

Ghats of Varanasi - An Emerging Centre of Pollution

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Abstract: Varanasi, the holy city of India, is also known by the name Kashi and Benaras among the locals. It is believed in Hinduism that Hindus who are cremated in Varanasi achieve an instant gateway to heaven. Ghats in Varanasi are the foremost places of performing pujas or are used exclusively for cremation sites (as per Hindu rituals). However with increasing population in India, the spiritual city is also being under the threat of acute problem of pollution. The river Ganga, along whose bank the city rose, is being constantly at a risk of endangering level of pollution from sewage or as a result of cremation. Thus there emerged a great concern to save and clean the river Ganga along with the Ghats in its vicinity. Several measures are taken by the Government to look into the matters more attentively. Thus it is of dire need of the people to address these problems with utmost concern.

Keywords: Kashi, Anandavan, Shankha, Ghats, Sraddha, Dasa-Ashwamedh Yajna

I. Introduction

VARANASI (25°20'N-87°7'E) is the spiritual capital of INDIA. The 3000 years old city is located in the eastern part of UTTAR PRADESH, along the left bank of river Ganga. The origin of the name of this holy city can be discovered through many tales and stories. The name VARANASI originates from the names of the two rivers- VARUNA (which flows from the north of the city) and ASI (which is a stream near Assi Ghat). The term "Ghat" refer to the areas in holy river-side cities like where stairs exist to reach the rivers. The ancient name of the city can be found in many Hindu scriptures such as THE RIGVAEDA, THE SKANDA PURANA, THE RAMAYANA and THE MAHABHARATA. THE RIGVEDA has referred the city as KASHI-The City of Light. In one verse of SKANDA PURANA, SHIVA says, "The three worlds form one city of mine, and KASHI is my royal palace therein." The city had tanks and little forests, which made it a peaceful place in pursuit of the metaphysical world. Hence, it has been named as ANANDAVAN (a forest of bliss) in many of the Hindu holy texts. Adi Shankaracharya, an austere worshipper of God said that- In the otherwise non-substantial world, the four substantial are: living in Kashi, the company of good people, water of the Ganga and worship of Shiva. It is also believed that Varanasi stands on 'THE TRISHOOL' (also called the TRIDENT) of the Lord Shiva. Hindus believe that one who is graced to die on the land of Kashi would attain salvation and freedom from the cycle of birth and re-birth. The river Ganga flows from west to east but at Varanasi it takes a north turn and forms vertical crescent shaped bank. The base of crescent is at the Assi ghat and at the tip lies at the Adi Keshava ghat. Thereafter, the river shifts to its east wards direction once again. Thus the city has a shape of a conch shell (shankha), which has got immense religious significance in Hinduism.

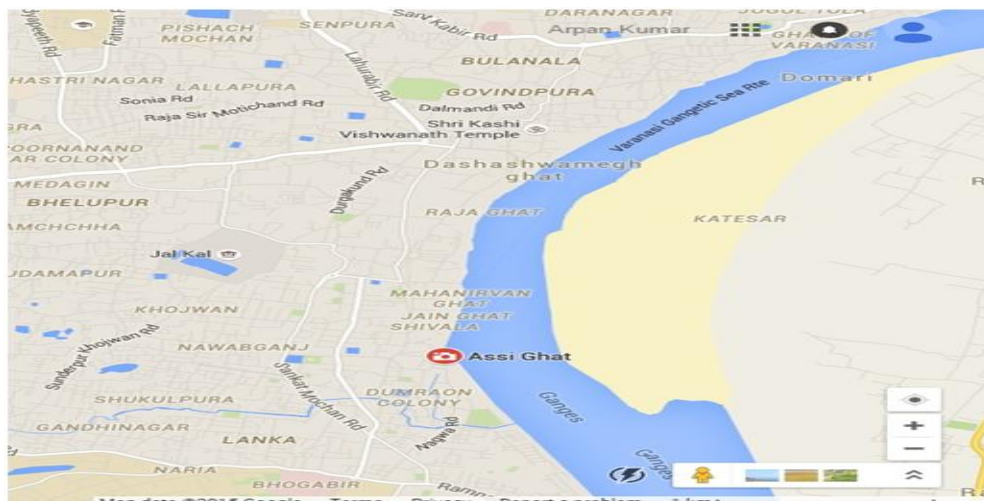


Figure 1: Map of the city of Varanasi along with the location of different Ghats.

II. Methodology

2.1. Pre Field Work

Identification of the problem- The main objective of the paper was to identify the cultural importance of Ghats and to access the present condition of the Ghats. Then the aim was to identify how pollution affects river Ganga and adjoining people of the city, which is the main problem of the region.

Then secondary data was reviewed by using a range of information sources such as research papers, newspaper articles, magazines on environmental threat and internet search engines. All these were collectively used to seek out solutions to solve such issues.

2.2. Field Work

Field survey was conducted to gather primary source data with the help of personal interviews with priests, boatmen, shopkeepers, devotees who come here to take holy dip in the river Ganga local people of Varanasi. Field work enabled to access the situation from a practical view.

