

How ‘fishy’ is the future of urban fishing in Varanasi?

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While Varanasi has garnered a lot of media traction in recent times with regards to mega projects under way - across its alleys, its waters and ancient corners of the city—little has been talked about its people who make a living out of this historic riverine landscape. Although the city’s laurels rest on its religious and cosmic plinths centering around Ganga, etymologically, this city draws its name from the two rivers, Varuna and Assi – etching out the urban geographical limits to its North and South, respectively. Thus, life and livelihoods around these rivers have in a way symbiotically grown over time for riverine communities, located both within the Old city as well as on its urban peripheries.

With the sleight of grand development plans sweeping across Varanasi since 2014, it has only become even more imperative to talk about these communities, to have insights on their everyday relationships with the river and to enquire as to how these terms are subjected to alterations as city-making processes start toying around the physicality and sociality of rivers.

This article talks about the river-city relationship forged by the fishermen community living along the banks of rivers Ganga and Varuna, based on a visit¹ to the fishing village of Saray Mohana and fishermen living around Bhainsasur-Rajghat-Khirkiya Ghat area. Further, it distinctly describes the precarity of their lives on the riverbanks. The fieldwork for this was conducted a week after the August floods hit Varanasi 2021.

As per the Handbook on Fisheries Statistics, 2020², Uttar Pradesh stands third in terms of state-wise inland fish production of 6.99 lakh tonnes (pp.8). Inland fresh water (riverine) fishing practiced as a full-time livelihood in and around the city of Varanasi, predominantly include stretches close to Varuna-Ganga confluence, those upstream of Assi Ghat and villages along Chandauli, Ghazipur, Jaunpur districts. In particular, Saray Mohana located less than 10 kms from the main city, is noted to be the urban fishing village in the district, while *machhuare* (artisanal fishermen) colonies can also be found lined up in pockets on the riverbanks near

¹Field Work part of PRC’s ‘Nagar-Nadi Fellowship’ 2021

²Handbook on Fisheries Statistics: 2020, Source: Department of Fisheries, States Government / UTs Administration; Department of Fisheries Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry & Dairying Government of India, New Delhi November, 2020

Bhainsasur Ghat and Khirkiya Ghat.

With the flow volume in Ganga steadily dwindling due to large scale damming on the higher reaches of the main channel as well as its feeders, the future of urban fishing for these communities already stands vulnerable, threatened by large scale pollution increasing fish mortality and change in species composition. There are matters of further concern as in recent times, large scale landscaping initiatives, concretised reengineering of riverbanks, ghats in Varanasi - on the model of Westernised 'riverfronts', unfortunately coincide with these fish-landing zones, triggering worries on the lines of displacement of communities and the ecological health of the rivers.



Photo 1: Khirkiya MMT near Malviya Bridge envisions a jetty, food-plaza, 1.6 acre multi-utility platform with helipads, water sports facility and CNG station.

Saray Mohana village, located near Rajghat Malviya bridge, is a census town under Chiraigaon block within Varanasi district where rivers Varuna and Ganga form the '*mohana*' (confluence). With a total population of 4824 of which 11.6 % is SC and 0.5% is ST³, the village roughly consists of 761 households primarily belonging to the *Nishad* caste (engaged traditionally in water/ river-centric occupations). My field data reveals that there exist strong caste hierarchies within the subcastes under *Nishads* – grading upwards from *macchuaries* (fishermen) to *Mallahs* (boatmen) or *Kevats* and finally to *Bunkars* (weavers), as community spaces within the village get settled accordingly. While Dalits are found on the ultimate peripheries of the village, caste-based geographies of occupancy compel the *machhuaries* to settle down as the other set of outliers - more towards the river's edge, upon the floodplains.

