Blurring the boundary between life and death – an afternoon in Varanasi, India

By Kate Graham-Shaw

The sky was parched grey and overcast. The river was expansive and a murky brown. The air was tainted with burning ash – the burning ash of human bodies.

The holy city of Varanasi, in the Uttar Pradesh state of northern India, is a city like no other in the world. Here the barriers between life and death are remarkably blurred. At the heart, it is a vibrant, pulsing city, where the furious beeping of tuk tuks or lively exchanges of inhabitants never ceases. This is starkly contrasted, however, with a prominent religious practice held daily on the banks of the Ganges – the spiritual burning of deceased bodies.

I arrived in Varanasi at the end of October 2019, having spent a month and a half travelling through India. My journey around this eclectic, unique subcontinent took me from the tourist-ridden golden triangle in the north to the beautiful lakes of Udaipur, along to the huge, colonial hub of Mumbai and down south to the laid back, greener regions of Goa and Kerala. Visiting Varanasi had not originally been on my itinerary, as I only had a limited amount of travel time, but once in India, it felt ridiculous not to do a detour to such a famed destination.

A boat sails down the Ganges beneath a blanched sky

Varanasi is considered one of the world's oldest living cities. It is a major religious centre for the Hindu faith and many followers undertake pilgrimages to the city – especially in later years of life – with the intention of dying there. Venturing far away from your home with the desire to die might sound strange to some, but the practice is so widely followed owing to details in ancient Hindu scriptures. Many followers of the faith believe that passing away in the holy city, having your body burnt and then afterwards having the ashes spread into the Ganges will break the cycle of death and rebirth. Thus, this would mean that your soul will achieve eternal salvation in the religion.

It was a warm, humid afternoon when I first witnessed these ceremonial cremations. I had set out from my hostel with the intention of reaching the site along the banks of the Ganges – I had read about the practice of burning bodies before arriving in the city and the distinctiveness of the ritual had sparked my curiosity immensely.

But I soon found that getting from the south part of the city along the Ganges towards what was locally known as the "burning ghats" was a much harder task than I had at first anticipated. There was no clear route down the Ganges, just a jumble of steps and sludgy banks which I somehow managed to traverse in slippy, sludge-covered sandals.

The path was made even more challenging by lots of uneven ground, mismatched pathways and even big pipes pumping out murky, polluted water into the sacred river. There was no possibility of getting back from the banks to the street once I had started – any likely way was blocked by huge, ancient ghats (holy buildings) which flanked the waterway like some impenetrable wall. So, as with many points on my solo travels, I gritted my teeth and continued on. Along the way, I caught sight of small groups immersing themselves in the river water – some going in fully clothed and splashing the sacred liquid over their heads.

I was lucky that some locals offered their hands to help me balance over some particularly difficult sections, and also helped to ward off the many rabid looking dogs and grumpy cows which were along the banks. This was often how the locals treated me across India, with kindness, respect and a willingness to help.

Men enjoying a stroll down the banks of the famous Ganges

"Don't take photos of the bodies" they warned me as I approached the first burning ghat, Harischandra ghat, about an hour into my walk. "It's bad karma". Karma was a word I had heard very often across India; it is taken very seriously there.

A good way down the bank from the first burning ghat, it was possible to make out the billowing plumes of smoke against the grey sky and hanging over the greyer Ganges. As I got ever closer, I saw the fires. And closer still, I saw the bodies.

My lungs and nose inhaled the sweet smelling smoke as I stood on the steps of the ghat. I was engulfed by a desert-like wave of heat which sent my head spinning.

Four or five pyres were burning in front of me. Deep red and yellow flames were writhing and pulsating, sending jets of ash and dark smoke into the air. At first it felt a little unreal what I was witnessing – it was hard to grasp that there were actual deceased bodies in front of me. I also felt slightly uncomfortable witnessing such an important moment for someone who I did not know. But at the same time, the ambiance was somewhat humbling – the juxtaposition between my own living

body and the stark nature of death in front of me seemed to shift something inside of me in a way I can't quite explain.

The atmosphere near the pyres was respectful, but not always silent and meditative. Mourning family members were there chanting hymns for their deceased, and about five metres away from me a group of young men were drinking, singing and dancing near the burning body of their relative.

One of my many local informers saw me watching. "They celebrate the death if it is an older person," they told me. "They drink and have fun. But if it is a young person, they do not do this." I asked them where the women of the family were. "Women are not allowed to attend," they told me. I found out later this is because women would apparently jump into the fire to join their husbands in death. This fact – if it is true – unsettled me a little for the pure and unwavering devotion it displays of women in the culture.

I was still breathing in the harsh, ashy smoke. But peculiarly, it didn't smell quite as I would have imagined scorching, melting flesh to smell. Another young local man had an

A dawn ceremony being performed at one of the many Ghats

answer for this one too. "You can't smell anything bad," he nodded knowingly. "This is Shiva's city, it is a holy city. This is a holy fire and it does not create a smell".

He was of course referring to the legend of how the city of Varanasi came to be some 5000 years ago. Hindu mythology states that Shiva, one of the principal deities in the Hindu faith, decapitated one of Brahma's (another Hindu deity) five heads and carried it around with him. Upon reaching Varanasi, Brahma's head was dropped to the ground where it disappeared, thus making the site extremely holy.

