

# Significance of Socio-Cultural Relationships Between River Ghats and Local Communities in Conserving the River Ghats: The Case of Baghbazar Ghat, Kolkata.

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## Abstract

Kolkata in India has a promenade riverine system. In it, the river Ghats are promenade structures that create communications between a river and its people. The local vernacular communities living close to them have closely knitted socio-cultural relationships with the river Ghats, which help to build their identity. In fact, they act as the thresholds between the rivers and the cities.

The Baghbazar Ghat, with its profound religious and cultural significance has been a hub for the traditional practices of the local communities. However, the changing dynamics of these practices, and the gradual abandonment of the Ghats pose a threat to their conservation and protection. This research examines the issue of the conservation of the river Ghats and their socio-cultural relationships with the local communities. It examines the history and different social practices associated with the river Ghats in the past and today.

The study uses a mixed-method approach to reveal the socio-cultural interactions between the local communities and the river Ghats. It also employs observations and interviews with the local communities to unearth the significant role the river Ghat plays in the socio-cultural practices. Maps, drawings and charts have been created to analyze the data.

The paper concludes that the river ghats play a significant role in the socio-cultural practices and identifies them as the backbone of the Kolkata city that fosters the traditional practices. They sustain the traditions, culture, social systems, history and heritage of the city. It therefore offers strategies for the conservation of the River Ghats.

**Keywords:** River Ghat, Local Community, Socio-Cultural, Traditional Practice.

## Introduction

Kolkata, the 'city of joy' has been formerly known as Calcutta. It is one of India's largest metropolitan cities and has a solid riverine system. River water connects different places, communities and various forms of life, which inspire and help sustain mixed cultural beliefs, moral values and myths. In the Indian way of life, community and water are woven together

like a composite fabric. In fact, the cultural legacy is supported by the different behaviors of rituals, practices and activities between the land and water interface, known as a river Ghat.

A river has many activities that influence the livelihood of the local communities surrounding it and establishes a socio-cultural relationship between the people and the river. Evolution of river basins is a process that shows how the relationship between the rivers and the communities has changed over time. For example, historically, the banks of the rivers have been the center of urban development and have served as important hubs of transportation, commerce and cultural activities. However, recently, the nature of the use and development of the river banks have changed dramatically. They often undergo different stages and some of these different stages of the transformations of the riverfronts can be recognized as follows.

1. Rising up of new settlements and communities along the riverfronts.
2. Growth of different settlements and local communities.
3. Ceasing of Urbanization at the riverfront.
4. Implementing different sustainable practices and planning to revive the riverfronts.

As has been said, the Ghats are the connections between the cities and the rivers. The steps leading towards a river are the promenade features, which provide places for different activities while the other characteristics of the river Ghats are derived from the different traditional practices. In fact, the river creates visual comfort and clear skylines in comparison to the closely-knitted, dense built-form of the city. The traditional practices and peoples' perceptions depend on the surrounding forms, structures, environments and the enclosures.

These spatial characteristics have significant roles in different practices. For example, the sense of openness creates the environment for gathering and performing different practices at different times of the day or in different seasons. There are many such intangible aspects of a river Ghat which can be understood as follows:

1. Different traditional socio-cultural practices.
2. Activities generated on a daily basis.
3. Change of socio-cultural patterns.

It is important to recognize that spatial characteristics of a river Ghat and the historical context of it. In fact, a proper framework for environmental flows helps to understand the relationship between rivers and people who are mutually dependent on each other. In this context, this paper aims to contribute to the preservation of the historic river Ghats of Kolkatta while respecting the socio-cultural practices of the local communities. Its objectives are to:

1. Reveal the socio-cultural and traditional practices associated with the river Ghats.
2. Recognize the spatial characteristics of the river Ghats in the construction of identity of the communities.
3. To propose strategies to conserve the social, cultural and spatial characteristics of the River Ghats in Kolkata.

## Theoretical Framework

River Ghats are unique cultural landscapes. Sauer (2008) introduced the idea of cultural landscapes, which enable the understanding of physical environments that facilitate human occupation and give rise to culture. He emphasizes how human activities shape environments and proposes that landscapes should be studied for their physical features and cultural and historical contexts simultaneously (Sauer, 2008). In this context, Lefebvre (1991) examines how space is socially constructed and how different social, mental, and physical spaces interact. He introduced the idea that space is produced by social practices and relationships rather than being a neutral container for social action (Fuchs, 2018). In this, undeniably, culture plays a significant role.

