Conservation and Urban Renewal as a base for Sustainable Development in Historic Cities: A Case of Varanasi

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ABSTRACT

Historic Indian cities have a unique built and cultural heritage which has always attracted millions of tourists and has also been one of the prime sources of economic activities. But the condition of historic core city areas and heritage precincts over the years has been degrading consistently. Not only are the conditions of heritage structures deteriorating but the quality of living environment and infrastructure in the core districts have succumbed to rapid urbanization. Today rapidly developing cities hence have a major challenge of building sustainable development practices that integrates their cultural heritage and future aspirations. It is imperative to link cultural heritage, city development planning and local economy development together for inclusive development.

The city of Varanasi, located in north India, documenting continuity of settlements and culture since 1000 BCE, is one of the most unique destinations showing exemplary natural, architectural, artistic and religious expressions of traditional Indian culture blended with magnificent public spaces and people. The sacred Ganges, concatenate 6.8 km riverfront Ghats, innumerous temples and inland water bodies (kund) - are all part of the cities heritage glory and form major parts of core city area. These landmarks not only attract lakhs of tourists, but most importantly are an integral part of local community fabric. But uncontrolled growth, coupled with poor governance and lack of awareness has resulted in utter neglect and degradation of the historic sites and core city. Due to deteriorating quality of neighborhood there has been a shift of residential preference from core city areas to the periphery. In the process majority of historic precincts have been occupied and encroached by poor communities and older city areas have also turned into hubs of poverty. This article intends to analyze the existing urban fabric in the core city, the use and present state of decay of the historic sites and monuments. Urgent need for conservation and renewal have been impressed upon to foster livability and sustainable community.

Keywords: urbanisation, renewal, conservation, livability, sustainability.
1. BACKGROUND

India is one of the countries with the greatest wealth in cultural heritage but also one of the poorest users of these assets for poverty reduction and inclusive development especially in urban areas. Yet because Indian cities are in an early urbanization process, they have a unique opportunity to reverse this paradigm to the benefit of its citizens. Emphasis on urban renewal as an integral part of urban development and planning has started gaining acceptance with the national and the State Government now putting in place more predictable funding. It is imperative to link cultural heritage, city development planning and local economy development together for inclusive development. There is a growing consensus in urban India that sound public policies at national, state and local levels, financial mechanisms and capacity for effective management are urgently required to improve the stewardship of historic cores and heritage assets in order to improve livelihoods and empower poor urban communities. A major shift in focus is required to fill such an existing knowledge gap in a critical moment of the urbanization process in India. Rehabilitating historic areas, conserving their cultural heritage and upgrading their infrastructure is an integrated approach to urban local economic development whereby historic cities can be leveraged as (a) service hubs for internal users (communities living in the historic cores and surrounding neighborhoods); and (b) sustainable destinations for external users (from other cities, other regions, or other countries).

2. INTRODUCTION TO THE CITY OF VARANASI

The city of Varanasi (population 1.435 million in 2011, UA area), recording continuity of settlements and culture since ca 1000 BCE, is unique in the architectural, artistic and religious expressions of traditional Indian culture and is, even today, a living example of this culture. The city — in the past and in the present — is an exceptional testimony to living traditions — to be seen to be believed — in religious faith, rituals and myriad festivals, traditional and ancient forms of worship and belief that are still practised, in the varied expressions of asceticism, spiritual and meditative exercises, education, music, dance, handicrafts and art forms that still continue to be transmitted through generations.

3. URBAN PROFILE AND DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

Varanasi Municipal Corporation spread over 82.1 sq km houseing population of over 12 lakhs as per 2011 Census which is 34.7% of the distreet population. The corporation is divided into 5 administrative zones and 90 wards for decentralised governance and efficient service delivery.

Graph 1 shows the increase of population in Varanasi urban agglomerate area being near about 2 lakh in 1931 and reaching over 14 lakhs in 2011. Although the increase in population has remained constant the growth rate has fluctuated in several decades. One prominent feature is that after 1991
the growth rate has declined considerably indicating the fact that urban renewal may be the need of the hour.

Figure 1. Population Growth of Varanasi UA

Source: Various Census Reports

Population density in Municipal area in 1991 was 18,197 pop/sq km, which increased to 15.070 pop/sq km in 2001. It has been observed that although the share of built versus open is very high in the core city and reduces towards the periphery, the population density is higher in the peripheral wards. This suggests that, there may be a shift of residential preference in the core city area to peripheries of the city. This is mostly due to congestion and crumbling infrastructure and service levels in heritage core city of Varanasi.

4. HERITAGE RESOURCES OF VARANASI

The heritage for the city Varanasi is vast, vivid and overwhelming. For the ease of listing of heritage in this section it has been divided into man-made and natural. The man-made heritage again is classified as - tangible and intangible. The chart below covers majority of the heritage-scape in Varanasi.

