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## **Kanwar Yatra as a Living Folk Practice of Varanasi: Shifting Paradigms**

**Dr. Mahima Singh**

*Asst. Professor, Dept. of English, DAV PG College, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India*

**Shreemukta Basnet**

*Research Assistant, Dept. of English, DAV PG College, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India*

**Shubham Kumar**

*Research Assistant, Dept. of English, DAV PG College, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India*

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores Kanwar Yatra and its recent emergence as a dynamic, living folk practice of Varanasi rooted in the city's sacred geography, as well as the current shifting paradigms of Kanwar Yatra in the city, newly shaped by performative devotion and introduction of technological interventions and collective memory, particularly of the youth participating in the pilgrimage. The paper employs an ethnographic research method utilizing extended field visits, informal interviews, testimonies from pilgrims as well as visual archiving. Locations have been selected based on the official government allotted Yatra routes for the pilgrims, as well as some popular spaces such as Kashi Vishwanath Temple, Dashashwamedh Ghat, Godowlia etc. which the kanwariyas frequently visit as a part of their pilgrimage.*

**Keywords:** Kanwar Yatra, Sawan Yatra, Folk, Varanasi, Kashi Vishwanath

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### **Introduction:**

Kanwar Yatra is an annual pilgrimage observed throughout the month of Shravan in the Hindu Calendar (July-August). The pilgrimage spans the states of Delhi, Bihar, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh, and attracts thousands of saffron-clad pilgrims known as *kanwariya* from multiple States, as well as Nepal. The journey takes them to pivotal locations on the banks of River Ganga, such as Haridwar, Gangotri, Gaumukh, Rishikesh, Sultanganj (Sati 125) etc., to fetch holy water from the river and pour it in temples of Lord Shiva.

The pilgrimage gets its name from the specific pole carried by the pilgrims, or *kanwariyas*, which have vessels hanging at the ends of the pole, carrying holy water from River Ganga. The whole structure is called Kanwar, and is decorated by the *kanwariyas* using trinkets and religious iconography such as Shiva's trident (*Trishul*), *lotas* made of Styrofoam (Fig. 2) etc.



Fig. 1- Kanwar decorated with religious iconography



Fig. 2 - Kanwar with styrofoam lotas meant to carry ganga jal

The pilgrimage gained massive popularity around the end of the 20th century, participation being only in thousands until the 1980s (Singh 25). Today, the Yatra amasses numbers in millions, with 38 million participants in 2022 (Rawat), and around 60 million expected in 2025 (Kumar). The pilgrimage has had its journey from an intimate practice done by older saints and devotees of Lord Shiva as a means to pay their respect to Shiv as well as the holy river Ganga, to a statement for the rising sentiments of Hindu Nationalism in the 1990s (Yashee), to the current state where major security and infrastructural measures at a National level is taken by the GOI to accommodate millions of devotees, ranging from children to the elderly, all walking barefoot in a sea of saffron to offer holy water to various Shiva Temples across the Delhi-Haridwar landscape.

One such stop made by these *kanwariyas* is Lord Shiva's own abode, Varanasi. While not a part of the original route followed back in the 80s and 90s, Varanasi has seen a new found rise in the popularity within the route of the *Kanwar Yatra*. The Kashi Vishwanath Temple becomes a pivotal location within this yatra, where millions of devotees can be seen walking the path from the Ghats to gather Ganga *jal* to the Temple for offerings.



Fig.3. Kashi Vishwanath Temple decorated ahead of Sawaan Month for Kanwar Yatra

### **Kanwar as Living Folk Practice of Varanasi:**

AK Ramanujan assigned a living and dynamic quality to Indian folk and folklore, a tradition centered around and through people. According to him, folk existed where people did, and all folk traditions maintained and engaged “in continuous and dynamic dialogic relations” (Ramanujan 96) as a shared practice whether between communities or individuals. Kanwar Yatra can also be categorized as a shared cultural performance, and what Ramanujan envisioned as “texts” in Indian folk. Alan Dundes shared the same concept of folk as an ongoing process, instead of a static residue of the past (2). Kanwar Yatra, similarly, embodies the concept of folk as dynamic, living and ongoing, with its roots in past brought forth by *kanwariyas* who maintained the devotional and ritualistic traditions merging them with modernity, creating a shared cultural experience that has only flourished through the years. The *kanwariyas* travel through multiple cities, and each region produces its own ritualistic and narrative inflections which is further absorbed in the pluralistic and adaptive space of Kanwar Yatra, creating what Ramanujan refers to as a fluid, dialogic negotiation. When observed through both the lenses of Western as well as Indian folk theoretical concepts, Kanwar Yatra resists the archaic idea of folk as a static and preserved entity, but rather a dynamic process that continually renews the social fabric of the individuals who perform the Yatra, as well as the communities of the cities that hosts these *kanwariyas* throughout the month of Saawan.

