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Varanasi: City of the Living, Dying and Dead

VARANASI, U.P. India

April 1996

*"Shanrd, sanrh, sirhi, sanyasi,
Unse bache, to sewe Kashi."
("Widows, bulls, steps, pundits,
If you can tolerate these, you will enjoy Kashi.")*

—The Kashi (Varanasi) Mantra

By Pramila Jayapal

"Why on earth would you want to go Varanasi?" an Indian family friend in Delhi said to me when I told her we were planning to spend some time here. "It's got to be India's dirtiest city. I only went because I had to; I had promised my mother I would sprinkle her ashes in the Ganga, so I did and just dipped my toe in the river to satisfy my promise to her. We got out of there as quickly as we could. Well, whatever you do," she continued, referring to an upcoming trip we were planning for my parents-in-law's visit, "don't take your in-laws there when they come. It's an embarrassment to us."

She, along with others who voiced similar sentiments, made us nervous. Yet, on the other side, there were the words of friends and relatives who had been to Varanasi (also called Banaras and Kashi) and loved it. "It is the city which is most representative of India," an Indian friend in the States said. "It is fascinating."

We knew we had to come. Varanasi is Hindu India's holiest city, the city of the life-giving Ganges River. Hundreds of pilgrims come every day from all parts of India: some to bathe in the Ganges, some to do the 5-6 day Panch Kroschi pilgrimage around the city's sacred sites and others to die here. (It is said that all those who die in Varanasi attain *moksha*, salvation.) I knew that my time in India would not be complete without seeing for myself what Varanasi holds.

Within a day of arriving, we had decided to stay for a couple of months. Varanasi cast its spell on us, and lured us into its palace of myths, legends, and beliefs. It caught us in its silken web of music, rituals and folklore. Varanasi is representative of India in that it is a microcosm of all that is unique about Hindu culture; it is not representative of India in that there is no other city in India like it.

One of the oldest living cities in the world, Varanasi encapsulates all the rituals and symbols of Hindu culture and religion. While other cities in India are interested in modernizing, Varanasi is interested in preserving tradition — and it has. Varanasi is the home of sadhus and saints, pundits and pilgrims, yogis and "bogeys." It is full of the contradictions and complexities for which India is famous. It is overwhelming in its noise, crowd and dirt, but peaceful in the purity of those who come to worship here.

In Varanasi, one can begin to see how the whole country can either be pulled

The Origins of the Names: Kashi, Banaras and Varanasi

Kashi: The most ancient name, initially used nearly 3,000 years ago to refer to the kingdom of which this city was the capital. Kashi means shining one, luminous one, illumining one. In eulogistic literature about Kashi, it is said: "Because that light, which is the unspeakable Shiva, shines here, let its other name be called Kashi." This name is used often, particularly in a religious context.

Varanasi: The official name of the city, although not necessarily the most widely used. Popularly, the name is said to come from the fact that Varanasi sits between the Varana River, which flows into the Ganges on the north, and the Asi River, which joins the Ganges on the south. It is likely, however, that the real origin of the name is derived from the single river that bordered the city on the north, known in early literature as the Varanasi River, not the Varana.

Banaras: A corruption of the Pali version — Baranasi — of Varanasi.

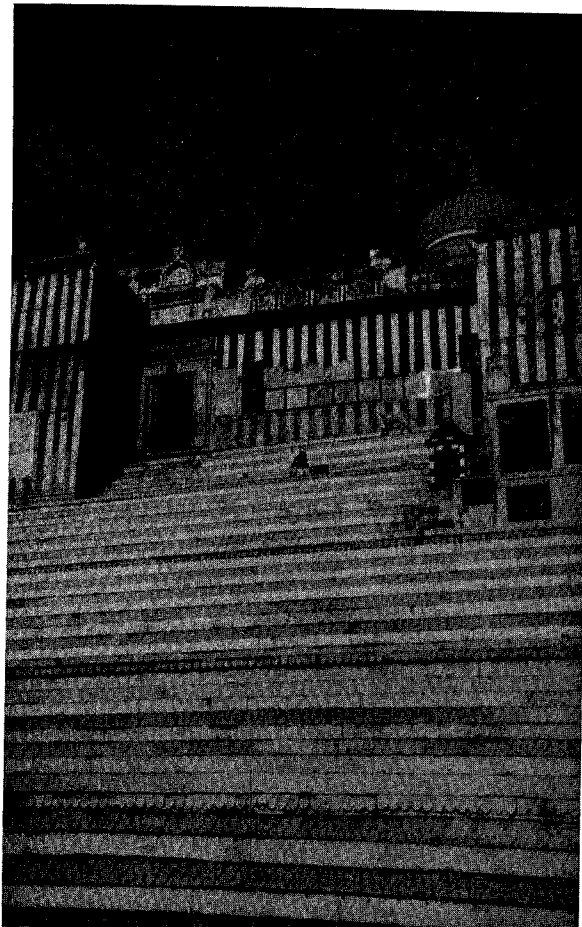
apart with religion or drawn together by it. Here, one can begin to see where today's understanding of Hinduism clashes with the idea of development, sometimes as unable to share the same pot as oil and water. Here, one sees how people have put everything into blind faith; how, often abandoned by society and government, people renew their belief in the first and last

great hope — God. Perhaps it is these reverberations of faith from the thousands of pilgrims who come to Varanasi that create a field of energy that envelops the city day and night.

It is impossible to describe Varanasi fully. After two months of being here, I am still struck by those things that are so typical to a Benarasi and so unique to a visitor.

There is the city itself, a collage of images, melded together in a patchwork that sometimes seems both coordinated and discordant. The streets around Gowdoulia, the central shopping area, are packed with cycle rickshaws, the front wheel of one pushed between the two back wheels of the one in front. Traffic moves as slowly as the ubiquitous cows that amble through the galis (tiny alleys that Varanasi is famous for). There are special sections of town as well as temples for people from different parts of India: Bengali Tola, filled with Bengali sweets and sarees, or the distinctively South-Indian-style, red-and-white-striped Kedara Temple, behind which is an *idlee-dosa* stand for homesick Tamils and Malayalees.

