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**RECONNECTING CULTURE, HERITAGE,
AND ARCHITECTURAL SYMBOLISM**

Vol. 2



THE RIVERFRONTSAPES OF VARANASI, INDIA: ARCHITECTURAL SYMBOLISM, TRANSFORMATION, AND HERITAGIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Varanasi (Banaras /Kashi) is commonly perceived as a site of 'vigor and rigor' where religious culture, people, and society get interconnected deeply, and the layers of transformations get absorbed in the landscapes, more visible and distinctively illustrated along the sacred river Gaṅgā – the *Riverfrontscapes*, exemplified with 84 *Ghāts* (stairways). Of course, the city represents a blending of tradition and modernity, it also records different niches of political interferences and niches of transformations over time, and imbued therein *dharmacracy* and related resurrection – altogether creating landscapes of different worldviews and images for the future, passing on the path of '*Succession, Sustenance, and Sustainability*'. The Ghāts and the associated sacredscapes present examples of the complex story of history, image-making, placemaking, identity formation, involvement of *dharmacracy*, and superimposing heritagization. The recent case of revitalizing Kashi Vishvanatha Dham is an issue of high debate. Similarly, getting the riverfrontscapes inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List is an issue of political hegemony and contradiction. The present paper examines the interfacing issues of pilgrimage, existing riverfrontscapes, and heritage politics and their upcoming consequences in making the overall urban future of the holy city, taking into view the strategies of modern development, mostly under the umbrella of PRASHAD, and present Master Plan of Varanasi, 2021-2041. Also, the related issues of the contemporary contexts of superimposed structures, making of new ghāts, the transformation of the age-old built-up spaces and related sacred sites, and critique of heritage politics (heritagization) and interfaces of diplomacy and *dharmacracy* are examined.

Keywords: Banarasis, belongingness, civic sense, *dharmacracy*, Ghāts, heritagization, public participation, riverfrontscapes, sacredscapes.

BACKGROUND AND SPATIALITY

"I am in love with this holy river Gaṅgā (the *Ganges*); the unique face of the town and inhabitants; the unspeakable solitude of the water, and the sweet security of its bank. I would set up my tabernacle here. I am content to stand still at the age to which I arrived; I and my friends: to be no younger/no older, no richer/no poorer, no more handsome or ugly. I do not want to be weaned by age or appearance. Any alteration, on this earth of mine, in vision or lodging, puzzles and discomposes me. My household gods plant a sacred fixed root and are not rooted up without this holy water." — A pilgrim (cf. Singh 2009a: 282).

The Banārasīs (dwellers of Vārāṇasī, or Kāshī) have an emotional attachment to the Gaṅgā River (Ganges). The factors which contribute to the development of one's sense of place (*topophilia* in Tuan's terminology) are numerous and varied and have grown with time. The 6.4 km (4 miles) long riverfront of the Gaṅgā, the eastern edge of the city, possesses a unique history, a specific vision of magnificent architectural row of lofty buildings and holy sites at the waterfront (*tīrthas*), and its spatial individuality. The Gaṅgā riverfront catches up with the historically developed socio-religious ideals, values, and place consciousness of pilgrims and their faith — altogether helping to form a unique *faithscape*. This provides the hope for belonging, the firm belief among the residents and pilgrims, or visitors' thoughts and feelings to realize the cultural milieu of Hindu traditions. The Gaṅgā does have a deep sense of place because it has a history of divine attachment since an ancient past as eulogized in mythological literature. Its manifested form reaches to perceive her as a goddess, evoking special emotions among the devotees. Of course, modern man has rarely time for such vision and feelings, however with

an increasing mass of tourists and pilgrims one is bound to recognize the spirit of place which is intangible, especially the Gaṅgā riverfront in the holy city of Hindus, Varanasi, and that is why it is worth defending to conserve our cultural heritage resource. Lewis' (1979: 29) remark is appreciable in this context: "To have a sense of place, to sense the spirit of place, one's place is as indispensable to the human experience as our basic urges for food or sex. I do not think one can survive as a humane creature on this earth without special attachments to special places".

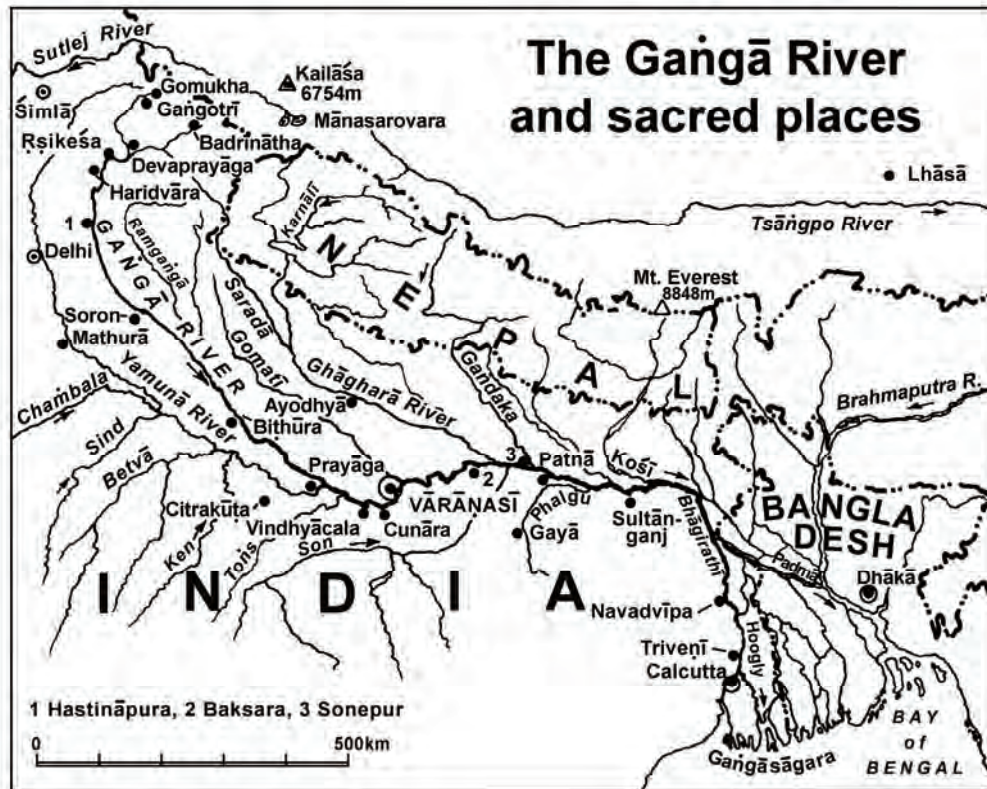


Fig. 1. The Gaṅgā River basin and location of holy places (courtesy & © by the authors).

As compared to the Nile River (6,650 km) or Amazon River (6,500 km) the total length of the Gaṅgā is only 2,525 km but it carries the highest quantity of sediment, (2.4 billion metric tons per year) which is greater than that carried by any other river of the world. The Gaṅgā has also acquired a unique position among other mighty rivers of the world by possessing the largest delta, which was formed with the deposition of these sediments through the ages. The Gaṅgā River herself is a symbol of Hindus' lifeworld and faith, that's why on auspicious occasions every perennial stream is cognised as the Gaṅgā, and the great rivers of the different parts of India are perceived as the Gaṅgā, viz. the Mandakini as the Gaṅgā of the north, the Godavari of the east, the Kaveri of the south, and the Narmada of the west. This perceived idea is eulogised in mythologies, this process may be called as *Gangaisation* of Indian cultural space.

From its source in the Himalayas to its mouth in the Bay of Bengal (Fig. 1), only in Varanasi does the Gaṅgā River flow in a crescent shape from south to north (Figs. 2, and 3). The 6.5km (4 miles) long riverfront of the river Gaṅgā, 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 history of Ghāts (stairways to the waterfront) goes back to the 8th-9th century, however, the stone stair ghats started construction in the 14th century, and as late as 2014 a few of the ghats were finally built into stones. The *Kāshī Khaṇḍa* of the *Skanda Purāṇa* (KKh), dated ca 13th century, does not directly mention the *ghāts*, rather it describes the *Jala-tīrthas* (waterfront sacred spots), numbering 96; however, all of them are associated to a sacred site and the ghat. Of these 24 are close to the Varana confluence and the Adi Keshava Ghat. The *puranic* mythologies refer to 96 sacred waterfront spots (*Jala tīrthas*) along the Gaṅgā bank in Varanasi, which is also considered to be an archetypal symbol, i.e., a product of 12 zodiacs and 8 directions (cf. Table 1). However, by the turn of the 16th century, the 96 *Jala tīrthas* get concentrated around the 84 ghats, as the special sacred chain of places (Table 2, Fig. 2). Before we may think of preserving our cultural heritage resource, understanding and their documentation are prerequisites.

