Varanasi Under The Shadow Of The Caste System: The City Varanasi In Tulsi Ram's Autobiography *Manikarnika*

Dr. Shiv Prakash Yadav

Abstract

This article analyses how Tulsi Ram reads the city of Varanasi and how he portrays Varanasi in his autobiography *Manikarnika*, focusing on its entanglement with the caste system and Hindu religious traditions. Drawing from autobiographical experiences, the author reveals how Varanasi functions both as a sacred site of spiritual liberation and as a harsh social space of systemic Dalit exclusion. Tulsi Ram's journey from Azamgarh to Varanasi uncovers the daily humiliations and structural barriers faced by lower-caste individuals in the city Varanasi, especially in accessing education, housing, and social respect. The autobiography is also a site of philosophical transformation, as Tulsi Ram moves from faith to atheism, from caste oppression to self-emancipation, engaging with Marxism, Buddhism, and Ambedkarite thought. The contrast between *mythical salvation* and *social reality* is central to his depiction of Varanasi, which he calls both a "city of faith" and a "city of death."

Research Question

How does Tulsi Ram read the city Varanasi in his autobiography *Manikarnika* and depict the paradox of Varanasi as a sacred city deeply rooted in religious salvation while simultaneously functioning as a space of caste-based marginalization and identity erasure?

1. Tulsi Ram

Tulsi Ram is one of the writers of Dalit literature. His philosophy is seen as a mixture of Marxism, Buddhism, and Ambedkar's position on society. Tulsi Ram was born on July 1, 1949, in a village called Dharampur, Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh. He belonged to a low caste. Until 2015, he worked as a professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi.

1.1. *Manikarnika*

Manikarnika is the title of his autobiography, which was published in 2015. In his book, Tulsi Ram explains why this ghat is called *Manikarnika*. The name of the ghat comes from Hindu mythology. It is said that the earring (Mani) of the goddess Parvati was lost here in the Ganges, which is why this ghat was named *Manikarnika.*

"Yah bhi kaha jata hai ki Shiv ki Patni Parvati ke kano me pahni jani wali Mani isi jagah Ganga me kho gayi thi, jiske karan is Ghat ka Naam *Manikarnika* pada."[1]

In her book *Benares: City of Light*, Diana L. Eck provides a detailed and symbolically rich description of Manikarnika Ghat. She emphasizes the centrality of death in the religious and cultural significance of both the ghat and the city of Varanasi. According to Eck, death in Varanasi is not viewed as an end but as an auspicious transition, believed to bring spiritual liberation (moksha). She presents Manikarnika as a unique sacred site, asserting that no other pilgrimage holy city (tirtha) or place can parallel its spiritual magnitude. The Ghat is described as the holiest place of cremation in Hindu tradition, where death is celebrated. Eck's understanding highlights the metaphysical and theological importance of the city. "This is Manikarnika, where death brings good fortune, where life is fruitful, where one grazes on the meadows of heaven. There is no Tirtha like Manikarnika, there is no city like Varanasi, there is no Linga like Vishveshvara, nowhere in the whole world."[2]

Manikarnika is the second part of Tulsi Ram's autobiographical work. The first part, *Murdahiya*, presents a detailed narrative of the author's childhood life in a village in the Azamgarh district of Uttar Pradesh. Beyond personal recollections, the text provides a collective ethnographic account of the lived experiences of Dalits in north Indian villages. While Dalit autobiographies had been written in Hindi and other regional languages such as Marathi prior to *Murdahiya*, Tulsi Ram's work is distinctive in its representation of Dalit life within a small village context. As literary critic Suryanarayan Ransube notes, *Murdahiya* can be considered as an autobiography of the Dalit community as a whole.[3]

In contrast, *Apne Apne Pinjre* by Mohandas Naimishray is considered the first Dalit autobiography in Hindi, focuses on Dalits residing in the urban periphery of Meerut Uttar Pradesh. Similarly, Omprakash Valmiki's

[1]Tulsi Ram. *Manikarnika*. Rajkamal Prakashan, 2014, New Delhi, P.9.

[2]Eck, Diana L. *Benares Stadt des Lichts*. Frankfurt am Main ,1989, P. 283.

[3]Ransube, Suryanarayan. *Tulsi Ram ki Atmkatha*: *Murdahiya aur Manikarnika*. In: Bayan. April 2015, P. 35.

Joothan portrays Dalit experiences in a rural area, while also incorporating insights from the author's time spent in Maharashtra. *Tiraskrit* focues specifically on marginalized individuals, highlighting their exclusion from existing social structures. In this context, *Murdahiya* is an important work, notable for its comprehensive depiction of village life, wherein the autobiography talks about an individual as well as about the whole community, representing not only Dalits but the socio-cultural dynamics of the entire village and entire community.[4]

Tulsi Ram's autobiographical narrative consists of two Parts: *Murdahiya* and *Manikarnika*. While *Murdahiya* recounts the author's early life in a rural Dalit community in Azamgarh, *Manikarnika* shifts the geographical and experiential focus to the urban centers of Varanasi and Kolkata, primarily exploring his youth in Varanasi where he spent a decade of his life. Together, the two works offer a comprehensive portrayal of Dalit life in eastern Uttar Pradesh; however, *Manikarnika* is structured such that it can be read independently of *Murdahiya*. The transition from childhood experiences in the village to formative experiences in the city marks a shift in both thematic focus and socio-cultural environment.

While *Murdahiya* tells about the collective village life of Dalits, *Manikarnika* centers on the author's individual narrative within the urban context, particularly focusing on his personal experiences of educational, and socio-political development. Tulsi Ram situates himself at the center of this narrative, offering introspective accounts that mirror broader systemic and structural realities faced by Dalits in urban cities.

