

TRAVEL WRITING AS CULTURAL BRIDGE: A STUDY OF *KALEIDOSCOPE CITY* AND THE REPRESENTATION OF VARANASI IN PIERS MOORE EDE'S TRAVELOGUE

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ABSTRACT

Travel literature has evolved into a genre that captures personal journeys while providing profound insights into diverse cultures and societies. This article examines Piers Moore Ede's *Kaleidoscope City: A Year in Varanasi*, a travelogue that blends historical narratives with contemporary cultural reflections to depict the vibrant essence of Varanasi. Renowned as one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, Varanasi holds a unique place as India's spiritual, cultural, and historical epicentre. Ede transcends conventional travel writing by adopting a cosmopolitan perspective that moves beyond colonial and orientalist frameworks. His immersive 'travel-in-dwelling' approach reveals Varanasi's spiritual depth, socio-cultural complexities, and economic challenges. The travelogue explores diverse facets of the city, from the sacred rituals of the Ganga and the grandeur of the *Ramlila* festival to the struggles of widows and sex workers, as well as the intricate artistry of Banarasi weaving. Ede's empathetic narrative bridges the gap between insider and outsider perspectives, offering a rich, nuanced understanding of Varanasi's living heritage. Ultimately, *Kaleidoscope City* exemplifies the evolving genre of travel writing, serving as a cultural bridge that invites readers to experience India's sacred geography and enduring legacies.

KEYWORDS: Travel Literature, Varanasi, Kaleidoscope City, Cosmopolitanism, Orientalism, Cultural Representation, Sacred Geography

RESUMEN: *La literatura de viajes como vínculo cultural: un estudio de Kaleidoscope City y la representación de Varanasi en el libro de viaje de Piers Moore Ede*

La literatura de viajes se ha convertido en un género que captura un viaje personal aportando a su vez una profunda percepción sobre culturas y sociedades diversas. Este artículo examina *Kaleidoscope City: A Year in Varanasi* de Piers Moore Ede, un libro de viaje que mezcla narrativas históricas con reflexiones culturales contemporáneas para representar la vibrante esencia de Varanasi. Conocida como una de las ciudades que más tiempo ha estado habitada de continuo, Varanasi tiene un lugar especial como epicentro de la espiritualidad, cultura e historia de India. Ede va más allá de las convenciones de la escritura de viajes al adoptar una perspectiva cosmopolita que trasciende los marcos coloniales y

orientalistas. Su enfoque inmersivo de “viajar-al-habitar” revela la profundidad espiritual, complejidades socioculturales y desafíos financieros de Varanasi. Este libro de viaje explora distintas facetas de la ciudad, desde los rituales sagrados del Ganges y la grandeza del festival de *Ramlila* a las dificultades de las viudas y trabajadoras, así como los intrincados diseños de los tejidos Banarasi. La empática narrativa de Ede cubre la distancia entre las perspectivas extranjeras y nativas, ofreciendo una comprensión rica y matizada del legado vivo de Varanasi. En última instancia, *Kaleidoscope City* ejemplifica la evolución del género de literatura de viajes actuando como vínculo cultural que invita a los lectores a vivir la geografía sagrada de India y sus perdurables legados.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Literatura de viajes, Varanasi, *Kaleidoscope City*, cosmopolitismo, orientalismo, representaciones culturales, geografía sagrada

Introduction

Travel literature has long been a captivating and intellectually rich genre that chronicles personal journeys while providing readers with an intimate glimpse into diverse cultures, histories, and landscapes. Emerging as a fusion of narrative art and cultural documentation, travel writing enables authors to explore the interplay between the ‘self’ and the ‘other,’ often resulting in profound reflections on identity, society, and the human condition. This article investigates the evolution and cultural significance of travel writing, with a focus on Piers Moore Ede’s (2015) *Kaleidoscope City: A Year in Varanasi*. By immersing himself in the vibrant and complex city of Varanasi, Ede crafts a narrative that bridges the insider’s perspective with that of the outsider, delving into the spiritual, historical, and socio-economic dimensions of this iconic Indian city.

