

Walking the Ghāṭs: A measured approach to the Banāras riverfront

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The ghāṭs of Banāras immediately came to mind when I decided to undertake a doctoral dissertation in architecture. The ghāṭs are a common architectural device in South Asia present on the edge of water bodies and consisting of steps, terraces, and tiers. In its most basic and everyday function the ghāṭs allow access to water at its very source in a country where there are major problems with water management and distribution and where most of its inhabitants do not have easy access to water. Be it in rural or urban environments one has to go far to draw water from a well, a pond, or a river, or fetch it from a pump or a tap installed by the municipality, one that is shared by the neighboring population. As an architect, I had already studied this architectural device and the spaces built and inhabited around water bodies in the arid regions of west India, in the states of Gujarat and Rajasthan where there was a tradition of water harvesting and where ghāṭs were used to manage the high variations in the water level between the dry season and the monsoons.¹ In Banāras this architecture unfolds on a monumental scale. Here, more than a hundred ghāṭs have been built on the concave bank of the meander formed by the Ganges. The ghāṭs here belong to a different context: they are constructed to manage and withstand the surplus of water and to channel floods, as well as manage the force of the river – the physical as well as symbolic force of the Ganges. Furthermore, the ghāṭs in Banāras are still very much alive and are constantly used, and their popularity explains why they are still today continually being repaired and why new ghāṭs are constructed. This unique gathering which reflects the image of the city is what most attracted me. The space of the ghāṭs welcomes a great number of people, city dwellers, pilgrims, and tourists, who come here for various reasons – to perform ritual and religious rites, to undertake pilgrimages, to fulfill day-to-day domestic duties, all of which call for a descent to the river, as well as those who go there simply for pleasure.

Each ghāṭ corresponds to a segment on the riverbank varying from 30 m to 180 m in length and 10 to 20 m in height. Each ghāṭ was constructed separately, at different periods and by various builders coming from the subcontinent, and each ghāṭ is different, in shape, structure, or dimension. However, in spite of their great het-

1 Few studies exist on this architecture: Pieper 1979, Rötzer 1989, Hegewald 2002, and Livingston 2002.

erogeneity and diversity, the ghāṭs in Banāras are linked to each other and offer a harmonious urban riverfront that forms a public space extending for more than 6 km. It is this aspect which took up all my attention, and my search was motivated by seeking to understand the formal, spatial, and symbolic organization of the ghāṭs in the constitution, the elaboration, and the construction of this urban phenomenon with exceptional dimensions. In this article I wish to emphasize the architectural and urban complexity of this riverfront and the different approaches that I needed to adopt during my fieldwork so as to study, observe, identify, and analyze it. I will center on the paths that have long existed along the riverfront, the paths that connect the city to the river as well as the paths that run along the Ganges.

A multidisciplinary approach

My approach to the ghāṭs revolved around two points, one relating to the interest of my study, the other to information that I managed to obtain. The difficulties in accessing data on the ghāṭs and the city prompted me to use a multidisciplinary approach. Various sources were called upon as necessary in keeping with and to complete my architectural work. To begin with, there is an abundance of documents on the role of Banāras as a sacred Hindu city that have profoundly influenced the historical, religious, and anthropological studies on the city. The ghāṭs of Banāras are mentioned in a multitude of writings on the city, and it is difficult to find one's way in the maze of information on them. It is also challenging to recognize what is history or myth, or to distinguish narrative from fantasy. In 1822 James Prinsep was perhaps the first to start a kind of inventory of the ghāṭs accompanied by beautiful lithographic illustrations. In the many books on Banāras published either collectively or individually, at least one chapter is dedicated to the riverfront: Sherring (1868), Havell (1905), Greaves (1909), Sukul (1974), Eck (1982), Rana P. B. Singh (1993), Swami Medhasananda (2002), Chandra-mouli (2006), and Julia Hegewald's article in Michell and Singh (2005) to name just a few. Descriptions of the waterfront are full of awe and wonder about the architecture of the temples and palaces. The names of the owners of the most beautiful palaces are mentioned, some historical events are cited, several mythological events are explained in connection with religious rituals or practices. The architecture of the ghāṭs aroused less interest, among art historians and with regard classification of heritage or restoration work undertaken by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).² According to Julia Hegewald (2002) this was due to the fact that their architecture is very much alive, still widely used, and it often falls under the responsibility of local communities or temples. Hence the ghāṭs are not catalogued as parts of a heritage on the verge of extinction or in need of restoration. Of all the ghāṭs and palaces present on the riverfront in Banāras, only the Man Mandir Palace has been designated by the ASI as a historical monument, and then merely the palace, not the ghāṭ that is present in front of it.

2 The Archaeological Survey of India, founded in 1861, is a government agency under the Ministry of Culture, responsible for research into and preservation of the country's archaeological heritage.