In his critical essay collection *Bahujan Vaichariki*, Tulsi Ram explains the symbolic and experiential rationale behind the title *Manikarnika*. His journey from Azamgarh to Varanasi begins with a bus ride that coincides with another bus with the name "Swargwas Mail"[5] which transporting corpses to Manikarnika Ghat, from different part of India. Both buses arrive simultaneously, prompting the author to draw a metaphorical and experiential parallel between his village, *Murdahiya* and the *Manikarnika* Ghat. Although he does not elaborate these parallels in the text of *Manikarnika* itself, he later clarifies in *Bahujan Vaichariki* that both places are associated with death and cremation practices. Specifically, *Murdahiya*, as described in the first Part, is a site where both animal and human remains are disposed of, a phenomenon he finds echoed in the continuous cremation activities observed at Manikarnika Ghat. This symbolic continuity forms the conceptual basis for the title and opening chapter of the second part of the autobiography.

> "Dusara bhag likhte samay sanyog se mujhe apni wah yatra yaad aayi, jo azamgarh se banaras tak thi. Murde ko le ja rahi wah bas hamari bas aage chal rahi thi, jis par likha tha ,Swargwas mail'. Wah Bas Murde ko Banaras ke prasiddh Ghat ,*Manikarnika*' Ghat le ja rahi thi. Isake sath meri bhi Yatra puri huyi. Is *Manikarnika* aur Murdhaiya me mujhe ek samyata najar aayi. Isi Samyata ko dhyan me Rakhkar maine Aatmkatha ke dusare bhag ke pratham adhyay ka naam *Manikarnika* rakh diya.'"[6]

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[4]Ibid., P. 35.

[5]Explanation: Name of a bus

[6]In: Yadav, Dharmveer. *Bahujan Vaichariki*. Delhi, 2016, P. 12.

In this context, literary critic Namwar Singh gives a reflective observation on the thematic orientation of Tulsi Ram's autobiographical works. He notes the deliberate repetition of the initial letter 'M' in the titles *Murdahiya* and *Manikarnika*, and draws attention to the shared motif of death that inaugurates both narratives. In *Murdahiya*, the narrative opens with imagery centered around corpses and death, forming a dominant thematic concern throughout the text. Similarly, *Manikarnika*—named after the prominent cremation Ghat in Varanasi. It begins with a symbolic encounter involving a funeral procession, underscoring the city's association with death and the cremation of bodies. Singh's perception talks about the structural and symbolic parallels between the two texts, particularly the centrality of death as a center point into the exploration of Dalit existence and spatial-cultural identity.

> "[...] Pahali pustak inhone *Murdahiya* aur dusari Mankarnika likhi hai. 'M', 'M' se dono Pustakon ke naam shuru hote hain aur vichitra sanyog ki baat ye hai ki 'Mrityu' se hi dono pustakon ka sanyog hai. *Murdahiya*'s connection is with death, and *Manikarnika*'s connection is also with death."[7]

In the preface to *Murdahiya*, Tulsi Ram says that the next part of his autobiography would document his experiences out of Azamgarh, such as life in Varanasi, in Delhi, and in Russia. He frames these narrative skills as an intellectual and philosophical journey, marking a transition from Marxist ideology toward the principles of Buddhist thought.

> „Aane wale *Murdahiya* ke dusre Khand me ghar se bhagne ke baad kalkatta, banaras tatha dilli hote huye England tatha Soviyat Sangh/Russia tak ki jeevanyatra ka lekha jokha hoga. Mulatah yah yatra Maksvaad se Baudh Darshan ki hai.‟[8]

The beginning of *Manikarnika* is devoted to a descriptive portrayal of the city of Varanasi, with particular emphasis on the Manikarnika Ghat. The rest part focuses on his academic life at Banaras Hindu University (BHU) and his involvement in political movements in Varanasi and Kolkata. Tulsi Ram talks about the structural and social challenges he faced as a Dalit student seeking higher education. As he arrives in Varanasi, he encountered caste-based discrimination that severely limited his access of renting a room in Varanasi. In order to obtain accommodation, he was compelled to give his fake caste identity by saying that he is a Brahmin. His early days in the city was very difficult, both economic and social. These narratives give an understanding of the intersection of caste, class, and access to education even in post independent India.

2. How does Tulsi Ram view the city of Varanasi?

Tulsi Ram's decision to leave his village and go to Varanasi to pursue higher education is informed by both material necessity and personal aspiration. His was attracted to Varanasi because of was the popular notion that "no one dies of hunger" in the city—a perception rooted in Varanasi's cultural ethos of religious charity.

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[7]Ibid., P. 17.
[8]Tulsi Ram. *Manikarnika*. Rajkamal Prakashan, 2014, New Delhi, P.6.

This belief and his acute experiences of hunger which he narrates in *Murdahiya* and his intellectual ambitions as expressed in *Manikarnika*, seems to have motivated his journey and stay in Varanasi. It was his first visit of Varanasi. He immediately confronted with the reality of death and burning pyres at the Manikarnika Ghat. This experience makes his perception of Varanasi as a city dominated by funerary rituals. Known as one of the holiest cities in Hinduism, Varanasi is deeply embedded in religious mythology, beliefs and ritual practices, specialy the belief in moksha, or liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Tulsi Ram sees this belief critically and observes that many individuals wants to die and be cremated in Varanasi, because they believe that such a death guarantees salvation. This creates an image of the Manikarnika Ghat which functions not only as a sacred and holy space but also as a site of particular jobs at Ghat and economic activity. Tulsi Ram observes that in Varansi the livelihoods of specific caste groups, particularly the Doms is dependent traditionally responsible for cremation practices—and the Pandas, or Brahmin priests, who perform last rites. The cremation needs the wood from Dom families so that the deceased's passage to heaven can be ensured, this highlights the intersection of religious belief, caste hierarchy, and commodification of death. In Tulsi Rams opinion, Varanasi is as a space where death is ritualized, monetized, and institutionalized, which is highly organized in terms of socio-economic functioning.

