



Old Building Forms of Varanasi

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Abstract: Now a days, due to modernization the inherent old culture has been extinct from our country. Varanasi is one of the historical cities which is holding up the historical as well as spiritual value of India. Based on the data collected from institutional records and questionnaire, this paper presents the study on the old building forms of Chausatti Ghat and Bangali Tola in Varanasi. More specifically, it looks at the urban and architectural forms of some old buildings. In order to achieve the objectives of the present study, in-depth qualitative survey method is used to know the history and architectural form of the residential buildings. Photographs and field notes, therefore, have strengthened the methodological background. It finds that old buildings, aged even in between 200-300 years, exhibit a few typical features.

Key Words: *Building; Architecture; Mythology; Culture*

I. INTRODUCTION

Varanasi is a city in the northern India state of Uttar Pradesh dating to the 11th century B.C. Regarded as the spiritual capital of India, the city draws Hindu pilgrims who bathe in the Ganges River's sacred waters and perform funeral rites. The origin of the name of this holy city can be discovered through many tales and stories. The name 'Varanasi' originated from the names of the two rivers – Varuna (which flows from the north of the city) and Assi (which is a stream near Assi ghat). Along the city's narrow streets are some 2000 temples including Kashi Biswanath, Lord Shiva temple dedicated to Hindu God Shiva. Art culture is the rich culture tradition of Varanasi that makes it also 'The Cultural Capital of India'. One of the seven holiest cities, Varanasi city is also one of the Shakti Peethas and one of the Jyotir Linga sites in India. In Hinduism, it is believed that those who are die and are cremated here get an instant gateway to liberation from the cycle of births and re-births. Varanasi is a melting pot, where both death and life come together.

The Urban Forms of Varanasi is very different and unique. The areas Chausatti Ghat and Bangalitola exhibit different architectural styles of buildings. These buildings are more than 400 years old. The outer and inner space of buildings reflects diverse features.

II. HISTORICAL AND MYTHOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY AREA

Chausatti Ghat: The Chausatti Ghat at Varanasi is named after the Chausat Yoginis, the 64 sacred feminine beings who are representations of Shakti, the primordial cosmic energy. According to popular legend, the Chausatt Yoginis were sent by Shiva to reside in Varanasi.



PIC: 1, CHAUSATTI TEMPLE

The fourth canto of the Skanda Purana, called Kashi Khando (which is dated to the 14th century), mentions the 64 Yoginis in Chausatti Ghat. Thus, we know that at least since the 14th century, the worship of these goddesses has been practiced in Varanasi. A famous temple is situated here which is known as Chausatti Temple. It is situated the bank of the Ganges River. In this temple the main God is Kali and Shitola and another God's which are Shiva, Ganesha is, Kartika etc. also worship here.

Currently the Sitaramdas Omkarnath Kashi Ashram is located in this ghat. They welcome people of all faith and castes. The founder Sitaramdas Omkarnath believed that religion is fundamentally the relationship between one sole and God. Through chanting the name of God, the mind can be oriented towards God. Thus, the Ashrams activities are designed towards promoting the chant of Hare Ram, Hare Ram, Rama Rama Hare Hare.

Chausatti Ghat is also the location of "Satyalok", the home of Lahiri Mahasaya, who is mentioned the famous book autobiography of Yogi by Paramahansa Yogananda. His grandson Shibendu Lahiri Mahasaya continues to live in Satyalok and teach Kriya Yoga.

PIC: 2 AND 3, "SATYALOK", THE HOME OF YOGIRAJ SHYAMACHARAN LAHIRI



Bangali Tola:

The first Bengalis settled here from the time of Rani Bhabani in 1757. Rani made around 7 temples here around which the Bangali Tola was formed. The Bangali population was mainly from the Brahmin caste that worked as priests or taught in Sanskrit schools.

The famous temple in Bangali Tola is Durga Bari (Mukherjee House). Mukherjee family's 1st generation was come in the year of 1767 from Janai, West Bengal and now their 9th generation lives in Bangali Tola. In Durga Bari the ancient Durga statue is worshipped which is about 249 years old was not immersed till date. Whenever immersion was attempted, the statue did not move. Every year, it is worshipped with just colors and new costumes from the first day of Navaratri.

It was the miracle of Maa Durga that 249 years ago, in a dream, she directed the head of the Mukherjee family that she did not want to immerse and wants to stay in the Durga Mandir of Mukherjee House. Since then, Maa Durga has been sitting at the home of the Bangali family. Besides durga temple there is also shiva temple is situated in this house.

PIC: 4 AND 5, DURGA IDOL AND SHIVA TEMPLE IN MUKHERJEE HOUSE



III.

