



Life in a City of Temples: An Anthropological Study among the Milkmen and Sweet makers of Banaras.

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Abstract: *This paper presents an anthropological study of Banaras, also known as Varanasi, through an ethnographic examination of two traditional occupational communities: the milkmen and sweet makers. These groups, integral to the religious, cultural, and economic life of Banaras, contribute to the city's identity. The study explores the socio-economic roles of milkmen and sweet makers in the context of Banaras's religious festivals and daily life, where milk and sweets are central to temple rituals, offerings, and hospitality. Using ethnographic methods, including participant observation and interviews conducted in Banaras from 2022-23, the paper sheds light on the communities' cultural heritage, occupational hierarchies, and economic impact. The study outlines the economic structure within these groups, which indicates that both carry their local traditions, but the sweet makers tend to be at a higher social and economic level owing to their artisanal skills and businesses. Further, it discusses the problems faced by them.*

The paper also discusses challenges faced by these communities. Despite these challenges, the milk and sweet industry remains central to Banaras's economy and tourism, maintaining its reputation for cultural and culinary richness. This study aims to contribute to the understanding of how traditional occupations adapt and persist within the evolving socio-economic and cultural fabric of a modern yet deeply traditional Indian city.

Key Words: *Anthropological, Banaras, Milkman, Sweet makers, Social Structure, Cultural importance.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Generally, anthropology is the holistic study of humans, focusing on the cultural, social, biological, and linguistic diversity that shapes human life. Basically, it encompasses every aspect of a human's life. Socio-economic and socio-cultural surveys are also part of anthropological studies and mainly focus on understanding the financial and occupational dynamics, livelihood patterns, beliefs, customs and traditions, values, practices, social hierarchies, kinship, religion, etc. These surveys aim to understand how culture impacts the social organisation and personal identity of the community. India is a diverse country with an intermingled cultural population. From north to south and east to west, people have been holding different identities both socially-culturally and economically as well. Since ancient times, it has been attracting tourists from all over the world. Every place in India has its own unique characteristics; thus, at present, it is the most efficient place for different cultural studies.

Banaras, or Varanasi, is described as the spiritual capital of India. Known for its temples and its connection to Hindu spirituality, Banaras attracts both pilgrims and tourists. Being the spiritual capital of India, it attracts millions of people for its mesmerised Ghats as well as temples and the river Ganga. The city on the banks of the Ganga River is not only a religious hub but also a cultural and economic hub for a few small groups. The indispensable ingredient of these offerings and rituals in temples, as well as in the unique cultural heritage of Banaras, is milk and sweets. Thereby, they, as occupational communities of diverse occupational jobs, occupy a niche position in the city's occupational communities, whose services are fundamental to their daily lives and religious practices. This paper is an effort at providing an ethnographic account of the milkmen and sweet makers, or *doodhwala* and *halwais*, of Banaras in relation to their livelihood and socio-cultural life.



2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

A vast literature about Banaras was carried out by many scholars from diverse academic backgrounds, which extends from the socio-economic life of its people to the religious and cultural core of Banaras. In "Culture and Society in India" (1953), N. K. Bose was an Indian anthropologist who dealt with the social life of Banaras, especially caste and kinship as well as ritual practice. His work narrates how the city has turned out to be a mini-world of Indian society as well as the complex interaction between castes, religious practices, and communities. "Ganga: A Study in the Political Economy of Banaras" by Alan R. Beals in 1990 has given importance to Banaras's political and economic factors. He takes under consideration, through his anthropological study, the role of the Ganga River as a religious icon but also as a resource that moulds the economy and politics of the city. Beals investigates how the water of the Ganges stands at the centre of both the ritual purity of the pilgrims and the livelihoods of the boatmen, washermen, and other classes that depend on the river. "Banaras and the River: Sacred and Economic Spaces" (2010) research by Michael Dumont gives a contemporary anthropological viewpoint and explores Banaras' shaping within the changing socio-economic landscape. The same has been reflected in the on-going struggle between maintaining the religious sanctity of the Banaras city and modern challenges of pollution, commercialisation, and tourism. Dumont investigated the relation between the sacred spaces of Banaras, especially the Ganges River. Apart from these, numerous works have been done on Banaras and its culture. The present paper thus intends to explore the socio-economic life of the milkmen and sweet makers of Banaras.

3. OBJECTIVES:

The primary objectives of the present paper are as follows:

1. To explore the role of milkmen and sweet makers in religious festivals and rituals.
2. To study the social structure of these communities.
3. To study their economic position and economic impact in Banaras.
4. To understand the problems faced by these communities.