Shrines devoted to one or many of the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses are everywhere: along the roadsides, inside the iron window-bars of the old houses that line the galis, gracing a table in many stores. Small shops fill the sidewalks, selling everything from lanterns to bicycle tires. People throng the streets, treading their way gingerly through mud and puddles left over from yesterday's rains, weaving their way between rickshaws and buffaloes, past young children sweeping the streets. Fruit and vegetable sellers' songs ring through the air as they wheel their wooden carts through the masses: "*Alu, phul-gobi, tomater, pyaz*" (potatoes, cauliflower, tomatoes, onions) echoes with another's call of "*Kele, santare, nimbu*" (bananas, oranges, limes), seemingly playing with harmonies and melodies.



The distinctively South-Indian-style, red-and-white-striped Kedara Temple sits atop a steep ghat.

The lanes radiating out from Gowdoulia lead to the



A woman washes her vessels as a cow looks on.

river, Ganga Ma, the Ganges. From the end of the road starts the long series of steps leading down to various ghats. Each ghat has a name, each name a story, each story a history and ten different versions. Here along the river people dry clothes, make dung patties and stick them against the walls and steps of the ghats to dry for fuel, or just sit and watch life as it passes by.

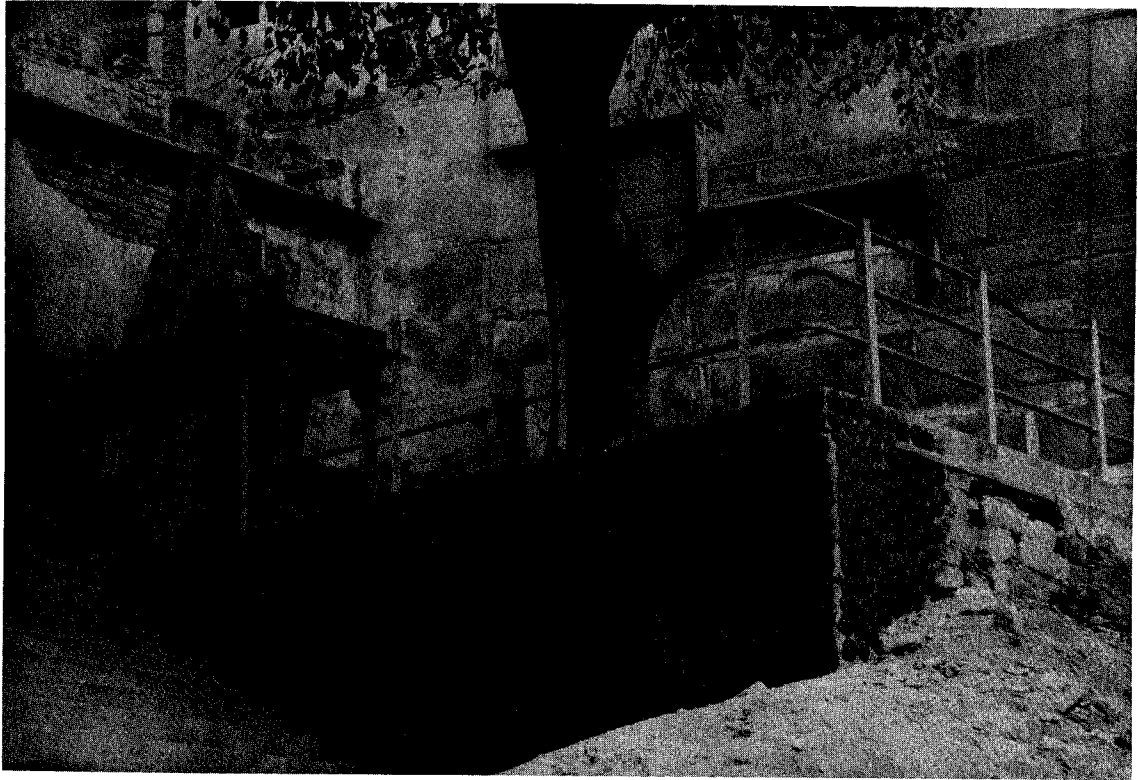
Equally distinctive is the Banarasi mindset, the concept of *masti*. There is no one translation of *masti*; it is the state of being without cares, of being intoxicated with the extreme joy of living, of being fully involved with what one is doing. People work hard in Varanasi — but without the sense of bitterness, despair, trouble that one feels in other cities of the same size. Along with hard work, there is a full enjoyment of life, whether it through appreciation of music and art, enjoyment of special Banarasi *paan* (spices wrapped in betel nut leaves) or sweets and *bhang* (marijuana that is very commonly put into drinks and food on special occasions), all of which Varanasi is famous for. *Masti* is an attitude to life that governs the most mundane to the most complex. It is calmness when one misses a train; and it is the rejoicing of death alongside life.

"Death may be the opposite of birth," said Diana Eck, a well-known Western authority on Varanasi, "but it is not the opposite of life." Certainly not in Var-

anasi. According to Eck, in the West death is something that is feared for all of one's life, where faces are averted from dead bodies, where old people are put in hospitals and retirement homes so that others do not have to witness their aging and dying. In Varanasi, death is welcomed as the ultimate goal of one's life, to achieve *moksha* (salvation). Often if someone has died, it is not said that he/she has died but rather "*Moksha mila*" ("He has received salvation").

Varanasi, often termed the world's largest cremation ground, is one place where life and death co-exist side-by-side ... literally. At the two cremation ghats, between 150-200 dead bodies are cremated every day. The bodies, wrapped in bright pink or red cloth, are transported on wooden stretchers down to the river, sometimes carried by people, sometimes simply propped up in a cycle rickshaw. The other day, I saw a body wrapped in magnificent pink lying in the middle of a crowded road; it was surrounded by a group of seven or eight men chatting — unconcerned about the traffic or this body; perhaps discussing how the body would be taken to the ghats. It is not uncommon to see someone who crosses the path of a dead body greet the body by raising their hands in *namaskar*. It is the acknowledgment of the achievement of the final fulfillment.

