

**Religious Cities and the Impact of Urbanisation:** Searching for new ways to preserve the old spirit: the case of Varanasi

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### **Presentation**

1.5 million people live along the left crescent-shaped bank of the Ganges river in the middle Gangetic Valley, in North India, mid-way between New Delhi and Calcutta. The religious heart of classical India, Varanasi, (or Kashi as it is popularly called) is the most important pilgrimage destination of the Hindus and Buddhists. There are presently over 3000 Hindu shrines, over 1300 Muslim shrines, a few Buddhist, Jain and Sikh shrines.

The city of Varanasi is archaeologically proven to have been continuously inhabited by humans since ca. 800 BCE and is therefore described as one of the ancient most continuously living cities in the world. It has always played a special role in India, and since 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE also in promoting education- debates and dialectics, religious, spiritual and scientific- traditional medicine, yoga, astrology.

Along the river Ganges, normally flowing eastward but turning northward in Banaras, making the sun rise perpendicular to the flow of the river, the pilgrim can, with joint hands, salute simultaneously the river and the sun, the *raison d'être* which makes Banaras the best site for holy dips. Every year, more than a million pilgrims come to this city to bathe in the Ganges river, to immerse the ashes of the dead, to offer special prayers. Pilgrims flock to the ghats- the steep stairs that lead from the city to the western river bank. They come here to have a ritual bath and perform prayers in front of the rising sun, offering terracotta or leaf cups with candles, flowers and incense that float down the Ganges. The air is pierced with the golden rays of the aurora, laced with the scent of burning sandalwood and crushed marigolds, reverberating with the sounds of mantras, and enveloped in an aura of devotion.

The impact of pilgrimage and economic activities is harder in the old city centre where population density is extremely high (400 to 500 persons/ha). Here, behind the riverfront ghats, the urban space is marked by innumerable narrow lanes that are unreachable on four-wheel vehicles, making these riverfront ghats one of those rare urban landscapes in the world where one can reach only on foot. The ground floors of most of the houses that flank the lanes are sites of little shops, converting all lanes into an open bazaar. There is no distinction between commercial and residential areas. Even warehouses and small industries are located inside family homes. Although the doors on the lanes seem small, houses may be very big with impressive courtyards inside. This epitomizes the character of the city: clean and rich inside; poor and dirty outside: an incredibly primitive society made of incredibly refined individuals.

### **The city with a mind**

It is difficult to find a city that has its own “personality” so strong as does Banaras. It never leaves you indifferent. It never leaves you lukewarm. There’s he who hates the city at sight: dirty, crowded, chaotic, disorganised, careless, without a centre, without the anxiety to improve itself, without a proper legislative plan for development; you can find people “running away” from the city, cursing those who advised them to end up in that crowded, hot and smelly trap. There’s he who immediately falls in love with the city: isolated from time, from hurry, from history; full of hidden art, full of images soaking in people, children, cows, monkeys, magic, religion, mystery. There’s he who muses over the idea of stopping for God knows how long to see the river from the ghats; to wander around the endless narrow lanes; to absorb the eroticism that oozes from its atmosphere; to be transformed by questions on life’s meaning, questions that echo in every corner

of the city; to give in to the indefinable and contagious relaxation of the place, a place where calm is endemic and lethargy is a virtue. It isn't rare to find cases of people who walk in the city and then decide to stay on. Here, couples part ways because one is captivated by the city and the other is repulsed by it; tourists leave their groups and stay on for months. He is fortunate who belongs to one or these two categories: most often, the danger is ending up simultaneously in both- with one part of you that loves the city and the other that hates it. If it ever happens to you, I would suggest just this- don't try to find which of the two parts are right because it would be impossible.

The real value of Banaras is its strong personality. And we must turn to this aspect to help us understand what this traditional city is and eventually for guiding its urban development in a way that constructs and not destructs this "personality" of the city.

In traditional culture, there are different "Banaras" or rather different "states" or "levels" of Banaras. The city is conceived as a live entity, endowed with its own body, mind and soul. The body of the city corresponds to what the modern mind understands as a "city", i.e., the together of its structure and services. To enter its body, it's enough to buy a ticket and reach it but to enter its mind is a totally different matter altogether. The Hindu pilgrim believes that he has to be in the right psychological status in order to enter the city's mind and to be also accepted by the city. And so the pilgrim, when he arrives to the city, does not go immediately to the city centre. He stays outside for the first night to purify and orient himself. He first undertakes, usually on foot, the pilgrimage of an outer circle of the city that is punctuated with temples and ashrams (simple lodging structures for pilgrims). Then he visits the secondary temples, (among which an important one is of the deity "Kala Bhairava", the custodian of the city from whom he asks permission to enter the city) and then he finally enters the "subtle body" of the city.