Only a few studies have been conducted on the architectural and urban aspects of the city of Banāras. A few ghāṭs and palaces had already been studied before but had never been contextualized in association with the city's urban structure and the geographical site. The studies were isolated; no study had been done on the expansion of the entire riverfront. The only plans of ghāṭs that exist were drawn by a team of architects in the 1980s (Couté and Léger 1989). Furthermore, maps of the city are not easily accessible and most have not been updated for more than a century. But more importantly, the dispersion of data in multiple administrative offices renders all work on the urban aspects of the city arduous. Long hours were spent travelling to the different offices. I was sent from one office to another or asked to return the next day or the week after. I had to knock on many doors and acquire countless permits from the different hierarchies to get hold of documents with no certainty of finding them, often in a poor condition, torn, missing, or simply 'washed away.' However, the bureaucrats were always civil even though the person in charge was either not there or unavailable and I was repeatedly asked to wait for a few hours or come back the following day. Photocopying needed another round of requests, so that sometimes it was easier to go directly to the photocopying shop and find, by chance, piles of rough drafts of the same maps.

These multiple detours through the various administrative offices of the city – the Jal Nigam (office for water purification), the Bundhi Division (municipal office undertaking repairs or new constructions of ghāṭs), the Public Works Department (a body for civil engineering), the Varanasi Development Authority (VDA) or the office for tax collection – though laborious enabled me to learn more about the work done by the various departments involved directly or indirectly in the development of the space of the ghāṭs. Thus the long process of collecting source material for my dissertation, which though difficult to access as it was scattered across several offices and archives, proved stimulating. It made me cross several disciplines: geographical data inherent to the site, socio-cultural realities, specific lifestyles and religious rites around the Ganges, historical facts and current public policies due to the aspirations of the builders in the past and the present, as well as the role of public services in the formation and transformation of the Banāras riverfront. It also prompted me to undertake the study of the ghāṭs from the point of view of a number of scales – from the landscape to the urban and architectural scale – in order to understand and analyze the logic behind the formation of this riverfront:

- the scale of the landscape in designing the fluvial and topographic environment;
- the city scale to place it in relation to its urban space and to understand the paths that lead to the river;
- the scale of its division into plots so important in defining the length and breadth of each ghāṭ;
- its structural scale in relation to techniques that were implemented for its construction through ancient hydraulic works as well as recent drafts undertaken by the municipality;

- the architectural scale defined by the space of each ghāṭ as well as the objects placed or inscribed in its space;
- the scale of urban furniture in relation to the uses and functions of the ghāṭs;
- the human scale (of each step for example) designed with respect to the human body.

Exploring these various scales was necessary in order to understand the ghāṭ as a spatial device, a device for architectural, urban as well as landscape design, and most importantly as a device that adapts to these different scales and articulates them to create an organized and coherent riverfront.

Map hunting

Firstly, my study focused on the development of the waterfront in relation to the geographical phenomenon of a river, its physical particularities, and its concrete form. It encompassed multiple temporalities and paid particular attention to the elements that have persisted for ages: the streets and urban networks, their orientation in regard to the direction of the river, and their impact on the shape of each ghāṭ. In this respect, it is important to mention the initial role of a site in ensuring urban continuity. According to Borie et al. (1976: 8):

Among the various factors that are decisive in urban formalization, the site has the characteristic (obvious yet essential) of existing prior to any intervention and of becoming more or less modified as a result of each urban development. The topographical site acts as a basis, it is the first form that acts as an agent of transmission vis-à-vis the various interpretations that develop and are superimposed on it.³

In a geographical context continually subjected to the forces of a river, the ghāṭ is only a small part of the landscape and has a temporary existence. It is an architectural element that is modeled according to the terrain, the seasons, and the river environment and it is constantly subjected to its forces following a regular process of construction and destruction.

The initial aim of my fieldwork was to become familiar with the site's complexity and geography. It was not to obtain a complete knowledge of the site but to identify the characteristics that lead to an understanding of space and help define the elements in the landscape that are visible on each ghāṭ. On an urban scale, cartographic research was needed to compare different fragments of plans, necessary tools to study the evolution of the city, to point out the elements that are permanent, those that have been substituted, elements that were added and those that have disappeared, in order to establish the relationship between the shape of the site and the development of the riverbank. For example, I superimposed the city's topographical maps onto urban layout maps. Maps showing the contours, the hydrology, or the nature of the soil were overlaid on those corresponding to the city's sewage system or street network. This overlap illustrated a

³ Translated from the French by the author.

close relationship between the important streets and the original thalwegs, as most of the streets follow the course of ancient rivulets (*nālā*) flowing towards the river. Today, many of these rivulets are underground sewers covered with paths. At least twenty such sewer drains discharge into the Ganges and many are identified by the massive sewer pumps constructed along the ghāṭs: at Teliyānālā Ghāṭ, at Rājārājeśvarī Ghāṭ, at Daśāśvamedh Ghāṭ, at Mānsarovar Ghāṭ and at Hariścandra Ghāṭ. The most famous example is the Godaulia *nālā* that was buried in the nineteenth century. The path that covers it today leads to the Daśāśvamedh Ghāṭ, one of the most important pilgrimage sites on the riverfront.



