

GHATSCAPES OF NORTH KOLKATA: THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DYNAMICS

Sukla Basu¹ and Kunaljeet Roy²

Abstract: Many social scientists particularly geographers prefer to operationalize seemingly more encultured and embodied concepts, such as place, environment, landscape, etc., in their studies than the earlier abstract concept of space. Now qualitative inquiries into human behaviour in a spatial context emphasizes on studying everyday activity patterns by spatial scientists, geographers and social anthropologists. The concept of territoriality and significance of a section of the River Hooghly is emphasized in the paper focusing on the banks (ghats) that evolved in pre- colonial native Calcutta. The paper strives to examine the complex and multifaceted ways in which aspects of religious practice interact with processes of social construction on the ghatscape and the ritualscape; the rituals taking place in special sacred spaces. Associated with this sacred socio-cultural aspect is social and economic cohesion through the various rites and related trade and commerce of religious ingredients. Based on literature survey the work is supported with primary data adopting a qualitative 'micro scale' and a 'practice-oriented' research approach. It is only through ethnography that religious meanings can be perceived and analysed so an ethnographically grounded theory has been put forth explaining the notions of place and space. Classification of ghats were done based on observation of functions on a socio –cultural and socio- economic basis and mapping based on Google Earth. This paper attempts conceptualizing the relationship between the significance and meaning of micro-social actions and larger- order structures such as institutions, and to understand the socio-spatial dynamics driving socioeconomic phenomena. This study is unique in that it attempts to showcase how early religious significance of the ghats is still vibrant in this present day neo liberalised contemporary urban cultural setting. The field study was done in the pre Covid period and so the Covid 19 and post Covid19 situational analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.

Keywords: river, ghat, ghatscape, religion, ritualscape, every day practices.

INTRODUCTION

When we think of 'urban' we attach multifaceted meaning to 'images' of diversity and cosmopolitan atmosphere of everyday life in bigger cities : of culture, arts and music, recreation and leisure, hustle –bustle of commerce, etc. Cities are best understood from the view points and sub disciplines of urban geography, urban anthropology, urban history, urban governance, etc., calling for an integrative, interdisciplinary and multi disciplinary outlook and approach. The concern of urban geographer is the social production of space, that of anthropologist culturally produced space, the urban historian time and space, the urban economist space and economy. According to Tuan (1977) 'Space', is a cultural and experimental construct with an unusual range of subtly differentiated meanings which can vary widely from people to people, and from individual to individual. In the past, the use of

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'Space' was mostly associated with and limited to the mathematical and geometrical applications. Now qualitative inquiries into human behaviour in a spatial context emphasizes on studying everyday activity patterns by spatial scientists, geographers and social anthropologists. Many social scientists particularly geographers prefer to operationalize seemingly more encultured and embodied concepts, such as place, environment, landscape, region and locale, in their studies than the seemingly more abstract concept of space. The relationship between the social and the spatial which Soja (1989) termed as 'socio-spatial dialectic', is an interactive one, in which people make places and places make people. Human activities as particular rhythms of time and space are not universal constructs: they are constructed in specific conditions at particular places such as cities. As per Jones and Murphy (2011) everyday practices are 'time-space assemblages' of body-minds, things, knowledge, discourse, and structures carried by agents such as individuals, organizations, and institutions. Catherine Brace, et al (2006) drew attention to religion as an axis of identity 'because of the manifold articulations between religion and conceptualisations of landscape and place, and the contribution of religion in sustaining material cultures'. They put forth a research agenda drawing on theoretical debates over issues of institutionalization and community construction, place identities, etc. We adopted these conceptual issues in this paper.

Space and place are two important concepts in humanistic geography. The theoretical and conceptual literature often disagrees about what counts as 'place' and what counts as 'space' and the nature of the relationship between these two concepts. 'Space' is an abstract, general realm without meaning, while 'Place' is concrete, is particular and has meaning (Agnew, 1987; Cresswell, 2004). Place is an inseparable aspect of daily life and is intimately linked to our life experiences. Places provide the context in which we learn about ourselves and make sense of and connect to our natural and cultural surroundings. We understand place as a 'meaningful location' (Cresswell, 2004): a cultural and ecological entity that includes a location's human scale, social relationships, cultural characteristics, history, natural and geographical landmarks, and built environment. 'Place' refers to how people are aware of/ attracted to a certain space and is more than a location created by human experiences, acts and everyday neighborhoods (Tuan, 1977). Agnew's (1987) definition of place has three fundamental aspects: (1) a location- that is, a specific fixed point in space where a place exists, (2) a locale- the material setting in which people conduct their lives at that particular location, and (3) a sense of place, or the meaning attached to a particular location and locale which may differ depending on one's social positionality. During the later years of the 20th century, a 'spatial turn' occurred across nearly all the human sciences, wherein scholars began to consider theories of space and place, alongside social and historical perspectives, as equally valuable ways of seeing and interpreting the world (Soja, 2010) and this is what the paper postulates.

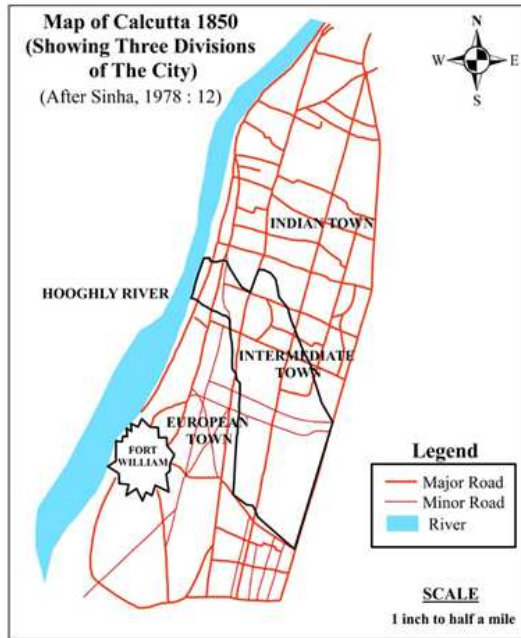
Place and territoriality emerged in the work of Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) and returned in the late 1980s and early 1990s across the discipline of geography. The construction of territory is the consequence of territoriality defined as the ensemble of relations that a society maintains with exteriority (the physical environment) and *alterity* (the social environment) for the satisfaction of its needs, towards the end of attaining the greatest possible autonomy compatible with the resources of the system (Raffestin and Butler, 2012). As for Soja (1971) territoriality affects human behaviour at all society levels and the river is one such territory. Sioli's classical metaphor as "Rivers as the kidneys of the landscape" (1955, published in English in 1975) was cited by Wantzen et al (2016) glorified the river. The first civilizations in the World are known by the rivers of Nile, Tigris and Euphrates, Indus and Ganges/Ganga. The cultures these rivers created have a striking resemblance in society, religion and economic structure. Affections to rivers, acknowledgement of their positive effects on human spiritual and physical well being are increasingly lost and hence their revival is the need of the hour. It is hence mandatory to put the river in the centre and not at the margins of land management.

A new phase of development is taking place along the rivers around the world and with it a renewed interest in the river as a common good. The river is considered as a resource with multiple cultural, economic, environmental and social values along its bounding spatial territories. It has both tangible and intangible components. The multi-level networked governance of inter-organizational relationships are cutting across administrative jurisdictional boundaries directing towards a common goal of river based city's sustenance with a two-pronged approach a top-down and a bottom up blending. The former is through World Bank, the UN resolutions, etc., the latter is from commitment of the individual city at the local level. The term Heritage has broad meanings with its entities categorized into Tangible and Intangible. The UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention adopted in 2003 and effective in 2006 had one of its five broad domains as social practices, rituals and festive events. These are 'habitual activities that structure the lives of communities and groups that are shared by and relevant to many of their members'. They are significant because they reaffirm the identity of those who practice them as a group or a society. They involve variety of forms such as worship rituals, funeral rituals; along with a wide variety of expressions and physical elements, special clothing and special food among others (<https://ich.unesco.org/en/social-practices-rituals-and-00055>). As for the tangible heritage they are the physical ones in the natural and the built environment (the ghat, the road-rail-river linkage, and their associated features and infrastructure) i.e., of the sacred river flowing by.