Tylor (1871) says that culture is a complex phenomenon that comprises knowledge, beliefs and values, customs and different arts that become routine or practiced by people as they are part of a community. As he points out, culture is partly inherited, but is also a process that is acquired by people in day-to-day life. Indeed, culture cannot exist without people and society, and society cannot exist without culture. As Pandey (2016) points out, the relationship between

culture and society is based on the common aspects such as language, beliefs and ideologies, values, norms and sanctions (Pandey, 2016).

However, culture is not static, but is constantly transformation along with the physical built-environment which facilitates the habitation of people. When these changes are abrupt and rapid, they cause serious issues in communities and do not allow sufficient time for adjustments. While recognizing such transformations however, it is also important to recognize that some kind of preservation of the core facets of culture is necessary for communities to manage the changes. This applies to both tangible and intangible aspects of culture.

Culture is our learned ways of behavior. It is not an individual phenomenon but develops through social interactions and shared by members of a society; sharing of culture helps in transmitting them from one generation to the next (Sharma, 1994). A socio-cultural aspect is a combination of social and cultural factors. Due to their strong interactions, it is challenging to assess their separate influence on an object.

Social change shows the remarkable changes in people's behavior, cultural norms, and associated values. Cultural change can be understood as being taught from one generation to another, and although bounded, culture can change. Culture cannot exist without society, and society cannot exist without culture. The relationship behavior between culture and society is based on its common elements of culture and society such as language, beliefs and ideologies, values, norms and sanctions. (Pandey, 2016).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) describes "Intangible cultural heritage" as the practices, performances, expressions, knowledge, skills, and associated cultural spaces that are considered part of a community's culture or belonging to its inheritance. The Burra Charter, also known as the Australia ICOMOS Charter, describes the conservation of places of cultural significance. According to the Burra Charter, "cultural significance" is the importance of a place to past, present, and future generations due to its aesthetic, historical, scientific, social, or spiritual values.

Therefore, facilitating culture change and development is a crucial aspect that affects all communities: both formal and informal. In preservation of culture, it is thus useful to look for those core facets to change slowly while allowing the peripheral to adapt to the changing world.

An urban waterfront is usually the birthplace of a city and plays an essential role in the early development and prosperity of a city. Over time, the waterfront continues to hold many histories for its city. Closely reviewing the waterfront lets us learn about the beginning of the city, growth, discontinuity and flourishing. Undeniably, in waterfront communities, culture and many habits and memories of the local people are either originated from or are influenced by the waterfronts. Furthermore, a waterfront is a unique place for recording the historical and cultural moments of a city, distinguishing it from other cities; in other words, giving rise to identity.

## Review of Literature

Cultural landscapes have been thoroughly examined and many facets have been revealed. For example, according to Sopher (1981), different physical and cultural landscapes shape different religious practices and beliefs. He establishes that the climate, topography and resources impact the religions and their practices (Sopher, 1981). It is also understood that most cities and the riverfronts have significant historical backgrounds. Moreover, it is stressed that restoring the ghats as cultural landscapes represent intangible legacy and physical buildings. Sinha (2015) points out that they offer methods for recovering and repurposing these areas while balancing contemporary requirements and preserving historical and cultural significance.

Pieris (2018) emphasize the 'cultural landscapes' where natural and cultural components coexist to create a unique pattern. These landscapes have complicated and multidimensional conservation needs since they are frequently associated with religious, historical, and ecological importance throughout South Asia. A cultural landscape is not only a physical space but also has intangible aspects. The conservation strategies for them thus should include:

1. Legal frameworks
2. Community participation.

She also argues that the community is an integral part of conservation, while highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary approaches, with contributions from different fields such as architecture, archaeology, environmental science, and anthropology (Pieris, 2018).

In this connection, Bharadwaj (2021) emphasizes on the relationship between spatial configuration, site development and cultural aspect of historical street patterns in Ulsoor, Bangalore. She explores the impact of historic streets on and uphold household dynamics, social interactions, and architectural features in a community like Ulsoor. Boruah (2017) looks at the socio-cultural changes among the Naga communities living in the Sivasagar District of Assam. In this region, the Nagas have undergone transformations due to various factors such as education, immigration, economic changes, religious developments and (Boruah, 2017).

In the past few years, urbanization and pollution have increased rapidly, causing the riverbanks to become decorated and require maintenance. Shrivastava (2021) shows that these river needs to be restored, as a cultural base to improve the riverfronts and also to promote local culture.

### **Research Methodology**

This research employs a mixed method combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods and involves observations and interviews.

The study area has been selected in Baghbazar Ghat and it falls under the Kolkata Municipal Corporation area. It has been selected based on the history and functionality of the river ghat within the Kolkata Municipal Corporation boundary. The area is heavily used by the people for different activities like transportation, promenade socio-cultural practices, livelihood support etc. The Eastern river has 14 ghats with similar characteristics (Team Sandhi, 2015). Among them, the Baghbazar Ghat is one of the most important Ghats on the Eastern side of the river. The study area is comprised of 1 sq. km area around the river.

