

## BANARASI (BANARASIDAS)

**Born** 1586 Jaunpur, India  
**Died** 1643 Agra, India

### Life

Banarasidas (usually shortened to 'Banarasi') was a Jain merchant, who was also a scholar and an accomplished, if unorthodox, poet. He was born into the Shrimal community, or caste, of Jains, who borrowed heavily from Hindu tradition. Having grown up in Jaunpur in Uttar Pradesh, his family then moved to Agra, where his father prospered as a jewellery merchant. More significant, his father was a leading member of the Adyatma reform movement among Jains, which opposed the creeping influence of devotional Hinduism and led to a more orthodox sect (Terapanth) among Jains. Banarasi's life, his choices, his ideas and his writings, were all largely shaped by the tight-knit Shrimal caste within the Jain community of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Mughal India. Today it is somewhat difficult to imagine to what extent the social and intellectual context of a community could exert such a controlling influence on someone's life.

Much of Banarasi's early adulthood was spent in Agra, where he started school at the age of eight and was taught by a Hindu pundit. His education included mathematics as well as assaying gold and silver, the two essential skills in the jewellery business. It is said that he was so bright that within one year he gained the necessary level of expertise to join his father in business. Banarasi also wrote verse at an early age, but none of it survives.

While still a teenager, Banarasi began to receive instruction from a Jain monk in theology and also Hinduism. He said he fell in love at this young age, too, but the affair remains a mystery. In 1610, when he was twenty-four, Banarasi's father decided to hand over the family business to him. But he was not particularly interested in his family's jewellery business, preferring reading and writing, and often fell into debt, forcing him to move from city to city around north India. On one occasion, he lost his entire capital and suffered hardship for six months until rescued by a cousin.

At age 37, he met a Jain monk who urged him to read a text, which then taught him the principles of the Adyatma movement. This was a protestant-styled reform tendency within Jainism that rejected outward shows of piety and concentrated instead on self-reflection. The text had a profound effect on him, but having given up all rituals, he did not fully understand what should replace them. A few years later, in 1635, he was again brought back into orthodox Jainism by yet another monk, only to fall out again and reach some kind of reconciliation in which he called himself both a Jain and a follower of Adyatma

In his final years, he wrote his famous autobiographical poem (*Half a Story, Ardhakathanaka*), which is influenced by this belief in an inward-looking, contemplative religion. He also wrote several works on religion and philosophy in those final years, and they survive only because his friends took care to preserve them. Banarasi died in 1643, only two years after completing his masterpiece, *Half a Story*. As the title indicates, he had planned on a long life, but his half story turned out to be the full story.

### List of works

*Samayasara Nataka* (a commentary on a Jain theological work)  
*Namamala* (a lexicon for a Sanskrit text)  
*Half a Story (Ardhakathanaka, 1643)*  
*Banārasivilāsa* (an anthology of poems, 1644)