4.1 Natural Heritage

The city represents a unique natural shape along the Ganga river which forms a crescent shape, flowing from south to north for about 7 km; the city has grown on the left bank in semi-circular form around it. The area along the right side is a flood plain, preserving the natural ecosystem. Thus, together the two sides represent the cultural and natural beauty where meet the human construct of architectural grandeur in the form of series of traditional buildings and other side perennial flow of the Ganga from south to north, which is unique in the whole course of the Ganga valley.
Figure 2. Heritage Categorization for Varanasi

4.2 Tangible / built heritage

The tangible heritage of the city covers riverfront Ghats, Kunds, Palatial Buildings, Religious Structures and Archeological Sites. The riverfront heritage covers the portion of the city stretching within 200 m from the river bank. Eighty-four riverfront Ghats cover a length of 6.8 km along the crescent-shaped bank of the River Ganga, Ganga-ji (Ganges in anglicized way, devotionally called Ganga-Ji), from the confluence of Asi drain in the south to the confluence of the Varuna river in the north. Here the riverfront is overlooked by lofty palatial buildings built mostly by kings and lords from different parts of India between 18th and 20th centuries, and the area along the Ghats is dominated by various shrines and temples. The Ghats of Varanasi represent one of the finest ensembles of monumental architecture linked with the everyday activities of the devout people, thus symbolizing the heritage tradition of India.

Kunds are sacred water bodies used for rituals. In Varanasi, many such kunds exists which are referred to in the Mahabharata (2nd century BCE) and which still attract a large mass of pilgrims, especially on festivals. Although various literature states that there was about 150 water bodies existed in the past but currently there do about 25-30 major water Kunds/Talav exist in the city.

The city is a mosaic of the various religious groups and their traditions. In the city alone, there are over 3300 Hindu shrines and temples, about 1388 Muslim shrines and mosques, 12 churches, 3 Jain temples, 9 Buddhist temples, 3 Sikh temples (gurudvaras) and several other sacred sites and places. Here Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Christianity and even Islam have their distinct traditions, and on the other end they together conform the harmonious life and culture of the city called ‘Banarasian’
4.3 Intangible heritage
Scholastic tradition, performing arts have been the backbone of traditional culture of Varanasi. Various fairs, festivals like Ramleela, Dev-dipawali etc has always a distinct flavor of Varanasi. Silk weaving practice and Banarasi sari is also one of major by products of the city culture and rich traditions.

5. IMPACT OF HERITAGE IN LOCAL ECONOMY OF VARANASI
The city economy of Varanasi is heavily dependent of tangible and intangible heritage resources of the city. Chunk of employment generation is a tribute to huge attraction of the built heritage monuments of the city resulting large tourist arrival every year into the holy city. Also the weaving and spinning on of the rich tradition of Varanasi accounts for one of the largest industrial employment generating sector.

5.1 Tourism and its multiplier effect in economy of Varanasi
The tally of domestic and international tourist inflow is increasing at a steady pace resulting in greater impact on fluidity of local economy. Interesting fact is that post the year 2005 the influx has increased rapidly for both domestic and international tourism inflow giving local economy huge boost. Among important tourist attractions Dasaswamedh Ghat area attracts maximum tourists visiting Varanasi followed by Durga temple and Bharatmata temple. Ramnagar fort, BHU etc also shoes very tourist influx.

Figure 3. Annual tourist arrival in Varanasi
(Source: WTO, Annual Report, Dept. of Tourism, Varanasi).

5.2 Employment generation in Weaving and Craft sector
Around 11% of the total population is engaged across different manufacturing activities whereas the tertiary sector accounts for 6.80%. The small scale and household industrial sector is better
developed employing majority of industrial workers and commuters. These industries mostly include spinning and weaving, followed by textiles, hosiery etc. Spinning and weaving is the oldest and most important household industry employing more than half of the industrial workers.

![Classification of Industrial Workers, VMC-2001](image)

**Figure 4. Classification of Industrial Workers, VMC-2001**

6. **ISSUES AND CHALLENGES RELATED TO HERITAGE MANAGEMENT IN VARANASI**

Although the city has abundant heritage resources, planning and management of heritage core areas has always been neglected and brushed aside topic in Varanasi. Limited attempt to conserve the built heritage masses and lack of initiatives regarding marketing of Kashi culture has resulted in decay and destruction of the rich heritage traditions of sacred Kashi. This section is an attempt to map out the issues related to heritage management in Varanasi which could be reversed back with various interventions.

6.1 **Issues related to built heritage stock**

With just over three thousand and five hundred heritage footprints, Varanasi is probably the largest accumulation of built stock in any living city in the world. But over the years the pristine temples, mythical Ghats, river side palaces, old havellies, crescent Kunds and colonial buildings is been in a state of decay and utter negligence. Little or no initiative has been in place to conserve the structures and preserve the wonderful glory of the cultural capital of India.