Observation studies were conducted in the study area to observe the patterns of use by the local community along the river ghat, livelihood practices, traditions and their various activities related to socio-cultural behaviors in the river Ghat. Documentation of the different socio-cultural activities has been undertaken using observation methods. Satellite images were used to obtain the spatial extent of the river ghat. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using predefined questionnaires. The semi-structured interview revealed the respondents' family types, sizes, income sources, connections with the river, values, traditions and other aspects of the socio-cultural activities.

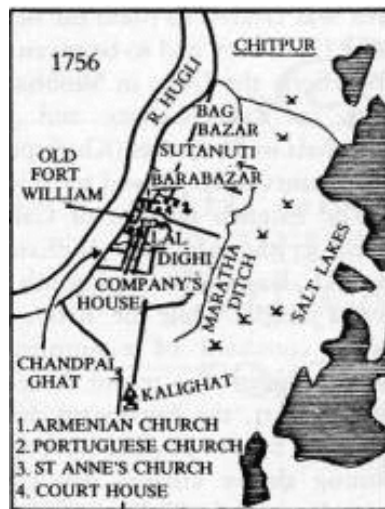
The methods of data collections is as follows.

1. Site visits were conducted at different times to identify the socio-cultural importance of the Ghats.
2. Primary data was collected by direct observation at the site. A visual survey was done through photos to understand the present scenario of the Ghats. Different maps and charts were created and described with the data gathered.
3. Interviews were conducted with the residents and staff of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation.
4. Secondary data was collected from a wide range of reliable sources, including literature, journals, newspaper articles, and other internet sources, to ensure the validity and comprehensiveness of the findings.

The findings were documented and converted into drawings and maps to analyze the data. Recommendations were proposed for preserving the Ghat River.

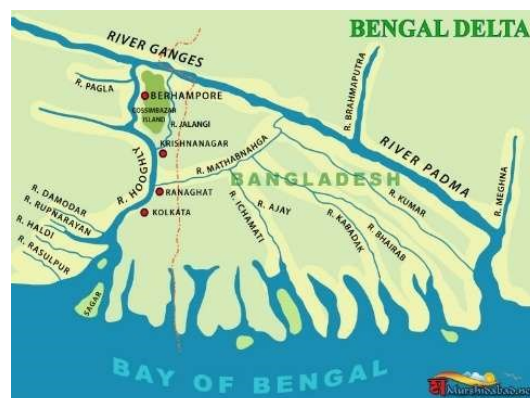
## Historical Context of the Baghbazar Ghat

The arrival of Job Charnok, a British ruler on the 24th August 1690, is known as being related to the birth of Kolkata. Sutanuti, Kolkata, and Gobindapur formed the Bengal Presidency in 1717 (Mukhopadhyay, 1921). It has a natural boundary, with the Hooghly River being one on the West. The Northside has Sutanuti, and the East side has salted wetlands. Sutanuti was famous for "Sutar Haat" (Thread market). It started from the mouth of Bagbazar and continues along the river. Before 1705, the Baghbazar did not exist separately. It is situated in the Northern part of Sutanuti. The name Baghbazar is probably a corruption of "bank bazaar", bazaar on the "bank" or bend of the river. There is an argument that the name evolved from "Bagh", referring to the riverside garden owned by Captain Charles Perrin (Mukhopadhyay, 2015). There is no mention of the word bazaar (market) when discussing the garden by the riverfront. Therefore, it was assumed that there was a market, too, which could be an extension of the 'Sutanuti' market.



**Fig. 1:** The old map of Baghbazar on the bank of Hooghly River  
Source: National Library, Kolkata

The lower part of the river Ganga in West Bengal is divided into two parts. One arm flow in the southern part is known as Bhagirathi, and another part flows towards the Southeast direction, which is known as the Ganga River. The lower part of the Bhagirathi is known as the Hooghly River, which provides access to Kolkata. It is considered a sacred river due to its connection with the Ganga River. Mythologically, it is believed that the "Bhagirathi" is not a natural river. The river was excavated by Bhagirath during the Mahabharat period (C. E. A. W. O., 1931).