Table 1. Varanasi: 96 Jala Tirtha ('waterfront sacred spots').

Ghat No., Ghat name*	Attached Jala Tirtha
1. Asi (Assi) Ghat	Asi Sangameha Tirtha
22. Harishchandra	Adi Manikarnika Tirtha (Prachin Parampapa Tirtha)
25. Kedar	Parampapa Tirtha
29. Narada	Prabhasa Tirtha
32. Pande	Gaṅgā Keshava Tirtha
34. Digpatia	Agatsya Tirtha
35. Chausatthi	Yogini Tirtha
41 a. Dashashvamedha	Dashashvamedha Tirtha, Rudra Sarovara Tirtha
42. Prayaga	Khurkartari, Markandeya, Vashishtha, Arundhati, Prayaga Tirtha
41 b. Dashashvamedha	Narmada Tirtha, Visandhya Tirtha
43. Rajendra Prasad	Prabhasa Tirtha
46. Mir	Jarandheshvara Tirtha
47. Yajnesvara/ Naya	Vishal Gaṅgā Tirtha
48. Nepali	Bhagirathi Tirtha
49. Lalita	Lalita Tirtha, Bharirathi Tirtha
50. Bauli/ Umraongiri	Pitamah Tirtha, Brahmanala, Jnana, Shailad Tirtha
51. Jalashayi	Vishnu Tirtha
52. Cremation Ghat	Pashupati Tirtha, Rudravasa, Vishvamukti Tirtha
53. Manikarnika	Manikarnika Tirtha, Chakrapushkarini , Avimukteshvara, Tarak, Skanda, Dhundhi, Bhavani, Ishana Tirtha
56. Sankatha	Harishachandra Tirtha, Parvata Tirtha
57. Gaṅgā Mahala-II	Kambalashvatara Tirtha, Sarasvata, Uma Tirtha
58. Bhonshala	Angara, Kala Tirtha, Chandra Tirtha
59. Naya	Vira Tirtha
60. Ganesha/ Agnishvara	Vighnesha Tirtha, Ikshvaku, Marutta, Menavaruna, Agni Tirtha
62. Rama	Rama Tirtha
64. Raja Gwalior	Piplada Tirtha, Tamra Varaha Tirtha, Kala Gaṅgā Tirtha
65. Mangala Gauri	Mayukharka Tirtha
66. Venimadhava	Vindu Tirtha
67. PanchaGaṅgā	Jnanahrida Tirtha, Panchanada Tirtha
68. Durga	Markandeya Tirtha, Kharva Nrisimha Tirtha
69. Brahma	Bhairava Tirtha
71. (Adi) Shitala	Karnaditya Tirtha
73. Hanumangarhi	Nageshvara Tirtha
76. Trilochana	Pilapipla Tirtha
77. Gola	Pinshegila Tirtha
78. Nandeshvara	Hiranyagarbha Tirtha, Pranava Tirtha
81. Naya / Phuta	Goprata Tirtha, Sankha Madhav Tirtha
82. Prahalada	Bana Svarnilina, Sankhya, Uddalaka, Nilagriva, Shesha Tirtha
83. Raj	Mahishasura Tirtha
84. Adi Keshava	Lakshmi Nrisimha Tirtha, Gopi Govinda, Vihar Nrisimha, Yajna Varaha, Nara Narayana, Vamana, Pranava, Aditya Keshava, Dattatreyeshvara Tirtha
85. Varana Sangama Ghat	Padodaka Shvetadvipa, Khsirabdi, Shankha, Chakra, Gada, Padma, Maha Lakshmi, Garuda, Narada, Ambarisha Tirtha

* The Ghats without any Jala Tirtha are not mentioned; for the list of Ghats, see Table 2.

Purāṇic Sources: Kkh, *Kāshī Khaṇḍa of the Skanda Purāṇa*; KR, *Kāshī Rahasya of the Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*; KKT, *Krityakalpataru of the Lakshmidhara's Tirthavivechanakaṇḍam*, TvK; and MtP, *Matya Purāṇa* (see Singh 2009b: 452-453).

Table 2. Varanasi/ Kashi: The 84 Ghats (Gt) along the Riverfront Gaṅgā (from the south to the north; see Fig. 2, cf. Singh 1993: 68, also Singh and Rana 2006, Singh 2009b: 450-451).

– Samne Ghat (facing Ramānagar)	31. Khori (earlier Ganga Mahal Gt)	61. Mehta (part of Rama Gt)
– Nagwa Ghat	32. Pande (part of Sarveshvara)	62. Rama (Vira Rameshvara)
1. Asi (<i>Assi</i>) Ghat (old & new)	33. Sarveshvara (Ganga Keshava)	63. Jatara (earlier Chor/Jadau)
2. Gaṅgā Mahala-I	34. Digpatia (part of Chausatthi)	64. Raja Gwaliar, part of 63.
3. Rivan (Riwan)	35. Chausatthi (earlier Yogini)	65. Mangala Gauri (Balaji Gt)
4. Tulasi (earlier Lolarka)	36. Rana Mahala	– Balaji (Raghoba Balaji)
5. Bhadaini (part of earlier Lolarka)	37. Darbhanga	66. Venimadhava (Bindu-)
6. Janaki (earlier Hayagriva)	38. Munshi	67. Panchagaṅgā
7. Anandamayi (Akrura, Imaliya)	39. Ahilyabai (earlier Kevalagiri Gt)	68. Durga
8. Vachchharaja	40. Shitala	69. Brahma
9. Jain (earlier Suparshvanatha)	41 a. Dashashvamedha	70. Bundi Parkota
10. Nishadaraja (rel. boatmen)	42. Prayaga (earlier Prayaga Tirtha)	71. (Adi) Shitala, part of 70.
11. Panchakota (part of Shivala Gt)	41 b. Dashashvamedha	72. Lal (Gopi Govinda Ghat)
12. Prabhu	43. Rajendra Prasad (earlier <i>Ghoda</i>)	73. Hanumangarhi, part of 74.
13. Chet Singh	44. Mana Mandir (Somesvara Gt)	74. Gāiya / Gāi (Gopreksha)
14. Niranjani (earlier Karttikeya)	45. Tripura Bhairavi (Varahi Ghat)	75. Badri Narayana/ Matha
15. Mahanirvani (Buddha took bath)	46. Mīra (earlier Jarasandheshvara)	76. Trilochana (Pilpippala)
16. Shivala (earlier Svapaneshvara)	47. Yajneshvara/ Naya	77. Gola (Pishegila Tirtha)
17. Gularia (part of Shivala Ghat)	48. Nepali (Rajarajeshvari Gt)	78. Nandeshvara/ Nandu
18. Dandi (extension of Gularia Gt)	49. Lalita (part of Nepali Ghat)	79. Sakka (Pranava Tirtha)
19. Hanuman (earlier Rameshvara)	50. Bauli / Umraogiri (Amroha)	80. Teliya Nala
20. (Old) Hanuman (rel. Ballabha)	51. Khiraki *	81. Naya/ Phuta (Gopratara)
21. Karnataka (Mysore)	52. Jalashayi (Jalasen Ghat) *	82. Prahalada
22. Harishchandra (Cremation Ghat)	– Cremation Ghat (Manikarnika)	– Nishada
23. Lali (earlier Vinayaka)	53. Manikarnika	– Rani
24. Vijayanagaram (part of Kedar Gt)	54. Baji Rao (also as Dattatreya Gt)	– Tikesvara
25. Kedar (earlier Svapnavara Ghat)	55. Scindhia (also Vioreshvara Ghat)	– Ravidas/ Bhainsasur
26. Chauki (rel. Bharashiva Naga)	56. Sankatha (earlier Yameshvara)	83. Raj (old Vedeshvara Gt)
27. Kshemesvara (Kshemaka)	57. Gaṅgā Mahala (II); part of 56.	– Lakshmana
28. Manasarovara	58. Bhonshala (earlier Nageshvara)	84. Adi Keshava
29. Narada (earlier Kuvai Ghat)	59. Naya (earlier Agnishvara Gt)	– Varana Sangama
30. Rāja (earlier Amritarao Ghat)	60. Ganesha (earlier Vighneshvara)	– Namu Ghat (<i>Khidkiya</i>)*

Note: * The Ghats numbers 51 and 52, are now completely converted into one Ghat named Gaṅgādvār Ghat (passage to Kashi Vishvanatha temple); additionally, a new ghat (Namu Ghat) was added as the last ghat. These two new ghats are opened on the auspicious day of Mahashivaratri, Shiva's marriage day, i.e., 1st of March 2022, Phalgun Krishna 14th Samvata 2078. Gt, Ghat; rel., related to.

