

## **Varanasi as Heritage City (India) on the scale the UNESCO World Heritage List: From Contestation to Conservation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

It has been realised that the cultural and natural heritages are increasingly threatened by destruction not only due to the traditional causes of decay, but also by changing social and economic conditions. From India 24 properties are enlisted in the UNESCO-WH List, however Varanasi has not yet been proposed for inclusion. The rationales for proposing Varanasi as a heritage city in the WH List are examined here, and the status of Varanasi on the scale of UNESCO-WH List and governance strategies are described. It is suggested that the City (District) Administration: (1) Draft and ratify a Manifesto committing itself to the conservation and protection, (2) All built heritage assets of the city must be identified and documented through a survey, mapping, architectural plans of individual buildings, historical evidence, visual photography, etc., (3) A specific conservation plan must be drafted as an integral part of the development plan of the city, (4) A Conservation Cell must be created within the local Development Authority; comprising administrative officers, local representatives, concerned local organisations and experts, and (5) Specific by-laws must be formulated for the development and preservation of heritage sites, their skylines and surrounding areas.

### **Perspective**

The city of Varanasi (1.27 million in 2001) 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, passing from one to other generations.

In the city of Varanasi have been found, underneath the sterile deposits of about 4m, microlithic tools associated with a kind of Red Ware, datable to the 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE. The city has two main historic remnants of a holy past: the first one being Sarnath where Buddha gave his first sermon, "Turning the wheel of law" in ca 528 BCE, and the second one being the Rajghat Plateau, where the archaeological findings and the C<sup>14</sup> dating of some of the wares excavated from the earliest level (upper part of IA layer, sample No. TF-293) confirm the existence of urban settlements in the period during 800-500 BCE. Both these sites have been included in the heritage zones identified for nomination to the UNESCO heritage list. Archaeological investigations, supported by Robert C. Eidt (1977) on the basis of scientific analysis of the chronosequence of non-occluded/occluded phosphate ratios of the vertical profile of anthrosols in the Rajghat area of Varanasi, confirm the existence of the city from 800 BCE to CE 800, and further the continuity of residential settlement. This result further indicate that the residents combined small farming with pastoral life. The archaeological remains (e.g. pottery, terracotta, iron implements, artefacts, seals, etc) found in the area are datable to the ca. 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and include evidence of Black Slipped Ware Culture. Since at least 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, the city started growing as a pilgrimage site and by 12<sup>th</sup> century, it became the most popular holy centre for the Hindus. During this period, various deities and their images were established. Their number at present reaches over 3000 Hindu shrines and a few Buddhist, Jain and Sikh shrines. Later Muslim shrines also became prominent and now their number has reached over 1350.

Varanasi owes its existence to the Gang\_ river (misspelled as Ganges is the West) considered to be the most holy river for the Hindu people and especially sacred in Varanasi where its course towards the Bay of Bengal suddenly turns north. Symbolically, the flow from south to north refers to the life cycle from death (south, the realm of death, Yama) to life (north, the realm of life, Shiva, i.e. Kailash). This

unique directional change of the river course led to the development of the ancient city, Kashi, on the west banks of the river, facing the rising of the sun and making thus the ghats of Varanasi sacred for all Hindu rituals.

Since Varanasi has always been important for religious purposes, kings, rich merchants and others who could afford, built houses in Varanasi so that their members could come and stay here in the auspicious city. So most properties either belong to trusts, or are divided among many successors, or belong to people who presently live in other cities. The Varanasi Development Authority has already drawn out a Master Development Plan of the City (1991-2011) and has identified heritage zones in the city therein. Although the architectural heritage of the city is still preserved, its existence is seriously threatened by immense pressures from increasing population, modernisation, economic development and tourism. The Varanasi Development Authority (VDA) has, with the aim of achieving a sustainable development of the city based on its architectural preservation and the conservation of its cultural landscape, recently undertaken the creditable and immense task of documentation of the vast architectural and intangible cultural heritage of the city and its surrounding region and of formulating a legislative framework to protect the same.

The proposed and identified “*The Ganga River and Riverfront & Old City Heritage Zone of Varanasi*” satisfies the UNESCO Cultural Heritage Criteria as set out in Article 1 of the Convention, and as set out in the Operational Guidelines- Cultural Criteria Para 24 (a). i, ii, iii, iv, v, vi, and para 27. ii, and the Cultural Landscape Criteria para 39.ii. and iii.

