

The exploratory study of Cultural Landscapes associated with Rivers in India- Case of Narmada

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ABSTRACT

Rivers play a prominent role in shaping India's landscape and are deeply intertwined with the cultural fabric of the country. Each river exhibits distinct physiographic and cultural characteristics along its course. A comprehensive understanding of these cultural landscapes necessitates an exploration of the entire river, from its source to its mouth. Thus, our exploratory study aims to provide an architectural perspective on the cultural landscapes associated with rivers in India. Through systematic observations and the use of secondary sources, we present a detailed account of the prominent destinations along river banks, shedding light on the cultural elements unique to each location. Specifically, we focus on the cultural significance river Narmada. Furthermore, we examine the festivals and functional activities that take place along the river banks, as they contribute to the creation of a distinctive landscape imbued with local traditions. The interplay of colors, seasons, communities, and ecological systems collectively shape the overall landscape of the region.

In our investigation, we adopt a broad approach to exploring cultural landscapes, moving beyond the confines of pilgrimage sites and encompassing the various visual elements that lend character to the rivers. By doing so, we aim to enhance the understanding of the cultural value associated with these rivers, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive appreciation of India's riverine heritage. In summary, this study delves into the cultural landscapes linked to rivers in India, presenting an architectural perspective. Through an examination of prominent river bank destinations and an exploration of festivals and functional activities, we offer a nuanced understanding of the cultural components intrinsic to these landscapes. By taking a holistic approach, we aim to contribute to the appreciation and preservation of India's diverse riverine cultural heritage.

Keywords: Riverine Cultural landscapes, Narmada, Cultural components

1. INTRODUCTION

India, renowned for its remarkable cultural diversity, occupies a distinctive position where the realms of nature and spirituality seamlessly converge. Within this nation, fire, air, animals, mountains, and rivers are venerated as deities, fostering a profound spiritual and emotional bond that transcends practicality and modernity. The bedrock of Indian culture is rooted in unwavering faith and the customs that accompany it,

with adherents serving as true custodians of their heritage. The intricate web of intangible values that unite communities can be elucidated by scrutinizing the physical settings and visual attributes that encompass them. Among these elements, rivers assume a prominent role, affording glimpses into the interplay of both natural and cultural landscapes.

The primary objective of this research is to delve into the intricate layers of culture and heritage that

intertwine with India's sacred rivers. Through an exploration of the sacred significance and inherent values associated with riverine landscapes, we aim to articulate the salient issues and inquiries pertaining to their essence. Specifically, our focus lies in examining the pilgrimage routes within the geographical context of rivers and the deeply ingrained beliefs that underpin these venerable traditions. Several key research questions guide our inquiry into the intricate relationship between cultural landscapes and rivers. Firstly, we endeavor to establish a comprehensive definition of cultural landscapes and elucidate the diverse ways in which they manifest across various regions. Secondly, we investigate the influence exerted by the geographical locale of a river on the distinctive cultural landscape characteristics of its environs. Lastly, we delve into the intellectual landscape examples that contribute to the perpetuation and evolution of cultural landscapes, transcending the realm of philosophical preservation.

The genesis of this study can be traced back to an examination of Varanasi, an ancient living cultural landscape that, somewhat surprisingly, has not been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site. This observation prompted an exploration into the criteria that qualify a cultural landscape as authentic and deserving of global recognition. Furthermore, our research delves into the captivating pilgrimage journey undertaken by devotees as they traverse the threshold from their daily customs into the immersive realm of sacred places, aiming to elucidate the profound psychological effects that permeate these hallowed sites. The scope of this research encompasses an in-depth analysis of the cultural character intrinsic to riverscapes, employing photographic visual analysis and meticulous on-site observations as invaluable tools for study. Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the inherent limitations of this research endeavor. Firstly, the study concentrates on specific rivers and their associated cultures within the distinctive context of India. Secondly, due to practical constraints, some illustrations and observations are based exclusively on visual assessments derived from photographs, thereby necessitating caution in their interpretation.

In summation, this research endeavors to unravel the multifaceted cultural and heritage dimensions interwoven with India's sacred rivers. Through an exploration of their sacred significance, an examination of pilgrimage routes, and a meticulous investigation of pertinent research questions, we aspire to shed light on the intricately woven cultural landscapes shaped by these rivers. The findings of this study contribute to a broader and more profound understanding of India's riverine heritage and its profound influence on the tapestry of the country's cultural fabric.

