

By The
Ghats
of
Varanasi

A Travelogue.



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Preface

What is Varanasi? Is it the world's oldest living city? Is it the sacred city where the Ganga flows, washing away not only sins but also the burdens of the soul? Is it the land of Banarasi paan, creamy lassi, timeless traditions, and a culture unlike any other? Is it where the wisdom of the Puranas and the Vedas still echoes through the ancient ghats? Is it the city where Aghoris, sadhus, seekers, and ordinary people coexist, each absorbed in their own search for truth? Or Is it the place where life and death are embraced as two sides of the same eternal journey?

Perhaps Varanasi is all of these, and yet, something far beyond words.

Seeking answers to these questions, the protagonist of the story boards a train to Varanasi. What begins as another trip soon transforms into an extraordinary journey; one that is not merely across miles, but deep within the self.

As he wanders through the city's winding lanes and sacred ghats, he encounters unforgettable souls whose wisdom quietly reshape his understanding of life.

Drawn by the city's irresistible charm, he finds himself longing not just to return, but to belong.

If Varanasi has ever called to you, this book is your invitation to answer. And if life has ever left you with questions too deep for ordinary answers, you may discover that they have been waiting for you here all along.

About the Authors

Hanisha Raghunath

Peace, love, and curiosity define Hanisha Raghunath's soul. Her life is a book filled with well-loved, dog-eared pages of joy, learning, and adventure. From crafting captivating stories as a Radio Jockey to contributing as an academic professional at a management institute, she has embraced change as the only constant in her journey.

Currently, she disperses her energy as a teacher, author and content creator. Beyond creative writing, Hanisha has collaborated with an educational publishing group to design curricula and author Life Skills textbooks for foundational, primary and middle school classes, blending empathy, creativity, and practical learning into education. Her work reflects her belief that stories have the power to connect people, spark imagination, and leave a lasting impact.

Urvesh Bhatt

Living in Mumbai may be a dream for many, but for Urvesh Bhatt, the real dream lies beyond the city's skyline. As a Digital Media Strategist, he spends his days crafting innovative strategies for brands, while carefully planning every leave to fuel his passion for travel. His journeys to offbeat destinations across India find a home in his visual diary, where each adventure becomes a story preserved to be told someday.

Beyond his professional expertise, Urvesh is admired for his humility, kindness, and unwavering willingness to help. A

thoughtful listener and a natural problem-solver, he has an extraordinary ability to put people at ease and offer practical solutions with genuine warmth. His work reflect his ease and simplicity in which he deals with life, a rare combination of strategic brilliance and an even more remarkable human being.

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Chapter One

The Enchantment

*दुर्लभ मनुस्या जीवन है, देह न बरम्बार ।
तरुवर ज्यों पत्ती झड़ें, बहुरि न लागे डार ॥*

Human birth is precious and that is stated by many saints including Kabir Das in this Doha.

Thus, travelling 84 lakh births and reaching this human form is no small achievement. Call it reincarnation, rebirth or the outcome of the law of Karma, the journey of the soul never ends. If we see the life force as a continuously flowing river, our soul boards different boats to reach the ultimate ocean of light, salvation. Yet, there are only a few whose quench for the destination is satiated. It is because the route plan to this magical land is not easy to find. Maps don't work and compasses fail, it is only the inner self that knows the way to it, but it is fast asleep.

Until this slumbered enlightenment wakes up, our soul travels through the circle of life and death multiple times.

The soul however is always in pursuit of finding the oasis of ultimate peace. There is a myth that while we sleep it takes a chance to go back to the places of past landmarks and sometimes it discovers new ones. Maybe those are the experiences we call Déjà vu. It is unknown whether the dreams are the reflection of those sightings or if it is a mirage created by the soul to float freely into the other world. Or is it a reminder from the soul about the long journeys it had, like a faint bell of awakening?

Dreams are mystical. There are many humans who have made advancements through dreams. Srinivasa Ramanujan, a noted mathematician, had confessed that in the journey of proving over 3000 mathematical formulas, Goddess Namakkal had many times shown him the solution to complex problems in his dreams. The inventor of the sewing machine, Elias Howe, also got the inspiration for the eye of a needle from a dream. This means dreams do carry signals. So, are these mystical figments of the brain enough to elude the soul from the sleep of many lifetimes? The answer to it is still in the veil. If we cannot intercept those signals, the soul has its trick to keep us bewildered.

There are times when one feels lonely without any reason. Like you have to go somewhere, an urge to travel, to reach, but the place is yet not known to you. It happens to me a lot of the time and I embark on a voyage. When I come back, the yen for travel increases multifold. Even after visiting numerous cities, unconventional places and exotic locations, the peace of the journey is hard to find at home. Enlightened ones call it a yearning to reach the doors of the divine. Meditation, spiritual studies and spiritual practices of various kinds promise to take you there, but without the

spiritual awakening, the doors and the passage to it remain arcane.

However, there is a place, where uniting with the eternal is guaranteed—the place which is as ancient as the being himself. There, Lord Shiva is the torchbearer for the souls. He whispers the Tarak mantra, the words of salvation, in the ears of the deceased and guides him towards the eternal light. This place is Varanasi.

There is a saying that the one who dies in Kashi and gets cremated in Manikarnika Ghat or Harishchandra Ghat attains salvation. This seems like an easy passage to escape the cycle of death and birth. But is it? There are many discoveries done by humans deciphering the codes of life, yet, our expiry dates remain encrypted. And who can guarantee that this is the true end? Still, this doesn't alter the enticement of the people for the city. Millions of people pour into the city each year and get awed by its mystics.

What is the magic of Kashi that draws so many people towards it? Not only Indians, but people from faraway lands also come and become a part of its charm. This allure, however, is not limited to humans. There is a legend that tells how even the divine powers could not remain unhypnotized from the city.

One cannot imagine Kashi without Lord Shiva; it is his abode. Yet, there was a time when Shiva could not enter the city.

Once when Shiva left Kashi for some reason, the Gods were worried that without proper management this glorious city could lose its charm and vibrancy. Therefore, Lord Brahma, the creator of the Universe came up with a solution. He thought of giving the administration of Kashi to one of his

devotees, Ripunjay, who had been doing penance in the forest near the city. He was a royal and a strong adherent of religion. The deity blessed him and explained to him the call of his duty was to set up the dharma. For this, he requested him to be the King of Kashi and retain its reverberance from falling.

After a thoughtful pause, the sage presented a condition before Lord Brahma. He said that he could not deny what the deity commands. But for being the rightful king of the land, he needs to do the dharmic reforms in peace without any Godly intervention. He wished that Lord Shiva should not be allowed to be in Kashi and live here. He presented the reasoning that if Shiva is here his devotees would always follow him and the transformations he wants to make would not be possible.

He promised that he would do all the Vedic rituals and Yagnas to confirm the prosperity of the city in every sense. Lord Brahma, blessed him with the boon and took some promises from him which were never to be broken. First, Ripunjay had to be an administrator without any flaws and every person staying in his Kingdom should be treated appropriately. Second, whoever comes to the city should be welcomed as per their religious pursuits.

Ripunjay earned glory as the King and came to be known as King Divodas. His boon made Lord Shiva stay away from Kashi and never return. The King managed the city very well as an administrator following the Dharma. He performed the Vedic rituals and Yagnas to bring rain and made Kashi affluent like never before.

Lord Shiva waited for the time when King Divodas would fail to keep his promise. He started missing the city dearly,

he wanted to come back but to respect the words of Lord Brahma he couldn't. He sent over his messengers, then Yoginis and the Sun God to find a flaw in King Divodas' administration but all these divine entities never returned, being enticed by the perfectness of the city. He even sent two of his trustworthy ganas to find a way for his return but they became the Dwarpalakas of Kashi and stayed there waiting for him. He considered this separation was because of Brahmaji's boon so he went over to him and requested to do something so that he could unite back to his city.

Brahmaji thought of a trick and proposed to the King to increase the size of his kingdom with an Ashwamedh Yagna with ten horses so that other places could also be blessed under such righteous King's governance. The Yagna was successful and nobody dared to capture the horses. The ghat on which this Yagna was performed came to be known as Dashashwamedh Ghat.

That was an unanticipated feat and this further added to the stronghold of the King. Lord Brahma, was happy to be there and did not bring any further propositions for Divodas which could lead to his downfall.

Lord Shiva's yearning for the city had now escalated multifold. He went to Lord Vishnu to seek his help in this matter. The deity took the form of a saint and offered the King eternal enlightenment. He appraised his virtues as King who established Dharma in his kingdom and made it a blissful place for its residents and visitors. When the King asked the deity, why he could not seek mental peace. He was apprised that the only deed that demurs his inner peace is that of abandoning Shiva from his abode. The deity suggested that for the salvation of his soul that was not a rightful deed.

Salvation is precious, the King invited Lord Shiva to his beloved city, establishing the Shiv Linga and left the kingdom becoming a monk.

King Divodasa had reached the pinnacle of life where nothing but the completeness of liberation remained. While Lord Vishnu illuminated him with knowledge, Shiva liberated him from this cycle. By this ancient tale, it is clear that Shiva has been ever present in Kashi. Is this the reason that River Ganga in its journey of over 2500 kilometres where it flows downwards toward the south makes an exception here?

It is bewildering that Kashi is the only place where Goddess Ganga defies its course and starts flowing towards the north again. It appears as if the deity wants to spend more time in this holy city to embrace Shiv who is ubiquitous here.

When the divine powers are so inclined to this sacred place, people tend to get fascinated by it like the bees to the nectar of flowers. However, it is not easy to identify the nectar at once. When you go to Varanasi, it is easy to call it just another city with narrow alleys. Or a city where the Banarasi paan punctuates the flow of life or a city which is the fiesta of Breakfast and the ultimate gastronomical adventure. But it is much more.

*One Varanasi is completion of journey,
One is a celebration of the beginning of eternal life.
One Varanasi swings in the remorseful chants,
One dances on the tunes of Kajri.*

*One Varanasi is fiesta of cultures and ancient rituals,
One is on a trip towards the roads of modernity.
One Varanasi is the static Adiyogi Mahadev,
One is the vivacious and ever-changing Ganga.*

*One Varanasi resounds with euphoria of bells and conch shells,
One exhilarates with gastronomical diversities and Bhang wali
lassi.*

*One Varanasi is carefree to forget everything about oneself,
One has attained oneself drenching in the ecstasy of
enlightenment.*

*One Varanasi is the perfect yantra to unite the micro and macro,
One is beaming with life in the labyrinth of jam-packed alleys.
One Varanasi is of sages and saints who drink its elixir daily,
One is of the living dead transforming into the luminescence of
the absolute.*

In the pursuit of experiencing the extraordinary in the ordinary, travellers often get intrigued to travel to this ancient city. Eccentrically, my journey to Varanasi happened because of a dream that took me to the ghats of Varanasi and I was awed to experience it. Speaking in terms of logic, my dream got its milieu from the show that had created a desire to travel there. However, I would call that dream mystical and hypnotical. Some force was pulling me there as if I was destined to visit the place. It may seem like an exaggeration if I say that taking leave was next to impossible for planning this trip. Yet, I was in Varanasi just after 15 days.

I too would have qualified only as a tourist to the city if I had not met Keshav in my visit. Keshav, whom I presumed to be some hippie travelling here. Looks are deceptive and now I fully agree to it. He was a person who, like an onion had multiple layers and each layer with multiple brick-like walls holding many secrets. He was the one who gave me the insight of this numinous place and its beings through his eyes of consciousness.



Chapter Two

At the first sight

Thoughts and feelings manifest into reality. Life is sewn with what we think and believe within ourselves. While this works for all the positive thoughts we create, every time we fear and traverse through the vices, we patent that very life for ourselves. Though the law of Karma still goes with its flow, it is the thought which makes life full of fire and brimstone or a passport to the Elysian Fields of happiness.

Scientists believe in decoding everything; they have even estimated that humans have over 6,200 thoughts per day. That means that every minute the mind pops up with nearly five new thoughts. Reading about this one day, I tried counting the thoughts which arose within me. The number is still a mystery for me but I discovered that most of my thoughts centred around the travel destinations I planned to visit. If I look back over my travel map, prior to the planning of all the trips, I had imagined travelling to the destination several times. This gave rise to another paradox. Can my eagerness really manifest into reality?

Enlightened ones affirm it and soon scientists may also come up with a theory about this. However, there is still a city that has been an enigma for all the big heads; Varanasi. What makes it so alluring? Is it a puzzle or an oversimplified maze that is hard to configure?

Before the trip there, I wondered what the world's most ancient city would be like. Several videos about the town created a vivid picture of the town in my mind. But for a place that was beaming with greatness and glory at the time when the big old cities of the world were struggling to exist or altogether didn't exist, the internet cannot add any lustre to it. These are merely the bland understatement to this exquisite city.

The train journey from Mumbai to Varanasi takes around 28 to 30 hours. The clash between the option of air travel and train travel happened many times. But in every plan, I envisioned myself in a train looking out of its window and beholding the floating clouds, the waving fields, the gleaming villages and the dancing trees.

The childhood love of the train journey won; be it the outcome of yearning or the force of the thoughts. I loved every bit of the journey. Before I officially stepped into the city, I had a glimpse of her soul; the Mighty River Ganga. I would have missed the sight if the people on the train would have not buzzed in excitement to see her. The train hummed with the energy of enthusiasm. For a new traveller to the town, it was incomprehensible at first. But when the train passed over the Ganga bridge, the river's miraculous appearance took me into enticement. The train in its hypnotical effect, seemed to slow down to pay its homage to her. Every element of the universe seemed to be playing its mystics, be it the time, early morning mist or the sleepy sun.

The charming play of motherhood was at its best. Mother Ganges in an attempt to wake her naughty child, sun, had lighted the earthen oil lamps on its breath. It is said that the child carries the reflection of her mother but there I saw the most unique sight. While the sun still pulled the sheet of night over itself, part of him was visible. The colour of the dawn shaded the waves of water and the riverscape was a pleasure to behold.

The melody of silence transcended within me after that. Even the chaos of the people packing and lining their luggage didn't alter my tranquillity. The next stop was the city of light and I guess its illumination had started its roleplay.

But, the first sight of the station left me flabbergasted. It was not the depiction I weaved. At 6:00 in the morning, the crowd was baffling and unhopd-for. It was simply unbelievable. My acumen reasoned it for a train's arrival or departure, so I got aside and waited for the multitude to clear. The scene remained unchanged. One of the passing porters asked if help was needed, and I nodded no.

I asked him, "Is there any festival in Varanasi?"

He answered in a plain no to which I countered, "Then, why is there so much of a crowd?"

He smirked, "You cannot call it a crowd, Sir. These are only a small bunch of people. The crowd comes during the festivals. At that time, there is no place to stand and if you get one then standing at that place is challenging."

Coming from Mumbai that imagination was not hard to configure. He broke my reverie saying, "Start walking slowly towards the main gate. If you stand here waiting for

the density of the crowd to descend, then you will stand here for hours.”

He was right. I started moving towards the main gate, pushing my way through the throng. It wasn't tough for a person who is from the city of local trains, coming out was easy-peasy. Mumbai somehow finds strings to keep me attached to it.

Every time I float like a kite, with the gusto of freedom and exploration of the new city, I forget about the spool I am attached to. Then, tweaks like these remind me that soon enough I have to roll back. Before this happens, I was ready to wallow in the magnanimity of cultures and spiritual energy that floats in the city.

On the way to the hostel, the window of the cab acted as the 5D canvas of the city. It looked like any other city at first glance. Then started the hide and seek of the main roads and narrow alleys. When I entered an alley, I thought we had reached the hostel but then we came back to the main road, my interpretation failed here. While the road labyrinth was hard to decipher, the crowd was common.

It was 6:45 AM, yet, we had to stop for the school bus to cross, the wrongly parked car to move, the vegetable handcart to cross the road and the round-shaped unique tricycle carrying school students to give us a passing side. It looked like perfect small-town scenery. People had time. There was a unique peace in the noise of everything happening around. The rush in the rush was missing and that is what made it different from the metros.

Reaching the hostel, I was greeted by a man named Ajay. We shared the same age group. The joyous innocence in his brown twinkling eyes made him a man, one could easily

trust. However, if my mother would have seen him, her views could have been different. His coloured hair and crazy tattoos would have raised her brow in terms of credibility. I do not know from where she got this perception but she believes that men with tattoos and coloured hair cannot be responsible. I smiled thinking about her interpretation and he smiled back.

The check-in formalities were quick and I was assigned a room. A small red bag was seated on my roommate's bed and that was the only luggage I could spot. Unlike me, his office had not bequeathed its blessings in the form of a machine that always stays by my side.

Like the fox declared the grapes to be sour, denial seemed the best policy. I placed my laptop bag behind the backpack. It was time to shed off all the enervations and get recharged to begin my holiday in the divine laps of the Ganga. Even bathing with water gave me the feeling of taking a dip into the river. It was an elixir to the tired body.

When I came to the common area, I found other travellers seated. Apart from the cup of a beverage in their hands, what they had in common was the expression of joy that the city had bestowed on them. Two of them were foreigners who had black hair like ours. There was a group of three friends having a chat. I found one more sole traveller lounging on the couch. He smiled at me and I knew whom I could join for a cup of tea.

Vasu, a short-height boy who was employed by the hostel to assist in the daily chores, handed me a cup of tea. I smiled and said, "Thank You."

He asked, "Do you need anything else, Sir?"

I nodded a no, to which he added, “Whenever you need anything, just summon me.”

“I will remember,” assuring him I went to sit next to the guy who greeted me with a smile.

Ajay also came strolling behind and asked in a soft tone, “Did you like your room?”

The hostel rooms mostly have a four to ten bunk bed setting and there I got inklings of only a roommate. More people means chances of knowing more places, cultures and stories. It is an exciting setting to have while you travel. It is like a tour within a tour. Some of the past memories of the hostel adventures ran through my mind in a flick. It delayed my answer for a second, “Yes, it is good.” I paused, but couldn’t resist asking, “But tell me is there only one roommate with whom I am sharing the room?”

“Yes, Sir. November is not the time when many tourists come. During the festivals, summer break and from December onwards there is a lot of rush here.” He attested to the query as if the hostel was at fault.

I guess, there are a few inquiries that shouldn’t be asked, viz. women’s ages, man’s salaries and any business’s clients. Correcting that mistake immediately, I skipped to the next question, “Can you suggest some good places where I can go now?”

He was ready with an answer before I could complete, “Ghats. If you leave right away the pleasant gust would add to the goodness of your start.”

“Sounds good,” visuals of the ghat started brewing in my mind. Keeping the empty cup aside, I asked, “How far is Ghat from here?”

He answered, “Dashashwamedh ghat is hardly a kilometre, you could walk up to the bank soaking the positivity that Varanasi beams with. The best part is that there are no barriers between the ghats so you can walk up to Assi Ghat if that pleases you.”

“That is indeed the best thing.” I stood up in glee to start my trip. I turned towards the person on the couch to bid adieu but he too jumped off his couch and asked, “May I join you on the way to Ghat?”

I said, twinkling at him, “More the merrier.”

On the way to Ghat, we got know-how about each other. His name was Krishna. He came from a small town Singrauli of Madhya Pradesh to appear in a railway examination. His personality had traits that went well with his name. He carried an air of happiness and contentment around him. He was simple yet mischievous.

While we reached halfway to the ghat, he stopped one of the tricycles and asked the man (rikshawala), “Will you go to Nepali Temple?”

The man happily said, “Yes, Sir. Surely.”

I looked at him puzzled as we had planned to go to Ghat. But since he had come to Varanasi several times before, I didn’t interrupt his conversation.

With a gush of laughter, he bantered, “Then go, what are you waiting for?”

The Rikshawala gave him a long stare. I thought that we were about to hear some rude words from him. But then Krishna put his arms around his shoulders and said, “Oh friend! You are so naïve.” The man left with his tricycle passing us a silly smile. Humans are uninterpretable. The

mocking which I thought would rage the man in lieu pleased him. The magic here was the touch of compassion from one being of God to the other.

The ego within us bars us from our eternal nature of love. It has made us the puppet of its play and we gladly self-identify with its nature taking pride in the class of our jobs, the homes we reside and the assets we have.

Travelling opens such unique chapters of the beings. It lets one look beyond the precincts of ego and meet the people like the people. They are like water and soil for holding the city to bloom. This tree shapes up with them making each destination what it is.

I was happy that Krishna accompanied me to the ghat. I asked him, "Where is this Nepali Temple?"

"It is at Lalita Ghat. Quite nearby. From Dashashwamedh Ghat we can easily walk there," he said casually.

