



# Manu Parekh

## Banaras

**Eternity Watches Time**

Mapin Publishing

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Banaras Sunset, triptych, acrylic on canvas, 204 x 45", 2006

## A Sanctum of the Human Spirit Aditi De

Silence sears the scenic edges with light. The incandescence of souls soaring, dipping, fleeting towards a sanctuary. The unspoken cadences of a quest for questions. The footfalls of faith doing a *parikrama* (ritual circular walk around a shrine or a temple) of an ancient sanctum sanctorum. One couched as a city. A city named Banaras.

Amidst the ebb and flow of light and shadow is a surge of abstraction: of a clash between the spiritual and the material being—a meeting, a parting, then an unequivocal bonding; of rites by wafted waves of incense and *homa* (fire worship) rites; of ancient chants and contemporary negotiations, but above all, most dominantly, of total faith; of the interstices of birth, death and marriage on the ghats by the Ganga, an eternal flow since time immemorial; of flickering flames and blooms that echo through shrines, past temples and dwellings of celebrants and mourners alike, a context beyond the mere migratory gaze, the fleeting passer-through.

Shadows crisscross the still, silent reaches. Not through the dramatic jostle and surge of humanity to evoke ancestry, or float lamps on hallowed waters. Not even as a painted chant derived from time-honoured scriptures.

Instead, the arc of the sky on fire blesses the dusk-dusted waters. A bright hibiscus blossom floats out

of a smoke-lit shrine, evoking an invisible human presence—a priest, a mendicant, a seeker. Black plastered on black offers transient glimpses of worship, a quiet interlude between passionate engagements with life, with ritual, with religion. A blanking out of colour, yet a setting free of hues unnamed, untrammelled, so far uncreated.

The passion exults in a tumult of acrylic and oils, singeing the canvas. Domed temples loom against skeletal branches, almost like shadow warriors, perhaps defenders of the faith. *Rangoli* (decorative patterning made with coloured powders to signify auspiciousness) riddles fuse the past and present into a melded, yet fluid, future. Celebration jousts with mourning in its winding streets, its open courtyards, its eternal river, through mindspaces that parallel the journey of life.

On the canvas lie mere hints. Of journeys without route maps. Or puzzles sans solutions. Or even landscapes untraceable by a normal intelligence.

What is this mythic landscape? Peopled by Shaivite shades, by the eternal union of Varuna and Assi, a fusion beyond mere tributaries or a divine conclave. Or even a vision beyond the 108 avatars. Reincarnated, rising from the ashes of each creation, infinitely potent, indestructible beyond imagining. And deeply imbued with the power to wash away all earthly sins.



Mapin Pu

Awash in brush strokes propelled by emotion, orgasmic colour frets, fumes, fusses and pauses for no man. It synthesizes dawn and dusk in a timeless city. It harnesses the mutual ecstasy of darkness and light. It mutes, suggests, then shrouds over, the potency of a higher power.

Can a city ever embody all the thoughts of its denizens since the moment it rose from the dust? Why should religion be stifled by a name, a face, a local habitation? What dreams, what prayers, what progressive thoughts direct its longevity, its teeming paean to a world beyond the merely mortal?

Is Banaras, then, a search for a resting space for ancestral spirits? A destination between the now and the thereafter? An elusive eternal search without an anchor, or even a horizon?

Images, ideas, idylls breeze down the sacred river, perhaps to the tune of Vyasa's hymns or Kabir's *dohas* (couplets in verse) that evoke bliss amidst the tumult of life. Or the haunting notes of Ustad Bismillah Khan's *shehnai* (wind instrument) or N Rajam's violin. Pausing to glance at the *jamdani* (fine muslin) saris, lustrous silks threaded through with intricate gold. Stopping by at each shrine that throbs with wishes, prayers, even gratitude for an ancestral soul set free. Or stepping over the threshold of the Kasi Viswanath Temple, with a prayer on the lips, faith pulsing through every cell.

Faceless, without figures, the city teems with spirit, with time-stilled voices. With pleas that defy age. With an overvaulting prayer. With *diyas* (lamps) that bob, skip and ride the riverine eddies to their ultimate end,



uncharted yet. With ashes and newborn cries, marriage rites and *sraddh* (memorial) ceremonies, celebrating the incessant cycle of birth and death. En route to *moksha* (liberation) from the ever after. Sin-free after a holy dip.

Banaras is where whatever is sacrificed, chanted, donated as charity or suffered in penance makes its mark, whether as *rangolis* on the streets or as a contemporary canvas. Legends and lore surge over the waters. Carrying along the memory of 3000 years of human habitation. Of the *jnana vapi* (the well of wisdom) said to have been dug by Lord Shiva—its waters tinted by liquid *jhana* (the light of wisdom).

Can anyone evoke the 3300 million shrines that dot the cityscape? Or the half a million images of deities? Can this giant cremation ground, this *mahashamshana*, free