Varanasi, revered as one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities, offers a unique tapestry of traditions, rituals, and cultural dynamics that have fascinated travellers for centuries. Ede’s travelogue not only highlights the city’s spiritual allure but also unpacks its multifaceted realities, including challenges such as environmental degradation, caste-based inequalities, and socio-economic struggles. This research situates Ede’s work within the broader context of travel literature, examining its alignment with critical frameworks such as Edward Said’s Orientalism and Debbie Lisle’s cosmopolitanism. Through a detailed analysis, the article underscores the potential of contemporary travel writing to transcend colonial legacies and foster cross-cultural understanding, offering a nuanced and empathetic portrayal of destinations

like Varanasi. The study highlights how travel literature can act as a cultural bridge, inspiring readers to appreciate the richness of unfamiliar worlds while challenging their preconceived notions.

The research article draws upon both mythological and theoretical frameworks to explore the depiction of Varanasi in Piers Moore Ede's travelogue. The mythological aspect is anchored in the sacred narratives surrounding the Ganga River, which is revered as a celestial deity in Hindu culture. The travelogue captures the essence of these myths, illustrating the river's spiritual significance and its association with liberation (*moksha*). These myths not only shape the cultural fabric of Varanasi but also resonate through Ede's portrayal of the city as a microcosm of India's spiritual ethos.

The theoretical framework is informed by Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and Debbie Lisle's notion of cosmopolitanism. Said's Orientalism provides a lens to critique historical depictions of India by Western writers, characterised by stereotypes and colonial biases (Said, 1978:6). In contrast, Lisle's cosmopolitanism offers an alternative perspective, emphasizing empathetic engagement and cross-cultural understanding (Lisle, 2006: 4). By situating Ede's travelogue within these frameworks, the study examines how his narrative transcends orientalist tropes, adopting a cosmopolitan worldview that bridges the insider-outsider divide. This dual approach enables a comprehensive analysis of Ede's work, highlighting its role in reimagining travel literature as a tool for cultural exchange and mutual understanding.

Ede's narrative exemplifies a contemporary travelogue that blends historical and cultural inquiry with theoretical depth. Drawing on Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism*, the study critiques how colonial-era travel writing often portrayed India as an exotic, mystical, and chaotic land. Ede's work, however, challenges these stereotypes by engaging with Varanasi from a cosmopolitan lens, as described by Lisle (2006). By interacting deeply with locals, exploring marginal communities, and delving into socio-environmental concerns, Ede's narrative fosters a nuanced understanding that counters reductive portrayals.

Comparatively, William Dalrymple's *City of Djinns* (1994) and Gregory David Roberts' *Shantaram* (2003) also explore India, albeit from distinct perspectives. Dalrymple's semi-historical exploration of Delhi aligns with Ede's immersive method, yet the former leans more on archival research. Roberts' fictionalised depiction of Mumbai lacks the empirical depth of

Ede's work but shares the focus on human connections. While Ede's work transcends orientalist biases, many earlier travelogues such as E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) reinforce binaries of 'civilised' versus 'other.'

Ede also resonates with Carl Thompson's (2011) analysis in *Travel Writing: The New Critical Idiom*, which asserts that modern travel writers blend empathy and observation to create balanced portrayals. Debbie Lisle's (2006) theory of cosmopolitanism reinforces this by suggesting that globalised travel writing must engage with shared human experiences. Thus, Ede's travelogue becomes a cultural bridge, echoing similar sentiments in Diana Eck's *Benares: City of Light* (1998), which venerates Varanasi's spiritual complexity while acknowledging its urban challenges.

Travel, whether religious or secular, has been a significant aspect of human culture throughout history. From ancient times, people have travelled for pilgrimage, trade, territorial conquest, education, and leisure. These journeys are documented in travelogues, stories, poetry, autobiographies, and treatises, which provide valuable insights into societal structures and the travellers' worldviews.

India has long fascinated visitors as the centre of the Oriental world. Its diverse geography, temples, forts, rivers, mountains, and vibrant festivals leave a lasting impact on travellers, evoking strong emotional responses. Western travellers, in particular, have struggled to understand the complexities of India's spiritual and emotional makeup, which often seems perplexing due to the depth of its cultural and social diversity.

As a land of various cultures, India remains a popular travel destination. While its natural beauty and cultural traditions attract visitors, foreign travellers have frequently critiqued its social issues. Travel writings, whether from Indians or outsiders, offer varied perspectives on the same places, food, or customs, allowing readers to gain a broader understanding of these subjects. Travel writing, thus, is more than a report or tourist guide—it is a literary art, reflecting both historical facts and personal experiences.