The peculiar shape of the Gaṅgā River, “crescent-shape like half-moon”, evolved as a result of the fluvial process through which the coarser sediments deposited on its western bank between Raj Ghat in the north and Samne Ghat in the south also represents ‘natural heritage’. The portion between these two points a hillock-like geologic feature, called natural levée, consists of a nearly 60m bed of clay with coarse-grained sand, limestone concretion (*kankar*) and gravel. Another similar ridge-like formation exists the other side at Ramanagar where exists the fort. This peculiar geological formation changes the flow of the Gaṅgā River in a half-circular shape. This sharp-bend meander is perhaps the only observed in Varanasi throughout its course. This unique geologic formation has provided the base for the growth of the city in a crescent shape, symbolically described as a crescent moon on the forehead of Lord Shiva, the patron deity. In terms of river ecology, this characteristic is also considered as the unique aspect of energy quantum and direction of the energy flow. This whole bed of the Gaṅgā river is an example of natural heritage in the Indian context.

The Gaṅgā riverfront catches up with the historically developed socio-religious ideals, values, and place consciousness of pilgrims and their faith – altogether helping to form a unique *faithscape*. This provides the hope for belonging, the firm belief among the residents; and pilgrims, or visitors' thoughts and feeling to realise the cultural milieu of Hinduism. The Gaṅgā does have a deep sense of place because it has a history of divine attachment since the ancient past as eulogised in mythological literature. In Varanasi the riverfront Gaṅgā provides a site series of 84 ghats (stairways to the bank) as the special chain of sacred places (Fig. 2). The first rays of sunrise reaching upon the water current of the Gaṅgā and their reflection on the magnificent buildings along the ghats compel to remind the Hymn to the Dawn of the *Rig Veda* (1.113): “Arise; the breath of life hath back to us, the darkness is gone, the light approacheth”.

Says Havell (1905: 94): "It seems, at first, as if the whole amphitheatre, about two miles (*in fact, four miles*) in a circuit, glittering in the sunlight, were one vast sun-temple: the priests, the Brahmins who are muttering the holiest of their mantras, the mysterious sun-invocations from the *Rig Veda* — the famous Gayatri — the priestesses, the women whose *saris* repeat the colours of the dawn, fast fading now in the white light of day; the votive-offerings, the golden marigolds and rose-petals which are piled in baskets on the ghat steps, and float on the surface of the water". Says Greaves (1909: 32): "All and many features contribute to make the complete view, one which stands quite alone, and possibly could not be surpassed in the whole world for genuine picturesqueness". Says Sherring (1868: 9): "For picturesqueness and grandeur, no sight in all the world can well surpass that of Benares [Banaras] as seen from the river Ganges/ Gaṅgā". Over time these glories faded, and this trend continues.

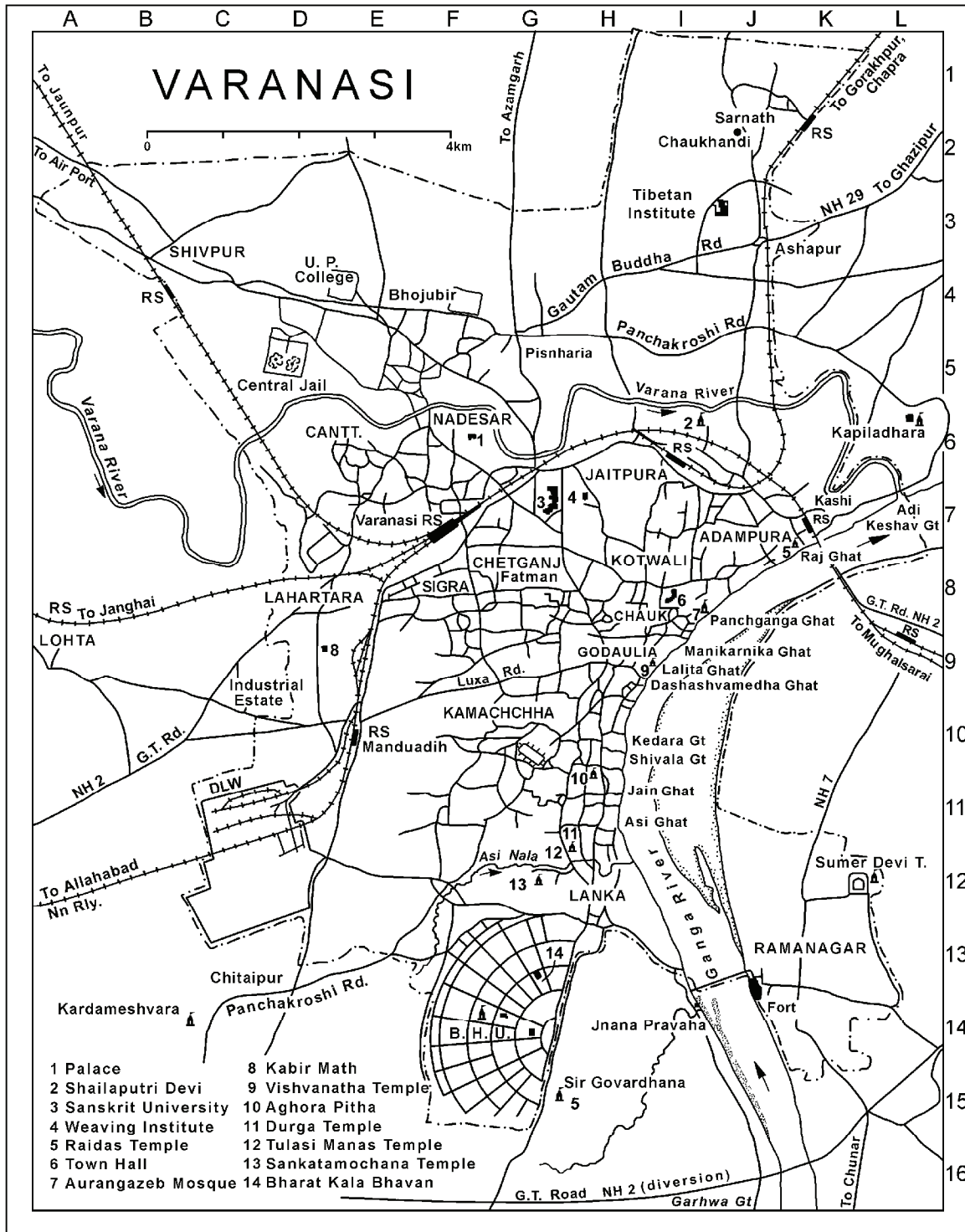


Fig. 2. The city of Varanasi (Banaras/ Kashi): Location and overview (courtesy & © by the authors).