The theory of place covering the institutional and individual practice and the structural features and the notion of space and time needs to be contextualised and conceptualised with particular reference to the ghatscape along a stretch of river Hooghly which is the spine of the metropolis of Kolkata. The term '*Ghatscape*'

has been coined by us being influenced by Carl Ortwin Sauer's 'Cultural Landscape' (1925); culture the agent, the natural area (the river) is the medium, the cultural landscape the result. The conceptual term 'ghat' is used in India only; and it refers to flights of stepped landings or a negotiable slope leading to a river or a pond from the adjacent land. The ghats are situated in specific locations along the Ganga and are an integral part of river life. The religious significance of the Ganga is physically manifested in ghats that form the land-water interface. The most notable ones are the Ghats of Varanasi (Banaras) in Uttar Pradesh and the Ghats of Hardwar in Uttarakhand. Hardwar is noted for the everyday sunset activity of *Aarti* (*bhajan* or prayer with lit *dias* or oil lamps) on the Har Ki Pouri Ghat, so also is Varanasi's Dashaswmedh Ghat, Shitla Ghat, etc. Some ghats are known for being holy Hindu funeral destinations such as Manikarnika Ghat which is one of the holiest where it is believed that a dead person's soul finds salvation (*moksha*) when cremated here. Gaya is noted for *Pindadaan* (offering food to the departed soul). The *pandas* (Brahmin priests who officiate religious rituals), *ghatias* (Brahmins who oversee ghat rituals), and *pujaris* (Brahmin priests in charge of worship in the temple) offer their services to pilgrims as well. The ghats are also tied to livelihoods of barber (for ritual purpose of *Mundana* or hair cutting), undertaker (*Dom*) and the ingredient suppliers. Our paper strives to examine the complex and multifaceted ways in which aspects of religious practice interact with processes of social construction on the ghatscape and the ritualscape. The territoriality of a section of the River Hooghly is emphasized with the river being the cultural construct of the, by the, and also for the communities living on its banks. In the contemporary situation we have explored the potentiality of the ghats as a public space in order to re-discover the vicinity of the river in the new socio-economic and political milieu. The spatial coverage is the native town/Indian town as demarcated in Wood's map of 1784-85 (published in 1792: *Plan of Calcutta*), Upjohn's map of 1794 and Sinha's map of 1850 (**Figure 1**) as the Black town of Colonial Calcutta. The 'Grey town' or the 'Intermediate Town', comprised of distinct neighborhoods of predominantly diverse trading communities (of Portuguese, Armenians, Jews, and Parsis) while the core of the colonial city centered around Fort William as the 'White Town' or European Town as the basic racism policy of *othering* of the English. This native town/Indian town/Black town pre-existed as the native (core) with brisk business and commerce. It was cosmopolitan in demographic composition with the Hindus and Jains, the Punjabis, the Rajasthanis (Marwaris), and Gujaratis, the Biharis and Oriyas and the local Bengalis. This cultural mix (of language, religion, migratory root of origin) till today predominates reflected through religious and occupational blending with the Bengali speaking showcasing the local-regional dynamics in spite of the strong imprints of colonial presence.

Figure 1: The racial division of colonial Calcutta



Against this background and to develop these arguments in depth, we structured rest of this paper as follows: Section 2 deals with the methodological approaches; Section 3 religious significance of the Ganga river, the religious practice and the related cultural landscape (ritualscape); Section 4 ghatscape and role of ghats in the socio-cultural –economic arena in Kolkata; Section 5 the metropolitan governance and the final concluding Section 6 summed up the main arguments of the paper.

OBJECTIVES, MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

There is a significant shift in the research interests and methodological approaches towards a practice-oriented one, towards a qualitative ‘micro scale’ practice research. This paper attempts to conceptualize the relationship between the significance and meaning of micro-social actions and larger-order structures such as institutions, social class, or culture and to understand the socio-spatial dynamics driving socioeconomic phenomena through the practice approach associated with the ‘ghatscape’. Our specific objectives are focused on:

- (i) Religious significance of the Ganga river, the religious practice and the related cultural landscape (ritualscape);
- (ii) Ghatscape and role of ghats in the socio-cultural arena in Calcutta /Kolkata studied through the everyday lived reality;

- (iii) Everyday economy based on ritual –cum-sacred space in ghat specific Calcutta/Kolkata area; &
- (iv) The contemporary interventional scenario of the ghats studied with pilgrimage tourism ventures in a governmental and PPP model .

Space bound up in daily life, social activities , and personal rituals (material culture), etc., needs to be studied by considering objects such as visual images created by artists , words deployed by writers to communicate ideas describing and prescribing space , planners (administrators). This survey was done after a brisk literature search engine of reports, documents, books and journals. In addition to the maps mentioned we consulted those by Bose (1965), Berry and Rees (1969), Dasgupta (2009), and Atlas of NATMO (2010). Mitra's map of 1850 (published in 1980) is in the vernacular. An edited book by Sukanta Chaudhuri's Volume-I on 'Calcutta: The Living City' of 1990; book authored by Ranabir Ray Chaudhury (2016) entitled 'A City in the Making'; edited book of 'Calcutta Mosaic'(2009) by Bannerjee, Gupta and Mukherjee, and Swati Chattopadhyay's 'Representing Calcutta Modernity Nationalism and the colonial uncanny' of 2005 were also referred . The geography, history and religious significance of the Ganga River with the rhythms of everyday life by Darian (1978) was enriching. Blogs and comments on the social media gave a feel of the present day significance and relevance and boosted us to take up this topic holistically untouched by local academic geographers.

For fulfilling the objectives mentioned above we went in for a purely qualitative methodology, beginning with a pilot study travelling by the local Circular Railway line to and fro, then intensively city walking purposively across the entire ghat stretch demarcated as the 'native town' on weekdays and Sundays from November 2019 to early January 2020. Since the field study was done in the pre Covid period and so the Covid 19 and post Covid19 situational analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. Walking has long been considered a more intimate way to 'engage with landscape'. The best method to know the city , it's 'secret history', is by walking purposively as it is the best way to explore and exploit the city; the changes, shifts etc. (Borden , et al (ed.) 2000). Walking on the rail tracks was purposively done wherever feasible and/or where the riverfront being almost parallel was visible from 12 noon to 4 pm.; since at this time there are no train services. After initial visual capture we descended the ghat steps for a closer perception and have a feel of the routinized mundane activities. It is only through ethnography that religious meanings can be perceived and analysed (Sterelny, 2017). We maintained an ethnographic field diary, keeping visual representations of the everyday lived spaces and economies of the target population. We later transcribed the data to interpret the river as 'mirror of the society'. Since no particular individual was taken up as a case study, the conflict of interest does not arise. While observing the rituals associated with funeral ceremony care was taken not to hurt the sentiment of any family participating by

focusing on their activities with the camera. Adopting the case study method we showcased two distinct case studies one religion based practices to showcase the Hindu crematorium practice as the 'Necro-Geographic landscape' of the area and the other economic based practices. Mobile phone's GPS enabled technology was superimposed on the Google Earth Open Source for accurate geographical location of the ghats(as demarcated in Figure-2). This smart phone with its enabled camera helped in documenting the observation of various phenomena. Finally an ethnographically grounded theory has been consequently put forth

GANGA RIVER: RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE, RITUAL PRACTICES AND ASSOCIATED RITUALSCAPE

Religion is deeply intertwined with dynamic historical and political processes. From early times the image of river Ganga took hold on western imagination (Darian 1978:161): her fame known wherever Indian culture had spread. Pierre Bourdieu (1977) mentioned that cultural rituals and individual habits reflect dispositions or subconscious understandings of the world (the *habitus*) that evolve historically and which position individuals within particular social classes or at points in a culture's social structures. Drawing on this notion we interpret the *habitus* as the Ganga and practice of worship as individual habits.

