
A Study of Kashi's Ganga Arti as a Cultural Phenomenon

Shubham KumarResearch Assistant, Department of English, DAV PG College, Banaras Hindu University,
Varanasi, India, PIN- 221001

Article Received: 12/03/2025**Article Accepted:** 12/04/2025**Published Online:** 14/04/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.04.421

Abstract:

The paper dwells on the study of Kashi's Ganga Arti as a Cultural Phenomenon. The paper studies this folk practice as a bandwagon effect. The paper studies the origin of Ganga arti and its rise and practice as folk culture. Ganga arti has become a very common religious and community practice. The ritual is performed on the ghats of the Ganges. The practice had evolved from a devotional practice into a cultural phenomenon that comprises of complex layers of cultural identity, spirituality, and religion. Ganga arti is attended by several groups of people and although being a Hindu cultural practice has transcended to become a part of the experience of several religious and cultural groups. The arti often comprises thousands of people taking part in it on a daily basis. Ganga arti has come to define Benaras and it has become a great tourist attraction. The paper studies the intricacies and morphologies of the ganga arti and tries to understand the role of its structure in making it a cultural phenomenon. The paper employs the theories of Durkheim, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall to understand Ganga arti as a folk practice becoming a cultural phenomenon.

Keywords: Ganga Arti; Cultural Phenomenon; Kashi; Folk**Introduction**

The city of Kashi (Varanasi), often hailed as the spiritual heart of India, stands as a place where tradition, devotion, and culture converge. Central to Kashi's identity is the Ganga Arti, a daily ritual conducted on the ghats of the sacred river Ganga. Initially intended as a simple act of devotion, the Ganga Arti has evolved over time into a multifaceted cultural phenomenon that draws participants and spectators from various parts of India and the world. The practice, which involves an intricate sequence of rituals—such as the lighting of lamps, synchronized chants, and elaborate ceremonial movements—reflects a deep-seated cultural identity that transcends its religious origins.

Ganga Arti's growth as a folk practice underscores the collective consciousness of the people of Kashi and exemplifies how a localized devotional activity can evolve into a broader cultural spectacle. Over time, this ritual has gained immense popularity, becoming not only a local event but also a tourist attraction and an experience that signifies Kashi's ethos on a global scale. As it has gained prominence, Ganga Arti has transcended its initial Hindu religious identity to become an inclusive cultural event that attracts diverse groups, from international visitors to local devotees.

This paper examines the transformation of Ganga Arti from a devotional practice to a cultural phenomenon, employing the sociological frameworks of Emile Durkheim, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall. Using Durkheim's theories on rituals and collective consciousness, Williams' concept of culture as ordinary, and Hall's insights into cultural identity and representation, this study seeks to understand the complexities of Ganga Arti's appeal and its role in shaping Kashi's cultural landscape. By analysing the structural components of the ritual and its widespread appeal, this paper aims to highlight how Ganga Arti has come to embody the cultural identity of Kashi, serving as both a sacred ritual and a communal experience that brings people together.

Review of Literature

Understanding Ganga Arti as a cultural phenomenon necessitates a theoretical exploration of rituals, cultural identity, and the dynamics of folk practices as they evolve within society. The theoretical frameworks of Emile Durkheim, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall provide valuable insights into the intersection of spirituality, culture, and identity that characterize this practice.

Emile Durkheim: Rituals and Social Cohesion

Emile Durkheim's foundational work on the sociology of religion and rituals emphasizes the role of rituals in fostering social cohesion and collective consciousness. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim posits that rituals serve as mechanisms for creating a sense of unity among participants, binding them to a shared set of beliefs and values. According to Durkheim, rituals are not merely symbolic acts; they function as practices that reinforce the social fabric and collective identity of communities. The Ganga Arti, with its elaborate structure and emphasis on communal participation, can be viewed through Durkheim's lens as a ritual that reinforces the cultural identity of Kashi's community. Its repeated enactment fosters a sense of belonging among participants and spectators alike, while simultaneously conveying the cultural and spiritual values that define Kashi.

Raymond Williams: Culture as Ordinary and Folk Practices

Raymond Williams, in his exploration of cultural studies, particularly emphasizes the concept of culture as "ordinary," encompassing the everyday lives, beliefs, and practices

of

people. His perspective on folk culture and its relationship with community identity is crucial for understanding Ganga Arti's evolution. In *Culture and Society*, Williams highlights how cultural practices, even those rooted in religious traditions, are shaped by the socio-political context of their time and can transform as they become integral to the identity of a community. Ganga Arti, once a localized ritual, has come to represent the "ordinary" cultural life of Kashi while simultaneously attracting a wider audience. The ritual exemplifies Williams's view of culture as an organic, dynamic entity that encompasses the beliefs and practices of people in their everyday lives.