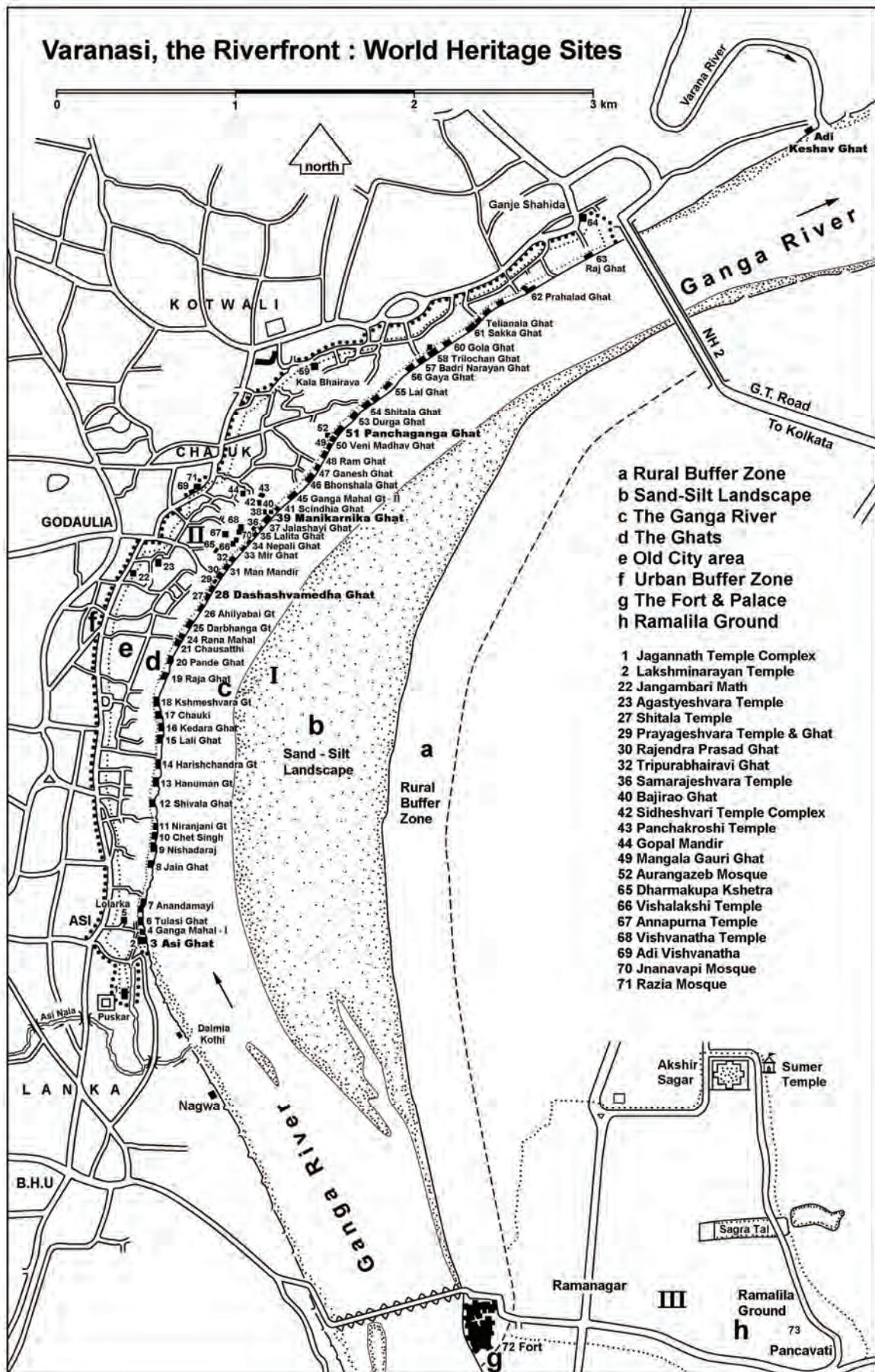


Fig. 3. The Gaṅgā Riverfront Ghats of Varanasi and World Heritage Sites (courtesy & © by the authors).

In archetypal connotation, the 84 Gaṅgā ghats (Fig. 3, and Fig. 4 for the scenic view) symbolise 8,400,000 organic species according to Hindu mythology, thus each ghat gives merit of becoming purified in 100,000 life-species (*yonis*). Thus, by taking holy dips in the Gaṅgā at all the ghats the individual soul can get purified in all the 8,400,000 species. Further, 12 months/zodiacs x 7 layers of the atmosphere comes to 84; thus, the annual cycle of the cosmic journey is completed by taking sacred baths at the 84 ghats (cf. Table 2). All the ghats are points on the divine-cosmic path (12 zodiacs x 7 chakras of body/ sheaths; thus 84) and several water-*tīrthas* lying along (12 division of time x 8 directions, points on the space circuit; thus 96) represents its manifested-transcendental dimension. That is how this frame shows a cosmic order and harmonic relationship between macro-cosmos (divine order) and micro-cosmos (human order) through the intermediary link of meso-cosmos (the physical order of ghats).



Fig. 4. The Gaṅgā Riverfront Ghats of Varanasi: the panoramic view (source: the authors' collection).

Among the 84 ghats the 5 described as the most merit-giving and sacred that bestowing special manifested merits, called *Pañchatīrthas*, are Asi, Dashashvamedha, Manikarnika, Panchagaṅgā, and Adi Keshava (from the south [sky] to the north [earth], number 1, 41, 53, 66 and 84; see Fig. 3). Respectively, they symbolise the five gross elements (*Pañchamahābhūtas*) and their main characteristics, i.e., ether/sky (space and container), air (motion, nourishment, and ethereal breath), fire (light, heat, and transformation), water (flow and liquidity), and the earth (solidity and stability). The *KKh* (84.107-10, 114) refers to "Having bathed in the five *tīrthas* a person never again receives a body of five-gross elements; rather he becomes the Five-faced Shiva [*Pañchabhūteshwara*] in Kashi". Taking a sacred bath at these five ghats provides the same merit as bathing at all the ghats. These five ghats symbolise the microcosmic body of Vishnu, respectively as the head, chest, navel, thighs, and feet (cf. Eck 1982: 233). That's how the area along the ghat is eulogised as Vishnu's body. At present most of the ghats are made of stone and concrete slabs (*puccā*); and ghats in the outside sacred territory are *kutchā* (clay-banked).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the early Buddhist literature, e.g., the *Jataka* tales, dated from ca 5th century BCE to the 3rd century CE, the ghats are described as centres of purification like bathing and spot of transport like ferry points. Worn sculpted images dating from the 12th-13th centuries are still on display at several ghats, especially in the lower part, but "it is impossible to re-establish the early architectural layout of the riverfront at this time. Later references indicate that the ghats along the Gaṅgā were delineated and named, but consisted largely of sand and mud embankments not yet firmly set and clad in stone. This lack of early surviving materials at a place with such a long history seems to be due largely to the river itself, which has an extremely changeable and destructive nature" (Hagewald 2005: 67). The *Rig Veda* (7.45.31), a ca. fifteenth-century BCE text, eulogizes the Gaṅgā as Gaṅgeya, which means the "giver of all sorts of prosperity and peace" – the liquid spirit of sustainability. Similar sentiments are echoed in the *Padma Purāṇa* (*Shristi* 60.64-65), a ca. CE thirteenth-century text: "We pray to you O! the Liquid-energy of the Gaṅgā – the universal form of supreme Lord Vishnu" (Singh 2009a: 268).

It is obvious from the archaeological investigations on the Raj Ghat that the water-front site was the centre of commercial activities. The earliest images found at this site show Yaksha and Yakshinis (vegetal demigods) and Naga (snake), indicating the predominance of nature worship. In the 2nd century, for the first time, we find the description of Dashashvamedha Ghat concerning the great horse sacrifice ritual performed by the kings of the Naga dynasty. They were Shiva devotees and were the first who installed several lingams in the city.

During the Gupta period, CE 3rd to 6th century, the ghats became the centre of economic and cultural activities. Puranic literature describes its glory vividly in various contexts. In the Gahadavala period, 11th-12th century, as many as five ghats were mentioned in several inscriptions, viz. Adi Keshava, Vedeshvara, Kapalamocana, Trilocana and Svapaneshvara (cf. Singh 1993: 67; cf. Niyogi 1959). From the inscriptions, it is also

clear that on solar and lunar eclipses and some other family celebrations people were going to the ghats for performances and giving donations to the Brahmins. The Jain text *Vividhatirthakalpa* (ca 14th century) has elaborated on the importance of the ghats. These festivities are continued, together with adding some more such performances and rituals over time.

Also, about other sections of steps along the river, it becomes clear that their shape was constantly revised and modified. Mud embankments were frequently first delineated at the top through the construction of walls and buildings. This protected the city against rising flood waters, especially during the monsoon rains. Subsequently, some step constructions were initiated on the upper part of the embankment, which later on would have extended further down towards the river. In many instances, there were separate owners for the top and the bottom parts of the ghats. Also, the number of named ghat sections increased noticeably over the centuries. This seems, however, not only to be due to the growth and expansion of the city along the river but also to the further division of originally longer ghats into several more compact compartments.