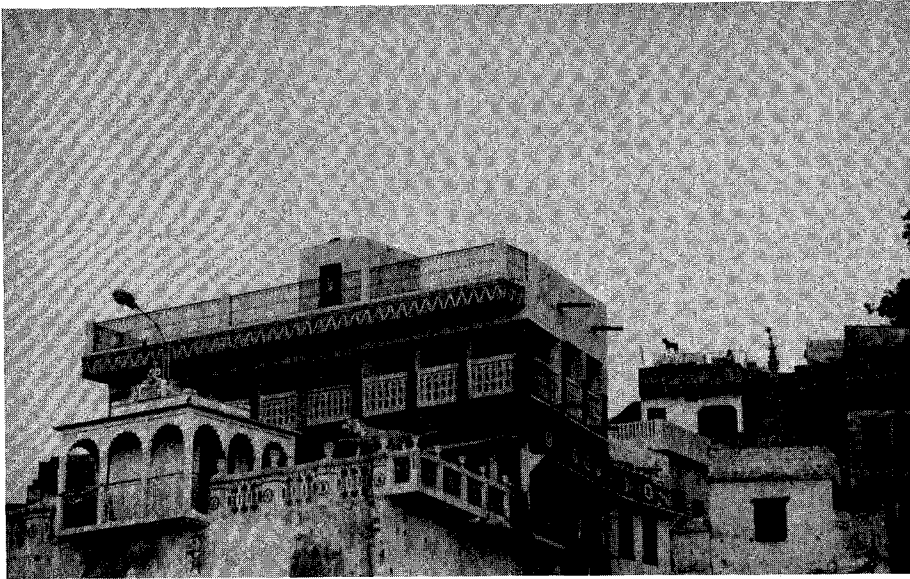
At Marnikarnika Ghat, the more famous of the two



Patties made of dung are stuck to walls to dry.



A typical Ganga scene: clothes dry, children play, people watch their boats and cows look



The Dom Raja's (head of the Dom caste that performs cremations) house with its prime riverfront location; cremation is quite a lucrative business in Banaras.

cremation ghats, children play cricket alongside the cremations. Hundreds of people stand and watch, talking and laughing with each other as the several fires burn, and a wood-smoke smell not too different from that of a barbecue wafts through the air. It is a hive of bustling activity, as lines of men carry loads of wood to and from the ghat, boats take families into the middle of the river to sprinkle the ashes of their recently cremated ones, and families perform the last rites for their loved ones. Individuals are completely involved in their own tasks, and though it might seem strange to have outsiders standing and watching, nobody minds.

I stood one day on the balcony of an old building just above Marnikarnika. Several fires burned below, each one managed by one or two *doms*, the caste of people who are the cremators. To the right was a huge weighing scale that weighed the correct amount of wood needed for each cremation. "It takes two quintals of wood to burn a body," the Indian man standing next to me said. "What kind of wood do they use?" I asked. "Depends on how rich the family is," he replied. "If they are very wealthy, then they use sandalwood. If they are very poor, they use whatever they can find which is the cheapest."

"It takes three hours for a body to burn," he continued matter-of-factly, "and three and a half if it's a female body, because of the hip bones." It occurred to me as he talked and as I watched, how much an art the act of cremation is. First, there are the rituals. Each body is first blessed and then dipped in the Ganga. Then it is wrapped in a very specific way, with pieces of wood inserted here and there between folds of cloth to ensure that all the right parts will catch fire. Once placed on the fire, the dom again blesses it, circling it three times in the air with a lit stick of wood. Now the cremation begins. The doms move, turn and flip the body as deftly as the greatest of chefs. Watching the

bodies become just blazes of fire is like seeing the concluding disintegration of the physical into its smallest pieces of ashes. No matter what caste, what class, what country, this is the ultimate commonality of each life — that it ends.

Varanasi as a cremation ground also lives side-by-side with Varanasi as a wedding ground. The city is known for its joyous weddings. The "wedding season" takes place during winter months, when every day the streets are filled with noises of wedding bands and processions. Particularly during the nights, the streets are often blocked with these processions. The turbaned groom, decked out in gold and white garb, sits atop a horse. He is preceded by the live band in red and gold uniforms, and surrounded by the wedding party (mostly men) who gyrate unabashedly to the music in a style that is a cross between John Travolta and the limbo. The whole crowd is outlined with the glow of large lamps carried on the heads of young girls and women (paid laborers), connected with wires to a generator on wheels whose noise competes with the band.

Almost every other day or week is a festival, each one celebrated with gusto as if it were the most important festival of the year. During festivals, the area next to the important temples is transformed. Roads that are normally filled with cars and auto-rickshaws become busy with large numbers of makeshift flower shops; garlands of jasmine and marigolds, carnations and roses are quickly erected on either side of the temple entrance. On the opposite side, shops sell various offerings to be given as food to the gods — condensed milk sweets, small packets of white sugar balls, and coconuts. Often, long lines form for men (there is a separate one for women) who want to take *darshan* (auspicious viewing of the god or goddess). One can often see water and milk trickle out of the temple onto the road, evidence of the thousands who have gone and given



The crowded entrance of the popular Durga Temple on one of the nine days of Navratra, when Durga is honored.

prasad (offerings that have been blessed by the priests), and have had holy water or milk poured onto their heads by a priest.

The day we arrived in Varanasi was *Saraswati-puja* (prayer), the day when Saraswati, the Goddess of Knowledge and Learning, is honored. Elaborate images of Saraswati are made from straw, clay and wood and then paraded down the streets on palanquin-type structures. People in processions make their way down to the Ganges, then float the idols down the river. For at least a week afterward, I could see Saraswati idols that had washed up along the river banks.

