

Ganga and Banaras: A Historical, Social, and Cultural Study of the Coexistence of River and City

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Abstract

The Ganga River and the city of Banaras (Varanasi) exemplify an enduring interrelationship that intertwines history, culture, and faith in the Indian subcontinent. This connection transcends mere geography, being deeply embedded in the spiritual, cultural, social, and economic fabric developed over millennia. Revered in Indian tradition as the giver of salvation, the sustainer of life, and a symbol of purity, the Ganga complements Banaras, celebrated worldwide as the “City of Salvation.”

This study examines the reciprocal influences between the river and the city, illustrating how the Ganga has shaped Banaras’s religious practices, commercial life, and rich traditions of art, literature, and music. It further addresses the transformative—often detrimental—impact of modern human interventions, including unchecked urban expansion, industrial effluents, and unsustainable tourism, which have compromised the river’s purity, flow, and ecological stability. The discussion also considers the role of governmental initiatives and the persistent challenges in safeguarding this intertwined heritage.

Within the framework of journalism, the paper underscores the necessity of moving beyond superficial event coverage toward in-depth, historically and environmentally informed reporting. Such journalism can play a pivotal role in advancing environmental stewardship, preserving cultural heritage, and fostering societal awareness.

The research concludes that safeguarding the Ganga and Banaras requires more than state policies; it demands the integrated efforts of communities, cultural institutions, educational systems, and the media. By bridging historical scholarship with media studies, this work offers insights of value to both disciplines.

Keywords: Ganga, Banaras, history, journalism, culture, ecology, coexistence, sacred city.

1. Introduction

The Rivers of India are not merely flowing bodies of water; since time immemorial, they have served as the lifelines of human civilization. They have shaped not only the geography of the land but also the culture, faith, lifestyle, and social structures of its people. Among these rivers, the Ganga holds the highest and most sacred place. Revered in Indian tradition as “Ganga Mata,” the river is considered a symbol of purity, salvation, and the eternal cycle of life. The Ganga is more than a mere geographical feature—it embodies the very soul of India’s collective consciousness.

On its banks stands Banaras—also known as Kashi or Varanasi—the world’s oldest continuously inhabited city. In its narrow lanes, the air carries ancient whispers; on its ghats, sacred chants echo; and upon its waves, flickering lamps illuminate the night. All bear witness to a unique cultural heritage. Here, the relationship between the Ganga and the city is not one of mere physical proximity, but of spiritual and cultural symbiosis. The city draws its faith from the waters of the Ganga, while the river, in turn, becomes inseparably woven into the city’s rhythm, colors, and traditions.

This research seeks to explore this complex and multifaceted relationship—to understand how, over the centuries, it has evolved, how it has shaped society, culture, and economy, and what challenges it has faced through time. Today, as the pressures of urbanization, pollution, and ecological imbalance loom over this sacred flow, it becomes imperative to comprehend the depth of this bond and to seek pathways for its preservation.

The study not only illuminates the shared memories and cultural traditions of the Ganga and Banaras but also invites a reimagining of their future. Here, the legacies of the past and the trials of the present converge, inspiring a future where the bond between the Ganga and Banaras is not only preserved but deepened.

2. Historical Context

Ancient Period:

Banaras—also known as Kashi and Varanasi—is among the world’s oldest continuously inhabited cities. The *Rigveda* refers to it as a favored abode of the gods, while the *Skanda Purana* describes it as a sacred city cradled in the lap of the salvation-bestowing Ganga. The river, venerated in the Vedas as *Pavani* and *Tripathaga*, has long served as a wellspring of spiritual devotion. Its banks have witnessed centuries of religious rites, including *yajnas*, ritual bathing, and pilgrimages. In antiquity, the Ganga’s waterway was a vital conduit for trade, handicrafts, and cultural exchange. Banaras was renowned for silk weaving, metalwork, and jewelry-making, attracting merchants from distant regions. Thus, the relationship between the Ganga and Banaras was not merely devotional but also a foundation for economic and cultural advancement, establishing the city as a distinctive and vibrant urban center.

Medieval Period:

During the Mughal era, Banaras preserved its spiritual aura despite shifting political circumstances that periodically reshaped its cultural landscape. Even amid changes in power and administrative reorganization, its spiritual currents flowed uninterrupted. This period saw the reconstruction of many ghats and temples along the Ganga, revitalizing the city's cultural profile. The resonance of temple bells and the ceaseless chanting of Vedic hymns reaffirmed Banaras as a dynamic religious hub. Scholars, saints, and artists of Kashi advanced the traditions of Indian philosophy, music, and art, further enriching its cultural heritage. Thus, despite political upheavals, Mughal-era Banaras safeguarded its identity as the city of the Ganga and a custodian of enduring traditions.