"Okay. Why is it called Nepali Temple?"

"It is called by many names. Some call it the Pashupatinath Mandir of Varanasi, for some, it is Mini Khajuraho and for some, its name is Kanthwala Mandir. And it is called the Nepali temple since it was made by a Nepali King, Rana Bahadur Shah while he took refuge in Varanasi. The aura of Varanasi had mesmerized him and he decided to build a copy of the Pashupatinath Temple in Nepal. It took nearly 30 years to complete the temple and his son Girvan Yuddha Bikram Singh undertook his responsibility after he departed from the earth. I think King Rana Bahadur must have felt that the trace of his home should be here in the original home of Baba Shiv."

“Maybe. The Kings of past eras have left many treasures behind.” I paused and then thought of the other names, the correlation was hard to make. “But if it was built by the Nepalese King and is a replica of the Pashupatinath Temple, then why is it called Mini Khajuraho?”

He smiled like a Cheshire cat. “You would know when you see it.”

I simpered, “Fair enough,” and continued walking the alley buzzing with people.

Some were speeding up to the ghat and some towards Kashi Vishwanath Temple. Reaching close to the ghat, each side of the lane was lined up with small shops. Some were selling saffron bags and scarves, some bottles for carrying Ganga water, some puffed rice, some flowers and some bangles. The area was crowded. Some people crossed us carrying bags of fresh clothes and some returned with wet ones after purging their sins. Contentment was a standard feature. Those who were approaching the Deity for worshipping her, had the satisfaction of getting the chance to meet the Deity, while those returning, had a gleam of worship. As we were climbing down the stairs, I could finally see the Ganga.

Krishna announced, “The world-famous Dashashwamedh Ghat, welcomes you, Sir.”

I chuckled and played along, “Thank you, thank you and thank you, folks.

We continued walking towards the river. Skipping the multitudes swarming on the riverfront, the Goddess had tranced me. Adding the wings of the wind, she came towards me and each of my senses danced in blithe. The effect was such that I couldn’t hear what Krishna said about the crowd. My eyes were glued on the ripples, the waves,

the eddies and all the mystics, the Ganga was showing me. The young sun rays filtered with the mist of the wintery morning and played with its current while the people on the banks and on the boats celebrated this unison.

My reverie broke when Krishna asked, "Are you joining me for the dip?"

I said, "No. You carry on. Ganga is everywhere in Banaras, I just had a bath in the hostel. And I have gadgets too."

He confirmed, "Sure?"

I smiled, "Sure. Hand over your things to me and go jump."

Without wasting a second, he handed me his mobile, T-shirt, jacket and jeans, and whoosh, he jumped cheering, "Hail, Mother Ganga." Amazingly, the crowd whooped it up with a resounding holler. I stood there agape. I didn't expect things to happen in such a flash.

Dashashwamedh Ghat is synonymous with celebration and whoever you are, it would engross you in its transcend. It was strange that even in such cold weather so many people were having baths. The air is quirky here and the magnetism of the Ganga is stronger than anything else. The hymns and the mantras reverberated with zephyr and I stood amazed absorbing the positivity.

Krishna happily waved and signalled me to join him and I moved my head horizontally. That day I wanted to witness the happiness and glee that everyone there had on their faces. It was a unique mesmerism, I didn't want to break. I cupped my palms and took some water from the river and sprinkled it over my head. I told him that I was going to the side where the crowd was not that dense. Standing amidst

people who were changing clothes when I was not even bathing, felt outlandish.

The ghat was lined with wooden bench boards that were taken by Pandits, Saints, and people who had come to perform the rituals. I spotted a few foreigners too. It is strangely exciting to see the foreigners performing all the Hindu rituals from ornamenting their foreheads with vermillion, to taking dips in the Ganga with mantras. I cannot understand what provokes them. Is it the travel that makes them try and emphasize new traditions or is it the enticement of the Hindu culture?

In the buzz of happiness, the wails of babies broke my assiduity. I turned to my right and saw two babies shaved off. Mundan, one of the most essential sanskaras of our tradition, was in procession. That was a moment of awe. The hairless babies looked like cute little monks.

I was experiencing the mirth at its fullest in different sights and captured a few of them in stills. My camera and I were working nonchalantly. I was left awestruck when in one of my frames I captured an Aghori Baba who was crossing by. I had only seen them on screens. A cocktail of emotions arose. Amazement, bewilderment, fear and curiosity, all pepped up together. While I was absorbed in the glimpse of Aghori Baba, Krishna tapped my shoulders.

I was startled which amused Krishna, "What happened? Did you meet the famous ghost of Rani Bhairavi?"

"Ghost of Rani Bhairavi?"

"Yes. She loves people who come here for the first time. Whoever meets her is left dazed on the ghat just like you. It is said that nothing in the world is as pleasing as her embrace."

“What? I didn’t see her. I saw an Aghori Baba.”

“Who gets so terrified by an Aghori Baba? They are Godly people. You Mumbaikars are funny.” He sniggered.

I simpered and tried shielding my reaction, “No I wasn’t terrified. It was just that I saw them for the first time and instantly all the hearsays about them crossed my mind.”

He was in a mood to play, “What have you heard about them?”

I told him what he wanted to hear, “People say they have magical powers which can make you progress or suffer depending on how you behave with them. And they live in *Shamshan* and eat human flesh.”

“So does it make them bad?” he countered.

“Does it not? I believe these are myths and I don’t know much about them. You tell me.” I wanted to learn his perspective.

“They are pious yogis. The reason behind the myths is that they are unconventional, their approach to reach God is different. People see them in *Shamshan* performing rituals over a dead body and get scared. They call them black magicians and many other names, though, their power is their Siddhis which are earned after years of Spiritual practice. It is hard to locate a true Aghori.” I nodded like an ideal student to the explanations he gave.

He had worn his clothes while all this discussion happened. Moving towards the tea stall, I remembered Rani Bhairavi. “What is the story of Rani Bhairavi?”

He chortled, “You are so naïve, my friend.”

I understood I was the butt of his jokes. The frolic approaches he made were hard to decode until he signalled.



Chapter Three

Kashyam Marnanmuktih *(One who dies in Kashi attains liberation)*

Compass is any traveller's best tool while he is off on an unconventional solo trip into the wild or over the mountains. Whatever the location may be this device dedicatedly points out towards the north without faltering. Even after using it for centuries, we have not learnt our lesson from it. We quarrel over the dogmas of faith and doctrines of logic, altering our internal compass setting that always points toward salvation. What seems merely a small deviation from the ideal path of life, a shortcut indeed turns into the misty jungle of emotions, attachments and vices that trap us into the cycle of life and death forever.

The ancient tale of Samudra Manthan also acts as a compass in guiding us towards the right set of actions. The churning of the divine ocean by the Devas and Asuras, a legend from Vishnu Purana and Srimad Bhagavatam can rightly be put

in the present Kaliyug to understand the ways to end our travail.

The Devs (good) and Asurs (bad) are not residing in different worlds but within us as positive and negative thoughts. The churning rod is our consciousness that is bound with the chain of karmas. As the enlightened ones say, our aim in this human birth is to reach the nectar of enlightenment. When we realize the purpose of our birth and start the grind, the avarice of the world, the poison, separates from the self. The treasures of other gems follow as the siddhis which are falsely perceived as magic tricks by the immature humans. Some get satisfied with the treasures and fill in the egos of achieving them, however, the ones who keep the work inwards reach ambrosia. The elixir of immortality is the cutoff from the vicious circle of birth and death, salvation. Krishan believed that Aghoris aim to reach this elixir and siddhis are the gems that we hear in stories about them.

When people mentioned different methods of achieving it, I perceived it as their wish to go to heaven. It was in Varanasi that I learnt its true meaning.

**असारं खलु संसारे सारमेतच्चतुष्टयम् ।
काश्यां वासः सतां सङ्गो गङ्गाम्भः पूजनम् ॥**

Sourced from *Skanda Puranas, Kashi Khand* this Shlok states that in the temporary life, living in Kashi, associating with virtuous people, bathing in the Ganga, and worshipping Lord Shiva symbolize the path toward wisdom, inner peace, and spiritual liberation.

When I went to Lalita ghat with Krishna and climbed the stairs to reach the Nepali Temple, suddenly Varanasi

transformed into a different city altogether. The red terracotta setting with the wooden and stone sculpted works highlighted the temple and the adjacent Dharamshala. Seeing the carvings, I understood why people associate them with Khajuraho. Yet, righteous to its name, the whole setting looked like Nepal. The Pagoda-styled temple, the priests, and the residents of Dharamshala all appeared from there.

I asked Krishna, "How is it that all people here look like they are from Nepal?"

"Because they are. Some people say that the Nepal government governs this Dharamashala and temple. But I am not sure of it."

Pointing towards the old ladies wearing saffron clothes, I asked, "Are these people the family of the priests?"

"These are the people waiting for their death." I stared at him listening to his statement. He continued, "Varanasi is the gateway to salvation. When they die here, they would be cremated in Manikarnika Ghat and they would achieve moksha," he said intensely.

"I had heard about bodies of the deceased being carried to Varanasi for salvation, but I had never heard about this," I said in a muffled voice.

We started our stroll towards the next ghat when he added, "People go to extremes to free themselves from the cycle of life and birth. And when as humans we can do several things to live well, then it is also important to die well. You know there is a lodge named, Kashi Labh Mukti Bhawan, that lets the people on deathbed stay and get cremated with the rituals here."

That was quirky to hear. I wondered how the dear one leaves their family member there. It felt like death before death. Everywhere in the world, death is hushed to be spoken about or talked about. It is believed inauspicious and in contrast to the beliefs, here people are preparing for the one. It was hard to decide whether it was a tragic event or a mere acceptance of death. But, when were the secrets of Varanasi so easy to decode? Out of curiosity, I asked, "And suppose the person heals, can he continue staying there in that case?"

"No. After fourteen days of stay, the person would have to move and give the room to someone else. You see there is a difference between what you want and what happens. And the right of death is exclusively booked by the higher authorities. You cannot walk into Varanasi and say I must die today," he whispered.

The paints of the imagination did not know the apt colour combinations to portray this picture. It was incomprehensible. It is an exam where one must figure out the right time to clear the entrance. With the unknown number of breaths given to us, Varanasi carries a lot of mystics around salvation. In silence, we walked to the next ghat, until the sight left me startled.

There were a dozen pyres burning and the air was inflicted with the smell of death. Manikarnika Ghat was standing in front, and I was not prepared to meet her so early.

Cremation grounds have that strange eeriness about them. Even if the deceased is not your relative seeing the dead body burning, hits you deep inside. And there I was standing at the threshold of the celebrating ground of death. The bodies dressed in bright new clothes and adorned with

flowers waited for their turn to come, while the ones who had taken solace in the fire were left in its embrace by their relatives.

The law of Karma is strange. The plants, the forests, and the trees which we consume as food and embellishments for our whole life, in turn, consume us in the end. The vision was terrifying. I turned back to return when Krishna held my hand. "What happened? Don't you want to see this chapter of Varanasi?"

"No. These are private rituals of families. There is nothing to gawk about this mass epilogue of life." Without replying to anything, he looked toward the foreigners who were sitting on the boat to see the dance of death. I spotted one of them on Ghat clicking photographs of the burning pyre. "Alas! Only foreigners can yearn for this painful play."

I turned back and he did not stop me after that. He carried his hushed emotions without commenting on anything. In contrast to him, my mind was whooping with questions that I could not mute. "How was that outsider allowed to click photographs of the pyre?"

"He must have spoken to the DOM *Raja* or the concerned DOM."

"Who are DOMS?"

"DOMS are the keepers of the celestial fire by which all the pyres are lit. The sacred kund of fire has been burning continuously for centuries under their maintenance. It is believed that only when a DOM puts the first five logs and hands over this eternal fire for the deceased, the soul departs for salvation."

“Okay. So are the DOMS the priests of the cremation ground?”

“No, no-no. The irony is that the services of DOMS are necessary for the freedom of the soul, they are vital for reaching the soul to its final destination. But in society, they are treated as untouchables. They are not allowed to go to temples and auspicious places.”

“Why is it so?”

“Primarily this is because they deal in death, a subject that is not talked about. Second, they are believed to be cursed by Mahadev.”

Unknown to any such tale of the olden times, I was intrigued. “What did they do that they are still suffering from his fury?”

“You cannot say suffering. DOMS have been earning their livelihood for uncountable years through this service. Everybody has a role to play in the process of life. Some play their role in celebrating the beginning, some in maintaining it and the DOMS take the tough job of breaking the illusion of life. And I believe many of them earn a good amount, especially the DOM *Raja*.”

“DOM *Raja*? Who is that?”

“DOM *Raja* is the person who owns this cremation ground and keeps the sacred fire burning. All the other DOMs work under him.”

“Okay. But you still did not tell me why they were cursed?”

“Legend says that Lord Vishnu dug a pond in Kashi for Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. While the divine couple had their bath in the pond, the jewelled earring of Goddess

Parvati fell into the water. When Lord Shiva told the Brahmins of the ghat to look for it, they found it but kept it to themselves. This enraged the Deity, and he cursed the people to be treated as untouchables for eternity.

They instantaneously realised their mistake and pleaded for mercy. But the law of Karma is hard to break. When even a thought can dawn a chain of actions, this was a deed of avarice. However, it is not hard to please a God with a child's heart, Bholenath. He blessed them with the sacred fire which would be necessary at the time of cremation for attaining salvation. This way though they are untouchable, they can never be ignored, and they can earn their bread too."

Sometimes the stories take you over the unfathomable clouds where you can only imagine what if the evaporation did not happen this way. I could not comprehend the lives of DOMS. "Still, is it not difficult to live in the company of the dead all the time?"

"It surely must be. Imagine dealing with dead bodies the whole day; arranging wood, handling the fire, or disposing of the physical remains of the deceased which are not even fully burnt sometimes. Everybody cannot pay the hefty cost of a pyre that could burn the body completely. The family members who shed so many tears on the death of their loved one, also leave the dead body burning. They do not stand there waiting. Visualize the heat of the pyres and the smell of the burning flesh they must endure. Then, after the hard day with the death, they sleep in its company. I have even heard that their food is cooked from the half-burnt woods from the pyre." He paused, from a very thoughtful perception about the DOMS, then, he retrieved his causal

self, “But they have been doing it for ages, they must be used to it.”

That was a baffling context to know. The cycle of my imagination was racing at a speed that the visuals were blurry and the innerself, anxious. Envisioning their life, brought terror and agony. With sorrows all around, peace and happiness were missing greatly. The ultimate goal behind anything we do is for finding these elements of solace but how would they be ensuing their life without it? It was a moment where my gratitude grew multifold for the life I was granted.

That is when Krishna changed the topic and said, “And do you know because the earring of Parvati fell there, the ghat came to be known as Manikarnika Ghat.”

I earnestly wanted to talk about something else and he gave me a chance. “That is not true! I have heard a different story about the name.”

He remarked, “But seeing the DOMS, does this story not sound the most apt story to you? I feel so. I am curious to know what you have heard without visiting Varanasi.”

You would be surprised Krishna, as this too sounds, as appropriate, as the one you told. “You remember how heartbroken Lord Shiva was when Goddess Sati died?” He nodded vertically. “So when Lord Shiva was carrying the lifeless Sati in his arms, forgetting everything else but the pain of losing her, Lord Vishnu disintegrated her body with his chakra to take him out of the phase of anger and pain. The parts of the Goddess’s body fell on different places and this is the place where her ear fell and is known as Manikarnika Ghat.”

“Yes, that seems quite relatable. There are different stories about the name of the ghat; some even say that it was the earring of Mahadev that was lost. Yet the story of DOM remains the same.”

I have been to cremation ground before in life but the remorse of losing a loved one veiled everything that happened and existed in the ghat. Never did the thought of the people managing the pyre pop up. But in Varanasi hearing about DOMS, my heart was throbbing in the gloomy beats. It was not rightly melancholy, rather it was the perplexity that daunted me. Interrupting my thoughts, Krishna said, “Take it easy bro. It is simply the flowchart of Karma. Everybody is designated according to that and on the brighter side they get a blessing in disguise.”

“How?”

“The business of death is always in a boom. No depression, no job losses and none of the human interferences can stop death from occurring. It is ultimate and it is sure. The people dealing in death are never out of work,” he tittered in his jest.

“That is indeed true.” We had enough discussion about death, and I intended no more thoughts to be put on the subject.

Though I had not officially stepped into Manikarnika ghat, the distant spectacles made my heart quench for life. The approaching sight of Dashashwamedh Ghat felt like an oasis. It was as vibrant as we had left it an hour before. Grabbing a cup of tea, we again sat on the ghat absorbing the joy which reverberated in the aura.

The mesmerism of the mighty Ganga glued me for an hour or two, as it sauntered before me playing the drama of

ripples and music of its waves. Life just happened around it. Happiness was the distinctive character of the ghat, whether it was the satisfaction of the bath, the winning of a lucrative bargain deal for the boat ride, or the faces of people visiting the place for no particular reason. Krishna in the meanwhile had climbed the ghat stairs and sat under a tree studying something on his phone.

When the needles kissed each other and AM changed its title to PM, we both headed back to the hostel. On the way, the stalls and shops serving hot piping breakfast caught our eyes. A friend of mine from the office had aptly described Varanasi as the city of breakfast. All the stalls were scented with the aroma of Poori/ kachori (fried Indian Bread) and sabzi (Potato in gravy) and after crossing 5-6 stalls, Krishna chose a stall where he had eaten before. Before we were handed our plates, the white wisps rising from hot steaming gravy had etched themselves on the cold air. Caressing our nostrils and senses, it hypnotized us completely.

The big gaudy five-star hotels have their charm, but nothing can beat the local street food. With the first bite, the memories of all the cuisine ever tasted faded away. The long fasting had added to the scrumptiousness of the food. Though the spices made my nose leak, I continued tucking my breakfast with gusto.

With a boyish grin Krishna raised his brows, opening his eyes, "So how is the breakfast? It is one of the famous shops here."

I said, "It's awesome!"

He taunted a bit, "Seems like, it is too spicy for you?"

I laughed and winked, "Spice is the elixir of life."

Two happy and contented souls then strolled back to the hostel with their bloated stomachs.

Reaching there, we both bid farewell as this turned out to be our first and final excursion together. His exam came in as a barrier between us. It was hard for him to spare his precious revision time in the evening. The next day, he was directly leaving for his hometown from the exam centre.

When I came to the room, the moments of the day were alive. It was my sheer luck to have a companion like Krishna who had the knowledge of ghats and knew the stories behind them. I would have never known about DOMS without him. Maybe I would have gone to Manikarnika Ghat but asking anyone about the people and traditions in such a distressing setting is something that my conscience would not allow. Thinking about them brought shivers to me. In a flash, my mind refreshed the memory of the scene which I had overlooked. It was of the time when one of the bodies was getting ready for cremation and the two workers whose job was needed afterwards were sipping tea in the meanwhile. It was so normal for them but daunting to me even in my thoughts.

At that instant, I felt the burning smell floating in the Manikarnika Ghat filled the room. I missed my roommate badly at that time. If he had been there at least we could have lighted up some joyous conversation. Nevertheless, his oblivious red bag gave me satisfaction that he would be there to accompany me during the night. A nap seemed the best remedy to free the mind from the captives of the terrifying thoughts. But catching some Zs was not as easy as I had thought.

After changing sides many times, I got up. I knew sleep was an alien to me right now. The language was hard to interpret. It was better I left for the ghat. Before leaving when I peeped in the common room there was no one except Ajay and Vasu. I left alone into the alleys to reach the ghat. The lanes were rush free during that time and so was the ghat. With a smaller crowd, the boat ride seemed like the best idea to observe how Varanasi changes with every ghat. I bargained a deal with one of the boatmen and was all set to soak in the unique aura of each ghat.

There is something magical about the music that oars make with every splash in the river. The best background score ever produced by a human in sync with nature. The cool breeze added to the symphony of the show and my half-closed eyes absorbed the benign the enchantress had gifted. My mother says everything is the outcome of the Karma and I wondered which beautiful deed ended in such benevolence.

The transcendental state of the mind was broken when something bumped the hull of the boat. The boatman looked on the sides and then raised his neck to look beyond me. He saw something and slightly turned the boat left to align from the straight line he was rowing. When I turned back, the sight gave me goosebumps. A partially burned corpse knocked the stern of the boat. Most of the flesh of the body had burnt but the skin of the left hand still covered the erected fingers. They seemed to be pointing at something and I did not dare to look in that direction. I requested the boatman to speed the boat as his trick had failed. The heavenly boat ride transformed into a fright ride.

