

Life along the Ghats of the Ganga: Unveiling the role of Varanasi's Ghats in sustaining its Socio-Religious fabric

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Abstract: *The Rivers of India and their associated riverine landscapes can be seen to provide an interconnected link not only to the aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems but also an innate connection to the socio-cultural, collective and individual identities that these rivers provide in terms of place, religious experiences, artistic inspiration, and cultural services. Historically, these rivers and the river valleys have a deep historical connection with humanity as they have been the cradle of early agriculture. Most of the ancient settlements along the Indus River Valley in India that were formed had demonstrated the critical role that these rivers played in shaping human civilizations. A notable case for this creation is the River Ganges that has been considered as a symbol of faith, hope, culture and livelihood and till today holds an immense social and religious significance in India. The Ganges River has showcased a rich history of cultural diversity which can be traced back to the ancient settlements in the Indus Valley civilization. The river's adaptations had made it possible for people to share trade and cultures which had led to rise of diverse identities were shaped by the Ganges and became a focal point for cultural variety as communities flowed. The Vedic, Mauryan, Gupta, medieval and colonial eras were among the major periods that contributed to this variety. The key notable features along the river Ganges are the Ghats that are considered as famous places of worship and culture which are used for religious ceremonies, social events and everyday community life. These Ghats developed into important religious and municipal symbols over centuries, drawing pilgrims and supporting thriving local economies. Some major Ghats, such as those in the city of Varanasi, symbolize the river's sacred essence, offering a place for purification rites, ceremonies, and cultural exchanges that reinforce the river's role in shaping identities and spiritual practices across generations. The paper will try to analyse and comprehend the existing literature and how over the years the Ghats have become an integral part of Varanasi's identity.*

Key Words: *cultural landscapes, Ghats, spiritual connection, historical evolution, architecture, religion*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The river Ganga in Indian context is considered as an embodiment of spirituality, purity and divinity among the people and not just as a water body. In Hindu mythology, the holy river of Ganga is personified as an embodiment of Goddess Ganga and is believed to wash away one's sin by taking a dip in its sacred water and also assures 'moka' (salvation) from the cycle of life (karmic cycle). Religious practices and rituals, integral to the cultural identity of these riverine communities along the Ganges, offer another layer of inspiration. The sacred nature of the river and its purifying waters become central themes in designs for sacred spaces, pilgrimage routes, and ceremonial landscapes. The confluence of various religious beliefs, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, inspires landscape architects to create designs that embrace diversity and foster a sense of community among the inhabitants.

Along the stretch of the river, numerous urban areas can be found that ranges from pilgrimage sites to religious cities. Cities and towns such as Gangotri, Devprayag, Haridwar and Hrishikesh in Uttarakhand; Varanasi, Prayagraj and Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh; Patna and Bhagalpur in Bihar; Kolkata and Howrah in West Bengal not only showcase their natural settings along the river Ganges but also highlights the elements of spirituality, devotion, cultural and historical significance through their architectural elements which can be seen in their temple design styles and the Ghats along the shore (Rongmei, 2024). These Ghats that found along the river holds a significant importance in Hindu culture, society and generation of economy.

Critical observations of these Ghats suggests multiple aspects of public life that are being carried upon by different communities ranging from the ritual priests, boatmen, aghoris, barbers, washer men, vendors, tourists, pilgrim

groups, students and mourners. Some of this community of people are also actively engaged in worship, making folk-art, crafting objects and selling artefacts while others observe and participate in casual social interactions. Another sect of people that are actively visible in the Ghats of Varanasi is the mourners that are present along the cremation areas within the precincts of these Ghats, particularly in Manikarnika Ghat. (Sinha, 2020).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

