





ASHES TO ASHES INDIA'S HOLIEST CITY EMBRACES THE CYCLE OF LIFE.

by DAVID FARLEY
photographs by TRUJILLO PALMIER



Previous pages: A sadhu (holy man), left, and a Hindu monk, right, greet the dawn on the Ganges River in Varanasi. This page: The empty sandy shore across the Ganges from Varanasi is faintly visible from Chet Singh ghat.



“YOU PEOPLE COME TO
VARANASI FROM THE WEST
BECAUSE YOU’RE SO
UNPREPARED FOR DEATH,”

said the 85-year-old who opened the door. His voice was bullish and loud. “But what you’re all missing is this: You need to be a *see-er*.” Now he was screaming. “A *see-er*! You understand me?”

I wasn’t sure I did. I had come to Varanasi, a city of some one-and-a-half million people in northerneastern India, on a mission—to engage with death, a strange quest I’ll explain shortly. So here I was at a place called Moksha Bhavan, a gated housing compound about a 10-minute auto-rickshaw ride from the Ganges River that could best be compared to a convalescent hospital. Except no one here is necessarily sick or needing care. It’s more like a waiting room for death, for the people who come to Varanasi to die. According to Hindu belief, succumbing in this holy city gives them more good karma to achieve *moksha*, or liberation.

Seatia Nararyna, as the man who screamed at me was called, had been here for 22 years. “Your eyes are covered, and the only way to uncover them is to really know yourself. Meditate. Think about yourself. And do this until you find *ananda*,” he said. When I asked what *ananda* was, he leaned forward and looked deep into my eyes. I felt myself starting to shake. “Bliss!” he screamed. “You need to do this until you have found bliss! Now go back to the *ghats*, think about yourself and death, and dedicate your life to *ananda*.” And with that, he slammed the door in my face. So I went back to the *ghats*, the multipurpose, stone riverbank steps that give access to the Ganges at various points.

Varanasi, it turns out, is a great place to die. People have been gravitating here—alive and dead—for millennia. The living come as pilgrims and tourists, visiting the plethora of temples that hug the riverbank; the dead arrive to have their bodies burned to ashes on a pile of banyan or sandalwood at one of two cremation grounds—Manikarnika ghat and Harishchandra ghat—and then scattered in the Ganges River. To be cremated in Varanasi is to achieve a reprieve from the cycle of life and death: You don't have to endure rebirth in the world, you don't collect 200 rupees, you go directly to nirvana.

Which, given that I'm still alive, isn't *exactly* why I'm here.

WHEN A GOOD FRIEND was killed in a car accident in high school, I felt profoundly unprepared. For the first time in my life, I found myself asking why such things happen. I didn't have any answers. What really disturbed me was the way many friends of the family reacted—by quickly and quietly drifting away. I decided that, no matter how difficult it might be, I wouldn't turn away from the face of grief and death.

A few years later, I volunteered at a hospice in Los Angeles. As a "friendly visitor," I'd turn up at the homes of the dying and chat about whatever they wanted to discuss. Often they'd tell me how much they appreciated my presence, and that many of their friends, out of discomfort with pain and death, had already disappeared from their lives. Making these visits for about six months was a deep plunge into the way Western culture deals (or doesn't deal) with death.

The first person I visited after going through the three-week training program, a 67-year-old accountant, took his last breath as I sat beside him holding his hand. Being around the dying, and talking to them about their state, helped demystify death for me. At least enough so that the questions of existence and mortality didn't haunt me as they had before.

That is, until about a couple years ago. I was going through the toughest time of my life. The end of a marriage, an unexpected rift with my parents, and the loss of a few friendships left me feeling like I was stuck in a deep pit, one that I could not, for the life of me, claw my way out of. At one particularly low point, during the holidays (isn't it always during the holidays?), I felt defeated. I was ready to give up.

To paraphrase a passage from David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, I was standing on the ledge of a burning building, and jumping seemed a lot more attractive than facing the

fire. Fortunately, at the last moment, and for reasons I'm still not sure of, I stepped away from that metaphorical ledge. In the days that followed, Varanasi kept popping up: There it was in a magazine; there it was on TV; there it was on someone's Facebook profile. The city, I realized, was a place defined by life and death, where loss is viewed in a completely different way. If I was going to walk through the fire, I needed to go to Varanasi, where darkness is nothing to fear. And I'd be showing up with a lot of darkness.

