

Travel Log #1: An Ode to the City of Death
(Varanasi; November-December 2019)
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Stop me if you've heard this one before: American journeys to India with the hope of finding peace, enlightenment, nirvana—whatever you'd like to call it. Ostensibly, not a novel plan, I know. But this wasn't my first time in India, so I was already self-aware about the Sisyphean nature of my aspirations. That is, searching for something that could be found in my backyard of upstate New York—and really, within myself—yet trekking back to India each time a new existential crisis cropped up. I was also self-aware of another potential pitfall: namely, using travel as a means of escaping my problems or fears, rather than confronting them. However, after my first trip to India back in 2016, I realized traveling, *real* traveling, brought you closer to your fears and really, yourself. I think one of my favorite authors, James Baldwin, summed it up best when he said, “I met a lot of people in Europe. I even encountered myself.”

When I arrived in Delhi on November 1st, beleaguered from a 24-hour journey that included a layover in Russia, I was greeted by a familiar, albeit grown, face: Sparsh. It had been four years since I had seen the cousin of my highschool classmate, Monica, and he had grown as much as one can from 13 to 17. He was the only child of the Dutt family, and we became very close during the short amount of time I spent in Delhi. Really, he became like a little brother to me.

After recounting the reason for my coming back to India, the Dutt's suggested I meet with their yogi. In traditional guru fashion, my dedication was put to the test. For one arduous week, I had to wake up at 5 a.m. and make the hour-long journey to his ashram in suburban Delhi where his free yoga classes were held. Much to his dismay, I dragged Sparsh along with me.

After an excruciating five days of contorting my body in ungodly positions, the yogi understood I was serious about this whole peace business. At the end of the week, he gave me the number to a friend of his: a swami, philosopher, and poet (lo! The trifecta of wisdom) from India's ancient city of Varanasi. Though the swami informed me he would be out of town, he insisted I stay at his ashram and meet with his assistant, Hitesh. Without hesitation, I booked my train to Varanasi.

After a 14 hour journey on the aptly named Ashram Express, the train screeched into Varanasi Junction about 2 hours late, which, according to Sparsh, actually meant that it was ahead of schedule in India. I didn't get more than a few hours of sleep because I shared a berth with a young couple and their wailing baby, who, perhaps sensing my excitement, refused to sleep. Thus, when I stepped outside of the station early the next morning, my tired eyes saw the whirling Indian city with a dream-like euphoria. The honking from passing motorists seemed to make waves in the air; the bright colors of women's *saris* felt as if they were the ones screaming

and not the crowds of people; the smell of samosas and bubbling chai both tickled and uppercut my olfactory cleft. Life seemed to be vibrating from every corner and crevice of the city.

I walked past the salivating rickshaw drivers who eyed me like birds of prey, and to my relief, I saw a 30-something-year-old with messy yet coiffed jet black hair and a Bollywood caliber smile waving at me from his Honda Hero motorcycle.

“Alex?” he asked.

Before I could let out a “Hello,” he kick-started the beat-up bike and motioned for me to hop on.

With Hermes-like dexterity of the motorcycle and an Evil Knievel-like abandon, Hitesh effortlessly navigated through the ever-tumultuous waters of urban Indian traffic. Soon after, we reached the ashram: a gated villa tucked away in Varanasi’s suburban district. Towering palm trees sprawled across this quiet part of town and protected the houses from the sun’s overbearing rays. Hitesh ushered me inside the airy temple like a shepherd bringing his sheep to pasture.

Inside the ashram, walls were covered in stalks of glazed bamboo and adorned with disparate religious iconography, ranging from Shiva and St. Anthony to Buddha and Lao Tzu. A massive portrait that fused Jesus and Marilyn Monroe hung above the doorway with Mona Lisa-esque eyes that seemed to follow me with every movement I made. It was somehow simultaneously beautiful, appalling, comforting, and off-putting. My host and I sat on straw mats as two cups of lukewarm *chai*, a sweetened milk tea, sat between us.

As if he were the Willy Wonka of Varanasi, welcoming me into the spiritual Chocolate Factory, Hitesh opened his arms wide and exclaimed, “Welcome to Varanasi, the only city in the world that lives off of death.”

Initially, I took Hitesh’s words to be purely literal, figuring the city owed a large portion of its income to the ritual cremations, which were done by the hundreds each day. It was only after my first day in the city that I realized his words contained more than a simple assessment of his hometown’s finances.

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As a creature of habit, my evenings in Varanasi have been nearly identical for the past month now. At 5 p.m., as the sun begins to set, the sky seems to act as a mirror for the devotion down below and turns shades of deep pink and crimson. I make my way down the Dashashwamedh Ghat, where preparations are being made for *Sandhya aarti*, a daily ritual that acts as a literal lullaby for the Ganges River. Below the ghat, pilgrims, laborers, men, women, and children all bathe side by side, washing away both the sweat of the day and accrued karma of past lives in this strong brown god’s waters. Indeed, this sacred river is thought to be of divine origin, springing from Vedic mythology. According to legend, Vishnu, the god of preservation and one of the three gods in Hinduism’s *Trimurti*, provided the water from his left foot’s big toe.