Modern Period:

In the colonial period, the Ganga became more than a river of faith—it evolved into a major axis of commerce. As a navigable waterway, it transformed the ghats of Kashi into focal points of east–west economic exchange. Boats and barges transported salt, textiles, grain, and raw materials to distant markets. However, industrial effluents and urban expansion began to tarnish the river's pristine waters. At the same time, the echoes of the freedom movement reverberated along its banks. The Ganga ghats became silent witnesses to both religious ceremonies and the secret meetings of revolutionaries envisioning independence. In this way, colonial-era Banaras embodied a unique convergence of commercial prosperity, cultural vitality, and political awakening, leaving an indelible imprint on Indian history.

3. Socio-Cultural Dimensions

The Ganga—the soul and lifeline of Banaras—carries in her flow not only water but also centuries of culture, faith, and countless shades of human life. Ritual bathing, *deepdan* (lamp offering), and the grand Ganga Aarti form inseparable elements of the city's cultural identity. In the golden mist of dawn, devotees performing ablutions; in the twilight, rows of oil lamps floating over the rippling waters; and the symphony of bells and conch shells during the evening aarti—these are not merely ceremonies, but profound spiritual dialogues between humanity and the river.

For centuries, Banaras has stood as a vibrant hub of music, poetry, and intellectual discourse. The echo of *ragas* in its narrow lanes, poetry recitals on the ghats, and classical disputations among learned men all bear the imprint of the Ganga's cultural influence. The life of the ghats mirrors the city's social and religious rhythms—every milestone from birth to death finds its sanctification along the riverbank. The Ganga, therefore, is not merely a river but a continuously flowing cultural current that has shaped Banaras into its unique form and secured its place on the world's cultural map.

4. Ecological Perspective

The ecology of the Ganga is a living and intricate system in which diverse aquatic species, unique soil compositions, and the quality of flowing water are deeply interlinked. The river is not merely a source of water; it is a sanctuary of biodiversity, a vessel of cultural memory, and a carrier of natural balance. Yet, in recent decades, this ecological equilibrium has faced a grave crisis. Unchecked sewage discharge, waste generated from religious rituals, industrial pollution, and illegal sand mining have rendered its waters toxic and destroyed habitats for aquatic life. Consequently, the Ganga is not only losing its physical purity but is also witnessing the erosion of its ecological essence.

In this context, robust water-management policies, advanced waste-treatment systems, and sustainable development strategies are urgently required. Such measures must integrate local community participation, scientific research, and traditional ecological knowledge. Reviving the Ganga is not solely an environmental necessity but also a cultural and moral obligation. This mission can only succeed if we recognize the river not as a mere resource but as a living entity, restoring our relationship with it to one of reverence and balance.

5. Journalistic Perspective

The relationship between the Ganga and Banaras is not merely a matter of geographical proximity; it represents a rare and dynamic dialogue of culture, faith, and ecology. In the realm of environmental journalism, this subject holds exceptional significance, for the pure flow of the Ganga is not only about water quality but is also intrinsically tied to civilization, belief systems, and livelihoods. Journalists play a pivotal and sensitive role—fostering public awareness, providing constructive coverage of pollution-control initiatives, and underscoring the urgent need to safeguard the historical grandeur and cultural legacy of the ghats.

Digital journalism, video reports, and documentary formats amplify these efforts, enabling wider reach. Through these platforms, stories of Ganga service initiatives, local community experiences, and inspiring examples of citizen participation are brought to the public at large. In doing so, journalists go beyond mere transmission of facts—they fortify the emotional bridge between society and the river, which lies at the very heart of Banaras's identity. The narrative of the Ganga and Banaras teaches us that environmental journalism is not only the dissemination of information but also a custodian of shared responsibility and cultural consciousness.

6. Analysis and Discussion

The relationship between the Ganga and Banaras is not merely a matter of geographic proximity; it is akin to the invisible thread binding soul and body. The Ganga, through her pristine flow, endows the city with life, faith, and livelihood, while Banaras, through its religious traditions, cultural activities, and

every day practices, sustains the river's spiritual vitality. This symbiosis has nurtured both for centuries. Yet, in contemporary times, threats such as pollution, encroachment, and climate change are eroding this ancient bond. The waters of the Ganga symbolize not only physical purity but also cultural sanctity—its protection is therefore a collective responsibility. Policymaking must extend beyond governmental mechanisms to encompass the participation of local communities, active engagement of religious institutions, and media awareness. Awakening public sensitivity, fostering behavioral change, and reviving the ethos of coexistence with the river are imperatives of the present age. The relationship between the Ganga and Banaras will remain immortal only if it is preserved not as a mere memory or symbol, but as a living and continuous experience. This is not simply the story of a river and a city; it is an enduring lesson in the balance between civilization and nature.