"WELCOME TO THE CENTER of the universe, my friend. You're standing at the beginning and end of all life, the epicenter of creation, the spot of ultimate transformation, the passageway through which souls achieve moksha." The man delivering this spiel, his face barely peeking out of a brown scarf that was wrapped over his head, had accosted me the second my foot landed on this supposedly most holy ground, Manikarnika ghat. And he wasn't just making this up as he went along. On my flight from New York, as I was reading a scholarly book on Varanasi, one line particularly struck me: "Just as India is the navel of the world, and Varanasi is the navel of India, so Manikarnika ghat is the navel of Varanasi." I was standing in what was, for the one billion Hindus on the planet, the core of all creation.

The guy who had become my impromptu tour guide was one of the *doms*, the people who work at the cremation grounds. They're among the untouchable caste, the lowest of the low, and are more or less condemned (as were their ancestors) to exercise this profession all their lives.

"Look around," he added, fanning his arm at what could have been a post-apocalyptic landscape, a panorama dotted with bonfires, stacks of wood the size of a small house, the odd leaning temple spire in the distance, and a riverside sprinkled with bathers ritually immersing themselves in polluted Ganges River water. Impossible to ignore were the groups of a half dozen men jogging lightly and carrying shroud-wrapped dead bodies on bamboo litters above their heads. They chanted, "*Rama nama satya hai!*" ("Only the name of God is truth") and were headed right toward where we were standing, the main cremation ground in Varanasi.

"This spot, this ghat," said the dom, "was not made by human hands. It was made by Lord Shiva 3,500 years ago."

I followed him as he scurried up the ghat's muddy, irregular steps, past sleeping canines and garbage-grazing bovines that seemed

unfazed by all the activity. Inside a portico overlooking the ghat, a flame, no bigger than what you'd see in an average fireplace, flickered. "This is the sacred fire," he said, adding that it has been burning constantly for 3,500 years and had been lit, naturally, by Lord Shiva. "This is the flame with which all bodies are ignited," he said. "This is the flame that sends people to moksha."

That flame is controlled by the Dom Raja, the lord of the dead. He rules over the doms and is said to be one of the richest people in town (despite his low caste). If you want to use the flame to cremate a loved one, you have to negotiate with him. His family has held this position for generations. As with royalty, the title would be handed down to the eldest son when the patriarch died. But when the Dom Raja Kailash Choudhary passed away in 1985, something interesting happened: There was a power struggle in the family, and eventually his five sons decided to split the Dom Raja duties.

THERE'S MORE TO VARANASI than just death. Though nothing as compelling. Also called Benares, Kashi, City of Light, and Forest of Bliss, this city on the Ganges is not, despite the implied tranquility of some of its nicknames, a peaceful haven. It's a cacophony of auto rickshaw horns and buzzing motorbikes, a maelstrom of swirls of dust and more dust. The smell of exhaust fumes, chai, and curry, plus the occasional waft of incense, intermingle to create the olfactory imprint of this ancient city, said to be one of the oldest continually inhabited spots on the planet. Just up from the riverbank is a warren of narrow, twisting, dank, excrement-dolloped lanes where every second storefront seems to be a yoga or meditation school. To the first-time visitor, the walkways go on forever.

This is not the India of techie call-center employees and upwardly mobile professionals. Varanasi exists far removed from that India. One finds few trappings of globalization and almost no cosmopolitan culture here. There are no kitschy souvenir shops in Varanasi. No racks of postcards. No stands selling MY UNCLE WENT TO VARANASI FOR ENLIGHTENMENT AND ALL I GOT WAS THIS LOUSY GOOD KARMA T-SHIRT T-shirts. Mumbai might have its Bollywood stars and Delhi its politicians, but Varanasi has its crumbling riverside palaces and temples, the dead, and the Dom Raja.