## 1. IDENTIFICATION

The city of Varanasi is located in the middle Ganga valley of North India, in the Eastern part of the state of Uttar Pradesh, along the left crescent-shaped bank of the Ganga river. The Varanasi City is the district headquarters of the Varanasi District and the major part of the urban area, delimited by the Census as ‘Varanasi Urban Agglomeration’ (VUA; 82° 56’E - 83° 03’E and 25° 14’N - 25° 23.5’N, covering an area of 112.26 sq. km) and consisting of 7 urban sub-units. These urban units are: (a) Varanasi (i. Varanasi MC, ii. Lahartara OG), (b) Ramanagar MB, (c) Maruadih Railway Settlement (i. Maruadih Rly. Sett. NA, ii. Maruadih OG), (d) Varanasi Cantt, (e) Banaras Hindu University NA, (f) Phulwaria CT, and (g) Sheodaspur CT. For the 2011 Master Plan the VUA is planned to expand over an area of 144.89 sq. km (82° 54’E – 83° 04’E and 25° 13’N – 25° 24’N).

For the 2011 Master Plan, the VUA is planned to expand over an area of 144.89 sq. km (82° 54’E - 83° 04’E and 25° 13’N - 25° 24’N). The average height of the city from mean sea level is 77m., i.e: around 72m in the south along the Asi stream, and 83m at the high ground near the confluence of the Varana to the Ganga river in the north (known as Rajghat plateau). The nature and the character of the banks of the Ganga river has made the position of Varanasi so stable and enviable that it is among the few cities of the world which show little shifting in its site. The city proper is built on a high ridge of *kankar* (lime concretion) that forms the left bank of the Ganga for a distance of 5km, being quite above normal flood level.

The following are their main boundaries:

**I. The Ganga river and the Riverfront Heritage Zone.** On the Eastern side, this heritage zone is flanked by the strip of green belt of trees along the sand belt of the river. On the Western side, it is delineated by the road that connects the Asi locality to Rajghat via Shivala, Pandey Haveli, Godaulia, Chowk, Maidagin, Macchodari and Bhaisasur. The Eighty-four riverfront ghats cover a length of 6.8km along the crescent-shaped bank of the Ganga river, from the confluence of Asi drain in the south to the confluence of the Varana river in the north.

This whole area can be divided into **SIX sub-zones/ Districts**: (i) **Rural Buffer District**, the green strip of 300m wide lying between the eastern bank of the Ganga river and the edge of the settlement area, (ii) **Landscape conservation District**, the sandy-silty loam area subject to annual inundation and seasonally used to cultivate summer vegetables and melons and for summer recreation, (iii) the 5.5km long **Crescent shaped basin** of the Ganga river from Nagwa to Raj Ghats, (iv) the 5.3km **stretch of 83 Ghats** (stairways to the bank) along the western bank of the Ganga river, (v) the **Urban**

**Preservation Sub-Zone**, the Old City Heritage Sub-Zone, and (vi) the **Urban Buffer Sub-Zone**, a strip of 50m to 100m wide from the western road marking the boundary, of course sometimes its boundary goes the road towards west with a view to covering some very pertinent sites, e.g. Adi Vishvanatha and Razia Bibi Mosque in Banasphatak.

**II. Core Heritage Area.** The core heritage area lies within the Old City Heritage Zone. The path linking Vishalakshi Devi, Dharmakupa, Vishvanatha, Annapurna, Adi Vishvanatha, and Razia Bibi Mosque demarcates it. The Vishvanatha temple is the nucleus. There are about 70 important shrines and temples in this area.

## 2. JUSTIFICATION

*“The Ganga River and the Riverfront & Old City Heritage Zone of Varanasi”* being proposed for nomination to the World Heritage List of UNESCO fall mainly into the second category of cultural properties, i.e: “groups of buildings, groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity or their place in the landscape are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science.” These groups of buildings identified in Varanasi fall into the category of historic inhabited town, now enclosed within the modern city precincts, i.e. “historic towns which are still inhabited and which, by their very nature, have developed and will continue to develop under the influence of socio-economic and cultural change, a situation that renders the assessment of their authenticity more difficult and any conservation policy more problematical.” Furthermore, the Ganga river with its riverfront ghats also fulfil the criteria of Cultural Landscapes as designated in Article 1 of the Convention and specifically that of a cultural landscape “that retains an active social role in contemporary society closely associated with the traditional way of life, and in which the evolutionary process is still in progress“ and an associative cultural landscape “by virtue of powerful religious, artistic, cultural associations of the natural element.”

The further justification of the above zone, according to the relevant criteria laid down by UNESCO, is as follows:

### **A Testimony to the Living Traditions of Indian Culture**

On the banks of the Ganga river, a faith in itself, stands Hinduism’s most sacred city--- Varanasi. A city like no other in the world, Varanasi has outstanding universal value, in that its architectural heritage is linked strongly, since centuries, to the living cultural and religious traditions of three of the major religions of the world- Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism for whom the city is the most important religious pilgrimage destination. There are few cities in the world of greater antiquity and none have so uninterruptedly maintained their ancient celebrity and distinction.

