the Ganga. Near this Ghat there are three Jain temples located to bank of Ganges. It is believed that visiting to these temples is a lifetime experience for Jain Pilgrim. Jain community people have a visit this place and have a dip in the Ganga and then go for prayers one by one in all the three consecrated temples.

Banaras, therefore, is a pilgrimage site for Jains along with Hindus and Buddhists. It is believed to be the birthplace of Suparshvanath, Shreyansanath, and Parshva, who are respectively the seventh, eleventh, and twenty-third Jain Tirthankars. Besides this, Shree Parshvanath Digambar Jain Tirth Kshetra (Digambar Jain Temple) is situated in Varanasi. This temple has a great religious importance for Jain Religion as such Banaras is a holy city for Jains.²⁶

Picture 4: With a Jain Monk in a Jain Temple



Source: Author's own, September-2011.

Banaras is also an important holy place for Sikhs because it is accepted that Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the founder of Sikhism, had been in this city. The story suggested that Nanak visited Varanasi two times; firstly when he was on pilgrimage. Secondly he came to have discourses with saints living in Varanasi and also to convey his messages in 1506 on the day of the Maha Shivaratri festival and stayed in a garden at this city, which later came to known as Guru Bagh. The Adi Granth consists of the hymns of Guru Nanak and of the first five gurus as well as poems by great earlier saint-poets and singers such as Kabir and Raidas. the visiting of Nanak played a large role in the founding and development of Sikhism.²⁷

Banaras also plays host to non-Indian religions such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The East India Company, which has begun a direct political control in the time of Warren Hastings by end of the 18th century, has established a strong field for Christianity in Banaras and this movement has encouraged the development of Christian missionaries. They have built sacred places for their religion. Some of the important churches are St. Thomas Church (at Godaulia), Red Church (at Nadesar), St. Paul Church (at Sigra), David's Church (at

²⁶ Bharat S. Shah, *An Introduction to Jainism*, p. 108.

²⁷ Surjit Singh Gandhi, *History of Sikh Gurus Retold*, (Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 2007), p. 90; S. J. W., Charles, *Guru Nanak and Origins of the Sikh Faith by Harbans Singh*, Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol. 92, 1972, pp. 320-322.

Teliabagh), St. Mary (at Cantt.), Bethlehem Gospel (at Mahmoorganj), Evangelical Church of India (D.L.W.) and Church of Varanasi (at Sunderpur and Kakarmatta).²⁸

Banaras, on the other hand, is an important area for Muslims and their religious traditions. Muslims have been residing in Banaras since several generations starting from the rule of the Delhi Sultanate. The invasions of Mahmud of Ghaznawi in 1021-1030 CE had opened the door to Muslim settlement in Banaras. Nowadays they constitute about one fourth of the total population of Banaras District and have earned a significant place in the traditional economy, society, culture and trade of the city.²⁹

In Banaras, there are a huge number of holy sites of Muslims such as Masjids (mosques), Mazar (religious-cultural sites), Takiya (burial ground) and Idgah (place of special prayer), since they have been living in this city for centuries. The total numbers of sacred places of Muslims are more than one thousand in this city. Among them the Mosques have basic and significant statuses which cater to the prayer needs of the Muslims. For Muslims, Gyanvapi Mosque, Alamgiri Mosque, Ganj-e-Shaheedan Mosque and Chaukhamba Mosque are some of the important sacred places in this city.³⁰

Picture 5: Muslims performing salaah in a mosque at Varanasi



Source: Author's own, February-2012.

These events demonstrate that the city of Banaras does the honors several holy sites and religious beliefs which are different from each other. People who live in this city can perform their religious doctrines and can visit their sacred places without any oppression and invasion. People, in general, respect to all kind of beliefs and allow living a person's inner life in this city. The majority of the people in Banaras are of the Hindus, yet religious tolerance is the norm in this city where a great deal of faiths and cults are believed in and different languages are spoken.

²⁸ Rana P.B. Singh and Dar V, *Varanasi as Heritage City (India) on the scale the UNESCO World Heritage List: From Contestation to Conservation*, p. 5.

²⁹ See G. Smita, *The Muslims of Uttar Pradesh*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 42, 2007, pp. 2142-2146; See in detail, Census of India-Socia-cultural aspects. Censusindia.gov.in. http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/Census_Data_Online/Social_and_cultural/Religion.aspx. [accessed 02.12.2012].

