

Twenty minutes at the burning ghat (*Varanasi, India*)

A fleeting meditation on mortality and sanitation on the bank of Mother Ganga:



Only in late afternoon, when the temperature has eased slightly below 45°, did MH and I emerge from the air-conditioning of the Ganpati Guesthouse annex. We descended the steps of the Meer Ghat and picked our way along the dirty flagstones piled with skinny logs to the Manikarnika Ghat. In the sudden scent of burning wood, we stopped up. Below the stone steps was the most sacred ground on earth for 1.1 billion human beings. For those who profess to Hinduism, that spot on the riverbank of Varanasi is the most auspicious place on earth to have one's remains immolated.

Well-apprised of the camera taboo and the waiting touts, we sat down on stone steps polished by innumerable bums over countless years. Facing the brown water of Mother *Ganga* [Ganges], we silently absorbed the scene:

Dalit [untouchable] workers in ragged *dhotis* worked in a slow methodical way, befitting the oven-bake humidity. At the top of the *ghat*, woodcutters split the logs from the piles and laid them into small heaps ready to receive each swaddled corpse. At the middle of the *ghat* were the burning piles in various stages of immolation. Some pyres were almost reduced to smoking ashes and others, freshly set alight, were raging with the ghee butter accelerant. Over these flaming piles, the *dalits* poised with long sticks, poked to ensure that the denser parts of the corpses were evenly consumed. The wafting smoke gave off an oddly pleasant campfire scent.

In the brown water beneath the *ghat* steps, another small crew of *Dalits* sieved the piles of black ashes before pouring them into the current. One worker stood chest deep in the brown water fanning his arms to spread the ashes as they slowly drifted away.

At the same time there were the new bundles, festooned like elongated *piñatas* and borne down the steps on shoulders of *dalits* in white *lungi*— first to be immersed in the Holy Mother Ganga before being set on cremation pyres.

All of this work was being undertaken seemingly without direction of an overseer, all in the acrid pall of smoke while dogs, goats and holy cows wandered freely amid the pyres. Meanwhile,

Indian onlookers— many probably family of the deceased— sat nonchalantly observing from neighbouring platforms and towers. Through it all, Varanasi’s notorious touts and grifters, some with cell phones, picked their way about or stood waiting to bait the few tourists with offers to find them a spot to “take pictures”.

As one of those western tourists all but ignorant of a Hindu sensibility: at first sight the cremation *ghat* could well have been a hazardous worksite. At one level the operation seemed more akin to burning wires to reclaim metal than the performance of sacred rituals of last rites. Perhaps in our twenty minutes on the stone steps we glimpsed only the grunt work of the burning and disposal of corpses. If priests were performing *puja*, as we’d expected, we did not see them from our vantage point.

Without reminding oneself that the swaddled bundles (seen yesterday on the city outskirts transported on minibus roof racks) were human bodies, one would hardly relate the operation at the *ghat* to the ‘processing’ of death. Yet it was astonishing to remember the *Lonely Planet* information that for over hundreds of years, scores of cremations a day had been conducted in a space that appeared to be no larger than a supermarket parking lot.

It was not hard to imagine why the spectacle, for devout Hindus, must be reassuring. By being both public and (seemingly) informal, the cremations must reinforce the understanding that an individual death is no bigger a deal than a birth. The perpetual flux of death, birth, rebirth— probably seems as calming as the waters of the Mother *Ganga* that have flowed since time immemorial from the Himalayas through the plains and down to the sea...

Yet all that was a superficial observation. At heart, I felt not a glimmer of the sanctity of that place. However non-religious, I have been stirred by beauty and mystery in the sacred places of both Buddhists and Christians. Yet the Manikarnika Ghat, by utter contrast, evoked something of hell as imagined by Breughel or Hieronymus Bosch: a manifestation of the ugliness and squalor of flesh unadorned. Still, as hard as I was looking, I wondered whether I was really *seeing*.

At the same time, in looking from the cremation pyres out to the sacred river, it was very difficult not to be foremost aware that the waters in which the Hindu worshippers were bobbing was choked with raw sewage. For a moment, I irreverently thought of comedian Lenny Bruce’s observation that civilization was based upon a tribal agreement about where to eat and where to shit. It seemed particularly ironic that the cradle of one of the world’s most ancient civilizations, should be so befouled with ordure.

Were I not so rattled by filth and squalor; might I have been more receptive to *spirituality*? Still, in seeing those devout Hindu, waist-deep in the Ganges ducking heads under lotus blossoms and floating turds it was impossible to ignore the apparent ‘spiritual’ blindness.

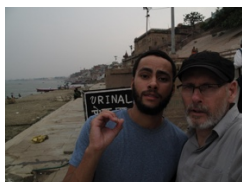
Admittedly, my impressions of India — fleeting and poorly informed though they are— have been gleaned through an often-cynical eye. India— as imagined by its elites—is both ancient and profoundly spiritual while modern and glamorous. On flipping through Indian TV, one sees very little of public squalor, racism and corruption.

Still, I felt that there had to be some lesson, some glimmer of wisdom to be gleaned on the Manikarnika Ghat. That thought came just before I noticed a few metres behind us on the shore, two blonde girls (possibly Scandinavian) in saris. They were both pressing lotuses to their foreheads. Appearing blissed out—they seemed oblivious to the squalor—even oblivious to the touts gesticulating around them. Even as fellow westerners—were they tuned in to frequencies beyond my range?

Turning back to the burning pyres, I was at least prepared to acknowledge the obvious. In the most densely populated country of the world, Hinduism had devised over centuries a method of disposing of the dead which was clearly efficient. Meanwhile, in comparing Hindu public cremation to the perverse sanitized concealment of death in the west—there was no question as to which practices were more civilized...

Before we rose from the eerie calm to head off in search of a meal, I looked at my son. He nodded and sighed. Granting him the inviolability of his own private reflections, I did not (as I too often do) try to pry forth a response. Still, in catching his eye as we walked away, I had no doubt that he was deeply moved...

Perhaps in some silence after my absence, he will remember this moment with fondness. Perhaps our separate contemplations at the Manikarnika Ghat will be at least as enduring as the moment when we both spontaneously rolled eyes before the Disneyland Parade...



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