The inhabitants of the city live this "subtle body" of the city in a different way. The people of Banaras (called Kashivasi) feel themselves a part of the collective mind of Banaras when they adopt the Banarasi attitude called "Banaras ki masti" (masti means drunk or in-love). It is an attitude that lies between the mystic, the enjoying and the ironic- somewhat like the culture of Naples but more extreme. The Banaras style is to take a lot of personal care and to neglect social hygiene, to be passionate about music and festivals and to be careless about managing urban services and technological instruments. Since it seems impossible that the situation could be improved or cured, people seem to enjoy whatever they can and forget the rest. This style of life animates the narrow lanes, the ghats, temples, etc. Banaras is also famous as the city of "death" because people come here to die or to immerse into the river the ashes of the dead. Maybe it is in reaction to this that the city has developed a great sense of enjoyment of life and is famous for its perfumes, sweets, pan (the betel leaf), bhang (cannabis), elaborate silk work, art, dance, music and yoga. Since traditionally, the last phase in the life of a Hindu man is spent in the forest and in isolation from society, half the population of Banaras lives in an "a-social" phase of their life, abstaining from the desire to possess and to have power and so they "abandon" themselves to the city.

### **A modern antiquity**

Howsoever much might one be captivated by the atmosphere of being "outside history" and might the Banarasi-s do all they can to hold on to it, the question that the city has now to put before itself is whether it can face the challenges of present history. One of the reasons why Banaras seems so "out of history" is also because of its beautiful old buildings- palaces, temples that are neglected. With the abolition of kingdoms and disputes between multiple inheritors of family properties, maintenance has been suspended since independence. The state and local government do not think it a priority to preserve even the most important artistic assets. If the architectural heritage of Banaras has maintained many of its characteristics, it is notwithstanding the various destructions done by Muslim dynasties, in the span of six centuries, to humble the city that was a symbol of

Hinduism. Reconstructed in the Hindu “renaissance” period of the Marathas, it was once again destroyed by Muslims in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and then conquered by the British. The latter put an end to the architectural destruction but intervened severely to change the urban structure: constructing roads where there were squares and canals (so Banaras gets water logged and flooded during each monsoon) and building where there once were gardens and making the once green city into what is today a concrete desert without its gardens. Very few trees remain today and what remains of the green areas of the city which was famous of the “city of the gardens” are at a high risk of being depleted. The only open public space that remains in the ancient city centre is its ghats. There are 84 ghats and around 40 to 60 stone steps on each ghat, depending on the height of each ghats. These ghats are spaces of social aggregation and they are similar to the squares in Mediterranean Europe.

During the period of colonising governments, Banaras had become the cultural capital of traditional India, encouraging the renaissance of Hindi, becoming the symbol of freedom. When India became independent, Banaras became just a peripheral city. But when the political importance of religion got lost, its spirit remained alive in the people and visitors of this city. The big palaces and temples constructed for a stretch of around 7 kms, built mostly by kings and feudal lords from different parts of India between eighteenth and twentieth centuries, are in an abandoned state today. Many of them are falling into ruin. But along the “Ghats”, religious life continues to thrive.

As an inheritance of having been the cultural capital of Hindu India, the city, besides thousands of monasteries, hermitages, and temples, has 5 universities, hundreds of active cultural institutes like schools for music, dance and art. But the capacity of these centres of learning to train people for modern professional competences is questionable. Much of economy revolves around tourism-pilgrims, foreign visitors and students.

Like most urban areas in India, Varanasi is being submerged by population increase and urban migration. With population growth, is increasing the demand for utilising every inch of free space in the ancient city centre that is already crowded. This is creating pressures for substituting existing spacious architectural forms with optimal space utilisation plans.

### **The need for a protective legislation**

So far Varanasi had been protected from the damages of development because it has remained outside development. But this is not going to last. One of the reasons is because neglect is taking its toll and architectural heritage could well be lost. The other reason is that India is developing fast and Varanasi cannot any longer remain an island outside this trend. But the question is “what sort of development”?

Tourism is seen as the potentially most promising industry. So there is an increased attention to look at tourism as the source to provide funds for the badly needed restorations. But should the buildings along the river-front be converted into hotels? But by betraying the traditional usage of urban space would we not be destroying the very resource for tourism, which is the “personality” of Varanasi?