> „Ek Hindu manyta ke anusaar jis kisi ka antim sanskaar *Manikarnika* Ghat par kiya jata hai, wah sidhe swarg chala jata hai. Is Ghat par sadiyaon se jalti Chitayen kabhi nahi bujhi. Atah Mritu ka karobar yahan chaubiso ghante chalta hai. Sahi artho me Mritu banares ka ek bahut bada udhyog hai. Anginat Pandon ki jivika Mritu par adharit rahti hai. Sabse jyade kamayi us Dom parivar ki hoti hai, jisase har murda malik lakdi kharidta hai.''[9]

Tulsi Ram observes that in Varanasi, individual and collective life decisions are taken according to religious faith. He says that how one lives, where and how one dies, and the prescribed rituals of cremation are all directed by system of religious belief, especially in Hindu tradition. Therefore, Tulsi Ram identifies Varanasi as a city which functions according to religious faith. In beginning of the book *Manikarnika*, Tulsi Ram gives a detailed ethnographic and cultural description of the Manikarnika Ghat and its important role in Hindu cosmology/mythology. However, Tulsi Ram also talks about other religious perspectives, particularly those rooted in Buddhism, which broadens the religious significance and importance of Varanasi.

Tulsi Ram's engages with Buddhism is both personal and philosophical. He states explicitly that his decision to leave home was inspired by Gautama Buddha. He draws a parallel between his own life and his departure and the renunciatory model which exist in Buddhist tradition. Tulsi Ram reflects on the Buddhist teachings which have transformative potential. He suggests that many young individuals, like himself, have been and will continue to be inspired to spiritual ideals.

He recounts a moment from his own life during a visit to Sarnath (very near to Varanasi) in April 1966, undertaken on the fourth day of his stay in Varanasi. Sarnath is historically significant as the place where

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[9]Tulsi Ram. *Manikarnika*. Rajkamal Prakashan, 2014, New Delhi, P.9.

Gautama Buddha delivered his first sermon following enlightenment. Entering in a principal Buddhist temple in Sarnath, Tulsi Ram encountered a series of visual representations narrating the life of the Buddha, from his birth in Lumbini to his death and attainment of nirvana. Especially moved by the depiction of Buddha in the *nirvana mudra*, Tulsi Ram experienced a emotional response. This experience of affective identification led him to contemplate how many others, across time and space, have embarked on similar journeys of self-transformation under the influence of the Buddha's example. Thus, in Tulsi Ram's account, Varanasi is not solely a sacred city within Hinduism but also holds deep spiritual resonance within the Buddhist tradition.

> „Banaras pravas ke chauthe din yani April 1966 ke tisre saptah ka koi din tha, main beniya bag se ek bas pakadkar Saarnath gaya. Man me bada kautuhal macha hua tha ki yahin dhayi hajar saal pahle Gautam Buddha ne apna pehala Upadesh diya tha. Wahan pahunchkar main videshi parytakon k eek samooh ke piche lag liya. Unke sath ek guide tha. Unka pichha karte huye main saarnath ke us pramukh baudhmath me pahunch gaya, jiski deewaron pe Budhha ka jeevan chitrit tha. Lumbini me janm se lekar grihtyag tha ant me nirvana tak ka chitran tha. Nirvaan ki Mudra me Budhha ko lete dekhkar main atyant bhauk houtha tha, isliye ro pada. [...] Main yah bhi sochne laga ki budhha se prerit hokar meri tarah kitane log ghar se bhage honge."[10]

Tulsi Ram offers in *Manikarnika* a critical observation on the entrenched caste consciousness within the social fabric of Varanasi based on his own experiences. He observes that individuals in the city are frequently identified not by their personal names but by caste-based appellations, such as Pande, Rai, Babusaheb, Gupta, Yadav, Maulabi, or Miyan. This practice, according to Tulsi Ram, reflects the deep-rooted normalization of caste as a primary social identifier. In the interpersonal interactions, the caste identity of a person comes first, particularly during introductions. This shows the reinforcing hierarchical social categorization based on caste.

Tulsi Ram characterizes this caste-based mode of social recognition as a distinctive cultural feature of Varanasi. Furthermore, he highlights the paradox that while access to basic needs such as renting a room is also based on caste identification. Information of caste affiliations, the caste system, and religious practices are easy to experience and observe. This observation gives the pervasive role of caste in defining access to both material resources and social mobility. This also reveals how caste operates as a gatekeeping mechanism at spaces which are historically regarded and considered as sacred and spiritually egalitarian. "Banares me yah vichitra sthiti thi ki makan to kiraye par milta tha, kintu Jaativaad muft me."[11]

According to Tulsi Ram, the caste system in Varanasi is not only deeply entrenched but also systematically enforced through mechanisms of social exclusion, spatial segregation, and caste-based violence. He asserts that individuals from lower castes are denied fundamental rights and dignity, particularly in interactions with upper-caste groups such as Brahmins. Drawing on both historical sources and popular cultural representations—such as the Bollywood film *Dharma*—Tulsi Ram illustrates how notions of ritual purity dictate social behaviour. For example, if a lower-caste individual encounters a *panda* (Brahmin priest)

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[10] Tulsi Ram. *Manikarnika*. Rajkamal Prakashan, 2014, New Delhi, P. 15.
[11] Ibid., P. 66.

returning from a ritual bath in the Ganges, the encounter is considered polluting. The consequence, as reported, includes physical assault on the lower-caste individual and a second ritual purification by the Brahmin. Such practices reinforce the ritual hierarchy and the spatial boundaries that structure everyday interactions in Varanasi.