Water is an important object of worship. Across the world in ancient culture areas the life-creating waters are embodied as a goddess. Among the many symbols of India endowed with spirituality, water is the most sacred (Darian, 1978:14). The Ganga river is playing a continual key role in the belief systems and culture of Hinduism; personified as Ganga *Mata* (*Mata* means mother) bringing life in the form of water. This holy water's appreciation is traced in literature, mythology, art and architecture; in practices through its worship, rituals and ceremonies, pilgrimages and sacred baths as associated with it are many beliefs including physical and spiritual cleansing. Bathing, drinking the holy water or having one's ashes scattered in this sacred river is believed will wash away one's sins and bring one closer to salvation. In Varanasi a special five-day festival celebrating the varied facets of Ganga is observed as the Ganga *Mahotsav* by lighting *dias* (oil lamps), chanting Vedic mantras and bathing. The *kumbha* (full vase) is another distinctive emblem expressing several values, mostly related to the generative and purifying power of water. Associated with it is the great religious *Mela* (bathing fair) once in twelve years at the confluence place (*sangam*) of the holy rivers. The Kumbha Mela's description by the Chinese pilgrim Hieun Tsang in the seventh century A.D, depicts this ancient custom of bathing at prescribed times of day on the site (*sangam*) sanctified from early times. It draws an incredible spectrum of humanity from yogis, priests, sannyasis and sages (holy men), businessmen, bureaucrats to the common irrespective of caste and class. Allahabad (Prayaga) is the foremost example of such pilgrimages; the others being Hardwar, Nasik and Ujjain held in each of these

four places every twelve years. Kumbha Mela is featured on UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage and is the world's largest peaceful gathering.

In Bengal Ganga worship (*Ganga pujo*) as an idol or in form of a clay structure or a temple is next in importance to the religious festival of the Durga Puja. Right from birth to death Ganga plays a prominent role in the *vratas* or religious observances of the people. The *vrata* includes a *puja* (a prayer with offerings) on a *dala* which is a pot containing flowers, *bel* leaves, coconut, a scented candle, *batasha* or *nokuldana* sweets, and a piece of cloth that represents one's earthly possessions. The Ganga water is collected and stored in pots and preserved throughout the year and offered to god at morning and evening worship at home. We both being Hindus saw our mother and grandmother sprinkle Ganga water over the threshold or in the corner of every room at sunset, beginning this ritual practice from the *Thakur ghor* or worship space allotted in the house. This showcases the sacred dimensions of domestic space. Sacraments associated with the birth of a child includes offerings to the river by the new mother accompanied by her neighbours and relatives in addition to worship at the temple of *Shasthi* (the goddess of children and the family). During the initiation or sacred thread ceremony (*upnayana*) the water is consumed with bread. The water also is deeply integrated in the marriage ceremonies. Offering of water to the dead or *tarpan* is also a practice. Unbaked clay images of Ganga are thrown in the river after ceremonies, especially by farmers. The fishing community offers *Ganga puja* during rainy season with the belief that the worship will bring them good fortune and improve their catch. The appropriation of capital through these symbolic dimensions of social life helps each group in seeking to sustain and extend their *habitus* (after Bourdieu). The sacred river provides a common theme for both Hindus and Muslims reflected through the folk songs of the Bauls. The image of her generative powers (Darian 1978:31) of giving birth, restoring life and conferring immortality is established through many tales and legends, love songs and ballads. The most common form of worship is the religious bath or *snana* or bathing festival the practice prevailing as early as the Mahabharata- of bathing in the river while chanting mantras common to people of all castes, rural or urban, rich or poor among Hindus. Bathing is a means of purification before religious services. One such *tirtha* (bathing site for religious purpose) is at Sagar Island near the place where Ganga joins the sea hailing pilgrims from across the country. This *Makarasnana* or taking ablution held annually is the best known Ganga festival in Bengal (Darian, 1978:156) where on the auspicious day of *makara sankranti* (mid January) people wake in the darkness, the worship beginning at 3 A.M. with a prayer to Kapila Muni. They brave the odds of the cold chilly weather, the tedious travel, the pilgrim shelter space (*dharmashala*) not being enough for the overwhelming crowd of devotees numbering in several lakhs.

The river Ganga is depicted as a child of the mountain (Darian, 1978). Hence in India other noted centres of pilgrimages associated with the mountains are Badrinath,

Kedarnath, Gangotri and Rishikesh. Her water is considered as holiest in Hardwar (the Gate of Vishnu) and Rishikesh (the last point in the Himalayas before the river enters the plains). The plants and the waters became a 'centering vision' of Hindu thought (Darian, 1978). The tree as the vegetal essence of life (Darian, 1978:42) figures prominently in the image of Ganga who is usually depicted beneath a tree. Ganga is also identified with the *yakshas*, spirits of primeval India. The connection between *yakshas* and the waters is seen in the *makara* (aquatic animal) which serves as a pedestal for Ganga and her signature, distinguishing this river goddess from other figures. Ganga is also associated with the Hindu temple concept. In myth and art Ganga and Shiva illustrate a primordial relationship which underlies the spiritual architecture of the Hindu temple. Shiva is characterized as Lord of the Lingam; the lingam being an emblem of death and symbol of life too and is thus the main object of worship in the Hindu temple. Shiva is identified as the Lord of the burning ground i.e., funeral ground.

Against this conceptual and contextual background an intensive ethnographic field survey has been done by the authors along a stretch of the river showcasing the ghatscape and role of ghats in socio-cultural arena of Calcutta /Kolkata till date.

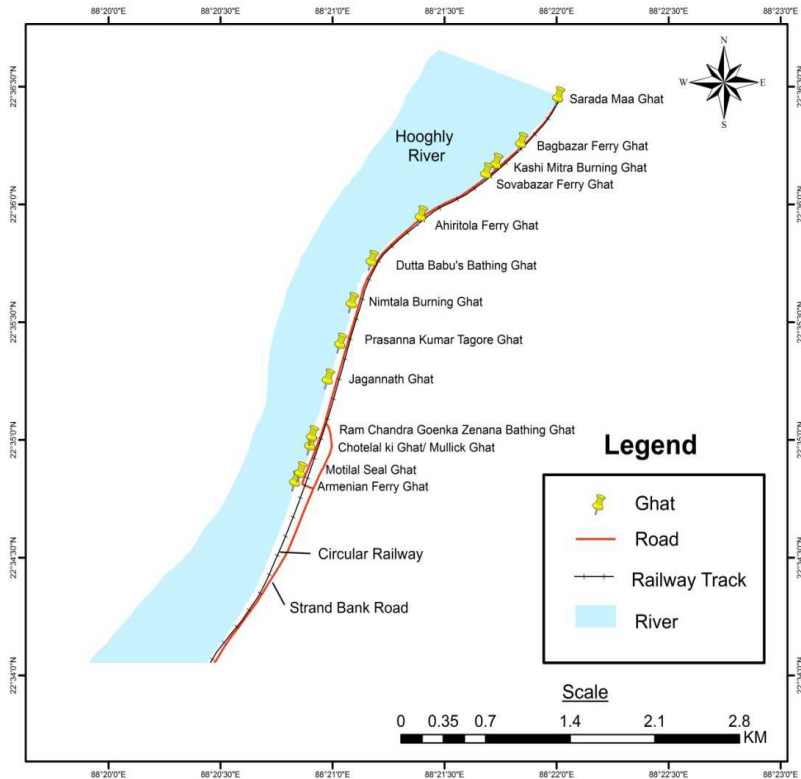
THE GHATSCAPE AND ROLE OF GHATS FROM SOCIO-CULTURAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES

The ghatscape

The term 'ghat' exclusively associated with certain parts of South Asia and particularly India refers to the series of steps (manmade) leading from the land surface to its water bodies be it a small pond or a big river (natural). Our study covers the holy river of Ganga known here as the Hooghly whose significance has been explored along a small stretch focusing on its banks (ghats) with their physical and cultural attributes. The innumerable ghats have their own individual root of origin, specific location and function, art and literature, history of growth and development, and also of decay or re-development and influence zone. Descending down these steps one transcends into the holy water to partake in ritual baths, religious ceremonies and festive occasions. The river also serves as a means of linkage of transport and communication with different parts through ferry services; and transport, trade and commerce between land and water. It is not only a provider of recreation-leisure-entertainment but also a burden due to environmental pollution, and institutional incoherence. Finally it is rich in its tangible and intangible heritage. From the priests to the common folk, the river is the mother; hence when someone breaths her/his last, the relatives of the deceased give away the ashes of the departed to the river believing that the soul rests in peace in the mother's lap according to the Hindu mythology. This also justifies the location of the burning ghats along the river. Out of the 25 ghats of 18th century Calcutta positioned outside the 'White'

European living quarter after Wood (spelt as ghauts in his map) 13 ghats have been identified extending from Sarada Maa Ghat (Geographical coordinates as noted from GPS to be 22.607, 88.366) in the north to Armenian Ferry Ghat (22.580, 88.348) in the south. Rest of the ghats could not be tracked as they have been either transformed, ruined or renamed. Continuous shifting of river channel has led to shifting or erection of new ghats or desolation of old ghats along the Hooghly River within the city limits (such as Joy Mitra Ghat lane as observed in the field).

Figure 2: The Study Area



Source: Field Survey

The socio-cultural local dynamics of the area

The earliest inhabitants in the 'native town' in pre-colonial days composed of primitive and impoverished aboriginals such as the *Jelias*, *Duliyas*, *Nikaris* and *Bagdis*. They were replaced by creation of permanent settlements through clearing of the jungles and reclaiming of the waste lands notably by the Seths and the Basacks (Ray, 1986). Blechynden (1905: 23) said that the ghats served as landing points

where boats laden with firewood and jungle produce landed their cargoes for the use of the growing settlement. Bose (1965) among others discussed how people from the ancient river ports lying further upstream on the Hooghly were attracted by the prospect of trade and employment. The new competing group consisted of the Hindu higher caste people mostly from Saptagram (Guha, 1965)/Satgaon the famous port which lost its importance due to silting of the Saraswati river. Mercantile castes of *Gandhabanik* (spice merchants) and *Subarnabanik* (bankers and traders in gold) were the first to step in (Bose, 1965) followed by upper-caste Brahmin priests and other elite Brahmin families of the Tagores and the Chakrabartis; the Kayasthas of Ghoses, the Mitras, the Deys or Debs, the Mallicks, and the Dattas; the bureaucratic staff of the Zamindars. They congregated in the riverine settlement of approximately 8 square km in area of Kalikata- Govindapur- Sutanuti complex on the eastern bank of the Hooghly River. This site's potentiality was gauged by these people in the pre- Charnock times as Rudyard Kipling had written the city of Calcutta was not 'chance-erected'. These original resident Bengali families were displaced later by the richer non Bengali trading castes migrating from northern and western India (notably Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat) who purchased the land and property including palatial residences from them; converting many to warehouses.

Moving from north to south we traversed the 13 ghats and the following observations made based on the field study. The Sarada Maa Ghat named after socio-religious reformer Sarada Devi is a bathing place-space for the Bengali (local) speaking people domiciled here. A recent venture by the Temple Trust, the local authority and local devotees has led to the introduction of holy prayer offered to the river in the evening (adopted after practice in the ghats of Varanasi and Hardwar) on a small local scale. Recent intervention of reclaiming the river front by National Ganga River Basin Authority (NGRBA) under Mission Ganga Project was noticed. The Bagbazar Ferry Ghat area with ferry service is also housing Bengali speaking people; the name itself connotes the identity of the entire neighbourhood. The rail station along the Circular railway is also of the same name. The area between Bagbazar and Sovabazar has the country's largest enclave of idol makers, famous worldwide as 'Kumortuli' which recently claimed its rights to be declared as Intangible World Heritage. Then the Kashi Mitra Burning Ghat was noticed with its function specified to cremation (converted to an Electric Crematorium) and associated Hindu rituals. Sovabazar Ferry Ghat serves as a water transport linkage between various nodes of riverine settlement. Its neighbourhood bears the past connection with Sutanuti (in Wood's map it is 'Sootalootee' literally meaning the yarn of cotton). The place Ahiritola borrowed its nomenclature from the erstwhile enclave of milkman community, known as 'Ahirs' while 'tola' marks the tiny hamlets in pre-colonial Calcutta and linked with it is the ferry service provided by the Ahiritola Ferry Ghat. The sixth ghat was the Dutta Babu's Ghat, earlier known

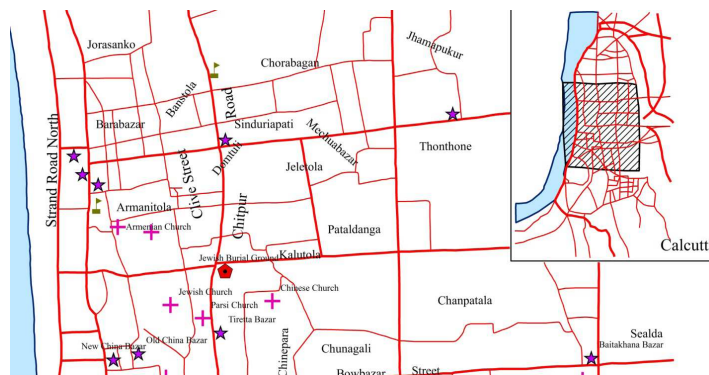
as Manick Bose's Ghat. As per the plaque on the structure of the ghat observed during our field it is mentioned that the ghat was erected by Ram Kishore Dutta in 1934 and that earlier it was known as Manick Bose's Ghat after Manik Chand Bose/Manikram Bose, a wise compassionate and popular person after whom perhaps Maniktala is also named (field observation). Generally in those days ghats were constructed by the local elite zamindars, feudal lords and 'babus'. Bathing and other daily uses related to the river was perceived. The stretch from Sarada Maa Ghat to Prasanna Kumar Tagore's Ghat is dominated by local Bengali community speaking people. This ghat is named after the Tagores among the richest Bengali families during the colonial era. Bathing and other daily uses related to the river and the recent reclaiming of the river front by NGRBA has been noticed here. Heading towards Burra Bazar (the Great Bazar of Wood's) the significant presence of the non Bengali speaking Indian communities was felt. The Nimtala/ Nimtollah Burning Ghat is one of the major spaces dedicated to Hindu crematorium (necro space) of Kolkata with its associated Hindu rituals. It reflects through its immediate and neighbouring cultural landscape an admixture of linguistic and religious background. Marwari influence with Vaishno Devi temple & the Resthouse (Bishram Bhawan) built by Mugneeram Ramcoowar Bangur adjacent (the Bangur's follow Jainism) is clearly visible. Jagannath Ghat named after Lord Jagannath, the famous cult in the neighbouring state of Odisha has Oriya speaking people working as porters residing nearby. Hindi speaking people refers to people from North and West India and dominates the area very close to Howrah-Burra Bazar area in the Ram Chandra Goenka Zenana Ghat, the Chotelal Ki Ghat/ Mullick Ghat, the Moti Lal Seal Ghat and its adjoining Armenian Ferry Ghat, beyond which begins the 'Intermediate or grey town' of the city and not under purview of this study. Thus linguistically Bengali speaking community was seen in the north from Sarada Ma Ghat to P. K. Tagore's Ghat, Oriyas in Jagannath Ghat, followed by Hindi speakers around Burra Bazar area further south.