Gāyghāṭ

I scrutinized the permanent elements that have structured the city through the study of its hydrological network and inundated areas. The presence of old sewers, for example, helped explain the structure of the city and the origins of the street formation.⁴ Current questions referring to the cleaning of the Ganges and the need to treat the sewers that are discharged into the river provided information on the city's sewage system and helped me to gather maps related to them as well as studies concerning the development of the sewage network, speeches by bureaucrats or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and complaints voiced by the inhabitants of the city.⁵ Many departments have been working in this field, particularly the Indian Ministry of Environment and Forests through the National Ganga River Basin Authority, the Sankat Mochan Foundation founded by Veer Bhadra Mishra who began the Swatcha Ganga Campaign (literally the campaign for pure water), and the Ganga Action Plan that was begun by the national government two decades ago.

Most of the plans collected do not exceed the 1/10,000 scale, offering only a general comprehension of the topography. The old map drawn by James Prinsep in 1821 at the scale of 1/5,000, for his 'amusement'⁶ and a more detailed map drawn in 1928

4 This method was used by Bernard Rouleau for the study of the streets of Paris (1988).

5 For further reading see Alley 2002.

6 'I had vowed to do nothing until I had accomplished my never ending map of Banāras. And with a work of labour undertaken as a work of pleasure, it is almost necessary to make a bond with yourself not to use your liberty of giving it up as soon as it becomes mere labour. In this only way have I brought it to a conclusion.' Prinsep's letter to his father, in O. P. Kej-

at the scale of 64 inch/mile (1/990)⁷ give better information on the shape of the ghāṭs and their links with the streets and built elements of the city. However, drawn nearly two hundred and one hundred years ago respectively, the maps are today quite obsolete because of the incessant construction and reconstruction of the riverbank. These maps have never been updated and a new map recently drawn by computer (using CAD software) is only a bad version of the 1928 map. Fragments of a plot plan of the nineteenth century were found. They were either copies of the original 'Revenue Survey Map of Banaras,' drawn in 1883–4 at a scale of 32 feet/mile (1:1980) and recently published,⁸ or schematic hand-drawn copies found in the tax collecting offices of the municipality. Although the latter are imprecise versions of the original copied many times and are approximations without all the details, they have been updated and are used for tax collection. This plan enabled the study of the different lengths of the ghāṭs and showed that plots were more divided at the places on the riverbank that enjoyed religious importance.

Drawing and measuring

Observations of the ghāṭs through sketches were necessary so as to discover and interpret the architectural and urban surroundings of the Banāras riverfront. Taking quick mental notes while sketching is a way for the mind and the eye to compose, interconnect, and understand the logic of a particular space.⁹ Rough sketches sometimes express the composition, complexities, and logic of a space more accurately and pertinently than a plethora of words. Drawing was a direct way to observe and understand the layout of the ghāṭ and to become absorbed by the place and its daily use by different people and communities. Furthermore, they allow more direct exchanges with the inhabitants and the local ghāṭ population, as a drawing is easily understood (by the general public) and more accessible than writing. The interest and curiosity that my presence as a stranger aroused was redirected to the drawing, so I was easily associated with the space and architecture that these drawings represented. A drawing requires time, and the time spent sketching, as opposed to taking a photograph, helped me to gradually understand the ghāṭ space and, to a certain extent, become part of it. I became accustomed to the different elements and functions of the ghāṭ and simultaneously my presence became more familiar to the people who came to the ghāṭs everyday.

riwal's introduction to the new edition of *Banāras Illustrated* (2004: 9.) This was the first topographical map in the history of Banāras.

7 Banāras City, Survey 1928–29, 22 sheets.

8 Two sheets of the original are today conserved at the University of Heidelberg and have been published in Gutschow 2006: 470–71.

9 As pointed out by Philippe Prost (2007: 52), the French language in the seventeenth century did not distinguish the words *dessein* (design) and *dessin* (drawing). The drawing is included in the design and vice versa. It is a tool to solve problems and raise issues to observe and reflect: 'We are not speaking of representation but of purpose, of the intelligence we have of the site as that of a project and that understanding of things necessarily involves the sketch.'