Religious rituals, beliefs and traditional worship are still practised. It was in Banaras that Buddhism was first promulgated and in Banaras that Hinduism has had her home. The city has thus given vigour and support to the two religions that to this day spiritually govern half the world. Ancient meditative practises and studies are still pursued here. From the ceremony of shaving off the hair of the new-born (tonsure) to the immersion of ashes, the city still witnesses the rituals and sacraments that existed in the Vedic period. Varanasi is also considered to be a veritable jungle of fairs and festivals with respect to variety, distinction, time, sacred sites, performers, overseers and side-shows. The popular saying that 13 festivals happen in 7 days of a week, express this richness. “Every day is a great festival in Banaras” – so says tradition.

**Living traditions in Indian Sciences and Arts.** In this city, one finds as nowhere else in the country, experts, researchers, students and practitioners of ancient Indian sciences like astrology, Vastushastra (traditional architecture), teaching Sanskrit and religious texts (in existing traditional Sanskrit schools), yoga, ayurveda and massage techniques. Dhanvantari or Divodasa, the father of traditional Indian medicine, or ayurveda, was one of the earliest kings of this city and Shushruta, the father of Indian surgery too was educated in Varanasi.

The **Banarasi music** and dance traditions are manifested in a special local style known as the Banaras Gharana (style). Many great musicians and performing artists have been born here and still regularly return to visit and to perform for the public as their tribute to the spirit of the soil.

**Handicrafts.** The city has been famous not only as a seat of learning and art, but also as a centre of cottage industries and textile manufacturing even in Pre-Buddhist times. Silk weaving and sari making, metal, wood and terracotta handicrafts, toy making, particular painting forms, etc., comprise the continuity of the historico-cultural tradition.

#### **Evidence of a disappeared civilisation**

The city has two **remnants of a holy past**: the first one being Sarnath where Buddha gave his first sermon, “Turning the wheel of law” in ca.528 BCE. Later during 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, king Ashoka built a monastery township there that continued its existence till 12<sup>th</sup> century CE and was later destroyed. The second one is Rajghat Plateau, where the archaeological findings and the C<sup>14</sup> dating of some of the wares excavated from the earliest level (upper part of IA layer, sample No. TF-293) refer the existence of urban settlements in the period during 800-500 BCE.

#### **An Outstanding example of a riverfront associative cultural landscape**

The riverfront of the Ganga river, forming the eastern edge of the city, possesses a unique history, and presents a specific vision of a magnificent architectural row of lofty buildings and holy sites. The city represents a unique natural shape along the Ganga river which flows northerly in crescent shape for about 7km and the city has grown on the left bank in circular form around it. The area along the right side is a flood plain, preserving the natural ecosystem. The natural heritage of the city, in the form of the river, predominates and strongly influences the nature and characteristics of the religious and sacred importance of the city. Thus, together the two sides represent the cultural and natural heritage, which is unique in whole of India and the aesthetic harmony between the river and the city is rare in its presentation.

Since ancient times, the natural and cultural landscapes of the city have retained an active social role in contemporary society closely associated with the traditional way of life. The city is a place of pilgrimage and a holy site for taking sacred baths in the Ganga River, to have a good death, to get relief from transmigration, to learn and receive spiritual merit, etc. The city has still maintained its traditions. In spite of invasions and political downfalls, traditions are fully alive even today in the presence of “dying homes”, charitable homes, pilgrims’ rest houses, *ghats* (stairways) along the Ganga that are some of the city’s unique characteristics.

#### **Unique Geological formation of the Ganga river in Varanasi**

The Ganga river, considered the most holy river for the Hindu people, is especially sacred in Varanasi where its course towards the Bay of Bengal suddenly turns to north. From its source in the Himalaya to its mouth in the Bay of Bengal, covering a course of about 2525km, only in Varanasi does the Ganga river flow in a crescent shape meander from south to north (length 6.5km). This peculiar shape is the result of fluvial process through which the coarser sediments get deposited on its western bank between Raj Ghat in the north and Samne Ghat in the south. The portion between these two points a hillock-like geologic feature, called natural levée, consists of nearly 60m bed of clay with coarse-grained sand, limestone concretion (*kankar*) and gravel. Another similar ridge like formation exists other side at Ramanagar where exists the fort. This peculiar geological formation changes the flow of the Ganga in a half-circular shape. This sharp-bend meander is only observed in Varanasi throughout its course (cf. Kumar, G. 1999). This unique geological formation has provided the base for the growth of the city in a crescent shape, symbolically described as crescent moon on the forehead of Lord Shiva. In terms of river ecology, this characteristic is also considered as the unique aspect of energy quantum and direction of the energy flow. In fact, this whole bed of the Ganga river is an example of natural heritage.

#### **A Mini India**

Varanasi is a living symbolisation and a living expression of Indian culture and traditions in all its religious rituals, in its multi-ethnic artistic traditions, in its architectural treasures, in its life-expressions, in its particular relationship with life and death, in its ancient educational forms and methods and in its multi-ethnic population.

