

# GHATS ON THE GANGA IN VARANASI, INDIA: A SUSTAINABLE APPROACH TO HERITAGE CONSERVATION

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## 1 ABSTRACT

*At Varanasi in India, where the Ganga reverses its flow, the 84 ghats (steps and landings) in a 6.8 km stretch are an iconic image of the city. Their built fabric evolved over 800 years from self-organized systems of worship and pilgrimage. The cultural landscape is complex in its layering and detail, and was resilient in its recovery from natural disasters as well as cultural upheavals. This can be interpreted as constituted by situated events, natural--flooding, silting, and changing flow of the Ganga--and cultural--ritual activities and performances in diurnal and seasonal rhythms tied to the Ganga. The riverfront is a complex ecosystem evolving from spatial practices responding to natural phenomena and its cycles that reflect the Hindu understanding of cosmic order. The ecosystem is stressed by over use and unprecedented levels of pollution in the Ganga, posing a challenge to the idea of the river as an archetypal symbol of purity and to the continuity of spatial practices. For sustainable conservation of the ghats, design and management strategies that will ensure a healthy and resilient cultural landscape should be based upon a systems approach. Patrick Geddes' town planning reports in early twentieth century India are a useful precedent in connecting traditional cultural practices with ecological planning. In the proposed framework, the symbolic meanings of nature in traditional beliefs and practices are augmented with utilitarian functions in local energy cycles linking sun, flora, and fauna that will address air and water pollution and increase the capacity of the landscape to recover from flood events.*

### 1.1 Keywords

cultural landscape, heritage, spatial practices, purity and pollution, sustainable conservation