

Summary

This research investigates the pluralized and contested use of cultural heritage discourses and materialities in the historic city centre of Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India. Adopting heritage as epistemic entry point to urban processes, the research investigates the intertwined and conflicting ways in which the object 'heritage' is mobilized for imagining, planning and resisting alternative visions of the urban. Specifically, the research explores how urban heritage making processes relate to practices and discourses of urban dispossession and urban care.

From a theoretical and methodological perspective, the research engages with critical urban theory, political geography, cultural anthropology and recent critical literature on urban heritage governance and activism. It underpins on an in-depth, single case study analysis, developed through qualitative methods such as: field observation, document analysis, interviews, press and media discourse analysis and ethnographic techniques.

As many globally renown sacred cities, Varanasi, thrives on a tourism and pilgrimage-driven urban economy. Indian political authorities at both local and central levels envision urban development for the city as the expansion of its capacity to host visitors and pilgrims. This is achieved by materially and discursively reproducing the city as the cradle of Hindu history and religious identity in North India. This process consistently aligns the city to the Hindutva-driven, neoliberal political agenda of the current BJP party-led Indian government at both State and central level, which employs the lexicon and materialities of cultural heritage for pursuing urban change.

By exploring a local urban planning project known as Kashi Vishwanath Special Area Development Project (2018-ongoing), the research analyses the socio-economic transformation of the historical neighborhood targeted by the project area.

The research firstly delves into the political and institutional context of the project, showing how the ambitions and rationalities of local authorities

intersect with the broader agenda of neoliberal restructuring and religious politics of the current Indian state government. In this context, the analysis reveals that cultural heritage – as both a materiality and a discourse – is currently employed by local and national authorities to legitimize processes of exclusionary spatial and economic restructuring.

Secondly, the research engages with the lives of the inhabitants of the area, most of whom have been or will be forced to relocate and to leave the neighborhood. This analysis investigates the various epistemologies and tactics emerging from the informal engagement of local people with local heritage – ruins, religious structures, historical narratives and the like. Drawing from studies in cultural anthropology and urban theory, the thesis argues that, in Varanasi, the relations between urban dwellers and the city's material and discursive heritages take the form of an *improvised ethno-entrepreneurialism*. This process allows locals to extract economic value from embedding individual identities to urban spaces, personal memories to collective histories, in a commodified narration targeted to attracting national and international visitors. Locals' reappropriation of historically dense urban spaces thus constitute an individual survival strategy against invisibility and erasure.

Thirdly, the research explores the more than two-decades long struggle of a local NGO for the preservation of built heritage in the historic city centre of Varanasi. Forcefully opposing the current KVSAD project as the symptom of an aggressive urban politics, the NGO is one of the few political voices raising against the use of cultural heritage for legitimizing processes of displacement and alteration to the build fabric. The research retraces the decades long activism of the NGO, underlining the role of local expertise and civic engagement as the driving forces for a vocabulary of heritage which talks of conserving and taking care of the urban history as a civic right.

By exploring these three intertwined contexts, the research advocates for a more in-depth engagement of urban scholars with the object 'heritage', whose ambivalent attributes – private vs public – and relationalities – property vs custody – inform both reactionary and radical urbanisms.