Though the environment isn't necessarily conducive to serenity, what with the yawps of children and shouts of tea vendors, I attempt to meditate by the river banks. After what feels like an hour but in all reality has only been 15 minutes, my eyes gravitate towards a fisherman who sits in a little cove above the banks. A pang of jealousy strikes me as I watch his single-minded concentration on the unleavened piece of dough attached to his hook. Though I don't eat meat, a broad smile comes across my face when I see his toil rewarded with his rodless cord's tug. After he successfully reels in the fish, he puts it into a metal container, attaches another piece of dough to his hook, and throws the line back in the water.

To escape the hordes of tourists that descend upon the Dashashwamedh Ghat for the daily puja, a little before 6 p.m., I start my stroll along the cracked sidewalk. By this time, the sun has nearly disappeared behind the old temples, and the sky metamorphosizes into a bluish-mauve. There is a slight chill in the air, and I wrap myself in a sand-colored shawl that matches the adobe stones. Though most of the ghats were constructed during the Maratha Empire in the 18th century, there seems to be something prehistoric about them—almost as if the Ganges itself crafted each one of the blocks millennia by millennia, as an edificial tribute to the god who spawned its existence.

Past the bathers and fishermen, wooden rowboats line the banks of the Ganges. The paint on the boats has faded away, and the previously crimson is now soft pink, and the once deep turquoise has changed to a brownish-green. Advertisements for local businesses are painted on the sides of the boats, too. However, only a few flakey letters still hang on, leaving one to wonder what is being advertised. An old ferryman lies sleeping in his boat with a bidi hanging from his lips while all the younger men wait on the ghat to catch a tourist for an evening boat ride. The young ferrymen are all well-dressed in collared shirts and fashionably ripped jeans. There is a certain hunger in their eyes as they ask every passing tourist if they'd like a boat ride, and also a certain frustration that comes across their face as people either ignore them or shake their heads.

For whatever reason, I have not felt ready, or maybe, worthy, to cross the river. And still, whenever the ferrymen ask me if I'd like a boat ride, rather than simply say 'no,' I ask them their question back in broken and probably wrong Hindi: "*naak chahiye aapko?*" Most of the time, hearing the question asked to them in Hindi by a westerner sends them into jubilation and confusion. Still, however, there are men less enthused with my self-conceived cleverness. The old, river-worn ferryman sitting in his boat, for instance, mutters something underneath his bidi smoke and pulls the brim of his hat over his eyes.

Before I reach my next destination, I stop by a *tupri*, a makeshift tea stand, to grab two chai's for me and my friend, Bharat. One would be hard-pressed to label Bharat a "beggar"—though his tin bowl is always full of coins and 10 rupee notes—because he never asks for money but merely sits on his tattered blanket and watches the river. Before learning his name, I simply referred to him as 'The Sitting Saint' in my notebook.

Much to my chagrin, Bharat always rises from his blanket and insists I sit down with a fervent gesture. The typical response he gives whenever I demure from his kindness is, “Atithi Devo Bhava,” which roughly translates from Sanskrit to “guest is God.”

With surprising nimbleness, he moves on the ground to the blanket’s side and gets in the half-lotus position, throwing his amputated left foot over his right thigh. I hand him his cup of chai, and he proceeds to withdraw two *bidi*’s, a cheap Indian cigarette wrapped in a palm leaf, from his coat pocket and hands me one. Before doing anything else, he wraps his cracked hands—which look older than the ghat he sits on—around the ceramic cup of chai and takes a deep inhale of the vapors. Only afterward does he strike a match and surround the flickering flame with his strong hands to light my cigarette, then his own. *This* is our daily ritual.

Like the colorful boats that dot the Ganges, orange and yellow-clad *sadhu*’s, or Hindu holy men, are scattered across the ghats, too. Bharat once gestured to a group of these men—dressed in their trademark robes, which are usually accompanied with matted hair and long beards—and called them, “fucker *baba*’s.” Though I wouldn’t necessarily use his language, I also wouldn’t disagree with Bharat’s description of these spiritual salesmen. Whenever a tourist comes passing by, the *sadhus* will shake their brass bowls and urge you to come by to receive a blessing. On one occasion, a *baba* gave me a blessing, but when I told him I had no money, he waved me away in disgust. I wondered to myself, “Would he remove the blessing?” and further, “Did the blessing mean anything in the first place if it was contingent on my giving money?”

After we finish drinking our chai’s and smoking our *bidis*, I take my leave from Bharat, and he gives me his usual solemn head nod. About one kilometer down the banks is the smaller of the two cremation places, Raja Harischandra Ghat. As I slowly walk there, I watch children play *patang baazi* with their colorful tissue paper kites. The game essentially involves competitors trying to knock their opponents’ kite from the sky while ensuring their kite stays airborne. It is not unusual to see a rainbow of remnants strewn across the ground during the wintertime. This is all in preparation for the annual kite festival held on January 14th, also known as Makar Sankranti, which celebrates the sun and, by proxy, Brahma, the god of creation, and another member of Hinduism’s holy triad.