7. Government's Role: Modernizing the Ganga–Banaras Relationship

As custodian of the cultural memory linking the Ganga and Banaras, the government's role extends far beyond policy formulation—it lies in reconstructing the very foundation of the river–city relationship. *Namami Gange*, launched in 2014 as a comprehensive national mission, aims to eliminate pollution from the Ganga, conserve biodiversity, and revive the cultural life that flows along its banks. Under this mission, more than ₹40,121 crore has been allocated to 492 projects, of which 307 have been completed. A total of 157 Sewage Treatment Plants (STPs) are operational, with a combined capacity of approximately 3,722 MLD—achieving nearly half of the targeted 7,000 MLD.

Uttar Pradesh, with nearly 1,100 km of the Ganga's riverbank, has received over ₹4,205 crore—making it the state with the highest national investment under this program. Moreover, to ensure rural sanitation, 1,274,421 individual household toilets have been constructed, leading to 4,464 villages being declared Open Defecation Free (ODF), thereby reducing direct contamination of the riverbanks. These measures have been crucial in preserving the Ganga's ecological integrity.

Scientific interventions have also yielded positive outcomes—for instance, an increase in the population of the Ganga River dolphin, with sightings even in previously unusual stretches such as Prayagraj–Bithoor, signaling ecological recovery.

Nonetheless, challenges remain: only 69% of allocated funds have been utilized; industrial and domestic waste continue to contribute to pollution; and certain river stretches still fail to meet the “bathing quality” standard.

Despite these obstacles, the policy direction, financial allocation, and implementation strategies clearly position *Namami Gange* as an exemplary initiative—seeking to address modern challenges while honoring an ancient commitment to the enduring bond between the Ganga and Banaras.

8. Challenges: Obstacles in the Ganga–Banaras Relationship

The Ganga, long venerated for its sanctity and uninterrupted flow, now harbors beneath its waters a tide of multifaceted challenges. From the sacred ghats of Banaras to the river's farthest reaches, a host of pressures threaten to disturb the natural lifeline that has historically bound the river and the city.

Foremost among these is the escalating pollution level. According to the *National Mission for Clean Ganga*, the volume of untreated sewage flowing into the river near Varanasi exceeds **300 million litres per day (MLD)**, while the treatment capacity remains at roughly **200 MLD**—leaving the remainder discharged directly into the water. Adding to this burden, effluents from tanneries, chemical plants, and metal industries introduce hazardous contaminants, further degrading the river's chemical integrity.

Equally grave is the challenge of maintaining uninterrupted flow (*aviralata*). The proliferation of dams, barrages, and canals has altered the river's natural course, undermining ecological balance and aquatic biodiversity. The shrinking habitat of the Ganga river dolphin is a stark indicator of these disruptions.

The pressure of mass religious tourism presents another significant concern. Banaras welcomes millions of pilgrims and visitors each year. Ritual offerings—flowers, garlands, ashes, cloth, and other organic waste—are often deposited directly into the river, resulting in measurable declines in water quality.

Cultural and behavioural issues are no less critical. While the Ganga is revered as a divine mother, the practical commitment to her protection remains inconsistent. The gap between spiritual veneration and environmental responsibility has proven difficult to bridge.

Policy implementation also suffers from systemic weaknesses: delays in project completion, underutilisation of allocated funds (barely 69%), and inadequate maintenance of installed infrastructure collectively impede progress.

Amid these obstacles, reviving the Ganga–Banaras relationship will require far more than isolated policy interventions. What is needed is a sustained cultural–social movement that unites faith, science, and governance into a coherent, action-oriented framework.

9. Conclusion

The Ganga–Banaras bond is not merely a product of geographical proximity; it is the confluence of millennia-old history, culture, and faith. Banaras, nestled along the river's edge, has absorbed the Ganga's imprint into its rituals, traditions, social structures, and worldview. This relationship stands as living testimony to the mutual enrichment of natural ecosystems and human civilisation.

Preserving this heritage demands more than government policies—it calls for vigilant civic participation and an active media presence. For journalists, this is an opportunity not only to report on the Ganga–Banaras dynamic but also to illuminate its cultural and ecological dimensions for public awareness. Historians will find in this study a vital record of the reciprocal influence between human civilisation and water culture, while environmental researchers can draw from it models for sustainable water management and ecological preservation.

In this way, a deeper understanding of the Ganga–Banaras coexistence can serve as an enduring legacy for future generations.

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