By the 17th century, the riverfront landscape (ghats) became prominent in the overall arena of Varanasi. Varadaraja's *Giravana-padamanjari* (17th century) gives a full account of the 25 ghats, rituals, and festivals associated with them, and also the temples and lingams existing nearby. The palatial buildings along the ghats were built under the patronage of the Marathas during the 18th-19th century. Prinsep on his 1822 map mentioned 57 ghats, but later Greaves (1909) described 64 ghats. Even in the 19th-20th century many ghats were re-constructed, re-named, and reshaped too. Since 1950 the state government of Uttar Pradesh has been deeply involved in making the ghats stone staired (*pucca*) and their repairing.

During the period between the late 18th and 20th century, many monasteries (*ashramas*), Sanskrit schools, temples, and pilgrims' rest houses were built by estates, patronised by the kings and queens, of different parts of India, like Peshvas of Pune (Gujarat), Holkar of Indore, and Scindhias of Gwalior (Madhya Pradesh), Bhonshalas of Nagpur (Maharashtra), Sursand, Bhabhua, and Darbhanga estates of Bihar, Rani Bhavani of Bengal, kings of Nepal, etc. Among the great poets, reformers, and philosophers, who passed most of their lives at the ghats, the notable had been Tulasi (CE 1547-1623), Madhusudan Sarasvati (CE 1540-1623), and the cobbler saint Raidas (1382-1505). However, over time the riverfront ghats suffered drastically from illegal encroachments, changes in the building structures, changes in functional uses from religious purposes to hotels and rest houses, and so on. Especially, during the last three decades more noticeable changes and transformations are recorded.

RIVERSCAPES AND FAITHSCAPES

The peculiar shape of the Gaṅgā River, "crescent-shape like half-moon", is the result of a fluvial process through which the coarser sediments 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 a nearly 60m (196.85ft) bed of clay with coarse-grained sand, limestone concretion (*kankar*) and gravel. Another similar ridge-like formation of limestone concretion exists another side at Ramanagar where exists the fort. The average elevation of such levée is around 72.2m (250ft), the crest of which is 15.24 (50ft) above the lowest level of the Ganga. The level of the land gradually drops down towards the interior from the crescent-shaped *kankar* ridge, which is bounded on the west roughly by the Asi-Raj Ghat route via Godaulia and Chauk. The rough line which marks the edge is to be demarcated with the help of an ancient road linking Asi-Godaulia-Chauk-Maidagin-Matyodari-Raj Ghat. This path is considered to demarcate the western boundary of the 'Riverfront Old City Heritage Zone'. This unique geologic formation has provided a base for the growth of the city in a crescent shape, symbolically described as a 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. The sandy-loam belt on the other side, which is subject to yearly inundation, is a natural breeding site for turtles. During the summer and autumn seasons, the sandy-loam belt is used for the cultivation of vegetables and melons. This belt is surrounded by bushy trees and mangoes.

Among the total 84 ghats along the Gaṅgā riverfront the 5 described as the most merit-giving and sacred, called *Pañchatīrthīs*, from the south to the north, are Asi, Dashashvamedha, Manikarnika, Panchaganga, and Adi Keshava. The importance of these five ghats has been first mentioned in the *Matsya Purāṇa*, ca 6th century. Taking a sacred bath at these five ghats provides the same merit as bathing at all the ghats. The Gaṅgā is the divine river that represents the integration of the trinity. She was born in the sacred pot of the Brahma (the Creator), got shelter in the toe of Vishnu (the Preserver), and roamed in the matted hair of Shiva (the Destroyer); and from Shiva one of the streams came on the earth. The five main Ghats are narrated below.

I. Asi Ghāt (no. 1)

Marking the southern edge of Varanasi city in terms of the confluence of the Asi [Assi] drain (now shifted a kilometre in the south), this ghāt was referred to in a 17th-century text (cf. Figs. 5, and 6). The palatial buildings nearby were built under the patronage of the Marathas during the 18th-19th century, and later on by the Maharaja of Banaras in ca. 1830. The temple of Asi Sangameshvara (of "the Lord of the confluence of Asi") is the landmark in this segment.

This is an example of a simple Nagara style of architecture, consisting of four gates in all directions. In the November of 1987, the family members of (late) Mahabir Prasad Jhunjhunwala repaired and renovated the temple.



Fig. 5. Riverfront Varanasi: A scene of Asi to Rivan Ghat (after Christine Macy, with courtesy, 1988).



Fig. 6. The Asi Ghat, view from the riverfront side (courtesy & © by the authors).

The temple of Asi Sangameshvara ("Lord of the Confluence of Asi") marked with a marble plaque establishes the *puranic* heritage of the site. The plaque reads that "in the Panchakroshi pilgrimage, this site is one of the *Pañchatīrthīs*". This ghat was mentioned in the inscriptions of the Gahadavalas (11th-12th century). By the turn of the 19th century, the long strip of the ghat got divided into separate ghats. In 1902 the Queen Dulhin Radha Dulari Kunwar of the Sursand Estate (Bihar) purchased the southern part of the ghat and built her small palace (presently Hotel Ganges View) and also the Lakshminarayana Temple.

The temple of Jagannatha (manifested replica of Puri, Orissa) lies close to the old route of the drain. With the support of Beni Ram and Vishambhar Ram, the two prominent and rich citizens of the Bhonshala estate of Nagpur living in Varanasi, Svami Bhalmachari built a temple honouring Jagannatha in 1802, and in 1806 had started a chariot procession festival (Ratha Yatra) that lasts for 3-days. This is the replica of the famous Jagannatha temple of Puri, Orissa. Every year during the month of *Ashadha* (June-July) the wooden idol of Jagannath from this temple is brought to the garden of Pandit Beni Ram in the Rathyatra area for celebrating the famous chariot festival, of course in abbreviated form compared to what takes place in Puri. For the 3 days, the road is crowded with people gathering from the neighbouring countryside. Many temporary shops adorn both sides of the road and are known for special cookies like *nan-khatai*, a crisp and very soft biscuit. This festival is an example of intangible cultural heritage (ICH).

The Jagannatha temple complex is the victim of illegal and immoral encroachments, construction, and mismanagement. The huge complex of great heritage importance, of course, unique in the early 20th century with pilgrimage path, flower gardens, sacred water pool (Chandan Talab), and green gardens, is now in danger. The catastrophe like illegal constructions and additional running of a big hotel in the compound itself, and above all complete lack of civil sense, and public awareness, altogether turned into a great loss to the city.

At the southern (extended) part of Asi Ghat, popularly called New Asi Ghat a fully developed stage-cum-pavilion is built for spiritual performances. The 365-day affair *Subah-e-Banaras* ('the Mystical morning of Banaras'), an initiative of the district administration and regional cultural office commenced at Asi Ghāt on 22 November 2014 to showcase the city's ancient culture, on the line of heritagization and *dharmacracy* (re-establishing old Hindu tradition through invisible political patronage). Many tourists also visit the ghat to witness the event. Apart from the routine Gaṅgā Aarti, Vedic '*mangalacharan*' (initiation music) recital by girl students of Panini Kanya Mahavidyalaya (school), and yoga sessions, carol singing will also perform by city-based choir groups on different occasions. This mystic blend of nature's grandeur and human existence, in the premises of the rising Sun the Golden Gaṅgā, and illuminated ghats inspire any human being to enchant, sing and conjure (yoga). This performance presents a morning of Varanasi full of life, light, and spiritual essence perpetuating the eternal beauty of nature along with the Vedic enchanting, classical, and traditional music and yoga.

At the adjacent ghat, Tulasi Ghāt, during the Hindu lunar month of Karttika (Oct.-Nov.) for about a fortnight (7-days in the dark half and 7-days in the light half, waning and waxing mode of Moon), Krishna Lila (theatrical performance of Lord Krishna's life) is performed every year. Its most important day is the show of Naga Nathaiya ("putting rope in the nose of Snake demon") on the second day of light-half Karttika. Popularly it is believed that this Lila was also initiated by Tulasi himself, and since then it has been continued, presently under the patronage of Mahant (late) Veer Bhadra Mishra and his successor son Vishwambhar Nath Mishra. A huge branch of the Kadamba tree (*Anthocephalus indicus cadamba*) is planted on the Gaṅgā bank and a small boy acting as Krishna jumps from the top of it into the river, and soon after appears standing on the hood of the giant snake (a model) whom he has conquered on fight under the water, and put a rope in the snake's nose. This is followed by his plays on his flute.

