Concept Note of the Ten Day Workshop on Varanasi and its Environment

(18-27 March, 2020)

Environmental setup around Varanasi region has been playing a very important role in the making of persona of the region through the millennia. It is reflected in material culture and socio-religious changes in the history of this holy city. It is widely accepted that Varanasi has been the melting pot of many faiths, sects and cultures since the ancient times. This unique interfaith and intercultural synthesis of Varanasi has evolved to establish the city as the ‘Cultural Capital of India’. The legacy of music and dance in Varanasi is tremendous and is acclaimed internationally. In its cultural journey from Janpada-Mahâjanapada Period to the present day, it has incorporated and moulded a rainbow of cultural traits which has culminated in epitaphs such as Ânandavâna, Avimukta, Rudravâsa, Mahâśmaśâna, Mokshdâ etc. being used for Varanasi.

The vibrant cultural heritage of Varanasi is manifested in various dimensions such as archaeology, art, architecture, iconography, literature, music, dance etc. including the Brâhmînic, Buddhist and Jain traditions. It is noteworthy that the areas in and around Varanasi region which lies along the rivers such as Gângâ, Varuṇâ, Gomati, Chandra-prabhâ, Kârmanâśâ and its tributaries have blossomed hundreds of ancient settlements. These settlements served as the centre of various craft activities that not only catered to the need of Varanasi city but also played an important role in socio-economic and cultural life of Varanasi. There are several smaller tributaries of these rivers flowing down the Vindhyan ranges which have facilitated the transportation of different kinds of stones, ore and other raw materials to the settlements surrounding the capital city of Kâshi Mahâjanapada.

Traditional arts and crafts have been the backbone of economy and social structure of Varanasi. The excavations at Râjghât, Âgîâbîr, Anai, Âkhâ, Râmagnar, Prahlâdpur, Râipurâ, Latif Sâh etc and the sites located on the Panchkrośi route of Varanasi and surrounding areas explored by our department have brought to light interesting evidence of crafts objects. There are exquisite pieces of ivory, bone, beads, semi-precious and precious stones and metal objects dating back to first millennium BCE. The prehistoric rock art heritage dating back to around 10,000 BCE are scattered in the hilly areas of Varanasi region.
The geo-cultural landscape of Varanasi has abundant heritage temples, mahals, kothis, kunds etc. It is said that the holy city is situated on the trident of Lord Shiva who blessed it with Mother Ganges which flows northward making the ghats east-facing and a perfect place for spiritual salvation.

Varanasi has been revered by both the Brāhmanic and Śramaṇa streams of Indian culture due to its strong association with Śaivism as well as with two major Śramaṇa religions i.e. Buddhism and Jainism. The Jain literature refers to Kāśi as an important Jain Tīrtha because four of the Jain Tīrthaṅkaras were born here. Tripitaka mentions Isipatana (literally means the abode of sages, presently identified as Sārnāth) as the most preferred place for ascetics to do penance and meditation. Thus this place was popular for interfaith interaction among spiritual persons since the ancient time.

The ten day workshop on Varanasi and its Environs aims to bring out and examine all such aspects of Varanasi with academicians and researchers for better understanding of the cultural heritage of Varanasi.

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