2.1 The City of Varanasi – the sacred city of India

The city of Varanasi also known as ‘the city of lights’ is a city that has a strong spiritual and religious connection with the people of India (Shankar, 2023). The history and evolution of the city of Varanasi is quite interesting and fascinating. Mythological, the city is believed to be created by Lord Shiva, one of three principal deities along with Brahma and Vishnu, as his abode; whereas archaeological excavation has identified the city as one of the oldest inhabited city, tracing back to 12th century BC (Shankar, Divine Varanasi – Decoding the mysteries of its spiritual magnetism, 2023). During the Gupta period, the city saw tremendous expansion and wealth and became an important centre of trade and commerce and was an important centre for trade and transportation because of its advantageous location on the Ganga River. By the sixth century CE, Varanasi had developed into a hallowed pilgrimage destination, with its Ghats acting as revered monuments. By the 17th century, the riverside had become an essential feature of the city's urban environment. During the 18th and 19th centuries, architecture saw a rebirth, with imposing structures along the Ghats acting as symbols of enlightenment. Varanasi's architectural mosaic is a reflection of its spiritual enlightenment and cultural variety. As quoted by author Mark Twain (Twain, 1897) about the city of Varanasi as, ‘Benares is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together.’ He extensively wrote about the city's influence in shaping the culture and traditions of historical India and its role in influencing the cultural diversity of India (Twain, 1897). Various authors and researchers have written in their findings that ‘the city is set outside of the mortal time and had a strong urban character with a dominant religious factor which in some case may be a boon or curse to the community (Kanungo, 2022). The culture of Varanasi city is deeply related to the river Ganga and the river's religious and spiritual importance. The city demonstrates a rich cultural landscape which is a dynamic mixture of both tangible and intangible heritage with more than 300 important monuments spread throughout the city. The tangible heritage of the city includes temples, mosques, museums and ghats; and the intangible aspects comprises natural landscapes and the cultural heritage that is prevalent in the form of music, art, folklore, crafts, dance, myths and literature (Jain, 2023). The Puranas explained Varanasi's holy landscape, which was bounded and delineated by a pilgrimage path with designated sites for shrines, springs, and ritual tanks. Additionally, the Panchakrosi pilgrimage path, which involves walking around the entire city, was recommended by the Kashi Khanda, Kashi Rahasya, and Brahmavaivarta Purana. Vishveshvara, the city's reigning deity, was at the center of the religious life of the city, which was organized on spatial systems such as the pilgrimage routes (Kanungo, 2022).

3. RESEARCH METHOD :

The methodology for this paper comprises of conducting a comprehensive literature review through various historical and archival documents, archaeological findings and written manuscripts. The findings from the literature were further synthesized in a coherent narrative to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. This literature review follows a systematic approach to identify, analyze and synthesize research on the role and the relevance of Ghats in the city of Varanasi.

4. ANALYSIS OF EXISTING LITERATURE :

4.1 The Ghats of Varanasi

The Ghats in Varanasi are a small public space located between the bustling city and the serene Ganga. The urban boundary is lined with 84 sets of steps, the number of which rises as subdivisions are made gradually. The Ghats' vast landings, where people pray, bathe and perform cremation ceremonies by the river, are accessible to locals, pilgrims, and visitors via narrow roadways. They are considered to constitute cultural heritage because they serve as venues for the continued practice of long-standing customs, upholding cultural memories, values, and beliefs (Gattupalli, 2023). Though the construction of the stone-stepped Ghats started in the 14th century, the history of water-front religious sites dates back to the 8th and 9th centuries. The vast landings of the Ghats mark the end of the old Varanasi's winding lanes, which lead locals, pilgrims, and visitors to the river where they worship, bathe, and bury the dead (Sinha D. , 2018). A continuing tradition from its historical past, the majority of the Ghats serve as busy locations for celebrations and ceremonies. The Ghats appear to be a single set of stairs, but they were constructed at several points in time and each has between 40 and 60 stone steps. They are symbolized by octagonal elevated platforms for public use and smaller, rectangular platforms nearer the river that are used for religious ceremonies by Brahmins. They host a wide range of

Varanasi cultural activities – from daily activities to spiritual aspects including immersion, festivals, rituals, and cremation. There are many different kinds of Ghats along the Ganga River – from conventional stone steps to intricate constructions with elaborate carvings and ornamentation (Swaroop, Sharma, & Kumar, 2023).

The Varanasi Ghats are the site of festivals all year round and are linked to the harvest cycle, the seasons and significant dates in the solar and lunar calendar that commemorate the sun's and moon's passage. Hindu tales and aspects of myths are lived out in the present, celebrating the births, unions and triumphs of gods and goddesses against demonic forces (Sinha, Ghats of Varanasi on the Ganga in India - The cultural Landscape Reclaimed, 2014). The Ghats often referred to as stairways are comprised of 87 riverfront steps that lead to the River Ganga is a living testament of ancient traditions that have helped in shaping the city (Shankar, Stairways to spirituality – Varanasi ghats where life and death dance, 2023). During the festival of Ganga Mahotsav, which honours the goddess Ganga during the Hindu month of Kartik (October–November), the land-water interface is celebrated spectacularly, with clay oil lamps lighting the route from Panchganga to Rajghat. A week after the Holi celebration in Phagun (March), the Ghats transform into a huge amphitheatre for the freshly restored Budhava Mangal festival, when musicians play on the river in decked boats. Every temple with a linga is decked out for devotion on Mahashivaratri, which commemorates the union of Shiva and Parvati, and the streets are crowded with processions honouring the couple (Sinha, Ghats of Varanasi on the Ganga in India - The cultural Landscape Reclaimed, 2014).