The boatman tried to get rid of that ghastly figurine, but it seemed attached to the hull from something invisible. It

stayed with us, whether we speeded or slowed, paused, or turned. Even when the Goddess took our side and tried detaching it with her rising and falling waves, the body stubbornly followed us. My heartbeat had risen to a point where I could feel the thumping all over my body. I was already sweating with fear when the next wave from the river gave a glimpse of its teeth. It was smiling. People would call it a hallucination but, I was sure. It was mocking me, and each second was getting more daunting. I wanted to get ashore and run in the embrace of the crowd.

Suddenly, the river upsurged with a strong current and the dead body rose with the splash. I closed my eyes after hearing a loud bang. Something had come over the boat and I did not want to see what it was. The rage of the river settled, and the pin-drop silence taunted the ears. A strange whirring sound of a machine filled the stillness. When I opened my eyes, the senile fan of the hostel room gave me a quizzical look. The noise from its doddered movements saved me from the climax of the boat ride in the dream.



Chapter Four

An invisible prison?

Saint Guru Nanak quoted,

*“False is the ruler,
False the subjects,
False is the whole world beside.
False is the palace,
False is the tower,
False the ones living there.
Gold is False,
And Silver False,
And False the one they adorn.
The body is false,
False its clothes,
And False their merit forms.
False is husband,
False is wife,
Both are burnt to ashes.”*

The pursuit of happiness in things, relationships and achievements has been an ever-present trait of humans. To remind us of this, many saints and sages have presented insights about life beyond what we perceive but all that wooed us was false. For ages, we have been hearing a phrase in the final journey of the body to the cremation ground, “Ram naam satya hai.” Meaning that the name of God is the only truth and this life is a golden chance to merge with him after death. Yet, what we see in death is the event to mourn for the lost asset. We treat it like an untouchable entity of which sight, sound and touch would make us its predator. But does any of this work? Death comes when it has to. Then why do we look away from it?

In the epic of Mahabharat, when Pandavas were exiled for 13 years, there was a time during their journey when the exhausted brothers couldn't find any water body to quench their thirst. Eventually, upon the discovery of a lake, all the brothers except Yudhishtira drank the water even after hearing the warning from the residing crane. They died the moment their lips touched the surface of the water. Yudhishtira, who had always walked on the path of dharma, stopped listening to the warning. To obtain permission for using the water, he answered numerous questions of the Yaksha in the form of a crane. During the questionnaire about life, when asked about the greatest wonder of life, he answered it to be the way humans perceive death. Even after seeing the innumerable creatures meeting death daily, they assume themselves to be immortal and look away from it.

Time and again we are taught so much about death. But what we have learnt is to fear it and call it inauspicious. Each aeon has trained us to avert death. And I was following the tradition taught to me. The fear that arose with the sight of

the cremation ground and the life of DOMS living there, was tremendous to handle. The dream was evidence of it. Even the unreal version of events made me jump out of my skin.

I was leaving for the ghat again, convinced about not taking a boat ride for that day. There was still a lot of time for the evening Ganga Aarti so I slipped into the alleys searching for the Blue Lassi Café. I wanted to check what was so special about it that Ajay suggested only this particular café when there were uncountable lassi shops. Or was it only an over-hyped junction? His direction and guidance seemed like a maze once I hit the roads. Thankfully, he had given me a joker card to this labyrinth and it was Kashi Vishwanath Temple. After reaching there, it was easy to take directions from the locals. One of the shopkeepers helped me trace the lane in which it was situated.

From the rave reviews I got from Ajay, I speculated about the parking crisis that this lane would have. The alley like the women's ponytail tapered gradually as it flowed down. The reason was the small shops which had hacked the space through their extensions. I was sceptical about the whereabouts of the destination, yet I kept walking.

When I finally reached it, I laughed at my imagination that pictured the outlet as some grand café. Maybe small in size but lavish. But has grandeur ever been the home of life? No, it is always classy. Blue Lassi Café was a small shop built using the frontal space of the house. It had a long list of curdy connotations from nearly all fresh fruits and dry fruits. Lassi flavours like watermelon, *Paan*, pomegranate and chocolate, blew my wits off. The choice was a difficult action to take.

I turned to the person sitting on the counter, making the lassi with the wooden churner instead of any automated blenders which are the stars of such places. I decided to order grape lassi and asked for it. Withholding the orange-red betel mixture from falling out of his mouth, he lifted his lower lip and said, "Grapes are not in season. Choose any seasonal fruit."

This multi-option choice was again a puzzle but in the second go, I randomly chose Pomegranate. While he was preparing my lassi, I went inside the shop. There was only a foreign couple seated sipping their beverage. I felt lucky to have some peaceful time out of the rush.

As I sat inside the shop, I noticed hundreds of passport-size photos pasted on the wall. That was baffling. Why is this place massed up with so many photos? I tried finding some common factors in those but I couldn't point out any specifics. The moment took me back to the time I visited Aeroplane Gurudwara in Talhan, Punjab where people offer Aeroplanes to get visas easily. Then in succession to Chittai Golu Dev Temple in Almora, where people tie letters on the premises to have their wishes granted? Does this place also have some mystics?

Containing my curiosity after that was difficult, I came out of the enclosed area and sat on a bench near the counter. He was full-heartedly topping my glass with sweet condensed milk (*Rabri*) and nuts. As he handed the glass to me, I asked, "What is the story behind the photos?"

Before answering the question, he emptied his beetle mixture filled mouth and said, "This is the love of people who visit our shop. When they like our preparations they paste their photo here."

“That is amazing. But when it started didn’t you feel odd about it?”

He smiled, “Not at all. We are simple people and more than money, we look for satisfaction in people’s faces. And deeds like this are very satisfactory. An evidence of their love and an evidence of trust which our grandfathers have built with their hardwork.”

I would have loved to continue the discussion but he had two more guests in the shop. In the meanwhile, I took a sip from the Kullad (a traditional earthen vessel) that was full up to the brim with goodness. It was good. After a few sips, the pink lassi made its revelation. The natural red colour of the pomegranate had turned it pink. The taste was amazing, nothing like I had ever tasted. I could relate to the testification of the flavours through the photographs. I glanced at the wall of photos and unconsciously started searching for a place to paste my photograph.

That is the magic of genuine taste. If a café in Mumbai serves Lassis like this, it would be a big hit because there, mainly artificial flavouring agents are used in beverages. I started building castles of a successful business empire in this as I devoured the enticing contents of the glass.

All of a sudden, the happiness of taste, and the satisfaction of the incredible business idea vanished in thin air when a dead body passed right before my eyes. The air around me resounded with sorrow. What was my deal with death? Why is it following me everywhere? And then, as if one wasn’t enough, two more came following back to back.

An unknown uneasiness engulfed me. We are taught that eating and drinking before a deceased is inauspicious. It was

abandoned and I was drinking lassi in their presence. I couldn't drink the remaining lassi as it felt ethically wrong.

I asked the shopkeeper, "Has any casualty occurred nearby? Three corpses passed from this lane!"

He smirked. "That is normal. What do you expect to see in a lane that ends up at the cremation ground of Manikarnika Ghat?" I couldn't believe it. How can a business dealing with edibles strive in a lane that is a dedicated passage for the dead? The lines of stress decorated my forehead. "Don't people find it odd to relish lassis before these passing carcasses?"

"This is Banaras, Sir. Here death is as accepted as the birth." The mystics of the city had stolen words and thoughts from me. I couldn't accept the strangeness. He further added, "Only three corpses made you worrisome? What will happen to you if you sit here for the whole day." He laughed and started making one more pot of lassi.

I couldn't decide whether it was sarcasm or words of enlightenment. My mind declared the left-out lassi to be impure. But it was hard to discard the left lassi when I had caught the shopkeeper's attention. Though he was busy making lassi, he threw some glances at me as well. I was in a muddle. I did not want to throw the lassi in front of him so I finished the contents in one go.

He caught me, "That became tough to finish for you?"

I tried escaping, "No. No. Your lassi was delicious."

He chuckled. "You are afraid of death?"

Death, death and death. I felt so bound inside an invisible prison with death, that even normal conversation turned towards it. "Nothing like that. From an early age, I have

been taught that we shouldn't eat or drink before the deceased body. That learning caught me into a dilemma today."

"Fair enough." He wanted to say something more, but I wanted to add more explanation fearing his judgement, "We don't see the funeral processions daily, nor do we see the cremation ground. Three dead bodies were way more for a normal person."

"Normal person? Aren't we normal?"

"Aah! Sorry, I did not mean that." I had pulled the wrong string. The people of Banaras are visionary and open to both ends of life. It was like a new version of life for me that was tough to speculate. I thought it was righteous to leave. But then there was something more than a glass of lassi for me.

"Let me change the definition of normal for you," he mysteriously said. I was steadfast on the bench after that. I waited while he took the payment from the foreign couple and shared a photo with them. The wait wasn't over yet. He then prepared a pot for two more guests and turned to me thereafter.

"Can you imagine a King assisting a DOM in giving the last service to the dead and living like a DOM?"

It sounded incredulous. "Why would he do that? That's not possible. Are you suggesting that someone in the past did that?" I rhetorically added.

"Yes. The famous King Harishchandra."

I had heard my mother quoting that he had left his Kingdom and sold himself and his family for keeping his promise but I had never heard of this part. How difficult would it be for a regal person to live a life of DOM? The thought gave me

goosebumps. I asked, “Why would he do this? I cannot believe it.”

He explained, “He did this to fulfil the promise he gave to Sage Vishwamitra. When one is on the path of truth, many challenges come along the way and only the righteous pass it and attain nirvana. King Harishchandra was one such ruler. He would adhere to the truth and his promises no matter what.

For a promise, he gave his Kingdom and all the belongings except his family to Sage Vishwamitra but still, the Dakshina (donation) of the saint remained pending. For which he left the Kingdom and headed towards Kashi. When he couldn’t accumulate the promised amount, he defrayed the cost by giving his wife and son to an old man. Then, he sold himself to the DOM *Raja*, Kallu DOM to free himself from the debt of a promise.”

The Kings of Satyug were tremendously powered by honesty and determination. His self-restraint was empowering to me but still piqued me. “Is it fair to face such wrath for truth?

“You call it wrath, he had to face much more than this,” he said.

“Even more than this? I guess this was more than enough to test a ruler.” I exclaimed.

“Yes, even worse and that too without any resentment or anger. But it is difficult to understand the decisions of the olden times by the restless present age,” he said with a mocking smile.

When he started working for the DOM, he was instructed to take the service charge for each cremation and give a part

of it to the DOM *Raja*, a part to the King of Kashi and keep the remaining for himself. While he struggled in the cremation ground, his wife toiled in the old man's family. One day, his son got bitten by a snake and died. His wife carried their son to the cremation ground but he, bound by his master's word, denied the service."

"Why?" That was incomprehensible for me.

He answered, "Because she did not have money to pay for the service."

"But he was also the father of the child, so did they not share the responsibility mutually?"

"Yes, he was the father. However, he had become the slave of Kallu DOM. He couldn't ignore his instruction. He could forgo his part but had to take the service charge for his master."

"Seeing the dead son is a pain that is hard to handle. How helpless he must have been when he did not even have the right to bid his child with proper ritual. Isn't it a high price? How can this test be fair?" I worriedly asked.

The Lassi shopkeeper said, "I agree but that is how it is. If you look at this with body consciousness then it is unfair but for the soul, this is only filtration. Sage Vishwamitra was a tough Saint to please. And after he was satiated with unbreakable faith in truth and honesty, he was blessed with half Punya of all the good deeds of the sage. *Raja* Harishchandra Ghat here in Varanasi is known after him. Some people even call this ghat Adi Manikarnika ghat, claiming it to be the ancient one."

I looked at him with a query and he exclaimed, "I don't know which one is more ancient!"

I chuckled at his statement. That was a big lesson learnt over a glass of lassi. I thanked him and pasted my passport photo on the wall. The memory of this lassi shop is moored deep within and I do not think that its anchor will loosen up any time soon.

The fear of the departed may not have gone away but after listening to him, I was glad that the dead bodies passed at that time from the alley. As humans, we are in the warren of feelings, where any signs of being mortal, scare us and we sink deeper into the quicksand. Journeys and lessons like this inspire me to excel at inner engineering and understand the deeper truth of life.



Chapter Five

Creatures of Habit

Humans are creatures of habit. From the very inception, we have tuned ourselves to accumulate things. Whatever pleases our sight, we like to keep it for ourselves; be it a simple sweet flower, a being or a mighty empire. Nothing is out of the perimeter of this habit of accumulation. All the boundaries of states and countries we see today are merely the result of it.

What a wondrous world it would have been if these boundaries did not exist. Ironically, that can only be a figment of imagination. We are deeply in love with all that we have acquired and is essentially not ours. Even the body that we identify as ours has been accumulated when our soul entered the mother's womb.

This way death is simply the shedding of the accruals that were made on physical and psychological levels. Then, why is it that everyone fears death? Srimad Bhagwat Gita clearly

tells us that the soul never dies and keeps on changing its forms.

*देहिनोऽस्मिन्यथा देहे कौमारं यौवनं जरा /
तथा देहान्तरप्राप्तिर्धीरस्तत्र न मुह्यति ॥*

Meaning the soul is within this body. As the materialistic form changes the phases from childhood to youth, then from adulthood to old age, similarly, the soul too changes its residence from one form to another. The self-realized soul is not bewildered by this process.

We have always known this from our scriptures. Still, death always brings fear, pain and agony with itself. Is it because, just like the habit of acquiring, we are also habitual of fearing death? Maybe that is the stimulus for all the anxiety I had after seeing the cremation ground, the DOMS and the dead. The knowledge of Satya Harishchandra's story did leave me baffled and inspired. But we are creatures of habit, and coming back to square one did not take much time.

The sky had fine-tuned the brightness to welcome the night. I proceeded towards the Dashashwamedh ghat to witness the grand Ganga Aarti. The alleys were swarming with people. In an hour, the crowd had multiplied to infinite levels. Reaching the destination towards the starting time was not a good idea. I had to watch the spectacular dance of fire lamps revering the Ganges from quite a distance.

The heads of the people stole the view of the river. But I didn't push through the people to make the way forward. The rotating fire lamps in tune with the hymns and bells created a positive aura that was to be absorbed standstill. While the devotees sang the mantras for the Goddess, the priests changed the multiple wick lamps to a huge lamp

which was shaped like a snake hood. There were many boats lined up in front to see this rhythmic devotional procession. That was the best place to witness the aarti.

I could only imagine the reflections of the mighty lamps, dazzling like diamonds over the Deity's waves. The sight must be truly pleasing that even the moon couldn't withhold anymore. It came to see its eternal friend in its full form, shining bright with the orangish tint over its face.

If I had left the Lassi café early, I could have rented a boat to witness the grandeur. But I did not want to bargain over that, the experience at the Blue Lassi Café was special in its way. With the movement of people outwards, I guessed that the aarti was coming towards closure. I was in no haste to run out and leave this energized aura created by the devotees and the supreme. With lesser people, the view became clearer. When the Priests offered the flowers to the Ganges the evening prayers finished. After staying for a few more minutes, I also walked out with the crowd towards the street. That day was not the day to roam in the new town. I was not prepared to contain the inner turmoil that I had suppressed a few moments ago.

"I would come back again," I thought and jaywalked to the hostel remembering the intriguing events of the day. Suddenly, the city looked like a secretive state of spirituality and all the gaga under its veil. There was a mystical peace here. But maybe the chemistry of peacefulness that the lassi man told me was hard to decipher. The elements of this formula were unknown to me. It was hard to eliminate the thoughts about the dead. I do not know how Satya Harish Chandra managed to work as a DOM after being a King. He was a divine soul and the chapter of divinity was yet to be opened in my life.

As I reached, Ajay smiled and asked, “You came back so early? What happened? Tired already?”

Communicating the uneasiness going on in the subconscious is not an easy job. I couldn’t understand where to start and what to tell. His eyes were looking for an answer, so I told him the whole episode of the Blue Lassi café but he didn’t express any remark to the story and simply the interjections of ‘mmm’ and ‘hmm’ completed the conversation from his side.

I tried inciting him, “How could people eat or drink where dead bodies pass? Isn’t it inauspicious?”

“It is Varanasi,” he said with a sly smile. Now, what should I imply with this? The intuitive beliefs rising with the current tide could not surpass the quantum of beliefs retained from childhood. Varanasi was playing its mystics at its best. Maybe the secrets are best disclosed through experience than through the lessons told by Anonymous.

In lieu of asking for an explanation, I placed a request, “I want to know more about Varanasi. A lot is adhered to this place and its ghats, some natural and some supernatural; I want to know it all. Can you introduce me to someone who knows about the history and the eccentricities of this prehistoric city?”

“Umm,” he thought for a while and said, “I can’t tell you any specific person, but I have a suggestion to settle your curiosity.”

I asked, “What is it?”

He suggested, “You go to the ghat early in the morning by 4:30-5:00 AM and walk through from Dashashwamedh ghat to Assi Ghat. You will have unique experiences

watching people engaging with Mother Ganga spiritually in varied ways.”

I said, “Are you saying that by walking through the ghats the secrets would be revealed to me?”

He assured me, “I feel so. Many travellers come here and tell their enticing stories which were sketched on the ghats. Even your roommate, he got so allured by Manikarnika Ghat that he is coming to Varanasi for the sixth time and his whole day and sometimes half of the night goes on the ghat only.”

“Oh! I have not met him yet. I only saw his red bag on the bed,” I remarked.

“You can meet him today; he is in the room. And before I forget, when you reach Assi Ghat tomorrow morning, have tea at Babloo Tea stall,” he advised.

I countered, “Is the tea so good there?”

“Yes, it is. But the prime reason is that you may meet some interesting people there. The ones we refer to as ‘*Vidvan log*’, the intellectuals, rich in literature knowledge and history,” he enlightened.

I was satisfied hearing that, “Okay, then I guess, I would follow your pursuits.”

Bidding him a goodbye I moved straight to my room. The inquisitiveness to know about my roommate was rising. Why was he coming to Varanasi over and over again? And what is so engaging in Manikarnika ghat? Merely the glance of that ghat had sent tremors of fear to the core. When I opened the door, he was sitting in a meditative position. The creak of the door didn’t stir his concentration. I quietly came inside the room and sat for a while observing

him. His long curly hair, tattooed arm and baggy- harem pants told a hippie story about him but his face carried the peace of a sage.

Good etiquette reminded me that I had stared at him enough. I slowly took my clothes and tip-toed outside the room. The door of the room was noisy so like a gentle roommate after the bath, I directly went to the common room for dinner. When I came back, he was still meditating. At that point, I felt as if he was faking it. Who gets so absorbed in meditation for so long? Have I travelled to the age where the saints meditated to get the boons from the Gods?

Alas! It was the day when only his glimpse was available for the silent one-sided chatter. Officially, the day had ended but even the mighty nighty 9 was five minutes away. Back in Mumbai, sometimes this was the time we had evening snacks in the office. Was I missing Mumbai? The answer was scrambled.

Sometimes I eagerly want to quit working and stick to travelling. The corporate world is an essential part of life now, but I yearn for the simplicity of the yesteryears. Like the Eucalyptus trees, corporate has its perks which are amazing, yet akin to the tree's plantation that eats up the nutrients and moisture reserve of the soil, corporate jobs too, deplete the absolute quality of life. One no more has the liberty over time. But that is merely a personal interpretation as in the times when the bank balance, the expensive gadgets and grand homes decide the happiness quotient, maybe I am the one in illusion.

I swiftly changed the tide of thoughts towards the present and the ride towards the nod land began. Just then, my

roommate got up from his place and left the room. He must have assumed I was sleeping. Maybe we were destined to meet a day after. My eyes were already droopy and within moments, I was in slumberland.

I woke up with a strong waggle. Strangely, there was no one by my side who could have pushed me so hard. I looked left, my roommate was fast asleep. Mysteries were following me everywhere. I changed sides to resume the broken slumber but all in despair. It was only 3 AM so I had nothing better to think of.

I thought maybe a trip to the loo would help out and went for it. On the way back, I felt as if somebody was following me. I turned back and except for silence nothing else could be sensed in the dark. On my return, I found someone else sleeping on my bed. I confirmed whether I entered the right room and my backpack confirmed it to be the right destination. Maybe someone mistakenly came to the wrong room.

I felt awkward waking him but sleeping in an unknown bed in those wee hours was not an option. I softly shrugged him and said, "Excuse me, that's my place. You are sleeping on my bed!"

