

Varanasi and Gaṅgā Today : Problems and Perspective

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Varanasi, a city known for its silk weaving narrow lanes, *ghāṭas*, educational institutions and spirituality, is one of the 63 cities under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM). It also is a group of 10 cities where the issue of heritage degradation is of primary concern. For long Varanasi has been the cultural capital of India. JNNURM calls for a City Development Plan (CDP) from the local authorities for the development of the cities. Varanasi's local administration (as instructed under the Mission) went ahead and prepared the CDP in collaboration with the New Delhi-based Feedback Turnkey Engineers Private Limited.

Preparation of CDP for a city like Varanasi is very difficult task to start with and when one addresses the heritage concerns it only makes the task more difficult. Then if there is a rush to have the CDP prepared in two months to meet a deadline it becomes impossible for the CDP to address adequately the concerns of the Mission as well as the city. This is exactly what has happened. The worse fear of a large amount of money being put into infrastructure projects in the name of development may come true if one goes by the CDP.

The CDP for Varanasi was prepared in just two months by consultants who had little or no information on the culture, history and life of the city. There was neither any participation by the local community; nor any consultation with it. Only a small "workshop" was advertised in the *Dainik Jagaran* newspaper through a 1 ??? cc news. Ironically, what was discussed during the workshop was the final draft of the CDP. One could clearly see the disguise of the policy of "Temples of New India" coming to the forefront.

Urban regeneration is surely different from urban development. Renewal of a heritage city like Varanasi for sure is miles apart from an urban development project. The mission seems to have overlooked the ground realities of the urban centres. Large infrastructure projects have been pushed under the disguise of the urban renewal projects. And because of this there is a large portion of the population that is not addressed.

Varanasi's CDP has a few points that one needs to scrutinise carefully. There

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has been intentional avoidance of past studies and reports on the various aspects of the city. One can see from the under-mentioned points very clearly that the local people, their needs and knowledge have been ignored.

1. **Construction of Permanent Jetties along the *Ghāṭas* for the boats :** This would completely ruin the 600-year old cultural and heritage fabric of the river front which is primarily used for pilgrimage, bathing and boating. This also does not take into account the variance of the level of water in the Gaṅgā. There is complete ignorance of the visual impact of this infrastructure development. Reason cited for this was the unorganised system of parking the boats. Anyone who has visited the city and has experienced the boat ride would appreciate the system in place.
2. **Construction sites of the 5 Flyovers proposed :** In a heritage city like Varanasi having flyovers in the old town and also in the area (Rathyatra) that already has a crossing which is 100 ft. wide and all four approach roads to the crossing being at least 50ft. in width does not make sense. It is one thing to look at flyovers as concepts of development and totally another for it to be a functional need of the city. The roads in the old city are flanked on both sides by heritage buildings, shops and residences.
3. **Construction of the Ring Road :** The concept and its success is very much appreciated but the actual execution with regard to the city of Varanasi is a big question. The city has a very important pilgrimage route around the city called '*Pañcakośī*'. For the devotees of Śiva this route is important as the route around Mount Govardhan in the Braj Area. Any roads that change or destroy this should be reconsidered and avoided to maintain the importance of this sacred route.
4. **Construction of a new area for Dying and Polishing of Fabrics :** This sounds to be a proposal of planners who do not have any understanding of the textile industry of Varanasi. The various regions of weaving have their own dying and polishing industry that caters to the hand-woven textiles, which are a benchmark in the world. These self-sufficient areas are like a group of cottage industries working together in harmony. Currently these units are conveniently located in various weaving areas and give the much-needed efficiency as compared to the plans of the CDP whereby a centralised area for this is to be allotted and the units to be

established there. This would firstly act as forced migration and also ruin the centuries old methods, lifestyle, cultural atmosphere, and create an industrial area for a cottage industry.

5. **Mass Public Transport System** : Busses for public transport system suggested where the old city roads are on 30 to 40 ft. wide. Objection has also been raised to the current cycle rickshaw (ecofriendly) and auto rickshaw (can be made eco-friendly with the introduction of compressed natural gas). These seem to be views of the modern town planners who would like to widen the roads and have a modern city in place of the culturally vibrant and historically important city like Varanasi which is full of heritage sites and has no green cover or parks to handle the pollution in the air.
6. **The Major Stress on the Heritage Component was on the Lighting of the Heritage Sites** : In a city that does not get more than 14-16 hours of electricity this seems a suggestion out of the textbooks on urban development with no understanding of the ground situation. We have lost our traditional heritage management knowledge and are perfectly happy to copy in bits and pieces of what is being done in the west today. This is all happening on the whims and fancies of the consultants, most of whom are from engineering or academic backgrounds with little experience of the living heritage.

The above few points give a very clear idea of the whole approach towards the CDP preparation methodology. We have to look at Varanasi in particular as a very special heritage city.

Varanasi is the only city in India that could be called the visual encyclopaedia of the architectural styles present in India. Varanasi was a thriving metropolitan city when cities like Jaipur, Agra, Fatehpur Sikiri, Delhi were being conceived. The city in its intangible form has existed now for about 3000 years with the exact descriptions in various religious texts.

There is a very distinct culture and way of life in Varanasi irrespective of the religion one belongs to, the customs change with religion but one can definitely see the uniformity that we here call "*Banarasi*".

