

The features of Varanasi

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.

Behind the riverfront ghats, the urban space is marked by innumerable narrow lanes that are unreachable on four-wheel vehicles, making these ghats one of those rare urban landscapes in the world where one can reach only on foot. These ghats are the only open space for the residents of the old city and some of them are unfortunately being eroded from beneath by the force of the river waters. Nothing is being concretely done to save them.

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, the characteristic balconies that overlook the lanes host some of the most beautiful pieces of wrought iron railings. The houses are often 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.

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.

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 5th century BCE also in promoting education- debates and dialectics, religious, spiritual and scientific- traditional medicine, yoga, astrology.

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.

The urban layout and space of Banaras has always been in harmony with its economic, social and cultural life. 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 change is, however, 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.

Pilgrimage related activities are still the economic backbone of the city. A large number of buildings in the old city are still used for religious purposes like temples and adjacent houses of the priests, ashrams (residential places for pilgrims), matths (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.

Banaras has become the cultural capital of traditional India, encouraging the renaissance of Hindi, becoming the symbol of freedom. Even 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. This is the real heritage of the city, linked intimately to the ghats, to the lofty buildings that flank the river and to the myriad of temples that punctuate every corner of the old city. If these buildings are demolished, the ever-living life of “Banaras-on-the-ghats” will die with it.

I think that the value of Banaras is also its strong personality. It is difficult to find a city that has its own “personality” so strong as does Banaras. This personality might help us understand what eventually could guide the urban development of the old city in a way that constructs and not destroys this “personality” of the city. The city never leaves you indifferent. It never leaves you lukewarm. There’s he who hates the city at sight: dirty, crowded, chaotic, disorganised, careless, 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 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.

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. The British 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 buildings where once there were gardens and making the once green city into what is today a concrete desert.