

Design Resource

Architecture of Varanasi

The Land of Spirituality

by

Prof. Nina Sabnani, Prof. Sumant Rao, Ruchi Shah

and Piyush Verma

IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/architecture-varanasi>



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About Kashi

Varanasi is also popularly known as Kashi. Living up well to the meaning of its name; the word Kashi is derived from the Sanskrit word कशी meaning 'where the cosmic light concentrates in circle', or simply 'illumination'. Located in Uttar Pradesh it is considered to be the holiest amongst the *Sapta Puri's*. The epicentre of devotement - Jainism, Hinduism and Buddhism have had coinciding paths and longstanding associations with Kashi, which has also witnessed an intrusion by the Mughals - connecting it to Islam as well.

The entire city boasts of an ancient feel - the narrow streets, detailed structures, peeling paint on the walls, public transport, unplanned constructions and *kaccha roads*. Be it the Benaras Hindu University (BHU) or the Observatory in the ManMandir Ghat built by Raja Man Singh they remain depictions of heritage Indian architecture. The sandstone used in this region over the years has been sourced from Chunar and Mirzapur.

The city is dotted with chai shops, temples in every nook and cranny, niches filled with skilled Paanwalla's, make-shift abodes of sages and gurus, and overnight lodgings of vagrants in abandoned ruins, *Thele's* of local food and chaat. Kashi balances cautiously on the scales of art, culture and deep-rooted spirituality, on one hand, edging unconsciously towards appearing like an unplanned city with an overwhelming population in self-neglect, living a contradicting life.

Yet, according to eastern philosophy, the shaping of the cultural and architectural landscape of Varanasi is based upon cosmological principles. A popular belief is that Varanasi is located at the centre of the earth, where the complete sacred universe convenes here in a symbolic *mandala*. The *Manasara*, a text about Hindu Architecture from the 10th century states that – the design of this Hindu city is established on the 'Cosmic Cross' the essential points, which are the corners of the macrocosm – making the entire city a divine city – or a cosmogram. Varanasi is not only a place of creation but also believed to be a crossing place (*Teerth*) between this world and the other-worldly brahman.

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Wayward but organic constructions now becoming a part of the cityscape overlooking the Ganges.

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Architecture of Kashi

A melting pot of cultures from India and beyond, the architecture of Kashi reflects diversity in construction, pattern and detailing. Ancient buildings falling to ruins, strong - proud pillars, traditional balconies, red brick-work, connected congested lanes, intrusive modern buildings, soot-covered temples and carpets of ash is what welcome you to the Land of Spirituality; Kashi. The course of the River Ganges has lent itself to the step-like constructions of the Ghats.

For all the creatures that can be found on the Ghats of Kashi, a popular Doha say...“Rand, Sand, Seedi, Sanyasi, Inse Bacche to Sevai Kashi.” In this saying, Kabir is credited to have said, “Widows, bulls, stairs and saints, escape them all to reach salvation (or Kashi)”. With this status of being used often as an adjective, synonymous with liberation another popular phrase is Karvat Kashi also known as the final sleep. It is a belief that people travel here from far off places to finally end their lives, in the Karvat Kashi temple located in the vicinity of the Vishwanath temple complex. However, in recent times the term Karvat Kashi has been used popularly to describe a bent temple (Karvat, meaning bent) located on the Ghats.

Most of these Ghats have been built during the rule of the Marathas, while some however were built over the ages. Special stories linking lineages, mythologies, epics and the timelines of history are associated with each of the Ghats. Over 80 Ghats that line the River Ganga; each unfurls a different style of architecture. Old houses, palaces, ashrams, ornate temples, and haphazardly built homes can all find space amidst the never-ending, horizontal Ghats.

In a sweeping glance, it is but natural to overlook the fact that the Ghats are connected with stone steps leading down to the River or up, towards the street side markets; the pillared balconies with intricate jali work, the small niches for windows or shops that go unnoticed, painstakingly stone carved window supports and forgotten buildings with creepers crawling out from the porches. Certain types of interactions amongst people are expected from this architecture. Unending walks, or bathing rituals, conversations over Banarasi chai - amidst travellers from Korea, Spain and Czech with the boatmen, early morning siesta's, contests of kite flying, chanting of prayers, songs of the boatmen, clicking pictures, catcalls and gambling form the pulse of the peaceful sunrise over the Ganges.

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The famous Ganga Mahal Ghat which used to be a part of the Yameshwar Ghat. This Ghat was built by the King of Gwalior in the early 19th century.



One can hear birds screaming from the roof of the Ganga Mahal; with its intricately designed supports and rusted metal edges that resemble a dark coloured lace, tourists can't help being drawn to the splendid architecture of this Ghat.

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A view of the Reewa Ghat and beyond, from the banks of the Assi Ghat in Benaras.



An image of the Chet Singh Ghat captured from a boat on the Ganges.