Varanasi is the mosaic of Indian culture with respect to representing the diversity and the distinctiveness of the regional cultures of India. Superimposition of various traditions have been added

one upon the other in the course of time. People from all parts of India, speaking different languages and dialects and carrying their own traits, taboos and traditions have settled in this city for solace, peace and sacred merit and also as a consequence of different invasions, while inwardly preserving their own culture and outwardly becoming part of the mosaic culture of the city. This synthesis of diversity in regional identity, language and tradition converges to form the personality of an all-India city, Varanasi.

This is the only city where textually described cosmogonic frame and geomantic outlines are existent in their full form and totality, thus making the city universally significant.

**Archetype of an All-India Holy Place.** The process of spatial transposition of holy centres of India has started in the 6<sup>th</sup> century and reached its climax by the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Gahadavala period. All the pan-Indian and regionally prominent sacred sites have been replicated in Varanasi. Mythological literature has been created to manifest the power of holy in those sites, which finally resulted in making this city the “holiest” for Hindus that preserved the cosmic “wholeness”. This together with the mosaic of ethnic and social structure further helped in the formation of Varanasi as the “cultural capital of India”. For example, the sites of the four *dhams* (abode of gods), the holy centres in the four cardinal directions of the country, i.e. Badrinath in the north, Jagannath Puri in the east, Dvaraka in the west and Rameshvaram in the south, are re-established in Varanasi in archetypal form as their representative around the nuclei of the presiding deities at Matha Ghat (Badrinath), Rama Ghat (Puri), Shankudhara (Dvaraka) and Mir Ghat (Rameshvaram). Similarly other sacred centres are spatially manifested in Varanasi where there are over 3000 Hindu shrines and temples, about 1400 Muslim shrines and mosques (more than any Muslim site), 12 churches, 3 Jain temples, 9 Buddhist temples, 3 Sikh temples (*Gurudvaras*) and several other sacred sites and places. This is the only place in the world where such a huge number of Hindu and Muslim sacred places co-exist.

**Jains and their temples.** After the Mahabharata War (ca 1400 BCE), changes and transformations in Hinduism had took place. At this moment Jainism appeared as an alternative reformation movement. The Jain literature refers to Banaras as a Jain Tirtha (holy place) because here were born 4 of the Jain Tirthankaras (the “ford-makers”). In the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE Parshvanatha was born around Bhelupur in Varanasi. He was followed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE by Mahavira, a younger contemporary of the Buddha, who also visited Varanasi during his 42<sup>nd</sup> year of itinerant teaching. The birthplace of Suparshvanatha, the 7th Tirthankara, is also described in the Jain literature, though its location and identification have still not been confirmed. It is believed that the present Jain temple in Sarnath, near the Dhamekha Stupa, was built to commemorate the birthplace of Shreyamshanatha, the 11th Tirthankara. He was born in the nearby village of Simhapur. The birthplace of the 8th Tirthankara Chandraprabhu, is identified with Chandravati, an ancient village lying on the Varanasi-Ghazipur road at 23km northeast from Banaras at the western bank of Ganga River.

**Sikhs and their holy shrines.** Sikhs are known as a special community called into being through the work of Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the founder, and his successors. Legends suggest that Nanak visited Varanasi two times; firstly when he was on pilgrimage as described in the *janam-sakhis*. Later he came to have discourses with saints living in Varanasi and also to convey his messages in 1506 on the day of the *Maha Shivaratri* festival and stayed in a garden at Luxa, which later came to known as Guru Bagh. The *Adi Granth* consists of the hymns of Guru Nanak and of the first five gurus as well as poems by great earlier saint-poets and singers such as Kabir and Raidas.

**Christianity and Churches.** Varanasi came under the direct political control of the East India Company in the time of Warren Hastings by end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. By serving the cause of Sanskrit teaching and Hindu theology through establishing a Sanskrit School in 1791 (by Jonathan Duncan), the East India Company has established a strong foothold for Christianity in the city. The first English Seminary, named Anglo Indian seminary, was established in 1830, and this encouraged the development of Christian missionaries. Presently, there are eleven important churches in Varanasi, viz. St. Thomas (at Godaulia), Red (Nadesar), St. Paul (Sigra), David’s Church (Teliabagh), St. Mary (Cantt.), Bethlehem Gospel (Mahmoorganj), Evangelical Church of India (D.L.W.), St. Mary Cathedral (Cantt.), Church of Varanasi (at Sunderpur and Kakarmatta), and Pilgrims’ Mission (Cantt.).

**Muslim Heritage Sites and Monuments.** Muslims constitute about one-thirds of the total population of Varanasi City and have earned a significant place in the society, culture, landscape and traditional economy of the city. The invasions of Mahmud of Ghaznawi in 1021-1030 CE had opened the door to Muslim settlement in Varanasi. With reference to spatial, functional and numerical perspectives, the Muslim sacredscapes of Banaras may be grouped into 7 types. They are: Masjid (mosque) 415, Mazar

(religious-cultural sites) 299, Imamchawk (the crossing sites for Taziya) 197, Takiya (burial ground) 88, Idgah (place of special prayer) 11, Imambara (the burial site for Taziya) 3, and Others 375. The total number of sacred places reaches to 1,388 of which about 30 per cent fall under the mosque category.