OBJECTIVES

Varanasi is the oldest living city of India. It has also mythological history. Due to its oldness, it occupied various old buildings, which is about 100-500 years old. This old building reveals the main histories of Varanasi. The basic objective of this study is to know about the urban structure of the old buildings of Varanasi. Now days, many of the other parts of India have loosen its old history due to urbanization and capitalization process, whereas Varanasi is the only city of India, which is still able to retain its own unique culture. So, this city has been selected to explore its oldest culture.

The objectives of the paper are outlined below-

- a) To understand the age and condition of the old buildings
- b) To trace the major occupational patterns of the residents living in these old buildings
- c) To examine the different architectural forms, designs and layouts of those buildings.

IV. DATABASE AND METHODOLOGY:

- 1) **Pre field work:** To assess the structure of the urban form of the surveyed area, a separate questionnaire was prepared, based on the literature. Google Earth images and Google Map were consulted to plan the drawing of base maps.
- 2) **During field work:** As the surveyed areas Chausatti Ghat and Bangali Tola of Varanasi are mainly residential, old buildings are surveyed to obtain the data on the condition of the old buildings, year of establishment, architecture of the buildings and detail of the present dwellers.

Purposive sampling technique is used for this survey.

- 3) **Post field work:** In the post field work the collected data are tabulated. The surveyed data has been analyzed through basic quantitative and cartographic techniques. These are used to represent the age of the houses, condition of the buildings and major occupation of the people of the surveyed area. Qualitative techniques like narratives based on in-depth household surveys are also used to describe the history of buildings.

V. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The old buildings of Varanasi reflect a very unique feature of the city. Varanasi is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities of the world. Old buildings at the areas of Chausatti Ghat and Bangali tola in Varanasi were surveyed.

Age of the buildings:

Most of the buildings are very old. People have been living in the same building from 3 to 9th generations and they are maintaining their house in whatever ways they can afford and choose.

The oldest buildings are found in Chausatti Ghat, which is reportedly more than five hundred years old. Most of the buildings age is from 200 to 400 years old, very few buildings are in between 100 to 200 years. So, the old buildings of Varanasi broadly represent a rich cultural as well as historical value.

Condition of the building:

Most of the buildings are basically 200 to 300 years old in an average. The buildings are different in terms of the condition. Some buildings are good in condition, because these buildings are modernized and well maintained. Most of the buildings are livable in which people are staying there for 3 to 9th generations. They are maintaining their buildings now. Another important thing is that here we found a building which is now used as Ashram purpose.

Some buildings are dilapidated in condition. Some people who traditionally belong to Rajasthan, Gujarat and other states of India are living in the dilapidated buildings in rent. They have very loose contacts with the actual owners of such houses. In fact, these owners hardly visit in Varanasi once in year. The owners of the buildings reportedly live in another state or country. They have not taken any step to maintain the buildings. So, the people who have rented the house are living in a precarious condition without any efforts of maintenance.

Major occupation:

In this area we have found different types of occupation. The people who lives this area their major occupations are business, professional or salaried employee, weaving, priest and labour. There are various categories of business such as: sweet shop, saloon, medicine shop, furniture shop etc. The area (Chausatti Ghat and Bangalit Tola) where the survey has taken place is mainly residential in character.

