

Varanasi cries for help

It is a question of 2.4 million empty plastic bottles dumped on a helpless city, and Varanasi, the cultural capital of India, doesn't even have regular garbage collection!

The Hindu holy city along the Ganges attracts roughly 2.5 million tourists annually, out of which 40,000 are foreigners. By simple calculation, for a stay of two days, every tourist requires on an average three bottles of water.

This works out to a staggering 2.4 million empty bottles per year.

Navneet Raman, convenor of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) in Varanasi, pointed out the various problems besetting the city of temples.

Pollution. Degradation. These are a few of the terms which have come to be associated with the beautiful city that was once described with only adjectives like rich cultural heritage and mystic beauty.

According to Raman, Varanasi is one of 63 cities under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission. But it is now also among the 10 cities where the issue of heritage degradation is of primary concern.

The local authorities have formulated a City Development Plan (CDP), which charts out numerous plans to restore the beauty of the city. But according to Raman, the plan has many loopholes.

Speaking at the India International Centre here Monday, he said past studies and reports on the city had not been taken into consideration before new plans were chalked out.

Criticising a plan to construct permanent jetties for boats along the river's ghats to avoid unorganised parking, Raman said this would ruin the 600-year-old cultural and heritage fabric of the river front which is frequented by pilgrims for bathing, prayers and boating.

Varanasi, with an area of 49 sq km, has only three percent green cover left and suffers from a high level of pollution. However, instead of coming up with projects to make the city greener, numerous settlements have been allowed to encroach on the fertile flood plane area to the east of the river, he said.

The CDP has also addressed the issue of building bridges. This, he said, would make the Ganga in Varanasi look like a hurdle to be crossed, just like the Yamuna in Delhi.

And even more important, people taking pilgrimage baths in the river will become a public sight thanks to the crossing traffic, which is hardly a comforting thought, he pointed out.

Also, plans to put lights at heritage sites, in a city that does not get more than 14-16 hours of electricity a day, is a thought which doesn't seem to be grounded on reality, Raman said.

Despite all the drawbacks, Varanasi attracts huge crowds every year, reinstating the fact that there is something about the city that can't be seen but felt.

However, if proper techniques to revive the city based on active study by professionals, citizens and experts are not employed soon enough, the eternal city might just lose its glory, Raman stressed.

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