Durgāghāt

The many hours and days spent drawing at the same ghāṭ, and returning to the same place, enabled mutual trust to develop with the people familiar with the ghāṭ – especially the *chaiwalas* and the boatmen – a trust that deepened thanks to the subject of my work – the ghāṭs – old heritage structures, solid and beautiful, the pride of all Banārasīs. Thus I was allowed to enter the privacy of the people’s daily lives, my presence becoming slowly part of the decor, with the purpose, although limited, of drawing and studying the architecture of the ghāṭs. From behind my drawings, it was easier to observe the daily occupations of the people there: the work of barbers, washmen, boatmen or priests, the bathing and dressing carried out by the locals, or the ablutions and *pinḍādān* performed by the pilgrims. On more specific occasions, I witnessed the rites offered to the dead before they were taken to the cremation ghāṭ, the vows made by newly married couples through offerings made to Mother Gaṅgā, festivals such as *śṛṅgārs*, *dīpāvalī*, or *devdīpāvalī*. My drawings attracted many passers-by and it was my way to make contact and to hear them speak about the place. I invariably spoke with men because they are the ones who come more regularly to the ghāṭs. Women come and go, they do not stop at the ghāṭ, while for many men – boatmen, priests, barbers, vendors, etc. – this is their domain. I tried to make conversation about the person’s everyday life. They would explain the sacred nature of the ghāṭs, narrate its myths, describe the festivities and their preparations, depict the construction of a particular ghāṭ, or vituperate or praise government works on the ghāṭs. Sometimes they expressed annoyance with the sewage problems of the city and the pollution of the river or complained about how dirty the ghāṭs are, while

at other times they commended the arrival of electricity or cleaning and safety measures introduced on the ghāṭs. These multifaceted views acted as a prism for my own observations about the reality of the riverbank.

The relationship of trust with the people on the ghāṭs, helped me when I took out my draughtsman's tools (scales, rulers, lasers, etc.) in order to include measurements in my drawings. Measuring tools always arouse suspicion as they are linked to power and to new projects and their use can easily raise objections. This explains why it was necessary for me to familiarize myself with the different places, while familiarizing the locals of the ghāṭ with the subject of my study. Actually, people on the ghāṭs welcomed these measured drawings, and they would take the trouble to explain what I was doing to any newcomer asking questions. These measured drawings were an alternative way to fill in the gaps in information due to the absence of detailed topographic contour maps or other more up-to-date maps. I endeavored to make measured drawings of ghāṭs at different places along the meander, so as to determine at different points the slope angle and height of the riverbank, the shape of the ghāṭs facing a ridge or a thalweg, their protruding or retreating position on the river (or the distances between the ridge and the river at different ghāṭs), and the way in which they articulate with the urban space. Sections were drawn on the area of around fifteen ghāṭs cut through building structures bordering the ghāṭs or along the passages running perpendicular to the river. They were measured from the water level (as it was in the month of February both in 2009 and 2010) to the highest level in the city or at least until the first bazaar lane.

I was attentive to the height of the steps (which were not always constant and varied according to the period when they were constructed) and to the topography of the terrain. There were steps and terraces as well as thresholds, passages, crossings, plazas of all sizes, platforms, hanging terraces, temples, palaces or simple houses, open galleries, and cells along the river. I noted down their location on the ghāṭ space, their dimensions, and the different activities they hosted, adding to these spatial characteristics brief notes on their symbolic meanings or significance. These architectural surveys, sketches, and drawings represented the site more or less exactly, and helped me grasp its original traits so as to allow for analysis of the different logic behind the building of the ghāṭ. Most of my initial questions linked to the erection of Banāras' riverfront originate from these drawings.