#### **Combining the Spiritual and the Material**

Varanasi in comparison to cities of its size is a balanced multifunctional city with six sporadic industrial areas at Ramanagar, Chandpur, DLW, Lahartara, Lohta and Shivpur. The urban morphology of the city shows a complex pattern where traditions are maintained and modernity is introduced often in a discordant way. The site areas that are the highest in the density of religious heritage properties are also the highest in the density of commercial wholesale and retail outlets. These commercial activities range from gold and silver jewellery, saris, typical food products of the city- and the lanes are still called by the category of wares they trade in- utensils, jute and bamboo carpets, handicrafts, publishers and book shops, stationery articles and handmade paper, etc.

#### **g) The “joie de vivre” Culture**

**Banaras:** where “always ready” (*Bana*) is the “juice of life” (*ras*)! It is the blending or “complex mixing” of these, which makes up the mosaic of culture known as Banaras, the City of Lord Shiva. The natural setting, the spirit of place, and the continuity of cultural traditions have all blended together to create and preserve a unique lifestyle known as Banarasi. The life style of Banaras is distinct in nature, and referred to as Banarasipana. It is an art of living, both passionate and carefree, both relaxed and concentrated, both intense and free, both traditional and modern- what the Banaras dwellers call *masti* (“joie de vivre”), *mauj* (“delight, festivity”) and *phakarpan* (“carefreeness”).

#### **h) Heritage at Risk**

The heritage zones, areas and properties identified above are at the risk of being irreversibly modified or even destroyed due to immense pressures from tourism, economic development and population pressures which are now threatening the unity and integrity of the cultural landscape and atmosphere, and the urban skyline in these zones. This increasing population is over burdening the carrying capacity of the urban environment and the river eco-system and unplanned mass tourism could potentially have a hard impact on the cultural carrying capacity of the old city centre. Social hygiene and sanitation methods too are beginning to bend under the pressure of a growing resident population and a constant large floating population.

### **3. DESCRIPTION**

The Riverfront heritage Zone, Core Heritage Area and other properties. The riverfront heritage zone is flanked by a wide sand belt on the Eastern banks. The sand belt is covered by the Ganga river during the three months- July to September. Beyond the sand belt is a protected green belt of trees within which lies a reserved area for turtle breeding. The sand is utilised for construction purposes and during the winter months, a portion of the sand belt is used for vegetable and melon farming. Many ascetics and wanderers also camp on this sand belt and hold various sermons during the winter months. The Western banks of the river are marked by lofty palatial buildings built mostly by kings and feudal lords from different parts of India between eighteenth and twentieth centuries. Stone steps flank the river on its western bank and lead down from the city to the river water. These steps are called “Ghats” and although they seem to be a continuous stretch of stairs, they were built in different historical moments. There are around 40 to 60 stone steps on each ghat, depending on the height of these ghats. The area along the ghats is dominated by various shrines and temples. The ghats are marked by octagonal raised platforms built for public use and smaller rectangular platforms that are closer to the river, built for use by the Brahmins for religious rituals. This is where takes place the ritual bathing of the pilgrims and the daily bathing of the inhabitants of the city. The ghats are give access to the boats on the Ganga river and are also a place for sports, exercise, meditation, socialising and rest.

The historically older site area of this heritage zone is on the Rajghat in the north of the city. The density of heritage site areas and properties is the highest in the above defined Core Heritage Area between the Durga ghat and the Manikarnika ghat, being also the most important according to cultural and religious parameters. As we move south from the Dashashvamedh ghat to the Asi ghat, the density of heritage properties becomes lower.

The conservation of most heritage properties faces intense pressure. Even if these properties are presently in the same physical conditions as in the last couple of decades and their architectural characteristics are being maintained without many legal and administrative measures, their architectural integrity is now being threatened. In the name of development, old structures are modified or demolished, even where the structures are made of stone and are not weak. Since the ownership is collective or remote (like maths, ashrams, palaces, etc.), and renovation work is expensive. Unless stringent measures are taken for protection, there is high probability that new structures, using new building materials, will increasingly replace old architectural shapes and material. Recent construction work and events in the old city demonstrate that even when ownership is in a single proprietor's hands, he prefers rebuilding rather than renovating. Besides these risks, the buffer zones and the skyline of the old city, whose status quo is preserved at this moment, are also being threatened by encroachments and rising heights of buildings.

#### **4. MANAGEMENT and CONSERVATION**

Most of the heritage properties in the old city belong to individual owners, substantial holdings by the Vishvanatha Temple Trust, non-government organisations and charitable trusts.