The Mahanirvani Ghat is named after the Naga saints. A sage of the Samkhya philosophy of Hinduism, Kapila is believed to have lived here. There are four small Shiva temples constructed by the Maharaja of Nepal on this Ghat.



Flat stones and arranged bricks make up for almost all the architecture on the Ghats in Kashi, imparting a characteristic look to the place.

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Painted steps on the Bhadaini Ghat livening up the space.



The Chet Singh Ghat confesses the story of a brave king, a true Indian nationalist who fought a ferocious battle against the British sepoys lead by Warren Hastings at this place.

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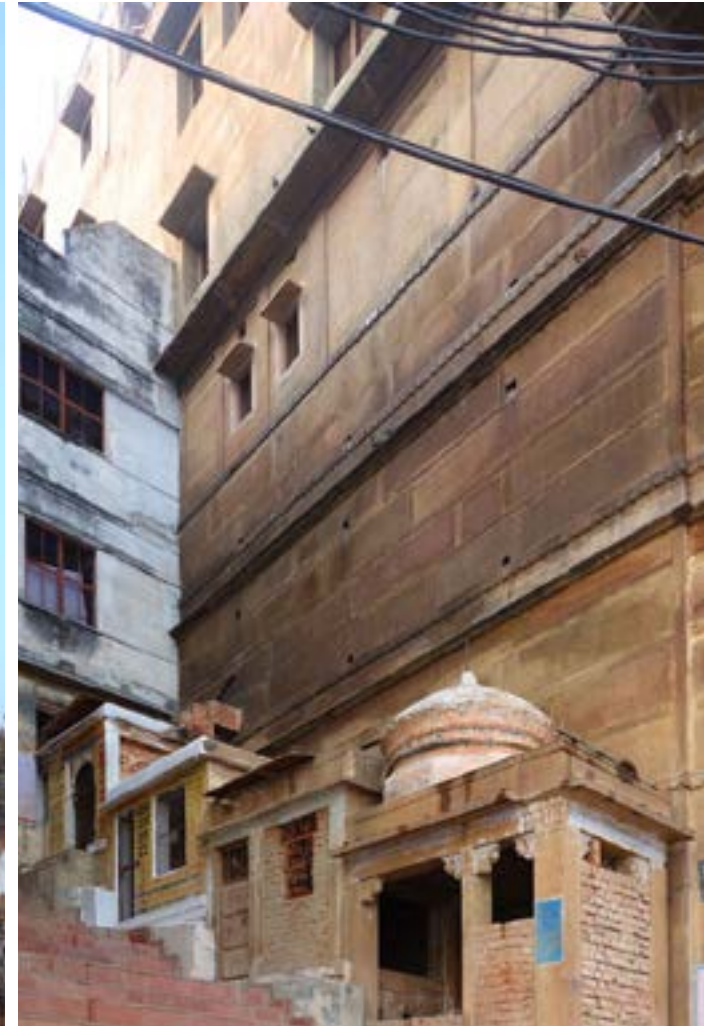
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Guest houses, homes of locals and ruins of old buildings, form layers on the Chausatthi Ghat.



Most of the Ghats have steps leading towards the streets above, the steps are lined with small shops, tea stalls and temples.

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With very few wide streets, Kashi has congested arrangements of small shops, vegetable vendors, and food stalls below the old structures that exaggerate the antiquated attitude of the city.



Manmandir Ghat formerly known as the Somesvara, came to be known by its current name when Raja Savai Mana Singh established his palace, and this very Ghat.



Primarily known for its magnificent building and exquisitely carved windows the topmost floor houses an Observatory.

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Carved windows at Manmandir Ghat.



Temples, houses and schools are all linked with a mesh of steps and staircases on the Vaccharaja Ghat.

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The prominent Jain Ghat was the birthplace of the 7th Tirthankara of Jainism 'Suparshvanatha'.

