

# **Indian Riverfronts: Functions, Religious Activities & Influence on the City**

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## **Abstract**

Indian culture has a completely distinct understanding of water & waterfronts. In Indian culture, water and religion are intertwined indivisibly, much like a complex fabric. In Indian culture and religious traditions, rivers hold a special significance. In Hinduism, rivers are valued as nurturing mothers and are thought to be pious. Water is considered to be an element of primordial substance from which the universe came into being. Due to the extreme tropical weather in India, sociocultural traditions have favored a strong afflux of culture & ritual practices on the riverfronts, such as bathing, lamp lighting, worshipping and other activities connected to religious rites. It is clear that India places a high value on water, holy waterfronts, waterfront components, and powerful sociocultural and religious contexts.

This paper aims to find out the relationship between Indian rivers, the city & the people of the city. To find out different functions a riverfront plays and different activities performed on them & what influence do they have on the city. The Kshipra River, Ujjain is taken as the example & its function & influence on the city of Ujjain is studied. Other than the religious aspects, other different functions of the riverfront in a city like port, farming, energy generation, etc. are also studied.

## **1. Relationship between riverfronts and the city:**

Waterfronts have been crucial to the civilizations from its beginning. Due to convenient availability to drinking water, fertile land near rivers, and the ability to use water for agriculture and other domestic tasks, people assembled along riverfronts. The development of technology led to the construction of canals, ponds, and reservoirs by humans. As the population increased, people started to settle near ponds, canals, and reservoirs. Gradually, water started to be considered a sacred symbol due to its importance to our life.

These water fronts have a wide range of impacts on a city or connected regions. These can be socio-cultural, infrastructural, religious, political, geographical, etc. They play various functions in a city's development.

The rivers in India are a lifeline for the people who live there, as well as being incredibly beneficial and necessary for the wildlife & other necessities for daily existence. The Indian people's lives depend heavily on the rivers. They act as a support system for our daily lives and other essential necessities, much like the spine does. The river systems provide us with irrigation, potable water, affordable transportation, energy, and a variety of other means of subsistence for our rapidly expanding population. On the banks of sacred rivers are some of India's largest cities like Surat, Ujjain, Ahmedabad, Kanpur, Prayagaraj, Ayodhya, Varanasi, etc. The river plays different functions at different times & as its travels through the city, many different activities and scenes are on its banks. River at times are used as means of transportation, ports & shipping, fishing and farming, place for haats, recreational space, power generation, etc.



*River Ganges, Haridwaar*

City's unchecked population growth is unable to keep up with demand, which caused the city's lakes and religious waterfronts to deteriorate. The majority of them have transformed their water borders into dumping grounds for the local's trash, sewage, and illegal encroachments.

In the rush & rapid urbanization, the essence of Indian waterfronts have turned away from the city. In India, development is currently being carried out increasingly. India's many cities have begun implementing the most recent technology in their transportation infrastructure.

Whether travelling across the bridges or seeing the ghats from a distance, the connection between them is forgotten, and the reclamation of land for economic gain continues to be the only goal. The topic of how vital it is to integrate the waterfront, the water, and the city must now be considered. Understanding the effects of religious waterfront and its link & effects to the city is the main goal of this paper.



*(a) Waterfront in developed country North America & (b) Waterfront in developing country India*

## **2. Use of waterfronts for different functions & activities:**

Every public area in a city is created by the interaction of three fundamental urban elements: (operation, function, and spatial arrangement) and their mutual relations. The presence of each of the three elements and their ability to meet the needs of the locals are what ultimately determine the quality of a public place.

When we talk about the urban riverfronts, we are referring to a region that is defined by the watercourse, on the one hand and building facades on the other (in regions with lesser development intensity, the embankment space is defined by the first river terrace). The work of Maxmilian Wittmann (2008) focused on the typology and use of urban waterfronts, classifying the fundamental functional functions of waterfront regions into the following groups:

- Transport (road transport, rail transport, walking and cycling)
- Social (linked with public facilities)
- Function additional to housing and housing itself
- Recreation
- Industrial use and as complementary functions
- Junction
- Specific social function



*Sabarmati riverfront as recreational area in Ahmedabad*

**2.1 Evolution of Indian riverfronts in different times:**

<p><b>The emergence of waterfront cities</b></p>	<p>The towns were closely related to the water's edge during these times since the water served the community's basic requirements and was also used for trade and water transportation. The waterfront community grew quickly because of the grand waterfront. Because the waterfront met the majority of people's requirements, the relationship between people and the waterfront was quite strong. They were in immediate contact with the body of water.</p>
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<b>The growth of waterfront</b>	Settlement along the waterfront grew to become a city. Trade activities made the waterfront a busy place, and buildings and warehouses were constructed there, blocking the roadway from the water's edge and featuring docking and storage areas. As a result of the waterfront's increased distance from the city center, alternative modes of transit were created. The city center was also separated from the waterfront. Interstate roads and elevated highways were developed close to the waterfront. When the waterfront turned into a place of commerce, a relationship between the people and the waterfront was developed. Due to industrial pollution, the waterfront environment deteriorated, the water grew polluted, and citizens started to lose interest in the waterfront as a result.
<b>Deterioration of waterfront</b>	Due to advances in shipping and containerization technology, changes in transportation patterns, and the construction of new ports outside of cities, the traditional ports at this point lost their significance as a means of transit and an industrial hub. Railways and motorways, two new forms of transportation, cut off the shoreline from the rest of the city. As public awareness of the environment developed, waterfronts deteriorated more and more, further distancing the city center from the water.
<b>Rediscovery of waterfront</b>	Governments starts the restoration of waterfront areas as the waterfront had been polluted over the years. With the development of mixed-use,