Tulsi Ram emphasizes that even Dalits who are permanent residents of Varanasi are routinely barred from entering temples or participating in religious worship, revealing the persistent denial of religious access and visibility to marginalized communities. For an outsider like Tulsi Ram—who migrated to the city with aspirations of education and social mobility—these barriers were compounded by his status as a non-local Dalit. He recounts the necessity of concealing his caste identity in order to secure housing, adopting an upper-caste pseudonym to navigate the city's discriminatory rental market.

In *Manikarnika*, Tulsi Ram writes: "Because of my caste, I had to live a double life, constantly searching for new rooms. I was a Dalit at university, but as soon as I entered the room, I became Sharma ji." This dual identity was not a choice but a strategic adaptation to caste-based exclusion. He notes that during the 1960s, landlords—particularly those from dominant upper castes—categorically refused to rent rooms to Dalits. As result of this, many Dalits were compelled to adopt upper-caste surnames and fabricate their identities just to rent a room in the city. Tulsi Ram recalls getteing a room in Gauriganj/Varanasi through the assistance of Munni Lal, who falsely introduced him as "Tulsi Ram Sharma from Uttarkashi, a Brahmin," to the landlady Rajvanti Chachi. Although she belonged to the same caste, her elevated social status rendered her more powerful than many Brahmins. When she suspected their true caste identity, she reacted with hostility, calling them *Chamar* and publicly denigrating their families despite the preteens.

The fear of caste-based exposure and subsequent eviction loomed constantly, forcing Tulsi Ram and his friend to relocate frequently. He reports that by 1966, they had been forced to change his residences four times. This continuous displacement defines the extent to which caste not only rules social and religious life in Varanasi but also severely restricts spatial mobility and access to basic human needs of a lower caste person such as renting a room.

"Jatigat yatharth ke karan baar-baar naye kamre ki talash me main dohra jeevan jine laga tha. Main vishwavidyalay me dalit hota tha aur kamre me aate hi Sharma ji ban jata tha.''[12] „Un dino Daliton ko Gairdalit log Kiraye par Banares me makan nahi dete the. Atah jo bhi dalit kiraye ka karma lete the, ve apni Jati Chhipa dete the. Gauriganj me jo Kamra hame mila, use munni lal ne tay kiya tha. Makan Malkin thi Rajvanti Chachi, jo jati se to teli thi, kintu bhedbhav me uske samne kattar bramhan bhi kahi nahi thahrte the. Rajvanti Chachi ne humlogon ki jati shuru me hi puuch li thi. Munni lal ne use bataya tha ki ve swayan kayasth hain aur mere bare me kaha ki main Uttarkashi ka Tulsi Ram Sharma yani brahman hun. […] Chachi hame dekhte hi ubal padi aur kahne lagi ki chaukhat ke andar ghusna nahi. Chamar hokar hamare ghar me daag laga diya, wah bhi jhuth

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[12]Tulsi Ram. *Manikarnika*. Rajkamal Prakashan, 2014, New Delhi, P. 41.

bolkar. [...] Upar se bhay hamesha bana rahta tha ki jati ka pata chalne par fir na bhagna pade. [...] Hamne jaati pratadana se bachne ke liye Khejwan bajar wale kamre ko bhi chhod diya. Is tarh san 1966 ke bitate bitate ham char makan badal chuke the."[13]

However, the adaptation of caste identity as a strategy for renting a room in Varanasi proved to be unsustainable over time. Tulsi Ram recounts that such fabricated upper-caste identities were often exposed within a short span either days or months—typically through inquiries or surveillance by landlords or caretakers who actively sought to determine the caste background of the person living in their rooms. Once identified as belonging to a Dalit community, the individual would be subjected to eviction or social exclusion. As a result of this systemic caste-based discrimination, Tulsi Ram reports that he was compelled to change his residence eight times within a span of two years. This repeated displacement illustrates the pervasive impact of caste stigma on spatial and social mobility in urban contexts, and highlights the extent to which caste remains a determining factor in access to renting a room and residential stability in cities like Varanasi.

> „[…] Sath me unhone ye bhi kaha jati ka pata chalne par yadav kabhi bhi karma nahi dega. Atah usi karmchaari ke sujhav par maine apne ko bhi yadav batakar karma hansil kiya tha. Ramashankar ne mujhe apni jati ka samjhkar kailash bhavan ki dusari manjil par sidhi ke bagal wala 25 number karma de diya. „Banares ke shuruaati do saal ke andar yah mera aathawanwan nivaas tha jahan main saat saal tak raha.''[14]

One of the most striking observations made by Tulsi Ram in *Manikarnika* concerns the institutionalization of caste-based categorization in higher education during his time at Banaras Hindu University (BHU). He recalls that in the university's admission forms it was mandatory for applicants to indicate their caste status by responding to the question: "Are you Brahmin or non-Brahmin?" This binary classification, as presented "in black and white," reflects the normalization of caste hierarchies within the administrative processes of academic institutions. According to Tulsi Ram, such categorization not only reinforced Brahminical dominance but also facilitated systemic discrimination against students from lower castes, both socially and academically. This practice exemplifies how caste was not merely a social identity but an institutional criterion that shaped access, inclusion, and treatment within higher education in postcolonial India.

