

LIVELIHOOD ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN BY URBAN POOR ALONG THE GHATS OF RIVER GANGA IN VARANASI

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ABSTRACT

This Paper aims to enlist typical livelihood activities undertaken by urban poor in the city of Varanasi along the banks of river Ganges. Also, it attempts to understand certain aspects of vulnerabilities associated with these livelihood activities through few cases. The livelihood activities enlisted are based on a snapshot view, at a particular point in time, undertaken by urban poor along the Ghats of river Ganga (Ganges) of Varanasi.

KEYWORDS: *Urban Poor, RajGhat, Assi Ghat, Livelihood, Diversification, Stabilization.*

Introduction



Fig 1: Panoramic view of Ghats in

Varanasi Ghats often presents a spiritual serene picture to international and national tourist. But this also has gloomy side picture, pale thin, half stomach filled children and adults struggling fragility to ensure their livelihood. This tourist spot has been livelihood earning ground for thousand of less privileged community. The sight of children involved in selling petty goods to tourist and old man begging incessantly shows their fight for survival against odds. The famous cremation ground like *Manikarnika* and *Harishchandra Ghat*, considered as place for salvation, in essence involves social outcaste community to earn their livelihood in various activities related to burning funeral.

There are about 100 ghats along side Ganga in Varanasi. Some of the prominent and popular Ghats at Varanasi are the *Dasaswamedh Ghat*, *Manikarnika Ghat*, *Harischandra Ghat*, *RajGhat* and *Assi Ghat*.



Fig 2: Children selling flowers and floating

The livelihood opportunities for poor living along the ghats of Varanasi have been largely composed of petty and small business. The existing resources and set of skills provides an opportunity to enhance the skill set The livelihood needs diversification and stabilization.

Methods

The data collected, a snapshot view of livelihood activities undertaken by urban poor, is primary data collected through survey of all major *Ganga Ghats* of Varanasi, at a particular point in time. These Ghats include *Dasaswamedh Ghat*, *Manikarnika Ghat*, *Harischandra Ghat*, *RajGhat* and *Assi Ghat*. All major ghats were visited and all observable economic activities were enlisted, the involvement of poor in these enlisted economic activities was then identified through observation and personal interviews of people involved in these activities. Also key informants were identified and interviewed. The selection of

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people interviewed was on random basis within the enlisted economic activities. The steps and tools as used for data collection have been depicted in Table 1.

Table 1

Steps and tools used in enlisting of livelihood activities of urban poor along the Ganga Ghats of Varanasi

Step	Activities/Tools	Outcome
I	Transect walk on <i>Ganga Ghats</i> of Varanasi.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preliminary list of business activities, by observation, on <i>Ganga Ghats</i> of Varanasi.
II	Identifying key players in the value chain of observed business activities and interviewing them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad list of existing business activities on <i>Ganga Ghats</i> of Varanasi.
III	Screening the business activities which include livelihood activities undertaken by urban poor and their involvement in the activities from the broad list of business activities generated by step II.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Screened list of livelihood activities undertaken by urban poor on <i>Ganga Ghats</i> of Varanasi .

Result

The list of livelihood activities undertaken by urban poor and their involvement in these activities is depicted as Table 2. Livelihood activities and microenterprises existing on the Ghats of the river have been enlisted, of the list activities typically undertaken by poor has been selected and listed. The basis of identification of typical livelihood activities undertaken poor has been the working Capital requirements, as assessed during the survey.

Table 2

Livelihood Activities Undertaken by Urban Poor Along the Ganga Ghats

SL.	Business Activity/ Products	No. of Units/ persons involved	Activities Undertaken by:- Categorization by Gender and Age group (<i>Adult Male / Female Adolescent Male / Female Male Child/ Female Child</i>)	Place of production/ Service (Local/ comes from Outside)	Working Capital Requirement per cycle. (Rs.)	Activities undertaken by poor in the business activity
1.	Floating lamp with flowers in compressed leaf plates	88	Child, adolescents (Male and female), adult female	Flower grown 20 kms from Varanasi, Compressed plates from outside Varanasi mainly from Odisha	500-600	Purchase of individual items, assembly and selling of the end product. This activity can only be undertaken by <i>Mallah community</i> .
2.	Flowers and flower garlands	12	Child, adolescent (Male and female) female adult	Flower grown 20 kms from Varanasi,	2000-2500	Selling of end product
3.	Plastic Galloons for carrying Ganga water (1 to 10 ltrs)	45	Male Adult	Comes from outside	5000	Selling of end product/ Working as helpers in shops selling these items