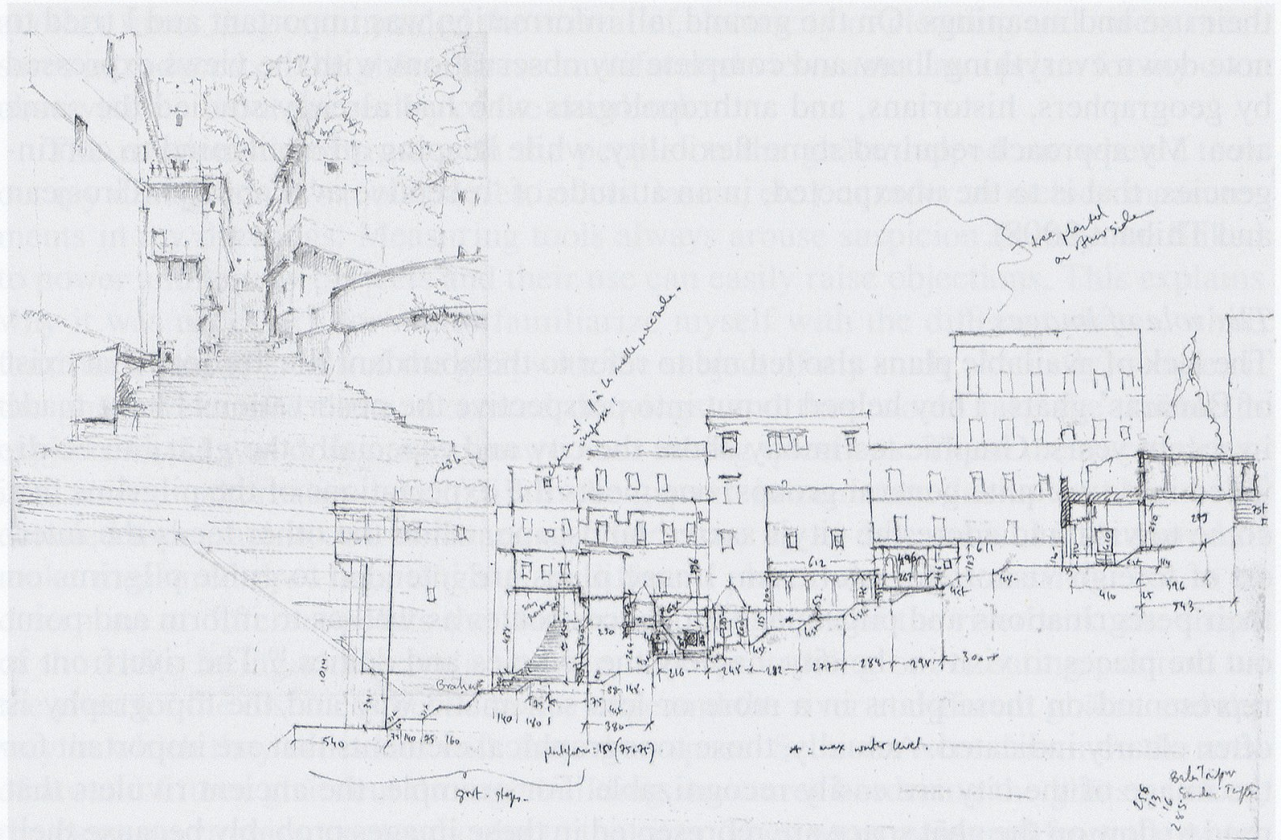
In order to understand how this riverfront emerged it was necessary to recognize the particular elements and trace how they were integrated into the whole complex. Do each ghāṭ and each element that constitutes it have a geographical, a historical, or a cultural particularity that explains its origin and evolution? To consider each ghāṭ with regard to the whole allowed me to understand its significant value in the composition of the riverfront. The overall analysis of the riverfront as an entity required a description of a few ghāṭs, a few places and objects, and to single out the character that makes each ghāṭ particular, or those elements that are recurrent in a number of ghāṭs. I identified the elements that have contributed to the construction and development of this front, observed, drew, measured, and recorded them, while describing

their use and meanings. On the ground, all information was important and I tried to note down everything I saw and complete my observations with the views expressed by geographers, historians, and anthropologists who had already studied the same area. My approach required some flexibility, while keeping an open mind to contingencies, that is to the unexpected, in an attitude of ‘receptive availability’ (Grosjean and Thibaut 2008).

The role of images

The lack of available plans also led me to refer to the abundant illustrations that exist of Banāras’ ghāṭs. They helped to put into perspective the observations I have made in recent years. Graphic testimony about the city and especially the ghāṭ can be divided into two quite general groups: one meets the expectations of the pilgrims that come to visit and adore the city’s sacred landscape, while the other feeds the interest of foreign visitors for exoticism. Image plans are intended to guide pilgrims on their peregrinations and pilgrimage sequences/routes as well as to inform and point out the places to visit in the city, namely the temples and deities.¹⁰ The riverfront is represented on these plans in a more or less schematic way and the topography is often clearly indicated. Actually, those topographical elements that are important for the image of the city are easily recognizable. For example, the ancient rivulets that used to flow on the ghāṭ space are represented in these images probably because their presence sanctified the place and the ghāṭ and we can see that these specific places are still filled with significance today.

10 Gutschow (2006) has analysed these illustrations, as have Jörg Gengnagel and the research team for *Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual* and the *Varanasi Research Project – Visualised Space*, of the University of Heidelberg.



Brahmāghāt

Those illustrations that belong to Western forms of representation – panoramas, engravings from drawings and photographs, watercolors and oils – were executed by travelers, often European, who had visited the city since the late eighteenth century and who were often missionaries, traders, or people in the service of the East India Company. Among these travelers professional designers, called landscape artists, were invited to come and draw the glorious projects of neo-classical colonial cities. They often discovered, at the fringes of the colonial neighborhoods, in the vernacular, a picturesque quality and a certain exoticism they were happy to take home (Tillotson 1990). Thus, aquatints and paintings by Thomas and William Daniell of the late eighteenth century, paintings by William Hodges published in *Select Views in India* in 1798, the paintings of Sir Charles Oily, William Wood, and J. B. Fraser, and the drawings of James Prinsep in the early nineteenth century show multiple scenes of Banāras' ghāts, palaces and temples. Louis Rousselet, a French traveler, took some of the first photos of the city that were transformed into etchings so as to be easily printed in his travel accounts (1874: 113–28).