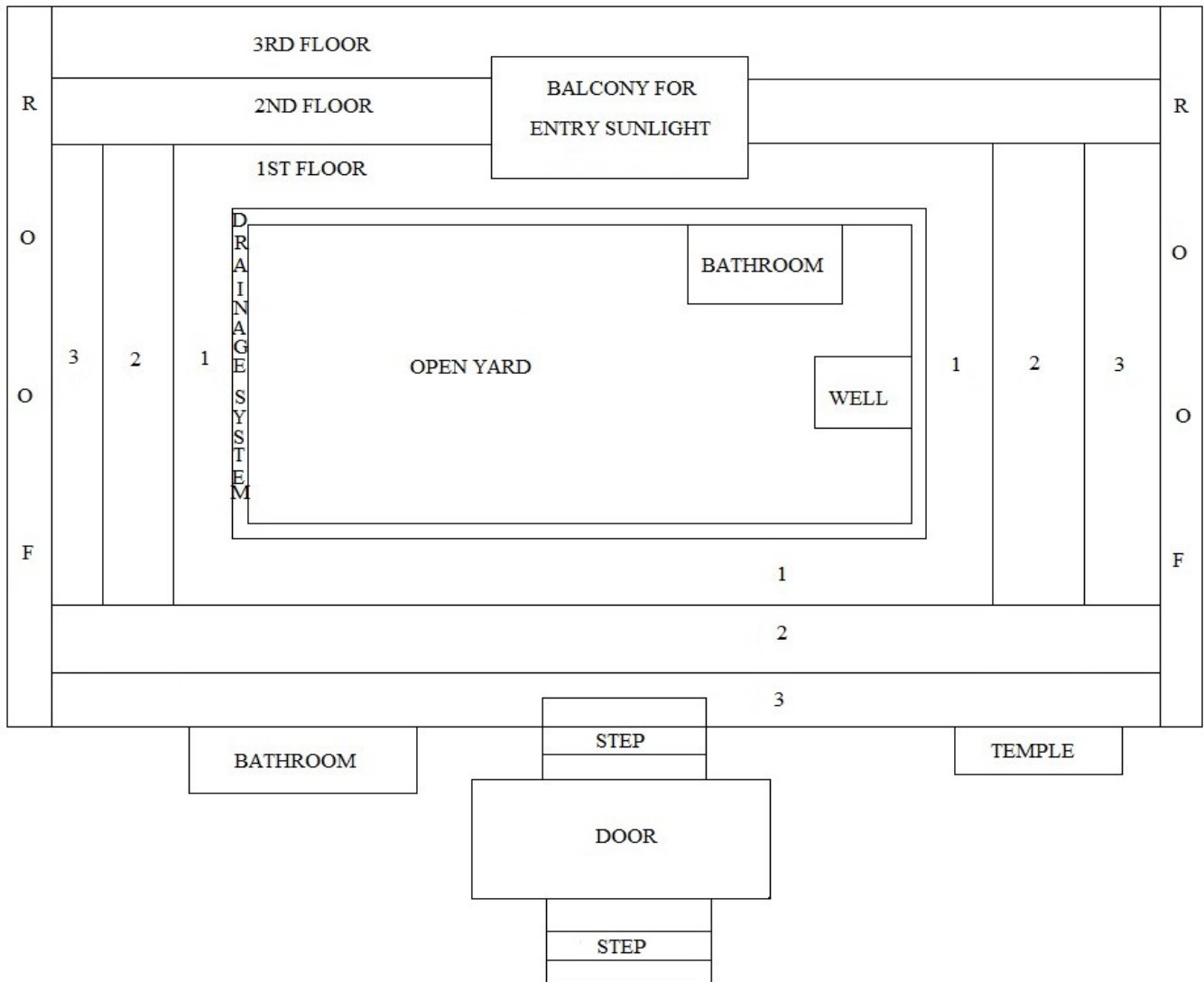
Another group of people involved in service as professional or salaried employee that mainly government and private sector-based jobs. Here we found some pandit who runs tolas.

Another important occupation is weaving. Silk weaving is a well-known household/cottage industry in Varanasi. Therefore, Varanasi is known throughout India for its production of very fine silk and Banarasi sarees.

PIC: 6, ABOVE 500 YEARS OLD BUILDING



Fig-1: A TYPICAL HOUSE PATTERN



Urban Forms and Design:

The main characteristic of every house in Chausatti Ghat and Bangali Tola is that the houses are situated close to each other. Most of the houses are very much old (almost above 200-300 years). All the houses have basically two main doors like one is main gate in outer side and second one is in inner part to enter the people in the houses. Steps are also connected with the doors. A small temple or “Tulsi tree” is situated opposite the entrance gate in many houses. Many houses have floors; basically, two or three floors with corridor are common feature in this area. The rooms are situated within the floors. Common features of every house are yards which are situated in the middle of the house. Some yards are small and some are big in nature. Each and every house has the grill or net system on the roof to enter the sunlight and also protect the house from external things and monkey. Most of the stairs are very steep and narrow in character. The ceilings of the rooms are made by wooden “Kari-Barga”. There have different types of pillar in house like cylindrical, rectangular and oval in shape and the pillars have specific ancient design. Ventilation system is also present in every house. The structure of the ventilator is mostly round and square in shape with different designs. The doors are made by thick wood and the lower part of the main door is basically eroded. “Kulungi” (niche) and chain lock system is also very common features of rooms. A small well or tank is situated one side of the yard and also a separate bathroom is situated in yards. Two bathrooms also present in many houses, one is in outer side and second one is in yard. A drainage system also can be seen in every house and the drain is connected with the main drain of road.

PIC: 7, GANESHA’S IDOL AT THE TOP OF THE DOOR



DOOR:

In India “Swastika” is considered as a very auspicious sign. It is believed to grant good luck and prosperity. In Varanasi, most of the Hindu houses have Swastika, Om sign or Lord Ganesha’s idol and that is situated at the top of the main door of every house. When people go out for somewhere else, they lock the main door first and then obeisance to the God, situated at the top of the main door. They believe that if they do it, then their work will be properly done.