Our field observations blended with literature reveals the following notable discernible social features exemplified through distinct neighbourhoods that are unique to these ghats as follows:

- (a) Between Bagbazar and Sovabazar area in the vicinity of Kashi Mitra Ghat and Bagbazar Ghat is 'Kumortuli'/Kumartuli (*Kumors* being artisans and idol makers). The area houses hundreds of idol makers working round the year, especially before the Durga puja. The Durga puja celebrated in an extravagant mood connoting one of the largest festivals around the globe, has been declared as an UNESCO Intangible World Heritage on 15th December 2021. The festival draws lakhs of workers of the informal and formal section of economic activities and generates huge income. The idol makers collect rich alluvial clay from the river bank. Thus their economy is well connected with the river for centuries.

- (b) In the vicinity of Ahiritola Ghat and Nimtollah Ghat of Sovabazar – Posta area are local neighbourhoods : the *Beniatola* (Gold smith/ ornament traders), *Ahiritola* (Milkman community) and *Dorjipara*(Tailor). ‘*Para*’ denotes a neighbourhood and ‘*tola*’ the tiny hamlets in pre-colonial Calcutta.
- (c) Near Jagannath Ghat, Mullick Ghat and P.K. Tagore Ghat of Posta - BurraBazar area were the *Dhopapukur* and *Chasha-Dhoba para* (washermen); *Mechua bazar* (fish market) and *Jeliatola* (fishermen). ‘*Pukur*’ is a pond.
- (d) In between Burra Bazar and Armenian Ghat/ Moti Seal Ghat: *Chunagali* (lime traders) and further away *Domtuli* (undertakers) (Mitra, 1980) .Thus we were able to trace ghats associated with specific caste based (jati) identity tracking from the neighbourhood dynamics (Fig 3)

Fig. 3: Neighbourhood Dynamics of parts of Calcutta



Source : Dass, R (1884) cited in Dasgupta, K(2009:32)

Everyday lived reality based on ritual –cum- sacred –cum economic space of the ghats :

Adopting the case study method to showcase two distinct case studies one religion based practices (Nimtala burning ghat) and the pilgrimage, cultural-economic (flower market) based practices (Mullick ghat) are discussed:

(i) Nimtala burning ghat: an exclusive sacred –cum -ritual space

The Neemtullah Gaut (of Wood’s)/ Nimtala/Nimtalla/Nimtollah burning ghat (Figure 4) highlights the city’s rich ethnic heritage .The evolving cultural landscape formed by funeral spaces has been partially incorporated in this study based on ‘Necro-Geography’ or the study of the morphology of cemeteries/ grave spaces. Little attention has been given to the spatial dimensions of the funerary landscape

in this area and so this documentation was felt essential.

Figure 4: Nimtala- the sacred (Necro) ghatscape



Source: Field Survey

Crematorium acts as a cultural institution, a marker of identity of the dominant Hindu community residing here where the mortuary rituals are enacted. Culturally specific mourning rituals, grief rituals have been practiced since the early beginnings of civilization. The ritualistic ceremony usually happens within the first 24 hours after a person passes away (*mukhagni*). The *sraddha* ceremony (*preta-karma*) to pay homage to the person's ancestors and to liberate the soul of the deceased takes place after a fixed number of days while some also conduct the annual *sraddha* ceremony at some specific allotted ghats rendering this exclusive service. The traditional cremation practice over pyres requires continuous supply of wood provided by a section of people. A city based NGO named 'Perna Foundation' collaborates with the municipal authorities to keep the ghat clean and pollution free along the river. It also supplies hand carts for carrying wood for the cremation. There is also an electric crematorium which serves a major section of the people of North and Central Kolkata. Adjacent is a rest shade (Bishram Bhawan) for the family members of the deceased built by the famous Marwari Jain businessman Mugneeram Ramcoowar Bangur.

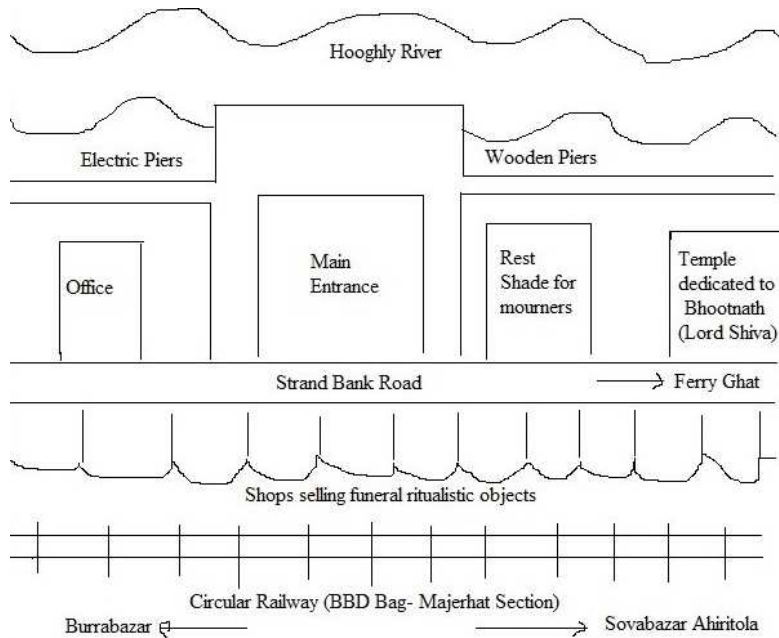
Figure 5: Funeral specific items in Nimtala Ghat Complex



Source: Field Survey

Burial practices require specific commodities like flowers, *ghee*, candlesticks, and specific fresh clothes to wear after burning of the deceased which are provided by 64 shops (managed by local traders' guild) here. These substances of fruits, *bel* leaves, etc., are believed to get blessed during the ritual and so there is a demand-supply mechanism in play. About 15-20 vendors sell food and beverages too. The shops have been positioned opposite the ghat between the road and the rail line. They are all numbered and categorically spaced based on the goods sold and served to the mourning family. All are semi-pucca shops with corrugated sheets, having electricity and serving the community on a rotational basis for 24 hours. Like all other burning ghats, Nimtala also house temples belonging to Hindu Gods. Hence idols, framed photographs of deities along with flowers, sweets, and clayey pots are the products sold here. It's quite a unique socio-economic landscape as it generates a good number of local financial exchanges and serves customers. This ghat is also noted for idol immersion during the festive events calling for intervention and cooperation by the local visitors. Thus in a country like India a crematorium as a place generates local cultural economy, is functional in nature as a service industry (municipalised and private) providing a source of revenue ranging from management staff, caretakers, the priest (*Brahmin*), the *Dom*, to the providers of various ritualistic objects. Five carts were seen where the carriers of wooden piers carry logs for the same.

Fig 6 : Cognitive sketch of Nimtala Burning Ghat (Not to scale) based on Field Survey



(ii) Mullick Ghat: an economic cum-cultural-space:

Mullick Ghat area the flower basket of the city and its hinterland is within a stone's throw of the Howrah Bridge. Railway, ferry and connectivity by roadway through Howrah Bridge provide easy and convenient access to it. The ghat deals with related trade and commerce of religious ingredients, and is mainly related with the economic space of religious ingredients. Thus it is categorized as an **economic -cum -ritual space** Hundreds of local and outstation vendors sell fresh flowers to the customers on a daily wholesale and retail basis.