**Fig. 2:** Map of River Hooghly  
Source: Murshidabad. net

In the 17th to 19th century, the river Hooghly and its bank were used as trading hubs by the Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, and British emperors. Later, industrialization began with the construction of big jute mills along the river stretch. The Eastern part of the river has 14 river Ghats, which have been constructed during different periods. The river ghats are made to create an access point for the river. All the Ghats have similar features and are made to perform different activities like holy dip, cremations, and ferry areas with the boatman locally known as “Ghat Majhi”. The Baghbazar Ghat is the oldest one among them. Many local interviewees have mentioned that many eminent persons also use the Ghat. Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and his wife, Sarada Devi used this Ghat for their daily practices. According to the old priest in this locality, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa used to do meditation after bathing under the big banyan tree near the Ghat. Sarada Devi uses this Ghat as well as the Mayer Ghat, for bathing purposes.

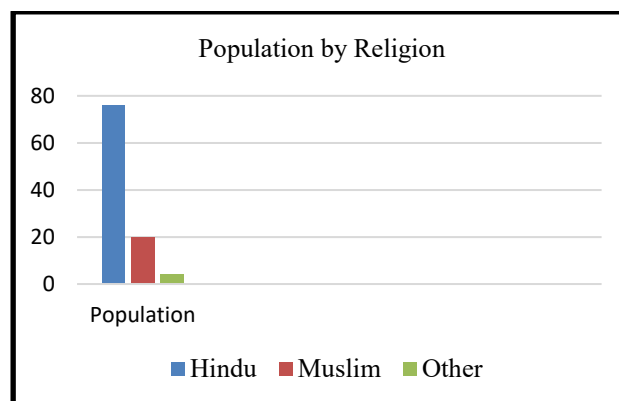


**Fig. 3:** Present condition of the Banyan tree, meditation area for Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa  
Source: Author<sup>1,4</sup>

Many famous poets like Vola Moira, and play writer Amirtolal Basu practiced their poetry and the acting edge of river Ghat. Locally, this drama is known as “Jatra”. Amirtolal Basu was a famous playwright who had a drama group. The group practiced their drama in the river Ghat for its openness and long stretch (Mitra, 1952). In the 19th century, the famous “Babu Culture” of Kolkata, where the zamindar used to come near the Ghat for daily oil massages. The Ghats are also used for different Kirtan, Bhajan and Geeta paths by the local Brahmins or the priests.

### Social Structure of the Local Settlement around the River

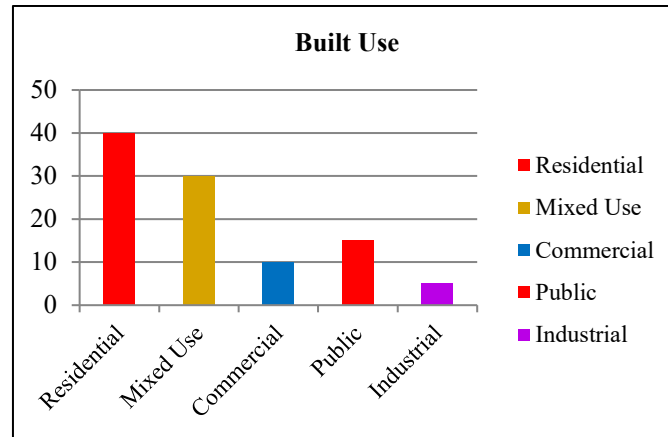
The social structure of the local community around the river has developed through its geography, economy, and social and cultural practices.



**Fig. 4:** Population by Religion  
Source: District Census Handbook Kolkata, 2011

The settlement around the river has a large Hindu population. Therefore, Hindu customs, beliefs, and values influence the social structure and the cultural practices. The local

settlement has Hindu temples and shrines, such as the Ganga, which is significantly associated with water. The river itself is considered sacred as it is a part of the Ganga, and rituals are held to honour it. Brahmins hold a significant role, participating in rituals and prayers while serving as spiritual guides. They also teach and interpret religious practices near the river Ghat.



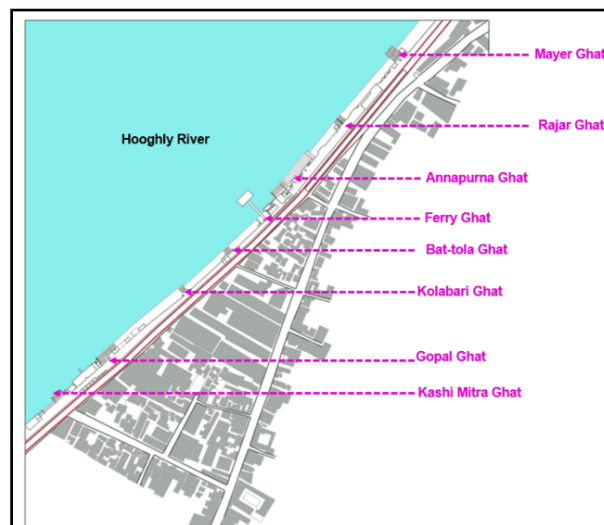
**Fig. 5:** Built Use map

Source: Author<sup>1,4</sup>

The study area has high-density residential and mixed-use buildings that blend with the location's cultural and spiritual significance. The river Ghat has a residential population, including families who have lived there for generations and have deep connections with the river Ghat for their religious and cultural activities. The lower levels of the building have house shops, tea shops, selling water jars (for carrying the sacred water), and businesses catering to different "Puja Samagri" related to ritual practices in river Ghat. Shops sell religious items, flowers, incense, and other ceremonies for different cultural practices. The local people buy all the needed paraphernalia for their daily practices.