He was sleeping on the sides facing the wall. He immediately turned and came close to my face and smirked. He was so close that I could smell the ash with which his face was covered. The definition of velocity was best explained by my rapid breathing at that moment. In a flash, I remembered who he was. Fear froze my veins. He was the same person whose body passed while I was sitting in the Blue Lassi shop. He whispered into my ears, "You are calling it only your bed. Did you forget you invited me?"

My heart skipped a beat in the apprehension of his statement. His bloodshot eyes had made my ribs heave. I couldn't understand which invitation he was talking about. With a trembling voice, I tried explaining, "I...didn't invite.... you. How could I?"

He roared a burst of laughter and said, "You pasted your photograph."

My blood curdled listening to this. I was no more befriended by consciousness as it had turned into a carousel of fears exploding with anxiety and helplessness. I started shaking uncontrollably. As his hand approached me, I shrugged it off.

A sharp noise started diluting everything into the thin air. I couldn't behold the sight and embraced whatever the destiny withheld with my eyes closed. Everything had muted. I slowly opened my eyes and discovered two things. First, life-like bizarre dreams are part of my travels. Second, it was not somebody's hand I had shrugged, it was my vibrating phone that I had thrown under the empty bed of my roommate. He had already left.

The alarm on the phone still vibrated. As I got out of bed, I hoped I hadn't broken the screen of this beastie, or it would cost a fortune. I got lucky that day. It was 5 AM and this gadget came as a rescue friend. I hurried as I did not want to get late in catching the early morning vibes of the city. Going to the washroom felt like *Déjà vu*. It was still dark and everyone was asleep. Only my filled bladder adhered me to the events of reality.

Within fifteen minutes, I came to the locked door of the hostel. "How did he go then?" I wondered about my roommate. It was odd to wake the snoring Ajay but I had

no other option. He was the one who had proposed this time. In a soft tone, I called out his name. With his half-opened eyes, he asked, "What happened, Sir?"

I hesitantly said, "If you could open the door, I can go to the ghat."

He ambled to the door with unsteady footsteps and opened it. The first bang of the wind came running and sent me in shivers. I closed the zip of my jacket up to the neck and went forth. The article I read about Varanasi which said November is not cold was truly misleading. The jacket (technically a sweatshirt) which I wore, was the only winter wear I brought.

It was dark. The chilly misty wind gave me the willies. I thought I had seen the worst weather and bravely went into the cold deserted road. A minute of walking was sufficient to take away the audacity I thought to pull off. Even the tiniest bone of the body danced in vibration with the current of wind.

I have trekked in Spiti Valley in the dense snow. This was nothing in comparison to that. It is all the games of the mind which trick us into its shivers. Had I known mornings are pretty cold in Varanasi in November, I would have been prepared.

Uncertainty was gift-wrapped for the day with that inexplicable dream I had at the start. Even the roads which were expected to have some people were waiting aloof to greet me with eccentricity. The only two beings I saw were squeaking into the empty roadside stalls with blankets rolled over them. I felt insane walking on the deserted roads and thought about returning. It is a tourist city, why was nobody going to the ghat? It was eerie. I could hear my

footsteps resound in the thin layer of fog. The cold winds passed through my jacket and then pinned my body with its coldness. I was numb before I reached the main road. But seeing people thereafter ended the anxiousness.

There were a bunch of people snuggled around the small fire which was lit by a bunch of twigs. It seemed like a perfect winter morning as told by my friends belonging to central India. I joined the roadside hearth near a tea stall for a moment. The warmth was reliving. The person making tea offered me a cup but I denied the tempting offer. Ghat was still away, I embraced the chilly shivers and made my way towards the Goddess.

With the reduced distance towards the ghat, the cold breeze rose in excitement. Without the multitude swarming over the steps and the river, the sight was completely different from the last morning. I was impressed seeing the lights all over the ghat. I immediately reached for the Ganga. With her first touch, she wordlessly spoke the language of compassion. There was strange hypnotism in her sight. Though I was still being battered by the serrated touches of the cold wind, I sat down on the bank near the Deity to let myself dive into the trance, she was all set to cast.

I was at peace. There were no negative emotions dusking the illumination of positivity spreading within me. The subtle river flowing past me had shunned all the noise within my head. There are very few moments in life when you experience such stillness. Nothing to rush for, nothing to be left incomplete, nothing to worry and nothing to lose; you just have the moment.

My reverie was broken hearing the Vedic chants by women. I got up and started walking toward the chorus sacrament.

Ajay had not told me anything about this. I crossed 4-to 5 ghats following the chants and the Ganga. I couldn't take my eyes off her as with every ghat she transformed as per the lights yet the serenity continued. But suddenly I froze seeing the reflection of fire over the river. There were a few funeral pyres burning. Amongst them, the most frightening for me was the pyre which was getting prepared. The body was transferred to a bed of wood for cremation. That was Harish Chandra Ghat. I was flabbergasted to see such early crematory processions.

The tranquillity in the aura which was pleasing a while before came as a storm and quelled the inner peace within me. I avoided looking at the body as I didn't want to have one more visitor in my dreams. I felt like rushing from the site yet I couldn't. There was something about the air that was crushing my heart. My legs were paralysed for the moment. I thought if I let the sun rise, then, I would pass through.

I read somewhere that the soul never dies and after death, it takes some time to realize this fact. It fights back to show its presence and regain its physical form. Experiences such as these were not the cup of my tea. I don't remember the book's name or whether it is true or not, still, I was freaking thinking about it.

The background score of the Vedic Chants had now metamorphosed into Ganga Aarti. With that something changed and within a snap of fingers, I passed through the pyre shunning the direct look. I saw it burning in the reflection over Ganga. Truth can never be ignored.

With the realization came the first ray of shimmering dim light. Mr. Sun was yet within the embrace of the horizons

but his scent had travelled. The horizons before letting the Sun out had painted the darkest hues with a tinge of Orange. And with the kiss of love, the sky dropped its black attire and transformed into a brightening one.

Watching this drama over the flowing waves of Ganga was the most beautiful experience of that day. I reached Assi Ghat watching the lovely showcase of nature and the Ganga Aarti concluded. What I thought to be a wonderful end was just the beginning. There was a small stage-like platform set with an old banner of Subah-e-Benaras.

I had done various searches about the city but I had never read about any Ganga Aarti happening on Assi Ghat. And the banner Subah-E-Benaras was also a newly discovered idea for me. I was inquisitive to know more about it. I sat on the stairs on one side and silently watched the proceedings.

I remembered the school days at that time; like yesteryear's school assembly, everything happened systematically. A man came on stage and started singing slokas in Sanskrit. His voice was croaky or he had caught a cold as his congestion was clearly articulated in his throat's guttural sounds, but still, his track was well modulated.

The ripples over the Ganga seemed to follow with the rhythm he sang; as if the deity was happy with the prayers of her worshipper. By the time he concluded, I proceeded towards the small tea stall on the ghat. Few people had crowded there to sip in the hot ambrosia he was serving. Believing in numbers is human and when you see so many people opting for a drink, you follow the group.

Tea, winters and the ghat, I had the best team on my side to start a perfect morning. I sat on the stairs of the bank and saw how the winter assembly had transformed into a yoga

ground. It was wondrous to see so many people add up in the short span. Like a proud Indian, I preened watching the group of foreigners also performing. If the tea had not enticed me that way, maybe I would have joined them.

I went on for the second and third cup progressively and soaked the morning essence watching the Deity and her worshipper. The music of nature went on to play its orchestra infusing more positivity in the air. The best part was that I was free from the bondage of needles and their exaction. They are tough masters; whenever I think their pressure is dwindling, their movement brings new deadlines. But at that moment, I was least bothered about it. It was a gift from Varanasi and I humbly accepted it.

Bejewelled with the crown of freedom, I walked back to Dashashwamedh Ghat. The ghats were beaming with life. After leaving Assi ghat, I remembered the tea stall Ajay had told me about. Postponing the meeting with the intellectuals, I embraced the walk and the stupefying scenery stretched with Ganga in the background. Just then, the Goddess extended one more of her bequests. I found an empty ghat waiting for me. Every other ghat that I crossed had some human engagement. Some had people bathing, some were booked for the unveiling of the mystics of Yoga and some had people doing their chores. But this one hid just for me. The city had started pouring its benignity and I was more than happy.

I sat on the stairs and bared my feet to dip them in water. The chilly early morning had become a soothing ally by then. But the water was still freezing cold for me. With the first touch, I felt a thousand pins pinching me. I pulled my feet back. At that very moment, I saw two local kids jumping into the river and floating with elation. Their

joyous celebration over the water made me immerse the retrieved feet back in the water.

Within seconds, soaking pedes in the water was the most relaxing thing. I understood one thing that day. If there is a heaven, it is beyond the tall wall of perceptions within us. We have strengthened that wall strong enough to build a fort out of it. And inside it is the mighty unconquerable castle of desires. Lost in the avarice of its galore, we keep on climbing and building floors to this castle. Among the builders, nobody has seen its top as the avarice keeps on making it higher.

Is it not strange that after being born as a species with the highest acumen we grind our life in the mortar and pestle of greed and lies? Are all those paychecks of any use after we die? Who has taken all the assets to the other side of life? No one. Then, what is the true purpose of life?

The answer to it was yet to be found as these thoughts were never pondered by me. Ganga was transmitting its purity with its touch and I was unveiling the simplicity of life. It was the most gleeful moment I experienced there. There was no hurly-burly happening around me. The morning sun twinkled over the waves and the cold yet calming water of the Ganga extended its tranquillity. The river seemed to have dismissed all its engagement just to be with me.

The background score was perfect. The dazzling water of the river, the floating boats in the distance and the birds flying over the water, caressing a drop of love with each dip. Indeed, a wonderful picture that nature had painted live before me. A scenery that I will never forget. The trance of the divine touch would have not been broken if the sun had not warmed the air to get back the attention of the Goddess.

I sat there for an hour or two without any realisation of time.

With a thought of breakfast, I made my move back to Dashashwamedh Ghat. I ambled through the ghats in pleasure unaware of the big change that was coming to be the part of my life on the ghat that made me tremble a few hours before.



Chapter Six

Dear Death

Why do I fear the dead?

Why do I snub the end?

Why is immortality pretended?

Why is death said ill-omened?

Maybe because life is the donor and death a brutal recipient.

Sounds good but is not true

It is the invisible prison we are celebrating through.

When the past birth can't be remembered

Why is the present associated?

When future births cannot be perceived

Why is salvation so coveted?

Isn't it a signal to forget everything and live your life to the fullest?

Sounds good but is not true

It is filling the soul with foul food thinking digestion would find the way through.

*When he is the doer and the Conscious agency
How do our karmas sew the life tapestry?
When everything is predestined and would happen unvaryingly
How can the freedom of non-existence be a possibility?
Maybe the bondage of existence is merely a harmonious anomaly.
Sounds good but is not true
Entangled in reasoning about the transient world, how can one
find the way through?*

For a swimmer, the size of the hole in his boat is not the cause of bewilderment, it is the size of the waterbody and his strength that may cause anxiety. Life resembles such a sailing vessel. Everyone has been endowed with swimming skills and a boat having a hole. It is on us that before the water drowns this boat, we shun the illusion of being hydrophobic and strengthen ourselves to swim across. The beautiful part is until we self-realise, every time we drown, we get one more such boat.

This means death is only a possibility. Either one is going to be part of the journey yet again or is reaching the destination. Then, what is so terrifying about it? Why is it a bad omen?

I was astounded by the questions Keshav had after he extended such clear-line explanations. Thinking about his logic, Death did not sound like a horrifying term at all. He had some deep connection with death. Or who could be so mesmerized in the close vicinity of the cremation ground?

The first time, when I officially met Keshav, I was rambling my way back from Assi Ghat to Dashashwamedh Ghat. Passing through a burning pyre in Harishchandra Ghat earlier the same day was a challenge for me but he was sitting amidst as if a child in his mother's lap. I did not want

to disturb him in his moment of bliss. I silently thought to pass by the stoves of pain. Surprisingly, someone called out, "Hey Mr Black jacket!" I heard it but I thought who knows me here and ignored it. But then he called aloud, "Hello, Roommate!" I knew who it was.

I turned to him and waved, "How did you recognize me?"

He laughed and said, "Don't you think one ought to know the guy with whom he shares the room?"

"You ought to." I chuckled at my awkward question and made a confession, "Do you mind if I tell you that last night, I gazed at you in astonishment while you were deeply absorbed in your meditation?"

"No, I don't mind. But why such astonishment?"

"Maybe, it was new for me. I have not seen anybody doing meditation at night or rather with such dedication," I plainly added.

"Who said meditation is fixed only for mornings? One can meet oneself at any time of the day." His smile said millions of words which were uninterpretable. He joined in my stride towards Dashashwamedh ghat and the introduction happened simultaneously.

He was a hypnotherapist from Bangalore. That was an unusual profession to know. I pondered why one would visit a hypnotherapist? He could ask you anything or know any secrets. A hypnotherapy session seemed sublimed with danger and risk to me. There were suddenly so many questions dancing over my head. Do normal people visit a hypnotherapist or secret agencies? Should I be befriending such a person?

I was in a state of delusion, when he coolly said, “Did you notice how easily you glided out of Harishchandra Ghat this time?” I was dumbfounded. Yes, the eeriness of the burning pyres went unnoticed in his company. We had already reached the threshold of Dashashwamedh Ghat. But how did he know? Did he see me before? Can he read minds without performing any hypnotherapy?

“Don’t be stunned. I saw you previously this morning. The terror was painted on your face.” He clarified.

“What was holding you then? You could have come then too?”

“I was enjoying seeing you at that time!” He sneered.

That was embarrassing to hear. I immediately retorted with a different genre of question. “What were you doing on the cremation ghat?”

“I like it there,” he said.

Who likes to be surrounded by dead bodies and the burning stench? I retorted, “Are you playing a prank on me?”

“No,” he said with a straight face. He was not joking.

“You know it stole my peace when I heard about DOMS. Their lifestyle where everything from food to rest, deals with death, is such a painful outline to stretch even in imagination. They are kind of helpless and after being laden with tags like *Chandaal* or untouchable, there is not much in their hands. But why would you....aaaa.. with your free will sit in *shamshaan* (cremation ground)? Are you really a hypnotherapist or have you been hypnotized to do so?” I said to him befuddled.

“You talk about the cremation ground as if they are bad,” he chuckled and progressed forth.

I speeded up my footsteps to match his. He had intrigued me. “What do you mean by that? Can you not see the pain and agony with which the place is laced with?”

“Can you not see the freedom and the new possibilities?” He rhetorically questioned me back.

“How can you say so?” I asked.

He stopped before one of the vendors that served breakfast. “You left to have breakfast. Right?” He looked at me, raising his brows and continued, “Let us first have that because a hungry belly doesn’t have ears.”

I could not laugh at his joke. My mind was fiddling between the possibilities of such communication with him. Stopping the tiff, I asked aloud, “How did you know that I was going for breakfast?”

“You ask a lot of questions. Obviously, you told me.” He said confidently.

I could not gather enough courage to argue over that. His aura was such that no one could deny him. Part of me even accepted the illusion of his statement while the other part stayed hushed in the dilemma. It was the same breakfast I had the day before. It was flavoursome, yet the drama of taste that captivated me earlier was missing. His enigma had enchanted me in its grip. Destiny had chosen a queer fish in preference to any other normal being as my roommate.

Over a glass of lassi after breakfast, I asked him, “Is hypnotherapy possible without the swaying pendulum or the vicious spirals?”

He giggled, "Yes of course. That concept is too filmy. In reality, you can get hypnotized several times a day without even realizing it."

I was terrified listening to this. All the doubts that I had on the backend resurfaced, "Oh! Really? That means you could hypnotise anyone without them knowing?"

He had suspected the confirmation I was seeking, "One has to be ready to fall into a trance. For example, when one goes to the Yoga class, he is receptive to the words of the instructor, following the breathing pattern and positions. The peace that follows is the result of the trance that the brain enters. Even the TVs and Mobile phones do the same with changing colours and brightness. That is how people binge-watch the full series even if they had thought to watch for a few minutes. Meditation too is a kind of hypnotism of the other realm."

With a sigh of relief, I said, "Okay. That way I too may have hypnotized myself many times. But going to a hypnotherapist still sounds scary to me."

Looking at me, he asked, "You are with one thought and what is so scary?"

With a hitch, I answered, "When you are hypnotized, the self-awareness is lost. You don't know what you are saying and what you are doing? Don't you think that it can be misused?"

My question made him titter, "Yes. It can be when you go to a Pseudo doctor (*Jholachaap*). Professionals do not do this!"

Both of us guffawed at his statement and following his steps, I walked back into the ghat. Under a big tree, we sat down

watching the Ganges spilling tranquillity all over. After some silent minutes, I asked him, "What brings you to Varanasi?"

That was a simple question I thought. I did not know that a big surprise was on the way. He looked directly into my eyes and said, "Aghoris."

I was astounded, "Aghoris?" He nodded a yes to confirm. It was unbelievable. A hippie traveller, a Hypnotherapist or an Aghori follower, what should I call him? The strings did not adhere to each other. And Aghoris, why does he need them? Is he into some black magic? Like them, is he also eating human flesh from corpses? The images that appeared before me were terrifying mentally. I stopped weening on such unreasonable aspects and directly asked him. "Why are you seeking them? Is there a problem in your life that has to be sorted out with tantric rituals? Is their association not dangerous?"

"Do you know what you said and what you were thinking are a kind of billingsgate to the Aghor path of spirituality?" Yes, maybe my beliefs about Aghoris were vague. I do not know much about them. I was arbitrary in putting such questions. But how can he confidently comment on my thoughts?

I began to feel a little trepidation, yet camouflaging it with an expressionless face, I clarified, "I apologize if I hurt your emotions but that is what the common belief is. You will find many TV shows supporting this. They are famous for their tricks and black magic. I respect them but also fear to have any engagements with them."

He looked at me and somberly said, "The fictional screen productions have acted deleterious in showcasing the Aghoris. The image they have created is indelible now."

"So, you mean to say that all we know about them is wrong?" I asked.

"Depends on your source, although, the general perception about them is incorrect. They are divine beings; it is just that their way of worshipping is different. Tantra is a science just like Ayurveda. It accelerates the mental power to the point that they obtain extraordinary power. For ordinary people, it becomes 'The Black Magic', but it is their siddhis that are misinterpreted this way. However, as the human custom is, anyone who is different does not gain much trust. We fear the unknown. And that is why many fear death too." He thoughtfully said.

His outlook seemed different from the knowledge I had. "But I have heard they do tantric rituals that require sacrifices like meat, fish, some grains, alcohol and even sex with a corpse. How is that spiritual?"

"You are right, there are certain rituals that require these sacrifices but those are largely for the amateur ones to stimulate the sleeping mind. Yet all these elements are only symbolic, merely the external aids of worship. For a true Aghori, the meat is the silence, the fish is the breath control, the deep concentration is the empowering grain, the intoxication of God's name is the alcohol and the merging of self-ego with the Absolute is the coition."

His words sounded to me like an alien language. I confessed, "That is way beyond my understanding. But tell me one thing, is every Aghori divine?"

“Yes. And the ones you are signalling are not Aghoris at all. They just have taken the traits to earn money from the blind followers. The path of Aghor is tough. It is easy to get misguided when one gets the siddhis. Or if one engages too much with the external aids for the acceleration within, they get diverted in the process getting involved with debauchery.”

“You know a lot about them. Still, I cannot understand how a hypnotherapist from Bangalore started roaming on the ghats of Varanasi behind the Aghoris and sitting in the cremation ground as if it is a workshop of happiness?” I asked.

“Workshop of happiness! Yes, it is but the proper name should be the workshop of truth.” He smirked, travelling years back to the time when it started. “The roots of this question start from my childhood. I was a curious kid. I had many questions about everything. Why should we pray? Who is God? Why can't I see him? If he is seeing everything, how can he allow anyone to do bad?”

I laughed, “you must be a tough child to handle then?”

“I bet I was. And I have even embarrassed my parents in public with the questions.” He said with a low tone.

I was already enchanted with the knowledge he had. I wanted to know his journey. I gave him the cue to start the story of his life, “How?”

He started, “On the death of my grandmother, I was so intrigued by the first encounter with death that even a public gathering did not stop me from questioning. I was 10 years old. At first, it was easy when I asked simple questions. Why isn't she moving? Why is she laid out in the courtyard? To which everyone said that she has gone to

God's abode and it is only her body. She loved me dearly. I loved her too but unlike others, her death did not bring tears to me. She was bedridden for a few years. The pain was her constant companion. I felt all her traumas have finally ended. Her face looked at peace. With that realization, I railed with the series. Where is that home of God? How do you know that she is there? How does one go there? And if she is already gone, why are we decorating her body?" You can imagine how unabatingly I was testing their patience." I smiled in confirmation.