These many illustrators have repeatedly experienced the city or the architecture of the riverfront through images. My study contributes to this corpus with the aim of analysis. I try to see beyond the simple facade of the riverfront in order to understand the volume, that which is palpable, the space and that which is lived in. My drawings attempt to identify the spatial characteristics and nature of the place. This assumes a singular representation that highlights some aspects and omits others depending on

the scale observed. I sketched the ghāṭ so as to better appropriate it, touch it, scan its surface, trace its edges, and explore its textures.¹¹ I looked at the space being built, modified, maintained, and constantly produced in a dialectical relationship with its environment already dense with symbol and meaning. I tried to document the changes operating on this space as the months passed by: a way to ‘look at time.’ I identified traces of the past: construction techniques, materials, shapes, forms, and symbols. Finally, I looked at ways of using and appropriating the space of the ghāṭs, the void where the life of a society is enacted. A void defined by objects, palaces, trees, platforms and especially the escarpment on one side and the river on the other – elements all symbolic that make the built-up area reflect the individuals, groups and society (Caniglia and Signorelli 2007). Through these observations, I could explain the materialization of Banāras’ riverfront and all the elements present as designed, arranged and drawn by the user, through the different practices as well as the many symbolic trajectories that surround it.

Ghāṭs designed by symbolic trajectories

In Banāras, the steps of the ghāṭs link the city level to the lowest river water level. They adapt to the variations in the water level of the river and to the riverbank topography. Whatever the river water level – which varies between 5 and 20 meters every year – access to the river water is made possible. Whatever the relief, steep or gradual, comfortable or slippery, the steps of the ghāṭs are ways of accessing the purifying river water and the return climb to the city and, for the numerous Hindu devotees, to its numerous temples. Illustrations from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries¹² and the 1822 plan by Prinsep show the presence of numerous ghāṭs that lead the way to the riverbank, intermittently, in specific places, allowing access from the city, an urban milieu, to the immersions in the river waters. To walk down to the Ganges and be immersed in its water is part of a purification rite necessary before entering a temple, an *akhārā* (gymnasium), a shrine, or any sacred space. Furthermore, water from the Ganges is crucial for cleaning and purifying and for the daily rites celebrated in the temple – such as the *abhiṣeka* or the bathing of the divinities. As access to water through the ghāṭs is safer and cleaner, the first ghāṭs on the riverfront were simply paths with steps that linked the river to the temple.¹³ The paths were often constructed at the same time as the temples and whenever a temple was repaired the adjoining path and the ghāṭ would be repaired too. A few ghāṭs eventually took the name of the temple to which they were connected, for example Caṃsaṭhī Ghāṭ was linked to the Caṃsaṭhī Devī temple. Examples of ghāṭs that lead to passages and temples exist in other South Asian cities – the temple cities in the south of India or even in a metropolitan city like Calcutta. These are often isolated passages to water;

11 The act of looking as described in Arnheim 1969.

12 Mainly panoramas of the riverfront. See Krishna 2003 and Gutschow 2006.

13 Pieper (1979) compares the path which, in South Asian towns, leads from the temple to the purifying water to the central square which brings together the city dwellers in Western cities.

they do not extend or develop into a riverfront as in Banāras. According to Jacques Gaucher, the remoteness of a river in an urban milieu was often the cause for the creation of a specific path, regularly crossed by the elephant or the priest in charge of transporting the holy waters (Gaucher 2007: 52).

The steps of the ghāṭs can be dangerous as is confirmed by the famous popular saying: ‘In case one wishes to serve in Banāras, one has to avoid *ran* (widows), *saanrh* (sacred bulls), *sirhi* (steps), and *sannyasi* (actually fake *sannyasis*) as the city is full of these risks.’¹⁴ The act of climbing steep stairs resembles the act of ascending a mountain¹⁵ or a difficult path that a pilgrim performs on many other pilgrimage sites to obtain salvation.¹⁶ By analogy, the construction of these steps is also salutary, and many elite patrons constructed ghāṭs for their own salvation. On an inscription from the Chandela period (tenth to thirteenth century AD) found in Deogarh (in the south of the state of Uttar Pradesh), the biographer Kirtivarman said about the king Vatsa Raja that he had made ghāṭs ‘in order to make his bright fame ascend up into the universe.’¹⁷ Examples of steep passages can be found in the Himalayas and in the peninsula of Kathiawad (in Gujarat) where spectacular flights of stairs allow access to the holy mountains of the Jains at Palitana and of the Hindus at Girnar and Junagadh (Tod 1822: 281–84, 369).

As Jean Deloche (1980 : 102) reminds us: ‘The tradition of linking the various sanctuaries in a sacred place by a path built in stone or by stairs cut out in the rock, when it is located on a hill, has been carried on throughout the ages, works of religious communities or of rich pilgrims.’ The ghāṭs are often called *tīrthas*, originating from a Sanskrit verb meaning ‘to cross over.’¹⁸ It designates a passage or a ford and represents an intermediary space, a place of departure and the end of a stage between life and death; devotees walk down the ghāṭs to be immersed in the waters and to symbolically undertake this journey. Actually, the entire city represents this passage, and pilgrims embark on a pilgrimage to Kāśī (Banāras’ religious appellation), called the Mahātīrtha – the great passage or pilgrimage – at least once in their lifetime or are brought here at death to be cremated on the riverbank. It is thought to be auspicious to come to die in the city because by dying or being cremated in Banāras one supposedly gains ‘liberation’ from the cycles of reincarnation. Thus the ghāṭ as a sign made physically manifest symbolizes *tīrthas*, pilgrimage sites, and the descent to purifying waters.

