

Threats and Prospects

Vrinda Dar

According to Hindu law it is one's moral duty to preserve one's inheritance and pass it down to following generations. But in Banaras it has always been difficult to preserve the architectural heritage and to defend it. The biggest challenge is posed by the Ganga itself. Rising to a maximum height each year in August and September, the swirling floodwaters of the river engulf the ghats and spill into the streets, dislodging massive stone blocks and causing structures to collapse. The architectural environment of the city may be seen as an ongoing struggle with this menace, responding to the dangers of its riverside location by more or less effective campaigns of repair and rebuilding. This explains why so few of the ghats and riverside palaces in Banaras date back more than two hundred years. Then there is the political history of the city itself. Enriched economically and culturally by its location in the midst of the Gangetic plain, at a strategic midpoint on North India's busiest highway where the Ganga could most easily be forded, Banaras attracted, and bore, waves of invading armies. The destructive impact of the invaders on the city's architecture is still plainly evident in the torso of the ruined Vishvanatha temple protruding from behind the mosque that Aurangzeb built over its remains in 1669. But though this and other examples of architectural destruction are plainly visible throughout the city, there is overwhelming evidence of an irrepressible force to repair and refashion the built environment. This then is the miracle of Banaras: its ability to survive and regenerate. Gone are the invading armies, but Banaras still faces a new and in some ways more menacing threat - that of unsustainable and unplanned development. The danger now is that the riverfront palaces will be substituted with luxury hotels and fashionable shopping centres. They will deprive the city of its historic landmarks and will dispossess the people of Banaras of the architectural expressions of their cultural identity. In order to respond to such a threat and fulfil the responsibility of preserving and transmitting the city's heritage, responsible citizens of Banaras, civil society bodies and government institutions have initiated a process of participatory policy design for the management of the historic city centre.

The authors of this volume have effectively outlined the broad range of the city's architecture; the illustrations that accompany their articles are a vivid testimony to the present-day condition of many of the most important historical buildings of Banaras; some palaces, havelis, temples and mosques are obviously well maintained and freshly painted; others are dilapidated (Devakinandan Haveli, Chet Singh Palace) or totally abandoned (Digpatiya Palace, Ausanganj Haveli, Vitthal Das ki Haveli); some are encroached upon (Gurudham Temple) or have been partially or completely destroyed (Kashmiri Mal ki Haveli, Darbhanga Palace, Shish Mahal, Mir Rustam Ali Fort).

While Banaras is one of the unique cities in the world where traditional life style is best preserved, it is paradoxically also one of the cities where architectural heritage is least protected. There is no law that forbids private owners to make drastic changes to their historic buildings or even completely destroy them just to achieve clear land property. There is indeed an ordinance that forbids new constructions within a 200 meter distance from the riverside, but this is little policed and extensively disrespected.

Until recently there has been no concern for architectural preservation. One reason is that in Banaras, architectural heritage is just one of many other and perhaps more significant, aspects of cultural heritage that is identified with belief and life style rather than with construction. In a liturgical sense Hindu temples are merely prasada, or left overs, of Vedic rituals. The sacramental centre of Banaras is not to be found in any building. Rather it is the altar made by the river itself, where the sun rises perpendicularly, forming the line of light that at dawn cuts across the waters into which the devotee dips and prays. The subsidiary importance given in India to architectural maintenance is perhaps more extreme in this city because it is the paramount pilgrimage site of the whole country. It is unfeasible for Hindus to view the architectural heritage as something apart from its ritual context.

A second reason for the neglect of architectural preservation in Banaras is that since the city, its population and visitors are considered so “traditional” those who concerned with its well being are focused more on establishing an agenda for development rather than for conservation. Such an attitude means that architectural heritage has never been privileged. Not surprisingly, this has led to disastrous consequences: the partial collapse of Balaji palace, killing pilgrims, the tasteless demolition of Kashmiri Mul ki Haveli and the open illegalities at Darbhanga palace. Balaji palace was perhaps the most beautiful residence on the riverfront of Banaras; its neglect has resulted in numerous partial collapses, the latest four years back when a balcony fell upon women singing devotional hymns in the holy month of Kartik. Its side walls now represent a serious hazard for all those who pass along the ghats below, but there is no announcement of any danger. The case of Darbhanga palace highlights the problems of development choices. One of the most photographed buildings on the central ghats, the palace was recently sold to a chain of hotels. Demolition and rebuilding began in open disrespect for the government ordinance that prohibits within 200 meters from the riverfront any construction except temples or ashrams. Only on the insistence of the Archaeological Survey of India has this activity been stopped. The half-demolished old palace and half-built new hotel epitomize the indecision of the city in conceptualising and implementing any effective plan for conservation management of the historic centre. But tourism is not the only enterprise that is inconsiderate of the historic heritage. Religious organisations and princely state

heirs also allow buildings to collapse or, worse, pull them down in the name of religion, development or lack of maintenance funds. The Kashmiri Mal ki Haveli and Ausanganj Haveli are some examples. Though the new buildings that will come up here may indeed accord with “orthodox Hindu” beliefs and architectural norms as conceived today, they will surely lack structural integrity and historic significance.

