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Safeguarding the Sacred Ghats of Varanasi: Preservation and Conservation Strategies

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Abstract:

One of the oldest continually-inhabited settlements in the world, Varanasi's historic position is accentuated by its parallel identity as Hinduism's holiest city. Its location on the sacred river Ganges imbues its image with great spiritual symbolism, and it is the most important religious urban site in India. In particular, its riverbank (known as the *Ghats*) has been an exceptionally revered pilgrimage site for over three millennia. With its pluralistic identities, Varanasi has been a destination for visitors since ancient times, developing into a sophisticated and cultured city of significant physical and spiritual wealth. This is reflected in its built form, which is a remarkable repository of architectural heritage represented in its numerous temples, palaces and mansions, in particular those situated on the Ghats. As the primary tourist destination in Varanasi, however, the Ghats are being impacted by local and international tourism, and contemporary observations reveal increasingly detrimental developments. In the absence of a comprehensive management strategy, their physical, ideological and historical integrity is being compromised, affecting damage to their aesthetic and functional character. This study is intended as an investigation into the phenomenon of conservation of the Ghats, engaging both theoretical and practical dimensions. Tracing their historical role, perception and identity, this paper evaluates the impact of tourism, assessing changes and documenting issues of serious concern. Highlighting the necessity for management and conservation practices, it identifies the complex religious, social, cultural and environmental causes of this process. Further, it proposes immediate and long-term measures, providing concrete recommendations for the protection of this unique heritage.

Keywords: Varanasi Ghats, sacred cities, cultural landscapes, heritage conservation.

1 Introduction

Varanasi is one of the world's oldest living cities, representing an uninterrupted pattern of settlement dating from 1000 BCE (Eck, 1982). Revered for its antiquity, it also holds a position of uncontested primacy in Hinduism as its holiest city. It is what Milton Singer and Robert Redfield have termed an "orthogenetic" city, "creating and sustaining the ethos and order of a whole culture" (Eck, 1987, p. 2). Its connotations of divinity derive from two auspicious references: its selection as his permanent abode by Lord Shiva, the most popular deity of the Hindu pantheon, and its location on the Ganges, the holiest river in Hinduism. With its multiple exceptional identities – Lord Shiva's chosen city, the *axis mundi*, centre of the universe, and supreme *tirtha* (a crossing or bridge) enabling humans to attain spiritual salvation (Sinha, 2006), Varanasi is "the primary pilgrimage site of the Hindu world" (Ching, Jarzombek & Prakash, 2007, p. 94).

Its sanctity is especially concentrated on the banks of the Ganges, where, over the centuries, stepped terraces and platforms were constructed to facilitate worship at the water's edge. Known as the Ghats, the formalized banks retain the original context of the city as a pilgrimage destination. The term *Ghat*, meaning bank or landing in Hindi, "signifies the heightened value of the transitional space where the land meets the river, especially in context of its religious or ceremonial function" (Verma, 2008, p. 244). The seventy Ghats stretch for a distance of six kilometres along the gentle curve of the river, and the assemblage of terraces and plazas, backed by temples, palaces and mansions is one of the most distinctive architectural panoramas of the world (see Figure 1, 2). In a city suffused with sanctity, the

Ghats constitute "the most sacred geography" (Ching et al., 2007, p. 94) and continue to draw multitudes of Hindu pilgrims today as they have done for millennia.



Figure 1: Map showing layout of the city and the Ghats. (Redrawn after Eck, 1982).



Figure 2: View from Dashashwamedha Ghat looking south

Since ancient times, they have also attracted cultural visitors who viewed the Ghats as the microcosmic image of India, embodying notions of Eastern exoticism, mystical religious practice and the colourful chaos of humanity. As iconic representations of Varanasi and Hinduism, the Ghats are exceptionally imbued with what Lynch (1960; p. 9) has called "imageability". Historical narrative by foreign travellers substantiates this perception and reveals their fascination with aspects of nature veneration. The fervent tradition of Ganges worship was recorded in 302 BCE by Megasthenes, ambassador of the Greek king Seleucus

to the court of the Indian emperor Chandragupta Maurya (Mahajan, 1984), followed by the famed Chinese traveller Huiuen Tsang in 630 CE and subsequently by medieval Arab travellers. Observing the Ghats, Ralph Fitch, the first Englishman to write about India, noted in 1586 CE that "... amongst the waters side bee very many faire houses... And by breake of day and before, there are men and women which come out of the towne and wash themselves in Ganges" (Foster, 1999, p. 20). An especially vivid description of their form and vibrant energy comes from Mark Twain (1996), who wrote:

The Ganges front is the supreme show-place of Benares. Its tall bluffs are solidly caked from water to summit, along a stretch of three miles, with a splendid jumble of massive and picturesque masonry, a bewildering and beautiful confusion of stone platforms, temples, stair-flights, rich and stately palaces – nowhere a break, nowhere a glimpse of the bluff itself; all the long face of it is compactly walled from sight by this crammed perspective of platforms, soaring stairways, sculptured temples, majestic palaces, softening away into the distances; and there is movement, motion, human life everywhere, and brilliantly costumed – streaming in rainbows up and down the lofty stairways, and massed in metaphorical flower-gardens on the miles of great platforms at the river's edge. (p. 496)

2 Overview of contemporary conditions

2.1 Present and future tourist traffic

In recent years, the popularity of the Ghats as a tourist destination has grown, aided by an increasing population, enhanced travel facilities and economic prosperity across India. Additionally, increasing numbers of international visitors are being drawn to their unique architectural, religious and cultural atmosphere. Most recent official statistics indicate 489,391 visitors during the high season from October 2005 to March 2006. (Government of India, n.d., p. 28). The survey provides no data for the low season. However, assuming a pattern similar to Varanasi's (50% reduced traffic in the low season), total annual traffic at the Ghats is estimated at 750,000 visitors. Future numbers are indicated by the proposed Action Plan (Government of India, 2007), which aims to increase the number of foreign tourists to India seven-fold from 3 million in 2007 to 25 million in 2017. Domestic numbers can reasonably be expected to exhibit an equivalent (if not greater) proportional increase, implying a significantly magnified tourist impact.

2.2 Assessment of issues of concern

As a living community and shared heritage, the Ghats are accessed and utilized throughout the year, including certain particularly auspicious days when they witness gatherings several thousand strong. Consequently, their current condition reveals extensive deterioration of their physical, social and environmental identity deriving from resident impact, unregulated tourism and large visitor volumes. The following summary discusses the most serious issues, which are documented and classified under four categories: Architectural, Social, Environmental and Ideological.

2.2.1 Architectural issues

There is widespread evidence of the functional and aesthetic deterioration of historically significant buildings. Several structures are unoccupied or in an advanced state of disrepair, while others have been altered using forms, materials or techniques incompatible with the original building style or intent (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Recent construction incompatible with existing historic fabric in form, materials and methods.

Many structures have been defaced with advertisements that mar their overall physical appearance (see Figure 4). Some promote amenities such as hotels, internet cafes and gift shops to tourists, while others target the local community for their products. This visual cacophony competes with and often overshadows useful civic signage such as labels identifying individual Ghats, markers locating community services (police posts, toilets, etc.) and painted appeals to visitors to keep the Ganges clean.



Figure 4: Prominent commercial signage dominating civic message (at lower left) for the preservation of the river.

2.2.2 *Social issues*

The presence of internet cafés, handicraft showrooms and restaurants threatens to subvert the character of religious spaces intended for social communion to a commercial market organized around tourist convenience and comfort.

A number of privately-owned buildings have been converted into hotels for tourists. The attraction of accommodations at the very edge of the water is a draw for tourists and a revenue earner for the operators of these facilities. It must be recognized, however, that this altered functionality commercializes the essential integrity of the Ghats as sacred spaces.

A significant proportion of the local economy relies on income generated from selling souvenirs, trinkets, food, boat rides, flowers and materials required for religious rituals. While this financial support is vital for the population involved, these unregulated activities impact the character of the Ghats adversely. There is also a significant population which relies on begging and donations given by pilgrims as expressions of good *karma* (pious acts).

2.2.3 Environmental issues

The Ganges is being polluted by several practices intended as gestures of respect, but which paradoxically result in its degradation (Alley, 2002). Ceremonial acts such as offering flowers, releasing clay lamps and feeding the fish to earn merit introduce substantial quantities of organic matter, oils and other contaminants into the water. Propitious acts, such as *snaan* (ritual bathing) utilizing soap, and the washing of laundry and utensils exacerbate the situation by releasing chemicals, detergents and food into the river (see Figure 5). The abrupt decline in the water quality of the Ganges as it flows past Varanasi has been extensively documented and analyzed (Chaphekar & Mhatre, 1986).

