

The Role of Belief Systems and Shared Culture on Mental Health

Amiya Banerjee

Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry, SIMS, Hapur, Uttar Pradesh

ABSTRACT

There is space for the concept of a 'collective conscious' as complementary to the collective unconscious in the understanding of behaviour and mental state of individuals and a community. This paper attempts to develop this concept using the modern Varanasi and mythological Kashi as a template. Such efforts focusing on our indigenous cultures can possibly enhance our understanding of mental health of our patients.

Keywords: Shared belief, community, positive mental health, collective conscious, Kashi

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I explore how a way of life that is lived in a discrete region and city, and that is existent almost unchanged and uninterrupted from ancient times, can inform our understanding of models of mental health that might be unique to our culture. The city of Kashi, and the mythology of Shiva on which it is based, forms the basis of my exploration in this paper. However, we must keep in mind that in an extremely diverse and plural country like ours, one can draw similar understandings from a study of different places and their associated beliefs and cultural behaviours. These will be very different from each other but very relevant to the people of that region.

The myth of the jyotirlinga

It all begins with the Pillar of Light. The myth is well known. It recounts the first appearance or hierophany of Shiva's *linga* which pierced the three worlds as a brilliant shaft of light and was witnessed by Brahma and Vishnu long ago. The *jyotirlinga* is the supreme, 'partless' reality, out of which Shiva may sometimes appear as a 'partial' reality.

This *linga* of light is 'the *axis mundi* - the pillar at the centre of the world, originating deep in the netherworld, cracking the surface of the earth, and splitting the roof

of the sky. In this 'partless' form, Shiva transcends even Shiva himself, in embodied, 'partial' form. This is not Shiva, beautiful or ugly, dressed in silks or tiger skins, wearing the crescent moon or the necklace of skulls. This light finally cannot be described or comprehended by any or all faces and attributes'.

In Kashi mythology *this*, Kashi, is the place where the light split the earth. However, the *linga* of light did not merely burst forth from the earth *in* Kashi. Rather, it *was* Kashi, the 'Luminous'. The entire sacred field included within the Panchakroshi Road *is* the *linga* of light, the blazing emblem of the Lord.

The word *linga* ordinarily refers to the image of Shiva. The word Kashi ordinarily refers to a city. However, here we have an extraordinary statement: the city *is* a *linga*. 'This great place, Avimukta, bounded by the five *kroshas*, is to be known as the one *linga* of light, called Visheshvara'. Needless to say, ordinary people like us will be unable to understand this world-spanning-*linga-of-light-that-is-the-city* in any meaningful way.

So, where is this Kashi?

Here, I will take a liberty with the text of the scriptures. I will use Varanasi/Banaras for the city you can take a train to and work and walk about in, and will use Kashi as the city in the above scriptural sense¹. In this sense, Kashi is 'in the world, but not limited by it; it is in the middle of the universe, but not in the midst of the universe'. To paraphrase Parvati as she expresses her admiration of the city, 'Even though it (as Varanasi) sits on the earth, Kashi is not an earthly city'. From being a pillar of light, spanning the three worlds, it is now the Varanasi-that-is-actually-Kashi. This is a bit easier to wrap our heads around, but it still eludes comprehension.

Corresponding Author:

Dr Amiya Banerjee

Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry,
SIMS, Hapur, Uttar Pradesh.

E-mail: amiyaban@gmail.com

There is another common image, in which Kashi's true location is described as high above the earth on Shiva's trident. When the waters of *pralaya* engulf the whole of creation, they do not touch Kashi. Here is something we can easily imagine and 'understand'. A handsome yet ascetic looking man, rising waters, a *trishul* and, atop it, Varanasi and all its creatures. I will come back to this image shortly, but first a question about the person, Shiva.

And who is this Shiva?

Shiva is a householder in Kashi. When he married Parvati and needed a suitable home, he scanned the entire earth from the Himalayas, and chose the city of Varanasi. Here, the mountain ascetic became not only a family man, but also a city man, dwelling in the very centre of culture. This is his permanent home, and he dwells here to bestow liberation, *moksha*. In Banaras there is a saying, '*Kashi ke kankar Shiva Shankar hain*'. He dwells in, saturates, not only the city's temples, not only its stones and pebbles, but in everything in Kashi: the trees, animals, and people of the city².

Identity and Belonging: the *banarasi* in Kashi

Let us return to the image of Kashi held above the earth on Shiva's trident. What does a *banarasi* mean when he says this? *Everyone* in Varanasi knows this, but they have quite different understandings of what this means. Some typical interpretations among *banarasis* are:

- This is his weapon, and with it He protects Kashi.
- He protects all the people who live in Kashi and gives them liberation.
- It is different. The place, and the life and culture of we who live here, is different.
- The three points are the three worlds. Kashi is above all these, and separate from them.
- It cannot be destroyed. Even when the whole world vanishes, Kashi will not vanish.

Two things are noteworthy in all these interpretations. One, they are all different, but one hears the same belief: Varanasi-that-is-Kashi is set apart from the rest of the world. It is different, separate and unique. Second, *every* *banarasi* - *Kashiwasi*, through his understanding of this image, and thereby his understanding of the subtle idea that underlies the image, shares this belief.

There is a way of living among people who call themselves *banarasis*. They call it *anand*, *masti*, *mauj* and *phakkarpan* (carefreeness). There is *santosh*, the

enjoyment and satisfaction with very little, a trait they share with their beloved Bhole Shankar. There is *akhadpan*, the headstrongness, ribaldry and roughness like the ganas of his marriage procession. These terms jointly relate an atmosphere of cultural, social and religious ecstasy in Kashi which is summed up in the local expression '*banarsipan*', a passion for the enjoyments of Kashi. As is apparent, these characteristics of *banarasis* are the characteristics of the Lord Shiva, the city's oldest resident, and of the *ganas*, *yakshas*, *pramathas* and *bhutas* who are his attendants.

