



Heaven's Gate

A lesson in spirituality, cremation and questionable drinking practices

text & photograph by Colleen Friesen

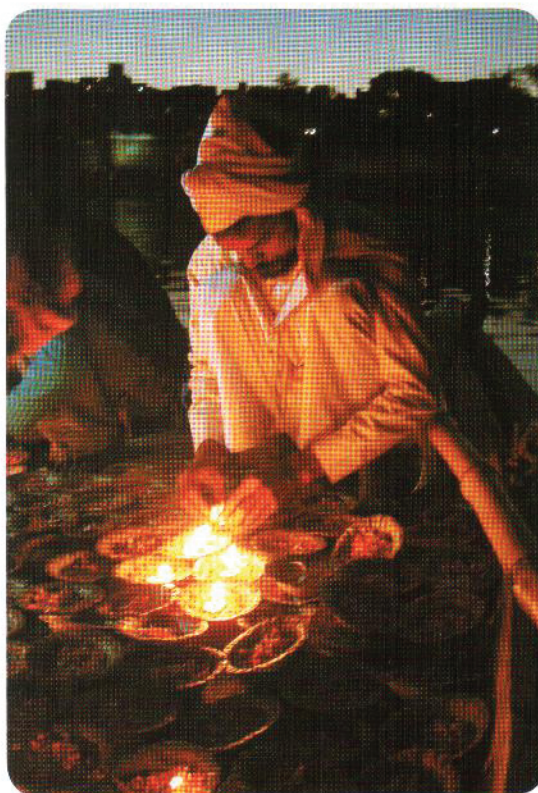
The feral dog has its skinny head down, shoulders hunched to the task – its entire body straining as it tugs and tears among the plastic bags, squashed marigold garlands and other rotting debris on the Ganges' eastern shore. Crows, like death's messengers, darken the flat, grey sky. And as our silent helmsman steers his battered wooden boat parallel to the shore, I turn to my guide, Mr. Sushil Kumar Roy, and ask, "Am I seeing what I think I'm seeing?" • "Yes, that is a human body."

This is Varanasi, India, the holiest of holy places according to Hindu belief – the place to die or at the very least be cremated. For it is here that the departed can stop the endless cycle of reincarnation and rebirth and instead go directly to heaven. Unfortunately, not every family can afford the wood required to burn their dead. So, while it may be illegal to throw bodies into the river, it is still done. The result, as Mr. Roy puts it, is "a harmony of contrasts."

I agree that India is the definitive study in contrasts. I'm not so sure about the harmony part. Its great river – which flows 2,500 kilometres from its source in the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal – is known as Ganga Ma, or "Mother Ganges." But it is also toxic, not only from the still-smoking body parts of the 45,000 cremations taking place annually in Varanasi but from the industrial effluent of its textile and chemical factories and 200 leather-tanning plants, plus the raw sewage from cities along its banks.

"Yes, ma'am. It is true. It is a polluted river," Mr. Roy patiently explains once more. "But there are two truths, and equally true is that the Ganges is a living goddess." At this, my guide, who in the last half-hour has quoted T.S. Eliot, Socrates, Plato and the Bhagavad-Gita, reaches over the side, scoops a handful of river water and slurps noisily through protruding teeth. He smiles. "I might not be described as healthy, but you cannot call me sick. And I drink from this river regularly."

The boat drifts gently on the goddess. I snap photos of locals smashing laundry on its steps, brushing their teeth, scrubbing their



bodies, swimming, and wading in its shallows where they make offerings and drink worshipping-handfuls of the divine waters. We steer toward Manikarnika Ghat, one of several sets of steps leading down to the river – each serving a different social function. Manikarnika serves as Varanasi's main crematorium, where we float just offshore, alongside boats piled high with twisted firewood and others filled with tourists like me. Nine bodies are burning; six shrouded corpses wait nearby on bamboo pallets.

Four men anoint a golden, wrapped body by submerging it. The pallet is then lifted

back onto the banks, where layer after layer of shiny gold and red fabric is removed, revealing a female form in a plain white wrapping. The body is placed atop a wood-pile, stacked log-cabin style, and a plastic pouch of ghee (clarified butter) poured over it – along with two kilos of black powder

from the guggul tree, to aggravate the fire and mask the smell of burning flesh. More wood is piled on, and the flames spark almost immediately. It will take just over three hours for the body to be consumed.

Our boatman pushes us away from shore, where a young boy balances a smoking, charred piece of flesh and bone on two sticks. Hindi instructions are yelled by the man in charge. The child looks confused and frightened. "That would be the oldest son," explains Mr. Roy. "Any remains must be removed so the next body starts on a clean site."

The sun sets through a charcoal haze over the city. The Ganges swirls around our boat. Mr. Roy bends to light a homemade candle in a thin, paper dish. Marigolds are stuffed around the flame. The skinny

little boy who sold them from his broken basket has a few more rupees to take home, stuffed in the pocket of his too-big shorts.

"Make a wish," says Mr. Roy. "And let your candle float on her waters so it can be granted." I protect the slender flame from the breeze off the river, and soon my candle is twinkling down the darkening waters amidst all the other dreams and yearnings cast off from shadowy boats, in a flickering, silent parade down the river. ■

Sechelt, B.C.-based writer Colleen Friesen travels whenever and wherever possible. But her favourite destination remains India.