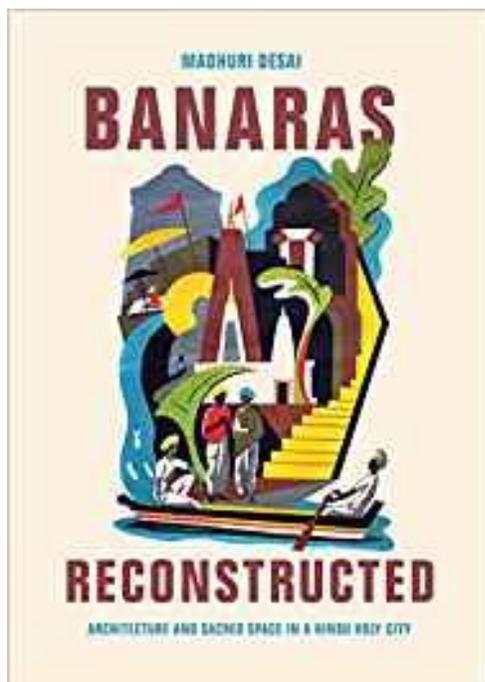


Book Review: *Banaras Reconstructed: Architecture and Sacred Space in a Hindu Holy City* by Madhuri Desai



Paperback: 304 pages

Publisher: University of Washington Press (31 May 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0295741996

ISBN-13: 978-0295741994

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The book comprehensively discusses the oft-neglected textual and spatial characteristics of the ‘timeless Banaras’ in its historical context. The vital focus of the book is on the city’s Indo-Islamic past and the resultant rich cultural exchange and heritage shared by people belonging to diverse religious groups. The author, Prof. Madhuri Desai has dexterously attempted to describe and exemplify how varied aspects have contributed in the consecration of Banaras as *sacred* amidst other buildings which hold a high degree of historical significance. The arguments by the author are meticulously supplemented with original layouts and documentations dating from the reign of Mughal Emperor Akbar. The book also draws attention as to how Kashi underwent several revival/ rejuvenation processes. It also points the hidden power politics behind these visual

patronages which were inexplicably crucial to the acquisition of cultural capital. It highlights how these interventions which were planned and undertaken played a significant role in furthering each ruler's personal ambitions. Issues of power, status, caste, visible piety was negotiated and represented through these patronages.

The author has come up with several remarkable eye-opening facts in her narrative which forms a direct contestation to the age old adage of the timelessness of Ganga Aarti which has been propagated by the state- machinery. Her view that that Ganga Aarti has been a spectacle designed especially 'to accommodate piety, pleasure and politics' is well documented. This representational enterprise of the Ganga Aarti includes pre-recorded hymns in praise of River Ganges, the ritualistic and ostentatious performances displayed by priests, waving of huge lamps in an orchestrated fashion. All this has invariably led the mesmerized pilgrims and audience (national and global) to naïvely believe in its timeless origin. This myth is conscientiously interrogated and subverted by the author's narrative. She shows how a falsification of history happens both at the local (priests, shopkeepers) and at the state level (ruling agency/ tourism) to precipitate revenue generation.

The book has a lot of supporting images and paintings which depicts various features of Banaras's unique topography by both commissioned and unknown artists. This charts out the slow and steady transition of Banaras to much-aspired modernity. The photographs produced by artists like Brajo Gopal Bromochary as a set of ethnographic projects of colonial regime and also as a part of the project to document living tradition for the ASI; further explicate this transition. According to the author, all these representations have contributed to a projection of Banaras and turned it to be an inevitable site for "Hindu patronage and devotions that was intermittently interrupted by instances of Islamic iconoclasm" (209) The book also unfolds as to how the Brahmin priests combined with colonial survey techniques and their forte of traditional knowledge on the city; re-imagined and materialized a *Kashikshetra* crowded with ritual sites and pilgrimage routes. Thus the newly imagined city was an effort on the part of the cartographers, historians, rulers and pilgrims. Overall, the book is an excellent resource for scholars working in the area of South Asian and Urban Studies.