³[1] Table 17. Number and percentage of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes population in towns, 2011, pp.39, DCHB VARANASI, Village and Town Directory, Directorate of Census operations, Uttar Pradesh, 2011, Series 10, Part XII-A

Being subjected to seasonal fluxes of water levels in the river, floods in Ganga and Varuna result in frequent inundation in the low-lying stretches leading to loss of livestock and damage to their already precarious shelters. In addition to the challenges of amphibious living, there exists ambiguities even in terms of their employment status in the Government economic registers. Riverine fishing in Varanasi and largely in the state of Uttar Pradesh has remained distinctly informal in nature as fishermen highlight the absence of issuance of fishing licences in practice. Issues concerning their trade and survival are dealt with by the administration on an ad hoc basis when riverine communities become apparent 'obstacles' in the way of smart river terminals and 'encroachers' on 'land to be developed'.

It was told that, the district administration had ordered last November the relocation of families without pattas, residing near Govardhan Dham Temple in order to pave way for construction works for Varanasi Smart City Limited's Khirkiya Ghat Redevelopment Project. The ones who forcefully stayed back on the floodplains however, had to face the brunt of a flood this year since the gabion and retention walls designed for the embankments along the river are yet to be completed. Most parts of the partially built multi-modal platform were found to remain either submerged indicating a spill-over of waters across the walls or remain covered with thick layers of silt, post the flood water recession.



Photo 2: With incomplete embankments, breach of flood water has led to submergence of all structures along the ghats - including this Sulabh complex and damage to Macchuare shelters (seen in the background)



Photo 3: Machhuares along Khirkiya ghat had managed to put up temporary embankments out of construction gunnies, tarpaulins to face the rising waters while construction works on the MMT lie submerged under water in most places.

As waters in the river rose, availability of fishes become difficult especially during the peak monsoon period. Many of them line up on riverbanks early morning for a decent but 'unlawful' catch for the day. Native fishes in and around Varanasi include Catla, Rohu, Meghal while the exotic species are Tilapia, Silver Carp, Common Carp, Grass Carp etc. (District Development Plan – Varanasi, 2019:63)⁴. Tilapia introduced in 1952 in India in pond ecosystems faced multiple episodes of escapement into the river due to recurrent floods allowing its proportion to increase upto 7% of the total fish species in the Ganga River System, especially between Kanpur-Varanasi (National Bureau of Fish Genetic Resources, Lucknow).

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⁴ DISTRICT DEVELOPMENT PLAN – VARANASI (2019), IIIM Lucknow, prepared for Office of Economic Advisor, Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion, Ministry of Commerce and Industries

Despite a ban imposed on Tilapia propagation in 1959 by the Fisheries Research Committee of India as part of 'Guidelines for Responsible Farming of Tilapia in India' (2015:3)⁵, it has seen voracious growth in the Ganga waters with its year-round spawning, invasive, predacious nature that restricts growth of other native species and tendencies to alter the nutrient cycles in aquatic habitats (2015:48)⁶. Local fishermen express their concern with regards to this changing species composition that affects the diversity in their catch which is likely to be worsened with the degradation of water quality as more and more untreated sewage continues to drain into the river.



Photo 4: Mughal era Shahi Nala near Khirkiya ghat supposedly carries city's sewage for 24 km between Assi to Konia and has been part of British sanitation plan

⁵ Published by National Fisheries Development Board, Dept. of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, Govt. of India, Nov. 2015

⁶ "Assessment of fish and fisheries of the Ganga river system for developing suitable conservation and restoration plan", MID TERM REPORT ICAR - CENTRAL INLAND FISHERIES RESEARCH INSTITUTE, (Sanctioned under National Mission on Clean Ganga, vide NGRBA Order NO.T-17 /2014 15/526/NMCG-Fish and Fisheries Dated 13/07/2015)

The study of river-city relationships and its impact on community livelihoods underscore the gaps in ground level understanding of how any intervention along the riverine landscape has cascading effects on the actors and elements making up the waterscape. However, when the floodgates of 'Nav nirman' (redevelopment works) unleash the dream a 'smarter' Varanasi, to these fishermen, the river becomes a friend and a foe at the same time—as Ganga decides their ebbs of fortune, their everyday, tangible battles.

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