

On the Ghats of Varanasi: A Holy Night by Shiva's Flame

“The most important sadhana in Banaras — for both visitors and locals alike — is the dawning awareness of the reality of their own, impending death.”

— Dr Robert Svoboda

It is December 2018, and I am in Varanasi — India's holiest pilgrimage city. Varanasi: City of Light. City of Death. City of Lord Shiva, God of yogis and dissolution. Kashi, *the luminous one* — so the locals call it, believing that death here brings liberation. According to Hindu tradition, those who die in Kashi are freed from the eternal cycle of rebirth. Pilgrims from all over India journey here at the end of their lives: to die and dissolve into light.

I have come to Varanasi to work on a photo exhibition about its cremation grounds. As always, I arrive without a plan — only a vision in my heart and quiet trust that everything will unfold as it should. And it does. Within days I meet Niranjana, a wise young man born beside Manikarnika Ghat, who has spent his whole life there. He knows every corner of this place: the *Aghora* sadhus, the *Dom* cremators, even the Dom Raja — the cremation king of Varanasi — whom he affectionately calls *chacha* (“uncle”), and whom I, too, will soon meet.

It is Niranjana who brings me to the sacred Shiva flame — the fire that has burned for millennia and from which all cremation pyres are lit. The moment I stand before it, I know: this is where I want to spend Christmas Eve. My friends Will, a British yoga teacher, and Soma, a Spanish artist, want to join me. Niranjana offers his help immediately and promises to ask the Doms for permission for us to stay through the night.

On Christmas Eve, around nine o'clock, we begin our hour-long walk along the Ganges, from Assi Ghat in the south to Manikarnika Ghat in the north. We walk slowly, reverently, in silence, reciting a mantra to *Kal Bhairav* — a fierce form of Shiva and guardian of Varanasi.

Varanasi is a city of the night. It reveals its magic after sunset. The Ganges flows quietly, lapping against boats tied along the ghats. There is no traffic here — only pedestrians, boatmen, and street dogs, all woven into the city's mysterious, timeless rhythm.

We pass Harishchandra Ghat, the smaller of Varanasi's two cremation grounds. Beside the path stand the metal frames where bodies are

burned. We pass a fire where two charred legs protrude. We are not yet used to this sight. But Varanasi keeps calling us to confront impermanence — and to see it as ordinary.

Above the cremation fires a *puja* is taking place for Lord Shiva. The sound of *damaru* drums is loud and fierce, beating in time with our hearts. We pause, bow, and ask for Shiva's blessing.

Further along, people sleep on the stone *ghats*, some without even a blanket. Two men sit on the lower steps playing a snake-charmer's tune on out-of-tune flutes. The melody is dissonant, almost absurd — and there are no snakes in sight. The surrealism makes us laugh.

Near Manikarnika, we meet Niranjan. First, we decide to visit the famous Kashi Vishwanath Temple, dedicated to Shiva. We walk together through dim, medieval alleyways. At a small temple I glimpse a priest through a window performing his evening *puja*. When he sees me, he momentarily abandons his ritual, runs to the barred window, and blows me dramatic kisses. *Oh, India — how I've missed you*, I think, laughing quietly as we move on.

By ten o'clock we reach the temple just before it closes. The atmosphere is electric. Men and women press toward the sanctum, chanting *Har Har Mahadev!* in a rising chorus. A priest marks our foreheads with *bhasma* — sacred ash — and we leave, blessed.

Back at the ghats we offer coconuts, incense, and prayers to Mother Ganga. As I bend toward the water, two street dogs run up to me, joyfully nuzzling against my body. They try to lick my face and will not leave, as if they have found a long-lost friend. I smile — it feels like a blessing from Lord Bhairav, who rides a dog. Dogs are sacred here, connected mythologically with death. What could be more fitting?

We stop at a small, hidden Ganga temple near Manikarnika. It is quiet, unseen from the path. Inside, small flames flicker. Before us lies only the dark river. We sit and close our eyes, listening to the gentle lapping of water. Time suspends. Then — shouting. Across the river a man yells in Hindi. Niranjan says it is an exorcism: a family has brought someone to an Aghori sadhu to expel a spirit.

Back on the steps, we witness another Aghora ritual. It is midnight. A strong Aghori, wearing only a red loincloth, stands in the freezing river with a flame burning atop his head. He chants mantras, dips statues into the Ganges, and occasionally shouts *pagal!* (“idiot!”) at those for whom

he performs the ritual. Niranjana explains that this family came with a wish, and Kali's energy is flowing through the sadhu.

Finally, we arrive at Manikarnika Ghat. It is utterly unique, especially at night. About twenty cremation fires burn. Scattered among them are men, cows, dogs. Only Soma and I are women. Up to two hundred bodies are burned here each day. If you want to look impermanence in the eye, this is the place.

We climb a narrow stairway to reach the sacred Shiva flame. Some Dom workers sit warming themselves; others sleep. Niranjana blesses us with a small puja and ash. We sit before the fire on the stone floor and begin our japa. The smell of burning flesh lingers faintly. I wonder: what is it like to live and work here?

Another street dog joins me, curling into my lap. I wrap part of my blanket over him — after all, we are in Kal Bhairav's domain.

A young Dom bakes flatbread over the sacred flame and calls out loudly for his father, who is tending a pyre. "Papaaaaaaa!" he shouts into the night until his father joins him for their midnight meal. They offer us a piece and smile as we accept — a rare gesture, since Doms are often deemed untouchable, and many refuse food they have touched.

Above us is a terrace where more bodies are cremated. The local barber, who shaves the heads of mourners, works day and night, as do the wood vendors. Men haul massive bundles of wood on their backs and heads. A huge black goat appears and sniffs around the fire, looking for scraps.

Relatives regularly arrive to collect fire for their family's pyres. One is a boy of about ten, the eldest son of the deceased. His head is shaved, he wears white — the colour of mourning — and bravely carries a bundle of straw to ignite the funeral fire. I try to imagine this in Germany. I cannot.

A young Indian man, mourning his friend, sits beside us. Curious about our presence, he strikes up a conversation with Will about impermanence and death. His friend's body is being cremated below, to the sound of Krishna Das's *Om Namah Shivaya*. Others sing along softly. It is two a.m., and the moment is beautiful. Sacred.

We continue reciting the Bhairav mantra, meditating. But actually, just being here — surrounded by the dead, the dying, and the eternal — is meditation enough.

Here, death is everywhere. And yet it does not feel grim or sorrowful. The energy is light, focused, peaceful. Manikarnika Ghat is one of the few

truly quiet places in India. Aside from the chant *Rama Nam Satya Hai* (“God’s name is truth”) as new bodies arrive, the atmosphere is still, reverent. Not only mourning — but also joy and hope. For Hindus, death is not an end but a sacred transition. Liberation.

And so we sit at the sacred fire until dawn. With the Doms, with the dogs, with our thoughts — contemplating the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth.

In Christianity, light was born on this night.

In Hinduism, here at the place of death, the light has always burned.

It was never born.

It will never die.

As the Aghoris say again and again: death is an illusion.

It is the light — and the way to the light.

There is no better place to understand this than here, beside the sacred fire in Kashi.

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