"I had made my father furious with those questions. He would have not taken me to the cremation ground but it was my grandmother's last wish that I light her pyre. It was the first time I had ever gone to a crematorium. I saw how they prepared the body for its journey. It was a painful sight. Before the final ritual, I stepped back denying my duty. I could not understand why burning down the body of your loved ones was so important. 'Is it not harsh? How could you do such a thing with your mother?' I screamed in agony before my father. He patiently calmed me and persuaded me to complete the ritual. But the pandora box was opened.

I kept on asking several questions about death for months. My father is a professor of Psychology so he dealt with me well by avoiding the questions. However, I was not a simple, incurious boy, I was Nachiketa."

"Nachiketa?" I had not heard this name.

"Yes. My father dearly called me by that name." He said pleasingly.

"But why Nachiketa? Who is he?" I inquired.

“Nachiketa was the son of Sage Vājashravas who was known for his bequests. You can find his story in the Katha Upanishad.”

“That I will try to read someday but for now you are my encyclopaedia, tell me what extraordinary accomplishments did Nachiketa have?” I asked

“He was a soul that was riveted by logic. His father was famous for philanthropy, but he did not hitch in cross-questioning him. One day he noticed that while performing a sacrificial yajna which required the donation of all worldly possessions, his father donated the cows which were considered more than wealth. But in this sacrifice, he gave away only those cows which were past their prime and disabled to give any milk to the beneficiary. This kind of hypocritic charity disturbed Nachiketa. He, also being one of his father’s possessions, went over to him and asked, “To whom are you going to donate me?”

His father ignored his question at first but when asked thrice, he bluntly added, ‘To the God of death.’

Marking his words as an order, he immediately left for Yamlok. When he reached there, Yamdev was not there. Entering Yamlok is not a matter of choice, thus nobody allowed him in. He stayed at the gate for three days and three nights without water or food. When the God of death returned and found Nachiketa at his doorstep, he felt sad for keeping a Brahmin waiting. Immediately he welcomed the boy with divine hospitality and blessed him with three boons.

Nachiketa’s heart was pure. He first asked God to end the anxiousness and anger of his father. He wanted that when he goes back, his father should receive him happily. Yama

granted it at once. As his second boon, he wished to learn the proper ritual for fire sacrifice and the Deity taught him that. Then, for his final boon, he asked something that Yamdev tried to influence him to change his wish for luxuries but he renounced all the worldly pleasures offered to him. He was persistent in knowing the mysteries of life after death. The God of Death knew that this enlightenment would lead to salvation but he could not back out from his words.”

His pause left me prying. I wanted to know the end, “So what he learnt from Yamdev?”

He said teasingly, “I thought you were not interested in knowing death and the secrets it holds?”

“Please.” I insisted

He said, “Putting that knowledge in words is difficult and even harder to understand. I will tell you what has been told to me. ‘The Self that is the Atma is the omnipresent Brahman in every being. The goal of the wise is to know this Self, to discover the seed of the Param-Atma within. But most of the time we are driven by the body, mind and senses which are just to assist the chariot of life. Thereby, falling into the loop of death and rebirth all over again. Until one realizes the Brahman (the supreme power) within, getting salvation is an impossible possibility.’”

“You were right, it is hard to understand and confusing too. If that is the way, why were senses given to us in the first place? Is it not the signal that we should wish for fragrant flowers and not rotting things? Is it not rational to ignore the ghastly visions and wish for a pleasing sight?” I queried.

“Yes, it is. Spirituality is not easy to comprehend. I too am looking for answers and it is this pursuit that takes me to different places each month.” He softly added.

It clearly implemented that there was no shortcut to the perplexities my mind was surrounded with. After a pause, I added, “Yet I understood one thing that all the answers we are seeking are hidden in Upnishads and other ancient Vedic texts.”

“True. Still, the readers are rare to find,” he said with a slight grin.

I felt guilty about being in that group. However, one question bothered me. “Hmm. Reading these knowledgeable epics is crucial but is it not simple to come to Varanasi and die? You would get the desired salvation.”

My question led him into hysterics. I chuckled in awkwardness, unable to understand the reason behind this jocular reaction.



Chapter Seven

The Living Dead

*The living dead they call themselves
But what does that really mean?
Is it eating the dead which adds such adjectives?
Or is it their adorning pyre ash that gives such names?
Is it their absence from the normal rituals of life?
Or their affection towards the original truth of life?
What is it that makes them minacious beings?
What do we know?
And what do we not?
Why are they living to die?
And why are we dying to live?*

How does one become a living dead? Is it like being a ghost? Or is it some kind of astral projection? Seeking the truth behind this phrase, I found out that it is not only referred to for Aghoris but the saints and the enlightened ones also preach to become a living dead. How could one die while he is still alive? Keshav had confused me with his answer.

My question was simple. If one could die in Varanasi and get salvation, why worry to understand so much about life? But he decided to start a rhetorical session in return. He asked me, "Is your expiry date known to you?"

I said, "No. Nobody can know that." Listening to this he sniggered as if he made his point clear. I wondered why he could not give a straight answer. I again queried, "But what does this prove?"

"When nobody knows the date of death, how can one be sure to die in Varanasi?" He put forth a rhetorical question once more.

Yes, he had a point but I had a few more questions to continue the refute, "What about the people who are living here? And what about those who are coming here for salvation and living here until they die?"

He let out a long breath and started his explanation, "You cannot be sure where the God of Death takes you at the last moment. If you are a resident, then too, you could leave the town for a job, business, family relatives or friends in your last moments, unaware of the contingency that could happen. And for those who have left everything to die here, are they not essentially the living dead?"

"Just because they have untethered themselves from the attachments, is it not rude to call them the living dead?" I asked.

"That is a compliment, my friend. All the beings seeking enlightenment are racing towards that state. Have you not heard that the Aghoris are often referred to as the living dead?" He cross-questioned.

“Aghoris? Hmmm. Yes, they can be called the living dead. Their eating habits and their lifestyle makes them associable with that term. There are so many hearsays about their powers that they seem quite fit with this weird name you have given. And to many people, they are even terrifying like the dead. Fear also cropped up inside me when I saw an Aghori yesterday.” I know he was not judging me but his look made me uncomfortable, so I continued with the justification. “I mean, I am scared of them but there are so many mystics about them that people fear them. My father says that one should not see them, eye to eye, they can make you do anything.” I paused for him to comment on this but he stayed hushed. So, I continued, “And the ones who come here to die are still like you and me.”

“What do you think a living dead is?” He asked.

“I cannot say that with conformity because if a person is living how can he be dead? It is like a confusing oxymoron. Though I had read an article sometime back referring to Aghoris with that reference.”

He smiled and said, “A living dead is a person who is beyond the ties of this world. It can be anyone who does not self-identify with worldly things. It can be you; it can be me; it can be anyone.”

“I cannot picture myself that way! I am not in any way like the Aghori or like the people who leave their homes. I have my own set of responsibilities.” I confessed.

“Your perspective is very restricted. You are like that horse who has endowed himself with blinkers. Do you think all Aghoris are like the picture you have; naked, ash-covered and always in shamshans? No. There are many who live

amongst us and yet we do not know them. We simply look at them as a friend or a neighbour or maybe a person sitting next to us in public.” He clarified.

I was stunned, “You are saying that an Aghori can have a family?”

He said, “Yes. I have met one such Aghori in Varanasi itself. They are like you and me but there is a part of their lives where they have completed the rituals, they have lived naked or even have taken alms as food.”

“Then, why aren’t all Aghoris following this, why are they naked? I curiously asked.

“That is their choice. They want to keep their egos at bay. When we wear clothes, we are not only protecting our body but we are also hiding the imperfections.” He added.

“Yes, you are right in that sense. But isn’t it odd to see them like this when you are with your family?” I asked.

He grinned, “You reminded me of a Britisher who was outraged seeing Telang Swami naked in Varanasi.”

That was a riveting remark. Though it was passed on to me, I was interested to know about this saint. “Who was Telang Swami? And what did he do that annoyed the Britisher?”

He said, “Telang Swami was one of the greatest Aghoris of Varanasi. And like you said that it feels odd with the family to see them naked, he must have had a similar opinion. But being a Britisher, he lacked emotions for Indian ways of spirituality and paths. He right away arrested him and learnt a great lesson of his life when the Saint transmuted his excreta into a roasted chicken.”

“Oh my God! That is unbelievable. So, you are telling me that Aghoris can transmute their excretions into anything via this story if it is true.” I put forth my doubt.

“Yes. I have heard a lot of transmutation stories of Aghoris and if you ask me of this story, I read it in one of the books concerning the Aghor path,” he said in confidence.

Listening about the books, I vowed to read more and thereby added, “There are a lot of things I need to know. But one thing is still unclear: how being a living dead gives you salvation?”

He facepalmed and laughed. His expression righteously expressed that we were back again to square one, “Hmmm. Let us take a familiar way to this concept. Have you heard that your last thought is the reflection of your next birth?”

That was a labyrinth, I was not able to comprehend, “Yes. I have heard that but how does that connect to the question?”

“When the date and time of death are unknown, how can one be sure of the last thought when one is already in trauma?” He asked.

“That is tricky! But I have heard, people come to know when their time is near.”

“There are only a few who really know. However, even if anyone knows, being the slaves of habits, one would be filled with anxiety, thinking about the unfinished businesses. Have you not seen in movies, how the person on deathbed tells a secret or has the feeling of revenge and blah blah?” He added a short giggle after his statement.

“Maybe. But again, what are you trying to prove?” I queried.

He said, "The point is simple. For the last thought to be pure, one has to be a living dead. That is a person who is not engrossed with emotions."

His statement was not making any sense. The living dead he was referring to felt more like his figment of imagination. I cleared, "How can anyone not be emotional? In the absence of emotions would a person not become cruel?"

"That is not how it is. Being emotional and not driven by emotions are two different things. Okay, let me take a different route to reach the conclusion. First, tell me are we on the same ground about the last thought being the footing of the further journey."

I was not sure about it. Though, having heard of it, I assumed the believable notion about it. I nodded into a yes. He started, "Okay. The living dead is also a person who does not have any expectations from anybody. And when one does not have any expectations, at the last moment too the person would be focused on meeting with the supreme soul. Being his last thought, he would attain salvation. Does this make things simple?"

He looked at me as if he had revealed some of Issac Newton's hidden secret before me. "Simple? Yes, it is. But it is also vague. Tell me, why are you so fantasized about the living dead concept? Having no expectations is easy."

"Saying that is easy. Don't you expect your salary after a month's work? Or the appreciation from your boss or team when you do some extraordinary work?" He asked.

I could not understand the jinx, "What is wrong with expecting the fruit of your work? Is it not my right?"

“There is nothing wrong in it but expectations are the roots of desires. These desires are always inside us and at the last moment too, they weave our next birth. Thus, keeping us looped to the cycle of birth and death.” He explained.

I was intrigued by his concept, “This whole version of yours is like a merry-go-round. I had never thought of expectations like that. So, if the expectations are not materialistic and one only desires love from someone while parting?”

“Then, the person will get it, maybe during the next birth. That is why we should be very cautious with our wishes and thoughts at the last moment.” He softly murmured.

I was confused, “But is it not normal to wish for the wellbeing of loved ones as someone is parting from the world? Moreover, these thoughts about them would crop automatically.”

He confidently remarked, “Yes, when you have not been rehearsing for death.”

At this point, I thought that he was certainly making a fool out of me. He was intentionally creating a riddle that had no end. “Death Rehearsal? Who does that?”

He asked a straight question, “Is meditation not the preparation of death?”

His questions sounded insane to me. I backed myself, “Meditation? Come on. That is for peace, or, making your mind stable.”

“In some sense you are right but that is the reciprocal of the process. Meditation is knowing yourself, the true soul within. Unless we take off our attention from emotions and the nine openings of the body and focus it on the 10th door,

meditation is not possible. And if you do that, you are like a dead person, immune to anything happening around you. So, is it not the preparation of death?” He asked.

I was not thinking about the questions he asked, my mind had engaged in counting all the apertures of the body. To my surprise, seven were on my face itself. Thinking about the last two openings, I thought who would focus on these, then suddenly, the cord struck and I realized what he was pointing at. That was an unbelievable cognizance I received on the ghats of Ganga. I had never thought of it that way. Yes, what we see, hear, smell, taste or get aroused to, are from these gates of our body. And as he explained that meditation is closing your attention from these gates, it was akin to death. But what was the 10th gate? Before I could ask him, he said, “10th Gate is the 3rd eye.”

“How did you know I was going to ask this? And why do you call it a gate? There is no opening on our forehead between our eyes?” I inquired.

He answered, “I saw your fingers move in the direction of the openings and I understood you were counting. And it is called a gate as it opens the door within. Even Srimad Bhagvat Gita states,

**‘युञ्जन्नेवं सदात्मानं योगी नियतमानसः ।
शान्तिं निर्वाणपरमां मत्संस्थामधिगच्छति ॥’**

That is, when a meditator, sits with a disciplined mind, steadfast in the thought of me (supreme), attains peace abiding in me, which is the supreme nirvana.

And one more shlok from the Bhagvat Gita states,

**‘साधिभूताधिदैवं मां साधियज्ञं च ये विदुः ।
प्रयाणकालेऽपि च मां ते विदुर्युक्तचेतसः ॥’**

That is, those who know (ME) the supreme as the one that underlies all the elements of this world, all the Gods and all the sacrifices, even at the time of death, steadfast in mind, know Me (the Supreme). The practice of knowing God in his various aspects throughout life enables one to remember him at the time of death. And when we remember him in such a critical moment, we end up in attaining him.”

He was telling me about the syllabus that was still out of my course. Without any experience in meditation or focus, I couldn’t express more than a nod in affirmation. I wondered how much he knew. I was left agape hearing such hard-to-remember shlokas. A part of me even thought, “is this a real being or a pure spirit from Manikarnika Ghat following me? Such an enlightened being cannot be real!”

And catching me in that moment, he again surprised me, “Why do you keep on asking how you know this and that? Come on, I am no magician or a spirit which can peep into your mind. I am just more observant and the study of human psychology is an added advantage.”

I confessed, “You are quite mysterious to me. Every time I am in confusion, you read my mind. It is miraculous. How do you know so much? And how from being a hypnotherapist you turned into a spiritual seeker?”

He said, “who said that a hypnotherapist cannot be spiritual? And believe it or not, it is this hypnotherapy that paved my way into spirituality.”

Science and divinity seem poles apart, I was eager to hear his theory, “How?”

He took a long breath, "Patients come to me for different ailments which deal with anxiety disorders, depression and even for post-traumatic stress disorder. Sometimes to find the source and cut the cord of pain, I have to take them back and then to a state of relaxation. One of my patients who was suffering from severe depression came to me. It was hard to align the dots as to what was making her so depressed. She had a beautiful life. Success, money or love, she had it all. A block was missing in this puzzle. She and her family believed that the reason was something from her past life. They requested me to try past life regression therapy. I had theoretically studied about this but never practised. Eventually, she became my first patient who was willing to go beyond this life. Things I got to know in the sessions I had with her, were the beginning of a new pursuit. Death intrigued me from childhood and now this new chapter made me keen to unravel the path of spirituality."

"Remembering the past life sounds very tricky to me. I believe they are hidden from us for a reason. I don't think it is right to dig out the past." I spoke.

He explained, "There are different views on past life regression therapy. For some it is just an illusion, some even call it unethical. But for my patient, it worked. She discovered that she was an enlightened sage in her last birth. It was the result of her good karma that she got such a sorted life."

"Then what was the reason for her depression?" I curiously asked.

He said, "She could not reach the destination in her last birth and in this birth, she had completely forgotten to continue the journey towards liberation."

It still seemed unfair to me, “This sounds strange. With this revelation, her life would have changed and her family would have repented the decision of taking the past life regression therapy.”

He chuckled, “Nobody repented. She came out as the happiest soul on earth. It became easy for her to meditate and reach higher levels. And this time she rightly died while living.”

“How did her family react to her departure?” I asked.

With a short giggle, he said, “She did not die the way you are thinking? I am talking about the living dead concept we were discussing a while before.”

I exclaimed, “Oh my God! That’s the whole cycle. I was not wrong; you are in love with this concept. I still think her family would have repented.”

He cleared, “No. Not at all. In fact, the people who have died while still alive are the most lovable people. They do not expect anything in return. They believe in the law of Karma and sincerely do their duty which karma has bound them with.”

I was understanding what he was implying but not completely. “I will take some time to comprehend such deep knowledge about life and its purpose. It is a perplexing subject for me. I need to research this more to grasp the meaning.”

It was not the end of the conversation, yet an odd silence prevailed for quite some time. The scenery before us got its attention back. It felt like we were talking for ages. The scattered people on the ghat did not qualify to be called the crowd. The weather too had taken an about-turn. One could

not say seeing the blazing sun and its heat that the morning could give anybody chills. Thankfully, we sat under a cool shade of a tree and enjoyed the breeze along with the pleasant sight of the Ganga.

As the sun planned to shift to another side of Ganga's laps, the weather mellowed the scorching heat flame in bits.

The water of the Ganga had transformed into a magnificent mirror reflecting what was surrounding her. Akin to her, my mind echoed with the thoughts, the day brought with itself. While leaving for the ghat in the morning, I wondered about the absence of this chap sitting beside me and thought of knowing him today. This thought manifested in such a way that in his presence over six hours passed unnoticed. He had a vast ocean of knowledge but it was hard for me to decipher the true meaning. It was puzzling.

Since the morning, he stressed that the goal of life was to seek the supreme inside us. Then, why is it that most of us are running after jobs, hankering over assets and goaling over accumulation? Does this mean that the majority of people are wrong? But if all follow the path he was suggesting, then how the world would be? The root cause of everything happening in the world is desire and without any desire will there be any regeneration? Or discoveries?

Breaking the ice, Keshav said, "Let's grab something to eat. I know lunchtime is over yet there is still some time left before it could be officially evening."

I had questions taking rounds over my head, however, I was too full to soak any more answers. Snacking seemed like a good idea. I said, "You may have your lunch while I catch on to some local tidbit."

“No, I was also not talking about any full meals. Come let me take you to one of the oldest shops here.” He said.

He had made his mind to fill me up with all types of fuels both for the soul and for the body. Crossing the labyrinth of lanes, we reached the shop he suggested. From the outside, it looked like any other sweet shop but the name was very impressive, Ksheer Sagar. The Ocean of Milk and the abode of Lord Vishnu and Goddess Laxmi.

He told me that the Rasgullas (cottage cheese-filled sugar syrup) here are exceptional. Through the glass display, I saw the delicacy; it was bigger than the regular size but nothing so special. I thought one would suffice, on which Keshav commented, “Need I say, you will ask for one more.” I believed his judgement and we got our plates with two Rasgulla each. He took one and squeezed the syrup completely and even then, the Rasgulla did not break. I tried it too and the sponge of this dessert was fantabulous. He was right, these were awesome. The best part was its sponge, squeeze it as per your sweetness quotient and it melted in your mouth.

I am not much of a sweet-eater but Varanasi had everything to change me. I was ready to have one more round of these soft sponges but he suggested that I try the Malpuas (fried pancakes) here. This time, I stuck to the figure of one. Two plates of steaming Malpuas made their way to us in a moment. The aroma was sizzling in my brain. The sweetness in the vapours, the fragrance of cardamom and the delightful glistening look. The first bite played as both, pleasure for the self and huzzah for the taste buds. That sweet was indescribable. I had eaten Malpua before but the taste that this shop had was unique.

As I finished, Keshav asked, “Will you like to have one more?”

I nodded a no, “That would spoil the charm. One piece is divine.”

He smiled and asked, “When are you going back?”

That sounded strange all of a sudden, “Day after tomorrow,” I answered.

“Okay. So, what is the mode of your transport?” He again added an abrupt question.

“By train. Why are you asking this?” I inquired.

“I thought that I would get some sweets for your parents. But on the train, it would not sustain.” He said.

“Oh! Thank you. Tell me, what were you considering for my parents?” I asked.

He said, “*Ras malai* and *Kheer Chamcham* are awesome here. Anything of your choice amongst the two, plus the Rasgullas.”

Grinning from ear to ear, I remarked, “Yes, they are obligatory. I guess I will bring them here on the next trip.”

“That would be wonderful.” He pronounced and we came out of the shop. There were hot Samosas being fried in the pan. He paused and without uttering a word, we came to an agreement of having one of those. People end their meal by having a sweet and we just flipped the chronology.