Tulasi had also initiated Rama Lila which now takes place for a period of seventeen days, ending on the 10th day of Light-half of the Luni-Hindu month of Ashvina (Sept.-Oct.). The first few days of the Lila are performed near the Tulasi Ghāt and finally ends here too, while the rest of the performances are held at different sites in the southern part. Both of these religious performances are examples of the continuity of traditions, and representation of the ICH (Intangible Cultural Heritage).

II. Dashashvamedha Ghāt (no. 41 a and b)

Dashashvamedha Ghat is the most important and busiest ghat concerning historicity and continuity of tradition. This ghat is divided into two parts (a and b, Fig. 7, lower and upper sites, respectively); in between the two parts is the Prayaga Ghat which replicates the holy city of Prayaga (Allahabad), lying 128km west. Even up to the early mid-nineteenth century a drain from Benia Talab to Godaulia (i.e., referred to as Godavari from which derived Godaulia) before meeting into the Gaṅgā River was bifurcated into two streams and get separated by a small island. Later the drain had been filled up and converted into Godaulia-Dashashvamedha road as existing today. This old route is shown on Prinsep's map of 1822 and distinctly picturised in his book of 1831 (Fig. 8) which shows the scene of the early 19th century. With time the old island converted into another ghāt, Prayāga Ghāt (Fig. 7). This ghat is presumed to be the first historically recorded site associated with the Bhara Shiva Nagas king of the CE 2nd century, who after defeating the Kushanas performed the horse sacrifice to please their lineage deity Shiva (Jayaswal 1933: 57). In the ancient puranic mythology this ghat has been eulogised as Rudrasara ("the water site of the Rudra/ Shiva"). According to another ancient mythology, lord Brahma ("the Creator")

performed ten (*Dash-*) horses' (*-ashva*) sacrifice (*-medha*) at this site, hence the name. The Four-headed Brahmeshvara linga (b, upper site) is taken to be evidence for the veracity of the story.

The *Kashi Khanda* (KKh, 52.1-10; 61.38) records many verses describing the glory of this ghat. Till the 18th century this ghat was widely spread, which later got divided into many ghats like Ahilyabai, Shitala, Prayaga, and Ghoda Ghats (Figs. 7, and 9). The other important divine images include Varaheshvara, Abhaya Vinayaka, the Gaṅgā ("goddess"), and Bandi Devi. These images and shrines are linked to several important pilgrimage journeys. Balaji Bajirao built the present form of this ghat in 1738-40, and later in 1775 by Ahilyabai Holkar of Indore Estate. The present stone staged structure was built by the government of Uttar Pradesh in 1965.

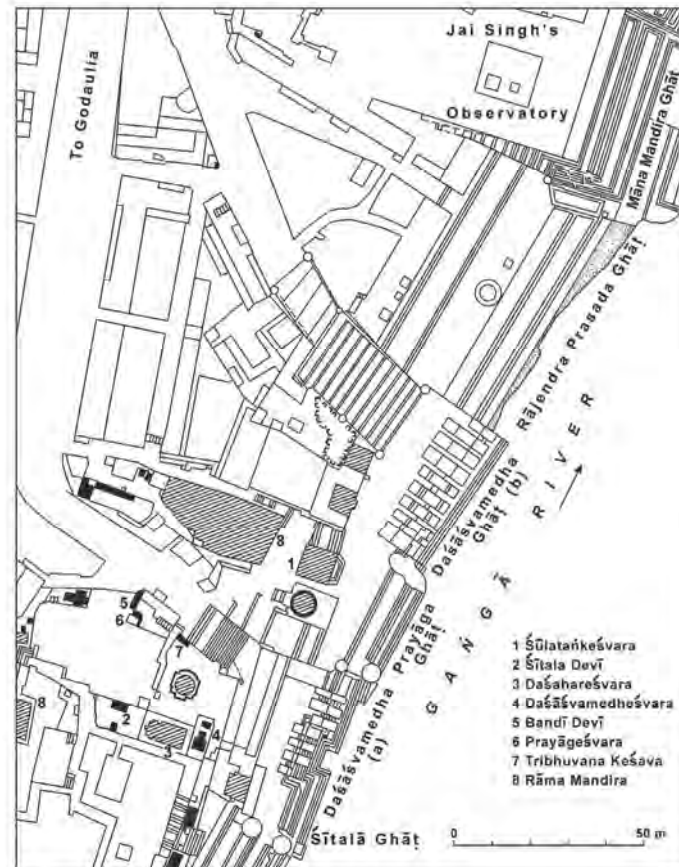


Fig. 7. Riverfront Varanasi: the Shitala, Dashashvamedha, and Man Mandir Ghats (courtesy & © by the authors).



Fig. 8. A scene of the Dashashvamedha Ghat area in the early 19th century, after Prinsep 1833.



Fig. 9. Riverfront Ghats scenario: the Shitala, Dashashvamedha, and Prayaga Ghats (courtesy & © by the authors).

On both parts of the Dashashvamedha Ghat, there are shrines of the Mother Gaṅgā, river goddess. Walking around one can get an idea of religious activities and the associated shops selling ritual items. The next adjacent ghat (to site b) was formerly known as Ashva/ Ghoda ('horse') Ghat in memory of the patron horse used in the horses' sacrifice ritual held in the 2nd century. In 1979 to honour the first president of the Republic of India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad (1950-1962), the ghat was named the Rajendra Prasad Ghat. On the 10th light-half of Jyeshtha (May-June), the worship of the Gaṅgā is celebrated on a grand scale in the Gaṅgā temple at the top of the ghat. This sacred day commemorates the coming of the Gaṅgā on the earth (i.e., at Haridvara). The sacred bath on the occasions of solar and lunar eclipses, and also on the starting day of the bath-ritual period in the months of Pausha and Magha (December-January-February), are important festive occasions at this place.

III. Maṅikarnikā Ghāt (no. 53)

Two ancient sacred waterfront sites make this ghāt, viz. Siddha Vinayaka and Svargadvareshvara. In the *Matsya Purana*, dated ca. 6th-7th century, this ghat is described as the third one among the five water-spot sacred sites, from the south to the north; cf. Figs. 10, and 11). Culturally, this site is important in the sense that this had been the meeting point of Shaiva and Vaishnavite traditions. The Vishnu Charanapaduka, a slab of marble representing the footprints of Vishnu, is considered as 'the holiest spot in the sacred city'. Ancient tales reveal that Vishnu performed meditation (*tapas*) here in a standing pose for about 500,000 years to please Lord Shiva. Finally, Shiva appeared, and by Vishnu's boon, settled here, and as a testimony to that story, Vishnu's footprints are visible nearby. From this area, one can easily identify the Vishnu Kshetra of the north and Shiva Kshetra of the south.

This ghat is described vividly in the *KKh* (26.119, 122; 33.103; 34.17-34), and popularly eulogised as 'the great cremation ground' (*Mahashmashana*). The Manikarnika Ghat is mentioned in the Gupta inscription of the 4th century. A myth mentions that Lord Siva gives the *tāraka mantra* ('prayer of the crossing') in the ear of the dead, therefore the form of Siva as Tarakeshvara, (the temple is at the ghāt), is propitiated whenever a Hindu dies. This is the first ghāt made stone staired (*pucca*) by the two king brothers in CE 1302-03; and was rebuilt and repaired in 1730 under the patronage of Bajirao Peshava, and in 1791 Ahilyabai Holkar rebuilt the entire ghāt. Again in 1872 repairs and renovations were done (Fig. 12). In 1965 the government of Uttar Pradesh repaired and rebuilt this ghat.

In the vicinity are the shrines of Manikarnikeshvara (a little far on the upper side of the lane), Maheshvara (open-air lingam at the ghat), and Siddha and Manikarna Vinayakas (Fig. 10). Located at the top and reached by the steeply ascending lane south of the water pool is the temple of Manikarnikeshvara (Gomath Ashram,

Brahmna, CK 8/ 12), and is approachable from the ghāt by taking a steeply ascending lane south of the Kunda. This is the first of the 108 shrines in the Panchakroshi pilgrimage route. It is located two stories below the courtyard of the monastery. Here, the notion of the golden age becomes manifest as the pilgrim descends into the dark underground, down to the original, the “real” soil of the world. Says Eck (1982: 246), “The lingam of this temple – set dramatically underground at the bottom of a deep shaft – could at one time be reached by a tunnel originating on the ghāt”. About 40m from the entrance point to the above ascending lane one will meet the shrine of Siddha (“perfection”) Vinayaka/ Ganesha (Brahmna, Manikarnika Lane, house- CK 9/ 1) on the right. He is the guard of the east and the giver of bliss, success, and relief from the curse of Yama (the god of death). He is the 8th among the 56 Vinayakas who protect the city at all the 56 conjunctions made of 7 round spiral layers and 8 cardinal directions.

