



Ghats of Varanasi: A Rising hub for Employment Opportunities

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Abstract: Varanasi has long been regarded as a city of culture and religion; one of the oldest cities in continuous habitation globally, it is now emerging as one of the smart cities in India. The famous ghats that line the banks of the Ganga River are now becoming a topic of greater importance among the citizens as providers of job opportunities. This paper looks at the socio-economic impact of the ghats in terms of the way in which old jobs, tourism, and new industries are transforming local economies. Historically, boatmen, priests, vendors, and artists have made a livelihood on the ghats. The increasing number of tourists within India and abroad has impacted employment in hospitality, retail, and cultural services. In response to this increase, local business owners and residents offer accommodations, conduct cultural tours, and start sustainable tourism practices. Plans such as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan and Namami Gange improve this development through infrastructural developments and cleanliness campaigns under government initiatives.

However, despite all these advancements, problems like low wages, pollution, temporary work, and social inequalities are the major issues that need more emphasis on sustainable development along with better resource management. This paper is mainly based on individual observation and analysis of some previous studies in order to understand how the ghats of Varanasi are emerging as a vital employment hub and promoting economic advancement while retaining the cultural identity of the city.

Key Words: Varanasi, Varanasi Ghats, Employment, livelihood, economic evolution.

1. INTRODUCTION:

This paper discusses how an emerging city is fostering employment opportunities for locals, transforming the area into a vital economic zone. India is developing at a fast rate, and the livelihood options for most of the population that resides here are changing day by day. A livelihood refers to some set of activities or capabilities that people need to earn assets and sustain. Varanasi, one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities and one of the developing smart cities in India, is not only a religious and cultural epicentre but also a city experiencing a steady economic evolution. The city has stepped embankments along the river Ganga, which are known as *Ghats*, which serve as a spiritual and religious pilgrimage site where thousands of tourists gather for a long time.

Varanasi is also known as Banaras or Kashi, is situated in Uttar Pradesh, India. The city is dedicated to Lord Shiva; the river Ganga has been witnessing a special place among Hindus, and they believe that dying in Varanasi will lead to salvation and freedom from the cycle of rebirth. Varanasi is famous for its art and culture, dance, music, crafts, temples, and many more. The ghats, the central places of the city, with their historic and cultural prominence, are evolving into a significant employment hub in northern India. The paper analyses the socio-economic impact of the ghats on local employment and the emerging opportunities that people are getting and their influences.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Extensive literature about Banaras has been done by many scholars who are from diverse academic backgrounds, ranging from the socio-economic life of its people to the religious and cultural core of Banaras. "Ganga: A Study in the Political Economy of Banaras" by Alan R. Beals in 1990 has given importance to Banaras's political and economic



factors. He takes under consideration, through his anthropological study, the role of the Ganga River as a religious icon but also as a resource that moulds the economy and politics of the city. Beals investigates how the water of the Ganges stands at the centre of both the ritual purity of the pilgrims and the livelihoods of the boatmen, washermen, and other classes that depend on the river. "Banaras and the River: Sacred and Economic Spaces" (2010) research by Michael Dumont gives a contemporary anthropological viewpoint and explores Banaras' shaping within the changing socio-economic landscape. The same has been reflected in the on-going struggle between maintaining the religious sanctity of the Banaras city and modern challenges of pollution, commercialisation, and tourism. Dumont investigated the relation between the sacred spaces of Banaras, especially the Ganges River. Apart from these, numerous works have been done on Banaras and its culture. In "Culture and Society in India" (1953), N. K. Bose was an Indian anthropologist who dealt with the social life of Banaras, especially caste and kinship as well as ritual practice. His work narrates how the city has turned out to be a mini-world of Indian society as well as the complex interaction between castes, religious practices, and communities. Apart from these, numerous studies have been conducted on Banaras and its rich cultural heritage. The present paper, however, aims to explore the socio-economic dynamics of the Ghats of Varanasi as a rising hub for employment opportunities.

