



The Ghats of Varanasi: An Exploration of Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract: This paper is about the ghats of Varanasi, located along the sacred river Ganga in India. It emphasises the role of river Ganga in shaping the economic and cultural landscape of the region, where different classes like priests, boatmen, and cremation workers depend on the river water as a source of employment. It explores the impact of increasing tourism and the opportunities and challenges associated with tourism. This paper examines the dynamics of livelihoods around the ghats, where on one hand the ghats have become the hub of gatherings and cultural events and on the other hand, it creates social issues like pollution, inadequate sanitation and many more. Findings reveal that there is need for severe development strategies in a sustainable way by promoting the importance of sanitation, scientifically proven infrastructures, skill enhancement programs for workers etc. These efforts aim to balance the cultural heritage of the city with the economic well-being of the population.

Key Words: Economy, Culture, Geography, Ghats, River Ganga, Opportunities, Pollution, Sustainable Development.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Generally, the subject matter of Geography is very vast. It is concerned with the study of physical and human phenomena that make up our earth, its environment, and places. It includes the exploration of people, culture, tradition, politics, economy, settlements, landforms, flora-fauna, climate, and many more. At present, Geographers are focused more on regional studies of different aspects. Different regions have certain traits in common, it can be natural or man-made. Regional studies help to understand the unique characteristics of places, along with their landscape, climate, culture, economy, politics, and others.

Varanasi is a city of culture, traditions, and spirituality that has been celebrating Indian culture from ancient times. Being located on the bank of the holy river Ganga, it attracts millions of pilgrims every year. Due to its rich cultural heritage, history, iconic riverfront ghats, alleys, and spiritual atmosphere, people choose to visit Varanasi. The river Ganga has a spiritual significance in Hinduism, and it's a blessing as it has been providing livelihood opportunities to locals as well. This paper has tried to discuss various employment opportunities and challenges that faced by the local people of Varanasi resides near the ghats with reference to river Ganga.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

The cultural heritage of India produces unity among Indians. In recent decades, it has played a vital role in boosting our tourism sectors. 'Cultural heritage is, in its broadest sense, both a product and a process, which provides societies with a wealth of resources that are inherited from the past, created in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations' (UNESCO, 2014). The tourism of Varanasi has developed at a high speed, but the development process has both negative and positive impacts on the heritage of the city, including the people reside here. In many cases, the benefits received by heritage locations through increased tourism activities may eventually be overshadowed by the negative long-term effects of the process (Benur and Bramwell, 2015). Alan R. Beals in "Ganga: A Study in the Political Economy of Banaras" (1990), has introduced the river Ganga as a religious symbol of society, its rituals, purity, pilgrims and the livelihoods of the boatmen, laundrymen, and other communities that depend on the river water. Beals also signifies Ganga as a resource that frames the economy of the city. "Prospects and Constraints in Development of

Varanasi as Smart City, India' (2016) by Akhilendra Nath Tiwary has discussed the scope of sustainable development through different parameters and policies and sustainable smart cities should be adopted utilizing modern technology.

3. OBJECTIVES:

The primary objectives of this study have been mentioned below:

- To explore the livelihood opportunities provided by the ghats of Varanasi.
- To study the role of river Ganga in the livelihood of the stakeholders.
- To identify the challenges faced by them.
- To suggest sustainable solutions for managing the problems.

4. METHODOLOGY:

This geographical research combines observation method, interviews with vendors and sellers around the ghats, and analysis of secondary data from governmental and non-governmental sources.

5. STUDY AREA:

Varanasi is one of the significant spiritual and cultural realms in Northern India, located on the left bank of Ganga River, which has a central place in the traditions of pilgrimage, death, and mourning in Hinduism. It is a city in the eastern Uttar Pradesh which was previously known as Banaras, Benaras or Kashi, and is recognised as the oldest living city, dating to the 11th century B.C. This sacred place is known for its culture, textiles, ghats, temples, ancient learning centres, foods, handicrafts and many more, which has been a symbol of the Hindu Renaissance. The river Ganga is like the spine of Varanasi, where the ghats play a crucial role in the livelihood of people. Currently, there are total 88 ghats in Varanasi. Most of the ghats are bathing and worshipping sites, where two of them are cremation sites i.e., Manikarnika and Dashashwamedh Ghat. According to studies, the business establishment in the old bazaar has increased by 50% and its daily revenue has grown by 80%. Moreover, the number of tourists has increased by approximately 90% in the city.

