

Scared Space and Political Symbolism at the Three Important Ghats of Varanasi

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Abstract

The ghats of Varanasi are more than just riverfront spaces along the Ganga River. They are places where culture, religion, public identity and everyday life come together. For centuries, these ghats have been associated with rituals, spirituality and pilgrimage. At the same time, they also carry political and symbolic meanings that have become more visible in recent years through tourism, media representation and government-led development projects.

The paper argues that the ghats have become symbols of both state-led cultural politics and sacred continuity. Dashashwamedh ghat reflects public ritual performance through the famous Ganga aarti, Manikarnika ghat represents the sacred association between death and liberation, while Assi ghat reflects the growing connection between spirituality, tourism and urban culture. Each of these ghats represents a different aspect of the city's religious and cultural identity.

The study is based on qualitative analysis using books, policy reports, journal articles, and observation-based understanding of activities at the ghats. The paper argues that these spaces are not only religious sites but also important cultural and political symbols. Government projects, media attention, and tourism have transformed the visual and social character of the ghats, making them part of larger discussions about heritage, identity and nationalism in contemporary India.

The paper concludes that the ghats of Varanasi continue to preserve their spirituality importance, but their meaning and public representation are gradually changing under the influence of the modernization and political narratives.

Keywords: Scared space, Political symbolism, Varanasi ghats, Cultural politics, Religious landscape, Pilgrimage.

Introduction

Varanasi's Ghat, particularly Dashashwamedh, Manikarnika and Assi, seamlessly blend ancient sacred space with modern political symbolism, serving as arenas for religious ritual and state spectacle. They represent the cosmic Hindu time and contemporary nationalistic narratives, transforming holy bathing spots into powerful civic stages.

The riverfront ghats of Varanasi hold a unique place in the religious and cultural imagination of India. These stepped embankments along the Ganga river are sites where spirituality, everyday life, ritual activity and social interaction exist together. Traditionally, the ghats have served as spaces for bathing, worship, cremation, meditation, and pilgrimage. However, beyond their religious importance they also function as political and symbolic spaces that reflects changing ideas of power, governance and cultural identity.

Scholars have described Varanasi as a sacred landscape where religion is deeply connected with spatial organisation and public life. Rana P. B. Singh explains that the ghats collectively form a symbolic sacred geography that shapes the identity of the city. In recent decades, state-led riverfront development, tourism growth and media representation have transformed the ghats into nationally visible cultural symbols. This paper focuses on three prominent Ghats of Varanasi- Dashashwamedh Ghat, Manikarnika Ghat and Assi Ghat- to understand how sacred spaces are connected with political symbolism in present day Varanasi. These ghats were selected because each one represents a different social and religious meaning within the cultural landscape of the city.

Literature review

Several scholars have studied Varanasi as a sacred and cultural city. Diana L. Eck describes the city as a “living sacred landscape” where religion is continuously practiced through everyday rituals and activities. According to her, the ghats are not only physical structures but also spiritual spaces shaped by faith and memory.

Similarly, Rana P. B. Singh explains that the ghats of Varanasi form part of a larger sacred geography connected with Hindu beliefs and pilgrimage traditions. His work highlights the symbolic importance of the riverfront and its role in shaping the identity of the city.

The concept of the “sacred complex,” developed by L. P. Vidyarthi, is also important in understanding Varanasi. He explains that sacred places are formed through the relationship between rituals, myths, people, and physical spaces.

Recent studies have focused on the impact of tourism, modernisation, and government development projects on the ghats. Scholars argue that many rituals have become more organised and public in nature. Rituals such as the Ganga Aarti are now performed in front of large crowds and are often shaped by tourism and media representation. However, there is still limited discussion about how different ghats represent different forms of sacred and political meaning. This paper attempts to explore that connection.

Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative approach. The paper uses:

1. Books and journal articles related to Varanasi and sacred geography.
2. Government reports on riverfront development and heritage conservation.
3. Observation-based understanding of rituals and activities at the ghats.

The study main focuses on interpreting the social, cultural and political meanings associated with the three selected ghats.

Dashashwamedh Ghat: Ritual Performance and Public Symbolism

Dashashwamedh Ghat is one of the most visited ghats in Varanasi and is widely known for the evening Ganga Aarti. Traditionally, the ritual was a devotional ceremony performed in a relatively simple manner. Today, however, it has become a highly organised public event involving co ordinated movements, music, lighting and large audiences.

The ritual now attracts pilgrims, tourists, photographers and media attention from across the world. Because of this visibility, Dashashwamedh Ghat has become a cultural symbol of Indian spirituality. Political leaders and public representatives are also often seen participating in ceremonies at the ghats, especially during major festivals or official events.