### Cultural Memories and Association with the River Ghat

The Baghbazar Ghat is famous for its rich history and rich cultural association with the local people. The Baghbazar Ghat comprises eight Ghats. Each Ghat has distinct role play for different cultural association. The cultural pattern of the ghat evolved from the people organized system of worship.



**Fig. 6:** Mapping of Different Ghat in Baghbazar

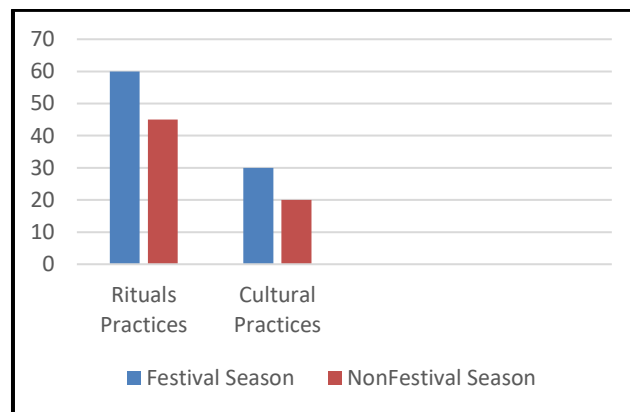
Source: Author<sup>1,4</sup>

**Table 1:** Bengali Festivals as per the Bengali Calendar  
Source: Author<sup>1,4</sup>

	Month	Festival
1	Boishakh (April-May)	Poila Boishakh (Bengali New Year)
2	Jyoishtho (May-June)	Jamai Shashti
3	Asharh (June-July)	Rath-yatra
4	Shrabon (July-August)	Guru Purnima, Manasa Puja
5	Bhadro (August-September)	Janmashtami, Vishwakarma Puja
6	Ashwin (September-October)	Mahalaya, Durga Puja
7	Kartik (October-November)	Chhath Puja, Annakut festival, Kali Puja, Kartik Snan
8	Agrahayan (November-December)	Ras Purnima
9	Poush (December-January)	Sankranti, Ganga Sagar mela
10	Magh (January-February)	Basanta Panchami
11	Falgun (February-March)	Shivaratri, Dol-Jatra
12	Chaitra (March-April)	Neel Sasthi, Chaitra Sankranti

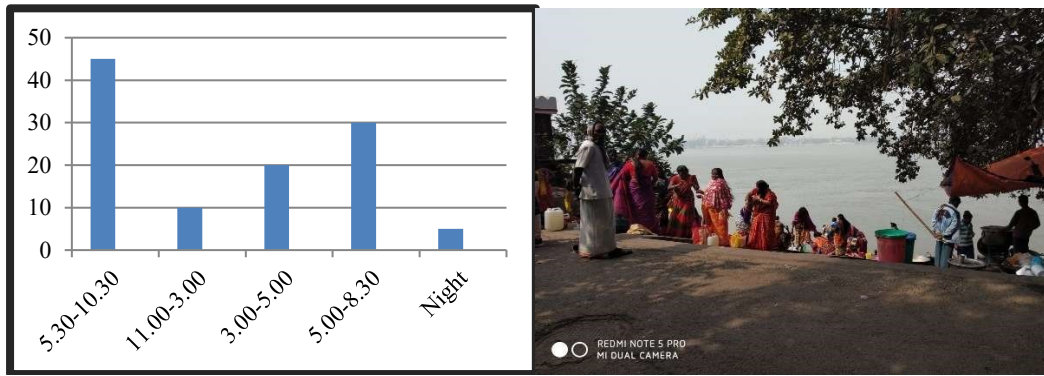
Bengali calendar has many festivals in different months. The Ghats of Baghbazar on the bank Hooghly River attracts local people during these different festivals. Needless to say, the Bengali festivals are greatly connected with their culture and traditions. Thus, the Ghat plays a sacred role to connect the river with the people.