Increasing visitor numbers have led to correspondingly larger quantities of generated waste. The Ghats are littered with bottles, discarded packaging, plastic bags and other refuse that ultimately washes into the river. This neglect and squalor is unhygienic and also directly contradicts the concept of sacred spaces (see Figure 6).



Figure 5: Residents bathing and washing laundry.



Figure 6: Garbage receptacles (at lower left). The painted sign (at right) invokes the Ganges as the universal mother and urges visitors to keep her pure.

2.2.4 Ideological issues

Certain behaviours exhibited by visitors profane the sacred aspect of the Ghats and violate notions of civility and propriety. This specifically references the two cremation grounds, Manikarnika Ghat and Harishchandra Ghat. Although cremations are extremely personal, emotional ceremonies, it is common to see their voyeuristic exploitation by tourists (enabled by local guides and boatmen) who treat them as spectacle and photograph them in violation of the sentiments of the bereaved, and despite posted signs prohibiting this practice.

The concerns delineated above manifest the symptoms of a complex underlying problem. The fundamental issue—the lack of a sensitive, appropriate regard towards a fragile and irreplaceable cultural resource—is not unique to the Ghats but unfortunately characterizes the treatment of heritage sites across India, most of which remain inadequately protected. Although the most popular sites are afforded a significant degree of protection by the Archaeological Survey of India, which regulates visitor numbers, interaction and impact, the substantial number of such sites makes expectations of comparable supervision unrealistic. Additionally, such control is only feasible for individual monuments or clearly-demarcated complexes of an easily managed, limited size. Living communities such as Varanasi cannot be correspondingly controlled and remain at considerable risk, an issue confronted in comparable sites such as the desert citadel of Jaisalmer (Jain, 1995; World Monuments Fund, 2001), Jodhpur, and Tranquebar, amongst others.

3 Acknowledging divergent perspectives

Sites of such exceptional symbolism as the Ghats contain their essence in intangible attributes rather than in their physical form. This adds a layer of complexity to the experience of the visitor who, to truly grasp this meaning, may require assistance in the process of discovery. Presently, the experience of the average visitor is a self-directed enterprise, with the extent of involvement with the spirit of the place determined solely by individual initiative and interest. There exist no interpretive resources to convey to a visitor unfamiliar with the religion, culture or architecture the import of what is being witnessed, heard or touched (Eck, 1982). Consequently, most visitors achieve only a partial comprehension of the intricate, profound character of the place. For their engagement to be authentic, they must

understand the ancient and multiple meanings, connotations and myths which constitute the essence of the Ghats.

Visitor demographic can be divided into two broad classifications: religious pilgrims who visit for *darshan* (sacred sight-seeing) and to perform ordained rituals and non-religious visitors (Indian or foreign) who are interested in social, cultural or historical exploration. Both groups view the Ghats in discrete ways, with the experience of each remaining insulated from that of the other. Ultimately, both derive only a partial understanding of what the Ghats truly represent. Religious pilgrims and worshippers are primarily attuned to the sacred aspects of their experience. Consequently, the fact that while the Ghats are fundamentally religious spaces, they are also monuments of great historical and architectural value may be hidden from them. Correspondingly, non-religious visitors arriving to experience unique architecture and specialized social spaces may interpret a place of exceptional spiritual and philosophical meaning through a largely superficial experience. In Varanasi, a place layered with symbolism, they may be unaware that the physical configuration of the city is a manifestation of religious cosmography (Kostof, 1991, p. 171); that the layout of the city represents the *Karmuka Mandala* (Sinha, 2006, p. 76); or that the Ghats as urban waterfront design are supremely suited to the diverse array of specific rituals conducted along the riverbank (Verma, 2008). Discussing these difficulties in her seminal exploration of the form and meaning of Varanasi, Eck (1982) observes that "We do not know the myths, the symbols and the images that are the language of access to Hinduism. In an important sense, we do not see the same city Hindus see" (p. 6).

4 Envisioning a new approach

Ultimately, any success in the preservation of the Ghats as authentic, meaningful spaces will be contingent upon a sustained and comprehensive stewardship program, without which the present deterioration is certain to become increasingly severe as visitor numbers grow. How can an inclusive, comprehensive strategy to moderate tourism impact on the Ghats be derived? What should the priorities be for determining this strategy?