„Iska sabse bada Pratik yah tha ki BHU ke admission ka jo form prakashit hota tha, usme ek kalam ke tahat saaf saaf taur par likha hota tha: Are you Bramhan or non-Brahman? arthat aap brahman hain ya gairbrahman ?[15]

In *Manikarnika*, Tulsi Ram provides a deeply personal account of the persistent threats and psychological distress he experienced because of his caste identity. He narrates how his everyday life in Varanasi was marked by continuous reminders of his Dalit status, which manifested in the social exclusion. One particularly significant aspect of this marginalization was his internalized fear and apprehension in the vicinity of religious

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[13]Ibid., P.37ff.

[14]Tulsi Ram. *Manikarnika*. Rajkamal Prakashan, 2014, New Delhi, P. 44.

[15]Ibid., P. 45.

spaces—especially temples—and in encounters with upper-caste priests. These places, traditionally governed by caste-based purity codes, functioned as spaces of symbolic and social exclusion for individuals from marginalized communities. Tulsi Ram's narrative reflects the embodied effects of caste discrimination, illustrating how structural inequality is internalized and how public religious spaces become sites of anxiety, surveillance, and exclusion for Dalits. "Mujhe hardam aisa lagta tha ki shighra hi mere upar prahar na ho jaye. Chamar jo tha.''[16]

Tulsi Ram's portrayal of Varanasi in *Manikarnika* reveals a city deeply structured by caste hierarchies, in which social mobility and everyday life are very much influenced by one's caste status. His narrative suggests that the life of an upper castes individuals like Brahmins is very easy and characterized by social legitimacy. In contrast, for those from lower castes, the city presents numerous structural boundaries, including restricted access to accommodation, education, religious spaces, social and cultural recognition. Tulsi Ram underlines that Dalit individuals are often compelled to prevent their caste identity as a survival strategy to limit the risk of discrimination and exclusion.

Based on his own lived experiences, he concludes that Varanasi functions as a socio-cultural space where caste is not merely a background variable but a dominant organizing principle of existence. He characterizes the city as one in which the rights of lower-caste individuals are systematically denied, and where caste-based discrimination is both pervasive and institutionally entrenched. This critique foregrounds the intersection of caste and urban spatiality, revealing how sacred geographies can simultaneously serve as places of exclusion and marginalization for subaltern communities.

2.1. Varanasi as a stranger city

India is characterized by its pluri-cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity. Each region, and often each small geographical area has different traditions, dialects, and ritual practices. As a result of it, intra-national mobility can produce experiences of cultural shock, where individuals may feel alienated or unfamiliar even within their own country. This phenomenon is particularly evident in cities like Varanasi, which, despite being located in northern India, often appears culturally strange to both foreigners and people itself from other regions of India.

Tulsi Ram recounts his first experience with this sense of cultural estrangement upon arriving in Varanasi, specifically at a tea shop where a Bengali family was seating. In a moment, he accidentally, unintentionally got touched by one of the family members. The reaction was immediate and severe—the family expressed visible anger and appeared as though they might resort to physical aggression. Tulsi Ram, initially unaware of the cultural offense he had committed. He later learned that, within certain Bengali ritual frameworks, physical contact/touch with strangers is considered polluting or inauspicious, particularly during specific times or in ritual contexts. This incident marks his first personal experience of "being stranger" within India, highlighting

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[16]Ibid., P. 71.

the complex intersections of regional customs, ritual purity, and social behaviour that can lead to cultural misunderstandings in own country.

> "[…] Hua yeh ki bangali pariwaar pahle se hi waha baitha tha. Mera pair us pariwaar k eek purush ke pair se thoda sa takra gaya. Ve krodhit ho gaye aur bangla bhasha me jor jor se chillane lage. Unaki raudhra mudra mere liye thapdiyane jaisi thi. Shuru me main samajh nahi paya ki wo itna krodhit kyu hain? main dara hua chupchap unse kafi dur piche ki bench par baith gaya. Chay wale ladke ne chay dene se pahle mujhe bataya ki bangali log pair lag jane ko apshagun manate hain, isliye ve aapaa kho baithte hain.''[17]

Tulsi Ram also talks about his first visit to the Raajghat bridge, from where he gazes out over the River Ganges. Someone tells him that many lovers have jumped into the Ganges from this bridge because their love was not accepted by society.

> ''Kafi der baad humlog tahlte huye raajghat pul chale gaye. Pul ke bichobich se niche bahti Ganga bhayavah lag rahi thi. Munnilal ne bataya ki prem me asafal ladke-ladkiyan is pul se kudkar ganga me jalsamadhi le chuke hain. Prem ki is jalsamadhi ne hame dara diya aur hum waha se chale gaye.''[18]

Tulsi Ram observes that Varanasi is widely recognized for its vibrant and diverse cultural heritage, which encompasses not only Hindu traditions but also the religious and festive practices of multiple communities. He notes that festivals associated with various religions are celebrated in the city with considerable enthusiasm and public participation, contributing to a distinct cultural atmosphere. This multisensory transformation of the city during festive periods is marked by multiple music performances, different classical dance programs, and public gatherings. This was for Tulsi Ram different than many celebrations in his native village.

Tulsi Ram highlights the Holi festival as a particularly illustrative example. While Holi is traditionally associated with Hindu religious practice, in Varanasi it assumes a more inclusive character, observed by individuals across different religious and social groups. He remarks on the uniqueness of Holi celebration in Varanasi. This observation shows cultural fabric of the city, where ritual practices and festive expressions often transcend rigid religious boundaries, fostering shared public experiences.