Varanasi as a city has its infrastructure and ecological requirements. It has only 3 percent green cover. The suspended particles in the air are as high as it has ever

been in Chandni Chowk, Delhi. The city is roughly 49 sq. km with a population of more than 1.2 million and a daily floating population of 0.6 million. The city caters to the medical requirements of a region that extends in the east from Gaya to Faizabad in the west and Gorakhpur in the North to Chitrakut in the South. The city also is the centre for education for the same region. Varanasi has the wholesale market for fruits for eastern UP. It also houses the wholesale market of grains, spices, footwear, clothes, etc. The year ending March 2006, Varanasi was the most visited foreign tourist destination. Roughly 400,000 foreign tourists visited the city.

There is no project or plans to make the city greener. The part of the city to the east of the river - the extended flood plane area- is mostly agricultural and has greenery which is now being encroached and one can clearly see small settlement coming up. This also means that in future bridges would be constructed in these parts- an issue addressed in the CDP. This would then mean that the river Gaṅgā in Varanasi would soon be looked at as a hurdle to cross like the Yamunā in Delhi. It is beyond anyone's imagination how people can have their pilgrimage bath while the traffic is crossing and watching them. The government's open land in the city is being sold to the builders for malls and multiplexes. In the heritage area the local administration has allowed one multiples to come up with glassed glass building front in complete contrast to the local architecture and feel of the place. Another much bigger mall and multiplex has been allowed and is under construction in the heart of the old city which is going to change the currently precariously balanced stress on the land use. It will also lead to traffic problems.

There has been no effort on the part of the administration to spread the city out to satellite towns. Residential buildings of seven floors are being permitted in this already congested city. The land tax rules in the state of Uttar Pradesh are being reworked in such a way so as to discourage people to have open spaces and build as much as possible on it. It seems the complete anti-thesis of what is required.

The living conditions in the city of Varanasi are at a point where the government should actually give incentive to people to keep one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world populated. The roads are non-existent. To travel 6 km in the city it takes over 30 min., that too when one is not commuting to city centre. The solution to this problem is "Speed Interceptor Vehicles" equipped with speeding guns and cameras to stop speeding in a city where the maximum speed can barely get to 30 kmph.

One starts the day in Varanasi with a power cut. As one gets to office by 9.30 a.m. you are welcomed by the power supply being switched off and it only comes back around 3.00 p.m. when the day's work is over. This has a major impact on the air quality of the city during a period when it is hot and people need to travel for work. All business and residences run generators and the air smells of diesel and kerosene but the local administration does not blink its eye.

All these problems would discourage any person to come to visit the city. But it still draws roughly 400,000 foreign tourists and 2,000,000 domestic tourists and pilgrims. So what does that mean? Firstly there is something in the city that cannot be seen but felt. The intangible supersedes the tangible and draws 2.5 million people annually to it. A very silent problem that will surface in the times to come is that of drinking water 400,000 foreign tourists mean roughly 3 bottles of water per tourist and even if we consider the stay to be of 2 days, we will end up with 2.4 million empty water bottles in a year. This city does not even have regular garbage collection and how it will address the issue of 2.4 million empty plastic bottles is beyond imagination. The other garbage that is generated out of such a large tourist influx has not yet been addressed.

Cities around the world look towards the Mayor of the city for possible solutions to problems and the local administration to back the solution with work. We live in a state where the seat of the Mayor for various political reasons is reserved for the backward classes. A city of the importance to the nation and the world is being politically exploited and neglected by both the government bodies of the country and various international agencies.

India needs to wake-up and do something to protect the city that symbolises its vast cultural heritage, built heritage, confluence of religions and the intangible heritage. The government needs to re-look at its policies and methodologies of administration and the international agencies need to apply the pressure and support efforts of NGO's. More importantly the international agencies need to rework the methodologies of collaborating with the government in the light of the current political willingness and encourage private initiatives and NGO's to take up the social responsibility.

We have sure given Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi a place as the father of the nation but have forgotten all that he stood for and all that he encouraged. We have taken him out of the hearts and streets of India and put him on walls, podiums and

textbooks. In a 100-year cycle this man and his ideas gave birth to new nation and then the degeneration of all that went into the birth of the new nation. Urban Renewal Mission being named after the founder of "Temples of New India" and not Mahatma says volumes of the direction this country is heading towards. Small self-sustaining villages and towns around the cities was a vision given to the country by the father of the nation, but in our futile effort to match-up with the west we need to make more Gurgaons and Noida. We need to pause and re-look at our policies and direction before it is too late.

The only way to help Varanasi and its people is to reduce this burden on them by developing satellite towns like Mugalsarai, Ramnagar, Bhadohi, Gopiganj, Aurai, Ballia etc. These towns need to become self-sufficient and then we need to address the future needs of Varanasi. Daily migration will throw all our figures of the mark if we do not curb it by giving them opportunities locally.

There needs to be proper time and participation of various "stakeholders" in the preparation of the CDP for Varanasi. It is in the larger interest of any efforts towards the urban renewal of Varanasi to have a proper extensive plan that is sensitive to the heritage, both tangible and intangible. The plan should be based on many layers of information and discussions with active participation of the citizens, professionals, scholars, academicians, experts, NGO's, national and international agencies and all those concerned with preserving one of the living treasures of the world. This should really become a role model for the people and government of this country to show to the world our understanding of our heritage and how we want to preserve it. We should most definitely focus on education of children and public awareness on these issues if we are to have sustainable efforts towards urban renewal.

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