

Ancient neighborhoods in Hindu pilgrimage city flattened by renovations

Varanasi has been defined by its maze of narrow alleyways, palaces, homes, and centuries-old temples.

by [Priyadarshini Sen](#) in the [June 5, 2019](#) issue

Even now, with a heap of debris in the courtyard of his 600-year-old home in Varanasi—a Hindu pilgrimage center and one of the world’s oldest continually inhabited cities—Ram Nath carries a pitcher of holy water from the river Ganges every day to perform his rites to the Hindu god Shiva.

“For generations, we ritually purified our Shiva deities before daybreak,” says Nath, 68, pointing to the ruins of the house’s sanctum, where he performs *puja*.

Also known as Kashi, Varanasi has been defined by its maze of narrow alleyways, palaces, homes, and centuries-old temples.

“We believed Lord Shiva roamed these alleyways and visited our homes to bless us,” Nath said. “It was our living city.”

Now hundreds of structures have been destroyed by the ruling Hindu nationalist BJP government to make way for an \$85 million, 300-meter-long corridor connecting the 18th-century Kashi Vishwanath Temple, a shrine dedicated to Lord Shiva, to steps leading to the banks of the Ganges.

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to Varanasi to lay the cornerstone for the corridor in March, he declared it “the beginning of the liberation of the Kashi Vishwanath *Dham*,” using the Hindi word for a major pilgrimage site. The prime minister said that Lord Shiva was feeling “suffocated” due to the lack of space around the temple.

The refurbished temple precincts will include an auditorium, museum, wellness centers, boutiques, and expanded 50-foot-wide pathways, according to Vishal Singh,

CEO of the Kashi Vishwanath Special Area Development Board.

“The rationale behind the project is to decongest Varanasi and have state-of-the-art facilities,” Singh said.

Many old neighborhoods predating the temple have effectively been wiped out, and thousands of residents have been evicted.

Krishna Kumar Sharma, who long served in the BJP’s parent organization, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, is a staunch Hindu nationalist but criticizes the Modi government for decimating Varanasi’s rich cultural heritage through “visionless development.”

Munna Lal, a former resident of a low-caste neighborhood in the vicinity, said widespread evictions have been under way since February last year.

“Initially, government officials tried to lure gullible residents with hefty compensations,” Lal said. “Then fearmongering became rampant,” with government agents threatening to cut off residents’ electricity and water service.

Slowly the ancient houses, typically crammed side by side in narrow alleyways, emptied out, and the neighborhoods were flattened by government contractors.

The demolitions also swept up some Hindu monasteries, old-age homes, artwork, sculptures, and shops that had existed for generations.

Initially, some residents were willing to support the idea of widening alleys and beautifying temples and even to cede portions of their homes to the project.

“We were OK with some changes,” said shopkeeper Anamika Madhukar, who has been served five eviction notices since last April. “But power and business interests drove the government to start the demolitions without a roadmap.”

Local supporters of the government’s plan say they are tired of choked lanes during festivals, when millions of devotees jostling for space can take eight hours to enter the temple.

“The alleyways are claustrophobic and lack basic amenities,” said Anup Mishra, a professor of economics at the Banaras Hindu University in Varanasi.

For pilgrims, the alleyways were part of their journey through the ancient city, and the narrow lanes brought together people of all castes and regions.

“Pilgrimage on foot ensured equality,” said Anju, a caretaker of the soon-to-be-demolished ancient mansion that houses the famed Amriteshwar Temple. Now, she said, earthy pilgrimages will make way for high-end religious tourism.

“Modi’s dream project has ruined the spiritual seat of Hinduism,” said Yogendra Vyas, a businessman. “In Kashi, there were gods and goddesses everywhere you looked—in houses, underground chambers, courtyards . . . the mystical search was endless.” —Religion News Service

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Ancient neighborhoods in Hindu pilgrimage city flattened by renovations.”