No older than 10, a little girl wistfully follows the undulating kites with her large brown eyes on nearby steps. She leans against her bouquet of toys and trinkets held up by a rotting bamboo stick. She does not even bother to try and sell anything to me. If one didn’t know any better, it would appear that she was sending a prayer towards the heavens. I think about what she might be praying for: freedom from work? A kite of her own? Or, perhaps the ability to fly like those kites? But no, there is no yearning in her eyes, but merely contentment in watching the kaleidoscopic dance of tissue paper kites.

By 7 p.m., I arrive at Raja Harishchandra Ghat. By this time, the sky has put on its midnight-blue pall in preparation for the cremations that take place on the ghats. Large piles of wood are stacked by the Ganges banks and are continually getting replenished by men who carry these logs from the larger cremation place about two kilometers down the river. Admittedly, I

was at first shocked by the ritual. Well, perhaps not so much by the practice itself as with the environment that surrounds it. Hordes of locals and a few scattered tourists sit on the ghat while bodies wrapped in colorful garments are carried past them. All the while, onlookers sip their tea and chat about daily happenings, while some tourists sneakily take pictures of the occasion. It is all so informal and contains none of the morbidity associated with the American funerals I have attended. However, I, out of some repressed Albanian/Catholic guilt perhaps, feel the need to be as solemn as possible for the dead.

And yet, regardless of how many times I watch the cremations, I still find myself mesmerized by the entire process. Though locals around me attempt polite conversation, my words stay sealed in my throat, and my eyes lay fixed on the raging pyre. Perhaps I am still a novice. Perhaps I have been so conditioned by my western upbringing to view death as a sad occasion. All the same, it is still a jarring experience to watch a body burn before your eyes.

Initially, the flames do not engulf the body in a big bonfire like you might see in some Viking film. Even with the accelerant on the cloth covering the body, the flames merely simmer at first, desiccating the corpse of its remaining moisture. The sizzling and hissing sound the body makes is like a cross between oil crackling on a pan and air being slowly let out of a balloon. Once this process is done, the flames encircle the corpse and strip away the cloth and sequined robes. The fire then starts to catch hold of the logs placed on top of the body and stretch out towards the night sky. The heat emanating from the pyre can be felt from 50 feet away. At some point, the body becomes so charred it is impossible to tell the difference between limb and log. Time seems to suspend itself during this process—I do not know whether it has been minutes or hours—but all around, life continues onward, unphased by death.

After the flames settle and only a few embers remain burning, family members put some of the ashes of their loved one in a jar and scatter them into the Ganges. According to lore, Shiva, the destroyer god and last member of Hinduism's trinity, grants the souls who have been cremated in Varanasi eternal salvation.

This is indeed Siva's city, being the god of death. Still, the deceased's ashes lay the fertilizer for life to thrive all around Varanasi, thus continuing the upward spiral of life, preservation, and perishment.

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“Do you understand what I mean when I say Varanasi is the only city in the world that lives off of death?”

These were Hitesh's first words upon my arrival back at the ashram after my first night in Varanasi. The jovial Willy Wonka figure I encountered earlier that morning had seemingly transfigured into a wise old sage. His youthful smile was now covered with a 5 o'clock shadow dotted with specks of white.

“Well, I don’t know if I’ve quite figured it out yet...” My voice trailed off into the sound of a honking vehicle outside.

“I’m not asking for your writer analysis—just tell me how you felt.”

I inhaled deeply and began.

“What I saw was the different ways that death can alter our approach to life. Some fill their time with material aspirations like gathering money. Other’s resign themselves to the futility of doing anything. And yet, others seem to find an equanimity within the fog of uncertainty. You see, I saw sadhu’s who only seemed interested in making money off of their prominent position. I saw the ferrymen who seemed to have become embittered by the daily struggle of finding work. But I also saw other things. I saw a fisherman, patiently waiting for hours. I sat with a man who sits on the ghats, watching for hours. And I saw children, flying their kites for hours. And I also saw a little girl, dreaming for hours. I guess what I saw were the two poles of existence: striving and desperation on one side, and apathy and resignation on the other. Yet somewhere, floating in the middle, there is patience and acceptance.”

My voice once again trailed off into the sound of a honking vehicle outside. A broad smile grew on Hitesh’s round face, which seemed to touch the tousled hair that shaped his chubby rosy cheeks. At that moment, he could have been a proud parent who just watched his child walk for the first time.

A car honked yet again, but this time, it was accompanied by a voice that screamed, “Hitesh!”

At this, Hitesh bolted from his seat and exclaimed, “The Swami is back early!”

For some reason, I wasn’t as excited to hear about the Swami’s return as I thought I would be. Maybe it was because I felt like I had already learned a seemingly self-evident yet not-so-easy to grasp lesson. Namely, that I just needed to have patience and observe everything around me and allow the world and its contents to be my teacher. Maybe that was the real key to this whole peace business. Maybe.