4. METHODOLOGY:

To understand the social structure and socio-cultural life of the milkmen and sweet makers of Banaras, ethnographic fieldwork has been carried out in Banaras during the period of 2022-23 for over one month. Data were gathered through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and informal conversations with milkmen, sweet makers, and customers. A purposive sampling method has been applied to select the respondents for the information.

5. STUDY AREA:

As it has mentioned above, this paper investigates the milkmen and sweet makers of Varanasi district, which was previously known as Banaras, Benaras, or Kashi. Banaras is recognised as the oldest living city in the world, located on the left bank of the Ganga River, between the confluences of the Ganga, Varuna, and Assi rivers, in the easternmost part of the state of Uttar Pradesh. It is one of the major pilgrimage destinations of northern India, which is said to have been founded by Hindu deity Lord Shiva around 5000 years ago. Various mythological stories are associated with Banaras, which is said to be blessed by Lord Shiva. Being a holy city of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, it's considered an important centre for learning, culture, and art. Banaras is known for its silk fabrics, perfumes or *attars*, and different handcrafted works and sculptures. It is the home of Ayurveda, which is the basis of modern medical sciences. Moreover, many notable people, saints like Tulsi Das, Prem Chand, and Bismillah Khan, are from Banaras. The fertile tracts of the river Ganga, along with the existence of religious glory, attract migrants from ancient times. Due to which, today, it has become one of the most populous places in the world.

This paper has tried to analyse the thoughts, knowledge, and importance of milkmen and sweet makers from Banaras. Selected places for the interview of respondents are Pandeypur, Nasirpur Rd., Lanka, and Assi Ghat. The small sweet shops in every corner of Banaras are not merely commercial spaces; they also serve as social hubs where people gather, socialise, and discuss local news and culture.

6. DISCUSSION :

6.1. *The role of milkmen and sweet makers in Indian culture*

Banaras is the rich, vibrant spiritual and cultural heritage of India. Peppering the city are numerous temples in a long list of gods and goddesses. Religious economy becomes part of life here with temple rituals, festivals, and pilgrimages creating demand for things like milk, sweets, and other offerings. This accords a special position to the milkmen and sweet makers, who have acted as the ancient supply chain for temple worship, passing through generations.

Undeniably, milk, considered equivalent to purity, is an indispensable element in various Hindu ceremonies and rituals and plays a crucial role in religious offerings and ceremonies in the temples as well as in the daily consumption patterns of the people. Milkmen supply the raw dairy products essential for these rituals, while sweet makers create delicacies of different varieties. Ranging from Abhishekam-ritual (bathing of deities) to Prasad-sacred offerings, the role of milk runs very deep. The *doodhwala*, or milkman, who provide fresh milk in earthen or metallic containers that are centuries old, are a vital part of the religious life in Banaras. Banaras is known for its devotion to Lord Shiva, and milk and sweets are key offerings in temples. In Indian culture, most of the sweets are prepared from milk, like *rasgulla*, *kalakand*, *rasmalai*, *peda*, *kheer*, *rabdi*, *lassi*, *thandai*, etc.



Figure 6.1 *Traditional Sweets prepared from milk.*

Moreover, *malaiyo*, a special delicacy of Banaras that is also known as *malai Makhan*, or *Daulat ki Chaat* in other parts of India, is made from milk cream during the winters, from November to February. People visit Banaras to try this local delicacy. Sweets are an indispensable part of Indian festivals as well. In Banaras during Holi, Diwali, Ram Navami, Navratri, and Dev Deepawali, the demands for sweets have increased at peak level, as well as during marriages and other celebrations. *Jalebi* is also served for breakfast with *kachori-sabji* on a daily basis. India has most of the world's vegetarian population, where dairy items fulfil their daily sources of protein. Offering sweets is a common practice in Banaras as a gesture of hospitality and social gathering, indirectly contributing to social rituals and customs of welcoming guests, celebrating life events, and building community ties. In this context, the milkmen and sweet makers are the ones who play significant roles within both the cultural and socio-economic fabric of the city, largely shaped by the traditional food culture, religious practices, and social economy.

6.2. *The social structure of milkmen and sweet makers*

Banaras is renowned for its rich culinary heritage, with sweets and dairy products being integral to festivals, rituals, and daily life. The milkmen and sweet makers uphold traditional methods of milk collection, processing, and sweet making that date back generations, thus preserving the city's culinary identity. Traditionally, many milkmen belong to specific castes like the *Ahir* or *Yadav*, known historically for their association with dairy farming and livestock rearing. They can be called the descendants of Lord Krishna. The *Yadavs* are a significant community in the dairy sector in Banaras



and often form a strong network based on shared lineage and social bonds. Their daily work is to rear cattle and collect milk from them; they supply milk directly to households or to the sweet shops due to the excessive demands for fresh milk.