2. MAJOR TERMINOLOGIES AND DEFINITIONS

2.1 Cultural Landscapes

"The cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a cultural group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape is the result"(Carl O Sauer, 1997)

Cultural landscape is the "cultural properties that represent the combined works of nature and of man." (world heritage committee). It may be a landscape intentionally by humans, naturally evolved and continued to stay or having an association with natural element or religious beliefs and values. Cultural landscapes are study matter where environmental behavior relationship and the study of traditional dwellings and settlements is done together.

Certain sites reflect specific techniques of land use that guarantee and sustain biological diversity. Others, associated in the minds of the communities with powerful beliefs and artistic and traditional customs, embody an exceptional spiritual relationship of people with nature. To reveal and sustain the great diversity of the interactions between humans and their environment, to protect living traditional cultures and preserve the traces of those which have disappeared, these sites, called cultural landscapes.

2.2 Rivers

Water is of special importance in Hinduism. Apart from its life-sustaining properties, holy rivers are immensely used for devoutness. Bathing also has religious significance, a holy bath in the waters of the sacred rivers are believed to absolve all from sins and fear of death. Most rivers are considered female and are personified as goddesses. The Seven Holy rivers are Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Sindhu, Narmada, Godhavari and Kaveri. Most of the holy places in India like Haridwar, Varanasi, Nasik, Talakaveri, Patna and Ujjain are situated along the banks of the seven holy rivers. Rivers are the motive for settlements and growth of towns and cities. It's an added element to the civilization. This natural feature gradually forms the cultural element of the city as the interaction of the people with river and their changes in the setting gives rise to a edifying character. These changes may be natural, functional or recreational. Apart from the rivers certain spots on seashore and lakes are also considered holy. According to a legend, the river Ganges is polluted by millions of people bathing in it. To cleanse herself, Ganges acquires the form of a black cow and comes to the Narmada to bath in its holy waters. Legends also mention that the Narmada River is older than the river Ganges.

2.3 River Landscapes

The term riverine landscape implies a holistic geomorphic perspective of the extensive interconnected

series of biotopes and environmental gradients that, with their biotic communities, constitute fluvial systems. (J.V.Ward,1998). River channels are only part of an extensive interconnected series of biotopes and environmental gradients. that, with their respective biotic communities, constitute ecosystems. In the unaltered state, river systems are characterized by multiple interactive pathways operating across a range of spatio-temporal scales. (Frissell *et al.*, 1986; Amoros and Roux, 1988; Minshall, 1988; Ward, 1989a,b) The mosaic structure and dynamic nature of river systems maintain their functional integrity (Ward and Stanford, 1995b). Effective ecosystem management of running waters necessitates a strong conceptual foundation that is based on understanding structural and functional attributes, including longitudinal resource gradients, floodplain dynamics, interactions with ground waters, and the role of disturbance regimes (Stanford and Ward, 1992). The main river landforms in the upper course are the v-shape valley, interlocking valley, spurs and waterfalls. In the middle course are **floodplains, levees, meanders** and **ox-bow lakes**. The lower course landforms are terraces, food plains, levees, delta etc.

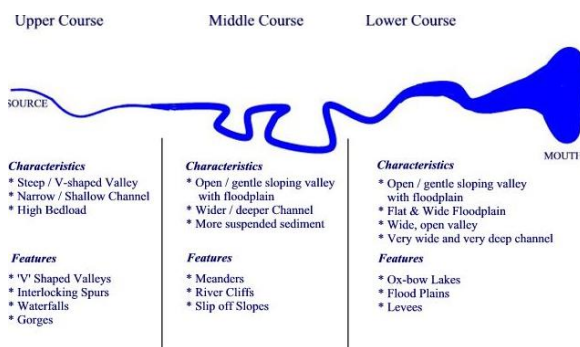


Fig. 1

3 Landscape Character along the Course of River Narmada

3.1 Source

Gaumukh is the source of river Narmada an open pool named Narmadakund surrounded by numerous temples dedicated to different deities. The source is considered to be 150 million year older than Ganga. Its lies in the plateau region on Amarkantak.

Amarkantak or 'teerthraj' is a natural heritage plateau at meeting point of Vindhya and Satpura ranges pivoted by the Maikal Hills. The plateau is amidst moist sal and mixed forest. Its the place for worship for all three worlds and God, Gandharvas, Asuras, Saints and Sages have gained power from here. Offerings made here assures to gain respect in society and place in heaven after death. Its sacred to the Hindus and considered as doorway to *nirwana*. Some of the most primitive tribals dwell in these regions. Ancient historical significant temples and Kund are another epitome structures of the area.

Kapildhara- is a 20m vertical water cascading down sheer basalt rock perceived as milk pouring from

heaven. there is a panorama of forested hills and valleys from the viewing platform. The surrounding mountains are full caves where saints perform spiritual practices.