Thankfully, the downward slide of architectural protection has not gone unnoticed. A number of NGOs in Banaras have become increasingly active in promoting the cause for protecting the city’s heritage. Recently, the city administration, eminent citizens and civil society bodies came together and agreed to animate a process aimed at producing a heritage conservation legislative framework for Varanasi. As a strategic step, it was agreed that the international value of the riverfront ghats and the old city centre would be acknowledged and that this site would be proposed for recognition by UNESCO as being of “universal value to humanity”. The Government of India has requested the city to complete the dossier with a detailed conservation and management plan so as to be able to propose it to UNESCO. Experts from India and abroad are forming a panel to support the Varanasi Development Authority (VDA) and the Municipal Board of Varanasi in this effort. Such activities require new agendas and new alliances.

The history of preservation and renovation of ghats goes back to the early 1930s when a religious trust, Kashi Tirtha Sudhar Samiti, KTSS (founded in 1926), realising the serious threats to the river front, drew up an improvement and development plan with a starting fund of Rs. 50,000. This project was supported by the Viceroy and Governor General of India, Lord Baron Irwin. The trust prepared a book giving a detailed account of the ghats and the improvement plan (1931), with an estimated cost of Rs. 3 million. But this amount was never allocated, and thus the project could not be fully implemented. The second attempt was made during the early 1960s by the American Academy of Banaras (since 1970 known as the American Institute of Indian Studies), taking as a pilot project the Rewa Palace where they had their first establishment. This was a successful project, and later the building was transferred to Banaras Hindu University. The third wave of conservation and preservation was started in the 1980s under the sponsorship of INTACH, Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage. With their support, the palace of Raja Ghat was completely restored, renovated and preserved in keeping with its original form. INTACH has further supported the restoration and cleaning of the Manikarnika Ghat. Since then, no such sponsored and community based restorations and renovations have taken place, except for some individual attempts.

Civil society bodies and government authorities in Banaras are agreeing that to achieve a more positive attitude towards architectural heritage, certain processes will have to be set into

motion. More evaluation and detailed listings need to be made of the existing heritage of the city. From this point of view, the present volume may be seen as a preliminary contribution, but a systematic and comprehensive documentation is now urgently required. Then there is the legal aspect: suitable legislation needs to be created and enforced at city, state and national level.

Above all, it is important to contextualise the protection of Banaras within the central emotional role that the city plays in the country's consciousness. Existing national and international consciousness of Banaras needs to be directed towards the city's architectural heritage. In responding to the Government of India invitation to prepare an effective Conservation and Management Plan, it is essential that all stakeholders be involved and that all aspects of the city's unique heritage be considered; namely (1) the tangible heritage, especially the built architectural heritage (temples, shrines, palaces, mathas, mosques, ashrams, water bodies, etc.), and art and craft heritage (paintings, folk art forms, silk weaving, wood, metal crafts, etc.); (2) the intangible heritage, covering the local religious and cultural life of the city and related activities (pilgrims rituals, traditional schools, music, forms of dance and folk theatre, study centres, matha and ashram life, religious teaching, etc.); and (3) the cultural landscape heritage, in particular the unique identification of the natural setting of the Ganga with the specific religious importance of the ghat area and religious buildings and palaces there, as well as the natural preservation of the eastern banks and rural area beyond it.

Clearly the challenge ahead is to integrate all activities of heritage preservation with the utilization of this heritage as a resource for improving the quality of life and employment opportunities of the resident community in this greatest of India's holy cities.

Ms. Vrinda Dar has been working since 17 years, in India and Europe, in projects on sustainable development. She firmly believes that only stakeholder participated approaches to development, based on preservation of local cultures, economies and social dynamics can lead to sustainable development. Her activities of protecting the heritage of the ancient city of Kashi are based on such an approach to development.

Email: vrinda.dar@gmail.com