Stuart Hall: Cultural Identity and Representation

Stuart Hall's contributions to cultural studies, particularly his insights into cultural identity and representation, offer a compelling framework for understanding Ganga Arti's transcendent appeal. In Hall's view, cultural identity is not fixed but is constructed through practices and representations that resonate with people's shared experiences and beliefs. Hall's work on the processes of cultural representation provides a lens to examine how Ganga Arti has been redefined as a symbol of Kashi's cultural identity, appealing to a diverse audience that includes tourists, local residents, and people of varying religious backgrounds. Ganga Arti, while rooted in Hindu devotional practices, has come to signify an inclusive cultural experience that appeals to a global audience, reflecting Hall's ideas on the fluidity of cultural identity.

Studies on Ganga Arti and Cultural Tourism

Scholars have observed that Ganga Arti functions not only as a religious ritual but also as a cultural event that promotes tourism and contributes to the global image of Kashi. Researchers like Rana P.B. Singh in *Banaras: The Heritage City of India* explore how Kashi's sacred practices have historically attracted pilgrims and tourists, establishing the city as a center of cultural tourism. Singh highlights the Ganga Arti as a contemporary ritual that embodies Kashi's cultural and spiritual allure, drawing thousands of visitors and fostering a sense of unity among diverse groups. Studies on religious tourism emphasize that Ganga Arti has become a shared cultural experience, transcending its origins to appeal to audiences worldwide.

In summary, the theories of Durkheim, Williams, and Hall provide a comprehensive framework for understanding Ganga Arti's transition from a religious ritual to a cultural phenomenon that represents Kashi's identity. By examining these theoretical perspectives alongside existing studies on Ganga Arti's impact, this paper seeks to shed light on the ways in which this ritual has evolved to become both a sacred practice and a cultural spectacle that fosters a sense of belonging across cultural and religious boundaries.

Analysis

1. Rituals and Social Cohesion in Ganga Arti

According to Emile Durkheim, rituals play a central role in fostering social cohesion and reinforcing collective consciousness within communities. Durkheim asserts that rituals go beyond mere religious functions; they serve to bind individuals to a collective identity, creating a shared sense of belonging. Ganga Arti, as practiced on the ghats of Kashi, exemplifies Durkheim's theory in several ways. In the Ganga Arti, a large gathering of people, including locals, pilgrims, and tourists, assemble along the ghats and participate in or observe a synchronized ritual. The uniform movements, the lighting of lamps, and the chanting create an atmosphere of shared experience, symbolizing Durkheim's idea of the "collective effervescence." This term refers to the heightened state of energy and unity felt when individuals engage in a communal ritual. Each participant's individual identity momentarily subsumes into the collective identity of the group, reinforcing the social fabric of the community.

Moreover, the Ganga Arti, through its repetitive and communal nature, strengthens the cultural and spiritual ties that bind the community of Kashi. It becomes a shared symbol that not only represents spiritual devotion but also reinforces social bonds among participants, who collectively affirm their place within the culture and heritage of Kashi. Durkheim's idea of the totemic function of symbols can also be applied here, as the Ganges River itself becomes a sacred symbol, central to the identity and belief system of those involved. Through daily practice, Ganga Arti embodies Durkheim's idea of how rituals can sustain a society's moral and cultural values, in this case, binding people to a shared reverence for the Ganges and the cultural heritage of Kashi. The Arti becomes a cultural symbol that represents the affirmation of community, which has bound the nation in one thread. The increment in tourism and the overflow of lakhs of tourists for the glimpse of arti and the synergy when the chanting takes place becomes the binding force between the general population. On the other hand, Le Bon distinguishes different types of crowds/communities, which possess varied number of characteristics, opinions, and beliefs. Ganga Arti also qualifies this definition of social cohesion. Durkheim claims that social cohesion is an absence of latent social conflicts based upon wealth, ethnicity, race, and gender and the presence of social bonds such as civic society, responsive democracy, and impartial law enforcement. The scene is termed as a spectacle, which is outside a theatrical space, and Crouch terms this as flirting with space. Also, in continuation, Crouch argues that in intersubjective practice, the crowd can be studied as a form of performance, and by extension, this collective ritual results in social cohesion.