3.2 Upper Course

Kabir Chabutara-junction of major districts. 4km from Amarkantak. It is the holiest place for the Kabir panth, where Kabir spent many years in meditation

Omkareshwar- is one of the Jyotirlinga, a Hindu dedicated to God Shiva on an island shaped like ॐ symbol called Mandhata or Shivapuri in the Narmada river. A very intricate architectural example is seen in the temple complex with fleet of steps leading to the mother river.

3.3 Middle Course

Mandleshwar- of great history on banks of Narmada is at narrow point wherein the monsoon the stream often rises 60 feet above its normal level becoming a roaring torrent. 'Mandleshwar' has a flight of 123 steps leading down to the river and expanding below into a wide ghat, called as Ram Ghat, where a chain of temples are located. One experiences kind of peace and tranquility in the space.

Maheshwar is an ancient town which was once capital of royal rule. Many fort and temples adorn the river bank. A sense of heritage runs through our mind just being in the ambience of these ghats.

3.4 Lower Course

Chandod- a holy and ancient religious place where shraadhha-vidhi is being undertaken for sad-gati of the deceased family members known as "saravani" since centuries.

3.5 Mouth

Bharuch- is considered as second most oldest city in India situated at the mouth of river Narmada which opens in the Gulf of Kambhat. It has a history of old traders using it trading port. Bharuch is home for Gujarati Bhargav Brahmin community for ages. It's a sacred city for sages and many come here to pray and gain more spiritual knowledge.

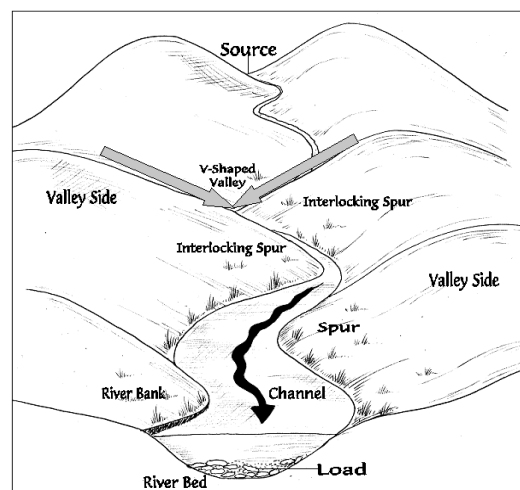


Fig. 2

4 Visual Assessment of Riverine Cultural Landscapes

4.1 Functional Activities

Washing and Drying A panoramic visual sight is created due to the colourful display of fabric along the banks and majorly on built ghats. The age-old tradition of washing clothes on river banks is a culture of India which is sometimes looked upon as under-developed custom. It's a open air laundry making a catastrophic change in natural landscapes. Also when Pilgrimage procession take place the orange and vermilion colour clothes are a common sight.

Fishing

The Indian fishing nets is a economical and functional character of the river generally seen in southern rivers in the states of Kerela and Tamil nadu. Culture followed here is a community activity of welcoming the monsoon and praying for blessing from natural forces. The installation of Chinese fishing nets make a very bold statement of the culture of these coasts.

Transport

Using Coracle boats for travelling differentiates the coast displaying the vernacular mode of transport.

4.2 Festivals

Chhath puja - typically performed in Northern India where a 4 day event is celebrated Sixth day of the Kartika Month Of Nepali calendar(October-November). Ladies perform rituals along the river banks which include taking holy dips, offering Arghya to rising and setting sun, making sweets and offering, observing fast, singing folk songs and stories and meeting and gathering with relatives.

Ganga aarti - Ghats on the Ganga are famous for the aarti done in the evenings which is attended by pilgrims and tourist to witness the glorious ceremony of praising Mother Ganga. Various pilgrim destination like Haridwar, Varanasi this kind of tradition is followed.

Kumbha Mela - Largest Hindu religious gathering is celebrated once every 12 years in each of the four places - banks of river Godavari in Nasik, river Kshipra in Ujjain, river Ganges in Haridwar, and at the Sangam of Ganges, Yamuna, and Saraswati in Allahabad. All sages and saint get-together into procession is leading to the destined temple. Having a holy dip in the waters is considered sacred for which thousands of believers turn up on the auspicious dates making the river a magnet for spiritual power.

5. Discussion & Findings

The findings from the observation and study of River Ganga and River Narmada shed light on the cultural and natural significance of rivers in India. These findings can be discussed in the context of relevant literature to deepen our understanding of the relationship between rivers and human activities.