Chapter Eight

Melody of Silence

Einstein believed that nothing could go faster than the speed of light; it is the fastest thing in the world. But he forgot the pace of thoughts. I could experience their velocity within. Even the *Rasgullas* and *Maalpuas* could not enchant me out of the whirlpool of thoughts that arose absorbing such wisdom from Keshav.

There was something magnetic in his personality that was attracting the iron-me. I had read in school that when iron is rubbed into a magnet many times it turns into a magnet temporarily. I was experiencing the magnetic field already. Was I been transitioned? Or had just begun the process? Or was it just the interim attraction towards spirituality? I saw him as an answer and affirmed to spend the rest of my time in Varanasi with him, as we walked from the sylphlike lanes back to the ghat.

Settling me on a boulder near the bank with a perfect view of all the evening proceedings, Keshav vanished for a few

minutes. In the meanwhile, I got back to my dear mighty mate and it bubbled and gurgled in happiness. Sitting unblinkingly, I felt like I was getting hypnotized by the swirl of the Ganga. I had readily given myself to her. It is hard to say what I was seeing, or what I was seeking beholding the Goddess but the sensuous warmth of the sight sufficed the pursuit.

I felt akin to the baby turtles of Velas Beach. When I went there sometime back, people told me that the mother tortoise buries her eggs on the sandy beach and retreats back to the ocean. Then from a distance, it concentrates on those eggs and sends such an intense current of love that the warmth of her love reaches the eggs and they hatch. I too was receiving such vibrations from the Ganga.

However, from time to time the background score did break my reverie. As the number of people started growing, different languages knocked my eardrums with their varied accents. I heard Marathi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Bihari and a few that I could not reckon. Each of them had their unique way of devotion toward the river. Some conducted rituals on the ghat, some inside the river and some just had the gala time meeting and feeling the Ganges. There were sadhus and saints, there were flaunters, there were people who just met the bare necessities and there were people who were somehow thriving. In those few minutes, I got a glimpse of India.

I looked for Keshav but he could not be located. The whole chapter of spirituality he explained rolled before my eyes. It summed out that if there is heaven, it is beyond the tall wall of perception that we have built within ourselves. I reminisced about a Doha of Kabir Das which I learnt in my Hindi book long back.

**“ज्यों नैनों में पुतली, त्यों मालिक घट माहिं /
मूरख लोग न जानहिं, बाहिर दूढ़न जाहिं ॥”**

In my school days, I just memorized the verbal meaning but its true meaning unfolded now. God, the supreme soul that we look up to, is within us like the pupils of our eyes; still, the unwise beings seek him in the outside world.

But if the goal of our life is to find his address somewhere within, what is the way? I tried closing my eyes, eager to find that path. But nothing was unveiled. It was just the darkness and the unspoken ‘what ifs’ surrounding me. The forgotten fears of job, completion of projects and desire to buy a property resurfaced.

I opened my eyes befuddled. I wondered how people meditate and concentrate when their fears and desires are always subtly hidden within themselves. I found myself caged inside the strong bars. Time always seems to slip. I want to do so much. Can I ever be free from these qualms? Was this because I wanted to do more? Or was this because of the responsibility I had as a son or as a brother? Or was this because of the mountain of unsaid desires I have, seeing the accomplished people or the life of ease they have? Is this the reason that saints go into the forest and do their penances alone? But if everyone does that, will it not be running from responsibility? Even Bhagwat Gita says,

**संन्यासः कर्मयोगश्च निःश्रेयसकरावुभौ /
तयोस्तु कर्मसंन्यासात्कर्मयोगो विशिष्यते ॥**

Means, Both the path of karma sannyasa (renunciation of action) and Karma Yoga (working in devotion) lead to the

supreme goal. But Karma Yoga is the superior karma sannyasa.

So, running from responsibility is not an option. Maybe he was right about being like a living dead, living within the system and yet not seeking the materialistic goals that society offers. But it seems more like a theoretical concept to preach.

Moreover, there are so many who inspire us to live life to the fullest, enjoying everything. Then, how can one know that this is the right thing? How can one be sure what happens after death? Or, what exactly is salvation? Suddenly, I remembered about the past life regression therapy he told me about. My mind constructed a hypothetical story-play where I saw my soul seeing the dead body it resided in for years. It felt insane. I shrugged myself out of that zone. What was I thinking? But why is death so mysterious? Is this the reason why we fear it?

Just then, I saw Keshav coming with two earthen glasses radiating the hot vapours in the air. This man had given me a new insight into life. Now, my goal was to search for its meaning because it was hard to believe everything he said.

How uninterpretable is the game of fate? Was I destined to meet him?

I expressed my gratitude for the tea he brought. That was the thing well needed. I said, "You know Varanasi quite well. Do you come here frequently?"

He said, "I visit once a year. I know the city as I did my Masters in Psychology from BHU."

I was surprised, "Oh! Then you must have many friends here."

He said, "Not many. It's been over 25 years since I did my post-graduation."

I roughly calculated the age by the statistics he told and exclaimed, "That makes my assumption of your age absurd. You look quite young."

He coyly added, "Thank you."

"But if not friends, what brings you to Varanasi again and again? I know you told me Aghoris were the reason, however, now I cannot accept that answer. You cannot come for them for 25 years." I said clearly.

He smiled, "Imagine you are relaxing in a comfortable chair on the balcony of your house. It is one of those perfect days when you do not have any pending projects to work on, it's just you and your solace. You start watching the clouds floating in different shapes, telling different stories and the pleasant-flowing breeze keeps on kissing your cheeks in between. It's quiet - everything is exquisite."

Indeed, he was a hypnotherapist, his words had carried me in that perfect moment. I was waiting to absorb more of this flawless feeling, just when he banged it saying, "Now in this very moment, you think of the friend who bought his new home. You feel happy for him but you start calculating the time you would take to buy your own home. You start making a new budget. Maybe you think of cutting down your expenses on the trips. The beauty of the moment is lost in the turbulence of multiple thoughts but do you stop looking for calm? Or does your charting expense stop your travel? No.

I also always had the urge to know about life after death and the mysteries of the soul continued though I had my career. I started reading more books on spirituality and paths

leading to salvation. Kashi came into the picture many times. It is a unique city; you can find seekers on both paths. That is when the trips to the city started. Apart from the pursuit, there is unique contentment that I experienced here. At first, I was enticed to the right-hand path, seeking God through rituals and societally approved methods. Then, quite recently I became eager to know about the Aghoris. I had many questions about them and their ways. Why do they do what they do? And by knowing them, I got to know many things.”

“Is this knowledge the beacon that led you to the Aghor path?” I curiously asked.

He retorted, “Keenness to know does not make you a follower.”

“Then, why were you sitting in the cremation ground?” I asked the same question.

“I told you before that it is a place for accepting the truth. It is the reality which everyone has to face. It helps me to not fall in the loop of fearing death.” He plainly added.

“There are many people who do not fear death but why such a weird showcase for bravery?” I queried.

“Aah! It is not a showcase; it is acceptance. Have you not seen people behave like untouchable when they visit some death ceremony? Some people even throw or burn the clothes they use for cremation ritual even if they are standing a kilometre apart.” I did not say anything but his statement raised my eyebrows, to which he added, “Do not tell me the germ infection thing. What people do is out of the fear of carrying death back home. I do not want to be the carrier of such anxiety.”

Listening to his answer, I wondered if I have that fear? If that was the reason for my distress while I crossed Harishchandra Ghat in the morning? It was hard for me to come to a conclusion or to find such a coherent perception like him. Maybe he was right but then Aghoris did it too. "Do Aghoris also sit in the cremation ground for the same reason?"

"First, they do not just sit there, they live there. I only go to the burning site once in a while or maybe when I visit Varanasi, but for them, it is the temple of eternal reality. People go there and cry, while they laugh as it is this place which frees the souls from the shackles of earth. Have you noticed that whenever one goes to attend someone's last rites, there is an odd feeling which makes every material thing offbeat and that includes the food as well?"

"Yes, it happens. That feeling of uneasiness is hard to take. I added.

"Yet, after a while, the normal self is resumed. Aghoris call it '*Shamshan* renunciation'. They say, "Mahakaal makes you forget it and until you stay long enough in the cremation ground, you will be embraced by the illusion of this world again." As he finished explaining, my thoughts took a ride back to the time when I first encountered the invitees of Mahakaal.

I found a baffling contradiction in context to Varanasi. "But the people here do not seem to be much affected by the dead bodies. Yesterday, I was stunned to see people having their Lassi while the dead bodies passed before them. They behaved as if some luggage was being repositioned."

"This is the city of Mahakaal, the city of Shiva and the oldest living city in the world; do you not think that the *Benarasi*

people ought to have such insight? Varanasi is eccentric and it enchants many beings like me, you and them,” he said, pointing to the big group of foreigners assembled for the evening Ganga Aarti.

He was right. I noticed that a day prior. This city has many chapters and each of them is unique in itself. River Ganga is the spine of this book that holds all the enchantments of Shiva's abode.

The preparations for the grand reverence of the Goddess had started and I was lucky to have the perfect seat. I could see people filled with excitement and devotion lined up till the end of the ghat. I had thought to see the Ganga Aarti from the boat but this place was even nearer and cost-free. As the old friend, shining bright in the sky, said cheerio, the lamps on the platforms where the Ganga Aarti was to happen were brightened. Everything started gleaming with sparkly lights on the ghat, from the pretty umbrellas over the platforms to the nicely decorated boats.

The blazing halogen lights had suffused the whole aura with their yellow light. The conch shells echoed and the procession started. The loudspeakers enveloped the environs with the vibrations of the hymns and all the eight directions reverberated with divinity. We were sitting adjacent to the priest platform on the extreme right. The fragrance of the flowers set up for the worship and of the ghee-filed small lamps amalgamated with the scent of incense sticks and the fumes of camphor, redefined the surroundings with positive energies. Mighty were the lamps that hailed the Ganga and deific were the brahmins who seemed to be one with the supreme energy. The circular moving lamps had hypnotized the worshipers and I could notice some of them moving their heads likewise. A

day before while seeing them, I was charmed by the rhythmic movement but with such a close encounter, the meticulous movement of such hefty lamps left me in awe.

As the evening worship ritual came to an end, the people on the boat floated small leaf-made bowls stuffed with flowers and a lamp. Few of the foreigners came marching towards the Ganga and took a dip. The people around hailed the Ganga with stimulating euphoria while I sat smitten with the vim and vigor of devoutness.

Everything that was static, while the Goddess was being revered, metamorphosed into the kinetic form. The distinctive feature of humans was all set on display. There was a rush all around. Firstly, when the Ganga Aarti was about to start, they hurtled to come closer and at the time of the exit, all wanted to race first.

While all this dash happened around us, we both happily sat on the boulder, admiring the view of hundreds of floating lamps on the river that made a golden lining of the Ganges beauty. Quite dutifully, we bid adieu to the lamps as they ended their journey. I could have sat there watching them for hours but with the crowd, the paper lamps also parted away. At this very moment, Keshav asked, "Will you like to take up the same journey?" The gleam in my eyes listening to the proposal, successfully answered him. We got up and he talked to one of the boatmen and sealed the deal for Rs. 300.

If any stranger would have seen both of them, he would have felt that they must be knowing each other for ages. Keshav so lovingly called this quinquagenarian, 'Dada' and got an equally compassionate smile back. I thought I am good at building relations but I stand nowhere before this

man. I knew that this evening ride over the Ganges was going to be etched in my heart forever as I stepped onto the boat as happily guided by 'Dada'.

As we glided away from Dashashwamedh ghat, the people, the halogen lights and the noise, all dwindled away in the rhythm of oars and their splashes with water. Frequently, the gaiety sounds of laughter filled the notes of air as other boats passed by. The breeze had turned cooler and I put on the jacket which was changing position from waist to arms since afternoon. Though it was not chilly like the early morning, yet my nose turned cold with the pleasantries that the wind brought in its draft.

The profound draught of the river concealed the inmates of the river. It has transmuted into a giant black mirror of lights. The essence of contentment that levitated over the waves of Ganga, clasped me into itself. While I absorbed the beauty that the evening spilt, Keshav was busy conversing with his 'Dada' about his home. With a small tap on his shoulder, I asked "what are your plans for tomorrow?"

He gently said, "I am leaving tomorrow. I have a train at 4:30 in the morning."

That came as a shock, "Tomorrow? Oh, God! But why? And how all of sudden? Why did you not tell me before?"

He laughed, "Sir, we have met today only!"

"Yes, indeed," I said mumbling with embarrassment. He was right, we had met today, however, the comfort zone I shared with him felt age-old. This trip to Varanasi had turned way more invigorating than I had thought.

The oarsman resumed the hush that he had while sitting on the ghat. His forehead lines and eye crinkles revealed the

long journey he had in life. I do not know if that was just an illusion but everyone I met in Varanasi, held contentment for life. Such insight and acceptance of the truth of life are hard to find anywhere else. It felt that here the highest level of speech, *para* (A mode of speech where the communication is made telepathically, known to be used in Satya Yuga) is still in existence. Is this the mysticism which entices Keshav every year?

The man is as quirky as the city. His presence was addictive. Though there was still more to be seen and lived in the city, I wondered what I would do the next day without him. But how could the solo traveller who had taken multiple journeys around India be congested with the idea of duality or companionship? I guess, his ideas had left a deeper mark than I perceived.

Like the day, the boat trip was coming close to the end. The people on the Dashashwamedh ghat had been reduced to a few countable groups. Keshav asked, "Shall we take one more round?" I instantaneously agreed. To this, he said to the boatman, "Dada, you desired Rs. 600? See, you get what you want."

The boatman laughed, "You are wishing to take two rounds with the fare of one round of boat ride. But how can *Dada* say no to his newly made brother!"

The air filled with notes of laughter on that remark. After a while of soaking the silence that resonated in the ambience of Ganga, I asked Keshav, "You have observed the Aghoris from close. Why do you think they take up such a path?"

The look of 'Dada' revealed that he found the question weird. He turned to Keshav to attentively listen to what he had to say. "When a person understands that everything in

this world, including all the emotions are nothing but *ghor*, he takes up the path of *Aghor*.”

Dada nodded his head as if he understood everything but, on my side, it raised several other questions. “What are you saying? I guess by *ghor* you mean that it is all a lie but do we not know this fact? We know it, we have been hearing it for ages. But since we lack belief in what we know, we do not take the path. But there are many saints who know this fact and believe in it, yet they do not take such austere practices.”

“Yes, because the beautiful part about spirituality is that you can take your path of belief. Aghor simply means light. How you unite with that light is your own personal will,” he said.

“And why did you not take up the Aghor path? I mean the path of Aghoris?” I asked again.

“I will answer that question with deep insight about meditation. People meditate to mature their bond with the eternal rhythm within. You must have heard that we have 7 chakras in our body through which prana shakti flows” I nodded yes, remembering a scene from the childhood serial, *Shaktimaan*.

“Each chakra has its own unique power. So now, some take en route from the lowest chakra Muladhara Chakra and make their way upward to Sahasrara Chakra. This enables them with various powers which feel supernatural to any other being. If you have been to Kumbh, you may have seen many babas doing things that are beyond the capability of any person. But these are merely the fruit of their meditation, ‘Dhyan.’ However, this is not the only way, some of them directly start building their connection with

Ajna Chakra (the third eye chakra) to reach Sahasrara Chakra.”

I could not understand anything he said apart from his mention of super-powerful babas present in Kumbh. Like always he read it, “I know this could be puzzling but instead of getting answers from me seek it yourself.”

“But you did not answer my question?” I queried.

“I did,” he replied with a smile.

Okay. I take that but tell me one thing if knowledgeable people like you do not share their experiences in meditation and spirituality how the unknown people would learn or seek as you said?” I asked.

“Have you ever noticed whenever we forget something and we try remembering it, our hand automatically goes on the forehead where the third eye is supposedly present?” He explained rhetorically.

His words made me think and, in that conversation, my hand automatically reached out to the forehead. He was right, “But what does that prove?”

“It proves that there is an inbuilt knowledge in all humans about the crown chakra, the place we need to focus to remember anything, even the fact that we are the travelling souls that have taken several births to unite back to the divine. And this is the enlightenment that the true meditators are seeking.

**आश्चर्यं वत पश्यति कश्चित् एनं आश्चर्यं
वत वदति तथा एवच अन्यः ।**

**आश्चर्यं वचनं अन्यः शृणोति श्रुत्वा अपि
एनं वेद नचैव कश्चित् ॥ श्लोक २९**

After he recited the Shlok, the whole aura felt mute. I could not understand the shlok he said and this time I was embarrassed to ask. Gladly, he explained it after a pause.

He said, “This is verse 29 from Chapter 2 of Bhagwat Gita which acutely answers your confusion. It says that some people see the soul as some amazing phenomenon and some call it a wonder. Some people hear about it as a wonder but some people cannot perceive its meaning even after hearing about it. So, my friend, this universe is filled with different types of people that have multilateral beliefs. All have the soul seeded within, yet everyone has to take a journey on the river of passion to meet the grand ocean.”

His words and his explanations all sounded wonderful but I cannot say that I understood it all. It was like a word maze for me. And I was silenced by his profound knowledge. I had heard from my mother that sometimes great saints and Deities visit us in disguised forms. Hearing such powerful words of knowledge, I wondered if Keshav was such a disguised being. For a second, I even visualized a bright circle behind Keshav and he was smiling with one hand raised to give a blessing.

I know that is more of an exaggeration so I shrugged the thought, “How can that be?” I could not count many of the righteous deeds to have been blessed that way. It felt funny and too filmy the second moment. I was smiling, pondering over my thoughts. Then, I again wondered, “Is he some spirit who has accompanied me from Manikarnika Ghat?” I chuckled thinking that I was lucky to have been caught by this enlightened spirit.

Keshav caught me, “You are weird. A while before you were so puzzled and now you are smiling.”

I chuckled at his remark and lamely added, “An old memory resurfaced.” I did not reveal the secret of my imaginative mind. The boat ride had come to an end but the day had some more surprise in its veil. After paying our regards and gratitude to ‘Dada’ we walked out of the ghat.



Chapter Nine

Seeking Solace in Solitude

I have heard people say that you must recompense for your sins in this lifetime. Agreement to this thought was delusional for me seeing some impetuous people on and off in different phases of life. But when I came to Varanasi and got to know that not only humans, but even divine beings must atone for their deeds, I had to accept the fact.

As we strolled towards the hostel after having a sumptuous thali at Madhur Milan restaurant, we crossed a puja shop named Kaal Bhairav. I curiously asked, “Some call Varanasi Lord Shiva’s City but say it to be in Kaal Bhairav’s reign, who is the true ruler?”

He immediately blurted, “Obviously it is Lord Shiva. He is the King of the city and Kaal Bhairav is like the guardian who records every deed of the people here and punishes them accordingly. Some people even call him the gatekeeper of the city, without whose permission nobody can enter the city or go out of it. It is said that your journey to Kaashi is

incomplete if you do not visit his temple. Some people even say you cannot stay long in Kaashi if you do not take his permission.”

“That is interesting. I had not heard about it. I would have gone back to Mumbai without paying my regards to him but now that you have told me, I would visit his temple before leaving. But tell me one thing when Lord Shiva is there In Varanasi, Kaal Bhairav could have taken care of some other city.” I curiously asked.

He raised his brow, smiled, and said, “For this, I have to tell you one tale from Shiva Puran.”

“You are the guardian of my ears.” I chuckled passing the joke which did not please Keshav as much, so I mellowed down.

He started, “Once there was a discord between Lord Brahma and Lord Vishnu as to who is more powerful. Lord Brahma was proud that he is the creator of the universe and thus, he is the superpower. But Lord Vishnu did not agree with him. When the Vedas were asked about it, they declared Lord Shiva as Supreme. This infuriated Lord Brahma, and he passed some ruthless remarks about Lord Shiva. This enraged Lord Shiva, and he opened his third eye and Kaal Bhairav emerged.

He cut off Brahma’s fifth face with the nail of his little finger.”

I was shocked, “Brahma Ji had five faces?”

“Yes, his fifth face faced up, representing pride,” he answered and continued, “Now imagine, when even Gods are not spared by Kaal Bhairav, do you think we humans stand a chance?”

I nodded with a deep, “Hmmm.” However, one thing was still not clear, I again tossed a question, “But how does this connect him to Varanasi?”