Locals perform during all the above-mentioned festivals, and the river plays a sacred role. In the morning, the Ghat is active, and most of the locals come to take a bath. The devotees start bathing early in the morning and offer water to their ancestors near the river Ghat, popularly known as "Punnosnan". This ritual continues till ten o'clock in the morning. However, on certain exceptional days like Mahalaya during the Ashwin month, it continues till the late afternoon. After the pious bath followed by the worship, there is also a tradition of food distribution on auspicious days, in which the devotees donate food and money to beggars and the needy persons.



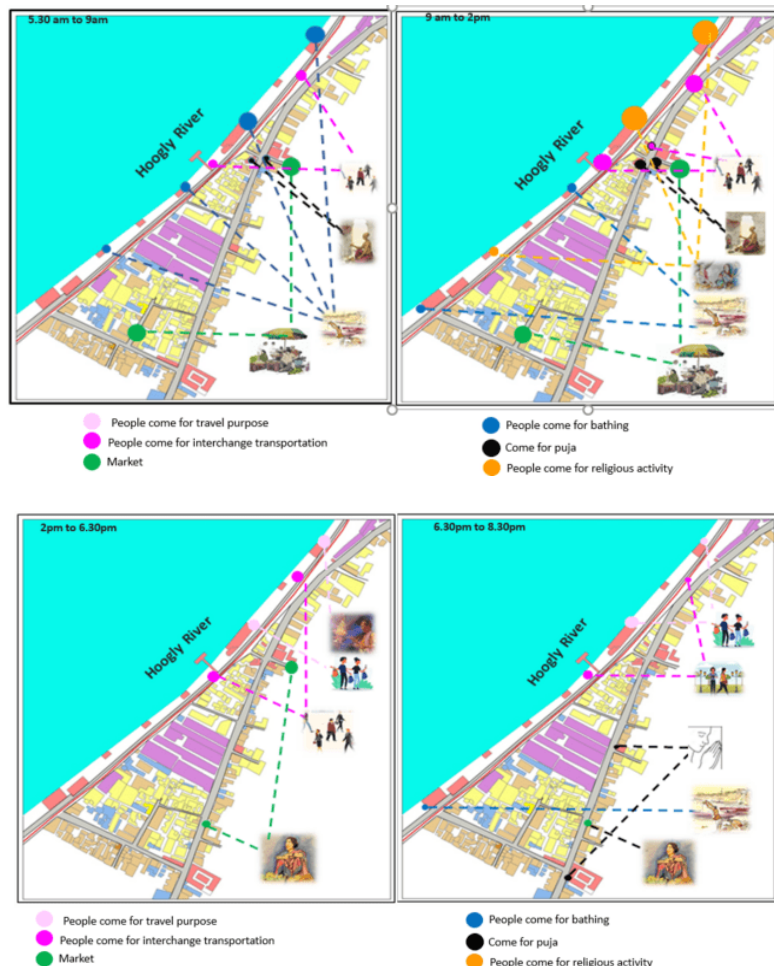
**Fig. 7:** Different social practices in different season  
Source: Author<sup>1,4</sup>





**Fig. 8:** Activity in river Ghat during different time of the day  
Source: Author<sup>1,4</sup>

Local people use the Ghat for daily bathing rituals. Many people believe bathing in the river here has spiritual benefits similar to bathing in the Ganga, as the Hooghly is a distributary of the Ganga.



**Fig. 9:** Activity map for the river Ghat  
Source: Author<sup>1,4</sup>

The localities mostly use the river Ghat from 5.30 am to 9.00 am for their daily ritual performance. Some people come for a holy bath in the morning. Very few people use the ferry for their transportation. From 9.00 am to 2.00 pm, people working in offices mostly use the river ghat in the morning. They generally come to take the ferry service. Office-goers use the


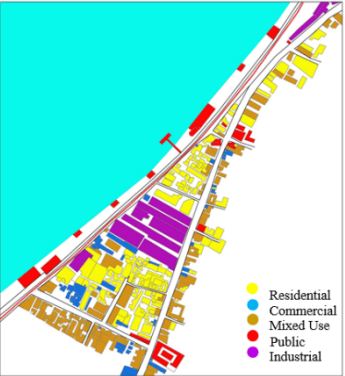
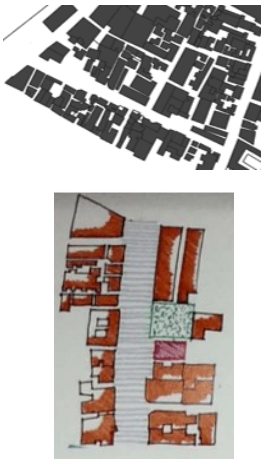
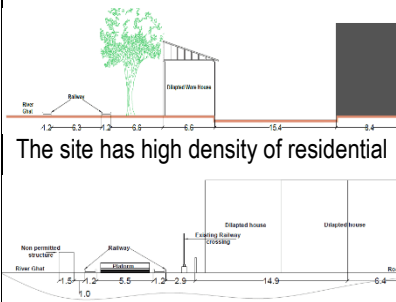
ferry service mainly because they need a waiting area to take another ferry. From 10.00 am, people come from different places for the ritual practices. The most popular ritual practice is offering this sacred water to ancestors and death rituals. Very few people use the river ghat from 6.30 pm to 8.30 pm, due to safety issues as it is dark. No activity happens around the river after 6.30.