2. Culture as Ordinary and Ganga Arti as Folk Practice

Raymond Williams' perspective on culture as "ordinary" allows us to understand how Ganga Arti operates as both a religious practice and a folk tradition deeply embedded in the daily life of Kashi's residents. For Williams, culture is not restricted to elite or high

art

forms but includes the everyday practices and beliefs of a community. Ganga Arti exemplifies this view, as it seamlessly integrates with the lives of Kashi's people, representing a form of cultural expression that resonates with both locals and visitors.

Williams argues that culture is dynamic, shaped by the socio-historical conditions in which it exists. Ganga Arti, originally a local and modest form of devotion, has transformed into a major cultural event that attracts people from diverse backgrounds. This evolution reflects Williams' concept that culture is not static but is continuously redefined through the interactions and practices of the community. The ritual has become "ordinary" to the extent that it is a part of the everyday identity of Kashi, yet it remains significant due to the symbolic meanings it conveys about the community's relationship with the sacred Ganges.

Furthermore, the Ganga Arti's transformation highlights Williams' idea of "cultural materialism," where cultural practices are not simply abstract values but are closely linked to material and historical contexts. The Arti has adapted to the changing social dynamics of Kashi, with increasing numbers of participants and growing media coverage, thus reinforcing its status as a cultural phenomenon. By embracing elements of local and global culture, Ganga Arti exemplifies Williams' idea that culture is both ordinary and evolving, representing the life and beliefs of Kashi's community while inviting others to engage with it.

3. Cultural Identity, Representation, and Inclusivity of Ganga Arti

Stuart Hall's theories on cultural identity and representation offer a framework for understanding how Ganga Arti transcends its initial religious boundaries to appeal to a broader audience. Hall contends that cultural identity is not fixed but is a construct shaped by various influences and representations. In the case of Ganga Arti, while its roots are firmly grounded in Hindu traditions, it has transformed into a symbol of Kashi's cultural identity that resonates with people of different religious and cultural backgrounds.

Ganga Arti's appeal to diverse groups exemplifies Hall's idea of "articulated" identity, where the practice itself remains rooted in tradition but becomes inclusive and representative of a broader community. For instance, tourists, regardless of their religious beliefs, are drawn to the Arti not only as an aesthetic experience but as an authentic encounter with Kashi's spirituality and culture. The ritual's visual and auditory elements—the rhythmic chanting, the sight of lit lamps on the river, and the communal atmosphere—serve as powerful symbols that transcend religious barriers and invite all to partake in a shared cultural experience. This inclusivity aligns with Hall's notion that cultural practices can serve as sites of identification and unity, even for those outside the original community.

Hall's theory of representation is also relevant here, as the Ganga Arti is presented in a way that appeals to the global audience. Media coverage, social media sharing, and tourism marketing have contributed to the ritual's construction as a cultural phenomenon that

is

both rooted in Kashi and accessible to the world. The ritual thus becomes a form of cultural expression that adapts and expands, embodying Hall's idea that cultural identity is not singular but layered, evolving through representation to accommodate diverse interpretations and experiences.

4. The Role of Structure and Symbolism in Ganga Arti as a Cultural Phenomenon

An important aspect of Ganga Arti's appeal lies in its structure and symbolism, which contribute to its allure as a cultural phenomenon. The ritual begins with priests invoking the river as a living goddess, lighting lamps, chanting hymns, and performing coordinated gestures. Each of these actions carries symbolic significance—the lamps symbolize the victory of light over darkness, the chants affirm devotion, and the structured movements represent unity and reverence. These symbolic elements resonate with participants on multiple levels, creating a layered experience that reinforces the cultural identity of Kashi.

The structured ritual, with its repetitive sequences and symbolic acts, enhances the communal atmosphere, encouraging collective participation and a sense of belonging. For Durkheim, such structured practices help sustain collective consciousness; for Williams, they represent the community's ordinary life transformed into symbolic action; and for Hall, they provide a site of shared cultural identity that extends beyond individual belief systems. Together, these elements illustrate how Ganga Arti functions not only as a religious ritual but as a cultural performance that speaks to the collective values and identity of the people of Kashi.

5. Tourism, Global Influence, and the Expansion of Cultural Identity

The influence of tourism and the global reach of Ganga Arti have amplified its role as a cultural phenomenon. As more people from around the world attend and witness the ritual, it increasingly becomes a site of cultural exchange, where people of different backgrounds converge to experience Kashi's spiritual and cultural heritage. Tourism has contributed to the ritual's growth and visibility, as many see it as an authentic representation of India's spiritual essence.

From Hall's perspective, this global expansion represents the fluidity and adaptability of cultural identity. Ganga Arti no longer serves only as a local practice; it has come to symbolize the broader cultural and spiritual values associated with India. As a result, the ritual functions as both a preservation of local heritage and an invitation to a global audience, reinforcing Kashi's identity while promoting cross-cultural engagement.