Still, besides gawking at the cremation grounds, one of the main things visitors to Varanasi do is stroll the three-mile waterfront, which is lined with 84 ghats. Here, between the river and the mishmash of dilapidated palaces,



One of Varanasi's main shopping area's, Thatheri Bazaar is best known for brassware, silk goods, and sarees.



Women prepare for worship at Assi ghat, the southernmost of Varanasi's ghats, situated at the confluence of the Ganges and Assi rivers.

श्री शिव ट्रेडर्स

यहाँ पर सभी प्रकार के गैस चूल्हा, भट्टी एवं
प्रेसर कूकर का मरम्मत होता है और
पार्ट्स भी मिलता है।

समय: सायं 6 से 10 बजे तक।





The pace of life slows as you wander deep into the old city alleys of Varanasi.

one will be accosted every seven seconds by teenagers selling hash or wanting to take you out in a rowboat—“Boat? Boat, sir?”—and men befriending you so you’ll pay a visit to their silk shops. Near the river, holy men meditate and children play cricket with tattered, taped-up balls. In the river, locals bathe and women wash bedsheets.

Each ghat has its own distinct personality and function. Gaya ghat, for example, near the northern end, is a place where pilgrims board boats to sail down the river, making stops at ghats that contain important temples. Dashashvamedha ghat, the “main ghat,” is the busiest, with holy men, or *sadhus*, planted under mushroomlike wooden umbrellas, some beckoning tourists over to receive a bit of wisdom, maybe in exchange for a few rupees. At the opposite end from Gaya ghat is Assi ghat, which has become a backpackers’ ghetto, chockablock with Western-friendly vegetarian restaurants and cheap hotels. In stark contrast, the other side of the wide river is a gloomy nothingness of brown dirt and haze.

Around the cremation ghats, Manikarnika and Harishchandra, the activity is relentless. For the denizens of Varanasi, it’s all very commonplace. But as a newcomer I was paralyzed with morbid curiosity, my attention inexorably drawn to the transformation of bodies from flesh to ash in a theater of death played out 24/7 for all to watch. More than 30,000 bodies are burned annually here. Harishchandra ghat even has an audience platform, beckoning onlookers, along with family members, to get a better view of the flaming spectacle. It may seem like a serious taboo for Westerners with eyes blanketed from death, but this sort of experience is exactly why we travel—to witness the “unreal,” to take in the extraordinary ordinariness of a way of life we could never have imagined.

THE DAY AFTER MY HAPHAZARD introduction to Manikarnika ghat, I returned for a deeper exposure to its rituals and protocols. Flames from the pyres punctuated the smoky landscape. The doms quietly went about their business, poking at the fires with bamboo sticks. Human ashes rained down on my head and shoulders as I watched a body being laid upon a stack of wood. The corpse was wrapped in a gold shroud, which I was later told indicated that the deceased was an elderly man who had died a good death. Red flecked with yellow is for high-caste women who die before their husbands, and white is for most men. Five men from the deceased’s family stood around the pyre. (Women aren’t typically allowed here,



for fear widows will throw themselves on the blaze.) One man, the chief mourner (according to tradition, the dead man’s eldest son), held a thick sheaf of straw on which he balanced an ember from the sacred fire. The men circled the pyre five times, one circumnavigation for each element: fire, water, earth, air, and ether. They walked counterclockwise, because, as one dom said, “in death everything is reversed.” The chief mourner placed the hay and the smoldering ember upon shavings of sandalwood that had been sprinkled atop the body. Thus ignited, the body began to burn. The rituals, while no doubt profoundly spiritual, were performed in such a routine manner that it put me at ease.

Around the cremation grounds, I talked to several doms about their jobs. They seemed largely unaffected by living and working in the constant presence of death. “It’s just a job,” said Gautam Choudhary, 22, when I asked about his work. Loulou Choudhary (all doms share the same last name, even if they’re not related), 31, who has been doing the job since he was 16, wandered over a few minutes later and echoed Gotham’s sentiments. “It’s not a matter of like or dislike,” he said of his job. “This is what I do. This is what my ancestors have done”—he’s a seventh-generation dom—“and it’s what my children will do. After all,” he added, “we’re untouchables.”