### **Ethnography:**

Kanwar Yatra assumes within Hindu traditions a folk character, wherein despite its current state as a nationally observed religious event, it emerges as a shared communal performance, marked with core features of folk practices such as songs, bodily movement, seasonal temporality and spatial ritualisation. Religious performativity becomes a major part of *Kanwar Yatra*, as millions of pilgrims walk barefoot chanting, singing, dressing in specific colours and fasting, all bodily performances of faith enacted collectively. The *kanwariyas* can be seen performing these acts while travelling, and some even while resting, where, as part of the field exploration, some pilgrims in the shelter tents were observed holding their ears and doing a sit up motion. When asked, the pilgrims described it as *prayaschitta*, asking *Bhole* (meaning the ‘innocent one,’ attributed to Lord Shiva) to forgive any shortcomings in the pilgrimage, as well as asking for his blessing. The physical exertion acts as both a step to atonement and penance for the pilgrims, a renouncement of their bodies and fate into the hands of Lord Shiva.

The pilgrims mostly travel in groups, more often than not barefoot or in some cases with a cloth wrapped around the feet to protect the soles from extensive damage and carrying a *kanwar* on their shoulders, covering the entire journey completely on foot. Traditionally, *kanwariyas* are meant to utilise little to no assistance of any vehicle, but in recent years large groups of the devotees move around using mini buses or even smaller trucks which are almost always decorated with lights and brightly coloured imagery of Lord Shiva. Some groups can also be seen using bikes. The *kanwariyas*, throughout the journey, chant “*bol bam!*” as they navigate through the cityscape of Varanasi.



Fig. 4. Pilgrims using bikes to travel in the yatra

Kashi has seen a surge in the Kanwar Yatri from previous years and majority of the Kanwar Yatra gathers from the neighbouring cities and Purvanchal belt. When talked to the interlocutors they mostly said they travelled from neighbouring cities with a herd of pilgrims for offering Ganga Jal to Lord Shiva, adoringly called *baba*. This year Varanasi saw a step rise of the people who were directed from Prayagraj after visiting the *Kumbh* as the government’s initiative at promoting religious tourism attracted millions of devotees.

Varanasi became one the most preferred destinations for the pilgrims who visited Prayagraj for the Maha Kumbh in the beginning of the year, and a similar trend was seen for Kanwar Yatra, which drove more pilgrims this year than seen before by the city. The Kanwar Yatri were mainly diverted via the GT Road, one of the lanes of which remained reserved for the pilgrims and they were guided inside Varanasi via the Varanasi Prayagraj Road to Raja Moti Chandra Marg (Churamanpur) directly leading to the Manduadih Road which is a 10 km direct road that leads to Dashwamedh Ghat. Schools were also closed for a few days and especially on Mondays to control and reduce traffic and handle the influx of pilgrims in Varanasi. Ten new police Chowkis were established at the Kanwar Marg and quick rescue teams were on standby to handle any emergencies. There were 2000 additional policemen deployed for a month to control the crowd and guide the possessions towards the entry of Raja Moti Chandra Marg so that the decorated tableaux could be led without obstructing the local traffic. There are several diversions made which last for half a month for the convenience of the devotees. Several resting tents are set up in areas such as Mahmoorganj, Rathayatra, Godowlia and Dashashwamedh, all of which fall under the route to Kashi Vishwanath Temple, in which tents, *chowkis* for resting, fresh water, popular *banarasi* snacks such as *Kachori Sabzi* and other refreshment are distributed free of cost, often hosted by some clubs, local businesses and government bodies.



Fig. 5. Resting stop made by local trust near Kashi Vishwanath Temple providing refreshments



Fig. 6. Shelters made for the pilgrims by the Government for overnight halts near Dashashwamedh Ghat

The devotees walk and travel in group dancing and singing barefoot excited for offering Ganga Jal to Lord Shiva. Kanwar Yatri often go to Trilochan Mahadev which is in Machhodari and not on the popular route taken by the pilgrims but Trilochan Mahadev holds importance as an important shrine for visit in the months of Saawan. On talking with few of these groups, it was found out that the *kanwariyas* generally prefer to arrive in the evening or late nights so that they can offer *jal* to Kashi Vishwanath in the morning, and once they have offered the *ganga jal* they disband with the tableau and take various means of transport to go back home. In their *kanwar* they carry *ganga jal* to offer to Kashi Vishwanath but sometimes they also fill their pots of water on the *kanwar* and take it to their home to offer it to their local temples or the temples in their homes.