The existing legislation is unable to prevent open spaces, even inside temple complexes, from being encroached upon by residential and commercial structures. These constructions are increasingly suffocating an already thickly populated and constructed area. The population growth is also over burdening the carrying capacity of the urban environment and the river eco-system and unplanned mass tourism could potentially have a hard impact on the cultural carrying capacity of the old city centre. Social hygiene and sanitation methods too are beginning to bend under the pressure of a growing resident population and a constant large floating population.

In the name of development, especially with regard tourism, old structures are being modified or demolished even there where structures are made of stone and are not weak. Recent construction work and events in the old city centre demonstrate that even when ownership is in a single proprietor's hands, he prefers rebuilding rather than renovating. The modification of urban spaces in the old city centre of Varanasi could also negatively and irreversibly alter the religious and cultural life for which the city is sacred and destroy the tourist attractions – both of which are the major sources of earning for its population.

### **Tradition and Modernity: The two fold path of a new culture for religious cities**

The urban layout and space of Banaras has always been in harmony with its economic, social and cultural life. But now changes are taking place in the urban spaces of the ancient city and in the social and cultural lives of the people. However, the change is still minimal. This is, paradoxically, because of the extreme religious importance of the city, the resistance of people to change, the strict following of age-old traditions and consumption patterns, a strict social structure of castes and poverty. The buildings are inhabited, largely by poor people who are tenants, since generations, or who are their guardians. They cannot be pushed out of their homes because of favourable legislations. These people are not owners of their homes and so they can neither change the use of their properties nor can they leave their homes because their livelihoods are concentrated in the ancient city centre (like the boatmen, the masseurs, the priests, etc.).

A large number of buildings in the city centre are still used for religious purposes like temples and adjacent houses of the priests, ashrams (residential places for pilgrims), maths (residential areas for followers of a certain religious sect), houses that are still kept as places of spiritual retreats for families residing in other cities, schools for religious studies. Majority of the remaining buildings are utilised for purposes related to religious activities, like lodges and eating places for pilgrims, shops catering to pilgrim needs, spaces for performing rituals, sermons, special prayers and outlets for traditional handicrafts and silk popular all over the country.

However changes are taking place in the urban space layouts and utilisation and in social behaviour patterns. These changes are an interconnected phenomenon. Wherever urban spaces and buildings in the city centre are being modified to suit modern needs, traditional urban life styles are beginning to change. For instance, where old houses on the ghats are being converted into hotels catering mainly to foreign tourists, presence of pilgrims and related activities is beginning to reduce. On the other hand, as small shops are being converted into cyber cafes, shops catering to foreign tourists, restaurants, social and cultural life patterns are beginning to change. Or, conversely, as people become more educated and less liturgically religious, as television increasingly becomes a means of entertainment and replaces moments of social aggregation, as restaurants become more fashionable than drinking tea while sitting on the ghats, the social and cultural behaviours of this religious town will begin to change.

**The efforts of our organisation.** Our organisation got catapulted into the battle for safeguarding the city's cultural heritage because it tried to stop a palace on the ghats from being demolished totally and from it being converted into a luxury hotel. This demolition was only the tip of the iceberg and our organisation realised that it could not limit itself to fighting a single case because the entire stretch of ghats was at danger of being damaged and altered. So, we proposed to the district authorities, fortunately sensitive to this issue, to do a thorough documentation of the entire ghat area and its buffer zone of around 400metres behind it and to enlist this entire area of the ancient city centre into the UNESCO World Heritage List. We felt that international pressure would push the state and the local authorities to make legislations for protecting the heritage of the city. And this is slowly beginning to happen. The city centre will be proposed for the World Heritage

List next year. This, however, was not enough to stop damaging development activities. So we have proposed heritage conservation legislations that will be presented for approval by the State Legislative Assembly probably within this year. And we are monitoring the old city centre to identify wrong construction activities.

But these steps are not enough. We need the direct participation of stakeholders in the process if we want to sustain our efforts in the long run. **We need the support of the people to sustain all activities of preservation.** So, we are parallelly trying to get schools involved in adopting heritage properties, in learning their history, in keeping them clean, maintain them, etc. We are trying to get youth organisations involved in adopting selected areas and then working for awareness building, increasing participative management and making people proud of their cultural roots and treasures.

**And we need to link all activities of preservation to development,** to the possibility of improving the standards of living (through tourism for instance) of the people and to increasing employment opportunities.

**But some of our questions still remain unanswered-** What will be the new culture of such religious cities as Varanasi? Will the forces of urbanisation and modernisation change the very reason and nature of their existence and their past growth? And if this happens, how will they sustain themselves economically, socially and culturally? Will they, within their physical and social structures, be able to harmonise modernity and tradition, their rural and urban character, prosperity and simplicity? Or will they have to leave one in order to adapt to the other? Or will they remain confused?