This transformation shows how a sacred ritual space can also become a site of political and cultural representation. The public presentation of Ganga Aarti creates a visual image of religious identity that is connected with ideas of heritage and nationalism.

Dashashwamedh Ghat also reflects the idea of cultural nationalism, where religious traditions are presented as symbols of national pride and civilizational continuity. Public rituals performed at the ghat create a collective cultural experience that connects spirituality with ideas of heritage, identity, and nationhood. During festivals and political visits, the ghat often becomes a stage for displaying cultural unity and religious symbolism.



Figure 1 Sacred Bathing Practices and Pilgrim Activities at Dashashwamedh Ghat along the banks of the Ganga River.

Manikarnika Ghat: Sacredness, Death and Continuity

Manikarnika ghat is one of the oldest and most sacred cremation ghats in Varanasi. According to Hindu belief, cremation at this ghat helps a person attain moksha or liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Unlike Dashashwamedh ghat which is associated with public ritual performance, Manikarnika represents spiritual continuity through Death ritual.

The atmosphere of the ghat reflects the close relationship between life, death and religion in Varanasi. Cremation rituals take place continuously making the space spirituality significantly for many Hindus.

In recent years, discussions around modernisation and riverfront development have also affected cremation ghats. Efforts to improve infrastructure and cleanliness have changed certain aspects of the space. However the sacred identity of Manikarnika Ghat remains deeply rooted in religious belief and tradition.

Politically and culturally, the ghat symbolises the timeless nature of hindu sacred traditions. It is often represented as the spiritual heart of Varanasi and plays an important role.

Manikarnika ghat is often portrayed as the spiritual heart of Varanasi, where life and death exist together. The political significance of Manikarnika Ghat is also evident in its portrayal across media, documentaries, and public conversations. Such representations enhance the perception of Varanasi as an eternal religious city and reinforce broader narratives of cultural heritage and civilizational identity.



Figure 2 Sacred Landscape of Manikarnika Ghat showing cremation rituals and everyday activities along the banks of the Ganga River.

Assi Ghat: Urban Culture and Modern Spirituality

Assi ghat represents another dimension of sacred space in Varanasi. While it remains an important pilgrimage site, it is also closely connected with tourism, cultural programs, music, yoga activities and youth culture.

Unlike the ritual intensity of Dashashwamedh or the funerary symbolism of Manikarnika, Assi ghat reflects the interaction between sacred tradition and modern urban life. Daily cultural programs, music events, yoga activities and tourism activities are common at the ghat.

Government beautification projects and tourism promotion have transformed Assi ghat into a major cultural attraction. These developments have increased public participation and visibility, especially among younger visitors and international tourists.

Religious and cultural events are now intricately linked with media portrayals, photography, and the digital culture. This indicates a larger trend where sacred areas are becoming integral to urban branding and the politics of culture in modern India. Government programs connected with the Namami Gange Programme and tourism promotion often highlight Assi Ghat as a model of cultural revitalization and sustainable riverfront development.

Thus, Assi Ghat serves not just as a place of worship but also as a political and cultural emblem of modernisation, heritage, and public identity in contemporary Varanasi.

Sacred Space and Political Symbolism

The three ghats discussed in this study represent different forms of sacred and political symbolism.

1. Dashashwamedh Ghat represents ritual performance and public religious identity.
2. Manikarnika Ghat symbolises death, liberation and sacred permanence.
3. Assi Ghat reflects urban culture, tourism and modern spirituality.

Together, these ghats reveal how sacred spaces are continuously shaped by political narratives, cultural representation and urban governance.

Riverfront development projects and cultural promotion programs have increased the national and international visibility of the ghats. At the same time, these changes have also influenced how rituals are performed and experienced.

Conclusion

The ghats of Varanasi continue to play a significant role in religious and cultural life. Nevertheless, the significance and portrayal of these areas are gradually evolving. By examining Dashashwamedh, Manikarnika, and Assi Ghats, this paper illustrates how sacred locations are intertwined with political symbolism and cultural identity in modern India. The forces of modernisation, tourism, and government development initiatives have enhanced the visibility and infrastructure of the ghats. However, these transformations have impacted the atmosphere and experience of ritualistic spaces. The challenge lies in maintaining a balance between development and the preservation of the spiritual and cultural character of the ghats.

Understanding the changing nature of these sacred spaces is important not only for heritage conservation but also for understanding the relationship between religion, culture, and politics in urban India.

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