“Kaal Bhairav had chopped off Brahma's head which was considered a murder and that too of a Brahmin. Brahma's skull stuck to Kaal Bhairav's hand and scourged him day and night. This was his punishment for his sin. He fled from one place to another to get off the skull of his hand, but he could not. In search of peace when he reached Shiva's abode, Kashi and took a dip in Ganga, he got free from the load of his sin and the skull.

Kapaal Mochan, here in Varanasi, is the place where he was unburdened. Have you been there yet?” He asked.

“No. I have one more day in Varanasi, so I will sit and plan my whole day. I will try to incorporate all the things in my itinerary.” I said thoughtfully.

“One day?” He rhetorically commented.

“I know it is less but let me make a try, I know I am coming back here,” I replied as we entered our hostel.

Ajay welcomed us with his smile and after a small chat, we headed to our room. The day was long and if I rewind my whole travel journey, it was the longest. How much did I learn from this person? He had left a permanent mark on me with his beliefs, stories, and perception. I thought if I had not come to Varanasi, could I have met a person like him?

I realized how physical appearances are so delusional. A day before, when I saw him meditating, I had various thoughts seeing his looks but after spending a day with him, I was full of admiration.

Before leaving for Varanasi, I did not think that this trip could be so enlightening. I wonder what the next day had in store for me. Interestingly, each day this mysterious city presented me with one of its admirers and I was left agape with their insights. I planned to leave for Ghat early and absorb the enchanting zephyr. I also planned to meet the intellects to which Ajay referred.

I could see myself doing all the planned things and dozed off. That day I was travelling the ghats of Ganga the whole night in my dreams. Maybe I met Nachiketa, I had some meagre reflections about him when I woke up. But I could not be sure, all I remembered was being on the ghats. The exhilarating experience of the previous day had a deep impact on my mind.

I checked Keshav's bed; he had already left. It was 4:00 AM and I knew what I had to do.

I assumed that the door should be unlocked because Keshav must have left a few minutes before but Ajay was a good administrator; the door was locked back again. When I woke up Ajay, he turned to see who was waking him up now after giving me a look of pity, he zombie-walked to the door and opened it.

The streets were maintaining the hush of the night and everyone seemed pursed in their homes or in the maze-like alleys. It was not the first day that I got scared of this aloofness. I analyzed how a day with Keshav felt like a month. I felt as if I knew this city in and out via his stories. The past two days introduced me to such elements of the city which I had not planned while planning the itinerary. I reached the river bank and crossed the Dashashwamedh

ghat which had some worshippers. I sat on a ghat which was quieter.

I was loving the nothingness. No plans. No rush. No schedules and no meetings. The ripples of thoughts and ideas created in the mind also seemed unperturbed. But then, I saw a foreigner-like-Baba approaching. I cross-checked each and every detail as he came near, he was definitely not an Indian but then how did he become a baba in India? He did not seem like a newbie. I wondered how he managed to take a bath in the chilly-cold water of Ganga so early in the morning. I was laden with a sweatshirt, socks and shoes, yet, I crouched in a corner and he barely covered his torso with a saffron cotton cloth and wore a cotton *dhoti*.

I wanted to talk to him about this transformation and wanted to know his back story but could not gather enough courage to talk to him. When he crossed me, I was looking at him and he smiled. I greeted him Namaste and he paused to revert to the greetings. He was again ready to move when I called, "Baba, May I have 5 minutes of yours?"

He stopped and I rushed to accompany him.

He asked, "How can I help you, son?"

"I just wanted to ask you a few things, if you allow," I said and he nodded in affirmation.

I asked him for his name first and, he said, "Shivadas," and continued his stroll as I joined him.

"What is your original name?" I inquired.

He smiled, "This is the name I got from my Guruji, 40 years back and now this is my original name."

I exclaimed, "40 years! You came here 40 years ago?"

"I guess it is more than 40 years. I came here in 1974," he said calmly.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"I came from Italy", he answered.

"Oh! Then, did your spiritual inclination bring you here?" I was curious.

"No. I was a hippie back then, living a totally different life. I was the lead guitarist in my band and slept at 4 in the morning and woke up at 1 in the daytime. Then go practice. My band was more rock and roll, with fast and loud music." He replied.

"Then, what made you stay here in Varanasi? What changed you?" By this time, I was matching my journey to Varanasi with his.

"The colours, the people and even the sadhus fascinated me. Seeing them smoking *chillums*, I felt that Sadhus in Banaras are the Indian version of hippies. I followed them and slowly learned what they truly are." He smiled peculiarly.

"Don't you feel cold taking a bath so early in the morning?" I continuously asked questions like a persistent interviewer, following him in the alleys he walked.

"Son, as I have learned from Gururji we should cleanse ourselves in Brahmanuhrat and start our meditation, I follow that religiously. Now that I have taken a bath I am going for my sadhana, then yoga or bhajans." He spoke.

I got a signal that I should part ways but I asked the last question, "What is morning in Banaras for you?"

"It is joy and harmony. It makes me feel I am part of everything. I feel peace and I become one with nature." He

said climbing on a boulder where one other Babaji was sitting. He was completely covered in ashes. It was their time to meditate and do their Sadhnas. As they took their smoke from a chillum, I bid them farewell and turned back to the ghat.

As I returned back to the ghat, I could not help but think how can someone leave the place where he was born and leave the things he enjoyed? How can someone be so enticed to an unknown place that he settles there forever? I started comparing how people coming from outside get so influenced and know so much about our culture while people like me who were born and brought up here know so little.

I was analyzing myself and I made a promise. I would take time to learn about my culture and invest some time in knowing the ancient wisdom that modernization or Western orientation had taken away. I had again reached the ghat and was strolling towards the Assi ghat where I wanted to witness the processions of Ganga Aarti from the start.

All things were getting ready for the program. The stage was set and well-lit. I could see a sitar, harmonium and tabla on the stage. I noticed one old man who looked like an eminent person to me. He was arranging, instructing and monitoring everything. I wanted to talk to him and learn about this mystic program Subah-e-Banaras. He was Mr Pramod Mishra, one of the prominent persons who initiated Subah-e-Banaras.

I did not realise when my curious wait turned into staring. He looked at me and I smiled. He smiled back and he got

back to his work. Then, after requesting one of the young volunteers to put up the chair he came to me.

“Yes, beta, what do you want to know?” He straight-away asked.

“Hello, Sir! How do you know I want to ask something? I guess my looks were not self-effacing.” I said embarrassingly.

“Yes. You looked in such a way that I had to come to you. And since you are early and all preparations are done. I guess I can give you some time.” He said.

“Sir, that is so kind of you. I was just curious about the programme Subah-e-Banaras. I had not heard about it even while I was searching about Varanasi. When did this start here?” I asked.

“It is not necessary that everyone is aware of what is happening. It has been five years now. It started on 24th November 2014.” He humbly said.

“So, from where did this term Subah-e-Banaras come?” I queried.

“This term was first used when one of the toll collectors of the nawab of Lucknow came here, he was mesmerised by the beauty of the morning here and he pronounced it as Subah-E-Banaras. Thus, the term arose from there and we too feel that the mornings of Varanasi are incomparable.” He said, taking a deep breath.

“Yes, it is. On one side people celebrate the morning and on the other people celebrate death. But how did Kashi become Banaras then Varanasi?” I asked.

“I am happy to see someone curious to know about this. People come to Varanasi with different agendas, it is rare for me that someone is thinking on these lines too. And now to answer you, the word Varanasi came when Lord Ram established the Jyotirlinga in Ramesharam. Then, Banaras is the name which came from the hearts of people, defining the *Ras*, the essence of nine emotions that people associate with the city, that is how Banaras came. And Kashi’s name comes from Kashi Vishwanath. The city is historical. It is here where Kabir Das got enlightened. It is here where Lord Buddha enlightened his followers. There were many Saints who have been here and added to its history. From Telang Swami to Rai Das, Kashi has an unmatched splendour.”

Yes, it is unique and where else can one find such uniqueness except for Shiva’s city, Kashi” I said.

“That is one way of defining it. But for me, it is the city of Lord Vishnu.” He remarked.

“But how?” I questioned him.

He said, “Because he was the one who gifted it to Lord Shiva.” I nodded remembering the tale of how Lord Vishnu illuminated King Divodasa to give it to Lord Shiva. Connecting the dots, I added, “And that is how this makes it a city of salvation.”

When I said this, I thought to ask him what Keshav’s multiple explanations could not satiate in me, “So is it not possible that you simply do anything, come here and die.”

He smiled, “People say it is a city of salvation but if you come here doing ‘*amaryadit aacharan*’ (any unreasonable act) and think of getting salvation then you are not getting it.”

His answer was lucid and clear with no ifs and buts. Do good and you get good, do bad then even nectar cannot work. In the background, the Vedic chants had started on the stage and I knew I cannot hold him further. I thought to ask him one more question which had always intrigued me. “As Kashi is believed to be the oldest city in the world, what do you think came first Hinduism or Kashi?”

“Do not ask questions to create some social media debate! There are few questions that should not be answered as it creates only delusion if answered. Different meanings are interpreted of the simple words. Our Hindu religion has no boundaries of time. Can you tell when Lord Shiva was born or when Lord Rama was born or when was Krishna born or when was the first time when someone started yagya or when was the first time when someone took a vow taking water in hand? So, there can be no sure answer for all these. Let’s close by saying that Kashi is the oldest city in the world.” He got up from the ghat stairs indicating the conclusion of the conversation with this diplomatic answer.

But I had a few questions left. “And Hindu Civilization is also old?”

He started moving towards the stage and I followed to hear, “Yes. If you look at the English calendar system, currently it is 2019 while as per our Hindu calendar, we are in Vikram Samvat 2076. So, definitely, we are ahead of them. There is no debate about that. We thought of Pushpak Viman when they could not even imagine it. They say their ancestors are monkeys but we say our ancestors were Rishi and Munis.”

That was such a logical explanation. I could not stop. “I have heard Ganga was much wider than we see now. Some

people say that Ganga will go extinct in a few years. What do you think?" I dived one last question towards him.

"This would never happen. Ganga will remain forever. It is invincible." The universe seemed to back up his answer as the Ganga Aarti started just at that very moment. He went to the forefront bidding me farewell with folded hands. Though the Ganga aarti at Dashashwamedh Ghat is grander, nothing could beat the mystics of the aarti following the conversation and the sun rising from the river's horizon.



Chapter Ten

From Kashi to Banaras to Varanasi

*Had I ever known,
That my journey would be like this?
A journey where the departed would-be companions,
And considering them inauspicious would be amiss.*

*Had I ever known,
That I would know the city beyond the ghats of the Ganges?
As a place where enlightened beings are in every form,
Some people like you and me and some ghostly untouchable beings.*

*Had I ever known,
That I would see the alleys where people wait to fulfill the
prophecy?
Bookings made for the pleasure of staying in the waiting room of
death,
And people mourn missing the fortnight of Kashyam
Marnamuktih.*

*Had I ever known,
That I would experience more than the senses feel?*

*The hint of the strange magnetism of the ancient allure,
Where people forget 'I' and live selflessly with zeal.*

*Had I ever known,
That the stories on the net are not even a glimpse of the whole?
I would have come to Varanasi before
And died while living as I untainted my soul.*

Sitting on the ghat I reflected on the words of Mr. Pramod Mishra. I wondered whether the 4-5 people who started the processions of Subah-e-benaras knew that it would become so grand. Truly the mornings of Varanasi are divine and it ought to have such majestic reverence. I bought a cup of tea from the tea stall which Mr. Pramod had insisted on trying and strolled on the ghat. I saw there were some students sitting on a ghat and gossiping.

I sat beside them and gradually started a conversation after a general introduction. They were from BHU. I reminisced that Keshav had also studied in BHU. I asked them, "Do you come here every day?"

One of them said, "We try to," then pointing to one of the boys he said, "he comes daily."

"That's great! What brings you here daily? And rather tell me your point of view about the expression of Assi Ghat, "Subah-e-Benaras", what is it for you?" I asked curiously.

The group looked at the daily visitor to answer this. He said, "It is like all positive things come together to this place early in the morning. You can feel the breeze, you can hear the sound of nature, you see people worshipping, and the experience the gaiety of nature and its being come to life. You can see all generations of people come here from elderly

people to young, from college-goers to children and young married couples. Sometimes I even feel that I carry the divine aura with me after coming here. This is unique and this morning is Subah-e-benaras.”

“That is true,” I said, picturing all the elements he just described.

One of them asked me, “Why are you asking all this? What exactly do you do in Mumbai?”

I did not disclose to them anything particular, “I am a regular visitor and nothing more. Ganga and its ghat intrigue me and I seek to find the core of its allure.”

“Yes, it must be quite different for you. Mumbai sleeps late, so nobody would be rising up so early,” one of the boys commented.

I said, “Mumbai may be known as *the city that never sleeps*, but who says Mumbaikars wake up late? That's one of the biggest misconceptions. The streets may seem quieter in the early hours compared to smaller towns, but inside every home, the day begins as early. Mornings in Mumbai start with a sense of urgency. Each one is in a rush preparing for a day that rarely slows down. Time is always racing with us, so we have to gear up, getting ready to travel long distances, rushing to catch the local trains, and syncing everything together. The rhythm is simply different there.

However, here in Varanasi I see mornings unfold at a gentle pace. People wake up with enough time to offer their prayers, soak in the calmness of dawn, sip their tea without glancing at the clock, and ease into the day. The heartbeat of this city is calm and slow while Mumbai's beats are a little faster.”

One of the boys said, "Every city has its own character. Living in a city is like a marriage where you have to accept the pros and cons of your partner." Everybody gave him a micro gaze after getting this unique comparison from a bachelor. Laughter was inevitable and we busted into it.

What had begun as a chance of meeting at Ganga Ghat ended with warm smiles, invitations, to each other's hometowns and a sincere farewell. As I progressed to move towards the Dashashwamedh ghat, the group called out, "Did you have tea?"

I turned wondering what is this buzz with tea, everybody insists on tea. Then, out of curiosity I asked, "Why are you asking so?"

"We just thought that since you are new here, we can suggest some good place for tea where you can get all the local vibe," one of them replied.

Some places don't reveal themselves through monuments or maps—they unfold over a steaming cup of tea. With that thought lingering in my mind, I made a beeline for Pappu Chaiwallah, the place they had recommended. I had a strong feeling that this wasn't just another tea stall; it was the ticket to see the new show of Varanasi waiting to be exhibited.

Crossing the bustling road near Assi Ghat and revisiting the newly composed market's symphony of bicycle bells, temple bells and the echoes of sacred chants, I finally spotted it. The stall was as humble as they come. Tea simmered away in battered kettles. Some tables were placed outside which were yet to get filled up, while inside, people occupied every available corner, sipping chai as if time itself had decided to slow down there.

I ordered a cup and quietly slipped into an empty seat, hoping to blend into the background. But that hope vanished in the blink of an eye.

The camera around my neck, the microphone peeking out of my backpack, and the tangle of recording gear made me stick out like a lighthouse in the dark. Eyes followed me; some direct and some from the nooks. I suddenly felt like a new student walking into a classroom halfway through the semester—every glance carrying a question, every whisper spinning a new theory.

For a few moments, it was a silent tug-of-war between their curiosity and my awkward smile.

Curiosity won.

From a circle of elderly men sitting in one corner, one gentleman finally leaned forward and broke the silence.

"What do you do?"

It wasn't merely a question; it was an invitation to explain why I had arrived carrying what looked like a miniature television studio.

"I'm a tourist," I answered.

The words landed with a thud.

"A tourist?"

Their expressions betrayed them. They were assuming me to be a person from the media, tourists usually carried backpacks and maps—not cameras, microphones, and audio recorders. My answer had only deepened the mystery.

Realising I had raised more questions than I had answered, I smiled and added, "I don't just collect photographs from

the places I visit. I collect stories. Every city offers some part of it as souvenir, and these gadgets help me carry a little of it back home."

The atmosphere changed almost instantly.

The guarded expressions softened. Faces lit up. Chairs shuffled. From the group, I was offered a seat closer. Another ordered a special tea. Before I knew it, I wasn't an outsider anymore.

A cup of chai had quietly become a passport into their world.

What followed wasn't a conversation; it was a treasure chest of memories. Stories of old Varanasi, forgotten traditions, changing times, local politics, neighbourhood legends, and everyday wisdom flowed as effortlessly as the tea being poured into earthen cups. Every anecdote peeled back another layer of the city, revealing a Varanasi that no guidebook, no documentary, and no Google search could have ever shown me.

That morning, I had gone looking for a famous tea stall.

Instead, I found a front-row seat to the soul of Varanasi.

And all it cost me was a cup of chai.

One of the men commented, "Many people come to Varanasi from different places; they rush to temples, to ghats and into the alleys. They believe they know Varanasi but what they see is only one attire of the city. Carrying a part of the city is a big statement!"

I got his point, "Yes, you are right. Varanasi seems unending. It has revealed new phases of life to me in two days."

“Two days!” he exclaimed. “As you say you know Varanasi a bit now, tell me a basic question, how is Kashi different from Banaras and Banaras from Varanasi?”

I was puzzled, “Aren’t they all synonyms for this city?”

They all passed a smile. They cleared their point - Varanasi cannot be known in two days. I asked, “What is the difference? Why is it called differently by different people?”

They were enjoying my ignorance. “That is a long tale to tell to a stranger?”

I got the cue and turned my chair even closer to officially join their group. Smiling, I introduced myself. “Hello! I am a traveler by heart and a digital marketer by profession. I live in Mumbai, though I like to believe that I have temporary addresses all over India. I am hopelessly curious, especially when someone tells me that a city has a story I don’t know. The city starts teasing me and as soon as I can convince my boss for one more trip, I set off in search of stories that make the destination.”

I had passed the litmus test. All the four men introduced themselves and I got to know that I am sitting with the esteemed personalities of the city. Among the group, the cleanly shaved person was the judge, the one who tossed the first question was the DSP, the one with big moustaches who challenged my statement was a university professor and the quietest was the trader of gems.

I asked them again, “How is Kashi different from Banaras and Varanasi?”

The DSP answered, “It is a long story which I will shorten up for you. So, the present Varanasi you see is much smaller than Kashi. Kashi was a whole kingdom while Varanasi

today is just a small city. Originally, the great city of Kashi lay on a higher ground at the convergence of three rivers, metaphorically Shiva's trident. Yet, it is difficult to point out the ancient topography of Varanasi because it differs from the description of the city in the old texts."

I was hearing an unknown tale of the city and I wanted to delve deeper, "That is interesting. I believe every city differs somewhat from its ancient form. But how did its name become Banaras?"

Intoning some Urdu lines Professor Mr. Jha said,

"kaf-e-har-khakash az masti kanishtey

Sar-e-har kharash az sabzi bahishtey.

Mirza Ghalib made it clear through these lines, in Kashi even dirt transforms into temples and thorns a bliss. This is from his famous work, 'temple lamp' dedicated to Kashi. So, whoever comes here experiences ecstasy in his own way. This place has so many diversities from culture to religion, from worshipping the serenity of temples to the silence of funerals, from food to everything, and when all this combines, it creates its own nectar which we call as 'Ras'. Old people describe this context as Bana-ras, meaning amalgamating everything."

"Wow! I never thought that the meaning of this word lied in simple disarticulation." The way he explained I would never forget this meaning. I found it so fantastic that I even asked, "Then is there any severance for Varanasi too?"

He said, "Yes. You must have visited Assi Ghat?" I nodded. "So opposite to Assi ghat, river Varuna flows. On that ghat, Ganga is called Assi river. Combining these two river names the name Varanasi came up. So, people coming from

outside the city call it mostly Varanasi but for us it is Banaras.”

“I guess I would also call it Banaras, now,” I said.

Sipping the tea, we then discussed the specialties of Banaras and its people. Reading the happiness on their faces as they voiced their emotions for their hometown, I made up my mind to settle down in one small town. The blithe and the compassion for life is incomparable here. I thought to ask them about property rates too, but then, I didn't. They were busy weaving a colorful tapestry.

I told them that I had not expected so much crowd here. That was an amazing statement for them. DSP Sir said, “My dear you were expecting the world's oldest city to be calm and quaint! Varanasi is one city which everyone wishes to visit atleast once in their life and dying here is a blessing. I agree many people see Mumbai as a dream city but nothing can beat the truth of life; nothing can beat the desire for salvation.”

“I back your statement. Yet I always assumed Varanasi to be very peaceful.” Judge, Mr. Ramola said, “Peace is one thing and crowd the other. It is crowded yet peaceful. My hometown is Champawat, a small town of Uttrakhand. I never thought that any city or place would woo my heart as my birthplace, but Varanasi changed my thoughts. First, my work brought me here and now I have even bought a home here.”