A few tangible heritage sites falling within the Riverfront & Old City Heritage Zone such as Manmandir Observatory on Dashashvamedh Ghat, Aurangzeb's mosque and the Jnanavapi mosque have been declared as Monuments by the Department of Archaeology, Govt. of India under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act 1958 Act No. 24 & 1958 (Central Act) and the said sites and its buffer zone are maintained and conserved by the Department of Archaeology.

At the Municipal level, the State Govt. had created the Varanasi Development Authority under U.P. Urban Planning and Development Act 1973 Act II & 1973 (State Act). This authority is responsible for planning the development of the city and is also responsible for the protection of Heritage zones, sites and properties and the surrounding physical environment. The Govt. of India and State Govt of Uttar Pradesh, with the participation of a local body at the Municipal level are involved in implementing the protective regulatory measures through the agencies enlist herewith:

- Varanasi Development Authority (VDA) with the Commissioner of the Varanasi division as its Chairman, the Vice-Chairman, Chief Town Planner VDA, Secretary VDA. The VDA has technical assistance and experts in its division of Town Planning, Architecture, Engineering and Surveying; the VDA is a State Government body.
- A Conservation Cell has been created within the Varanasi Development Authority comprising the four eminent citizens of the city knowledgeable in issues of heritage preservation, and the members from the VDA, is currently responsible for the conservation and protection of the heritage sites with participation of Tourism Department of State Government and Government of India. This Cell is responsible for monitoring the preservation of heritage sites.
- Department of Archaeology, Govt. of India and the State Archive is a part of the State Ministry of Culture and is represented by their staff which monitors the protection and maintenance of properties registered and supervised directly by them. This organ of the government registers historically, artistically and archaeologically important properties- buildings, artefacts, objects, etc. and protects the same.
- Many local NGOs also work for the protection of the river Ganga and the promotion of the local culture. The Ganga Seva Nidhi and Ganga Seva Samiti organise the evening prayers offered to the river Ganga each evening on the central ghats of the city. The ghats are cleaned of mud each year after the monsoon season by the local administration in collaboration with a local NGO. The Sankat Mochan Foundation is an organisation that has been working since many years to test and clean the Ganga waters and spread awareness on the same.

#### **Legal Measures taken**

In April 2002, the VDA Board has proposed amendments to the Urbanisation Laws for the purposes of Heritage Conservation, and recommended that the following sub sections of the (Amendment of Urbanisation Laws), Act Amendment to U.P. Urban Development Act be added:

Definition 2(dd1) Cultural Heritage as including all art, handicrafts, music and dance forms, folk theatre, ritualistic traditions. 2(dd2) Cultural Landscape Heritage as meaning manifestations of the interaction between humankind and its natural environment and including specific techniques of

sustainable land-use, considering the characteristics and limits of the natural environment they are established in, and a specific spiritual relation to nature. 2(hh) Heritage Sites as including monuments, buildings, artifacts, structures, areas and precincts of historic, aesthetic, archaeological, architectural, scientific, ethnological anthropological, cultural, environmental significance and value published and further the Ganga riverfront, i.e. the entire stretch of ghats along the western bank of the River Ganga and sand belt on eastern side of river between Malaviya Bridge and South East point of Fort, Ramanagar, Fort in Varanasi.

**Amendments have been proposed to U.P. Municipality Act:** 5-a-I-Conservations, 5-a-2 Cultural Heritage, 5-a-3 Cultural Landscape Heritage, 6-A-I Heritage Sites, Provision of Section 128 to be added 2-A. Provided that no tax shall be imposed on the Heritage building and Heritage Sites or Grade-I and only 50% of annual normal value of the tax could be imposed on Heritage Building of Grade-II and 75% of annual value of the tax could be imposed on the Heritage Building of grade III. Amendment has also been proposed to the Municipal Corporation Act 1. Following addition will be made to 5 2-(ii)-a-Conservations; 2-(ii)-b Cultural Heritage, 2-(ii)-c Cultural Landscape Heritage, 2-(27) Heritage Sites, 2. Proviso to be added to 175(iv)

In addition to this, the VDA has drafted a **Master Development Plan** (1991-2011) for the city precincts. This plan is the first of its kind to be officially approved by the govt. of Uttar Pradesh. For the first time, heritage protection issues have been discussed in this Plan and heritage zones and sites have been identified (see Table 1). The Plan has been revised in order to implement the policy of preservation of heritage sites and to channelise the development of the city in the context of environment and heritage protection.