This paper proposes that any such strategy must primarily achieve two different but related goals:

- a) Regulate tourist traffic and practices to preserve the physical and ideological integrity of the Ghats, and
- b) Ensure that visitor experience facilitates a deeper understanding of the Ghats and what they truly represent.

Spaces of such complexity as the Ghats, with a diversity of enmeshed identities call for a strategy of corresponding multidimensionality to adequately engage all aspects of the situation. The implementation of an appropriate long-term strategy will necessitate the establishment of relationships between administrative, social, cultural and political agencies, with multiple levels of government involvement and supervision (Shankland, 1975, p. 29). This paper identifies the following as the initial remedial measures for the immediate resolution of the most exigent practices and conditions. The proposed steps are classified into four categories: Architectural Conservation; Public Education; Environmental Awareness; and Enhancement of Tourist Amenities.

4.1.1 Architectural conservation

The authentic appearance of the Ghats must be restored by removal and cleaning of painted signs, graffiti, commercial notices, advertisements, and pasted posters. Besides creating visual pollution, the chemical media used (such as paint, adhesives, etc) can damage

or discolour the stone and plaster surfaces of buildings. To ensure compliance, painting, marking or otherwise using the building facades as billboards must be prevented and violations duly penalized.

Regulation must be established to proscribe the destruction, alteration, defacement or vandalism of historic buildings. This mandate must be a cooperative effort of the administrative body, i.e. the local government, as well as other civic organizations seeking involvement in the process. Related issues of encroachment, illegal occupation and unauthorized construction must also be appropriately addressed by such regulation. The promulgation and enforcement of such legislation is the only means to affect positive change and this necessitates its proposal in the initial stages of this discussion.

Structures must be repaired to reflect accurate chronological and ideological identity. There must be a review of new construction, alterations and demolitions to ensure conformity with the overall rhythm of the Ghats and to prevent contraventions of compositional integrity. In certain instances, unsightly and inappropriate structures have been constructed by the government itself, such as the sewage treatment towers at Dashashwamedha Ghat, which degrade its visual appearance, function and spatial cohesion (see Figure 7).



Figure 7: Sewage treatment towers at Dashashwamedha Ghat. While fulfilling a vital need, their form and placement compromises the integrity of the sacred space.



Figure 8: Utilization of building façade as canvas for symbolic art. The images represent important Hindus deities.

Sections of the facades offer an exceptional opportunity to showcase paintings or murals referencing folk art, local artists or events, as already evidenced in some locations (see Figure 8). This engagement of buildings can add a new dimension to the identity of the Ghats which, while enriching the experience of the visitors, can also involve and benefit the local community. Utilizing the buildings as a canvas to promote local artists, seasonal events or religious festivals can be a revenue earner for the community, and for visitors, a window into aspects of local culture which would otherwise remain inaccessible to them.

4.1.2 Public education

A root cause of the current crisis is the immutable Hindu belief that the Ganges, due to its divine origins, is incapable of being profaned by human agency (Alley, 2002; Sinha, 2006). Many practices continue as they have for millennia, whereas historical trends appropriate for the smaller populations of the past are unsustainable in today's magnified context. It must be communicated to residents and visitors alike that notwithstanding mythical and religious portrayals of the city and the river as eternal, divine, and indestructible, they can be (and already have been) harmed and adversely impacted by the human disregard for their well-being.

There must be an extensive campaign to inform locals of the unique heritage of which they are guardians, as well as the necessity of responsible stewardship on their part to ameliorate its current degradation. Although the attraction of the Ghats for visitors from great distances and diverse cultures is recognized, there is no awareness of the necessity to protect this shared universal heritage. Private gain and profit are allowed to influence decisions to the extent that the very character which has drawn people for millennia is now being jeopardized.

The ecological identity of the river must be highlighted to present it as a complex and fragile natural system which is more than a mere channel to carry away undesirable effluent, whether physical garbage or spiritual sins. Currently, perception of the river as a sacred goddess overshadows its non-divine identity, an ecosystem supporting a diverse array of biological life. As a vital component of the natural environment, the Ganges needs protection too, and its cycles, processes and rhythms are objects of relevance not merely for scientists but for all visitors.

