

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

It's December 2018, and I am in Varanasi, India's holiest city. Varanasi: City of Light, City of Death, and City of Lord Shiva, the God of yogis and dissolution. Indians call this place *Kashi*, Light, because according to Hindu faith, those who die here are freed from the eternal cycle of life, death and rebirth. Hindus from all across the world journey to Kashi at the end of their lives, to die in the arms of their beloved Mother Ganga and dissolve into the light of liberation.

I have come here to work on a photo exhibition about Varanasi's cremation grounds. As so often, I have no idea about how this project will unfold. My companions on this journey are openness and a vision in my heart, a quiet trust that everything will reveal itself in time. And so it does. Within days I meet Niranjana, a wise young man who was born right beside *Manikarnika Ghat*, the city's main cremation ground, and has spent his entire life immersed in this world. He knows every corner of this place: the *Aghori* sadhus, wandering mendicants who meditate on corpses and are said to eat human flesh; the *Doms*, the cremation ground attendants, and even the *Dom Raja*, the mighty cremation king of Varanasi, whom he affectionately calls *chacha* ("uncle"), and whom I, too, will soon meet.

It is Niranjana who takes me to the sacred Shiva flame - the fire that has been burning continuously for thousands of years 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 so that we can spend the night undisturbed at this sacred site.

On Christmas Eve, at around nine pm, we begin our hour-long walk along the Ganges, from Assi Ghat in the south to Manikarnika Ghat in the north of the city. We walk slowly, reverently and in silence, fortified by a mantra to *Kal Bhairav*, a fierce form of Shiva and patron saint of Varanasi.

Varanasi is a city of the night. It reveals its magic after sunset. The Ganges flows quietly, its waves lapping against the little boats that are 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 cross *Harishchandra Ghat*, the smaller of Varanasi's two cremation grounds. Beside the footpath, metal cremation frames for the dead line the way. We pass a fire from which two charred legs protrude. We are not yet used to this sight. But Varanasi will keep calling us to confront impermanence and its ordinariness again and again.

Above the cremation fires a *puja*, a Hindu ritual of worship, 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.

Our pilgrimage continues. Several people are sleeping on the cold stone *ghats*, some without even a blanket. Two men sit on the lower steps of the ghats, near the Ganges, and play a snake-charmer's melody on out-of-tune flutes. The sound is dissonant, almost cacophonous - and there are no snakes in sight. The surrealism makes us laugh.

Near Manikarnika Ghat, we meet Niranjan. First, we decide to visit the famous Kashi Vishwanath Temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva. We walk together through the dim, medieval alleyways of the Old City and pass a small temple. I glimpse a priest through a window who is 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 pm, we reach the temple just before it closes for the night. The atmosphere is electric. Men and women jump, push and press toward the sanctum, chanting *Har Har Mahadev!* in a rising chorus. We get caught up in the mood. 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. My heart melts - this feels like a blessing from Lord Bhairav, whose vehicle is a dog. Dogs are also mythologically connected with death. What could be more apt?

Afterwards, we visit a small Ganga temple just before Manikarnika Ghat. It is hidden and can't be seen from the path. The atmosphere inside is magical and still. Small flames flicker inside the otherwise dark sanctuary. Before us lies only the dark river. We sit and close our eyes, listening to the gentle lapping of water. Time suspends - until we suddenly hear mighty screams from across the river. A man shouts something in Hindi, over and over. It sounds threatening. Niranjan says it is an exorcism: a family has brought a relative to an Aghori sadhu so that he can expel an evil spirit that they believe has taken hold of the afflicted person.

As we ascend back onto the footpath, we witness another ritual. It is now midnight. A strong-looking Aghori, wearing only a red loincloth, stands in the freezing river with a flame burning atop his head. He chants mantras, dips statues of deities into the Ganges, and occasionally shouts *pagal!* ("idiot!") at those for whom he performs the ritual. Niranjan explains that this family came with a wish, and that the energy of Kali, the fierce Goddess of transformation, is flowing through the sadhu.

Finally, we arrive at Manikarnika Ghat. It is utterly unique, especially at night. Cremation fires burn everywhere, around twenty at the same time. Scattered among them are men, cows and dogs. Soma and I are the only women present tonight. Up to two hundred bodies are burned here each day. If you want to look impermanence in the eye, this is the perfect place.

We climb a narrow stairway to reach the sacred Shiva flame. Some Dom workers sit warming themselves by the fire; others sleep. Niranjan blesses us with a small puja and ash. We sit before the fire on the stone floor and begin to recite mantras. I catch a faint whiff of burning flesh. I wonder: what would it be like to live and work here?

Another street dog joins me. This one curls itself into my lap without much further ado. I let him and wrap part of my blanket over its emaciated body - after all, we are in Kal Bhairav's domain.

A young Dom worker bakes flatbread over the sacred flame and calls out loudly for his father, who is tending a pyre. "Papaaaaaaa! Papaaaaaaa!" he shouts into the night

repeatedly, 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 deemed untouchable in India, and most people here refuse to eat food that 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, who, as the eldest son of the deceased, has to light his father's funeral pyre. His head is shaved and he wears white, the colour of mourning, and bravely carries a burning bundle of straw to ignite the funeral fire. I try to imagine this situation in the UK. I cannot.

A young Indian man who has lost 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*. Friends sing along softly. It is about two am, and the moment is beautiful. Sacred.

In-between, we continue reciting the Bhairav mantra and meditate. But actually, just being here, surrounded by the dead and the eternal, is meditation enough.

Death. Death is everywhere here. And yet it does not feel grim or sorrowful. On the contrary: the energy is light, focused and peaceful. Manikarnika Ghat is one of the few truly quiet places in India. Apart from the chant *Rama Nam Satya Hai* ("God's name is truth") that resounds across the ghat with the arrival of new bodies, the atmosphere is one of stillness and reverence. It envelopes not only grief, but also joy and hope. For Hindus, death is not an end but a sacred transition. Liberation. A passage.

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 is always burning. It was never born, and 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, at the sacred fire in Kashi.