At the beginning of March was Holi, the festival of colors that signals the entrance of spring and the new year. During Holi, all that is bad from the previous year is released, symbolically through the burning of straw statues of the Demoness Holika in the middle of large bonfires. For weeks before Holi, the streets are lined with shops displaying pyramids of colored powder, which is mixed with water and thrown over people the morning of Holi. The spirit of Holi is supposed to be playful and fun, and, as a friend of ours explained, is a time when "all hierarchy can be turned on its head. Children who usually come and touch my feet and are never allowed to answer me back can come and abuse me on Holi. This gets out all the negativities before the new year starts." However, in recent years it has become a most un-holy holiday: children go overboard, men consider women who are walking during the morning fair game for their leers and pent-up sexual frustrations, play often gets violent. We stayed



The goddess, Holika, about to be burned in a Holi bonfire.

locked up in our house for the morning, following the strict instructions of friends and neighbors, then ventured out in the mid-afternoon hours when "Wet Holi" was over. After "Wet Holi," people go home to bathe and put on their new white clothes. Then "Dry Holi" and the visiting hours start. Families and groups of people walk around together visiting relatives and friends, dry colors are smeared on foreheads as a sign of welcome and Banarasi hospitality is at its finest. We visited several households, and came home with our stomachs stuffed with *dahi-vada* (small, fried, doughnut-shaped lentil patties in yoghurt) and *namkeen* (salty snacks), and our foreheads and faces smeared with red, pink, yellow and green. Perhaps the oddest thing about Holi for me was the way that this conservative society was essentially "given grace" to turn tradition and hierarchy on its head for eight short hours, after which peace was restored completely, instantaneously, and with no outside intervention.

In the two months we have been in Varanasi, there have been countless other festivals: Shivratri (the greatest Shiva festival, which celebrates the marriage of Lord Shiva to Parvati), Navratra (the nine-day festival honoring different forms of Goddess Devi), Ram Navami (which celebrates the birth of Lord Rama, incarnation of Vishnu), and Burhwa Mangal (the river festival of music).

In between all of these festivals are the individual days of the week, each one of which is devoted to a different God or Goddess. Monday is Shiva's day, Tuesdays and Saturdays belong to the Goddess Durga and to Hanuman, Fridays are for Santoshi Mata and Sankata Devi. If I did not live in Varanasi, I could easily think that each day was just like any other, that these days devoted to gods and goddesses were only in name and not practice, that the city functioned as did any other city. It is only through being here that I have realized that these traditions and rituals are very strictly adhered to by the majority of people; that the gods' respective days, the main temples will be flooded with their devotees.

In Varanasi, people's faith is so strong that even the most mundane of events is interpreted as a religious happening. The other day, I went to Kashi-Viswanath Temple, the most famous Shiva Temple in the city. The temple sits in a tiny gali and, because it is one of the sa-



The gali just outside Viswanath Mandir.

cred sites that is contested by Hindus and Moslems, is watched by scores of policemen in khaki uniforms carrying large *lathis* (wooden sticks). (Since the 1992 destruction of the Babri Masjid and the violence that followed, the government has stationed police officers all along Viswanath gali.) It was Monday — Shiva day, and that, too, during the nine-day Navratra festival. I found myself caught in the middle of a huge crowd, between several old women who held on to my dupatta so as not to get pushed over by the crowd, a saffron-clad pujari gingerly holding a brass pot filled with water, and two more aggressive youths. Overwhelmed, as I often feel in crowded temples, I was filled with a sense of claustrophobia and fear of ruthless crowd devotion. Just then, everyone around me started shouting in fear and I found myself flattened in the pushing of the crowd. People were trying to run



Two Shiva-lingams on either side of Nandi, Shiva's bull.

but it was impossible to move even a limb in the crowd. I could not understand what they were yelling, nor why. Suddenly I realized that most of the crowd had dived inward, and I was now on the outside of it. A small space had been cleared on one side of the tiny gali, and coming toward it was an unfriendly-looking ox with long, sharp horns. The ox occupied at least half the gali, while hundreds of people flattened themselves against the outer walls of the temple in fear. The ox stopped, looked around and finally moved on, deciding none of us were worth his time. "What were they yelling?" I asked a friend who was with me. "Didn't you hear? They were saying 'Shiv-ji aye hai! Shiv-ji aye hai!' Lord Shiva has come in the form of an ox — only in Varanasi could it be that the meanest of oxen could be granted the status of a God.

Even outside the temples, I am often reminded of how much a part of everyday life beliefs and rituals are. Just the other day, sitting in the business center near our house, I saw Mr. Battacharya, the owner, sewing together nine green chilies and a lime. "What is that?" I asked curiously. He laughed. "I knew you would ask. We believe that if too many good things are said about us or our business, then it will be bad luck for us. Hanging this outside our shop is the way to negate the effects of all good things that have been said. You will see, almost all businesses do this once a week."

Another time, I ran to a shop near us early in the morning to buy something but realized I had forgotten my wallet. The shopkeeper, who knows me well, looked at me a little sheepishly and handed me a Rs. 10 note from his own wallet. "Any other time, sister, it would have been okay for you to give me the money later. But now, you are the first customer of the day and it will be bad luck if you do not buy something with cash. You pay now with this money, and you can give it back to me later."

The Linga at Kedara Temple: A Devotee's Reward

The legendary king of ancient India, Mandhatri, gave up his kingdom and went to Kedara in the Himalayas in hope of darshan, of liberation through seeing Shiva's linga. After years of worship there, he was told by Shiva that only in Kashi was the darshana of his linga possible.

The king went to Kashi; every day before taking his meal, however, he returned to the Himalayas, traveling with the swiftness of thought by virtue of his yogic powers. There he would worship Shiva and travel back to Kashi.

When he became very old, it was very hard for him to make this daily pilgrimage. Again Shiva spoke to Mandhatri and told him this time he should eat his meal first each day and then commence the journey, strengthened with food. The king reluctantly gave up the strictness of his practice, and prepared some khichari, a dish made of simple lentils and rice. But when he went out to find a guest with whom to share his food, as was proper, Mandhatri could find no one. Unwilling to eat without serving a guest first, he worried that he would not be able to commence his pilgrimage that day at all.

At last, Shiva himself appeared in the guise of a mendicant and became Mandhatri's guest. Mandhatri happily cut the khichari in two, but when he went to offer half to his guest, he found that the whole plate of khichari had turned to stone. Shiva appeared to him, right out of the khichari, and revealed his linga form. Today, this place where Shiva manifested himself is considered one of Varanasi's most sacred sites.