Local attendants were supervising the pyres; they would throw more wood on, and reposition it with a stick, occasionally poking at blackened body parts. The attendants are known as Doms – a section of the untouchable caste community whose job it is to tend to the flames and keep the bodies burning. It is perhaps somewhat ironic that these people literally make a living off of the dead.

With cremating dead bodies in Varanasi, as across all of India, there is a strict caste regime. In fact, the burning of bodies has a whole economy behind it – as more than 200 cremations happen at each of the two burning ghats in Varanasi each day and the fires are burning continuously, it takes a lot of expensive wood and man power to maintain. Lower caste families with deceased relatives may have to negotiate in order to burn the body – perhaps even exchanging cows or other valuable items. There are also several different qualities of wood available, as well as gas and electrical cremations.

The average body will take around 50,000 rupees (approximately £500) to burn, but rich families can pay several million rupees for special cremations. Sometimes if a family is unable to pay enough, the cremations are left only half completed and bodies or body parts of the deceased are pushed into the Ganges regardless.

I sat and watched for a while longer, considering the heat, the murmuring river, the hissing and spitting fires transforming the constituents of a human body into their basic, elemental levels. Ragged dogs were barking, the religious chanting kept going and the ceremonial bells kept ringing. The odd cow would amble along the sludgy river banks and munch on rubbish. Busy tourist boats paused at the site. I watched their pale faces considering the unceasing, unrelenting fire which burned and burned and burned. A new body came, shrouded in white. The Doms prepared a fire meticulously, methodically.
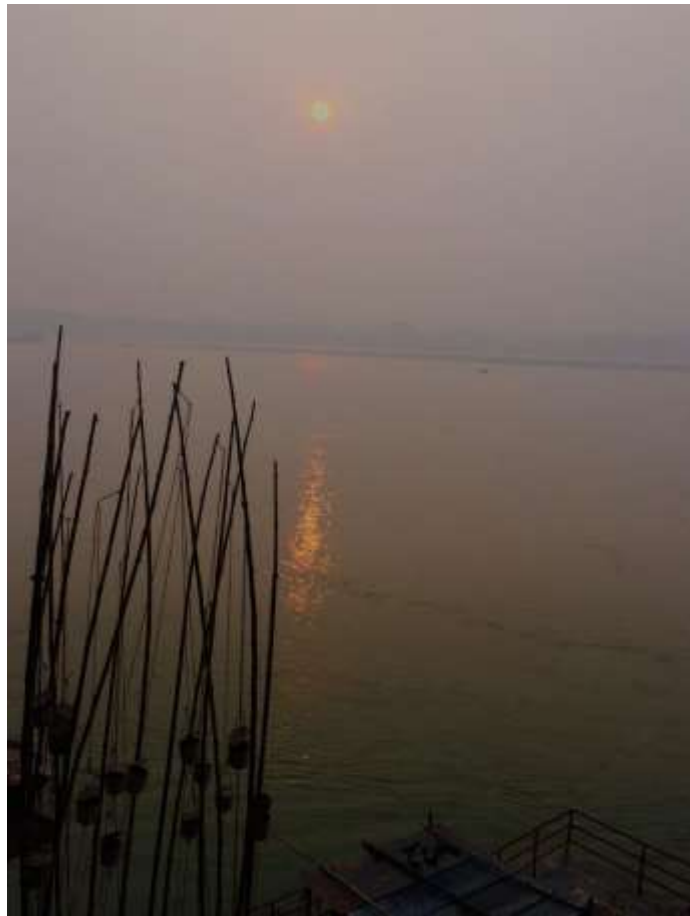

The Ganges at sunset

One of my favourite lines in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* – a film about British retirees moving to India is this: *"India is an assault on the senses, a riot of noise and colour".* This quote, I feel, perfectly encapsulates what it is like to visit the country.

There was often so much going on in this unique place, so many new and interesting occurrences happening all around me, all at once, that it was often hard to truly process everything that was happening. Examples include the man casually riding a horse on a dual carriageway, the random cows just happily roaming the streets everywhere, all day, the eclectic spice markets with exotic smells I had never before encountered, the sweltering temperature which made meant I felt constantly on the verge of fainting, the people hanging out of train doors as we sped along at 100mph and the time I saw a troop of monkeys siege a restaurant for food.

But looking at those burning pyres and watching those sacred, influential rituals had a profound effect on me. I have never been religious – I have always been a woman who studies science, though I have been careful never to firmly hold atheist viewpoints. Nevertheless, I have always been respectful of other people's beliefs and listened to what they have to say about them. It was clear that these rituals mattered to the Hindu people around me. The cremations of beloved family members mattered.

The barrier between life and death seemed truly blurred when it was presented right in front of me, in such vivid and unquestionable detail.

I wondered, as I finally found my way away from the banks and entered Varanasi's famous, winding alleyways, what the lives of the people I had seen burning had been like. I speculated who they were, what they had done, who they had loved and who had loved them. Because each and every life was so complete and individual, and yet this was so easy to forget going about my own daily life.

The alleyways of Varanasi were throbbing with people that afternoon; tourists and locals were rushing through the narrow gaps between the old, rickety buildings like red blood cells pulsing through arteries. There was shouting, beeping traffic, laughter, cooking food and children playing.

It was a comforting to me that a city which could so easily be associated with the dark, cold and lifelessness of death was the exact opposite – pure, uncensored life was erupting from every facet of the city's cracked walls.

Visiting Varanasi allowed me to realise that death can and does coexist with life, all the time, every day. Not only that it can, but that it must.