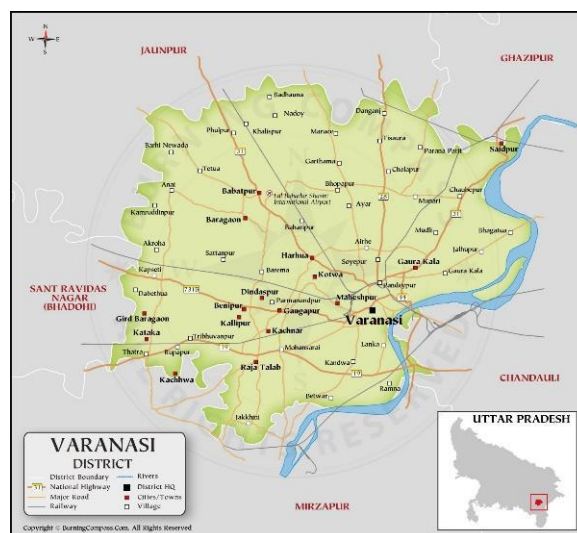


Figure 1. District map of Varanasi

6. DESCRIPTION OF THE GHATS :

Ghats are generally the riverfront steps towards the bank of river. In Varanasi, the presence of the ghats are mainly due to the existence river Ganga. At present, Varanasi is the home to almost 88 ghats, each of which has its own unique history and story behind its names. They have been an integral part of spirituality from ancient times, but most of them were rebuilt in the 18th century under the Maratha patronage. The ghats are surrounded by enormous old buildings, temples and gullies. The main attraction of these ghats is the captivating morning and evening *Aarti*(worship), where several pundits or priests perform this ritual on a daily basis. All rituals start at the ghats with a sacred bath in the river. The aura and mesmerizing view attract visitors from all over the world.



Assi ghat	Harishchandra ghat	Darbhanga ghat	Bhonsale ghat
Tulsidas ghat	Lali ghat	Munshi ghat	Ram ghat
Janki ghat	Kedar ghat	Dashashwamedh ghat	Panchganga ghat
Vaccharaja ghat	Kshameshwar ghat	Man Mandir ghat	Durga ghat
Jain ghat	Narad ghat	Mir ghat	Gai ghat
Panchkot ghat	Raja ghat	Lalita ghat	Prahlad ghat
Shivala ghat	Pandey ghat	Manikarnika ghat	Ravi ghat
Hanuman ghat	Chausatti ghat	Scindhia ghat	Raj ghat

List of popular ghats in Varanasi

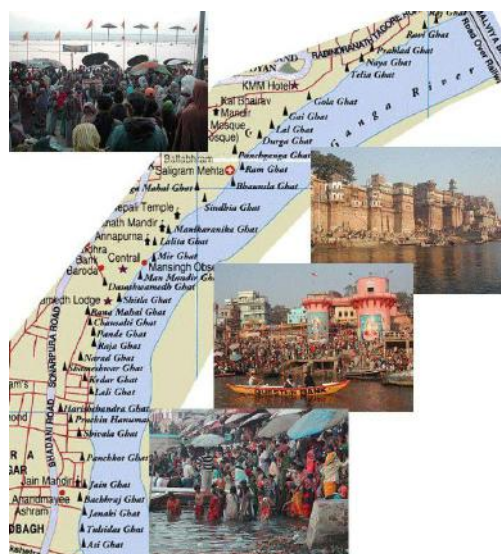


Figure 2. Ghats map of Varanasi

Assi ghat, the most famous ghat for tourists, is the southernmost of all, located at the confluence of the river Ganga and Assi. It is spacious and not as crowded as the others, a place for tourists, students, researchers and also a hub of employment for locals. **Dashashwamedh ghat** is one of the oldest ghats in Varanasi, most popular among people due to its presence near the **Kashi Vishwanath Temple**. Evening **Aarti** is the main attraction here. **Manikarnika** and **Harishchandra ghat** are two cremation ghats where traditional Hindu cremation rituals are performed. It is believed that these sacred, iconic sites are the paths to liberation; those who get cremated here are liberated from the cycle of life. Every ghat in the city has its own unique characteristics.

8. LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES AT THE GHATS:

The river Ganga is a boon to the people of Banaras. The unity of spirituality is clearly seen in Varanasi, which ties a strong knot of harmony among people. The ghats are the heart of the city, where people gather and enjoy the beauty of harmony. With the emerging tourists from all over the world, today it has become a hub of employment. The settlers of nearby states and districts migrate here in search of work; most of them are from economically weaker states like Bihar. The most common means of earning in the ghats are boatmen or ferrymen, priests, street vendors, tour guides and photographers, hospitality sector workers, artists and many more.

Traditional occupations that prevail around the ghats of Varanasi are **priests, temple workers, cremation workers** etc. Varanasi is home to thousands of temples, which were erected at different times throughout history by various saints and rulers. Priests perform religious rituals for pilgrims and get a monthly allowance from the Government. The cremation workers, known as **Doms**, run the cremation services, where nearly 100 corpses are cremated everyday. They work endlessly throughout the day, earning lesser to run their families.