Typically, sweet makers are the people who belong to the Vaishya community by birth and are associated with trade and business. This particular profession of being a halwai comes in the realm of confectionery, and traditionally, most such trades have this profession passed down generations to the next in a very strong tradition involving sweets making and recipes. They are an important part of the culture of Banaras, producing sweets for daily consumption, festivals, and religious practices. They heavily rely on milk from the local dairy community. Their works are highly skilled and have immense knowledge and skills of sweet making.

Despite being India's highest milk-producing state (Uttar Pradesh), milkmen occupy a middle-to-lower-middle social status in Banaras. Though some have achieved good status, especially those who have expanded their business or network of distribution. Although the *Yadavs* typically have a strong political identity in northern India, including Banaras. While sweet makers hold a higher social status within the *Vaishya* community. Their reputation is based on the quality and authenticity of their products. The reputed shops become an integral part of the city.

6.3. The economic positions and economic impact of milkmen and sweet makers

Traditionally, milkmen in Banaras have been suppliers of fresh milk from local dairies to rural suppliers. They often serve fixed households and sweet shops with daily milk needs. Their income varies depending on the weather, their owning of cattle, as well as their scale of operation. Generally, milkmen without their own dairy setups make modest incomes, with incomes higher for those who own cattle. On the other hand, sweet makers have a slightly higher economic position, especially those who have well-established shops. During festivals, different sweets allow some sweet makers to earn a steady income. Shops with their own unique recipes and high-quality ingredients make good gestures, making them economically better positioned than individual milkmen.

It can be seen that the dairy and sweet industry in Banaras is a significant source of income for many families. Milkmen contribute to the supply chain by collecting and selling fresh milk, which directly impacts the local economy, whereas sweet makers create products that generate local employment for cooks, helpers, and delivery persons. Banaras attracts a steady stream of population or tourists, and the cuisine also plays a significant role. Popular sweets like *lassi*, *rabdi*, *jalebi*, *thandai*, and *malaiyo* are in demand, and sweet shops play a role in the local tourism economy, enhancing the appeal of the city's food culture.

7. CHALLENGES:

- The weather, especially during hot summer days, they face challenges to deliver their items because, due to heat, the dairy items get spoilt early as compared to winter days.
- Due to rising inflation, the milkmen face challenges in the maintenance of livestock care, while the sweet makers face increased costs for ingredients like milk, sugar, ghee, and other items.
- The introduction of packaged milk and branded sweets poses problems for milkmen and sweet makers.
- Now-a-days, people become more health conscious and avoid eating high-fat foods, which indirectly impacts the milk and sweet industry.

8. CONCLUSION:

This study highlights the critical role that milkmen and sweet makers play in the socio-cultural and economic life of Banaras. These communities are not only the symbol of culinary traditions but are deeply embedded within the city's spiritual, social, and economic landscape. Their services are indispensable for religious rituals, festivals, and daily consumption patterns, making them essential to both local life and the city's appeal as a cultural and religious hub. Milkmen, predominantly from the Ahir or Yadav community, continue to supply fresh milk for households and temples, adhering to traditions passed down through generations. Meanwhile, sweet makers from the Halwai community contribute significantly to the culinary identity of Banaras, creating iconic sweets that are deeply associated with the city's heritage and celebrations. Their work supports a complex social economy that interweaves caste, occupational



identity, and artisanal skills, with certain groups achieving respect and economic stability based on their skills and the quality of their products. Moreover, there are numerous challenges that are faced by such communities, including inflation, a high cost for keeping livestock, and competition with packaged dairy and branded sweets. Also, seasonal climatic conditions as well as an increase in health consciousness by consumers are making their livelihood very complex. Still, both the milk and sweet sectors do not let their businesses be affected too much because these are used in cultural contexts as well, and tourism, along with local customs, generates demand that is pretty consistent.

The milkmen and sweet makers of Banaras are not just providers of food; they serve as cultural bearers whose work reflects the city's resilience and adaptability. Their contributions go beyond commerce, shaping the social fabric and religious experiences of Banaras. Thus, any policies aimed at urban development and tourism should consider these communities, ensuring their sustainability and recognition in the cultural economy of Banaras. This study underscores the need for further research and support for these occupational groups, whose contributions are integral to maintaining Banaras's unique identity.

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