Travelogues capture local colours, temperatures, and cultures, often taking on a metaphysical or semi-religious tone, as the journey becomes an exploration of the traveller's own inner

world. This makes travel writing a significant literary form that not only describes places but also delves into the human spirit.

To understand the contemporary trajectory of theory, it is essential to consider its position within a distinct political and economic context; one that both encourages and constrains critique. In this context, the cosmopolitan study of travel writing and “world literature” (Clifford, 1997) competes with the material realities of regional disparities and the dominance of transnational monopolies. Edward Said, in his seminal work *Traveling Theory*, argued for an understanding of the circumstances that shape theories (1983: 226-247). He highlighted the crucial role of context in the development of ideas, noting that theories often evolve through local origins, translations, alterations, and misreadings at their point of reception. While Said spoke of the “commerce of ideas,” he could not have predicted how this phrase would take on a different meaning in the era of the privatised neoliberal university (Said, 2000: 57).

Carl Thompson examines the ongoing influence of colonial legacies in modern travel writing. He suggests that contemporary travel writing often perpetuates imperialist tropes and strategies, even after the decline of European imperialism (Thompson, 2011: 136). Debbie Lisle’s *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* (2006) stands as a foundational work in the field. Lisle contends that modern travel writers, unlike their colonial predecessors, present interactions with other cultures in more favourable terms. These writers emphasise empathy, awareness of cultural differences, realizations of equality, and the recognition of shared ideals. According to Lisle, these travel writers adopt a cosmopolitan worldview, moving beyond the colonial legacy by focusing on the unifying effects of globalization (Lisle, 2006: 4).

Building on Lisle’s insights, the current study aims to demonstrate how selected Western travel writers, while writing about India, adopt a cosmopolitan approach that reflects a more positive engagement with the “other” (ibid). These writers, enamoured with the Indian spirit, shed their prejudices and biases, offering a more objective perspective. Rooted in Western traditions, they transcend the Orientalist viewpoint, embracing Indian culture, spirituality, and emotional depth. By employing an outsider/insider strategy, writers like Tully (1991) and Dalrymple are able to provide a more nuanced, fair depiction of India. In doing so, they contribute to what can be considered a ‘counter-colonial’ genre of travel writing.

William Dalrymple, Gillian Tindall, Gregory David Roberts, Dave Prager, James Cameron, Mark Tully, Oliver Balch, Sam Miller, Patrick French, and others have all contributed to the genre of travel writing about India. Unlike the portrayals of India in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western travel literature, which were often tainted by racism, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, these contemporary authors present India's history, culture, diversity, and challenges with compassion and empathy. These writers, upon arriving in India for various reasons, become captivated by the country's culture. Their works delve deeply into the historical, religious, social, cultural, political, and economic facets of India, as well as the everyday realities of life in the country. They travel extensively, interacting with locals and immersing themselves in India's complex fabric, producing rich, insightful accounts of their experiences.

Recent years have seen a surge of travel publications that have renewed the genre, infusing it with fresh perspectives and innovative structures. These contemporary travel writers, grounded in personal experience, attempt to revive the genre with more thoughtful engagement. Piers More Ede's *Kaleidoscope City* is an excellent example, blending history, culture, politics, archaeology, art, philosophy, and more. Through this eclectic mix, Ede rejuvenates the travel genre with artistic creativity and intellectual depth.

Ede's work on Varanasi stands out as an exemplary representation of India's historical richness. His travelogue offers vivid descriptions of the city's ancient history and cultural significance. Through a year of meticulous observation and investigation, Ede uncovers the deep, layered past of Varanasi, exploring everything from the modern day to its origins as mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, which dates to around 800–400 BCE. His detailed exploration provides readers with a wealth of knowledge, enriching their understanding of the city. Using his 'travel-in-dwelling' approach, Ede captures the spirit of India, offering a profound reflection on the history and culture of Varanasi, and in turn, India itself.