2.3. Post field work

After suitable data were collected qualitative techniques has been adopted to carry out the assessment to derive appropriate results and solutions.

III. Importance of Ghats in Varanasi

The 84 Ghats of the river Ganga along the city of Varanasi is a sign of divinity endured in physical, metaphysical and supernatural elements. Sraddha is performed at these Ghats along with gifts and land donations are also made in the name of Brahmans who officiate various rituals. Taking a holy dip along the Ghat in river Ganga is considered to be pious deed. Many of the Ghats were built when the city was under control of the Marathas.



Figure 2: Dashashwamedh Ghat of Varanasi.

3.1. Dashashwamedh Ghat

The Dashashwamedh Ghat is located on the Ganges, close to the Kashi Vishwanath Temple. It is believed that Lord Brahma created it to welcome Lord Shiva and performed the DASA-ASHWAMEDH YAJNA which was done by sacrificing ten horses during the religious oblation. After the sunset the magnificent GANGA AARTI is also performed at the Dashashwamedh Ghat and Dr. Rajendra Prasad Ghat, by the 11 priests.

3.2. Dr. Rajendra Prasad Ghat

Man Mahal situated at Dr. Rajendra Prasad Ghat (just adjacent to the Dashashwamedh Ghat) is beautiful example of Mughal-Rajput architecture with stone balconied windows and painted ceiling. It was constructed in around 1600 A.D. by Man Singh, the Raja of Amber. An observatory (with a famous sun-clock) was added to this architecture in around 1737 A.D by Sawai Jai Singh II (1686-1745 AD) who was a great astronomer, a descendant of Raja Man Singh. Man-Mahal and the observatory is presently running in the safe hands of The Archaeological Survey of India.



Figure 3: Priests performing puja at the Ghats of Varanasi.

3.3. Harish Chandra Ghat

Harish Chandra Ghat is a cremation Ghat which is named after a mythological King Harish Chandra. Fate made him work at the cremation for the perseverance of truth and charity. The history of this Ghat is preserved in the tales which say that God rewarded him for his resolve, charity and truthfulness and restored his lost throne and dead son to him. According to Hindu mythology it is believed that the person cremated at this Ghat attains salvation (moksha). The Ghat has been modernized in the late 1980s with the inauguration of electric crematorium over here.

3.4. Manikarnika Ghat

The Manikarnika Ghat is the Mahasmasana (great cremation ground), which is followed by raised platforms that are used for death anniversary rituals. Stories are such that an ear-ring (Manikarnika) of Lord Shiva or his wife Sati fell here. There is another myth related to the Tarakesvara Temple (Shiva temple at the Ghat), which says that Lord Shiva whispers the Taraka mantra (Prayer of the crossing) in the ear of the dead for which the dead gets moksha.

3.5. Panchaganga Ghat

The sacred Ghat is located at the confluence of the five holy rivers which is Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Dhutpapa and Kirana. The Ghat is also marked by the Alamgir Mosque (locally known Beni Madhav- Ka- Darera), erected by emperor Aurangzeb, on the ruins of a Vishnu temple which was then built by the Maratha chieftain Beni Madhav Rao Scindia.

Thus different kinds of rituals related to the Ghat had emerged since the medieval period which are still followed by the people in their own ways.

IV. Problem Statement

The main problem of the cultural heritage city of Varanasi is that the Ghats are being increasingly becoming a disposal centre of industrial effluents, domestic sewage and also due to human cremation as per Hindu rituals. As a consequence water pollution in the River Ganga has increased manifold. This is a great concern because the river serves as a source of living for the people. Alternatively, the Ghats which are a site of cultural heritage are also simultaneously being polluted.

V. Major Findings

Ghats of Varanasi are the roots of cultural heritage of India which are presently at stake. Approximately 60000 devotees take holy bath in river Ganga, every day at these Ghats. The river is a medium of life for thousands of people. The major findings of the survey were:



Figure 4: Over pollution at the Ghats in Varanasi.

1. During the British rule, the city was given due importance to the construction of well-designed underground gravity sewage. Along with it, flushed toilets were installed and other required urban infrastructure were also laid. On the contrary, the present population of the city is about 1.5 million but the infrastructure then created has still not been improved to a significant level. The sewage system has become old and is unable to accommodate the present population which is spreading in an unplanned manner.



Figure 5: Crowding of boats along the banks of Varanasi.

2. People have started settling in low-level lands and on both sides of the small rivers, Asi and Varuna. People have started using storm water drains as sewer outfalls. The solid waste which is dumped on both sides of the river Asi (along the drains), enters the river in the monsoon due to the overflow in drains.

3. The river Varuna has turned black and turbid due to the excessive presence of city sewage in it. The Sakka Ghat witnesses a huge heap of solid waste tilting towards it.