3. OBJECTIVES:

The primary objectives of this study have been mentioned below:

- To examine the traditional employment linked to the ghats and how it supports local livelihoods.
- To assess the economic impact of tourism on employment in Varanasi.
- To explore the industries emerging around the ghats.
- To understand the role of government and private companies in creating sustainable development.

4. METHODOLOGY:

This study employs both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Participant observation was conducted at prominent ghats, including Dashashwamedh, Assi, and Manikarnika, to understand daily activities and interactions. Semi-structured interviews with Ghat workers, including priests, boatmen, artisans, and tour guides, provided in-depth perspectives. Discussions with local stakeholders, highlighted broader socio-economic dynamics. Analysis of government reports offered additional context. Audio-Video was taken as well.

5. TRADITIONAL OCCUPATIONS IN THE GHATS:

Varanasi possesses many mythological stories to share; being a city of Lord Shiva, the Ganga River is the heart of Varanasi. There are almost 100 ghats located in Varanasi, which runs from Assi Ghat to Raj Ghat from south to north. Ghats have always been a place for religious activities and social gatherings, but they got their present position in the 18th century by Maratha rulers. The spiritually signified ghats are the main attraction of the city. People come here to experience the soulful *subah-e-Banaras*, and *sham-e-Banaras*, are ritualistic prayers performed at the ghats to appease Lord Shiva and Maa Ganga. A boat ride along the river or a walk along the ghats is also fascinating experience. Various recreational activities have taken place at the ghats as well.

The most famous ghats of Varanasi are Dashashwamedh Ghat, Assi Ghat, Manikarnika Ghat, Raja Harishchandra Ghat, Chet Singh Ghat, Darbhanga Ghat, Scindhia Ghat, Tulsi Ghat, Bhonsle Ghat, Jain Ghat, Rajendra Prasad Ghat, etc. Out of these ghats, Manikarnika and Raja Harishchandra Ghat are cremation ghats; both have their own mythological stories. Death is like a celebration in these two ghats. They are the largest and most auspicious cremation ghats; daily around 100 bodies are cremated along the riverside. Due to the significance of these ghats, often large waves of people visit Banaras, which boosts the tourism of the city. The arrival of tourists demands more facilities like accommodation, market facilities, food hubs, recreational activities, etc. The unemployed local people are getting benefits by serving them and earning money to run their families. Historically, the ghats have provided employment through traditional roles, such as:

Boatmen: Boats are an essential part of the ghats, as they provide transportation and river tours for tourists and pilgrims. A boat ride is one of the main attractions of Varanasi, where people enjoy the view of lights that enlighten the entire city in the evening. Typically, the community who are playing the role of boatmen are from *Nishad* and *Manjhi* caste. They charge around 400 INR for one ride, but it also depends on time and distance.

Priests: Banaras is a religious place. The number of temples in Varanasi is nearly around 3000, and every ghat has temples around it. The *Pandits*, or priests, serve in those temples, perform rituals, and make offerings to God. Moreover, some priests or spiritual leaders run their individual shops, where people come and take blessings from them by paying money.

Vendors: The ghats are full of shops and small markets. Locals sell different items like worship items, flowers, foods, handcraft items, cloths, toys for children, and many more. Some of the vendors run their own shops, and others are selling by roaming from one ghat to another. Even small kids also help their parents in their free time. Many children are seen in the ghats selling clay lamps, balloons, etc.

Artists: As in most of time, the ghats are full with people, there is a great chance for individual artists to show their talent and earn money. People are seen with music instruments playing, singing, or dancing, while others are seen with paint and brushes, drawing and selling for their livelihood.

Generally, a good portion of the city's population is engaged in these occupations, especially those communities who have ancestral links in these occupations. However, the income depends on the season and numbers of tourists visited.



Figure 1. A Glimpse of the Ghats.