Mukesh Khosla, in his article *Authoring India*, notes the growing number of foreign writers, including historians and Indophiles, publishing books focused on India. These books often explore the everyday lives of ordinary Indians, steering away from grand historical narratives. Instead, they delve into the common experiences that shape the country's diverse social fabric (Khosla, 2012). This approach can be seen in Piers Moore Ede's *Kaleidoscope City: A Year in*

Varanasi, which offers a unique and unorthodox portrayal of the city's past and present. Paul Smethurst observes that travel writing often serves as a vehicle to transport the narrator to historical sites, where they can metaphorically travel back in time to engage with the history they encounter (2011: 156).

In Ede's *Kaleidoscope City*, the history and culture of Varanasi, India's holiest city, are encapsulated through his year-long immersion in the life of the city. Known also as Kashi and Benares, Varanasi has long been a religious magnet for Hindu pilgrims and a source of fascination for international visitors. By living in the city for an entire year, Ede was able to uncover its rich historical and cultural layers, offering a vivid portrayal of the city's spiritual essence and the everyday lives of its inhabitants. His sensitive insights transport readers into the heart of Varanasi, allowing them to deeply appreciate the reverence and complexity that surrounds the city's traditions and customs.

Ede, a British-born travel writer, is known for his nuanced understanding of the places he visits. In addition to *Kaleidoscope City*, he has authored other notable travel books, including *Honey and Dust* (2004) and *All Kinds of Magic* (2010). His works reflect his extensive travels and the diverse experiences he has encountered, exploring themes of place, people, culture, history, and society. Beyond his writing, Ede contributes to environmental and literary publications such as *The Times Literary Supplement* (1902), *The Telegraph*, *The Ecologist* (1970), and *Earth Island Journal* (1982). He is also a guitarist and photographer and runs Indophile, a website dedicated to providing authentic information for Indian and international travellers (www.earthisland.org/ July 25, 2006).

Ede's fascination with Varanasi began during his travels to Nepal, where he stopped in the city en route. Enchanted by the city's people, faith, and culture, he chose to return and spend a year immersed in Varanasi's historical and cultural layers. P.N. Singh described Varanasi as "one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world" (Gupta, 2009), a fact that likely played a central role in Ede's decision to explore its depths. Mark Twain, too, famously remarked, "Benares is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together" (Basu, 2016). Ede himself reflected on his motivation for coming to the city, stating: "I had come to Varanasi to understand, if I could, this most ancient of cities—to breathe in the pungent smells of its labyrinthine streets... I wanted to know the city's secrets, press my ear to its heartbeat. What was it that made this unique amongst cities?"

(Ryder, 2015). Ede chose to live near Assi *Ghat*, on the banks of the Ganga River, where the renowned Swiss sculptor and painter Alice Borner had once been similarly enchanted. She wrote in her diary, “In it I feel I have returned to myself, to my home, my domicile. It is so familiar, so welcoming, so warm... I feel fulfilled, happy, settled and supported, like on a gentle stream” (Vinay, 2016). Through Ede’s immersion in Varanasi, he seeks to capture this deeply rooted sense of belonging and the profound connection the city fosters among its residents, pilgrims, and visitors alike. Similar to Borner, Ede’s year-long stay also allowed him to peel back the many layers of Varanasi, presenting a multifaceted view that merges its sacredness with its struggles.

The structure of *Kaleidoscope City* mirrors the city itself—fragmented yet beautiful, much like a kaleidoscope. Ede delves into various facets, from the sanctity of the Ganga River to the reality of life on its *ghats*, the complexities of caste and religion, the artistry of local craftspeople, and the pollution that affects the sacred river. He introduces readers to individuals such as the Dom Raja, who supervises cremations by the Ganga, a sweet maker in the lively markets, the Aghori sadhus practicing asceticism, and silk weavers continuing ancient traditions. Each character offers a unique window into the vibrant and sometimes contradictory life of Varanasi.

What makes Ede’s writing stand out is his ability to balance the city’s more challenging aspects with its extraordinary beauty and energy. As Richard Tarrant notes, “it takes a resident’s insight to balance the city’s darker side with a celebration of its luminous creativity, renowned cuisine, and masti, infectious joie de vivre peculiar to its inhabitants” (Tarrant, 2022). Ede’s perspective is not an orientalist one; he adopts a cosmopolitan view, embracing the complexities of Indian culture as part of the global cultural mosaic. His approach transforms Varanasi from an object of fascination into a dynamic, living entity where each street, each encounter, deepens our understanding of the city and, by extension, of India itself.