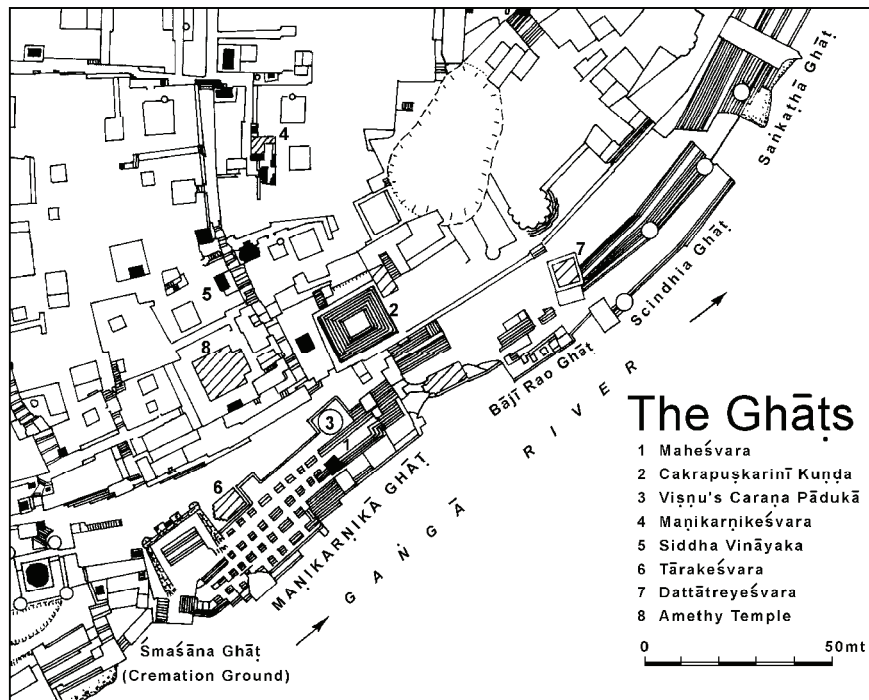


Fig. 10. Riverfront Varanasi: Manikarnika to Sankatha ghats (courtesy & © by the authors).



Fig. 11 (left). Riverfront Varanasi: Manikarnika Ghat and the scenario (courtesy & © by the authors).

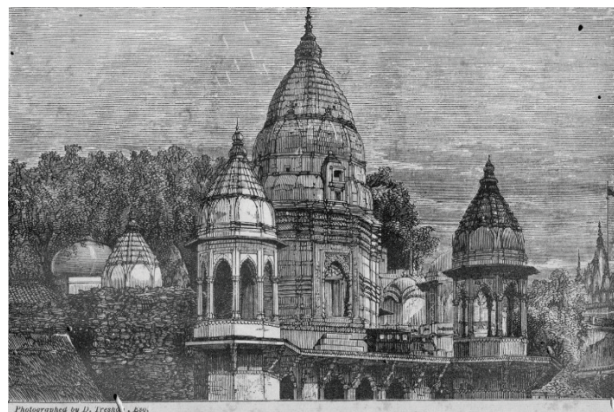


Fig. 12 (right). The temple at Manikarnika Ghat, after Sherring 1868: 70.

Maharaja Mangal Singh of Alwar Estate, Rajasthan, built the Manokameshvara Temple in 1895, on the roof of his residential quarter. The sectional parts include the half-sanctum, half-pavilion, and rectangular *mandapa*. The porches are well decorated and represent the mature work of stone carving. There are gates in all four directions of the inner sanctum. There are beautiful images of Shiva, Ganesha, and Parvati. To reach this temple, one has to pass through the residential quarter, which many times are unpleasant.



Fig. 13. The Ratneshvara temple at Manikarnika Ghat (courtesy & © by the authors).

Close to the bank is the Maheshvara linga in the open air. On the right one can see a temple slowly leaning into the Ganga. Since the early 19th century this temple has been standing in the same way (Fig. 13). Bajirao Peshwa built the nearby ghat in ca 1735, but before the basement had been raised some metres, the tremendous weight of the massive masonry caused a landslide, which made the whole fabric topple over so that the work had to be abandoned. The unfinished façade and portion of the ghat are still visible. The entire structure sunk several metres into the earth since its erection. Later in 1830, the queen Baijabai of Gwalior got it repaired and partly rebuilt; moreover, she built the Ratneshvara temple in the Gujarati style at the bank side, which also shrunken down only after a few months of construction and since then laid down as such. This is a landmark in this area (Fig. 13).

Close to it is Chakrapuskarini ('Discus Lotus-Pool') or Manikarnika Kunda, a sacred water pool. According to *puranic* mythology Shiva's crest jewel (*Mani-*) and his wife Parvati's earring (*-karnika*) fell off into the sacred pool, hence the name Manikarnika. A tale relates that with his disc (*Chakra*) Vishnu made this pool, which is reflected in the name Chakrapuskarini. Along the sacred route, on the ghāt itself, are the symbolic-holy footprints of Vishnu (Charana-Paduka), set in a circular marble slab. Through the centuries millions of devout Hindus have sprinkled it with the holy Gaṅgā water and adorned it with flowers. A plate from Prinsep's 1831 collection of engravings shows these footprints, which the subtitle calls "The holiest Spot in the sacred City". The closeby place to this holy spot has been reserved for the cremation rite of a few selected, especially the Maharajas of Kashi (Eck 1982: 246). According to the 12th-century text, the *Kashi Khanda* (26), Vishnu made this beautiful 'lotus pond and filled' it up with water from the sweat of his limbs, and performed fierce austerities here. Says the KKh (60.137-138): "For the benefit of the three worlds King Bhāgiratha brought the Gaṅgā to the place 'where Manikarnika is – to Shiva's Forest of Bliss ('Anandavana'), to Vishnu's Lotus Pool (Chakrapuskarini Kunda)'.

Towering over the Manikarnika Ghāt, there is a Shiva-Durga temple of Raja of Amethy (Oudh; now Uttar Pradesh). Built-in ca 1850 by the king of Amethy (Awadh, Uttar Pradesh), this Shiva-Durga temple is distinct with its five deep-red spires and gilded pinnacles. The temple is on a raised ground, ca 3.5m high from the nearby bank. Clambering up a side staircase, one passes under the Naubatkhana, where images of musicians are chanting praises of the goddess. On the right side of the entrance is a fine bronze lion of Durga, and on the left Shiva's bull. In the inner sanctum is the image of Mahisasuramardini. In the different portions of the temple, there are images of the forms of Vishnu, like Varaha, Narasimha, Balarama, and Krishna, and also are the goddess images of peacock riding, Vina carrying, and lion riding. Nowhere on the wall, there is an image of Shiva. There are many images depicting the life incidences of Krishna. The temple is an example of the *Pañchāyatana* style ('five gods and their five spires'), with the centre as the core and four other attached temples at the four corners. The quiet and cleanliness inside are a relief from the bustle, sloppiness and dirt, and somewhat sordid atmosphere of more popular Banaras shrines.

IV. Pañchagaṅgā Ghāt (no. 67)

This is believed to be the meeting point of five drains, viz. The Ganga, the Yamuna, the Sarasvati, the Kirana, and the Dhupapapa, among which only the first one is visible and the rest are vanished, or assumed in the form of manifestation. The merit and glory of this ghāt are described in an eleventh-century text and also in the *KKh* (59.116-144). In the Gahadavala period (11th-12th century) this was a popular and prominent ghat, patronised by the royal family. Since that period there was a famous temple of Vindu Madhava, which was demolished and converted into a mosque in 1673, that is how the ghat was called Veni Madhava Ghat, presently this is the lower part of the ghat (Fig. 14). The two water-front sacred tirthas mentioned in the ancient mythologies are the Vindu Tirtha and Panchanada Tirtha. The *KKh* (59.116-144) describes its glory very highly, and even today this is the second most important ghat after Dashashvamedha, for devotees paying a visit and the merit perceived by the people.