6.2 **Degrading and disappearing nature of Water system, (Rivers and Kund)**

River Ganges, one of the largest perennial water system in the world with its sacred blessings flows and purifies along side the city of Varanasi, giving the settlement a unique shape and richness. But the city of Varanasi on the contrary has only congested, polluted and dumped the holy river of Ganges and its two sub system in Varanasi: Varuna and Assi. Today the river of Assi is almost extinct and on the northern side Varuna is reeling with pollution and encroachments. On the other
hand Ganges is only treated as a waste water and flower disposal site for the city. Today in Varanasi Mother Ganges is only a symbol of religious madness devoid of respect and any attempt of rejuvenating and reviving the sacred river. Kund’s, the inland water system is also on verge of extinction due to lack of awareness and initiatives of preservation.

6.3 **Degrading housing environment in heritage zones**
Due to utter negligence and little efforts to protect areal uniqueness in the heritage precincts, quality of living environment in heritage areas of Varanasi has dilapidated considerably. Large concentration of slum pockets within identified heritage zones indicates that these heritage precincts are not only degrading in terms of structural condition of buildings but also service levels are also falling down considerably.

6.4 **Sanitation management issues in heritage zones**
As Varanasi is predominantly a city of temples and religious importance, the generation of biodegradable flower waste is high. Apart from this, Varanasi has as many as 85 Ghats which are frequented by large number of pilgrims and tourists. Several types of religious ceremonies are performed at these Ghats and these ceremonies generate variety of wastes amounting to near-about 4.2 MT/Day flower waste generation. A city which is already struggling to manage household waste is no position of fixing the issues regarding this phenomenon. This has resulted in open dumping in heritage precincts and river Ganges, shaping highly polluted heritage zones. Varanasi has a poor tradition of open defecation around critical environmental system and heritage areas. Low levels of sanitation infrastructure couples with increased floating population have resulted in growing rate of open defecation along the Ghats and river banks. These natural assets which are very attractive to tourists and rated as sacred gradually losing the heritage value and also giving birth to highly polluted and unsanitary heritage neighborhoods.

6.5 **Lack of awareness and respect to Culture and Heritage**
Heritage conservation and management often depends on the level of awareness of people and their level of respect towards their own heritage assets and culture. In case of Varanasi there is clear deficiency in both of the above mentioned aspects. Washing of cloths in the holy river, Ghats, and sacred Kunds is a routine for the people of Varanasi. Throwing of various types of solid waste into river, open defecation, urination etc is part and parcel of living in Varanasi. If Varanasi is to become a World Heritage City, these tradition and practices has to depart and people should take the responsibility and charge of the heritage neighborhoods.

6.6 **Feeble Institutional framework for heritage management and promotion**
Effective governance mechanism and regulations is the key to heritage conservation and urban renewal. Varanasi neither has any strong and efficient dedicated institution for heritage.
conservation and management, nor have sound regulatory framework for preservation of monuments and heritage precincts. Varanasi Development Authority which is responsible for preparation of Master plan for VUDA area is also leveled with charge of heritage management in the city. But heritage management for VUDA has only meant for creation of a new chapter on heritage in the Master Plan document and nothing more than that. Municipal Corporation, VUDA and INTACH all has separate list of heritage structures and monuments but they has never converged into a single comprehensive list. What these mean is that there is clear lack of linkage between various institutions and technical expertise on issues related to heritage conservation and management which is the need of the hour.

7. CONCLUSION AND LESSONS

With increasing rate of urbanization, dilapidated heritage assets and detoriating service levels coupled with low level of awareness and lack of effective governance, the city of Varanasi featuring valuable historic cores and heritage assets is struggling to modernize without completely losing their uniqueness. The level of economic activity in Varanasi have sustained increases, sometimes substantially, but in the process the city risking losing their distinctive traits, becoming less vibrant and livable. This is not merely a concern for culture-loving intellectuals in Varanasi and India: all income groups of local communities may regret the loss of a sense of place, which makes them feel part of their society. New innovative instruments are hence required to be adopted to bring back the glory of the unique heritage assets of city and vibrant culture of Kashi as we all know.

Through a balanced blend of regulations and incentives, the public and private values of heritage in Varanasi can be enhanced and leveraged for development of livable neighborhoods, vibrant cultures and fluid economy. Heritage investment in Varanasi can boost tourism, a labor intensive industry that provides proportionally more income opportunities for the cities low-skilled laborers and the poor. Among the resources that the city of Varanasi need to harness is its heritage and cultural assets, which are unique features that differentiate the city from other cities.

REFERENCES