

Life, Enlightenment & Death in the City of Divine Light

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Born in an ice cave high in the Himalayas in the north of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, the mighty Ganges River or Ganga Ma - mother of all Hindus - winds down the mountains, on to the plains towards the Bay of Bengal south of Calcutta. Geographically the Ganges is eclipsed by many other world rivers in size, volume and length - in spiritual power and religious significance it has no equal. On the banks of the Ganges is Varanasi, Hindusthan's most sacred destination and one of the worlds oldest living cities. Millions of people journey here to find enlightenment and spiritual liberation ... they also come here to die.



The Ganges River and Varanasi just after dawn

Nowhere else in the world is a city so connected with death. Every Hindu wishes to end their earthly journey on the cremation ghats at Kashi, as the more pious Hindus know Varanasi. Some come to live - and inevitably die - in Kashi and are known as Kashivasis; others arrive nearer the end of their lives for Kashi Labh or "the Benefit of Kashi", to die in peace - a good death being just as important to Hindus as living a good life. Moreover, most visitors to Varanasi are religious pilgrims and inquisitive travellers.

As a photographer, I had a desire to visit Varanasi since first seeing images illuminated with impossibly beautiful light. What filters or trickery had been

used to capture these extraordinary images? Perhaps this single-minded purpose left me unprepared for Hindusthan's most hallowed city. My expectations of Varanasi were to be enhanced many times by the reality of this inspiring and unique city.

Hinduism is by any measure the most dominant and powerful influence that makes India what she is. For more than 750 million Indians, Hinduism is a creed of life; it guides their lives; it is their lives. Hindus largely direct their own destinies with the check of retributive accountability (karma) in the form of incarnation on one's death at the end of each life cycle.



Hindu pilgrims bath at the Scindia Ghat in front of the partly submerged Shiva temple

Hindus believe Varanasi is the earthly home of Shiva, creator and destroyer and one of the two most consequential Hindu Gods. Shiva and his wife the Goddess Parvati are considered the parents of the world by Hindus. Shiva is credited with the taming and placement of the mighty Ganges River during its fall from heaven as a torrent. It is Shiva who whispers a sacred mantra into the ears of those about to die at Varanasi, ensuring liberation or moksha.

The goal of Hindus is ultimate liberation through the four Purasharthas or, purposes of life, which govern a Hindu's life. The first Purashartha is Dharma, a code for life extolling the virtues of morality and righteousness and providing a link between man and God. Artha, the second Purashartha, is the code defining the aims of human life in terms of material possessions and wealth. The third code is Kama encompassing passion, desire and sensual love. The fourth and most important is moksha. Hindus believe in reincarnation and that they will have numerous deaths and rebirths in a cycle of incarnations during which they will live through the first three Purasharthas. The ultimate liberation from this cycle is moksha, attained only by those who have renounced

rewards and all selfish desires to reach a state of complete submission to God.

Varanasi or Banaras as it was known in the days of the Raj faces east overlooking the Ganges River. The golden, dare I say, celestial light from the first rays of the sun reflects off the mist-laden Ganges, illuminating the ancient palaces and temples along the river bank. Before sunrise in the barest pre-dawn glow, there is already activity on the many ghats, or stepped banks, as Hindu pilgrims arrive to take their ritualistic plunge in the sacred Ganges water to wash away guilt and sins.

Early morning is the best time to visit the ghats and the best view is from the water. Solid wooden rowing boats with boatmen are for hire and for every boat there are at least five young boys touting for business. The resilience of Varanasi touts will test the most hardened Indian traveller. With haggling completed, an early morning paddle along Varanasi's seventy or more famous bathing and cremation ghats is not to be missed.

Women in bright coloured saris and loin-clothed men stand waist deep in the river facing the rising sun with offerings of marigolds and tiny paper floats bearing candles. Ornate brass pots are filled with holy water of the Ganges to be offered at a later time to various temple-residing deities. The Ganges water is taken away in a variety of containers for friends and relatives not fortunate enough to visit Varanasi, or to be consumed in cooking and tea. Although at first you may feel like a voyeur in a giant bathhouse, those on stage, the Hindu pilgrims, unselfconsciously carry on their yoga, wrestling and bathing rituals with devotion and ardour, while Brahmins squat under large umbrellas on the steps performing puja - prayer. It is a hypnotic scene - a kaleidoscope of colour and life in the illusory light.