This was the chief resort of a great teacher of Vedanta, Ramananda (CE 1299-1411) to whom Kabir (1398-1518), a great reformist *bhakti* (devotional) poet, accepted as the guru. Ramananda's monastery is still there. Tulasi (1547-1623), the poet par excellence of the medieval period and author of *Ramacharitamansa*, had passed several good years of his life (ca the 1580s-90s) at this ghat where he composed the famous writing, the *Vinaya-Patrika* ("The Petition to Rama"), describing the glory of Vindu Madhava temple (VP, 61-63; cf. Allchin, 1966: 129-132; compare *KKh* 60, 61).

The ghat was made of stone stepped (*pucca*) in 1580 by Raghunath Tandan (Todara Mala?), the finance secretary of the Mughal emperor Akbar. This information has been supported by an inscription, which till a decade ago was in one of the niches. In 1735 Bajirao Peshva-I together with Sadashiva Naik rebuilt and repair it. In 1665 the French traveller Jean Baptise Tavernier, a dealer in jewels, paid a visit to Varanasi and described the Veni Madhava Ghat and the grand temple of Veni Madhava at the riverside, which he called a "great pagoda".

The ghāt was made of stone steps in 1580 by Raghunatha Tandan (Todara Mala?), the finance secretary of the Mughal King Akbar. In c. 1735 Bajirao Peshva-I together with Sadashiva Naik rebuilt and repaired it. Again in 1775 renovations and repairings were done by Sripatirao Peshava, and Pant Pritinidhi of Andhra. There are eight riverfront sacred tirthas at the ghāt: Pippalada, Vindu, Makha, Mayukharka, Jnanahrida, and Panchanada. There are two monasteries at the ghāt, viz. Shri and Ramananda. Most of the other temples belong to the 19th-20th century. However, the only old temple in this area is Rama Mandir of Kanganvali Haveli (house K 22/ 25), built in the early 17th century by the king of Amer (Rajasthan), Mirza Raja Jaisingh, originally as a Vedic School. This is described by the French traveller Jean Baptise Tavernier (in 1665). Nearby to it is Tailanga Svami Math (house K 23/ 95), established by a great saint of 19th-century Tailanga Svami, which contains a huge linga called Tailangeshvara.

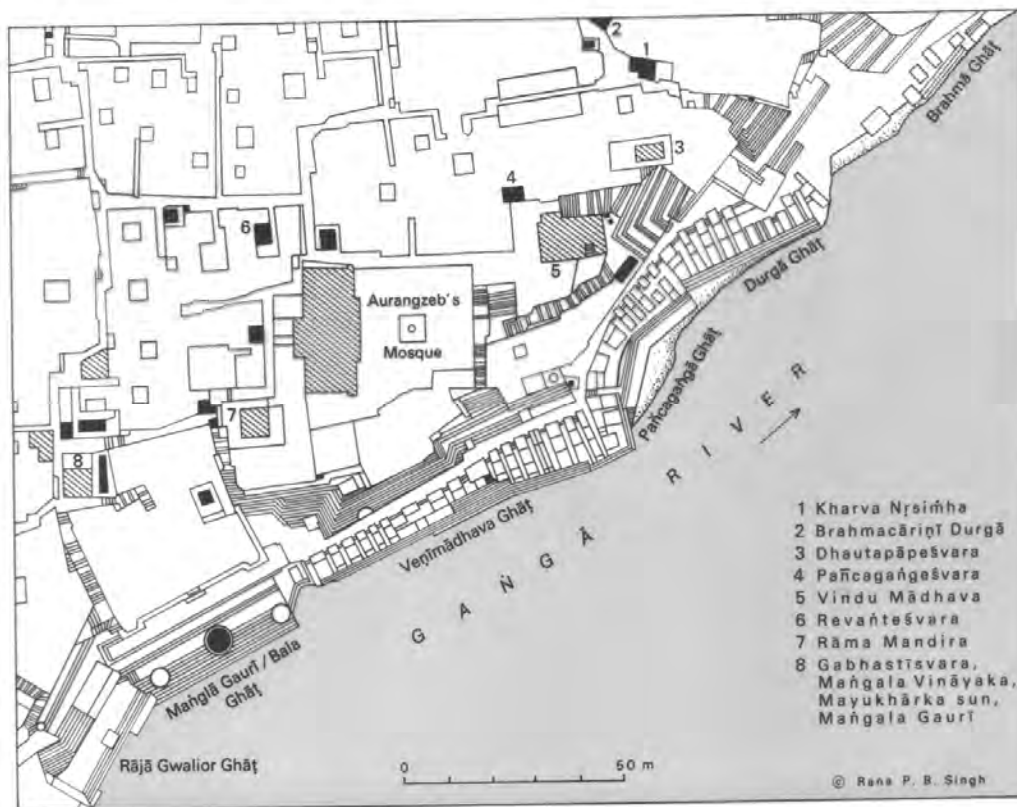


Fig. 14. Riverfront Varanasi: Raja Gwalior to Brahma (courtesy & © by the authors).



Fig. 15. Riverfront Varanasi, the scenario of Panchaganga Ghat and environ (courtesy & © by the authors).

At the ghāt, close to the riverfront, there are “the dozens of three-sided cubicle shrine rooms that open out into the river. Some contain a lingam or an image, such as the lanky reclining images of Vishnu sleeping upon the serpent Shesa. Others are nearly bare and used primarily for yogic exercises and meditation” (Eck 1982: 235). The Ganga-arati (‘ritual of offering oil lamps’) at the time of sunrise and sunset is the most attractive scene at this ghāt, which is performed in honour of the mother goddess Gaṅgā River. The shrine of the goddess Gaṅgā is also here. During the month of Vaishakha (April-May) and Karttika (Oct.-Nov.), devotees, mostly ladies, use to take sacred baths in the morning at this ghāt. Special festivity and sacred bathing are performed here on the birthday of the Ganga, i.e., Vaishakha 7th light-half (waning of Moon). In the month of Karttika (Oct.-Nov.) ritual of offering oil lamps to ancestors, arranged in the sky with the bamboo stands (*akasha dipas*), is performed by the Ghātiyas (ghāt-priests) on behalf of the devotees who patronize the cost, or materials and rewards (in cash, or kinds, or both) for the service. There is a stone pillar with a 108 sockets stone-made structure, built by Ahilyabai Holkar in the late 18th century, to hold the lamps lit on the night of the full moon in the month of Karttika.

The landmark in this area is the Alamgir mosque (house K 22/ 28; Fig. Figs. 14, & 15), which is converted form of a famous 11th-century Vishnu temple. After its first destruction in the 15th century, it was re-made in 1585 by the king of Amber, Raja Man Singh, but finally demolished and transformed into a mosque in 1673 by the bigoted Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. There is a high wall, next to the street running by the western side of the mosque, which is continued around to the northeast corner. A door in the northern wall opens the way into the enclosure, in full front of the mosque; the latter being situated on its southern side. From the eastern side commences the long flight of stone stairs descending to the river. Says Sherring (1868: 111), “The mosque itself exhibits nothing striking, and, indeed, can hardly be called beautiful. It is plain and commonplace; and, were it not for the minarets rising above, it would not be accounted a noticeable object in Banaras”. One of the minarets fell down in 1948, and the other one got cracked resulting to pull it down in 1954.

V. Adi Keshava Ghāt (no. 84, the last ghat)

In the Gahadavala inscription (ca. CE 1100) this Ghāt was referred to as an extended part of Vedeshvara Ghāt. This is assumed to be the oldest and the original (Adi) site of Lord Vishnu (Keshava). The temple complex of Adi Keshava has a pleasant pastoral setting on the bank above the confluence of the Varana and the Gaṅgā rivers. Among the oldest *puranic* listings of sacred sites in the city, this is one of them. This sacred spot is fully eulogized in the ancient *puranic* eulogies (cf. *MP* 185.68, the *VP* 3.43-50, the *KKh* 84.109, and see a51.44-82). This was the favourite holy site of the Gahadavala kings, as evident from the Gahadavala inscription that “a great number of regal ritual occasions in Varanasi included the worship of Adi Keshava or a dip in the Gaṅgā at the Varana confluence” (Niyogi 1959: app. B as in Eck 1982: 233). The ghāt was made pucca in 1790 by a Diwan of Scindhia State.