4.1.3 *Environmental awareness*

An organized system of regular collection and disposal must be implemented for the refuse which presently either lies uncollected until it disintegrates, is consumed by animals, or ends up in the Ganges. This service can be implemented with the involvement of local residents and will allow them to generate income for their families. Additionally, it can create opportunities for civic participation by interested citizens groups and educational organizations.

A number of drains deliver their contents directly into the Ganges at various points along the Ghats. In many instances, raw sewage is released in locations used by devotees for bathing or prayer, creating a health hazard as well as an aesthetic problem. It must be ensured that the contents of these drains are treated before being diffused, and then at points distant from those used for ritual ablution, prayer or ceremony.

4.1.4 *Enhancement of tourist amenities*

Adequate information facilities must be installed to orient visitors to the site and provide materials on the rich and multifaceted identity of the Ghats (as archaeological, religious, cultural and social assets) to those unfamiliar with these aspects. The availability of such literature (in the form of books, brochures, posters, and postcards, etc.) will greatly assist all visitors in comprehending the meaning of the Ghats. This concept can also be a potential source of revenue for the State Tourism department and, in fact, has already been implemented at several heritage sites across India. Presently, any information acquired by tourists comes either from guidebooks that cover the Ghats in a cursory way, or from local guides who are usually untrained and therefore unable to offer a neutral and authentic narrative.

The provision of maps and educational guides will enable tourists to self-navigate the spaces at their own pace and gain a complete and accurate picture of the visual narrative being presented.

The placement of contextual markers at each individual Ghat and other points of distinction will aid in conveying historic or other significant information pertaining to the location or object, along with relevant references to local or vernacular mythology, if applicable.

It is essential to provide services and amenities such as left-luggage facilities, clean and convenient toilets, etc. conforming to international standards to ensure a satisfactory experience for the average visitor.

5 Conclusion

For centuries, the Ghats have been the emblem of Varanasi, their seeming permanence and timelessness recalling the eternal *nirvana* to which the city is considered a gateway. Yet recent developments reveal their fragility and illustrate the need to moderate human impact on their physical and philosophical identity. Formulating a managed approach to tourism will be an essential first step towards accomplishing this objective.

It will be meaningful to briefly locate the proposals made in this paper within the broader Indian context. Historically, conservation has been interpreted largely as archaeology, and preservation (whether of built heritage or cultural landscapes) has not been adequately emphasized. It remains a nascent enterprise, with only recent recognition of the value of the common heritage and the need for its protection. Furthermore, the concept of tourism, specifically cultural tourism, has not yet evolved to provide an informative, contextualized experience for the visitor while safeguarding the heritage. This can partly be attributed to

India's status as an ancient country, abundant in sites requiring protection but with its limited resources directed towards the alleviation of social and human needs. Recent studies (Ghosh, 2002; Jain, 2008) have delineated the absence of an adequate conservation movement, stressing the need to define an approach deriving from, and adapted to, India's specific conditions and characteristics. They have also emphasized the importance of conservation to be adequately promoted as a priority for government and administrative agencies.

It is recognized that the characteristics of a developing country—insufficient finances and resources, cumbersome bureaucracy, inadequate infrastructure, among others—will make this a formidable challenge. The difficulty will be compounded by the lack of a pre-existing robust tradition of conservation and stewardship. Yet recent developments hold the promise to affect positive change in this direction. India's emergence into a phase of self-confident maturity, out of the shadow of post-colonization, has coincided with economic reform, progress and prosperity. This, coupled with its prominent role on the global stage, and the recognition of tourism as a revenue generator could collectively become the necessary stimulus for a reinterpretation of attitudes towards historic conservation.

The task under discussion will be facilitated by the distinguished dual identities of the Ghats as religious and historic monuments, with a distinctive profile not merely locally but internationally. They are cultural resources which are perceived as the shared common heritage of the national and religious community. More than physical monuments, the Ghats are living communities, and this fact can provide an incentive to participate for local residents – as stakeholders in this reformatory process, they will be protecting not merely their past but their futures as well. Ultimately, a successful strategy at the Ghats can potentially be an important case study with wide-ranging implications for other sites. The universality of its issues makes it a prototype easily emulated and adapted by other cities confronting comparable crises of heritage conservation and comprehensive tourism management in the face of accelerated change.

Note:

All drawings and photographs are by the author.

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