The significant finding is that the source of the river is considered holy and is treated with reverence. This aligns with the literature that emphasizes the sacredness associated with the origins of rivers. It is common to

find temples or shrines built around the source, as it is seen as the starting point of the river and is deemed necessary to keep it clean. The absence of bathing rituals or offerings at these sites may reflect the recognition of the need to preserve the purity of the source.

Another finding is the celebration of the widening of the river as it transforms from a stream or rivulet. This is marked by the construction of temples at the confluence points. This finding resonates with the literature that highlights the sacred and natural significance of confluences in Indian culture. These confluence points hold both religious and ecological importance, and the construction of temples signifies the cultural significance attributed to these natural phenomena.

The establishment of ghats along the riverbanks is another notable finding. As the river slows down and the water becomes calmer, the banks are made accessible for various uses, and ghats are built. This finding aligns with the literature that emphasizes the importance of ghats in Indian riverine landscapes. The presence of grand temples along the banks further underscores the cultural value associated with these locations. Additionally, the construction of palaces by the royals along the riverside indicates the significant impact of the riverscape on the cultural landscape of the region.

The variation in the riverine landscapes as the river approaches the mouth, such as the delta region and plains, is also reflected in the cultural landscapes. In these flatter regions, ghats may not be prevalent, but open spaces are used for fairs and gatherings. This finding is consistent with the literature that emphasizes the connection between natural and cultural landscapes. The functional activities, such as fishing and daily chores, also contribute to the transformation of the landscapes and play a defining role in shaping the culture of the region.

Table 1

RIVER COURSE	CULTURAL COMPONENT	HUMAN ACTIVITIES
Source	Temple, shrine, sacred groove, sacred lakes	Meditation, worshipping, hiking,
Upper course	Temples, underdeveloped ghats,	Worshipping, holy dip,
Confluence	Ghats, temples,	Holy dip
Middle course	Highly developed temples and ghats, palaces,	Pilgrimage destination, royal family residents, daily chores.
Lower course	Island temples, delta flat lands, flood deities,	Fairs, recreation,

Furthermore, the geographical variation in riverscapes corresponds to variations in culture. The northern rivers

are associated with religious practices, including rituals like holy dips and evening aartis held at the ghats. On the other hand, the southern rivers are revered for their natural beauty and abundance. This finding aligns with the literature that highlights regional variations in religious practices and cultural expressions related to rivers.

The findings also indicate that riverside communities gather for religious purposes in northern regions, while in the southern regions, gatherings are more functional and festive in nature. This finding resonates with the literature that emphasizes the role of rivers as community spaces for various social and cultural activities.

In conclusion, the findings from the observation and study of River Ganga and River Narmada provide valuable insights into the cultural and natural significance of rivers in India. These findings align with relevant literature, highlighting the sacredness of river sources, the cultural celebrations associated with river confluences, the importance of ghats and temples along the banks, and the influence of geographical variations on riverine landscapes and associated cultural practices. This discussion enhances our understanding of the intricate relationship between rivers and human activities in the Indian context.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings from the study of River Ganga and River Narmada highlight the significant role of rivers in shaping the socio-economic and cultural aspects of human civilization. From an architectural perspective, rivers are not merely sources of water or means of transportation, but they encompass all dimensions of human settlement. The cultural landscapes surrounding rivers are more than just aesthetic features; they serve as intelligent landscapes with traditions rooted in environmental protection. The act of worshipping rivers and their associated natural features reflects a deep reverence and a desire to preserve and respect the environment. These traditions have a logical basis, as worshipping an object inherently discourages harm and promotes environmental stewardship.

Furthermore, the geographical landforms along the river course play a crucial role in shaping the cultural components of the region. Temples and shrines built around the source of the river signify its sacredness and the need to keep it clean. As the river widens and flows, temples are constructed to mark confluences, symbolizing the significance of these natural phenomena. The construction of Ghats along the banks of rivers and the establishment of royal palaces showcase the integration of rivers into the fabric of human civilization. These architectural elements not only provide practical access to the river but also serve as cultural and social gathering spaces.

Moreover, the activities and practices carried out on the river banks, such as fishing and daily chores, contribute to the distinct cultural identity of the region. The variation in cultural landscapes along the river course

reflects the diverse traditions, rituals, and beliefs of different communities. From an architectural perspective, rivers hold immense significance as they shape human settlements and encompass various socio-economic and cultural components. They serve as a source of inspiration and influence the built environment, leading to the development of temples, palaces, and ghats that enhance the cultural richness of the surrounding areas.

In conclusion, the study of rivers in the context of socio-economic and cultural dimensions reveals their profound impact on human civilization. Recognizing the importance of rivers from an architectural perspective allows us to appreciate their multifaceted role and encourages the integration of sustainable practices to protect and preserve these invaluable natural resources for future generations.

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