6. IMPACT OF TOURISM ON EMPLOYMENT :

With the increase in both domestic and international tourism, there has been a noticeable demand in the service sector. The demand for boatmen, tour guides, photographers, hotels and lodges, guesthouses, and yoga studios near the ghats has increased, providing jobs for locals in hospitality and wellness. Employment in the hospitality sector spans from entry-level positions like housekeeping to skilled positions like hotel managers. The hospitality sector offers year-round employment, providing stability to many of the populations in the city.

People are starting to open guesthouses in their own homes, providing the tourists with a homely feeling. These are like extra businesses for the locals, and they earn a sufficient amount of income for them. The growth of eco-friendly initiatives and heritage tourism is also notable. Local entrepreneurs are opening sustainable accommodations and



organising cultural tours, which promote both local culture and responsible tourism practices. This not only provides jobs but also boosts traditional arts and crafts.

The retail and service sector around the ghats creates employment and includes a variety of small shops for tourists, selling religious souvenirs, clothes, and traditional food items. Retail sectors also provide jobs like guides and translators, and these roles often attract young kids fluent in foreign languages. Mostly, Varanasi's traditional festivals are celebrated around the ghats, where locals find some ways to earn by selling handcrafted products or other items. Also, ghats are becoming an important source of livelihood for artists.

7. ROLE OF GOVERNMENT AND PRIVATE INVESTMENTS:

'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan' and 'Namami Gange' are two actions taken by the Government, which aim to create hygiene facilities near the rivers. It tries to improve the infrastructural facility and making them suitable for tourists. While private investors are focussing more on hotels, restaurants, parks, cafes, creating jobs of low wages for the locals.

8. CHALLENGES AROUND THE GHATS:

While the ghats generate employment, several challenges persist:

1. Low wages of traditional occupations are one of the major problems of locals, limiting financial security.
2. Pollution in the ghats create problems to both tourism and health of the locals.
3. Many employment opportunities are seasonal, leaving workers vulnerable during off-peak seasons.
4. Social inequality among the locals also creates problems in employment.

9. CONCLUSION:

The ghats of Varanasi are not only a landmark of spirituality and culture but have also become important economic centres and source of employment. It has contributed in keeping alive more traditional livelihoods such as that of boatmen, priests, vendors, and artists. At the same time, tourism development has immensely added to the local economy by creating new jobs in various fields like hospitality, wellness, retail, and cultural entrepreneurship. These opportunities are financially supporting numerous locals and transforming Varanasi into an emerging employment centre.

Initiatives such as 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan' and 'Namami Gange' have played a vital role in improving the ghats' infrastructure, hygiene, and environmental conditions that would attract more tourists and investments. In addition, the scope for employment has increased with private investment in tourism-related infrastructure development. Low wages, pollution, seasonal employment, and social inequality continue to pose challenges that need to be overcome to achieve sustainable and inclusive growth.

In conclusion, the ghats of Varanasi reflect how cultural heritage can act as an economic driver. If the policies that are implemented and stakeholders work together, ghats can be used to balance religious and cultural importance with modern economic development, making them a model for sustainable livelihood generation in heritage cities. More research and action are required to overcome the existing challenges and maximize the socio-economic potential of ghats for the local community.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS:

Recommendations have been mentioned below:

- **Enhanced Training Programs:** Skill development programs should be introduced to enhance local expertise in tourism management, foreign language training, and customer service.



- **Environmental Management:** Investment in cleaning and preserving the ghats is essential to ensure long-term sustainability.
- **Micro-financing for Small Businesses:** Local artisans and small vendors could benefit from micro-financing options to expand their businesses.
- **Promoting Off-Season Tourism:** Initiatives to promote Varanasi as a year-round destination could help to reduce seasonal dependency.
- **Heritage Conservation:** More policies should be implemented to preserve the cultural and architectural integrity of the ghats.

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