Table 1. **Varanasi Master Plans, MP:** Land Use, I: 1961-91, and II: 1991-2011

Se	Land Use Category	Area, 1988, ha	I: MP, as in 1991		II: MP, as in 2011		Change, I – II, %
			Area, ha	% area	Area, ha	% area	
1.	Residential	2615.64	5,457.24	37.65	9,254.61	51.62	+ 69.58
2.	Commercial	176.08	475.10	3.28	618.23	3.45	+ 30.13
3.	Industrial	195.31	981.37	6.77	656.19	3.66	- 33.13
4.	Public & Community facilities	261.05	450.42	3.11	1,309.07	7.30	+190.63
5.	Recreation (Park/ Open ground)	53.04	2,705.76	18.67	948.47	5.49	- 64.95
6.	Services & Utilities	----	----	----	103.97	0.58	---
7.	Govt. & Semi-Government	56.69	292.18	2.01	1,433.15	7.99	+390.50
8.	Tourism (area) & Heritage zone	----	----	----	423.73	2.37	---
9.	Transport & Communication	914.30	1300.27	8.97	1,460.35	8.15	+ 12.31
10.	Other (agriculture & open space)	1,393.79	2,832.06	19.54	1,683.45	9.39	- 40.56
	<b>TOTAL Area, ha</b>	5,665.90	<b>14,494.40</b>	100.00	<b>17,927.22</b>	100.00	+ <b>23.68</b>

(Source : *Varanasi Master Plan—2011*. Varanasi Development Authority, & Town & Country Planning Organisation, Varanasi Uttar Pradesh. 13 July 2001; 50pp + 1 Map; ref. page 5)

In order to absorb population growth in the old city centre, new buildings are being constructed either by demolishing old structures or by building on them. Since most of the heritage sites are in these densely inhabited narrow lane areas, two state government orders (order number 320/9-A-32000-127, dated 5 February 2000, and order number 840/9-A-3-2001, dated 11 April 2001) state that, in all the towns situated along the Ganga river, no development activities can take place 200 metres from the riverbank. It specifically prohibits new construction on the riverfront ghats unless these buildings are temples, maths and ashrams and only if these have approved construction plans or are solely being renovated.



## 5. PRESSURES and HERITAGE SCENARIO

### Development Pressures

**Increasing Population.** According to the Census of 2001, the population of the city was around 1.27 million. It is projected that by 2021 the population of the city will cross 2.5 millions! There is, moreover, an estimated 30,000 daily floating population in the city. The riverfront and old city heritage zone of the city is densely populated (above 500 persons/ per ha), and it is here that development pressures are altering irreversibly the socio-cultural fabric of the city.

**Shrinking spaces.** With population growth, is increasing the demand for utilising every inch of free space, including gardens. This is creating pressures for substituting existing spacious architectural forms with optimal space utilisation plans. Parks are becoming smaller and giving way to concrete residential or commercial structures.

**Modifying urban spaces.** The modification of urban spaces in the old city centre of Varanasi could also negatively alter the religious and cultural life for which the city is sacred and destroy the tourist attractions – both of which are the major sources of earning for its population. Many of these are potential heritage buildings.

**Increasing traffic.** Increasing population is leading to traffic congestion, not only at peak hours but at most hours of the day. This leads to noise pollution and smog.

### Tourism and Pilgrimage Pressures

Every year around a million pilgrims come to this city, and all of them bathe in the Ganga river, followed by worshipping in various temple. Tourism and related activities are major source of city's economy. However, it is more important to maintain a sustainable tourism development that is in harmony with the existing cultural and religious atmosphere of the city. Some efforts to this end are being taken by the concerned authorities through specific kinds of promotion activities and organisation and re-vitalisation of religious festivals.

Among international tourists visiting Varanasi, more than 40% is shared by four countries, viz. Japan, France, UK and Germany. While the Japanese come to the city because of its association with the Buddha, who in 528 BCE gave his first sermon in Sarnath, the British are attracted by the colonial tales of India, the Germans follow their indological perceptions and the French are guided by their aesthetic quests for selecting this city as destination point. The foreign tourism inflow is largely seasonal concentrating in the months of July- September and from November to March.

The hard-impact mass luxury two-day tourism, that views the local culture as a museum, is the new major threat to the local urban and cultural environment that is the real tourism attraction. The pressure for developing this kind of tourism in the old city is immense. The negative impact of such tourism on the local culture and economy multiplies when such hospitality structures are inside densely populated heritage zones of the city, like the ghats, where they are in disharmony with the spiritual and religious atmosphere of the place and where they also overburden the carrying capacity of the urban and cultural environment, water resources, sewage systems, etc. This kind of tourism does not bring economic benefit to the city but only to the luxury hospitality structures. Unless counter measures are taken, this tendency will spread like wildfire.

### Environment Pressures

The rich abundance of clay has kept the eco-system of the river still intact but increasing urban and industrial pressure and pollutant agricultural run-offs have started stretching the sustainable limits of the river system to the maximum. The river eco-system is facing pressures in the riverfront heritage zone and also from other parts of the city whose sewage flows directly into the river. It is also facing pressure from the pollutant agricultural run-offs from villages around the city. However, approximately 80% of the pollution in the River Ganga in Varanasi is urban waste, and of its 60% is concentrated in the Riverfront and nearby Old City heritage zone. In order to tackle these problems, broad based policy initiatives are required and must be supported by strict implementation, monitoring and impact evaluation of environmental legislation.