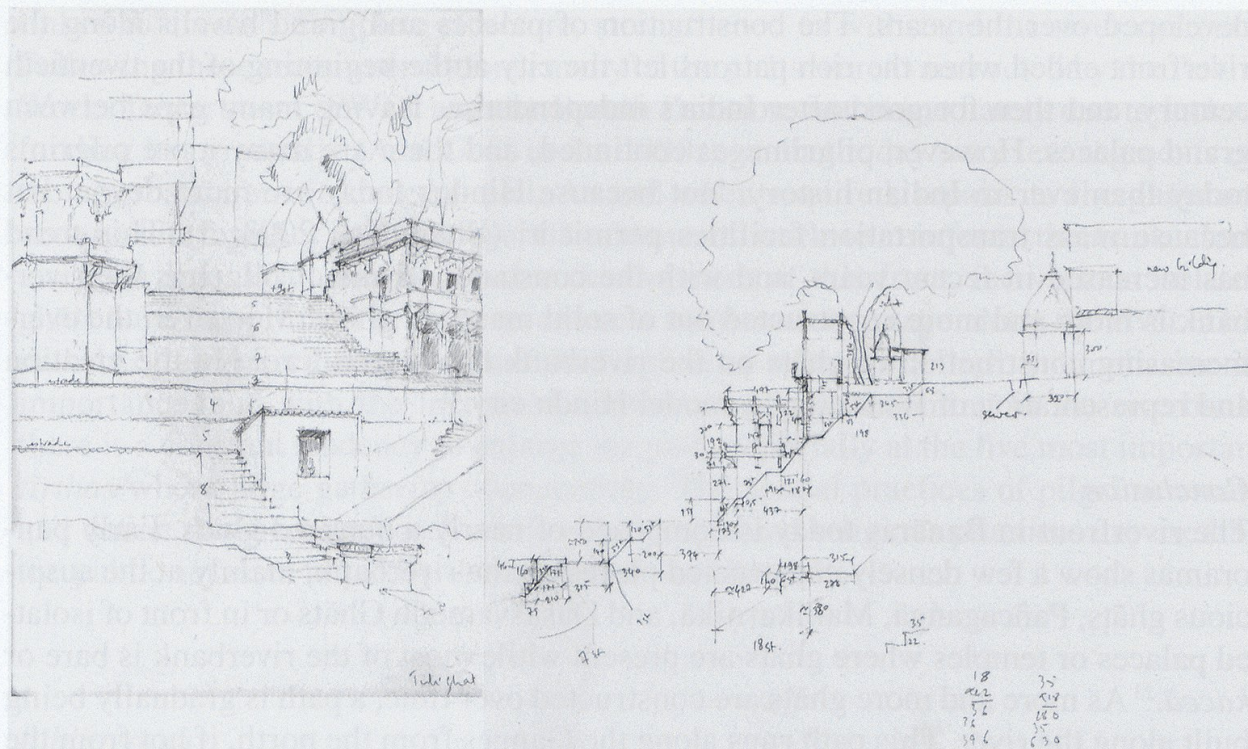
14 See Krishna 2003: 6 and Prinsep 1996: 18.

15 Another meaning for the word *ghāṭ* in Sanskrit is mountain pass.

16 Fuller 1992, Hegewald 2002: 67, and Deloche 1980.

17 Chandela inscription, no. B, on Deogarh rock. Inscription of Kirtivarman, v. 7, Ind. Ant., Vol. XVIII, pp. 238–9, quoted in *An Encyclopedia of Hindu Architecture*, Manasara series vol. vii. London: Oxford University Press, 1946, p. 168.

18 From the word *tī/tārati* meaning a passage. The *tāraka mantra* that Siva insufflates to the dead before his last journey finds its origin in the same word. See Eck 1981.



Tulsīghāt

The other symbolic trajectory in the city is performed along the riverbank. The riverbank is the most constant limit of the city,¹⁹ because the city never crossed over to the other side of the river. It is a limit that constantly extends beyond its southern border. This limit, like any periphery, is thought to be vulnerable, in need of protection, and this is why the protective divinities are concentrated along this limit and along the riverbank, i.e. the Viṇāyakas, the Bhairavas, the Vetālas, and the Śāktis.²⁰ Pilgrimages around this limit is a way of visiting these divinities, to have their *darśan* and implore their protection. Three of the main pilgrimages of the city take place on the ghāṭ space along the Ganges: the Pañcakrośīyātrā, the Vārāṇasīpradakṣiṇapāṭha, and the Avimuktayātrā.²¹ Only the Antargṛhayātrā around Viśveśvar temple is within the city and does not lie on the ghāṭ path. However, before undertaking this pilgrimage, pilgrims come to bathe at Maṇikarṇikā Ghāṭ and thus connect with the sacred river through the ghāṭ. This pilgrimage is part of an ancient practice that has been

19 Be it in the sixth century when the city, apparently quadrangular in shape and one *krośa* in length, was situated at the confluence of the Varuna river, or in the twelfth century when the sacred domain of the city extended to nearly five *krośas* as it still does today, the riverbank has always been the limit of the city.