The five sacred Ghats of Varanasi also known as the ‘Panchatirthis’ are the following that are considered sacred and considered to have spiritual connection with the heavenly deities –

1. **Asi Ghat** – confluence at the Asi and Ganga River and have both religious, cultural and spiritual significance.
2. **Dashashvamedha Ghat** – one of the most significant Ghats among the pilgrims comprising of many shrines and temples and is associated with Lord Brahma.
3. **Manikarnika Ghat** – one of the holiest spot and is famously used for cremation as it is believed to provide salvation afterlife.
4. **Panchaganga Ghat** – one of a sacred tirthas and believed to be the meeting points of Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Kirana and Dhutpapa.
5. **Adi Keshava Ghat** – believed to be one of the original site of Lord Vishnu.

At several locations along the Ganga riverbed, the renowned Ramalila of Banaras enacts the epic narrative of the hero deity Ram, including his birth, marriage, exile, and triumph over the demon Ravan in Ashvin (October). Ramlila ends with Dusshera and Diwali, which fall on the same day as Navratri, a nine-day celebration honouring the goddess Durga's victory over the monster Mahishasur. Festivals honouring the harvest and the change of the seasons include Makar Sankranti, Holi, and Vasant Panchami. At different temples devoted to the gods, the festivals of Janmashtmi, Hanuman Jayanti, and Ganesh Chautha commemorate the births of the gods Krishna, Hanuman, and Ganesh, respectively (Sinha, Ghats of Varanasi on the Ganga in India - The cultural Landscape Reclaimed, 2014). The historical redevelopment and reconstruction of Ghats in Varanasi have started after 1700 AD during the reign of the Maratha Empire. The key patrons in the reconstruction were the Marathas, Shindes, Holkars, Bhonsles and Peshwas who have highlighted and imprinted their ideologies along this (Shankar, 2023). As time passes over, the Ghats become both observers and storytellers of ceremonies and happenings. The Ghats represent the conclusion or end of a journey as well and a beginning of a new one. The Ghats construction and architecture adapts to the Ganga's fluctuating water levels both during monsoon and winter seasons.

Table 1: List of Important and Famous Ghats in Varanasi

Sl. No.	Ghat	Activity
1.	Dashashwamedh Ghat	One of the most sacred Ghat of Varanasi. Every evening, the Ghat comes alive with thousands of people as priests perform the famous Ganga aarti. It is situated close to the Vishwanath Temple.
2.	Assi Ghat	Located at the confluence of the rivers Ganges and Assi. This Ghat attracts hundreds of pilgrims and devotees who come here to take a holy dip and perform rituals. Assi Ghat is not only a religious site but also a cultural and social hub. The ghat is also famous for its divine sunrise and Ganga aarti also known as Subah-e-Banaras.
3.	Manikarnika Ghat	It is the main cremation Ghat in Varanasi and is believed to grant liberation from the cycle of birth and death to those cremated here. The air around the ghat is filled with the smell of incense and funeral pyres burning day and night.
4.	Harishchandra Ghat	It is also dedicated to cremation rituals and is believed to have been named after the legendary king Harishchandra, known for his truthful and righteous nature. This ghat is also referred to as “Adi Manikarnika” due to its significance. This ghat also serves as a constant reminder of the cycle of life and death, attracting spiritual seekers and tourists to witness the awe-inspiring rituals associated with them.