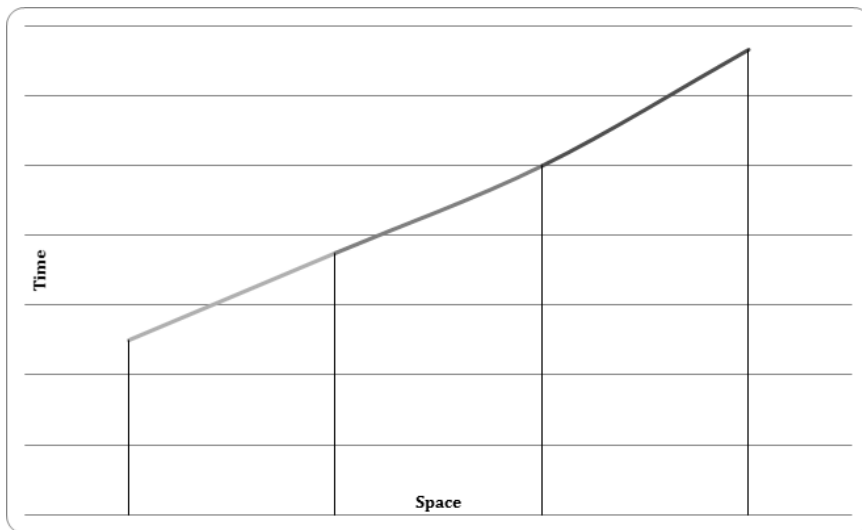
Figure 7: Mullick Ghat: the flower basket of the city

Source: Field Survey

The Ghat's Flower Market was initiated by Ram Mohun Mallick in 1855 after whom the market is named. It is perhaps Asia's one of the largest flower markets with an approximate 4000 vendors selling variety of flowers as per literature search dated 15th Feb 2019 ([https:// www. thehindubusinessline.com](https://www.thehindubusinessline.com).). The market is a daily market with a weekly peak on Wednesday as Thursday is considered a special holy day of the week by the Bengali Hindus. The market flourishes throughout the year with a seasonal low in the rainy season and a seasonal high during religious festivals, weddings and rituals of various communities. This part consists of retail shops aligned to the river and extending from Mullick Ghat to Ram Chandra Goenka Zenana bathing Ghat. In front of this retail market is the Strand Bank Road and the Circular Railway line. Crossing them on foot one can reach to one of the largest open sky flower wholesale market of the Mullick Ghat beneath the iconic Howrah Bridge. Most of the vendors come from various corners of the adjacent districts of Howrah, East Medinipur, North 24 Parganas and South 24 Parganas. As flowers are perishable items hence the sellers start their activities earlier in the morning, even before the sunrise. They carry their item in the local suburban trains as it is

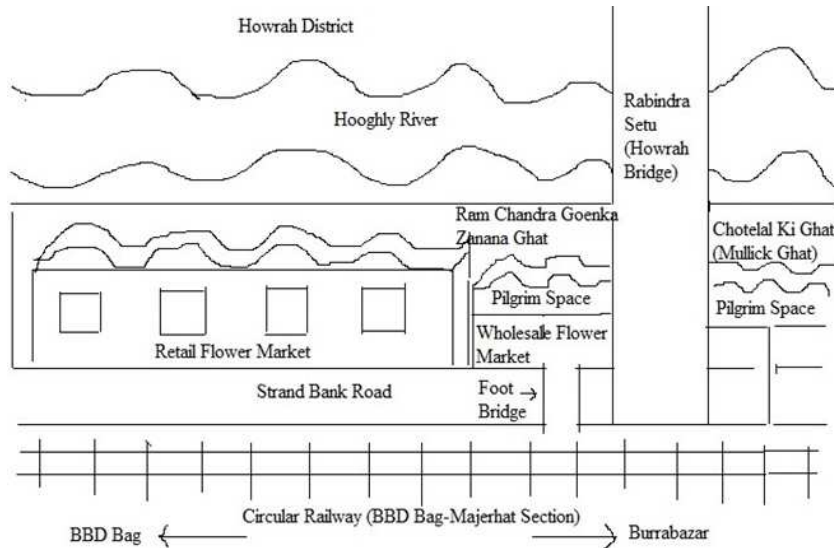
the cheapest and fastest urban transit medium commented by the vendors . Sealdah in the east and Howrah in the west (opposite side of the river) serve as the oldest railway junctions and prime focal point of trading and everyday economic activities related to the Mullick ghat and adjacent flower market. Here we have applied the concept of Time-Space Prism as cited by Hanson and Hanson (1993); the original concept was that of Hagerstrand. This helps us to illustrate graphically (**Fig8**) the spatial reach of the everyday geography of the flower market and its ecology with all of its stakeholders:

Fig 8 : Time-Space Prism of flower market morphology and everyday activities



Source: Participant observation and visual ethnography (Modified by the authors from Hanson, S. and Hanson, P. (1993).

Fig 9 : Cognitive sketch of flower market (Not to scale)



Source: Field Survey

Within this premises was seen Ganga Seva Samiti with its Ganga Seva Samiti Bhavan, the Siyaram Akhara Byayam Wrestling Hall and a charitable dispensary. The beautifully decorated pillars (i.e., architecture) signify the glorious past of native Bengali feudality as the Mullicks were one of the richest families who lived in the heart of the native town. It also has an imprint of the English. Adjacent is the 'Chotelal Ki Ghat'. It is being renovated by the NGRBA. A wrestling arena is in the ghat's land area patronizing supremacy of male dominated everyday activities around the ghat. A bunch of pilgrims were also found resting while we were surveying just before the *Makar Sankranti*. Mullick ghat and adjacent 'Chotelal Ki Ghat's social space is shown in **Figure 10**.

Figure 10: Social Space of ‘Chotelal ki Ghat’



Source: Field Survey

The term ‘**social space**’ was coined by famous sociologist and thinker Emile Durkheim at the end of the 19th century and later popularized by many academicians. From a geographer’s point of view, social space is characterised by group consciousness with either the space being made of homogenous groups or by overlapping of the heterogeneous population born through communication and business networks. Thus the ghatscapes of Mullick Ghat and adjacent Chotelal Ki Ghat are ideal examples of such overlapping of heterogeneous social space presently dominated by overlapping socio-economic everyday activities of pilgrimage and ritualistic economy of flower sellers.

It is now pertinent to explore the rich cultural heritage of the Ghats from the pilgrimage point of view. The ghats serve as connection between the pilgrims hailing from different parts of the country coming to the Howrah Rail station and destined for the holy dip at Ganga Sagar through the waterway service providers -private, governmental and PPP. Hence the metropolitan governance issue needs a scrutiny here.

CONSERVATION, RESTORATION AND PRESERVATION OF THE ‘GHATSCAPE’

Rooted in a balanced and sustainable relationship between the needs of present and future generations and the legacy from the past the UNESCO has made urban heritage a resource for urban development and provided opportunities to address many of the challenges. In addressing urban areas, the UNESCO Recommendation

on the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) accepted in 2011 was a significant step. The HUL Approach adopted in 2011 by the UNESCO stated that “the principle of sustainable development provides for the preservation of existing resources, the active protection of urban heritage and its sustainable management is a condition sine qua non of development” (UNESCO, 2011). This integrated approach would place development (social and economic) and conservation of urban heritage on the same plane. It included social and cultural practices and values, economic processes and the intangible dimensions of heritage. The HUL recommendations applicable to all urban areas in a wider context is aimed at linking between various stakeholders and local communities, promoting civic engagement tools to empower people in the decision making processes for cultural heritage and also on the longevity of the cultural resources: all the essentials of a healthy society. Since the principles in the HUL recommendations are fully compatible with other UNESCO conversations and UN documents, especially the UN 2030 Agenda, it is a means of implementation at the local level. An integrated urban management approach that embraces development, as well as potentials of culture, is a strong tool for adapting the New Urban Agenda (brought up by UN-Habitat) to national urban policies that are compatible with the 2030 agenda (Erkan, 2018). The sustainability of planning and design interventions can be enhanced by taking into account the existing built environment, intangible heritage, cultural diversity, socioeconomic and environmental factors along with local community values (Bose, 2018). Revitalization of the unique *ghatscape* by adopting the Historic Urban Landscape Approach in accordance with UNESCO guidelines is sustainable. This is because it moves beyond the preservation of physical environment by focusing on the entire human environment with all of its tangible and intangible qualities. Tourism and culture led revitalization is another prospective venture as it helps in developing a new and diversified economic base through exploring the historic assets of the area. Pilgrimage tourism associated with the Ganga (Hooghly) river and the associated ghatscape may enhance this quotient in the following manner:

PROMOTION OF PILGRIMAGE TOURISM

Pilgrimage to holy places (*tirth yatra*) is an ancient and continuing religious tradition of the Hindus. The Ganga Sagar Mela is the second largest gathering of annual based pilgrims across the country, next to the holy Kumbh Mela held at Allahabad every twelve years. It is at Sagar island (under the administrative jurisdiction of South 24 Parganas District) located 80 km south of the city of Kolkata (by waterways) at the confluence of the Hooghly and the Bay of Bengal. Notices are put up in several of the Jetties by Hooghly Nadi Jalpath Paribahan Samabay Samiti Ltd. (HNJPSS Ltd) that the regular launch/steamer ferry services by the state government would remain closed for some days. HNJPSS Ltd along with West Bengal Surface Transport Corporation Limited (WBSTC Ltd.) a state government undertaking ensures smooth

transportation of pilgrims to and fro across the river. A detailed time table for launch and vessel service is put up in three languages (English, Hindi and Bengali). There are privately operated river vessels and local road transport vehicles in addition to lodging and boarding facilities. So here an urban-rural, a local-state-national, government-private governance (PPP) looks into the public safety and security of pilgrims. A high speed cruise liner (air-conditioned with modern amenities) run by the 'Osprey India Waterways' has started plying since March 2020 between the Millennium Park Jetty and Sagar Island (Ganga Sagar) and is emerging as popular among tourists and pilgrims. Another private cruise liner 'Vivada' runs cruises for Sunderbans and daily urban river tour in the evening plying from Babughat to Belur Math (holy site at Howrah district, the west bank of Hooghly River) including Dakshineswar (another pilgrimage site lying north of Bagbazar under the jurisdiction of the North 24 Parganas district).

BEAUTIFICATION AND MAINTENANCE OF GHATS

Information on waste management rules to be followed by the people to keep the surroundings of the ghat clean was through notices put up in jetty areas by the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC). The NGRBA's River front management scheme has been implemented in Sarada Maa Ghat, Ahiritola Ferry Ghat, P K Tagore's Ghat, and Chotelal Ki Ghat' (Source: field survey). The *Bidhayak Elaka Unyan Prokolpa* (BEUP) a Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) funded scheme is looking into improvement of road services such as lighting. The 'Clean City, Green City' is a dream project of the Government of West Bengal's Urban Local Body i.e. the KMC. In collaboration with several administrative institutions such as the Kolkata Police it is looking into multiple activities such as environmental, recreational, controlling crowds during idol immersion, etc. The Clean Welfare Society a project under KMC looks into the sanitation issue through services of 'pay and use' toilet (thus arresting open defecation practice) adjacent to the ghats. The Kolkata Police also demarcated one of the ghats as a dangerous one to prevent mishaps in its premises. The Kolkata Port Trust (KPT) has put up parking fees for vehicles of goods transport in the Armenian Ghat premises. The fare charts of ferry services and launch services (for tourists) are looked into by West Bengal Transport Corporation (WBTC) and West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation (WBTDC) respectively. Contemporary capitalism is through neoliberalism governance. The country now post liberalized is sharing its interventionist space with NGOs and/or privately owned enterprises in the provision of public goods and services within the ghatscape. Some of the ghats' beautification and maintenance is by Central Kolkata's Prerna Foundation (an NGO) in co-operation with KPT and KMC. Local committees such as the Ganga Seva Samiti are also significant. The UNESCO's "River and Heritage" initiative through inventory of river cultures began in India with the Ganges in Banaras declared as a heritage site. Initiative from the

KPT towards it has already begun ten years ago through ‘Maritime Archives and the Heritage Centre’ set up in 2009. Thus the multi-level networked governance of inter-organizational relationships is cutting across administrative jurisdictional boundaries directing towards a common goal of city’s sustenance.

India’s Ganga Action Plan (GAP) of 1985-86 concerned with prevention of pollution of the river Hooghly, incorporated schemes such as low cost sanitation, renovation of bathing ghats, development and improvement of burning ghats equipped with electric cremation furnaces, construction of electric cremation, restoration of cultural heritage sites, etc. It was implemented after May 31, 1994. Having a slightly different approach with a focus on land-water interface the National Ganga River Basin Project (NGRBP) was formed in 2008 for the cleanup of the Ganga after the river was declared as a National River by the then Prime Minister. The NGRBP with funds from the World Bank functions on the principles of sustainable relationship through partnerships and collaborative state, civil society, and the private sector (World Bank, 2011). Accordingly the Central Government constituted the West Bengal State Ganga River Conservation Authority for implementing decisions or directions of National Ganga River Basin Authority (NGRBA). NGRBA is looking into the improvement and redevelopment of some ghats funded by the World Bank.

The state government of West Bengal has responded institutionally to the internationalization of real estate and to urban renewal and revitalization ventures. This was done because both real estate development and heritage conservation can be mutually compatible, particularly in Government led-urban renewal projects. Based on ‘Neo-Liberal Global Economic Agenda’ the state has assigned many built heritage to private or voluntary sector. Some important urban development, redevelopment or revitalization programmes and policies includes the Calcutta Urban Development Programme (CUDP)- 3 phases (1974-92); the Calcutta Megacity Programme (CMP) 1996; the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) – 2005; ‘Clean City’ under ‘Kolkata My City’ campaign launched by KMC in 2014; the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT)- 2015; the Smart City Mission’s (SCM) 2015 - in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG goal 11 etc). This is also at par with the HUL recommendation’s potential existing in integrating urban planning with the conservation of urban heritage through empowering people, while at the same time promoting creativity and cultural expressions, that are the essentials of a healthy society.

Based on our previous field survey of the ghats only those measures that have already been taken up (all respective stakeholders: governmental, NGOs, etc.) at that point of time are mentioned in this research article. The multi-level networked governance of inter-organizational relationships is cutting across administrative jurisdictional boundaries directing towards a common goal of city’s sustenance. They are definitely sustainable as they have been implemented based on intensive

research work by the concerned respective stakeholders as funds are allotted only after pilot studies, SWOT analysis, FGD, etc are done. We as participant observers did feel the visual difference (being both acquainted with the everyday ghatscape either as ferry service riders or as visitors to the tourist spots along the ghats or as a mourner in the concerned space). There is a qualitative improvement in the aesthetic appearance, maintenance of the traditional culture and local community values, improvement in the sanitation system, etc., has been commented upon during our ethnographic researching by the local people (sellers, buyers, holy dip bathers, purohit, barbar, local residents both young and old, across class, caste and sex), people belonging to different communities (linguistically) and passer bys. Moreover, the text itself has attempted to justify the sustenance issue implemented at the global-national and local level through the goals of the various schemes launched, monitored and implemented