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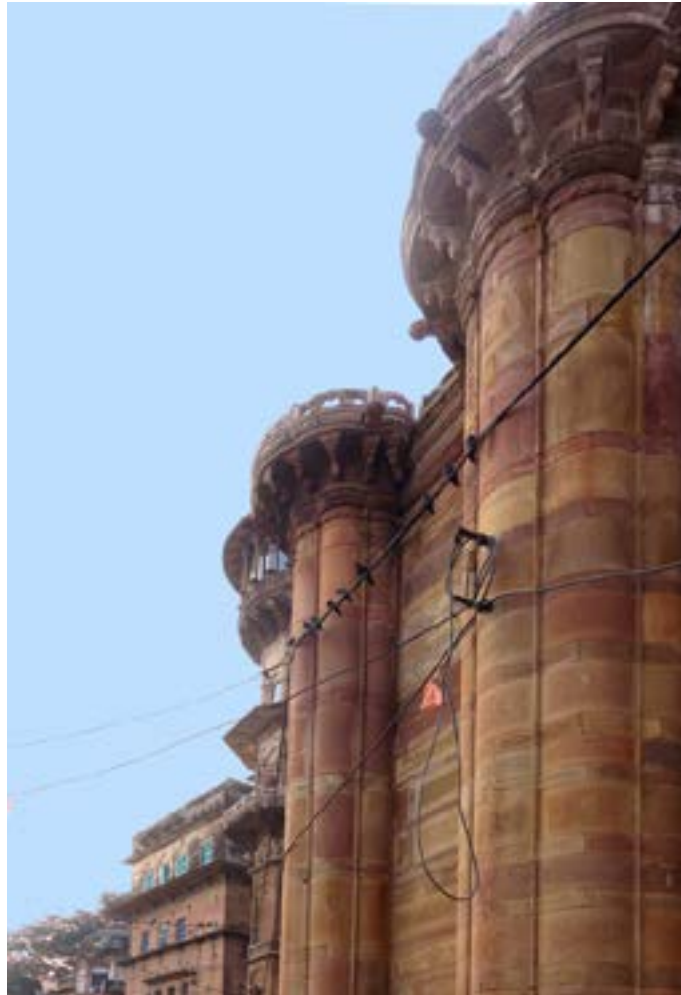
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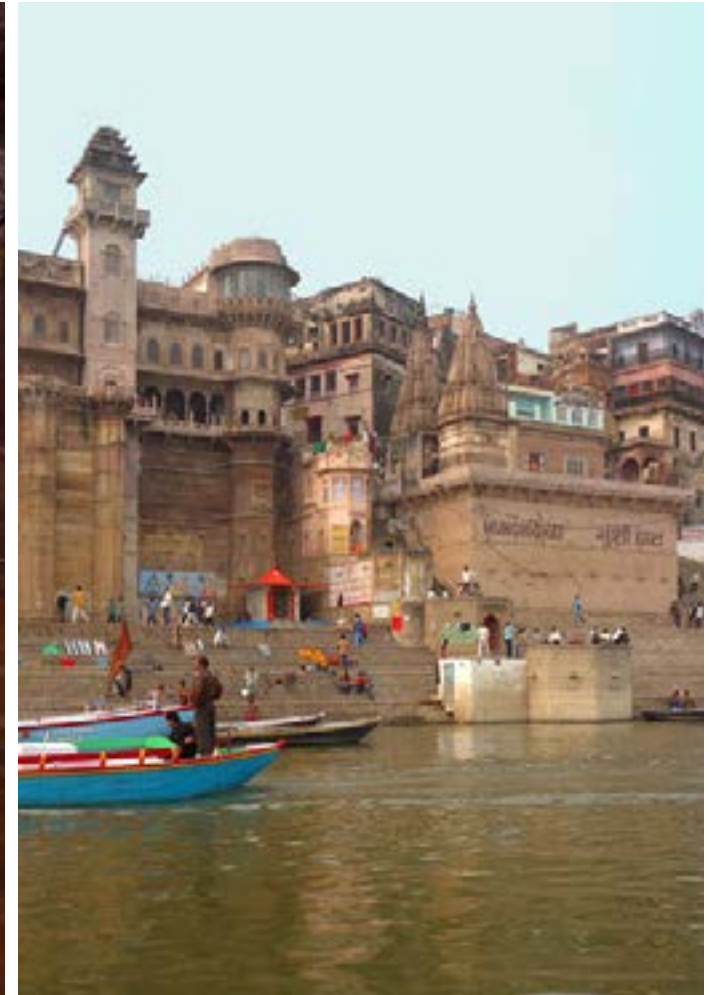
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Constructed from the sandstone of Chunar with stunning porches and greek pillars this impressive building has been made on the Darbhanga Ghat.



Munshi Ghat.

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The Munshi Ghat gets its name from Sridhara Narayana Munshi, he was a finance minister from the area of Nagpur. He was in charge of the creation of this palatial building. Later on the King of Bihar brought this Ghat named it as what we know as the Darbhanga Ghat.



Apart from the ancient buildings and the history of the Ghats - a slow intrusion of modern architecture can be seen in the form of hotels and guest houses on the Ghats.

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One of the oldest Ghats - the Harishchandra Ghat is used for cremating the dead bodies. The story behind this Ghat is how King Harishchandra submitted his wealth, sold his family and himself to the cremation grounds as the caretaker in order to pay the dakshina that sage Vishwamitra saw in his dreams. Apart from this incident he was renowned as a kind and revered king.



This is known as the Karvat Kashi - or the tilted temple on the Scindia Ghat. It is believed that the foundation of this temple was shaken and damaged during the flooding of the River Ganga.

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Parasitic buildings have emerged above the ancient ruins on the Harishchandra Ghat, as homes for the local boatmen and small home stays.



This Ghat is named after Lalita - the goddess. The temple below contains her shrine apart from Kasi Devi, Gangatitya and Ganga Kesava. A glimpse of this goddess is proportional to circumambulating the entire earth. Above this Ghat, lies a Nepali temple built close to the Nepali Ghat.

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