Figure 3. Livelihood Opportunities at the Ghats

The influx of domestic and international tourists has created demands for **boatmen, tour guides and photographers, translators, vendors, hotels and guesthouses**, etc. Boatmen and ferrymen are an integral part of the city's history and economy; traditionally, they belong to the *Nishad, Kewat, Manjhi and Chamar* castes. Types of boats vary from traditional wooden boats to river cruises, where the fares of boat ride varies accordingly. The self-skilled boatmen ride their boat from one ghat to another and charge accordingly. Varanasi is a photogenic place, and one can easily find photographers and guides around the ghats. Vendors are seen roaming around the ghats with items like candles, flowers, sacred items, traditional handicrafts, toys, fast food items and many more. Service sector offers employment options to the locals. The ghats have become a focal point for cultural events and festivals, where local artists can earn money by showcasing their talents and one can open small temporary shops. These occupations hold a significant amount of Varanasi's population; however, the income level highly depends on the traffic of the tourists.

9. EFFECT OF RIVER GANGA ON THE OCCUPATION OF LOCALS:

The river Ganga plays a pivotal role in shaping the livelihoods of people living in and around the ghats of Varanasi. This holy river is not just a spiritual symbol of Hinduism but also the economic backbone for many communities. The river Ganga provides a livelihood to local fishermen, who catch fish and sell them in the market. People also engage in aquaculture, harvesting fish and other aquatic resources like water plants. The washing and dyeing industry is heavily reliant on its waters for washing clothes; the ghats provide open spaces for drying under the sun. The textile industry also uses the river water for processing fabrics. However, there's an interrelationship between the river Ganga and the activities of the locals. On one hand, the river provides opportunities to people, and on the other hand, the river is affected by the activities of people. Moreover, the river Ganga poses some difficulties in the occupations of locals. When the level of water in the river rises during monsoon, it causes several problems in the city, including flooding around the ghats, which indirectly creates other challenges like diseases, and disruption in the transportation which lowers tourism traffic. The submergence of ghat steps influences the works of people, affecting cremations at Manikarnika and Harishchandra ghat; floods cause inundation of temples located on the riverbanks. These floods disrupt livelihoods, displacing people and damaging property, particularly for boatmen, vendors, shopkeepers, laundry workers, and fishermen. They face income instability, roads get blocked, as a result of which the problem of traffic congestion appears in the city. The water level of the river drops significantly during dry season.

Despite being a lifeline for Varanasi and holding immense cultural, religious, and economic significance, the river Ganga and its ghats are affected by the activities of people, and outcomes are again harmful for people. Religious offerings, untreated sewage, inappropriate garbage dumping contribute to the river's pollution; higher levels of water contamination can cause several diseases among people. Continuous water flow and construction of infrastructures cause erosion of ghats, threatening historical structures and livelihoods dependent on these areas. Religious activities like cremations contribute ash and remains in the river. Pollution and habitat destruction endanger aquatic species like the Gangetic dolphin, affecting the ecological balance and local tourism.

Efforts to address these challenges, like the '*Namami Gange*' program, aim to clean and rejuvenate the Ganga river. However, consistent community participation and sustainable practices are crucial for a meaningful change.



10. CHALLENGES & RECOMMENDATIONS:

The paper has included common challenges that are faced by the locals residing around the ghats:

- People have to rely on the peak season for a good income, because during the monsoon it is dangerous to roam around the ghats, especially for street vendors and artists, leaving them vulnerable with low income.
- The problem of sanitation is one of the major concerning problems primarily caused by overcrowding, posing threat to the health of the working population.
- The traditional works around the ghats offer low wages, which disturbs their financial stability.

Recommendations have been mentioned below:

- Promotion of cleanliness campaigns, displaying advertisements with hoardings and paintings to make people aware and to attract tourists.
- Development of infrastructures in a sustainable way.
- Enhancement of the skills of communication and introduction of training programs for the local workers will be helpful to lead a smooth life economically.

11. CONCLUSION:

The cultural tradition of Varanasi is an essential part of the city's identity, which serves employment options for local peoples. The paper highlights the essential role of river Ganga in providing a livelihood to different classes living near the ghats. The influx of domestic and international tourists creates employment in the tourism and hospitality sector. It has turned these ghats into a hub of employment but with challenges as well. Common challenges like floods, pollution, and lower wages for workers adversely impact the economic and social well-being of the locals. A combination of sustainable development practices and community-driven initiatives is essential to address these challenges. These sustainable practices can enhance their quality of life. The Government of India has already taken steps like '*Namami Gange*' but it's not sufficient for the development; they require continuous community participation and effective execution to achieve a meaningful change. The ghats are a source of immense cultural and economic wealth; this symbolic relationship between river Ganga, the ghats, and local population must be nurtured to maintain the balance between ethnic culture and tradition, livelihood, and environmental health.

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