> "Jahan tak 1967-68 ke dauran Banaras shahar ka sawal hai, wah bhi apne khile sanskritik vyavhaar ke liye bada Manoranjak bana huya tha. Basant Panchami ke din se hi waha ka sanskritik vatavaran jeevant hone lagta tha. Charo taraf 'barahmasa' tatha 'holigayan' ki dhum machi rahti thi. Banaras ke vibhinna Mandiron aise karyakramo ke jamghat ban gaye the. Main 1967 me pahali baar banares ke holi dekhkar dang rah gaya. Bahut uddandta ke saath holi manane ka tarika apnaya jata hai. Log ek dusare ke sar varnish se rang dete the tatha gobar evam keechad se pura sharir mal diya jata tha.''[19]

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[17]Tulsi Ram. *Manikarnika*. Rajkamal Prakashan, 2014, New Delhi, P. 16.
[18]Ibid., P. 17.
[19]Tulsi Ram. *Manikarnika*. Rajkamal Prakashan, 2014, New Delhi, P. 55

Tulsi Ram reports a moment of cultural dissonance upon learning from his peer, Tapsiram, that it is customary for students in Varanasi to visit the Hanuman Temple during examination periods with the belief that divine intervention will aid them in achieving academic success. This practice comes from popular religious belief, which appeared unfamiliar and surprising to Tulsi Ram.

Tapsiram further elaborated that the presence of monkeys at the temple was a regular phenomenon, as the animals are attracted to the offerings, particularly bananas, left by people. However, he also remarked that the temple space was often subject to acts of petty theft, including the stealing of women's ornaments, footwear, and other personal belongings by opportunistic individuals who exploit the crowd and distraction associated with ritual gatherings. This juxtaposition of practice in Varanasi was stark contradiction to Tulsi Ram. For him it shows the complex interplay between religious faith, communal behaviour, and material insecurity at public religious places.

> "Tapsiram mujhe batane lage ki imtahan ke dauran ye sabhi achhi shreni me paas hone ke liye hanuman ji se vinati karne aate hain. […] Is dauran mandiron kea as pas anak bandaroon ki jhaptmaari muhe bahut acchi lagi. Ispar Tapsiram ne kaha ki Bandar to sirf khane ki chijon pe par jhaptate hain, kintu yahan astha ke bahane bahut saare lagangon ki drishti Mahilaon ke abhushno par rahti hai. Ve juta, chappal churate hain tatha chhedkhani me lipt rahte hain. Mujhe yah sab jaankar bada hi aasharya hua.''[20]

2.3. From stranger to being familiar to the city

Moving to a new locality often precipitates a sense of cultural disorientation, in which individuals are confronted with unfamiliar linguistic, social, and value systems. Tulsi Ram articulates this phenomenon in *Manikarnika* through his initial experiences in the city of Varanasi, which he perceives as culturally and linguistically strange. He observes that, in Varanasi, faith assumes primacy over empirical truth, making not only the social imaginary but also everyday practices and interpersonal relations.

From the linguistic point of view, Tulsi Ram identifies a marked difference between the vernacular of Varanasi and that of his village. He highlights the permanent use of the term "Guru" as a culturally form of accepted address and a discursive marker of social intimacy. Furthermore, he tells the widespread incorporation of expletives into casual speech. These expressions give linguistically a literal sense but they function pragmatically as indicators of familiarity and friendly in Varanasi. Initially, Tulsi Ram experiences discomfort and estrangement in response to this normalized linguistic informality. However, through continued social immersion, he gradually tries to accept these linguistic codes and symbolic behaviours, thereby mitigating his sense of cultural foreignness and fostering a sense of belonging.

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[20]Ibid., P. 14.

In addition to this Tulsi Ram observes the centrality of *paan* consumption and other lifestyle practices as constitutive elements of Varanasi's culture. Over the time, these elements—initially perceived as strange but become naturalized within his own experiences which shows a process of cultural adaptation and integration.

> ,,Banares apni masti ke liye hamesha vikhyaat raha hai. Wahi masti BHU ki kakshaon me bhi parilakshit hoti thi. Is sandarbh me banares ki rojmarra ki sanskriti se judi kuchh chuninda galiyan hoti thi, jinka prayog apsi ghanishthta ka sabse bada Pratik mana jata tha. Inhi galion me sabse jyade proyog me layi jane wali gali is prakar hai: Log ,bho' aur ,di' ke Beech me ,sa' ka istemaal behichak dusare ko sambhodhit karne ke liye karte the. Aisa sunkar shuru me bahut achambhit hota tha, kintu dheere dheere apne vyavhaar me shamil kar liya tha. Ek dusare ko sambhodhit karte huye log ,GURU' shabd ka bhi istemal bade paimaane par karte the. Khan Paan bhi wahan ki sanskriti ka ek abhinn ang tha. Adhiktar chatra avam Pradhyapak paan kuchte class me aate the. Chatra log to paan kha khakar kakshaon ki deewaron par thook thook kar penting bana dete the.''[21]

2.4. Criticism of faith, religion, and God

Varanasi is widely considered as a city of religious faith which often described as conducive to the cultivation or intensification of spiritual belief. The religious belief and sociocultural narratives say that one who was previously non-religious may develop religious inclinations after being or visiting the city Varanasi and the ritual practices there. However, Tulsi Ram's experience is different. Despite residing in what is considered one of the holiest cities in India, Tulsi Ram's engagement with the city's religiosity could not reinforce faith but rather catalyzed a process of critical approach. The approach led him toward rather atheism. His case illustrates an exception to the dominant cultural and religious belief, demonstrating how religious saturation does not uniformly produce belief and may, in certain instances, provoke skepticism or ideological resistance.