CONCLUSION

We focused on the routine, everyday and ordinary actions i.e., the 'mundane' practices of individuals to provide critical insights into the social and cultural factors that shaped the geographies in the ghatscape. The different forms of social construction has been examined in terms of class (elite consisting of wealthy merchants and landlords and the labour), caste (occupation and hierarchy) and gender (representation of the river as goddess while the patriarchal order is demonstrated through occupation by priests associated with worship rituals). Such spatial practices of these people, the patterns and physicality they created, the social spaces generated and transformed places of the city as a dynamic one which transcended from pre-colonial through colonial to the globalization era. We noticed that the entire ghatscape in the native town is dotted with banyan trees, small temples as places of worship just at stone's throw from each other. The ghat's buildings serve multiple functions which differ based on the economy in its vicinity. Mullick Ghat noted for the wholesale flower market uses the space for storing flowers and leaves. Ferry service ghats of Bagbazar Ghat, Sovabazar Ghat, Ahiritola Ghat, and Armenian Ferry Ghat had ticket counters which displayed ferry service timings and rules and regulations for passengers and service providers. Ghats which are used specifically for death related rituals had living and worshipping space of the Brahmins and the deceased family members respectively. Ghats associated with the *sraddha* or practice of post death funeral rites are Arya Sraddha Ghat, Nimtollah Ghat and Kashi Mitra Ghat. Ghats used for cremation (Nimtollah Ghat and Kashi Mitra Ghat) had space for mourners' rest room and office record room for details of the deceased. Those exclusively used for bathing had rooms allotted for dressing/changing clothes; some were only for the male (Rammadan Bandopadhyay Ghat), some exclusively for the females (Ram Chandra Goenka Zenana Ghat) while the rest were unspecified. Only here was seen the gendered space else it is basically a male dominated functional

space reflecting the patriarchal order in the society is our observation. Contextual background of the ghats has been tracked through the nomenclature of the ghats : be it local individualistic founder or a dignified personality ; be it community , be it type of function . Naming after for example in remembrance of Maa Sarada as Maa Sarada Ghat , Mullick ghat of the Mullicks, Moti Lal Seal Ghat reflecting the founder . Armenian Ghat, the Ahiritolla Ghat , Ram Chandra Goenka Zenana Ghat as of Armenians , Ahirs and female communities (gendered) respectively. Casheram MeetersGaut/ Kashi Mitra Burning Ghat and Nimtala Burning Ghat are funeral functional spaces allotted. Bagbazar Ferry Ghat and Sovabazar Ferry Ghat serve as water transport linkage.

We applied the notions of ‘space’ and ‘place’ in terms of understanding the relation between the ‘ghatscape’ and the people associated with it. The ghats are themselves spaces of everyday water bound activities including bathing, ferry based transport services, sacred offerings, cremation, etc. The behavioral and psychological attachment between the space and its users remain sublime/ passive during the usual course of such actions. However, the similar site becomes a ‘place’ when certain identity making notions are being ascribed to it. For example, the ‘Nimtala’ burning ghat or the ‘Kashi Mitra’ burning ghat are sacred urban ‘necro’ spaces where the entire space is occupied by objects and persons associated either with the deceased or with the cremation activities. The use of religious objects includes those people who are involved in their production, ritualization and maintenance as religious acts and actors. People with a specific clan of ‘undertaker’ (s) known as ‘*Dom*’ who deal with the dead bodies (regarded as untouchables in traditional Hindu caste hierarchy) are found here ascribing their identity with this place and the specific occupation they perform. Similarly, for Kumartuli (Bagbazar and Ahiritola ghat areas) the so called ‘space’ of these ghats transfers to ‘place’ when the ecology of the space is very much linked with the activities of the potters and idol makers (*Kumor*) whose entire cycle of year long activities found attached to the adjacent ‘ghatscape’ (from collecting the clay soil of the Ganga (Hooghly) for idol making to transporting the finished idols by boat).

Following Agnew (1987) we demonstrated that the ‘location’ of a place includes both the natural and the built environment, while the ‘locale’ encompasses human, cultural characteristics of the stretch of ghats studied .Massey’s (2005:9) definition of space is one not as bound by location but as a sphere of ‘coexisting heterogeneity’ that is a product of interrelations and is always under construction wherein space is ‘never finished, never closed’ is exemplified through the ghats. We identified and analyzed empirical research that engages in ‘place inquiry’: place being the ghats. We defined place inquiry as any form of empirical research that collects place-specific data, draws on these data explicitly during data analysis, and/ or generates insights that speak back to the role of place in answering our research questions. Research falling under this definition includes not only those studies

that are grounded in a theoretical framework drawing on critical theories of place and space but also use traditional data collection methods (e.g., ethnographic or case study approaches and explicitly spatial methods within any methodological or theoretical approach. The ‘explicitly spatial’ data collection methods included GIS and GPS (Global Positioning System), and mapping of the ghats. We collected place-specific data through diverse methodologies (e.g. ethnography and case study methodologies, participant observation and archival methods).

Ritual is the chief mechanism of religion. Rituals serve as a focus for social and religious identity, preserve and strengthen an already established socio-religious order and are cultural conventions. The religious practice and related cultural landscape or ritualscape formed by funeral spaces has been incorporated in this study. Also based on ‘Necro-Geography’ the study reflects the cosmopolitan lens. Little attention has been given to the spatial dimensions of the funerary landscape in this area and so this documentation was felt essential. Crematorium as a place is an integral part of an urban physical landscape, a community specific one that has little impact in terms of land use and soil contamination compared to burial practices. In Kolkata such grounds are therefore planned in the core of the city serving the religious majority demographics such as the ‘Nimtala’ burning ghat, the ‘Kashi Mitra’ burning ghat. These two ghats act as a site with specific death related purpose: the ghat acting as the place where the relationship between the dead and the bereaved is established, a separation of the living from the dead, a private emotional space on a public place. Moreover crematorium is one of the objects of the ritual activities. Cremation of the corpse on a pyre is considered mandatory in Hinduism is culturally created during ‘end-of-life care’. Since the cremated ashes are scattered over a sacred body of water the day after the funeral the Ganga / Hooghly river is the sacred place; the rituals taking place within the precincts of these ghats

Through empirical research we identified the factors and traced the sets of associations that led to the distinct socio-cultural outcomes in the study area. In the spatial practices the various functional spaces through everyday life and urban activities have been encompassed and empirically observed representing the economic or material base. Regarding the representations of space a form of knowledge that provides the various understandings of space required for spatial practices (Borden, et al ed. 2000) to take place, we incorporated the intellectually constructed space conceived as ‘the concept without life’ through the various governmental interventions. The spaces of representation which as per Lefebvre (1991) are ‘life without concepts’, concerns those experienced as symbols and images. Here our paper has interpreted written words (literature, documentary evidences, etc.), photographic evidences, maps, buildings associated with the river frontage (ghats) as the place. Pictorial and written forms of evidence can be apprehended as texts. The photographs chosen helped in creating a comprehensive

visual narrative materializing the events that took place at the time of the event. In cultural studies, analysis of the visual has always been integrated to explain the social relationships and cultural practices and meanings. By dealing with the audio-visual representations and texts the researchers have tried to establish the relationship between images and words as central to the practice as academicians after Pink (2008: 131); making a full transcript of the recordings, gaining insight into the function for the analysis through which the social context has been reconstructed and multiple conceptualizations of ghats constructed. The method applied was mainly the academic labour of field work which is still the central component in the production of knowledge. By purposive walking a more intimate way was engaged with the landscape offering the privileged insights of the impact of religion on landscape and landscape on religion through the symbolic meaning of the Ganga river. This paper has thus explored the socially constructed landscape of place (ghat) and landscape (ghatscape) in the lowest reaches of the Ganga River known as the Hooghly. We covered contemporary diverse themes such as the mobility of religious adherents in acts of pilgrimage, the iconography and symbolism of religious landscapes, the sacralisation of nature, and the contribution of religion to local economy. Drawing upon the literature based on religion we took up a new approach to understand space, place, identity and religion addressing the local context and place based community through some of the ghats as site of our analysis beyond the temple or the officially sacred space. We demonstrated that moving beyond spaces of the temple it is possible to pay attention to the links between community work and religious belief by focussing on the everyday formal and informal practices based on ethnographic sources gathered in selective sites.

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