To analyse Ede’s work on Varanasi, insights from Homi K. Bhabha and Clifford Geertz offer valuable perspectives. Bhabha’s idea of “cultural hybridity,” from *The Location of Culture*, explains how cultural exchanges produce hybrid identities that challenge binary views of East versus West (Bhabha, 1994: 112–122). Ede’s portrayal of Varanasi exemplifies this hybridity as he immerses himself in local life, blending his outsider perspective with an insider’s

understanding. This approach destabilises traditional hierarchies of cultural representation. Similarly, Clifford Geertz's concept of "thick description," as outlined in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, underscores the importance of detailed, contextual observation in comprehending complex cultural phenomena (Geertz, 1973: 3). Ede applies this method in his nuanced exploration of Varanasi, capturing its spiritual rituals, culinary traditions, and the intricate work of silk weavers. By situating Ede's work within Bhabha's and Geertz's frameworks, his travelogue emerges as a culturally sensitive text that transcends exoticism, offering a deep and empathetic representation of Indian culture.

In contrast to many Western travellers who may view India through an orientalist lens, Ede strives to approach the country with empathy and respect, seeing it as a world of contrasts and complexities. V.S. Naipaul, in *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), took a more critical tone, commenting on the stagnation he perceived in Indian culture and its resistance to change. While his observations are often provocative, they lack the empathy and cultural sensitivity found in Ede's work. Ede's interactions with locals—whether discussing the master-pupil relationships of musicians or engaging with environmentalists concerned about Ganga's pollution—enrich the reader's understanding of the social, cultural, and political currents shaping Varanasi. As Himanshu Joshi points out, Ede's travelogue is not merely an outsider's perspective but an effort to see the city through the eyes of its people, which is essential for grasping the emotional depth and contradictions of this ancient city (2015).

Ede's writing goes beyond a simple record of sights and sounds; it invites readers to feel and experience the city in its full complexity. His depiction of Varanasi is rooted in the emotions it evokes, making the book not only an informative account but a compelling narrative that pulls readers into the daily life of the city. As Ede himself writes, Varanasi is a microcosm of India—"a river city containing every facet of humanity, every creed, colour, caste, both astonishing beauty and the most harrowing ugliness and desolation" (KC: 2). This view frames the city as a lens through which India's vast cultural diversity, with all its beauty, contradictions, and complexities, can be understood.

The travelogue's structure, divided into eight chapters, reflects different aspects of Varanasi's life, with each chapter building on the last to provide a fuller portrait of the city's identity. The opening chapter, "Instant Moksha," sets the stage for Varanasi's association with death and rebirth—a central theme in Hindu belief. The fact that many Hindus come to Varanasi to

achieve *moksha*, liberation from the cycle of life and death, speaks to the city's profound spiritual pull, which Ede explores in rich detail, allowing readers to understand Varanasi's significance not only as a religious pilgrimage site but as a powerful symbol of India's spiritual and philosophical traditions.

Kaleidoscope City reminds us that travel writing, when approached with sincerity and insight, can go beyond mere observation and become a tool for understanding. Ede's year-long immersion in Varanasi allows him to offer the city with a level of depth and authenticity rarely found in such works. As John Cheeran (2015) observes, Ede's empathy for the people of Varanasi and his ability to balance the city's light and dark sides make the travelogue not only informative but deeply moving. It is a book that urges readers to look beyond the surface of Varanasi, engage with the realities of its people, and gain a richer understanding of one of India's most iconic and enigmatic cities.

In a similar vein, Ede offers a thorough exploration of the role of death in the sacred city of Varanasi. His interactions with the Dom Raja and various sadhus shed light on the omnipresence of death and the Hindu belief that "dying in Varanasi brings enlightenment" (KC:12). Despite being an outsider, Ede immerses himself in the city's culture, developing a sharp insight into practices that might be unrecognised or unaccepted in Western societies. Through his travelogue, he conveys this understanding to his readers. He emphasises the city's spiritual and ritual significance, writing:

...if one should draw one's last breath anywhere in the city, the entire cycle of death and rebirth can be sidestepped: Moksha is granted regardless of one's current place in samsara...Death here becomes free of terror, and a gateway into the realm of the immortals. A folk saying – still muttered by pilgrims – reads 'Kashyam maranam muktih' – 'Death in Kashi is liberation.' (KC: 13)

This vivid portrayal of Varanasi underscores the profound cultural traditions of India, which encompass a diverse array of customs and beliefs surrounding death and the afterlife.