Conclusion

The study of Ganga Arti as a cultural phenomenon reveals the profound role that rituals play in shaping, reflecting, and evolving community identities. Once a simple devotional practice, Ganga Arti has transformed into a multifaceted cultural event that

attracts thousands of people daily, resonating far beyond its religious roots. This transformation illustrates how traditions can evolve to accommodate new social, cultural, and economic dynamics while still preserving their core values.

By employing Emile Durkheim's theory of social cohesion, we see how Ganga Arti functions as a powerful unifying force within the community. The ritual's structured practices—chanting, lighting lamps, synchronized gestures—generate a collective consciousness among participants and observers, creating a shared identity rooted in devotion and reverence for the Ganges. Durkheim's insights help us understand Ganga Arti not merely as a spiritual act but as a social institution that reinforces communal bonds and upholds cultural values.

Raymond Williams' perspective on culture as ordinary and dynamic further highlights Ganga Arti's transition from a localized ritual to a folk practice that represents the cultural identity of Kashi. By integrating into the everyday lives of Kashi's residents, Ganga Arti exemplifies Williams' notion of culture as an evolving entity that is inseparable from the lives and beliefs of the community. Ganga Arti has become a "living culture," a daily event that is woven into the identity of Kashi and its people, blending tradition with modernity as it draws in participants from around the world.

Stuart Hall's theories on cultural identity and representation underscore Ganga Arti's inclusive nature, showing how the ritual has transcended its Hindu origins to appeal to a diverse, global audience. Through media coverage and tourism, Ganga Arti has become a symbol of India's spiritual heritage and cultural vibrancy. Hall's concepts of fluid and constructed identities are reflected in the way Ganga Arti has adapted to global attention, becoming a site of cultural exchange where people of various backgrounds come together to witness a representation of Kashi's identity. This transformation suggests that cultural practices are not static; they evolve to reflect and incorporate changing identities, thus creating new layers of meaning that resonate across cultural boundaries.

In essence, Ganga Arti's journey from a religious ritual to a widely recognized cultural phenomenon underscores the transformative power of tradition and its ability to connect communities. The ritual serves as a bridge between the local and the global, the spiritual and the cultural, reflecting Kashi's ethos and India's heritage. Ganga Arti embodies a collective identity that binds participants through shared beliefs and values, while also inviting people from all over the world to engage with Kashi's rich spiritual and cultural landscape.

Through the lenses of Durkheim, Williams, and Hall, this study illuminates how Ganga Arti serves as a living testament to the adaptability of cultural practices. It reaffirms that cultural phenomena are not confined to rigid boundaries; rather, they are fluid expressions of identity that continue to evolve with time and context. As Ganga Arti

continues to inspire and attract people globally, it stands as a powerful example of how rituals can transcend their origins to become universally significant, symbolizing the cultural heartbeat of a community and, by extension, the heritage of a nation.

References:

- Crouch, David. "Flirting with space: thinking landscape relationally." *cultural geographies* 17.1 (2010): 5-18.
- Crouch, David. "The diverse dynamics of cultural studies and tourism." *The Sage handbook of tourism studies* (2009): 82-97.
- Durkheim, Emile. "The elementary forms of religious life." *Social theory re-wired*. Routledge, 2016. 52-67.
- Durkheim, Emile. *Readings from Emile Durkheim*. Psychology Press, 2004.
- Fonseca, Xavier, Stephan Lukosch, and Frances Brazier. "Social cohesion revisited: a new definition and how to characterize it." *Innovation: The European journal of social science research* 32.2 (2019): 231-253.
- Hall, Stuart. "The work of representation." *The applied theatre reader*. Routledge, 2020. 74-76.
- Hénaff, Marcel. *Claude Lévi-Strauss and the making of structural anthropology*. U of Minnesota Press, 1998.
- Holloway, Kerrie, and Caitlin Sturridge. "Understanding Social Cohesion." *Social Cohesion in Displacement: The State of Play*, ODI, 2022, pp. 9–16. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep51381.7>. Accessed 12 Apr. 2025.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology Zero*. John Wiley & Sons, 2021.
- Singh, Rana. *Banaras: Making of India's heritage city*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.
- Williams, Raymond. *Culture and society, 1780-1950*. Columbia University Press, 1983.
- Zara, Cristiana. "Rethinking the tourist gaze through the Hindu eyes: The Ganga Aarti celebration in Varanasi, India." *Tourist Studies* 15.1 (2015): 27-45.