(From Diana Eck's Banaras: City of Light)

Do people really believe in these myths, these legends? Is it possible that people who worship at Kedara Temple actually believe that the linga (an aniconic stone shaft, which is the symbol of Shiva and is worshipped in all Shiva temples) there is the one that self-manifested itself in a plate of rice and dal in recognition of one devotee's devotion to Lord Shiva? Thousands of pilgrims and residents from all over India come to Varanasi, spending hundreds of precious rupees to come and bathe in the Ganges, or perhaps to do the Panch Krosi pilgrimage in their bare feet with bundles of rice and temple offerings on their heads. What do people think as they worship? Why do they come to these temples, to see these Gods?

They come because they *do* believe; they believe in the power of the gods, and in the power (*shakti*) of Kashi to end *dukhi* (sadness), to cleanse away one's sins. They come, some of them, because they have made a promise to their gods that if their prayers are answered for specific events they will do some rituals in thanks. They come, others, because they believe that the more prayers they offer, the better their lives will be. They come to die in Kashi and attain moksha.

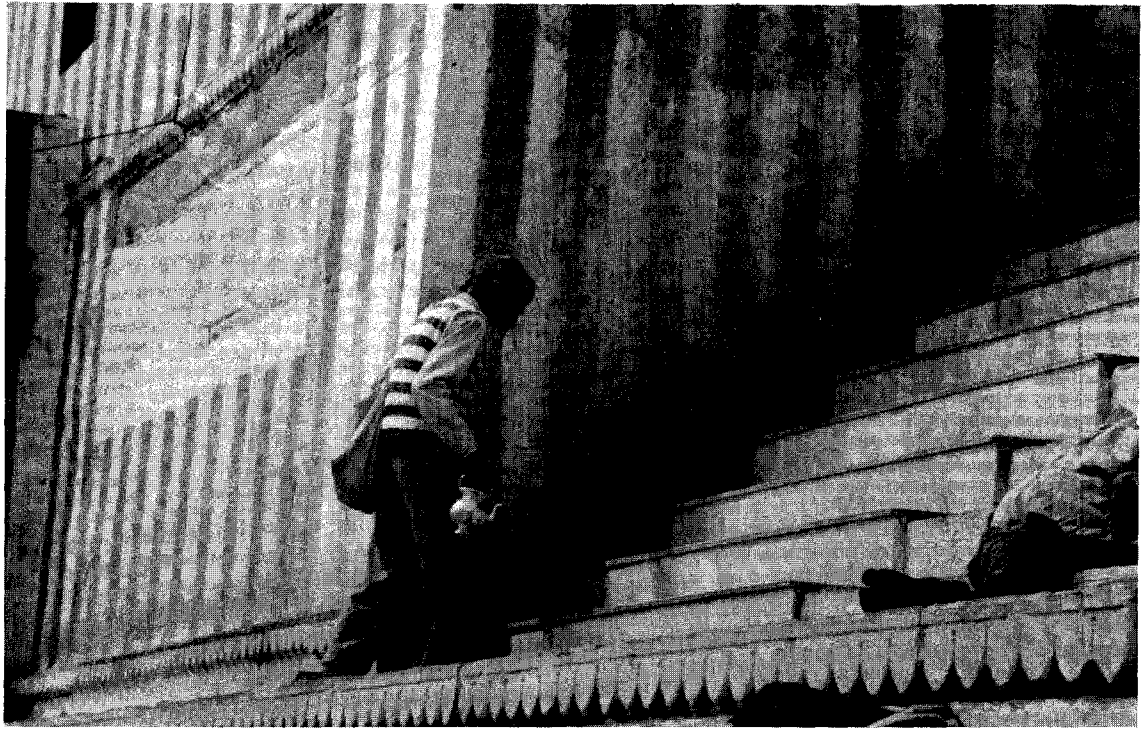
At the Ganges River every morning, thousands of people come to bathe, greeting the sun as it brings its brilliant red body out of the river and into the sky. Old women,

sadhus, children and men, waist-deep in water, hold their arms outstretched, palms raised to the sky, as they chant the names of gods: "Ram, Krishna, Shiva, Devi..." Some scoop up water and trickle it over their heads, while others hold their noses and plunge their heads into the water. Taking a boat ride down the Ganga with a toothless old man who rows effortlessly and knows every story of every one of Varanasi's 80 ghats is an indescribable pleasure. Varanasi is famous for its ghats, long steep sets of steps that lead down to the river. Atop the ghats are palaces that belong to rich rulers like the Maharaja of Jaipur, or historic buildings that have now been converted into hospitals, ashrams or guesthouses. All forms of life happen here in the river: people bathe, brush their teeth, wash clothes, worship, and even play water polo in the summers in this holy water.

Every pilgrim I spoke to knew that Ganga water is holy, pure. Sensing any shred of disbelief, they will counter, "Haven't you tried to put Ganga water in a jar? It will stay fresh with no odor for years." Another pilgrim told me the story of someone who had committed a terrible sin and tied his cow up without feeding it. (Cows are considered extremely sacred. It is said that one can go to the other bank of the river, to salvation, by hanging onto the tail of a cow.) The cow eventually died, and the man, terrified of what would happen to him for committing this sin, went to a Brahmin