³⁰ Koenraad Elst, *Ram Janmabhoomi vs. Babri Masjid*, (Voice of India, New Delhi, 1990), p. 140.

3. Contribution of Banaras to Religious Tolerance

The city has been famous not only as a religious sites and place of pilgrimage but also as a center of cottage industries and textile manufacturing even in Pre-Buddhist times. Silk weaving and sari making, metal, wood and terracotta handicrafts, toy making, particular painting forms, etc., comprise the religious and commercial importance of Banaras. These commercial activities range from gold and silver jewellery, saris, utensils, carpet weaving, a variety of handicrafts, publishers and book shops, stationery articles, handmade paper, wooden toys, bangles made of glass, ivory work, perfumes, etc.³¹ All these activities make the city holy and significant and give an opportunity to observe of various religious traditions and customs.

The cultural and religious richness of Banaras, on the other hand, leads to increasing of religious tourism. Hence, religious tourism is a thriving business in Banaras, where thousands of temples and sacred places represent numerous religions. Every devout Hindu hopes to visit the city at least once in a lifetime, take a holy dip at the famous “Ghats” of the Ganga, walk the pious Panchakosi road that bounds the city, and die here in old age. Every year around a million pilgrims come to this city, and all of them bathe in the Ganga River, followed by worshipping in various temple. People from all over the world visit this historical city in order to promenade the holy places and to purchase same special goods during a year. Tourism and related activities are major source of city’s economy.³² However, it is more important to maintain a sustainable tourism development that is in harmony with the existing cultural and religious atmosphere of the city. Some efforts to this end are being taken by the concerned authorities through specific kinds of promotion activities and organization and re-vitalization of religious festivals.

Both Hindus and non-Hindus from around the world visit Varanasi for different reasons. For every visitor, Varanasi has a different experience to offer. The gentle waters of the Ganges, the boat ride at sunrise, the high banks of the ancient “Ghats”, the array of shrines, the meandering narrow serpentine alleys of the city, the myriad temple spires, the palaces at water's edge, the ashrams (hermitages), the pavilions, the chanting of mantras, the fragrance of incense, the palm and cane parasols, the devotional hymns that is unique to the city of Banaras.³³ Among international tourists visiting Varanasi, more than 40% is shared by four countries, viz. Japan, France, UK and Germany. Especially the Japanese come to the city because of its association with the Buddha, who gave his first sermon in Sarnath.³⁴ The foreign tourism inflow is largely seasonal concentrating in the months of July- September and from November to April.

By the way of religious sites and religious tourism individuals can attain a chance through which they can observe several religious traditions. Thereby they enhance religious tolerance to all kinds of beliefs. By means of religious tolerance a person accepts and permits religious beliefs and practices which disagree with his own way of life. Moreover he acknowledges that others have the right to hold and practice their beliefs.³⁵ Another significant benefit of religious indulgence is, within a nation or ethnic group, acceptance of the right to hold beliefs that differ from the dominant religion, worship freely according to these beliefs and attempt to peacefully convince others to convert to that faith.

³¹ Wilbert M. Gesler, Margaret Pierce, *Hindu Varanasi*, Geographical Review, Vol. 90, 2000, pp. 232-235; Rana P.B. Singh, *Cultural Landscapes and Lifeworld. Literary Images of Banaras*, p. 17.

³² Rana P.B. Singh and Dar V., *Varanasi as Heritage City (India) on the scale the UNESCO World Heritage List: From Contestation to Conservation*, pp. 9-10.

³³ S. Pravin, *Banaras Region: A Spiritual and Cultural Guide*, p. 11.

³⁴ Rana P.B. Singh and Dar V., op. cit., p. 9.

³⁵ Jolie M.F. Wood, *Contentious politics and civil society in Varanasi*, (Anthem Press, 2011), p. 9.

4. Conclusion

The existence of temples (Mandir, Gurudwara etc.), mosques, churches and devotees of different religions affirm that religious tolerance is the basic feature of Banaras. In this sense, Banaras, which is called the religious capital of India, is one of the most appropriate model of city of religious tolerance where various cultures and religious systems have been living since centuries.

Consequently, the model of Banaras and events which are mentioned above demonstrate to us that holy sites bring about the improving of the religious tourism. A result of religious tourism, people attain an opportunity in the name of understanding and observing of other person's sacred values. Hence, it can be put forward that the role of holy sites is very important and essential on behalf of increasing the religious tolerance.

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