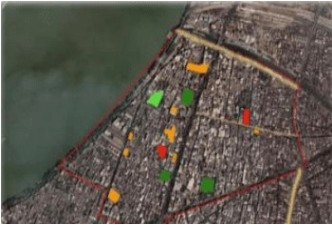

However, on some important days, such as the periods designated for the Sharadha Puja on Pitra Paksha, Hindu mythology lists sixteen primary rites, or samskaras. These rituals begin with child birth and conclude with death ritual. At these banks, all sixteen life cycle rites are carried out. For example, the asthi-visarjan was practiced in this area for a long time due to the presence of a crematorium in this Ghat. Similarly, “Mahalaya”, the ending of Pitra Paksha, also use this Ghat to offer water for their ancestor.

### Findings and the Discussion

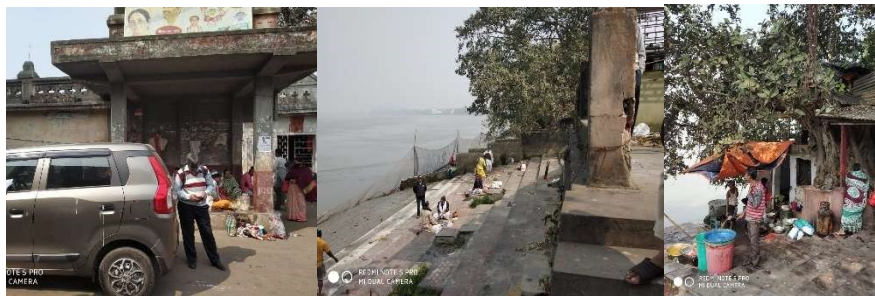
The Baghbazar Ghat comprises with seven smaller Ghats. It accommodates different social practices and is marked as a city boundary. The settlement around the river ghat has a deep connection with the river and this Ghat becomes the promenade to connect the river water with the people.

### Analysis of the Study Area

<p>Study area</p> 	<p>Geographical location</p>		<p>Socio cultural factor</p>	
	<p>Area</p>	<p>450 km of River stretch</p>	<p>Language</p>	<p>Bengali</p>
	<p>Total population</p>	<p>19000</p>	<p>Relegion</p>	<p>Hindu populations are more rather than other communities.</p>
	<p>KMC Ward no</p>	<p>7</p>	<p>Occupation</p>	<p>Self-employed, mostly with some people doing Government job.</p>
<p>Land use</p>	<p>Settlement Planning</p>		<p>Ghat section with Settlement</p>	
			 <p>The site has high density of residential building with organic pattern. Narrow lanes between the houses are used to approach the river Ghat.</p>	

Important Landmark		
 <p data-bbox="268 526 606 678">The site has major magnets within the 1sqkm area. Spillover of the crowd on the magnets already attracts people. These zones are having mixed activity pattern.</p>	<p data-bbox="632 248 916 398">Mayer Bari, Balaram Mandir, Shopping Street, Schools, Girish Moncho Theatre, Baghbazar ground (Famous for Durga Puja)</p>	

### Changing Dynamics of the River Ghat



**Fig. 10:** Present Scenario of religious practices at Ghat  
Source: Author<sup>1,4</sup>

1. The canopied structure on the four-sided pillar has been earlier used for forming death rituals. However, at present, the river steps are also used for this. It has no shade, and therefore people put temporary tarpaulin sheets or sit near the shaded area. At present, people bring their priests to the ghat. Earlier, they were dependent only on the priests available in the ghat as they believed they were wiser at performing the rituals. Clean and dedicated space for the rituals practicing will provide more uses.



**Fig. 11:** Bhagwat Sabha at the river Ghat  
Source: Author<sup>1,4</sup>

2. The added structures like Bhagwat Sabha, Anganwadi, public toilets, and ferry areas have altered the essence of the openness of the space, which has diverted people from practicing their regular culture. People are practicing the Geeta path, but they are reading the Geeta in Bhagwat Sabha instead of at the river bank.

