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Title : Corporates may step in to rejuvenate Varanasi ghats

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Corporates could be roped in to rejuvenate the decaying 'ghats' at Varanasi, complete with jetties for boats and improved facilities for tourists and bathing pilgrims.

The 100 ghats at Varanasi have immense spiritual attraction, drawing foreign and domestic tourists, but have been neglected for years. With PM Narendra Modi as the MP from the holy city, officials now hope there could be a move to improve their condition. Sources said many corporates, including major hospitality chains, had expressed interest in adopting the ghats for a make-over.

The ghats, or steps leading to the Ganga, were built when the city was controlled by the Marathas. The most popular are Dashashwamedh ghat, Rajendra Prasad Ghat and Kedar Ghat.

At present, there is lack of changing rooms and bathing space for pilgrims, haphazard parking of boats, broken steps and stone walkway to the Vishwanath Mandir, poor quality of takhts (where the priests or pandas sit), too many overhead cables in the bylanes of Vishwanath Mandir, damaged umbrellas used by the 'pandas', lack of signages and drinking water.

A report prepared by IL&FS for the union tourism ministry also underlined poor lighting on the ghats, lack of resting, sanitary facilities for tourists and garbage bins. A big problem is devotees disposing of garland and pooja material in the river, adding to its pollution. Officials said plastic emulsion paint had been used on the ghats which would have to be scrapped off.

"This could reduce the life of the stone by 50 years. Using plastic emulsion is tampering with heritage and it has to be removed," an official said.

The ministry had recently allocated Rs 18 crore for a make-over and plans to build changing rooms, create longer jetties on each side of the ghat and carry out repairs using red chunar sandstone.