5.	Tulsi Ghat	It is named after the poet Tulsidas, who lived there while he wrote the Ramcharitmanas and the Hanuman Chalisa and is one of the most popular tourist destinations.
6.	Scindia Ghat	It holds immense significance in terms of both religious and historical importance. The Ghat also offers scenic views of the river attracting tourists from all over the world. The partly submerged Lord Shiva temple at this Ghat makes it a unique feature from the other famous Ghats. Scindia Ghat is a well-known spot for early morning meditation on the Ganga River's bank.
7.	Kedar Ghat	It is one of the oldest Ghats in Varanasi. It has a beautiful temple that is dedicated to Lord Shiva and is one of the five holy Ghats in Varanasi. It stands out from the other Ghats because it is built in a unique South Indian style.
8.	Lalita Ghat	One of the most important Ghats on the Ganges River in Varanasi is Lalita Ghat, named after Lalita, the Hindu goddess. The Ghat was built by Rana Bahadur Shah, the King of Nepal, at the beginning of the 19th century. The Ghat is well-known for its religious importance, its beautiful building and the beautiful views and is popular among painters and photographers. Between Raj Rajeshwari Ghat and Vishnu Ghat is a long stretch called Lalita Ghat, which has some of the most famous temples in the city. The well-known Nepali temple and Lalita Gauri Mandir are both situated on this Ghat. A two-story building called Lalita Palace is right next to Lalita Ghat. The house has a few shrines from the 1800s and sculptures from the 1200s.
9.	Man Mandir Ghat	Man Mandir Ghat is one of the 84 Ghats that line the holy banks of River Ganga in Varanasi. It is among the ancient Ghats and is said to be built by Maharaja Man Singh of Jaipur in 1600CE. This Ghat lies near the Dashashwamedh Ghat. It is one of the major tourist attractions in Varanasi. It is also known as the Someshwara Ghat because of the presence of lingam of Lord Someshwar, which is another manifestation of Lord Shiva. Man Mandir Ghat is most known for the astronomical observatory that was built here by Maharaja Jai Singh. Another important feature of this Ghat is the presence of an Akhara.
10.	Shivala Ghat	This Ghat is famous for monastery, temples and many other structures.
11.	Bhonsale Ghat	It's a substantial stone building with small artistic windows at the top and three heritage temples – Lakshminarayan Temple, Yameshwar Temple and Yamaditya Temple and was built in 1780 by Maratha king Bhonsale of Nagpur.

Table 2: List of festivals celebrated within the city of Varanasi that is dependent on the Ghats

Sl.No.	Festival	Month	Ghat
1	Ganga Mahostav	Occurs in the month of October/ November and begins 15 days before Diwali.	Sant Ravidas Ghat or on Rajendra Prasad Ghat
2	Buddha Mahotsav	This festival is celebrated on full moon in the month of late April or May.
3	Maha Shivratri	This festival is celebrated every year on the 14th day in the month of Phalgun February – March.	Not particular Ghat
4	Holi	Holi is celebrated in the month of Phalgun, February – March.	Not particular Ghat
5	Dev Deepawali	This festival happens on the fifth day of Hindu month of Kartik October/ November.	Not particular Ghat
6	Makar Sankranti	This festival has a fixed date unlike many other festivals in the country. This one happens on 14th January.	Ganga Ghat
7	Annakut	This festival is celebrated on the fourth day of Diwali October- November.	Manikarnika Ghat
8	Akshaya Tritiya	Akshaya Tritiya happens in the month of Baisakh April/ May.	Dashashwamedh Ghat
9	Panch Kosi Parikrama	It is done in Hindi month of Sawan mid of July till mid of Aug.	Manikarnika Ghat
10	Chhath Puja	The four-day festival happens in the month of October/ November.	Ganga Ghat
11	Bharat Milap	This festival happens during October- November.
12	Nakkatayya	This festival happens in mid-October.
13	Hanuman Jayanti	This festival happens on the 15th day of Shukla paksha.
14	Dhanteras	This festival happens around October, November.

Each of the Ghats has its own unique narrative that connects various lineages, mythology, epics and historical eras. The remarkable figures connected to their history or their mythological and spiritual importance is the inspiration behind the names of several of the Ghats. There are well than 80 Ghats along the Ganga River and each one has a distinct architectural style of its own. The endless, horizontal Ghats may accommodate old residences, palaces, ashrams, elaborate temples and carelessly constructed dwellings. With its elaborate pillared balconies, small niches for windows or shops, stone-carved window supports and abandoned buildings with creepers creeping out from porches, the Ghats are a distinctive architectural style that is linked to street markets or stone steps leading to the River. These features reveal specific kinds of human interactions within their proximity (Sabnani, Rao, Shah, & Verma).

Hence, the Ghats of Varanasi can be identified into four board categories from the literature analysis –

1. **Historical tapestry** – living testament of Varanasi’s cultural and spiritual legacy along with the architectural heritage.
2. **Social hub** – the Ghats acting as social centres for the daily life of both residents and tourists congregate as melting pots where they exchange tales and build relationships. By adding vitality to the landscape, this social interaction turns the Ghats from areas of reflection into places brimming with the city's communal energy.
3. **Visual Identity** – the Ghats of Varanasi serves as a visual element for the city and over the time has created an artistic appreciation not only in the minds of people of India but also worldwide. These images, which represent Varanasi's holy essence, have become iconic and engrained in the world's awareness. The city's distinctive appearance is greatly enhanced by the Ghats, which make it easily recognized wherever in the world (Chaudhuri, 2024).
4. **Ecological Harmony** – and lastly, these Ghats plays a crucial role in the city’s ecological balance by acting as a barrier between the river Ganga and the densely populated city of Varanasi. These steps minimize the effects of floods by keeping the river from immediately flooding the streets. The Ghats also serve as homes for aquatic life, with fish and other river animals finding refuge in the submerged areas. Additionally, the platforms and steps provide bird nesting locations, drawing a variety of bird species to the riverfront. In this way, the Ghats support a peaceful coexistence between human settlements and the natural environment, contributing to the city's delicate ecological balance (Jalais, 2008).