Thus, the visual connection is lost. People start to read Geeta in the enclosed area. The openness of the river will bring back more crowd participation. At present, around only 30 people come for Geeta-path in the morning. So, if the ghats are more open and a sitting space near the river can encourage the reader to use it more.



**Fig. 12:** Temporary structures in river Ghat

Source: Author<sup>1,4</sup>

- There are temporary shops, structures, and unauthorized parking, which creates a visual boundary. As there is a need for a more direct visual connection from the road to the river, people avoid coming and sitting and enjoying the beauty of the river. Enjoyable recreational activity was also reshaped, which used to happen earlier. The mediation area by Ramkrishna Paramhansa Deb is covered with temporal structures. The Ghat should have a clear skyline. The historic Ghat has many influences from eminent persons, who can be reattained and showcased to promote the history of the river Ghat. The meditation area near the Ghat must be highlighted for better gathering space.



**Fig. 13:** Railway along the river side

Source: Author<sup>1,4</sup>

- Modern theatre replaced folk theatre practices near the river Ghat 'Jatra'. For many people, watching this rehearsal in the river bank was entertainment for them. The added structural change replaces this entertainment. This entertainment is obsolete, which altered the relationship with river Ghat from recreation to transportation after launching a circular railway along the river Ghat.

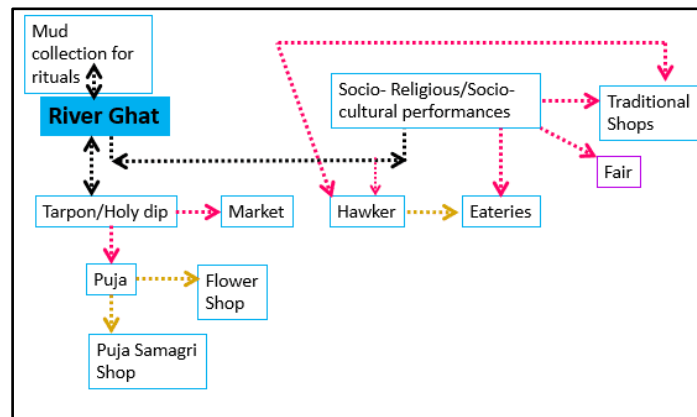


**Fig. 14:** The Ghat is dumped with wastages.

Source: Author<sup>1,4</sup>

- The Ghat has a historical aspect. However, it is unused, and waste is dumped. This changes the historical significance of the Ghat, and cultural practices like meditation under the big Banyan tree are altered by the dumping of waste. Waste management is another critical challenge that affects socio-cultural practices. People do not use Ghats if there is much garbage. The rituals practiced here are very sacred, thus a quiet and clean space is needed to perform them.

### Local Community and the Links with the River



**Fig. 15:** Interdependency Activity around the Ghat  
Source: Author<sup>1,4</sup>

It is observed that the social and cultural relationship is the primary connection with the river ghat. Other activities are dependent on this primary activity. This primary activity helps generate the economy and support the livelihood. Religious activities like selling flowers or puja Samagri, shops for food, and hawker activities, support many aspects of the economy,.

### Conclusions

This study concludes that the Baghbazar Ghat represents the traditional practices of the local community, where different cultural and religious values are associated with rivers and Ghats. It identifies that the river Ghat is the backbone of the Kolkata city that fosters the traditional practices. Indeed, the cultural and religious practices are deeply attached to it. Therefore, these Ghats sustain the traditions, culture, social systems, history and heritage of the city. The sacred river Ghat must therefore be preserved, and the socio-cultural characteristics of the local community could provide the appropriate basis for sensitive planning of such preservation without hampering their beliefs.

### Recommendations for Preserving the Ghat

Preserving the river Ghat with cultural and religious values however requires an approach that respects the historical, cultural, and local people's beliefs. Following recommendations are offered for preserving the river Ghat.

- Different programs and campaigns are to create awareness of the cultural and religious significance of the Ghat. This awareness program requires the involvement of the local communities, educational institutions, and religious institutions.
- The government could play a crucial role in preserving the historical and cultural significance of the Ghat. By documenting its importance and supporting the celebration of traditional festivals and rituals, the government could help maintain the cultural connections and bring attention to the significance of the Ghat.

3. Remove the temporary structures and renovate temples or steps connected to the Ghat. Conventional materials and methods are beneficial to keep the site authentic.
4. Preserving the cultural and religious values of the Ghat requires more than just awareness. It demands the development and enforcement of laws that ensure that the rituals and ceremonies are conducted in an environmentally sound manner. This includes instructions on using natural resources, communication restrictions, and designated areas for different religious practices.
5. Organize cultural exchange programs that could bring together people from different regions or countries to learn about the importance of the Ghat and contribute to its conservation.

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