4.	Pujan Samagri- Coconut, elachi dana, Sindur, Kapoor, Raksha thread, Lutiya (earthen), other items	45	Male Adult/ Female Adult;	Local	20,000	Working as helpers in shops selling these items
5.	Chunri	35	Male and female child & adult	Local	500	Selling of end product/
6.	Agarbatti (Incense)	70-80	Male and female Adult	Local and outside	1500	Selling of end product
7.	Rui-batti (cotton used in lamps)	10-15	Male adult	Local and Outside	500	Working as helpers in shops selling these items
8.	Tea/ Coffee Selling in cans	10	Male adult	Local	500	Selling of end product
9.	Idli, vada, Dosa	4	Male and female adults	Local	2000	Preparing these products and selling it
10.	Fruits Selling	4	Male adult	Local	2000	Trading
11.	Ice Cream selling	2	Male adult	Local	2000	Selling of end product
12.	Papad, Namkin Sev selling	4	Male adult	Local	1000	Preparing these products and selling it
13.	Jhal Mudi/ Bhel pudi	15-20	Male adult	Local	1000	Preparing these products and selling it
14.	Artificial Mala and jewelries (beads)	20	Male Adult/ Female Adult; Child/ Female Child.	Local and Outside	5000-10000	Selling of end product/
15.	Photo cards (Souvenir)	30	Children Male and Female	Local	500-1500	Selling of end product/
16.	Toys	8	Male Adult	Local/ outside	1000	Selling of end product
17.	Boat/Ferr y Service	400-500	Male adult of <i>Mallah</i> community	Local	--	Boat rowing
18.	Body Massage	4	Male adult of particular community	Local	--	Service
19.	Photogra phy	20	Male adult	Local	1500-20000	Service
20.	Mehdi	10	Female Adolescent	Local	500	Service
21.	Swimmin g Training	5	Male adult	Local	--	Service
22.	Laundry	10	Male and female adult of particular community	Local	1000	Service

23.	Shav Dah Samagri (Items required to perform last rites and rituals)	8	Male adult of particular community (<i>Dom</i> community)	Local	15-20000	Selling of end product/
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Source: Field Survey

Discussions

There are important underlying aspects related to these activities undertaken by the poor, as enlisted in Table 2. The scale of operation is too small, the terms of trade not so good, seasonality etc. resulting in low and erratic income upscale possibility very low. All these and other factors combined makes the livelihood options pursued by poor vulnerable. Together these factors could be summed up to following underlying aspects:

- Labour is the major investment
- Low entry and exit barriers
- Low income and low investment
- Seasonality
- Erratic income
- Other factors

To add to the vulnerability are the other factors. The spread of which could be enormous and contextual in order to capture certain aspects of these factors two small cases have been presented as observed in the field, as Box 1 and 2.

Box 1: Demolition of Shops at Harishchandra Ghat : A Livelihood Crises for Local SC Community

Pitambarpura is residential area of SC community at Harsichandra ghat. The ghat is a famous as cremation ghat and provides an opportunity to sale last rites puja samagri (ritual goods) to many vendors. Jagriti devi , a member of three month old SHG promoted by a local NGO, has her son engaged in selling of such last ritual goods through a small shop at Harishchandra ghat. As per information, shared by her son, family was able to earn Rs 200 to 300 per day as margin through selling such goods. However in the second week of May, a drive was undertaken by Nagarpalika to demolish shops at ghats and her shop was one of victim to this drive. Interestingly they were not informed or have received written notice for demolishing their shop. As they have very small shop, they have not lost much in terms of fixed capital but have lost the opportunity to sale and earn. The business has been affected negatively and her son could not shift to other livelihood at such a short period. He has lost his means of livelihood through losing the place of sale. Sure enough, it will take over a month now for him to resettle in any other business. The shop keeper has been a meek spectator to such drive and Nagarpalika is not sensitive enough to provide alternative livelihood options or creating infrastructure to lease them as shops. There is high possibility to find out a better option for achieving effect of such drive through ensuring livelihood and ensuring ghats safety and pathways

Source: Field Survey

Box 2: Lack of Financial Inclusion Leading to Case of Possible Cheating: Case of A Young Boatman Subhash

Subhash a 24 year young person from Mallah community has been engaged in ferryman job since age of 12. He left school as early as age of 12 to take up boat ferrying and supplement livelihood of families. Today he has been a seasoned earner and earns Rs 200 to 300 daily in best of seasons (Earning is limited to estimated 150 to 180 days in year). He also supplements his earning through selling flowers in lean season, daily wages and had a small stint as salesman to a cloth shop. However he has spent his surplus earning in liquor and could not save. He is still unmarried and supports his young brothers and parents in the family. Of late (6 moths back) through an LIC agent, he could take up a policy of Rs 4500 premium to Life Insurance policy as Money back Scheme. He has been contributing quarterly premium and deposited two installments as of now. However he has not received any premium receipt from the agent and neither has policy documents at his custody. He was informed that he could get it only once he deposits one year premium. Although he beams with happiness that he could save and deposit two installments and he would get a Lakh of Rs at the end of policy period, he is almost ignorant about the process and importance of receipt of his payment made. Although of late he has realized importance of such risk coverage policy and savings, there is chance of him falling to a scrupulous agent and may get robbed of his hard earned savings.

Source: Field Survey

The urban poor households like expert portfolio managers undertake not just one but different activities thereby diversifying the risk and increasing the chances of their survival despite of odds. The households have a coping up strategy of their own which is effective in helping them survive. However, if we look to take such poor families out of poverty merely appreciating their survival skills are not enough. We need to support them to add value to their livelihood activities and provide a springboard facility to them such that their entrepreneurial activities are rewarded and they could pursue livelihood options which are more resilient and rewarding.

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