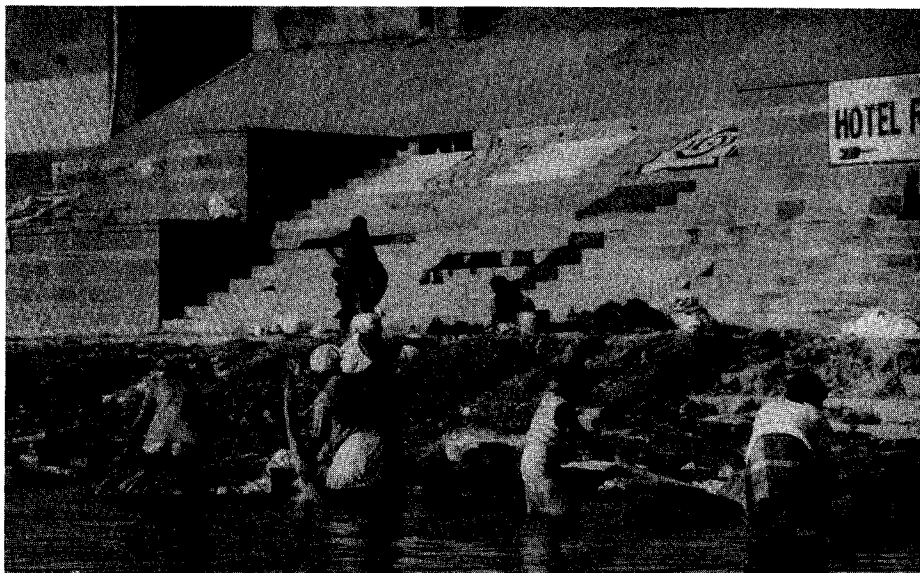
An old woman prays outside Kedara Temple.



An old man climbs the steep steps with his water jug, which he will use to pour water in offering over the Shiva lingas inside the temple.



A woman who is preparing the essential pieces for a big puja.



Dhobi ghat, where washermen and women wash clothes by pounding them against big slabs of rock.

who told him that only bathing in the Ganga could cleanse him of this terrible sin.

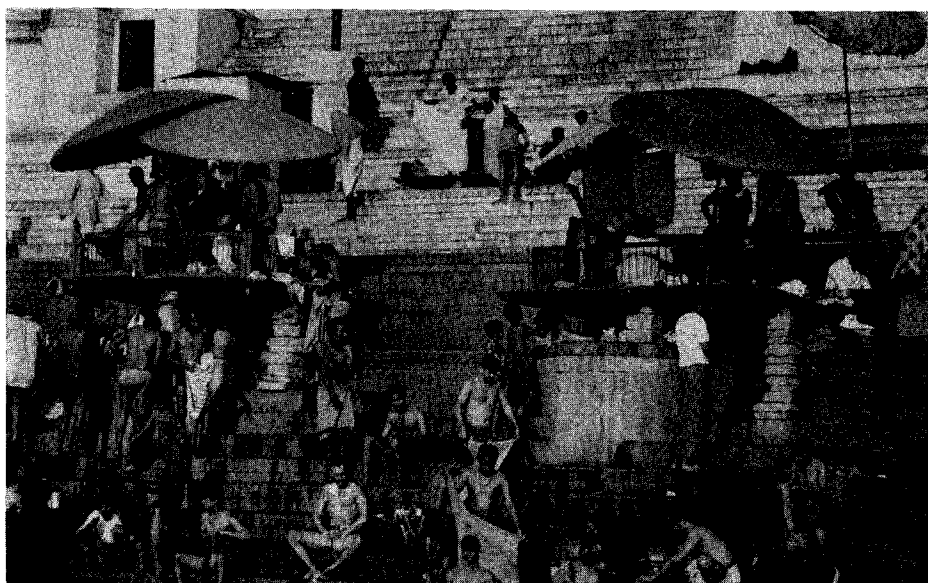
Not all people believe that the Ganga cleanses one of sins. But those who believe do so fervently. Those who don't still believe that there is something purifying and holy about bathing in the Ganga. Whatever they believe, they come in droves, morning and evening to worship this "life-giving" river.

For many devotees that I have spoken with, God is someone who is to be thanked for all good things that happen in life, someone to ask for those things that are needed (birth of children, blessing of a boy-child, winning an election), but never someone to be reprimanded if something does not happen that you want. All bad things in life are a result of one's own actions; there is a firm belief that it must have happened for a

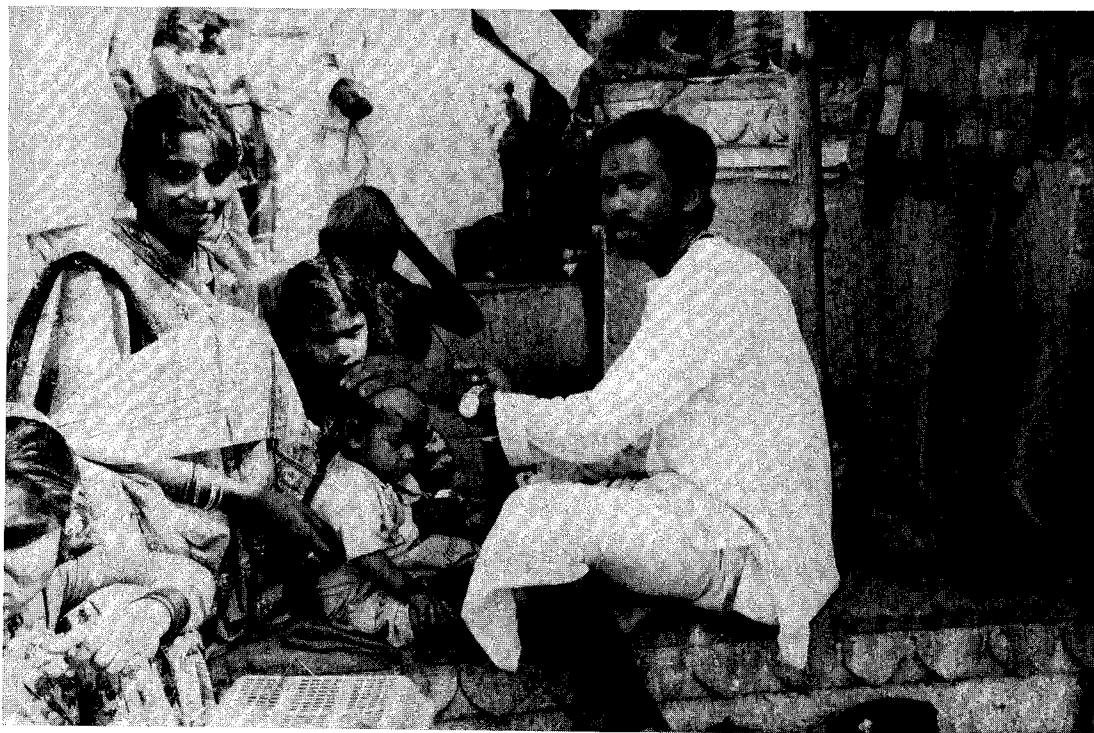
reason—or, as one Indian man said to me, perhaps it is just that it is not good for your own karma to say that it is "God's fault" that something happened.