Afternoons and evenings are a quieter, more relaxing time on the river. Fishermen mend nets; sadhus in simple orange robes and mumukshus - the near-naked ascetics pursuing moksha through the practices of discipline, yoga, and acquiring wisdom - engage in trance-like meditation and offer devotions at the water edge. A few inquisitive visitors wander along the ghats soaking up the atmosphere, sharing their paths with donkeys, goats and the resolute cows.



Sunrise on the Ganges



Brahmin priest at Varanasi ghat



Fishing on the Ganges

Sunil was a 10-year-old boy I met while I walked along the ghats one afternoon.

“What country are you from?” Sunil asked as he fell into step beside me.

“What are you selling - postcards, silk, carpet?” I mused, skeptically acknowledged his greeting. Sunil had nothing to sell and wanted nothing from me other than the opportunity to practice his English. He lived with his extended family in a small dwelling in the old city. His father worked as a laborer seven days a week after helping Sunil’s uncle row sightseers on the river at dawn each morning. An older brother also helped with the boat and ran a “chai” - Indian tea - shop near the busy Dasaswamedh Ghat. Sunil was at the ghats at dawn each day helping his family, acting as a guide and selling postcards as a sideline before school. During the following days I met several of Sunil’s family who were all as hospitable, friendly and disarming as Sunil.

Cycle-rickshaw wallahs vie for business as vigorously as anywhere in India. This area receives millions of visitors each year and consequently the price of services such as taxis and rickshaws are subject very much to the forces of supply, demand, nationality and haggling. Once you’re over the vexatious dilemma arising from having another human being expend copious energy towing you around for what seems a small reward, the advantages of cycle rickshaw transport become obvious. There is no pollution, no noise and the pace enables good sightseeing. No less important is that there are thousands of rickshaw-wallahs in Varanasi who need to earn a living. Raja, my first rickshaw-wallah, became a con

stant and reliable provider of transport, guidance, and stories during my stay at Varanasi.

A conglomerate of Indian society is ever present in the labyrinth of winding streets and alleys of the old city. Pilgrims who could be from any era in history and dressed in little more than rags mingle with opulent silk-clad women and prosperous-looking men. Small stalls sell flowers and minute quantities of spices as offerings in Varanasi's plethora of temples. Large emporiums display silk and carpets reputed to be the finest in India. The streets become so crowded in the evening that even the tenacious rickshaw-wallahs have trouble getting through. Many tourists, some of whom appear to be in a state of bewilderment, are witnessing scenes they will see nowhere else in the world.



Hindu pilgrims at Hanuman Ghat - one of over 100 ghats along the Ganges River at Varanasi

Ram Nam Sat Hai, Ram Nam Sat Hai ... the chant of "God's Name is Truth, God's Name is Truth" rings out as funeral processions accompanied by drums, bells and symbols wind through the streets towards Manikarnika Ghat throughout the day and into the night. Bodies are borne on bamboo biers; some wrapped in white cotton and decorative silks and garlanded with flowers; others from less fortunate circumstances draped in simpler cloth, make their final earthly journeys in carts and rickshaws - a wayward hand or foot sometimes protruding from beneath the funeral shroud. The spectacle creates no particular ceremony, nor attracts extraordinary attention from people in the streets. Such is the way of death in Varanasi.



Varanasi school children crowding onto a ricksaw



Hindu Saddhus, followed by a donkey, walk along the ghats



A saddhu chilling out on steps above the ghats

Varanasi is a microcosm of India where religion, life and death intermingle with little separation; where a display of items of everyday life takes on strong religious significance; where there is a concentration of all the elements making up a vast and somewhat heterogeneous nation. You are likely to see situations that can be confronting and evoke thoughts and emotions including exhilaration, fascination and frustration. Some may have trouble in embracing Varanasi on first encounter. Many, having discovered the true heart of India beating very strongly in this captivating city, find it difficult to leave.

And that impossibly beautiful light? Well, it is certainly a reality and no doubt has something to do with Varanasi's traditional name of Kashi, which literally means "divine light".



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