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## RENOVATION OF THE HOLY CITY OF VARANASI BETWEEN 2014 AND 2025: IT'S IMPACT ON TRADITIONAL VENDORS

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### Abstract

This paper examines the socio-economic impact of urban redevelopment or renovation of the ancient city of Varanasi between 2014 and 2025 on the city's traditional vendors.

Banaras, the world's oldest city, today known as Varanasi, is known as the spiritual capital of India. Varanasi has been the focus of national flagship schemes such as the Smart Cities Mission 2014, the Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY) and the Swachh Bharat Mission. My paper uses a mixed-methods approach, analysing urban development project reports and existing scholarly literature, with little input from secondary data such as newspapers. The findings highlight a couple of aspects: while Varanasi has been modernised and has received new heights in beauty, attractiveness, tourist inflows and economic opportunities, Varanasi has also been largely successful in preserving traditional beliefs. Some of the problems observed include displacement of vendors, lack of access to customers in core areas due to new regulations, increased freight charges due to disruption of transport, and threat to the survival of historic street markets. The article concludes that for Varanasi's development to be truly sustainable and inclusive, future policy must ensure integration of formal planning with the informal economy through active vendor rehabilitation, participatory urban design, and formalization of vending rights under the Street Vendors Act, 2014.

**Keywords:** Varanasi Development, Varanasi, Traditional Vendors, Smart City, Informal Economy, Cultural Heritage, Sustainable Tourism and Displacement.

### 1. Introduction

Varanasi, more commonly known as Kashi or Banaras, is one of the oldest cities in the world. It encompasses not just an urban environment but also an eternal and timeless culture, a pilgrimage and destination for Hindu pilgrims from around the world, a global centre for Banarasi classical music known as gharanas, and Banarasi sari weaving. The economy of the city of Varanasi is a vibrant and sustainable one driven by a cluster of informal businesses, the backbone of which are traditional vendors. These vendors sell religious materials, street food, flowers, silk products and everyday items. Varanasi is currently an economically active city and also preserves a diverse socio-cultural fabric, which is known as the city of the famous Ghats and street of Varanasi city.

The election of the current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, as the Member of Parliament from Varanasi in 2014 marked a paradigm shift in the city's developmental trajectory. It was catapulted to the forefront of several national urban renewal missions. This paper seeks to investigate the nature of these development projects, their implementation from 2014 to the projected outcomes of 2025, and their multifaceted impact on the livelihoods of Varanasi's traditional vendors. The central research question is: \*\*How have the urban redevelopment initiatives in Varanasi post-2014 impacted the socio-economic conditions and spatial rights of its traditional vendor community?

### 2. Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

Scholarly work on urban development in the Global South often highlights the tension between modernist, top-down planning models and the organic, informal urbanism that characterizes cities like Varanasi (Bhan, 2019; Roy, 2005). The "world-class city" discourse often marginalizes informal economies, viewing them as obstacles to cleanliness and order rather than as integral components of the urban ecosystem (Ghertner, 2015).



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The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, passed by the Indian Parliament in 2014, provides a critical legal framework for this study. It mandates the formation of Town Vending Committees (TVCs) and the creation of designated vending zones to protect vendors' rights. This research is situated within this contradiction: the simultaneous enactment of a protective law and the implementation of large-scale projects that often contravene its spirit.

### 3. Methodology

This is an attempt at a qualitative desk-based research study based on secondary data analysis. The relevant sources used in the paper are as follows:

**Policy:** Smart City proposals, HRIDAY Mission guidelines, and project reports of Varanasi Smart City Limited (VSCL).

**Academic:** Peer-reviewed articles on urban studies, informal economies, and South Asian development.

**News media:** Reports from national and local newspapers and digital media outlets documenting project progress and vendor responses.

**NGO and civil society reports:** Studies and assessments conducted by organizations working on urban rights and livelihoods.

The analysis is thematic, identifying major development projects and categorizing their direct and indirect impacts on the vendor community.

### 4. Varanasi's Development Landscape (2014-2025): Key Projects

The transformation has been driven by several interconnected initiatives:

1. **Smart Cities Mission (SCM):** Varanasi was among the first 20 cities selected. Key projects include:

**Integrated Command and Control Center (ICCC):** For city-wide surveillance and management.

**Smart Ghats:** Renovation and installation of LED lighting, CCTV, and Wi-Fi along the riverfront.

**Road and Infrastructure Upgrades:** Decongestion efforts, paving of streets, and creation of pedestrian-friendly zones.

2. **Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY):** Focused on preserving and revitalizing the heritage core. This included the restoration of ancient temples, heritage buildings, and the improvement of basic infrastructure like water supply and sanitation in the old city.