There is an odd "bargaining" relationship with God often visible: "If you do this for me, then I will do this for you in thanks." Just a few days ago, during Navrastra, I went to Dasashvamedh Ghat, one of the busiest ghats in Varanasi. The long steps down to the river at Dasashvamedh Ghat lead toward scores of small wooden platforms covered with bamboo umbrellas. From the river, it looks almost like a beach resort. From the shore, one can see that the platforms are occupied by various pujaris who will perform the necessary rites and prayers, and (for a small fee) watch your clothes while you bathe in the Ganga.

Dozens of barbers had joined the pujaris during



Dasashvamedh Ghat, with its umbrellas, pujaris, and bathers.



Two mundans are performed.



Navratra to perform mundans, a ceremony when a child's first head of hair is shaved and offered to a specific god or goddess. One beautiful young woman, her long, braided hair gleaming in the sun, told us that she had made a promise that if she was given a child, she would offer its first hair to Shitala-Devi, the Goddess who commonly manifests herself in "both the outbreak and the "cooling" of fever diseases, particularly smallpox. Her wish had been granted, and so she had come to perform the mundan.

The Ghat of Ten-Horse Sacrifices

Dasashvamedh Ghat, or "Ten-Horse Sacrifices" Ghat, is said to take its name from the story of how Shiva tried to win back Kashi from King Divodasa. It is said that Lord Shiva loved Kashi like no other place in the three worlds (heaven, earth and the underworld) and wanted to make it his home. To do so, however, he had to find a way to make King Divodasa, who was ruling Kashi, leave — by "creating a flaw in the dharma of the King." Shiva sent all kinds of forces — from yoginis, or female goddesses, to the Sun — to try and trick the King into leaving Kashi, but with no success. Finally, Shiva sent Lord Brahma, who went as a brahmin to Divodasa's court. Brahma, as a religious figure, won the confidence of the King and ordered him to perform a simultaneous ten-horse sacrifice (ashvamedhas). The ten-horse sacrifice is an extremely complex and exacting ritual, which Brahma was certain the King would be unable to perform perfectly. And, according to the laws of dharma, if the King made even one mistake in performing the sacrifice, then his dharma would be flawed and he would be forced to relinquish his rule of Kashi to Shiva. Unfortunately for Shiva, Divodasa performed the sacrifices perfectly. Shiva was once again foiled (although he did finally win back Kashi), and the Ghat where the sacrifices were performed was named Dasashvamedh and considered particularly holy.

(From Diana Eck's Banaras: City of Light)

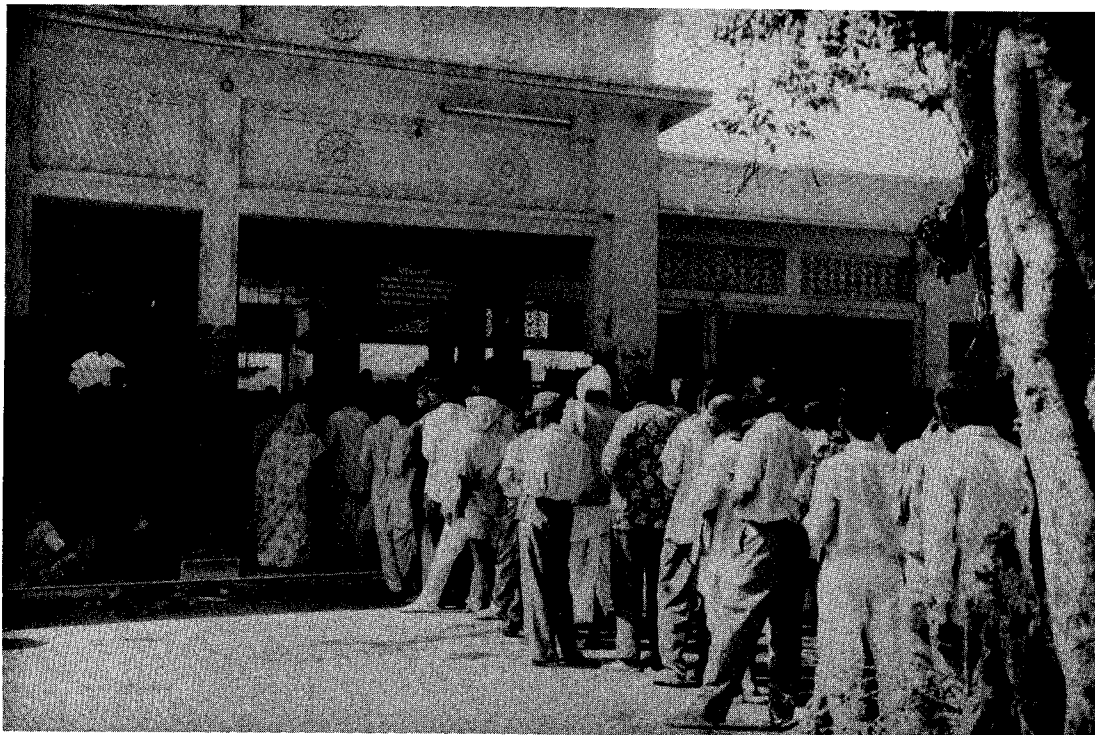
Shitala Devi's temple sits halfway down the steps of Dasashvamedh Ghat, and was crowded with people who had come to pay their respects, some to offer special puris and ghee to the havan, the stone fire pit which is said to be the mouth of the goddess. According to the head priest's son who was presiding, the havan is also said to burn away sins and evil spirits. A mundan was taking place inside the temple; all the relatives and family members who had come to participate gathered around the barber, who held the child on his lap and expertly shaved its head. Drum beats and chanting of sacred shloks (verses) filled the air, as people squeezed themselves closer to the fire to throw a garland or pay their respects.