4. These days the traditional boats have motors attached to them, which are used for tourism and transportation purposes along the river. This cause is a regular spillage of diesel into Ganga by the motorized bikes and the issue is still unable to grab the attention of the municipality.

5. There are no proper arrangements for the disposal solid wastes which even include garbage, unclaimed human dead bodies, half-burnt bodies, plastic bag and even the animal carcasses.

6. B D Tripathi, founder coordinator of Centre for Environmental Science and Technology at the Benaras Hindu University and an expert member of the National Ganga River Basin Authority (NGRBA) gave some statistics on the pollution of river Ganga which is enough to make the nation worry about the cleanliness of the river. He showed in a study (2012) that 300 tonnes of half burnt flesh is released in the river along with about 3,250

bodies of adults and children and 6,000 animal carcasses which are pushed into the Ganga. The sewage and industrial effluents of the holy city flow entirely into the river along the Ghats of Varanasi.

7. In 1986, according to Government's estimates, about 147 million litres per day (MLD) of sewage and industrial waste generated in Varanasi flowed into the Ganga. Now, over 200 MLD of wastewater is flowing into the river.



Figure 6: Priest bathing on river Ganga,

8. River Ganga is sick in Varanasi. Along the Ghats of Varanasi, Ganga water is polluted in which about 95% of this pollution is caused by sewage flowing into the river. The river water at the end of the town is grey and stinks, with methane bubbles coming to the surface where the river along the Ghats of Varanasi is used culturally, and is used for sipping, drinking and worship in the temples.

9. In particular the concentration of Nitrate, Chloride and Faecal coliforms in the river water has a major effect on water-borne disease like diarrhoea, viral hepatitis, dysentery, typhoid, cholera and gastroenteritis.

10. The BOD (biochemical oxygen demand) of Ganga water in Asi stream is around 4 mg/l and the (faecal coliform counts) FCC/100 ml is around 60,000. Safe drinking water here has become a challenge for the people. They do not have access to clean water for bathing which results in blinded eyes by trachoma

VI. Results and Discussion

It has thus become a priority for the Government of India to take a deep look into the affairs of Ganga, which is a chief river system in the country. Varanasi, being an important city located along the river bank, need special attention for the cleaning of the city. Thus several attempts have been taken by the government from time to time to clean the heritage city and to make it more pious. Some of such attempts to clean Ganga and associated Ghats of Varanasi are as follows-

6.1. Sankat Mochan Foundation

Sankat Mochan Foundation (SMF) which came into existence in 1982 and launched a "Swatcha Ganga" campaign in the same year. The organization started its work from Varanasi where they acted as a catalytic agent to spread the message of "clean Ganga" and to assure peoples' participation and assistance for the accomplishment of the objective

6.2. Ganga Action Plan

Many initiatives were taken to clean the holy river Ganga in Varanasi which includes: GANGA ACTION PLAN which was launched way back in 1986 under the surveillance of the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi but could not gain success till the programme got approval for its second phase on July 31, 2000. THE NATIONAL GANGA RIVER BASIN AUTHORITY was also formed by former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh on February 2009 with the objective of reduction of pollution and conservation of the river Ganga.

Narendra Modi, after becoming the Prime Minister of India, have launched a "Clean India" campaign, under which the Assi ghat and the ghats beside it, got cleaner look. He set up a national commission to clean Ganga.

The Union Minister of State for Tourism, Shripad Naik has announced allotment of Rs.18 crore (INR) for making the famous Ghats of River Ganga in Varanasi pollution free and aesthetic.

This is one of the first in the series of decisions taken immediately after Narendra Modi took over as the Prime Minister of India. Modi has inducted Uma Bharati with the task of totally cleaning River Ganga and Varanasi and directed Naik to develop this ancient city as a major attraction for the international tourists.

'Mission Clean Ganga by 2020' is the first priority of the Prime Minister. Modi has announced that no untreated municipal sewage and industrial effluents would flow into River Ganga and the investment required to create the necessary treatment and sewerage infrastructure will be shared suitably between the Central and state governments.

6.3 Mission Prabhu Ghat

Temsutula Imsong and Darshika Shah, both of whom work for a Varanasi NGO called Sakaar Seva Samiti, decided to take matters in their own hands by cleaning up the Assi ghat, for which they launched Mission Prabhu Ghat. After they finished their work at Prabhu Ghat, they are now working at Babua Pandey Ghat. Their work has won them praise from Prime Minister Narendra Modi.



Figure 7: The team working on Prabhu Ghat.

VII. Conclusion

According to Hindu Mythology, Varanasi liberates the soul from the body to the ultimate. It is the Ganga Ghats of Varanasi that complements the concept of divinity. Thus the culture, science and technology, political processes and the people of a nation must interact for balanced development of the country where various educational institutions and professional bodies have to take the lead, be it cleaning of rivers, environment or other spheres. A fresh start should be taken towards the project of cleaning Ganga at Varanasi, using appropriate technology which incurs minimum costs and involves the mass. This cultural heritage of India needs to be saved.

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