“That is great! Just a while before I had similar thoughts,” I confessed.

See, I told you. And don't you call this a crowd. Come here during the times of Rath Yatra when all the streets are jam

packed, moving becomes difficult and people on foot are faster than the people driving.”

I started picturizing the streets, as they added about the monsoon season and the traffic. From the mention of monsoon, one more intriguing story came lingering. They said that if I truly wanted to witness the city at its most mysterious, I should come to Varanasi during *Nag Panchami*, when the streets and shrines seem to blur the line between devotion and myth. It is the time when one could see the maximum number of snakes.

According to them, it is the time when serpents are not just feared but revered, when faith itself takes on a more primal form. People enter a *Naag Koop* (well) and worship Lord Shiva in Karkotkeshwar Mahadev temple. India is truly the land of stories and rituals that can test how daring you are!

I was mentally taking notes of all fantastic things about Varanasi for my next visit, when Mr. Jha added one more to the list asking, “Have you been to Sarnath?”

“No. Not yet.” I replied.

He said, “Then why don’t you go today?”

I replied, “I was thinking of being at the ghats today.”

He explained, “It is already 9:30 AM. It would only get hot and sunny during the afternoon. If you leave even at 10 you can reach in an hour at max, spend some time there and be back by 3:00 PM.”

I found it to be a good itinerary.

That is when Mr. Rajput said, “I find it very boring. Why do people go there? Just to see a few old pieces of ancient history and bake themselves in the scorching heat? He does

not even have a kid whom he can take care of and scold as he runs in deer park and touches the relics of the museum.”

The imagery he presented brought a dose of laughter in the whole group. It is rightly said that quiet people have the loudest minds. That called for one more round of tea.

Seeing my interest in the history of the city, they even told me about the bookstores near Kashi Vishwanath temple and one on Assi ghat, where I can find the books on Varanasi history. Since Assi Ghat was near, I told them that I would visit the bookstore before leaving for Sarnath. They had given me the agenda of the day and I was all set to go, but then, I thought the bookstore would have innumerable books and I had only one day. So, I asked them, “When I go there, what should I look for or what should I read?”

Mr. Jha said, “, if you want to read and go a little off track then you should read about Aghoris.”

“Aghoris?” My thoughts came out loud. I had heard so much about them from Keshav and Krishna. I wondered why everyone I am meeting in Varanasi has to tell me about Agoris. Something was again and again pulling me towards them.

Mr. Jha broke the mist of my thoughts saying, “Yes, they are deeply connected to Varanasi and knowing them is essential if you want to know Varanasi. Would you not like to know why they are so attracted to Varanasi? Or to Nepal?”

“Yes, I surely want to know about them. Previously, I was only scared of them, Varanasi has changed the way I look at them. I think there is more enlightenment needed.” I told them.

“You can get many answers in books. And obviously for knowing even more you have to stay with them, but for a long time. Apparently, your company will not empathize with your plan so books are a better option for now,” he chuckled. Then he inquisitively asked, “Did you visit Baba Kina ram ashram?”

I said, “No. Who is Baba Kinaram?”

He said, “Baba Kinaram is known to have written Aghor principles in writing. He founded this sthal. It is also known as Aghori peeth. He also is known to have been blessed by Lord Dattatreya who is known to be the deity of Aghoris. So, visiting the place becomes important if you want to know something about Aghoris. You can get some books about Aghoris there too. I would say it is a unique place for all the outsiders.”

“Why outsiders? Not for you?” I asked.

“Because to the people of Varanasi, Aghoris are companions,” he remarked.

“Hmm.. You know I never heard of Baba Kina ram or Lod Dattatreya.” I confessed.

“That is why you are here in Varanasi. To know the unknown. And do not fall into the wrong hands Sir. Not all who look like Agoris are true Aghoris.” He said.

“Yes, my friend warned about them. And maybe it would be my next trip to Varanasi where I would explore more about them. This time just the books. But I will try to visit the ashram. Tell me where it is?” I enquired.

“It is in Bhelupur. Roughly around 3 kilometers away from here.” He said.

My road map was clear; from this stall to the bookstore; from there to Sarnath and then to Baba Kinaram Ashram and finally to the hostel. After exchanging numbers with my new found friends along with a promise to meet again, I began my pursuit.



Chapter Eleven

Sheets of Soul

*With each meeting, a new path unfolds,
Knowing unspoken stories and mysteries on hold.
The journey still comes to an end,
For that what has started has to suspend.*

*But with every end, a start begins,
Like the circle of life, which always spins.
No final line, no closing gate,
For those who wander, there is no permanent estate.*

*New destinations would sway the gloomy heart
And the existing would fade, in hope of a new start.
The soul-touching journey that I lived every moment
Would become a memory just leaving its pigment.*

I have been to Assi Ghat so many times but I never noticed any book stores. I walked on the Ghat to find any bookstore boards. I did not ask anyone and just kept strolling. My eyes scanned every faded board and narrow lane with a little more intent. And then, tucked away in what looked like the

outer room of a modest home, I found it. A bookstore so unassuming that I might have walked past it many times without a second thought.

At first, I expected a handful of books, maybe a few well-worn paperbacks lined up quietly on a shelf. But the moment I stepped inside, that assumption crumbled.

I was cornered by intrigue.

Books were everywhere! Some stacked, spilling, leaning into each other like they had stories of their own to tell. Each spine seemed to call out, each title pulling me in deeper than the last. What was meant to be a quick stop suddenly felt like stepping into a labyrinth with no visible exit.

I checked my watch, it was already 11:00 AM. Time was running a marathon with needles passing the baton as quickly as possible. Eventually, the owner came to rescue. I asked, "Can you find some good books on Aghoris and the history of Varanasi?" He nodded with quiet understanding, as if he had been waiting for this question long before I arrived.

Without a word of exaggeration, he gently placed a few books in my hands and said, "These might not just give you information... they might open doors to what you're actually looking for."

And just like that, the bookstore stopped being a place to buy books. It became a place where I had unknowingly walked into a conversation with the unseen soul of Varanasi. I wondered, "what is with this city? Every individual, every corner, every shop is ready to amaze me with a different story.

I purchased the books and while I was making payments, the owner asked me, "Where are you from?"

"Mumbai."

He exclaimed, "Mumbai! That's surprising. I did not know people of Mumbai could also like this kind of literature."

Mumbaikars have certainly built a different kind of image for the whole of India, especially the small towns. If I would have asked for books on how to be successful or how to be more rich, it wouldn't be a shocker for him. And it was not only Mumbaikars youngsters and even millennials generally do not read such books. However, without any disagreement, I remarked, "You are right. There are very few people who like reading this unconventional stuff and know the old traditions and culture."

He leaned back, as though he had been waiting for someone to say that.

"And it's not just Mumbai," he said thoughtfully. He spoke my mind, "I've noticed this everywhere. Hardly anyone asks for these kinds of books anymore. I usually keep only one or two copies because they rarely sell. Now that you've bought them, I'll actually have to order fresh stock!"

"Well," I grinned, "I'm happy to be responsible for your restocking."

He laughed, packed my books carefully, and wished me a pleasant journey.

I thanked him and took one last look around the bookstore. What I had assumed would be a quick five-minute stop had turned into an unexpected literary adventure. Keshav had instigated a reader in me and wooed me in buying all these books. Apparently, choosing books is like choosing

prospective friends for your future. Let's see how this friendship goes!

By the time I finally walked out, the sun had climbed high in the sky. It was almost noon.

Clutching my little treasure trove of books, I hurried back to the hostel, kept them safely in my room, and without wasting another minute, set off for Sarnath. First, I thought to take an auto and breathe more of each element of the city but then the sun convinced the cab to be the better option. Varanasi had charmed the traveller in me and I was curious to discover what stories awaited me beyond the pages.

With the first glimpse of Sarnath, I felt I was in a different city altogether, especially not a city of Uttar Pradesh. Though there were many locals, yet, monks overpowered the scenery. There were monks with saffron coloured clothes, white clothes and there were some dressed in grey attire and with cone shaped caps. It seemed like a set of a Chinese movie where the life of monks was shot.

The sheer expanse of the archaeological complex shimmered under the afternoon heat, and I instantly regretted my timing. "I should have come much earlier," I thought. Today, the sun was clearly in no mood to go easy on anyone. It seemed determined to keep every visitor running to see the whole premises.

While most tourists had already completed their rounds and were now cooling their heels in the shade of the Deer Park, I was only just beginning my exploration.

Some families had come well prepared. They had spread bedsheets beneath the trees and turned the visit into a cheerful little picnic. Children darted across the lush lawns, chasing one another without a care in the world. Watching

them, I couldn't help but smile as Mr. Rajput's words echoed in my mind. "He was right after all." I thought.

Not far away, a small group sat in complete silence, listening attentively to a spiritual discourse. Like in Ghat there was a contrast of death and celebration, here too contrasts played their game. On one side, children filled the air with laughter, on the other seekers soaked in wisdom. Everybody was either with a companion or with their family. Strangely, I was the only lone traveller.

As for me, there was no time to waste. Late arrival, less time and tough master sun to make the job complex. My camera and I had switched to full throttle. Every weathered brick, every towering tree, every laughing child, and every quiet corner seemed to beckon, asking to be remembered. The sun might have been relentless, but it certainly wasn't going to stop me from capturing every frame of this timeless place.

I saw the Dhamek stupa from a distance. It is the most imposing structure of Sarnath. I saw people taking rounds of the religious structure but I moved forward and saw some remains of the city originally built by Emperor Ashoka. History seemed to have stopped there. Scenes of a few serials from my childhood seemed to have found the grounding. The memories played hide and seek but I wasn't able to recall any particular serial name or maybe it was a movie.

I do not think any shooting may have been done here, though, past recallings loved to associate it here. As I walked further, I saw even the broken buildings and structures were also revered with full dedication. There was also a section there where some excavation happened. In that area there were various platforms that were raised. It

gave me an impression that maybe here people must have come to study Buddhism or gain knowledge like Nalanda. In one corner of this huge piece of land, there was a garden as well. The stupa that stood in that area was very huge and made from the red bricks which were very rare even at that time.

Then, hearing one of the guides talk about Mulgandhkutti as the most important structure, my attention was stolen. I followed the group of foreigners whom he guided. When one of them asked the meaning, he said, it means the first perfumed chamber.

I was intrigued to see it. Imaginations transported me to Kannauj and reminisced about the Petrichor attar I experienced there. Somehow, I started smelling the fragrance of Petrichor. However, hopes crashed, when the broken structures again introduced themselves.

I got to know that it is the place where Lord Buddha spent the first rainy retreat. The refreshing fragrance was replaced by some broken bricks, big stones and some Lotus flowers dedicated to the sacred site. Sometimes the expectations become the best athlete. But I think it is only faith and dedication which makes everything special.

I took pictures of all these sites and got to know about the museum there. The needles were already striking 4, I was running short of time so I proceeded towards the temples. First, I visited the Thai Buddha Vihar where a giant Buddha statue is placed. It must be around 80 ft. While I took pictures, my eyes were in search of a person who could tell me all the details but I couldn't find anyone. Rather if stated correctly, my heart was somewhere else and this whole visit

to Sarnath felt like studying the syllabus that was not opted. I was missing the Ghat.

Suppressing my eagerness to return, I continued to the Tibetan temple.

The peace inside was incomparable but the emptiness in my heart resounded a score which was deafening. I knew the day was ending and so was my time in Varanasi. FOMO was at play. Though, Sarnath is beautiful and an experience in itself but the calming songs of Ganga were wooing me back.

The sun had called his best friend and while the two friends shared the sky before playing hide and seek, I thought about leaving back to the city.

Coming back, instead of going to the hostel, I went straight to the Dashashwamedh ghat. I started my stroll as if recollecting whatever was missed over the day. I know a rolling stone cannot gather moss but this stone was feeling to settle and to stop by the Ganges. "Should I buy a home here?" I thought. It was satiating. Then, the future setting up bricks to lay the foundation. The cool breeze came running, carrying the mist and telling me, "Yes! You can do it." A smile has many emotions; sometimes happiness, sometimes hope and sometimes a veil to the turmoil. I only had a smile as reply.

I again reached Manikarnika ghat. There were bodies lying there, few were burning and few getting ready. I guess the sheets of my soul had metamorphosed, it was not scary anymore. As I crossed the ghat, I saw a temple submerged in water. I remembered seeing it on TV. The evening had taken a darker shade so I didn't go very close to it but I sat down on the ghat to look at it. I realized it was even tilted.

Why didn't I notice it earlier? Then I thought, why has it not been taken care of? Now, I had to know the story. I started looking for someone before whom I could open the box of questions. Everybody around me seemed engrossed with their families, friends or partners. I looked keenly and spotted a peanut vendor who could serve my curiosities.

He was a middle-aged man wearing a dull orange shirt with faded pants. He seemed to be a hard-working man who would not waste time chatting around. Like a clever fox, I stopped him to buy peanuts. While he did all this, I asked him about the temple. He said pointing out to the temple, "This temple, it's cursed *Babujl*. Every time it is rebuilt, the riverbed takes more of it in. And with every reconstruction, the tilt grows, a slow surrender to the inevitable pull of water and time."

Then, I bought two more packets to buy more time. "And why is it so? Who cursed it?"

"That I don't know! But I will tell you one more weird fact about this temple. You know, this temple has been struck by lightning four or five times. That is why no one goes inside to conduct even the worship rituals. And in the rainy season half of the entrance gets absorbed in water so nobody goes inside."

It was strange though, even the heavens themselves can't decide whether to bless it or challenge its existence. There must be some history behind all these happenings but he did not know it. I thanked him for the peanuts and started strolling back to Dashashwamedh ghat where the evening aarti was in procession. I sat there absorbing my last aarti in Varanasi. From the moment the echoing bells and sacred mantras of the aarti faded into the gentle whispers of the

Ganga, I waited. The river carried away the last echoes, just as time sifted through my fingers like sand in an hourglass. My farewell was near—unfolding not in haste, but in the quiet certainty of the flowing tide.

Then I thought, let me colour the soul with one more shade of Banaras. I walked out of the ghat and stopped outside a shop with the name, '*Banarasi Thandai, Bhang and Lassi*.' A visit to Varanasi without sipping the 'Bhaang wali Thandai' would be an incomplete travel affair. I went into the shop and proudly asked for one "Bhang wali thandai." The stress on Bhaang was way too much. The shopkeeper quickly sensed I wasn't a local and asked, "Where are you coming from, sir?"

I smiled faintly and replied, "It's not about where I'm coming from, it's about where I'm going now. My train leaves tomorrow morning, taking me back to Mumbai, my abode." He nodded listening to my curly reply and he tediously started making the Thandai from scratch. From his looks it was clear that he was expecting a straight answer than this. It took him around 15 minutes to make it. I asked him, "Don't you keep it ready?"

"We make it fresh as it gets spoiled easily," he said, handing me the glass.

I quite liked the flavor; sweet but not overwhelming. Refreshing in every sip. Greedy for more, I figured another glass might even replace dinner. Turning back to the vendor, I asked for one more. Listening to this demand, his eyes widened, almost amused, yet cautious and he asked, "You sure?"

Puzzled by his statement, my nod gave affirmation. Maybe with my answer he was assuming me to be high with Bhaang. “What happened?”

He leaned in slightly and lowering his voice, he said, “One glass is enough for you. You said you have a train to catch, right? If you drink another, you might not make it.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You won’t feel the effect of Bhaang now,” he explained, “but in half an hour, maybe 45 minutes, maybe an hour—it’ll hit you. Hard!”

I stared at him, weighing his words. He seemed certain, and which shopkeeper would not like to sell his stuff? There was no sense in taking risks. With a reluctant chuckle, I nodded. “Fair point.”

I turned away, feeling a little funny, a little wary; one glass deep, one train to catch, and so many stories to remember. Grabbing a packet of chips, I walked back to the hostel. Every second, every minute and every moment were set on rewind. I felt each nook, each shop and every element of the road, waived goodbye with a heavy heart.

By the time I reached the hostel, the dizziness he had warned me about had already started creeping in. The world felt a little softer, a little slower, as if time itself had loosened its grip. The moment I stepped inside, I looked for Ajay and said, ““Listen, I have a train at 2 PM tomorrow. I’ve already taken a bath, so just make sure to wake me up by 11, alright?”

I made sure to tell at least two or three more people, even the property manager. He reassured me, “Don’t worry, we’ll wake you up.” That gave me some peace of mind.

Reaching the room, my world felt like a spinning merry-go-round. Everything swayed slightly, and I could still feel the lingering effect of the *bhaang*. To keep myself occupied until sleep took over, I decided to transfer my photos. I started the process, but at some point, without realizing it, I slipped into unconsciousness. The next morning, I woke up at 10:30. Miraculously, the *Bhaang* hadn't hit me as hard as I had feared. Some people are like a blessing; the shopkeeper must have been thoughtful while preparing my *Thandai*. However, some alien had surely entered my brain.

Someone was continuously pounding hammers inside my skull. My head was heavy and my thoughts sluggish. But there was no time to rest. I had to pack up and brace myself for the chaos of traffic, because missing my train was not an option. I went to the cafeteria to grab some tea and a quick breakfast but the staff said, "Tea and breakfast close at 10. It's already a quarter to 11."

I sighed. "I'm not feeling well. If not tea, at least give me a glass of water with lemon. The hangover of the *Bhaang* is torturing me."

He looked at me knowingly and smirked. "Sir, if you had *Bhaang*, lemon will only make it worse. Trust me. Instead, have soda with salt, you'll feel better. Then maybe in an hour, I'll make you some tea."

That was a new fact thrown for me to catch. But I was too exhausted to play dodge ball, I nodded. A few moments later, I sipped on the salty soda, letting it work its magic. Slowly, the dizziness subsided, and my head felt lighter. Feeling a little more like myself again, I packed up my things, checked everything twice and bid adieu everyone

with a hug and a smile. There was an unsaid promise of return.

By 12:15, I was out the door, heading toward Varanasi station. I stopped on the platform where it signalled B5, my coach. Isn't it strange that just 3 days before this station seemed so unknown, so crowded but today it felt lonely even when the number of people remained the same. I do not know why it happens every time? Why does it become so hard to return? My mind was held captive by the memories of fantastic people I met during this journey. The wait time of the train evaporated in seconds with the remorse of leaving this city. Anyone close to me could see the gleam, the pain and the anxiety in my eyes.

The train ride for which I was excited like a five-year old boy while coming, couldn't even bring a smile then. The mountain of luggage on my shoulder pulled me back as I climbed on the train. The emotions packed inside were too heavy.

As the train rumbled along, I stared at my phone, scrolling through the photos I had just transferred. The familiar buzz of contentment filled me as I revisited moments from my trip. I felt like I was in Varanasi again. I felt Keshav, Krishna and my older buddies were all with me. But my thoughts were interrupted by a soft voice beside me.

"Did you come to Varanasi to travel?" she asked, her voice warm and curious.

I looked up, meeting the gaze of the young lady sitting next to me. She was average in height, wearing a pair of neat spectacles perched on her nose. Her face was framed by soft, dark hair that fell just past her shoulders, and there was a

certain cute, approachable energy about her, something that made her easy to talk to.

The question was an odd start for conversation but anything to escape the gloom of separation. "Yes, I came to explore Varanasi from Mumbai," I replied, offering a small smile.

Her eyes brightened, and she tilted her head slightly. "There's a place called Ramgarh. Did you visit it?"

I blinked, surprised. "No, I didn't go there. I didn't have the time," I confessed, then added sheepishly, "I didn't even know about it." She teased me, "You didn't know about Ramgarh? It's just 15-20 minutes from the city! How could you miss it?"

I chuckled, feeling a little guilty. "There should be something for the second trip here. Right? And there is a lot which will summon me back."

She nodded and then adjusting her spectacles she spoke. "It's beautiful. The place has these old forts, and the history there is amazing. It's peaceful too. It is kind of a nice escape from the busy city life. You really should check it out next time."

I nodded, a little regretful and then on a funny note I remarked, "Next time, I will take notes from you before I leave."

She nodded sympathetically, and then, as if to ease my disappointment, she continued, "I'm from Haldwani, but I've been living in Pune for a while now." She smiled brightly, almost as if sharing a piece of herself.

I smiled back, intrigued. "So, what brings you to Varanasi?"

We then drifted into general travel talk—exchanging stories of favourite places, missed opportunities, and the adventures that seem to follow you even when you least expect them. I could tell Neha was the kind of person who could become my travel partner on my next trip. But I do not know what the future has in store for me. One thing was sure, the city secretly had sent a companion to steal the melancholy and transform it into a joyous farewell.