The book also introduces the Doms, a lower caste responsible for handling the cremation rituals at the burning *ghats* and overseeing funerals. Ede's conversation with a Dom Raja offers valuable insights into Hindu customs and rituals. The author is struck by the Dom Raja's candid revelation that he has accepted death as a part of life since childhood: "...even as a boy I was never fearful of it. After school I would just come down here to help. I would stock the fires,

and watch the bodies burning... this was enjoyable for me. This was my family business, my work and my caste" (KC:18). By allowing the Dom Raja and other local figures to speak for themselves, Ede demonstrates his intellectual narrative style, effectively stepping back to avoid imposing his own voice and perspectives on the story. His careful observations and detailed descriptions of the people, their caste structure, and rituals transport readers into the sacred culture of this ancient city.

Ramlila, another important cultural event in Varanasi, also occupies a significant portion of Ede's travelogue. His exploration of this thirty-day festival, detailed in *Searching for God Rama in Ramnagar*, enriches the book, offering readers an in-depth look at one of India's most celebrated cultural and religious events (Kapur 2006: 81). Through his vivid portrayal of the *Ramlila* festival, Ede presents an essential aspect of Varanasi's vibrant Hindu culture, immersing the reader in the city's spiritual and festive atmosphere (KC: 32-33).

Aldous Huxley, in *Jesting Pilate*, delves into Varanasi's religious significance but often views Hindu spirituality through a detached, critical Western lens (Huxley 1948: 98–100). While Huxley is struck by the city's mysticism, his tone lacks the immersive engagement seen in Ede's narrative. Elizabeth Gilbert's (2006) *Eat, Pray, Love*, though not centered on Varanasi, reflects her broader spiritual journey in India, romanticizing the transformative power of Hindu rituals and meditation. However, her narrative leans more towards self-discovery than an ethnographic portrayal of the religious aspects of Indian culture.

However, alongside the grandeur of the Ganga *aarti*, the majestic *ghats*, and the city's pervasive holiness, Varanasi also holds darker elements that, while acknowledged by those who love the city, are often overlooked. Ede's travelogue does not shy away from depicting the city's more sinister aspects, urging readers to consider both the light and dark sides of India's spiritual capital. In his book *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery*, Harvard scholar Siddartha Kara (2010) offers a stark contrast to Varanasi's sacred image:

Shivdas Pur was not merely as large as Falkland Road or Kamathipura... Typically there might be around 2,000 prostitutes... during police raids in Varanasi, the brothel owners and customers were never arrested, only the prostitutes. After a few bribes, most prostitutes were returned to their owners. It was a regular racket. (Kara 2016)

By presenting this darker reality alongside the more celebrated aspects of the city, Ede provides a holistic view of Varanasi, reinforcing the complexity of life in this ancient city, which is both

a centre of profound spirituality and a place where darker realities coexist with its sacred traditions. In the chapter 'Sex for Sale', Ede sheds significant light on the dark side of Varanasi as a sex trafficking hub, where the sex trade has become a persistent issue. His research into the history of trafficked women reveals a dramatic shift in their status over the twentieth century. As Ede discusses with a Ph.D. student from Banaras Hindu University (BHU), these women once held a powerful social position, but by the twentieth century, they had descended into the margins of society. Ede quotes:

The twentieth century saw a massive decline in the status of these women in North India... They went from virtual royalty in some cases, to the detritus of society. This hasn't just been a loss for these women, however, it's been a loss for the whole of India. (KC: 56-57)

This depressing yet candid portrayal highlights the harsh realities that exist alongside the sacredness of the city. Ede's intention is not only to inform but also to urge readers to reflect seriously on the need for action to address such systemic issues.

In his portrayal of Varanasi, Ede also addresses the plight of widows, particularly the disadvantaged and impoverished women who live in a state of widowhood. Citing research from Atma, a Ph.D. student at BHU, Ede delves into the rigid social codes that govern the lives of these women. He discusses the social and theological constraints they face, as well as the protests sparked by Deepa Mehta's (2005) film *Water*, which depicts the harsh realities of widowhood in Varanasi. Ede visits *Asha Bhavan*, a widow's home in Banaras, and conveys the emotional weight of the widows' struggles. He contrasts the sadness of their lives with the work of organizations like the one Lydia Smith (2015) represents, which aims to empower widows by offering training and job opportunities to help them lead lives of dignity. Ede does not condemn Indian society but instead presents a compassionate view of the situation, encouraging readers to consider the social complexities involved.