A body can take anywhere from two to 12 hours to burn. “It depends on one’s karma,” another dom told me. “The better the karma earned in life, the faster you burn.” He then told me about the five types of people who can’t be cremated: pregnant women, children, *sadhus*, lepers, and people who died from a snakebite. These people get a rock tied to their bodies and

are dropped into the Ganges.

About an hour after the elderly man’s corpse had been lit, the chief mourner approached the pyre, carrying a bamboo pole. He raised the four-foot stick over his head and then thwacked the corpse’s skull. It split open. This, Loulou Choudhary told me, is the moment when the soul is officially freed from the body and travels to the afterlife. Calmly, the mourner walked away. He showed little emotion.

I showed plenty. The enormous difference between the American and Indian outlooks on death hit me like a lead pipe, or a bamboo stick. The idea of having to split open your father’s and mother’s skulls so that they can successfully achieve heavenly liberation was something that I had a hard time wrapping my own head around. I had to remind myself why I was here—to better understand some of the unfortunate choices I’d made (or almost made). But I was still having a hard time making sense of what was taking place in front of me. I didn’t yet fully grasp the power of Varanasi, how the people here could be so accepting of death.

THEN I MET S.B. PATEL. A 25-year-old college student in a nearby town, S.B. happened to sit next to me on the viewing platform at Harishchandra ghat the next day. We began chatting while an older man and a middle-aged woman were being cremated in separate pyres. The man’s head was burned to a blackened crisp. The woman was almost all ashes. A man who had been swimming in the Ganges walked over to one of the pyres and held up his wet towel to dry a bit in the heat. A dog was sniffing around the other pyre.

“So what are you doing here?” I asked.

“You see that woman burning over there,” S.B. said. I looked over and then nodded. “That’s my sister.”

“Are you sad?” I asked, realizing this was about the dumbest question of all time.

“Yes,” he said. “But I can’t show it. It’s bad karma for the soul of the dead if mourners show grief during the cremation.” Forty-four years old and married, his sister died of a heart attack. This was her funeral. I asked if it was strange that I and other people who didn’t know his sister were watching this.

“No,” he said, shaking his head from side to side. “In Hinduism we try to let go of our ego. I’m appreciative that you’re taking an interest. My sister would have liked it.”

Just then, someone crashed our death party. He was introduced to me as Nehna. He was one of the five Dom Raja brothers.

This Dom Raja of Varanasi was wearing gold chains and a wifebeater tank top. His beach



One of the oldest and most revered of Varanasi's ghats, Manikarnika ghat is the prime site for Hindu cremations.



ball-size belly protruded from under his shirt.

Nehna Choudhary, 32 years old, said he worked at Harishchandra ghat. (His brothers controlled Manikarnika.) He couldn't stay to talk; he had business to do, but he asked me to meet him here tomorrow.

The following day I met Dom Raja Nehna along the river at Harishchandra ghat. "We take a boat," he said. Minutes later we were in the middle of the Ganges River. Smoke from three different cremations wafted toward the sky. Nehna explained the intricacies of splitting what had been one job several ways. He works about 105 days a year, he told me, as he rowed the boat toward the other side of the river. "I'm no longer fazed by what I see," he said.

When Nehna spoke, he did so through his lower teeth, because he always had a chunk of betel nut stuffed in his lower lip. It made him sound like a subcontinental version of Marlon Brando's *Godfather* character. Which was fitting, since Nehna was pretty much an analogous Godfather to the dead and their mourners.

"My idea of life and death hasn't changed," Nehna said, interrupting my thoughts. "But I do get a sense of happiness when I'm on the cremation grounds."

My ears pricked up when he said this. What would I learn from the Dom Raja, who has been around death all his life, where the acceptance of mortality is probably deep in his genes? "Because of moksha?" I asked. "Because it has made you see the important things in life, or it makes you feel redeemed about life on a daily basis? Because it reminds you of the impermanence of all things and that you have to live in the moment?"

In my excitement I was speaking too quickly for Nehna, who I suspected wasn't even listening to me anyway.

"I feel happiness when I'm there," he said, "because I can see all the money I'm making."

I sighed and focused on a nearby pilgrim who was leaning down from his boat, throwing water over his head and repeating, "Shiva, Mother Ganges."