By the promise of Annapurna, everyone will have *khichri* (lentils) to eat and Ganga water to drink in Kashi. And by the promise of Shiva, everyone will be blessed with liberation at death. It is an art of living, both passionate and carefree. It is the enjoyment of life without ostentation. Most of its pleasures are simple. One need not worry about life, or about death. This is at the very core of Kashi's *masti*. The joy of living can become a high art only when the fear of dying has been vanquished.

The *banarasi* is not necessarily a devout or pious person. Part of the enjoyment of living in Varanasi-Kashi is that one need not make a point of being pious, for everything one does in this sacred zone is a religious action. This, after all is what religious life is: living life at that centre-place that gives meaning to all one's activities, sleeping and waking, buying and selling, bathing and worshipping. For the *banarasi*, Kashi is that place at the centre³.

The poet who goes by the name Bedhab Banarsi had this to say:

'I will not leave Varanasi, where you get,

Langra mangoes when alive, and Ganga water after death.'

A *banarasi* and a psychiatrist

Kashi is the unfathomable *jyotirlinga*. This pillar of light spans the three worlds, spans cycles of time, and Kashi is somewhere up there. The rest of the world gets dissolved and gets created, but Kashi has always been there. Kashi is Shiva.

Shiva lives in Kashi. He has a wife, Gauri and two kids and attendants. They quarrel, they make up. He has a home and she has a kitchen, which is always open to all. He enjoys some *masti* with his *ganas* now and then. He loves his city and calls it *Avimukta*, that which he

will never forsake. Out of this love, he has taken on a responsibility, a job that keeps him busy. He protects Kashi, and is the *taraka*, the ferryman to the other shore. For him, Kashi, the luminous pillar of light, is in Varanasi, his city.

This meaning system that is so implicit for the banarasi has some implications for mental health that I would like to point out⁴.

- 1. The city is the person.** As Kashi is loved, protected and redeemed, so is the Kashiwasi. The *pancha kroska* of Kashi, Shiva's body, and the *pancha kosha* of the human body is a powerful image of the physical city, the physical body, and the special meaning underlying both of them.
- 2. The sense of community.** I have touched upon *banarasipan* earlier. There are three other aspects of community life here that I will touch upon. Firstly, from the earliest times, people from all parts of the world, what to say of all corners of India, have been coming to Kashi. The Banarasi is cosmopolitan and comfortable with diversity. Conversely, *anyone* who shares their world view and way of life can qualify to become a banarasi.

Secondly, for all the temples and all the grand themes, Varanasi is, and has been, open to all kinds of heterodox traditions. I need but mention the Buddha, Kabir and the Muslim invasions. The inclusiveness in the world view, that comfortably embraces as one the three worlds and a pebble, sees as one all creatures from Brahma to a blade of grass, is the basis of the syncretic, tolerant society seen in daily life.

Thirdly, there is a sense of fun, and a pleasure in putting the high and mighty in their place. The many melas and festivals, and the unique *kavi sammelans* are well known. One would be hard pressed to conjure community coping strategies more potent and cost effective^{5,6}!

- 3. The sense of purpose.** For every person, there is as if a template that guides his day to day life which is easy to follow. The answers to the big questions are known by everyone here, one doesn't have to struggle with them. The idea of the collective unconscious seems relevant here. It is a powerful idea which hints at continuity, at implicitly shared beliefs in a defined community. The small problems get taken care of by the shared sense of community and the shared culture with its unique aspects. Can we not call it the collective conscious?

CONCLUSION

One does not have to be born a banarasi; anyone can become one. Anyone who embraces the banarasi way of life gets endowed with a closely enmeshed system of belief and conduct. This system provides him with a map of meaning guided by which he can lead a positive life. This map spans many levels, rather like zooming in and out of a map on a computer. It guides his inner life, seamlessly carrying him from birth to death and then beyond. It guides his conduct, from the most intimate and private to his communion with thousands in the public events of Banaras. It guides his interactions with fellow humans and fellow creatures. They may be strangers, but they are all familiar from being fellow banarasis.

However superficial his understanding, however lighthearted the occasion, there is always the awareness that all rests on something profound. However grave his difficulties, or onerous his responsibilities, there is always the awareness that one need not take anything too seriously. This anchoring in a belief system, a way of life and a shared community contributes to positive mental health⁷. These aspects of our culture are unique and merit further study.

Ethical clearance: not needed

Source of funding: self

Conflict of interest: nil

REFERENCES

1. *Kashi Khanda* of the *Skanda Purana*
2. The city of Shiva. P. 94-146, in 'Banaras – The City of Light'. Diana L Eck, Penguin Books India 1993.
3. Varma KV. Cultural psychodynamics in health and illness. *Indian J Psychiatry*. 1986; 28: 13-34.
4. Juthani NV. Psychiatric treatment of Hindus. *Int Rev Psychiatry*. 2001; 13: 125-30.
5. Gupta S, Avasthi A, Kumar S. Relationship between religiosity and psychopathology in patients with depression. *Indian j Psychiatry*. 2011; 53: 330-5.S
6. King M, Speck P, Thomas A. The effect of spiritual beliefs on outcome from illness. *Soc Sci Med*. 1999; 48: 1291-9.
7. Shamsunder C. what kind of psychotherapy in the Indian setting? *Indian J Psychiatry*. 1979; 21: 34-8.