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REBIRTH, BLISS ARE GANGA'S GIFTS

Here 'Moksha' rules the heart and the mind; the initiated ones aspire for a holy bath in the waters of the Ganges. The presence of Shiva, the third god of the trinity pantheon, is overwhelming. Here, death is celebrated eternally, defying conditioned logic. The ghats are an invitation to step back into ageless time, to witness a small world of bliss. Welcome to Kashi, the city of lights, literally.

Kashi, or Varanasi, lies around the bend where the river Ganges flows northwards for a short stretch before turning east on its way to the Bay of Bengal. Its age-old history is laced with Gods, and wars fought over the glory of the erstwhile Kashi. The town lives (and sleeps) beyond the western banks of the river in a myriad kaleidoscope. The serpentine lanes criss-cross the old town like a live game of 'snakes-and-ladders'. Unusually small balconies and trellises peep into these (in) famous lanes of yesteryears, where white clad babus glorified 'mujras' and the 'banarsi paan'. Some melodious strains of the old charm still seep into these 'gallis'. The ghats- riverfront steps rise from the river in ageless textures. The weathered steps withhold ancient tales of conquests and shame. Our History mentions of luminous personalities, like the the Adi Shankaracharya and Gautam Buddha having descended these ghats for their measured dose of spirituality.

Varanasi abounds in duality where life and death is celebrated and witnessed in one span. The supreme holiness lies in the presence of the Kashi Vishwanath temple (a sacred shiv-lingam) and the river Ganges. At Dasashwamedha, one of the holiest bathing ghat, pilgrims immerse in the river for a literal rebirth- soul cleansing; while at Manikarnika, the burning ghat, funeral pyres burn ceaselessly for rebirth of the soul. It is believed that Shiva himself rows the soul across astral planes humming the *taraka mantra* for the liberation of the soul.

Beyond these burning ghats, hospices are over loaded with frail bodies seeking 'moksha'. Death is welcome. Glazed eyes stare beyond stacks of burning wood, awaiting their time. In the evening, the waters of the river reflect the dancing flames within the obscure haze of the smoke from burning pyres. The sight is unworldly to the faint heart, the spell of stillness and charred wood, overbearing.

The physical appearance of the river waters is revolting, a fact debated and re-debated by the Government and NGOs. Humungous measures are underway for its purification. But a river such epic needs more than this. A spiritual seeker, waist deep in waters is oblivious of this fact. He believes in the purifying powers of the Ganges, as he aspires for spiritual knowledge. The Ganges can give him more, as it has given his father and forefathers, whose probable ashes now lay on the murky bed of this sacred river. The global Hindus can rejoice for the holy Ganges can still consume their mortal remains.

The Ganges is not a mere river; it is the lifeline of Hinduism. It holds a promise of every believer. A faraway pilgrim with meager belongings saves all his life for that one moment, to allow him to immerse in the holy waters intoning the Gayatri mantra. A vow made to his dying mother, thus fulfilled. Having completed his worldly duties, he is content and willing to die. Shiva assures him a higher rebirth.

Mother Ganges' is supremely personified and worshipped every evening at the Dasashwamedha ghat. The priests go through a ritual, worshipping the river with flowers, incense, vermilion and sandalwood. The pilgrims descend in large numbers at the ghat in the hope of faith, a larger belief, and a much larger self-realisation. Amidst burning incense and chanting mantras, the pilgrims let tiny floaters made of cupped leaves lit with a small wick, into the gentleness of the river. A small remembrance of the relatives passed on into the other world. The sight is a perfect frame of enlightenment.

As night falls, the Ganges sleeps. The gentle lapping of the ripples against the ghats reveals signs of life, her heartbeat. She awaits another busy day. Much before the sun rises, she awakes to the sounds of the temple-gongs of the Kashi Vishwanath temple. A dinghy full of pilgrims swims into the first light. A streak of lit floaters dance on the river surface.