We bumped up to the riverbank, and Nehna pulled in the oars. I'd been looking across to this side of the Ganges, and its emptiness, ever since I arrived. This side of the river is completely uninhabited, with absolutely no signs of human handiwork—Varanasi's antipode, a barren yin landscape to Varanasi's baroque yang. It makes the habitable side of the river, the one crammed with crumbling palaces and crawling with living beings, feel like the beginning of the world, the place where civilization starts, the spot that, five days

A GUIDE TO INDIA'S SOUL CITY VARANASI ETIQUETTE

Varanasi expert Mayank Pahwa, a guide with Varanasi Walks (varanasiwalks.com), offers tips on how to explore India's City of Light deeply—and respectfully.

—AISLYN GREENE

STOW THE CAMERA Photography near the cremation ghats is strictly prohibited, but travelers can take photos from a distance. To do so, hire one of the many wooden boats that tour the Ganges. The oarsmen will let you know when it's acceptable—or not—to take a shot.

BE OPEN BUT MINDFUL "It's in the culture of Varanasi to roam around and meet people," says Pahwa. You may be approached by young apprentices who want to explain ghat traditions. "If you're interested in learning, have a chat. If the person spends 10 or 15 minutes with you, you can tip him 100 rupees. If you don't feel the vibe, just leave."

RESPECT MOURNERS It's perfectly fine to stand close to the cremation ghats, but keep at a respectful distance from mourners, and let them initiate any conversation. "We celebrate people who lived their lives completely," Pahwa says. "So someone might very well want to

share and tell you, 'My grandfather died, and this is what he did.'"

CHECK YOUR SOLE(S) Remove your shoes before entering a temple. And watch for the short stone, metal, or clay shrines and icons called *shiva linga*. It is considered inauspicious to step over them.

DANCE WITH SHIVA Don't be shy about joining the boisterous processions that mark the more-than-400 festivals Varanasi celebrates each year. "People are honored if you want to participate," Pahwa says. "Just start walking, or dance if they're dancing." Smaller funeral processions, though, are for mourners only.

FLOAT A FLOWER The ghats are especially dramatic at sunset. Come dusk, visitors can buy blossoms to add to the sea of lotus-shaped candles floating downstream during *ganga aarti*, a glowing tribute to the Ganges River.

earlier, I was told is the epicenter of creation. Or, depending on how you look at it, the place where civilization ends, and thus starts over all again. Which was suddenly all starting to make sense, since a sadhu or a pilgrim or even an auto-rickshaw driver will remind you, as they did me, that in Varanasi there are no beginnings and endings, only passages and transformations.

Here I was, being rowed across the Ganges by the Dom Raja himself. It almost felt like I was physically making the post-cremation journey to moksha. Perhaps I was nearing ananda, just as Seatia Nararyna, the 85-year-old man I met at Moksha Bhavan on my first day in town, had advised me: bliss through nothingness, the kind of state a Hindu (or a Buddhist) tries to attain during meditation. Symbolically, the far side of the Ganges is devoid of desire and ego and grasping, because, well, there's *really* nothing there.

I'm a long way from the bliss that Mr. Nararyna charged me to go and seek. But this I learned in Varanasi: I had walked through the

fire during those unlit days a couple of years ago. I did it just after stepping away from that ledge. But it took coming here, talking to the doms and the mourners about death, feeling the vast blankness across the most holy river in Hinduism, to see that I only needed to let go, to realize that in nothingness is clarity and in clarity is peace. For nothingness isn't empty; it is the beginning of a hitherto unknown spirit we have the ability to tap into.

If we just choose to.

Once we rowed back to the habitable side of the river and got off the boat, the Dom Raja invited me over to his house for dinner that night. I said thank you, but no. I think, until my own time comes, I'm done with death for a while. I shook his hand, and walked away, ready to make my exit, fully alive, from Varanasi. **A**

Contributing writer David Farley has written about Czech cuisine, Ethiopian coffee, Vietnamese noodles, and more for AFAR. The photography team TrujilloPaumier is profiled on page 14.



A standing sadhu and a sitting meditator embody the stillness of morning prayer on the ghats along the Ganges river in Varanasi.