20 See Eck 1982 and Gutschow 2006.

21 The Avimuktayātrā encircling the Avimuktakṣetra or 'the domain never abandoned by Siva' extends from Trilocan Ghāṭ to Kedār Ghāṭ. The Vārāṇasīpradakṣiṇapāṭha or Nagarapradakṣiṇa falls within the two frontier rivers – the Varuna and the Assi. The Pañcakrośīyātrā extends largely outside the limits of the city formed by these two rivers and encloses a perimeter that falls beyond the western limit of the city.

developed over the years. The construction of palaces and grand havelis along the riverfront ended when the rich patrons left the city at the beginning of the twentieth century, and then for good after India's independence, leaving many gaps between grand palaces. However, pilgrimages continued, and there are many more pilgrims today than ever in Indian history, 'not because Hindus today are more devout but because mass transportation facilities permit it' (Bharadwaj 2003: 5). This trend has increased in recent years, and with the constant arrivals of pilgrims the riverbank is more and more constructed out of solid masonry ghāṭs. Moreover, the ever-increasing construction of ghāṭs on the riverbank has played a role in the creation and representation of Banāras as a model Hindu city.²²

Conclusion

The riverfront in Banāras today is composed of nearly a hundred ghāṭs. Early panoramas show a few densely constructed places on the riverbank, mainly at the auspicious ghāṭs, Pañcagaṅgā, Maṇikarṇikā, and Daśāśvamedh Ghāṭs or in front of isolated palaces or temples where ghāṭs are present while most of the riverbank is bare or *kaccā*.²³ As more and more ghāṭs are constructed over time, a path is gradually being built along the river. This path runs along the Ganges from the north, if not from the confluence of the Varuna at least from Rāj Ghāṭ, and extends to the south at the confluence of the Assi *nālā*. According to the character of the ghāṭ and the topography of the place, the path is situated along a landing in the ghāṭ 'stairway,' an enlarged space or a narrow passage. Depending on the water level, it is above the river or submerged in it, and depending on the season either very crowded or empty. Even before the construction of most of the ghāṭs there was an earth path traced along the bank. This path, indicated in dotted lines on the 1928 map, is called the Pañcakrośī *patha* named after the popular pilgrimage and is included in the area of each ghāṭ, be they bare or built in solid stone. The existence of this original path might explain why the riverfront was developed. Just as the path between the temple and the river paved a ghāṭ, so too has the ritual path of the Pañcakrośī always been integrated in the development of the riverfront. The steps of the new ghāṭs are adjusted to old adjacent ghāṭs, catching up with the different levels between them and creating a continuity thus linking the different ghāṭs and leading the flux of passers-by and pilgrims over a succession of varied ghāṭs.

At the beginning of the twentieth century many hydraulic theories were put forward to construct the entire ghāṭ, first of all to maintain the stability of the bank, and secondly to protect existing ghāṭs from damage. According to engineers at the time: 'The crescent of the ghāṭs is like an arch and the weakness of a single spot on it is apt to undermine the strength of the whole.'²⁴ Hence one of the preventive measures proposed was to build a continuous line of ghāṭs; every individual ghāṭ was to be

22 See Desai 2003.

23 See Swami Medhasananda 2002, for the number of ghāṭs through the ages.

24 *Banāras and Its Ghāṭs*, 1931, p. i.

linked to create a complete structure, strengthened to withstand the river currents. Following these recommendations, many of the ghāṭs were constructed by the Public Works Department (PWD) and the Bundh Division, not immediately due to lack of funding but gradually (Assī Ghāṭ in the 1980s), so that today very few segments on the riverbank remain undeveloped. As and when required, repairs to the ghāṭs are undertaken together with an overall scheme of work to reinforce the bank along a regular line. With the progressive development of this front, the various isolated ghāṭs have been linked in order to create a continuous passage along the river. This path is often described as a 'road' in English or *mārga* in Hindi to emphasize its importance, and with the increased number of pilgrims coming to the riverbank, there is a constant tendency to enlarge the path, especially at the five most important *tīrthas* where large gatherings concentrate. The spatial practices of pilgrims create and define the sacred space,²⁵ while pilgrimages and religious practices are used by the public services to justify the work done on the ghāṭs.

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25 See Gengnagel 2006: 159.

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