Fig. 7. Pilgrims gathered at Dashashwamedh Ghat to collect Ganga jal



*Fig. 8. Crowd of pilgrims gathered at Dashashwamedh Ghat*

Most of the *kanwar yatri* travel in groups of their friends and relatives which mostly comprises young males. While there has been a significant increase in the number of women and children who perform the yatra in the last 10 years, the majority of the category is of male devotees. Women do not usually travel in herds like their male counterparts, and are often accompanied by families travelling together in the yatra. Children are rarely seen, but the number is not zero. Devotees from the neighbouring localities can be seen donning orange attires and walk to the ghats to carry *jal* in their small pots and offer it to Lord Shiva. The *kanwariyas* sometimes travel from farther locations and they make a halt of 2 to 3 days in Varanasi and sometimes use the open Shelter Homes and temporary tents that are set up by the community and government to rest and relax after such long and strenuous walks.



*Fig. 9. Children and Women participating in the Kanwar Yatra near Rajendra Prasad Ghat*



*Fig. 10. Pilgrims carrying water from River Ganga at Dashashwamedh Ghat*

### **Shifting Paradigms:**

Kanwar Yatra has seen a major increase in participation as well as transformation in the last few decades. Beginning as a small-scale practice among select followers of Shaivism, the pilgrimage is, currently, one of the largest folk practices of Hindu traditions, amassing pilgrims in millions. Majority of the literature locates Haridwar as the earliest and only city which the pilgrims visited to return with sacred water from Ganga. As of 2024, that location has expanded to numerous cities and temples located on the banks of river Ganga across the Delhi-Haridwar landscape, with states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh becoming a part of the pilgrimage, either as the route or as states with the majority of participants belonging to. Apart from this, pilgrimage has also seen major shifts in rituals, trends and internal practices in recent years.

One such recent development in the practice of this pilgrimage has been the rise of youth participation. Kanwar Yatra was, earlier, meant for old devotees and saints of Lord Shiva, mostly celibate men who devoted their whole lives. Recently, however, a surge in participation by married women, young men, and even children has been seen. Families as well travel together, with members of all ages following the same rules and path set out. This change is reflective of the rising trend of a 'consumptive religiosity' amongst people, driven by factors such as seeking spiritual contentment, cultural immersion, and the performative trends in religiosity (Tompe) As part of the ethnography done on field, few of these pilgrims were seen interacting heavily with social media. When asked, a majority of the youth participants answered that they were in fact motivated by the Instagram reels made by other pilgrims when visiting the city, which provided a glimpse into the cultural and religious fervour around Kanwar Yatra and Kashi Vishwanath Temple in Varanasi. The younger pilgrims can more often be seen making Reels of the journey, as well the famous tourists spots of Varanasi that are a part of the pilgrimage route such as Dashashwamedh Ghat, the markets around Godowlia, various gates of the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, etc. Through social media, the appeal of these locations as a part of the city's sacred geography has been expanded, catering especially to the younger generation.



*Fig. 11. Younger generation participating in the pilgrimage*

In recent years, there has been a heavy number of technological interventions in religious pilgrimages of such mass scale in India. Kanwar Yatra has been no exception, where the use of electronic devices of various kinds can be seen utilised by the pilgrims as well as the cities

hosting the pilgrims. The resting stops at various locations within the city almost always have elaborate decorations of Shiva iconography using LED and other kinds of artificial lights.

Some of them come with a fully installed music system, which blasts bhajans and other religious music all throughout the day. The pilgrims who travel in groups are also seen with LED decorated iconography and music playing in cars or other vehicles that they use. The scene almost resembles a Mardi Gras float; elaborately decorated tableaux with the mobile DJ at the front playing beats of popular Bollywood songs through PA systems altered to praise Lord Shiva, and dancing *kanwars* slowly tagging behind, immersed in a trance of devotion. There has been a significant rise in use of this kanwar music and a shift in EDMC moving out of club cultures and being used in this religious pilgrimage (S). A practice largely associated with urban and westernized communities, the introduction of electronic dance music in Kanwar Yatra coincides with the rise in the participation of the younger class as seen in recent years, no matter their background.



Fig. 12. *Kanwariyas dancing and travelling with mobile DJ*

## **Conclusion:**

Kanwar Yatra in Varanasi emerges as a living folk practice that is continuously reshaping itself through devotion and technological interventions. The practice is rooted in the sacred geography of the city and collective memory, and the Yatra reflects the dynamic nature of folk practices, as theorised by both western as well as Indian folklorists such as Dundes and Ramanujan. The increasing participation of youth in the Yatra in recent years, the role of technology and the evolving spatial and performative dimensions of the pilgrimage reflects the adaptability of folk practices and traditions in contemporary culture. As the city of Kashi becomes increasingly central in the route of Kanwar Yatra over the years, the practice maintains the city's sacred identity while incorporating the modern shifting paradigms.

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