	<p>recreational, residential, and commercial districts, there was a chance to reconnect the waterfront to the downtown area for public use. Several waterfronts close to the city centers have been opened to the public at this point. People are able to access the waterfront once more.</p>
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### 3. Religious activities on Triveni Ghat, Ujjain:

From early dawn to late at night, there are a variety of activities carried out on the ghats of the Kshipra River in Ujjain, one of which is the Triveni Ghat. Thousands of pilgrims arrive to cleanse their bodies, minds, and spirits by taking holy baths in the river. Other activities like prayer, chanting, worship, and other similar tasks are also carried out here in addition to these. The following is a list of everyday activities:

#### 3.1 Arti and Deepdaan:

People visit the Triveni ghat in Ujjain, which is very sacred and located on the bank of the River Kshipra, to attend aarti. The pundits make various arrangements in addition to performing aarti on the wooden takhats. In this ghat, a large number of sadhus can be observed doing the arti. Many devotees arrive in large numbers to participate in arti in the evening. Following arti, hundreds of earthen lights are submerged in the holy Kshipra River, and the floating lamps give the river a divine appearance as twilight falls.



*Aarti at Triveni Ghaat, Ujjain*

### 3.2 Bathing:

This ritual, known as "Devsnan at Devmuhurat," is very sacred. Devotees begin taking baths in the Triveni ghaat early in the morning, and it lasts until 10 o'clock; on some important occasions, it lasts the entire day.



*Bathing activity at Triveni Ghaat, Ujjain*

### 3.3 Rites & Rituals:

There are 16 main rites (sanskars) in Hindu mythology, which begin with a child's birth and continue through a person's death. The banks practice all 16 life cycle rites. The rituals take place in Triveni ghaat.

### 3.4 Food distribution & philanthropy (Bhandara):

After the religious bath and worship, there is also a custom known as "bhandara" in which the devotee offers food and other beneficial supplies to the beggars and those in need. Individuals either carry out this practice on stalls or on moving cars.



*Devotees preparing for bhandara*

### **3.5 Sociocultural activities:**

Publicity is done at the ghat by various religious organizations. On significant holidays such as Makar Sankranti and Narmada Jayanti, there are several public gatherings and a projector screen is used to show movies and promote events.

### **4. Effect of the riverfront on the city, Kshipra River as example:**

The river is the spine of the city & the city usually develops along the length of the river. River provides many opportunities for the people of the city and is a major factor for the city's development and identity. These are some of the effects a riverfront has on the surrounding city:

- A place to live, work, and enjoy leisure time activities
- A contribution to urban development
- A big economy booster in the neighborhood
- A natural and ecological restoration
- A revitalization of long-forgotten features
- Flood prevention
- Building a unique identity for the city
- New means and routes of transport
- Riverbed restoration

#### **4.1 The Kshipra & the Simhastha:**

The city of Ujjain hosts and experiences the holy festival of Simhastha in intervals of 12 years & a fair is hosted called Kumbh Mela. All Hindu sadhus & monks from all parts of India arrive at the ghats of the river Kshipra (Triveni ghaat, majorly Ramghaat), to take a holy dip after 12 years. To attend this holy event, lakhs of devotees gather at Ujjain. This may look just as a religious or cultural event but merely this event is a

major factor in Ujjain's development and brings Ujjain its own identity. Some ways in which this event of 'Simhastha' affects the city of Ujjain are:

- The city experiences major changes and development prior to this event. The public facilities are improved, roads are built, city is cleaned, and painting and repairing work is carried out all over the city before 1-2 years of Simhastha. The city gets an all new look.
- Many small and big businesses target Ujjain as a potential city during the Simhastha times and are setup in the city premises.
- The city experiences major infrastructural development prior and during the Simhastha & Kumbh Mela.
- During Simhastha local businesses are at boom and it greatly benefits the city and the locals of the city. The city experiences huge positive cash flow and its economy booms.
- The businesses such as transportation, lodging, hotels, food, clothing, apparel, religious souvenir, puja samagris, etc. are at boom.



*Kshipra River during Simhastha*



*Development before Simhastha*

This event which may look just religious have a great impact on Ujjain city, provides the city an identity it is known for and also is a major economic and infrastructural development factor for the city.

## **5. Conclusion:**

Due to various historical & economical reasons, the river's function in cities has changed time to time. Naturally, the interaction between the city, river, and people has developed over time. Present-day urban landscapes include rivers and their waterfronts, which are essential to reconstructing the past identities of cities. Waterfronts are essential to establishing a relationship between the city and the river. Protecting the distinctive character of the urban waterfront & riverfronts that contribute to the area's distinctiveness, competitiveness, and sustainability requires the preservation of place identity.

Riverfronts have a specific place in the urban framework. They help to create the complex inner structure of the city organism along with the streets, squares, parks, and other public areas. Riverfronts are distinctive as a spot where urban land and the landscape meet, unlike other public spaces. They define the boundary between two worlds and serve as their link, which influences how the city and its surroundings interact with one another. Urban waterfronts are thus a reflection of our current social and cultural values.