3. **Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM):** Aimed at making Varanasi open-defecation free (ODF) and improving solid waste management. This led to the construction of public toilets and a push for cleaner streets.

4. **Kashi Vishwanath Dham Corridor (KV Corridor):** The most ambitious and impactful project. It involved acquiring and demolishing over 300 properties to create a 50-meter-wide, 400-meter-long corridor connecting the iconic Vishwanath Temple to the Ganga ghats, fundamentally altering the spatial dynamics of the old city.

### 5. Impact Analysis on Traditional Vendors

The implementation of these projects has created a complex web of consequences for vendors.



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## 5.1 Positive Impacts:

**Increased tourist inflows:** Better facilities, improved transport and infrastructure, and big global brands have attracted a large number of domestic and international tourists to the shrine and market, potentially increasing the customer base of vendors selling religious items and symbols of Varanasi, known as the world's oldest religious city.

**Improved environment:** Cleaner, well-lit and more secure Ghats and streets can create a more pleasant environment for business.

**Opportunities for formalisation:** Some initiatives, such as the designated vending zones proposed under the Smart City Plan, provide avenues for formal recognition and access to services such as credit and insurance.

## 5.2 Negative Impacts (Main Challenge):

**Direct displacement:** The opening of the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor project directly displaced hundreds of shops and vendors whose houses were demolished, causing them to suffer. Although some were provided with temporary alternative spaces or compensation, this was seen as inadequate by most shopkeepers, primarily because vendors were displaced from high-traffic, spiritually significant areas that were crucial to their businesses (Dainik Jagran, 2021).

**Indirect displacement and reduced access:** While pedestrian routes to the temple were made easier, roads were widened, and vehicles carrying goods for sale were banned, but this was necessary to control congestion, and it is directly beneficial, as this arrangement has restricted access to key areas for both customers and vendors. Shoppers who once came by car or rickshaw now have to walk long distances, reducing the impulse purchases of many vendors.

**Socio-spatial disruption:** Varanasi's traditional economy is based on a delicate spatial logic—flower vendors near temples, snack vendors near the ghats, silk shops in specific lanes. Large-scale redevelopment disrupts these networks, breaking long-established customer-seller relationships.

**Rising costs:** The general beautification and “upgradation” of the area has led to increased costs of living and running a business, reducing the profit margins of small vendors.

**Threats to cultural intangible heritage:** The Varanasi experience is inextricably linked to the sensory overload of its crowded, chaotic bazaars. Sanitation and space-arrangements threaten to turn the city into a monotonous tourist destination, destroying the very character that attracts people, and ultimately hurting vendors in the long run.<sup>6</sup> Discussion: The Policy-Implementation Paradox

A significant gap exists between the protective intent of the Street Vendors Act, 2014, and the on-ground reality of urban development. While the law calls for surveys and the inclusion of vendors in TVCs, the top-down, time-bound nature of projects like the KV Corridor often overrides these participatory processes. The definition of "encroachment" becomes blurred, and vendors are frequently treated as obstructions to development rather than stakeholders in it.

The challenge for Varanasi is to navigate its path to becoming a "smart" and "clean" city without sacrificing its soul—the informal, chaotic, and deeply cultural economy that has defined it for centuries.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The development of Varanasi from 2014 to 2025 represents a profound attempt to reshape an ancient city for the 21st century. While the improvements in infrastructure and cleanliness are commendable, the impact on traditional vendors has been largely adverse, characterized by displacement, marginalization, and a threat to their livelihood.

For the development to be truly sustainable and inclusive, the following recommendations are proposed:



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- 1. Implement the Street Vendors Act in Letter and Spirit:** Conduct a comprehensive survey of all vendors in Varanasi and ensure their adequate representation in the Town Vending Committee. This body must have a decisive say in all urban planning decisions affecting vending zones.
- 2. Design Participatory Rehabilitation Plans:** For every project that causes displacement, a transparent and participatory rehabilitation plan must be developed \*in advance\*, offering vendors viable alternative locations with comparable commercial potential.
- 3. Integrate Vendors into Urban Design:** Instead of viewing them as a problem, design new public spaces (like the areas around the KV Corridor) with integrated, aesthetically pleasing vending kiosks that complement the heritage aesthetic.
- 4. Promote Vendor-Tourism Linkages:** Develop curated heritage walks and maps that intentionally guide tourists through traditional market areas, turning vendors into key protagonists of the Varanasi experience.
- 5. Provide Financial and Digital Literacy Support:** Assist traditional vendors in adapting to the new economy through access to digital payment systems, micro-loans, and training.

Varanasi's future depends not on choosing between heritage and development, or between order and informality, but on creatively and compassionately synthesizing them. The traditional vendor is not a relic of the past but a vital partner for a sustainable urban future.

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