Thanks are also offered to gods in more elaborate ways. At Hanuman's temple, Sankat Mochan, a family from Tiwarpur (outside Varanasi) had come to give thanks for the win of a family member's election as

Chairman of Mirzapur District. They had chosen the Tuesday of Navratra as the auspicious time to perform an Akand Ramayan, a 24-hour non-stop, live recitation of the Ramayana. The chanting, broadcast over loudspeakers, filled the temple grounds with even more religious fervor than already existed. The sister-in-law of the man who had won the election proudly told us that many relatives had come from several states to attend the Akand Ramayan, and that the whole thing cost them about Rs. 10,000 including the singers (which were cheaper because they were brought from outside Varanasi), the pujaris donations, offerings and all other necessary items. The covered hallway in front of the sanctum sanctorum was jammed so tightly with people that no-one could move. Those who were only a few feet from the sanctum had given up getting their prasad blessed by the priests, or even getting a quick look at the idol. From far away, I could see only hundreds of arms raised in prayer or trying to catch a few drops of the holy water that was being thrown from inside the sanctum sanctorum. Again, the line of men stretched almost to the gate of the temple compound, several hundred meters. Devotees circled the temple, clockwise, often stopping to touch their heads several times to the small shrines in the temple sides, or to take a smudge of vermilion from in front of the idol and apply it to their own foreheads.

The intensity of faith in religion here has its ugly side. Faith seems to act as fertilizer for exploitation in the name of religion. Religion often becomes a business in Varanasi. "Temples are one of the best investments you can make," a friend once commented to me dryly. He is right. Not too far from where we live, a new temple is being built. The owners of the temple are in stiff competition with the owners of Sankat Mochan temple. In order to raise money and popularize the temple even before it is completed, they have stationed the primary Shiva-linga in the back of a brand new, richly garlanded Maruti van. Brahmin priests gather around the van's back door to do aarti (lighting of the lamps as offerings to the gods), complete with bells and chanting. A rope is tied at the beginning of the street where the van is parked, indicating the "beginning" of the temple where one must remove one's shoes. Apparently, this is a "touring temple-van," which will make its way through the country, stopping in various spots for months at a time to popularize the new temple.

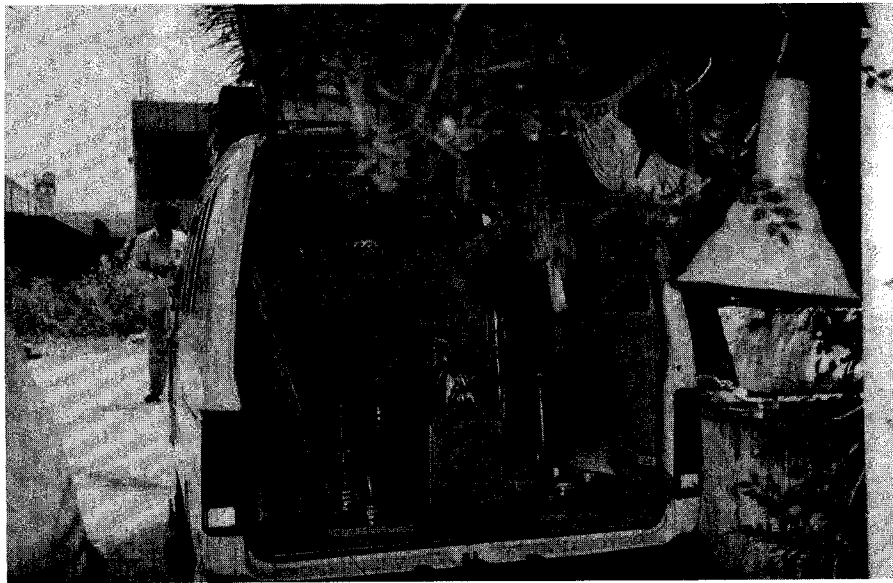
The corruption of religion in Varanasi has been spurred on by its thugs, the powerful pundit families who control the masses through religion. A well-known movie made in the 1960s, called Sangash, detailed the hypocrisies of these so-called religious families. There is a scene in the movie where the pandit tells an unsuspecting couple that they must "offer" their daughter to him, and then they can buy her back with several thousand rupees and the wife's string of pearls. I have been told by many Benarasis that these incidents actually did and do still happen. There continues to be an elaborate system of "trapping" the unsuspecting pilgrims who come to the city to worship.



The men's line to have darshan at Sankat Mochan Temple on a Tuesday (Hanuman's day).



Shri Akash Ganga: The Touring Temple-Van



The inside of the van, where the flint linga is kept, flanked by a Nandi bull and a trident, one of Shiva's symbols.

On the train several stops before Varanasi, a man working for a thug, will board the train and begin to gain the confidence of the pilgrims he meets. True con artists, these men are well trained to recognize where people are from, to mention names of known families from the same villages, to endear themselves to the pilgrims. Upon reaching Varanasi, the pilgrims are taken to the pandits, who advise them to perform several rituals, including large donations of money and jewelry, in order to please the gods.

The former Mahant, or head priest, of the Kashi-Vishwanath Temple was put in jail in the early 70s for stealing hundreds of thousands of rupees in silver and gold from the temple. He has since died, but I interviewed his son, Dr. Kulpati Tiwari, who still calls himself Mahant, in spite of the fact that the Government has since taken over the temple and installed its own Mahant. Dr. Tiwari, while speaking about the atrocious way in which money has become the "mother, father and religion of people," picked up the ringing telephone in front of him. "Just get the work done at any cost," he told the person on the other end. He listened to something the other person said and then replied irritably, "Then give him whatever money he wants. Just get it done." Obviously, money is his master too.

Varanasi has certainly kept the traditions of rituals alive; but the understanding of the meaning of those rituals is largely lost. The average person appears to believe in religion because his ancestors did, or because he

knows he should. Those who have religious power know that the best way to keep the masses in their clutches is to keep religion mystical, unfathomable, based largely on blind faith. And yet, perhaps it is this very blind faith which allows people to hope and dream of something better than what they have, to imagine that their lives will be illumined through devotion by the bright power of Kashi. □

