

Why Varanasi needs a Conservation Policy

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In Banaras, the tourism industry is greedily investing in building new structures to lodge tourists who stop over for short visits to get a quick view of those parts of the “old” city that are world famous for their unique features. The tourism industry in Varanasi is little concerned with sharing the benefices of development with the local community. In fact, one of the features of the city is that here the tourism industry is less capable than elsewhere of preserving the resources upon which the tourism business is based, i.e. the architectural, social and cultural heritage of the historic city centre.

Many of the historic palaces, that are the stars of the city, are in a dilapidated state. Everybody finds excuses for oneself and throws responsibility on others. The state blames this on the lack of budget provisions and pressing matters of higher national importance. Developers lobby for new constructions and not for conservation of the old. The result is the rampant erosion of an increasing number of neglected old structures along the Ghats. So the “developers” are raising this issue to force their solution, i.e. to transform these structures into luxury hotels along the Ganges. But unplanned commercial exploitation of the Ghats will lead to disharmony with the traditional life along the river, provoke crises in the identity of the resident community of the historic city centre and will also undermine the resources upon which tourism is based. So, the challenge is to contrast such an unsustainable model of development. Some people, including visionary administrators, responsible political people, motivated traditional stalwarts, professors, lawyers, media and civil society bodies like the Kautilya Society, are now taking up this challenge.

This short article interprets what has been discussed and done by these people, gathers together their thoughts and speaks on their behalf. Classical civilisations, and especially the Hindu culture, have attributed supreme importance to the preservation of tradition. Its central idea was that social institutions, scientific knowledge and technological applications need to use “heritage” as a “resource”. Using contemporary language, we could say that ancient Indians considered, as social resources, both economic assets (like natural resources and ways to utilise them) and factors promoting social integration (like institutions for the preservation of knowledge and maintenance of civil order). Ethics considered that the inherited ought not be consumed, but be handed over, possibly enriched, to successive generations. This was a moral imperative for the householder as well as for the ruler of a state. Of course, there were people who squandered rather than transmitted but the ethical condemnation of such behaviour was universal and such an exploitative attitude could have been implemented only by force.

Modern times have however arrived with a different perspective of the value of heritage and the role of ethics in community life. And this has arrived even in Varanasi where now we have the paradox of it being one of the cities where traditional life style is best preserved, but also where architectural heritage is least conserved. There is no law that forbids private owners to make drastic changes to their historic buildings and even completely destroy them just to have a clear land property. There is a timid ordinance that forbids new constructions within “200 meters” distance from the riverbanks but this ordinance is little policed and extensively disrespected. This ordinance was issued by the Uttar Pradesh Government in 2001 to protect the architecture and river front facades of old cities along the river Ganga but State Government will continue to forget monitoring its implementation unless local community is involved in the process of policy planning for the conservation and management of the historical city centre.

The city has so much of “historical” and the people have been so much “traditional”, that those who were concerned with the well being of Varanasi have been busy in trying to establish an agenda for development rather than for conservation. Anyhow, there are enough religious institutions and conservative landlords to take care of the old. But even if Banaras is reputed to be resting on the top of Shiva’s Trishula (trident), it isn’t isolated from the rest of the world. Here, too, unsustainable development is taking its toll. Old buildings are not maintained; the land mafia has learned to do business with priests and sadhu-s; fundamentalist politicians do not consider it anti-patriotic to dismantle historic symbols and cater to “running-through” international tourist groups; and constructors are using the label “development” for whatever addition of bricks and cements they make to the overbuilt city centre.

Banaras has started recognising that this asset might not be transmitted to the next generations. Two examples will clarify this issue. One is what is happening to the Balaji Palace and the other to the Darbhanga Palace. Two years ago, in Banaras, during the sacred month of Kartik (October-November), a group of women was singing devotional songs, along the riverfront ghats, below the walls of the historic Balaji palace of the Gwalior estate. Suddenly, the walls of the palace collapsed, burying with it twelve of the women who were immersed in prayers. The remaining walls of the palace still stand precariously, ready to fall and kill anytime. The reason for this neglect is certainly not the lack of funds with the owner. Neither does a system exist to protect the public from such fatal situations nor does an insurance to compensate the lives lost due to the owner’s neglect. So, there is a lack of legislations and a lack of concern. In such a vacuum, even aggressive initiatives like the one of the Darbhanga Palace have public support. One of the most photographed palaces on the central Ghats of Varanasi, it belonged to the king of Darbhanga and was sold six years ago to a national hotel chain. The demolition of the palace began at the beginning of the year in an open act of refusal of the state Government ordinance, which prohibits the construction of any building

200 metres from the riverbanks, except temples, or ashram, which have received approval. Except for its front external façade, the palace, including an old temple inside it, was completely demolished and an ugly high modern structure was constructed instead. This constructed has been stopped for the moment, not because it is located in the heritage zone, nor because of its proximity to the river; only because the media, some responsible political people and civil society synergised to move the administration and because it was within 300 meters of a “National Monument” (the Manmandir observatory), protected by the Archaeological Survey of India and so requires their permission. This approval has not yet been granted.

But the real question is not of a formality like that of “distance” from a monument. The vital question is whether the local community has a say on the transformation of the riverfront from a sacred area to a tourist facility? Demolishing old palaces and converting them into new hotels in the old city centre and along the ghats will drastically change the economic, social, cultural and environmental balance which makes the city unique in the world. The minimal existing legislation is unable to prevent open spaces, even inside temple complexes, from being encroached upon by residential and commercial structures. The population growth is over burdening the carrying capacity of the urban environment and the river eco-system and unplanned mass and luxury tourism could potentially have a hard impact on the cultural carrying capacity of the old city centre. Social hygiene and sanitation services too are beginning to bend under the pressure of a growing resident population and a constant large floating population.

While demographic pressures force new illegal and low-standard housing to mushroom in the low lying areas along the River Ganga at the two ends of the city, beyond the river Varuna in the North and the river Assi in the South, new illegal structures get added on to old historical buildings, temples and ashrams along the river in the ancient sacred part of the city. Not only are the historical, cultural and religious buildings today in peril of being demolished or mutated forever in a misused interpretation of “development”, but so are the old trees of this once famous “city of the gardens”, the haveli-s of the benefactors of this city, the sacred water bodies or kunds, the riverfront and the Goddess Ganga herself. Like most urban areas in India, Varanasi is being submerged by steep demographic increase and urban migration. 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 riverfront be converted into hotels? Does development always have to imply construction? Can we not develop preserving our heritage? By betraying the traditional usage of urban space, would we not be destroying the very resource for tourism, which is the “personality” of Varanasi?