## 6. A Threat to the Ganga River

The standard of purity set for the Ganga by the environmental ministry of India is a maximum biochemical oxygen demand (BOD) of 3 parts per million or 3 milligrams per litre. Tests conducted along the Ganga report a BOD of over 5.5 parts per million and faecal coliform counts of 5,000 to 10,000 per 100 litres (cubic centimetres) of water, while the limit for the latter is only 3,000 per 100 litres of water. At some of the sewage outlets the faecal coliform counts exceed 100,000 per 100 litres.

In 1986 the *Central Ganga Authority (CGA)* was created and unveiled a master plan for the cleanup with its highly touted *Ganga Action Plan (GAP)* with a budget of 293 million rupees (equivalent to 18.5 mill. US dollars) for the first five years. It started its functioning in 1988. The Second Phase was planned for the period of 1994-1999 with a budget of Rs 491 million rupees (equals to 16.5 million US dollars), but has never been implemented. The Third Phase, including the budget of the Second Phase, is in process with a budget of Rs 2080 million rupees (equals to 45.2 mill. US dollars). These proposals include pollution prevention, checking and diversion of sewage outlets, increasing the capacity of treatment plants and over 30 related schemes. Alas! The scheduled time has already passed, and the mother Ganga is still watching her children to unite for the cause to clean and save her.

*The Swatcha Ganga Campaign (SGC)*, an NGO launched in 1982 dealing with ‘cleaning the Ganga movement’, is a widely publicised and propagated programme in this area. Both of these bodies (GAP and SGC) make their own *claims* for the great success, and always *blame* each other for obstacles and misuse of money! To different degrees, both agencies seem more concerned with creating reputations at the local, national and international levels than with taking swift and decisive action to clean up the Ganga river. The clean-up campaign of the Ganga has failed miserably in almost all respects. There is a lack of public participation and a lack of awareness of the river’s problems. The only solution is through the public awareness, civic sense and creation of moral character with a view to saving our cultural symbol and identity, the *mother Ganga* – all to be linked with the legislative network.

The increasing impact of pollution and the decreasing volume of water in the Ganga together have a multiplier effect in Varanasi. By end of March the growth of a huge sand-island and speedily downing the water level of the Ganga will be soon proved as a threat to the existence of the Ghats. About three decades ago the width of the river had been 225-250m, however it reached to around 60-70m. The main stream has lost the high speed of the current due to less volume and pressure of water. Close to the Asi Ghat, the first one, the river has already left the bank about 7-8m. The existence of Ghats in Varanasi is in danger because the existence of the Ganga is in danger.

### **Sensitivity and Search**

Mahatma Gandhi rightly warned us that “nature has enough for everybody’s need, but not for everybody’s greed”. A mass awakening of awareness in the context of old cultural values would promote a new spirit of sustainability. Such a revival, however, need not turn into fundamentalism nor should it cause any damage to secular life. In temporal frame we have to give respect to the past, search solutions in the present, and make directions for the future.

The disposal of human wastes and other pollutants in the Ganga has been prohibited since time immemorial. According to the *Prayaschitta Tatva* (1.535), a ca 9<sup>th</sup> century text,

“One should not perform fourteen acts near the holy waters of the Ganga river, i.e., excreting in the water, brushing and gargling, removing all clothes from the body, throwing hair or dry garlands in the water, playing in the water, taking donations, performing sex, having sense of attachments to other holy places, praising other holy places, washing clothes, throwing dirty clothes, thumping water, and swimming”.

The *Padma Purana (Bhumikhanda, 96.7 - 8)* states that persons who engage in such unsociable activities and engage in acts of environmental pollution are cursed and will certainly go to hell.

### **7. Towards Sustainable Urban & Rural Planning**

Sustainable planning is no way separate from the Eco-friendly planning. If nature is in danger, culture has to pay its price. If both to be taken in an integrated way, it would result to more beneficial in the preservation of the nature and their long-term use by the mankind. In framing the legislative structure care to be taken on these lines. The following major criteria for the development of Eco-friendly structure should be taken into consideration:

1. Structural growth should avoid cutting significant tress and minimise disruption, and eco-system should be maintained.
2. People should respect and ethically preserve the patterns and habitats of wildlife.
3. Building should be spaced to allow the natural scene of trees. Design of house should be made of local construction techniques, materials available and befitting cultural images.
4. Use of automobiles and other vehicles (ships in the holy river, like the Ganga) should be strictly limited, and not allowed after certain distance.

5. Landscaping and waterlines should be in the frame of minimum disruption and limited use of air conditioning.
6. Involvement of local people at different levels and in different activities should be given priority; future policy and strategy always be made in the local environmental perspective.

Remember, a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the site as living organism.

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