The Ghats of Varanasi due to their unique socio-cultural features has been inscribed in the UNESCO lists as organically evolved landscapes that are developed due to anthropogenic influences upon them as well as an associative cultural landscape due to its significant cultural implications on the region. The landscape of Ghats over the years has evolved to support and nourish the ritualistic enactments and is a representation of the mythic narratives that is associated with the River Ganga in its built form. The cultural environment of the Ghats includes both tangible and intangible aspects that are showcased in its historic, performed and celebrated aspects. One of the prominent examples of the historic aspects along these Ghats is the riverbank palaces and temples constructed over the last three decades (Sinha D., 2018).

4.2 Temple architecture styles along the river Ganga in Varanasi

Throughout the course of history, the riverbanks acted as forces for the establishment of temples complexes which later on evolved into pilgrim sites, palaces, forts, temple towns and capitals under the reign of different rulers (Gattupalli, 2023). A substantial portion of the Ghats traditional architectural fabric is made up of the temples (Sinha D., 2018). The temple located along the stretch of Ganga River particularly in the city of Varanasi showcases a blend of architectural styles that highlights the local traditions, spiritual beliefs and the historical eras that have influenced their styles and have evolved into their current styles. The earliest temples laid down along the city were simple and straightforward in design and the material of construction was primarily wood and mud. However, as time passed over the centuries, the exquisite intermixing of Hindu, Islam and Colonial influences have created a fusion of diverse architectural styles and cultural significance. Nonetheless, these temples along the Ghats not only serve as a place for worship but also as landmarks of cultural and spiritual integrity and tourists attractions – serving as a rich testament of India’s cultural and spiritual landscapes (Swaroop, Sharma, & Kumar, 2023).

The temple precincts within their proximity also had designed water features known as temple tanks; which primarily comprised of kunds, pokhara, bavali, water tank, wells, water pool and artificial pond and forms an integral part of the temple complexes. One notable designed water feature is the Jnana vapi also known as well of wisdom, located north of the Kashi Vishwanath Temple in Varanasi. This well is a scared site within the temple complex as many devotees conduct various rituals and fairs within its proximity. These temple tanks often have natural inlets and outlets that are connected to the river Ganga and are typically square or rectangular in shape. There are clay-baked bricks or sandstone masonry steps with decorative accents on all four sides that lead to the river. The ramps are chipped into these steps, and the water tanks' sides may or may not have walls around them. At the heart of many Varanasi temple tanks is a little well that serves the mutually beneficial purpose of replenishing the groundwater (Gogate).

5. CONCLUSION:

In addition to being actual buildings, Varanasi's Ghats serve as entryways to a world rich in spirituality and cultural legacy. They serve as a reminder of the cyclical cycle of life and death and a link to the complex fabric of human existence (Garg, 2023). These Ghats over the period of time have emerged as a place of response to the religious, spiritual and social needs, desire and connectivity that are prevailing along the river edges and thus becoming centres of human congregation (Gattupalli, 2023). The Ghats of Varanasi along with its interaction with the River Ganga marks as a dynamic process of transformation and construction of varied ideas connecting people and their network. This notion had led to the creation of Religioscapes – a type of public spaces that is primarily marked by the presence of physical icons ranging from small shrines to large monuments and lastly involves an interchange between power relations – within the stretch of the river and the Ghats (Kanungo, 2022). The Ghats of Ganges in Varanasi is an integral part of India's rich cultural heritage as they have immense contribution to the spiritual enlightenment of not only people belonging to India but also to the people that are travelling from the outer regions (Swaroop, Sharma, & Kumar, 2023). Varanasi's Ghats are more than just physical landmarks; they are the living embodiment of the megacity's identity, closely intertwined with the holy Ganges. They operate as a stage for the performance of both regular life and ancient rites, and they exude the meter of life, death, and devotion. The Ghats serve as a reminder of the connection between cultural legacy and environmental health. To protect one is to protect the other. To ensure that the Ghats continue to be a revered representation of Varanasi and the holy Ganges, we must take a comprehensive approach that tackles both the aesthetic and environmental issues. Thus, Varanasi's creative heritage and its longstanding relationship with the Ganges are revealed through the lens of these Ghats which act as living museums (Shankar, Stairways to spirituality – Varanasi ghats where life and death dance, 2023).

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