The door is usually wooden and very heavy. The design of the door is rectangular in shape and the height of the door is very small. The reason behind the small height is because residents traditionally believe that if they enter in the house by lowering down the heads, then it is a proper way to show respects their ancestors. Apart from this reason there is also another reason like rescue from robbery or thief’s attack. Chain lock is the most common feature of each and every door.

PIC: 8 CHAIN LOCK SYSTEM

PICS: 9 AND 10, DESIGN OF THE DOORS



PIC: 11, DESIGN OF PILLARS



PILLAR:

The old curvy design is found in many houses of Varanasi. It is situated on the top of major pillars and it touches the ceiling through the cornice. This feature is mainly made by stone. Pillars are made with stone or limestone. The shape of pillars is basically circular, rectangular, cylindrical or oval. Most of the pillars have specific design. It is situated around the sides of the yard and in the front side of houses.

NICHE:



PIC: 12, GOD’S IDOL IN NICHE

Another typical feature of the house is Niche (*Kulungi*). It is situated inside of the room. During the past years, this was used for placing the *Pradip* or *Diya* for lighting the room. It was also used to place as God’s idol for worshipping. But at present, people do not use it for any specific purposes. It remains as unused and neglected part of the house.

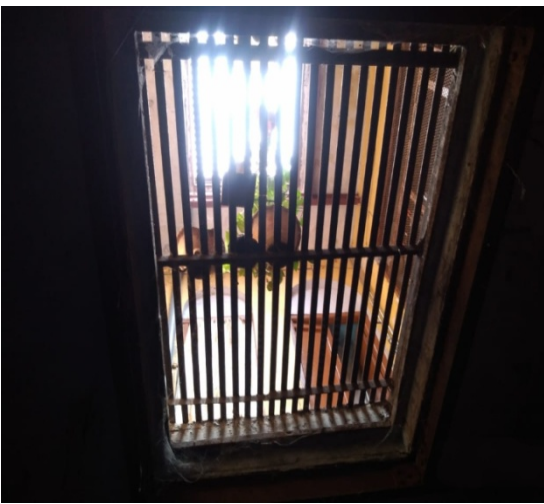
PIC: 13, STAIR CASE

**STAIR:**

It is very important feature of houses in Varanasi. It situated in front of the main door and/or yard. If people want to enter the house, they have to use stairs. Stairs, situated inside of the house, joins the lower portion of the house with upper floor. The step of the stair is relatively higher and it is made with stone.

**PIC: 14, SMALL WELL
SMALL WELL:**

Small well is usually situated in the yard of every house. People use it for household purposes. The shape of the well is rectangular or circular. In some houses this well is covered by stone.

**PIC: 15, DESIGN OF ROOF****ROOMS:**

In some of houses, the rooms are horizontally situated and the floors are vertically situated and every old building usually has two floors and eight to ten rooms. In the left side of the open space of buildings, there is a worship room. In the right side of the room, there is a toilet and at the corner of the left side, there are steps to reach the first floor. The steps are steep and narrow with railing on one side.

After entering the first floor, there is a door with traditional design. In the first floor there is a balcony which is surrounded by living room, kitchen. In all over the house, the floors and walls are renovated by tiles and roofs are made of beam. Beams are basically wooden but now that is renovated by iron for entering the sunlight and air, they made open space vertically towards the room.

WINDOW:

In some old building, windows are situated in lower part of the wall. Some windows are small in size and also covered with iron net. The windows are 'U' shaped and square in type. But the windows are rectangular. and small inside the houses. In some old buildings, windows are seen at the southern part of the house because of entering the cold wind blowing from the Ganges.

PIC: 16, DESIGN OF THE WINDOW**PIC: 17, WALL DESIGN IN BOTH SIDES OF THE FRONT DOOR****WALL:**

Wall of the houses mainly the outer part is decorated with some paintings, marked with some cultural symbols like swastika, om sign etc. This decoration we can see on the both side of the door. Various wall paintings are also seen at both sides of front door in every house in this area. According to the respondents this painting is done during the time of marriage rituals, puja purposes and festivals like Navaratri etc.

PIC: 18, WALL DESIGN AT TOP OF THE DOOR



VI. CONCLUSION

This study finds out that the houses, which are much closer or nearer to the ghat are very ancient. Even a few are 200 to 300 years old. The architectural form of the houses is very different, some house forms follow by the ancient texture. Some Hindu Houses have a big temple beside the house. The characteristic of Hindu house is that after the entrance there is a mandatory presence of courtyard and Tulsi tree. People have used wooden or iron net on the top of the roof so that the sunlight can easily enter into the house. Many houses have underground drainage system. Every building has separate sanitation system. The doors of the houses are basically made by wooden ancient architecture.

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