

Kashi Diary

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1. I was invited by [Dr. Subhash Chandra Lakhotia](#), the Banaras Hindu University (BHU) Distinguished Professor (Life-long) and SERB Distinguished Fellow to deliver two public lectures in BHU. Both the lectures entitled; **[“Romance of Innovation-R&D for forgotten Indians”](#)** and **[“Ethics of Work or how to be a good citizen”](#)**, were well-received.
2. BHU [Vice Chancellor Dr. Rakesh Bhatnagar](#) was gracious enough to attend one of the lectures.
3. This visit to BHU gave us (my wife Nandini accompanied me) an opportunity to visit the ancient city of Kashi (Varanasi). This was our first visit to the city. Varanasi weather was hot and humid and with tremendous air and noise pollution it was miserable to walk on the roads. Thus it was really sad to visit this ancient city which is dirty, noisy, very polluted air-wise and just too crowded with traffic to move in any direction comfortably.
4. The road in front of main BHU gate is quite broad, but extremely crowded with chaotic traffic and thus to travel 2-3 kms takes about 45 mins. to 1 hour.
5. The internal roads in old part of town are really horrible. There are huge potholes and in quite a few places there is no road, just some rubble and dirt. Going over these roads at fast speed (the taxi and auto rickshaw driver's drive as there is no tomorrow) I felt that my back will give way any time.

Only the road from airport to the city is decent. If the city has to be improved its roads have to become much better.

6. There are hardly any city buses that we saw on the roads. The main public transport is by auto-rickshaws, e-rickshaws and cycle rickshaws. Auto rickshaws have no meters so one has to haggle about the fare. For a big city like Varanasi there is a need for metered auto-rickshaws.
7. The [BHU campus](#) is huge with beautiful old architected buildings, lawns and a lot of trees and playgrounds, but the internal roads were crowded with 2-and 4-wheelers, cycles, rickshaws, etc. Thus it was not a pleasant experience to walk on these roads even at 6:30 a.m. in the morning because of traffic and noise pollution due to honking by two and four wheelers. Nevertheless this visit gave us an occasion to see the inspiration of [Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya ji](#). How with meager resources he built in 1916 a world class residential university which had all the departments in the same campus. This vision copied later by IITs was so far ahead of its time.
8. Kashi is a foodie delight. Thanks to Mrs. Sarita Lakhotia (wife of Dr. Subhash Lakhotia) we ate the famous breakfast of kachouri and jalebis and later on drank the famous Varanasi Lassi. Kashi is also famous for its sweets and chats. Mrs. Lakhotia was gracious enough to also take us on a walking tour of some of the small alleys (galis) of the old city. The alleys were relatively clean but very claustrophobic.
9. Visit to Varanasi is not complete without visiting the famous [Kashi Vishwanath temple](#) and the evening aarti at Ganga Ghats.
10. We were lucky to easily have darshan of Bholenath at 8 a.m. There was not too much of a rush at this time and so were able to reach the temple

easily. The temple premises were clean and keeping the valuables (no cell phones are allowed) and shoes was done in an orderly manner.

11. All around the Kashi Vishwanath temple we saw houses being razed to clean the surroundings of the temple. The demolishing of houses was done in a haphazard manner with some roof beams hanging dangerously very close to the road. They could fall anytime and even kill the pedestrians.
12. We attended the Ganga aarti at Assi Ghat. It was very crowded and noisy due to the Dolby sound systems. The aarti itself was not that great and performed with poor choreography by amateur pujaries. Besides sitting outside in the stifling humid heat of early September together with the pollution from the oil burners of aarti lamp was not a very pleasant experience.
13. First day in the morning we visited [Sarnath](#) where Gautam Buddha gave his first sermon to his five former companions. The place is quite serene with beautifully maintained lawns. The visit to the Sarnath Archeological Museum was an eye opener with artifacts displayed from the 3 century BCE to the 12th Century AD. It was especially interesting to see the famous Ashoka Lion Capital which is the national emblem of India.
14. We also visited the famous [Bharat Kala Bhavan](#) museum on BHU Campus. Dr. Subhash Lakohtia together with assistant curator of the museum Ms. Chandra gave us a grand tour of the art and archeological museum. It has very old artefacts going back to almost 2-3 century BCE and has one of the finest collections of miniature Mughal paintings besides others. The only jarring note was the poor air circulation in the museum. With tremendous perspiration flowing down our backs because of hot and humid Varanasi climate it was difficult to focus on seeing the precious

collection. We discussed this issue with the curator of the museum in his air conditioned office!

15. We visited [Dr. Lakhotia's](#) lab which was like a maze akin to alleys of Varanasi. His first-class labs with large contingent of faculty and students have grown organically and are an example of maximum utilization of limited space. It is remarkable that in an atmosphere like that in BHU he does world-class research on *Drosophila*.
16. We were put up in the Laxman Das Guest house in a new wing which was built just 4 years' ago. The upkeep and maintenance of the guest house leaves much to be desired. The leaking A.C., non-working geyser, and erratic cleaning of the rooms takes away the pleasure of staying in an otherwise excellent guest house.
17. Being an ancient city, Varanasi is dotted with old buildings with beautiful facades and architecture. It is a sign of times that they are being pulled down and in their place ugly malls, commercial complexes and fast food restaurants are coming up. It will be nice if Government of India can provide soft loans to people who own these ancient buildings to maintain them. This will help retain the charm and beauty of old Varanasi.
18. Varanasi is the city where the 15th century great Indian Yogi and poet Kabir was born and lived. We went searching for his birth place and his museum. After great difficulty (going through narrow sewage-filled alleys) we found his birth place which was abandoned and unkempt. Nearby there is a so-called museum of Kabir, but it was closed and under repairs. It is really a shame that one of the great saints of India has hardly any place in the present city of Varanasi.

Photos



Nandini, Sarita and Subhash Lakhota



AKR and Nandini in Sarnath



Sant Kabir's birth place (poorly kept)



Sarita ji and Nandini in front of
kachauri/jalebi breakfast place



Nandini and Sarita ji at Ganga aarti

Ganga Aarti at Assi Ghat