Ede also attempts to provide a holistic view of Varanasi in his travelogue. He dedicates a significant portion to the culinary culture of the city, a key part of its appeal. He emphasises that food in Varanasi blends seamlessly with religion and culture: "Food here blends with religion and culture" (KC: 80). The city is renowned for its street food, which draws travellers from all over. Ede details a variety of dishes such as *chaats*, *samosas*, *papdi chaat*, *bhel puri*, *mithai*, *pani puri*, and *khoya*, describing the intricate preparation methods and ingredients used.

He writes, “These foods are an extraordinary mixture of sweet, sour, salt and spice, best enjoyed with the roar of street life in the background” (ibid). This exploration of the city’s culinary diversity adds another layer to the reader’s understanding of Varanasi, offering a sensory experience that complements the city’s spiritual atmosphere.

Central to life in Varanasi is the Ganga, the sacred river that flows through the city. Ede dedicates an entire chapter to the river, underscoring its importance not only as a geographical feature but also as a revered spiritual entity. He delves into the myths, legends, and beliefs surrounding the Ganga, exploring how she is considered a celestial goddess in Hindu thought. He writes, “Ganga is the feminine essence, a celestial river so powerful that, save for Shiva’s bending to withstand the impact—thus tempering the flow with his matted hair—the entire universe would have been destroyed” (KC: 98-99). This explanation helps Western readers understand the concept of the Ganga as more than just a river but as a divine, almost mythic presence in the lives of millions. Ede also examines the practical issues surrounding the river, particularly pollution, which poses a significant challenge to its sanctity.

In his interactions with the locals, especially the boatmen, Ede captures the deep reverence that Varanasi’s residents have for the Ganga. One boatman, Kashi, shares his personal belief:

She takes on all the sins of the world for us. But as a river, she is carrying away bodies and dirt, and providing us food. As a goddess my father told me that even one glance at her waters is enough to clear thousands of negative karmic actions (KC: 101).

This description highlights the Ganga’s dual role as both a literal river and a sacred deity, offering readers an insight into the spiritual devotion that Varanasi’s residents have for her. Through these accounts, Ede aids readers in understanding why the Ganga is not only a river in the conventional sense but a living goddess central to the religious and cultural fabric of Varanasi.

In his travelogue, Ede expresses deep concern for the health of the Ganga, emphasizing its significance as a vital source of life for India. He strives to raise awareness about the pollution affecting the river and highlights efforts to combat this environmental crisis. Among these efforts, he discusses government programs like the Ganga Action Plan (GAP) and the work of non-governmental organizations such as the Sankat Mochan Foundation. Ede also praises Prof. Veer Bhadra Mishra, known as the ‘Ganga man,’ for his tireless efforts to preserve the river. Ede’s interactions with Mishra offer readers a glimpse of the passion and determination driving

these initiatives. The grief of the Mallah community, made up of boatmen and fishermen who depend on the Ganga for their livelihood, is also conveyed, showing the deep connection between the river and its people.

Cheryll Glotfelty, a foundational figure in ecocriticism, in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, asserts that literary studies must address the relationship between literature and the environment, exploring how nature is represented and the consequences of human interactions with it (1996: xxvi–xxxvii). Ede's portrayal of the polluted Ganga aligns with Glotfelty's concerns, as he writes, "The Ganga takes on all the sins of the world for us... but as a river, she is carrying away bodies and dirt, and providing us food" (KC: 101). Similarly, Vandana Shiva (2002), in *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit*, critiques the commodification and destruction of natural resources, emphasizing the cultural and ecological significance of rivers in India. Ede echoes Shiva's concerns, highlighting the Ganga as both a lifeline for local communities and a victim of unchecked industrial and ritual pollution. His depiction of Varanasi also draws attention to the spiritual reverence and ecological neglect of the river, creating a layered narrative that reflects the duality of environmental and cultural preservation in modern India. Patrick French (2011), in *India: A Portrait*, leans heavily on India's political and historical transformations, providing a macro perspective that contrasts with Ede's microcosmic focus on Varanasi's local life and ecological issues.