> "Karmnasha ke bare me aam dharna thi ki usme jo nahata hai uske saare karm dhul jate hain. Isliye anak log usme nahane se darte the. Kintu ham sabhi karmnasha me nahane jate the."[22]

Tulsi Ram recounts a period of existential inquiry and theological scepticism in *Manikarnika* which is triggered by his experiences in Varanasi. Despite being in a city which is known for its sacredness and spiritual intensity, his search for a tangible or experiential confirmation of divine presence remains unfulfilled. The persistent absence of empirical or affective validation of God's existence induces a state of inner discomfort. As a form of epistemological provocation, Tulsi Ram engages in performative acts of defiance. Therefore, he used to stand before temples and verbally challenging deities and their existence. This behaviour reflects not merely religious disbelief but a critical interrogation of fundamentals of Hindu beliefs as well as of the holiness of the city Varanasi. His actions illustrate a radical reorientation from passive religiosity to active atheistic resistance, which emerges within a broader discourse on caste, power, and spiritual legitimacy.

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[21]a plant species from the genus Pfeffer in the pepper family.
[22]Tulsi Ram. *Manikarnika*. Rajkamal Prakashan, 2014, New Delhi, P. 87f.

"Tumhari Kshay[23] padhne ke baad Banares me charo taraf ishwar ko dhundha, Ganga se lekar mandiro se hotehuye BHU tak, kintu kahin nahi mila. Shuru me main nastikata ki santaran wali isthati se gujarane laga. Ishwar hai, nahi hai ke vivaad ne mere mastishk ka pareshan kar diya tha. Main ishwar ke hone ki pariksha lene ke liye Banares ke tamam mandiron ki feri laga aur devi devtaon ki murtion ke samne khada hokar unhe dher sari galiyan deta aur unse kahta ki yadi ,tum ho' to mere khilaf dandatmak karvayi karo.'[24]

Tulsi Ram's religious orientation got over time transformed in Varanasi after he left his Village. While being in the village he did not prompt overt criticism of God, the intensively religious atmosphere of Varanasi acted as a catalyst for theological dissent rather than affirmation for him. His transformation was Contrary to normal expectations in the holy city of Varanasi. Tulsi Ram's experiences in Varanasi led him to adopt a critical stance toward the concept of God. In *Manikarnika*, he draws upon the rationalist writings of Rahul Sankrityayan to assert that God is a human construct, an imagined entity born out of ignorance. Tulsi Ram contends that the widespread belief in a divine power serves to intellectually and psychologically weaken people. He identifies this epistemological dependency on God as a fundamental obstacle to India's sociocultural progress. His critique comes with a broader materialist and humanist perspective that challenges metaphysical determinism and emphasizes human agency in confronting structural inequalities.

"Unhone Dhram ko bhartiya samaj ka sabse bada shoshak mana hai. […] Unka ye bhi manna tha ki bhagwan ek kalpnik vastu ke alawan kuchh bhi nahi hai. Agyan ka hi dusra naam ishwar hai. […] Ishwar ko chunauti dena koi mamuli baat nahi thi. Mera anubhav batata hai ki yah bada hi mushkil kaam hai, jisake liye sahasi hona avashyak hai, kyonki ishwar hamesha darpok darwaje se hi mastishak me ghusta hai. Vyavharik roop se ishwar manav ko sirf darpok banata hai. Maine paya hai ki ishwar ki aadharbhut kalpna hai. Karl Marx ne thik hi kaha tha ki ishwar hridayhin vyaktiyon ka hriday hota hai.''[25]

Tulsi Ram offers a critical appraisal of the city of Varanasi, characterizing it as a space saturated with religious dogma and superstition. The city is culturally and theologically venerated for its association with moksha, the liberation from the cycle of birth and death believed to be conferred upon those who die and are cremated there. A rational thinker Tulsi Ram interrogates and ultimately rejects this metaphysical claim and he challenges the foundational premise that Varanasi possesses within Hindus. From his rationalist and experiential standpoint, such beliefs are construed as cultural fabrications that perpetuate mythological thinking rather than empirical truth. His critique positions Varanasi not as a sacred place to transcendence, but as a locus where superstition is institutionalized and valorized in everyday life.

"Punarjanm ke bare me unka tark tha ki yadi punarjanm hota to ek ke marne par ek hi paida hota ya usase bhi kam, kyonki hindu mythology ke anusaar kuchh logon ko moksha mil jata hai, arthat moksha mil jane par janm nahi hota hai. Kintu dekha jata hai ki ek marta hai to das paida ho rahe hain aur abadi ki badhotari is samay

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[23]Ibid., P. 59.
[24]A book of Rahul Sanskritayan
[25]Tulsi Ram. *Manikarnika*. Rajkamal Prakashan, 2014, New Delhi, P. 62f.

vishwa ki ek badi samasya ban gayi hai. Akhir itnne log kahan se paida ho jate hain. ,Punarjanm nahi hota hai' ke bare me yah ek akatya tark hai.''[26]

In her book Benares: City of Light, Diana L. Eck describes the Ganges River and writes that the Ganga is called the heavenly river. "Long ago, the Ganges agreed to flow on Earth as well. Out of great compassion, she helped a king named Bhagirta, who begged the god Brahma to let the Ganga flow down from heaven."[27]

In *Manikarnika*, Tulsi Ram critically examines this prevailing religious ideology, particularly the belief in the salvific capacity of the Ganges River. He documents how local residents, as well as countless pilgrims, attribute redemptive power to the river, believing it to possess the ability to purify one's soul by absolving sin and liberating the individual from the karmic cycle of reincarnation. Ritual bathing, the immersion of ashes, and death in proximity to the Ganges are thus widely practiced acts of spiritual merit.