Ede further captures the essence of Varanasi by exploring the city's famed weaving industry, particularly the Banarasi Sari. The iconic garment has made Varanasi a hub of India's weaving culture. Ede reflects on the cultural significance of the Banarasi Sari, noting that "Benaras is the place where this garment has achieved its highest expression," with brides from all over India traveling here to select their bridal trousseau (KC: 130). The weaving industry in Varanasi is not only an economic activity but also a symbol of the city's rich cultural heritage. Ede emphasises the importance of preserving this tradition, which faces challenges in the modern era.

Music also plays a central role in Varanasi's cultural landscape, and Ede gives it special attention in his travelogue. He describes how the city is alive with the sounds of soul-stirring hymns, mantras, and *aartis* performed on the *ghats*, as well as the enchanting music played by

local musicians. Ede's portrayal of Varanasi's music echoes the sentiments of Simar Preet Kaur, who writes, "Classical music echoes everywhere. It reminds me of a city's heritage that goes far back in time, a living impression of its ancientness" (Kaur, 2015). Ede devotes an entire chapter to the city's music, describing how its rhythms and melodies embody the spirit of Varanasi. He writes, "Everywhere, the echoes of the traditions perpetuating themselves told me that, despite a rapidly changing India, the heart of Varanasi remained alive and well" (KC: 172). His depiction of Varanasi's musical heritage further enriches the reader's understanding of the city, presenting it as a place where tradition and modernity coexist in harmony.

Through his detailed exploration of various aspects of Varanasi, Ede provides a multifaceted view of the city—its beauty, its struggles, and its vibrant cultural life. His travelogue offers not just a personal journey through Varanasi but also a call to action for the preservation of its cultural and environmental heritage. Ede's travelogue provides a nuanced and in-depth portrayal of Varanasi, capturing its essence in all its complexity. By referring to the city as a "kaleidoscope," Ede emphasises its ever-changing and multifaceted nature, suggesting that Varanasi is a place where different aspects of life, history, and spirituality constantly shift and interlace. Ede seeks to 'freeze-frame' this dynamic, offering readers a glimpse of a city on the brink of transformation due to modern influences. He acknowledges the city's deep historical and cultural roots while also grappling with the forces of modernization that threaten to alter its character.

Ede's travelogue serves as a reflection of his fascination with Varanasi, contrasting it with cities like Bombay, which draw people seeking new opportunities and material wealth. In contrast, Varanasi attracts those searching for salvation, where the pursuit of materialism takes a backseat to spiritual fulfilment. Through his vivid depiction, Ede draws attention to the city's conservative nature, highlighting its attachment to the past, which stands in stark contrast to the forward-looking ethos of other major Indian cities. This duality creates a compelling portrait of Varanasi as a city deeply entrenched in tradition yet faced with the challenges of modernization.

In conclusion, the exploration of India through Western travel writers, as exemplified by Piers Moore Ede's (2015) travelogue *Kaleidoscope City: A Year in Varanasi*, unveils a nuanced and multifaceted perspective. The essay highlights the evolving nature of travel literature, moving beyond colonial and orientalist approaches to embrace a cosmopolitan worldview. Ede, along

with other contemporary travel writers, endeavours to present a more empathetic and comprehensive portrayal of India, acknowledging its rich history, diverse culture, and complex societal issues. The travelogue serves as a bridge between cultures, providing readers with a deep and intimate understanding of Varanasi's spiritual essence, cultural traditions, and societal challenges. Ede's immersive approach, characterised by his 'travel-in-dwelling' technique, allows him to delve into the intricacies of the city, unravelling its layers with sensitivity and curiosity. From the spiritual significance of the Ganga to the vibrant tapestry of Varanasi's culinary delights, Ede captures the city's essence in all its hues. Moreover, Ede's exploration of Varanasi extends beyond the enchanting aspects, addressing the darker realities such as sex trafficking and the plight of widows. This holistic approach, presenting both the luminous and shadowed facets of the city, reflects the author's commitment to an authentic and unbiased depiction. Through his travelogue, Ede invites readers to not only witness Varanasi but to live and breathe its history, culture, and everyday life.

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