However, Tulsi Ram introduces a rationalist and socio-materialist critique of this belief system. While acknowledging the symbolic and emotional potency of the Ganges within the collective religious consciousness, he talks about its limitations from a pragmatic and ethical standpoint. He notes that although the river is thought to cleanse spiritual transgressions, it cannot address the material conditions of suffering, most notably, hunger and poverty. His observation that "the Ganges can wash away all human sins, but it cannot feed the hungry" serves as a powerful metaphor that challenges the efficacy of ritual purity in addressing real-world inequalities.

> "Ghat ki sabse nichali sidhi par baithkar maine apna dono paanw Ganga me duba diye. Us din behad garmi me pairon ki jalsamadhi bahut rahatkari to lagi, kintu sochne par majbur ho gaya ki Ganga kisi ke paap to dhul sakti hai, bhukh ko nahi.''[28]

2.5. The change in Tulsi Ram's life and Tulsi Ram's understanding of death

Varanasi has been a focal point for literary and anthropological explorations about death and death ceremony, both in Indian and international contexts. The city is considered to be a sacred place where death is not seen as a tragic conclusion but as a spiritually desirable event. According to Hindu soteriological beliefs is the notion that dying or being cremated in Varanasi ensures *moksha*—liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth. Therefore, the city has a meaning for those who seek a spiritually significant death, and mourning is often replaced by ritual celebration.

However, Tulsi Ram presents a counter-narrative that questions this conventional belief. While acknowledging the city's theological association with *nirvana*, he reorients the symbolic significance of Varanasi from death

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[26]Tulsi Ram. *Manikarnika*. Rajkamal Prakashan, 2014, New Delhi, P. 62 f.
[27]Ibid., P. 62.
[28]Ibid., P. 253.

to life. In his autobiography, he emphasizes that for him, Varanasi was not a place of spiritual closure but rather one of existential awakening and intellectual formation. The city marked the beginning of his political consciousness, academic development, and philosophical transformation. In contrast to the dominant cultural narrative that gives meaning in death, Tulsi Ram locates meaning in life and lived experience within the socio-political landscape of Varanasi.

> "Benares ki *Manikarnika* kisi ke bhi asistitva ko hamesha ke liye mita deti hai. Kintu mere sath ekdam ulta hua. Benaras me mera jivan hi wahin se shuru hua, fir main duniya ke un chand logon me shamil ho gaya, jo jite ji shokanjali ke shikar ho gaye."[29]

In his autobiography, Tulsi Ram asserts that his long engagement with the socio-cultural environment of Varanasi resulted in strong personal transformation. He basically distinguishes his identity in Varanasi from that of his earlier self in his village and indicates a shift in many dimensions in his life like religious belief, political orientation, and caste consciousness. This transformation is noted as a departure point from theistic frameworks; not believing in God does not lead to existential crisis, but rather to a sense of intellectual clarity and psychological contentment. Tulsi Ram characterizes this new transomed self as a product of autonomous self that is a result of consciously cultivated identity. It comes with his values and experiences in a place like Varanasi where caste-stratified, and ideologically charged context rule the place. His self-description as a "new man" reflects a critical break from traditional structures and a reconfiguration of subjectivity grounded in rational inquiry, political awareness, and individuality.

> "Main ek naya insaan ban gaya tha. Ghar se bhag kar jo aaya tha, usase bilkul bhinn. Mujhe lagta tha ki ishvarvihin duniya ka main malik ban gaya. Kangali ki haalat me bhi main sampann ho gaya tha."[30]

Conclusion

Tulsi Ram reconstructs in the second part of his autobiography *Manikarnika* his life in Varanasi and at Banaras Hindu University. Tulsi Ram has very different experience than expected in a very highly proclaimed city for Hindus. Therefore, he reads the city Varanasi differently and offers in *Manikarnika* a different perspective about the city Varanasi and a powerful critique of the religious hypocrisy and caste orthodoxy entrenched in the city of Varanasi. Tulsi Ram reads Varanasi just opposite to what Varanasi is known for. In Hindu Mythology Varanasi is a place of moksha (liberation) but Tulsi Ram uncovers it as a city where caste identity governs every social interaction and decides roles of every individual. He sees Varanasi as place where casteism is practised very systematically. While mythological belief says that death in Varanasi and get cremated in Varanasi ensures freedom from the cycle of rebirth, but in Tulsi Ram's view death and death ceremony in Varanasi is a business and showcase of caste hierarchy. For Tulsi Ram is Varanasi not a place where he wants die or gets cremated and gets moksha, rather for him and many other Dalits it is and it can be

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[29]Tulsi Ram. *Manikarnika*. Rajkamal Prakashan, 2014, New Delhi, P. 5.
[30]Tulsi Ram. *Manikarnika*. Rajkamal Prakashan, 2014, New Delhi, P. 63.

a place of self-transformation as a new personality and intellectual rebirth. *Manikarnika* is not just a reconstruction of his sufferings in Varanasi but it is also a text which challenges the mythological beliefs. His experiences in Varanasi illustrate how Dalits must often hide their identity, negotiate survival through lies, and endure everyday discrimination. Through political engagement, philosophical questioning, Tulsi Ram challenges the moral fabric of a city that sees the city Varanasi as a place of spiritual superiority but social inequality where caste-system is a truth and practised.

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