

BBC ONLINE – BURNING GHATS OF BENARES

August is shockingly hot in Benares, with temperatures getting up to 40 degrees centigrade. The fast-flowing Ganges river offers no respite from the heat, despite seeming to pay respects to the ancient city as it bends northward in a majestic arc. Rising in steep steps along the banks of the river are the burning Ghats, where Hindus are cremated. I've come here with my producer, Anthony Denselow, to find out more about the phenomena of sanyasins – individual men and women who choose to renounce the world by breaking all ties with their families and friends, wearing simple clothes and wandering around India. Benares has for long been regarded as a holy city by Hindus, Buddhists and Jains. It is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world and the oldest in India. As one of the seven most holy places in the country, it is a key focus for many sanyasins. The documentary we're making explores how the notion of *sanyas* (renunciation) sits beside a rapidly modernising India.

We were guided to the Ghat through what can best be described as an open-air warehouse – a vast yard stacked to over 2 meters high with chopped mango wood. We were told this is the particular wood used on the funeral pyres, chosen for its fast-burning properties. Mango trees are indigenous to the Indian sub-continent, their leaves evergreen and the trees generally long-lived, with some specimens still bearing fruit after 300 years.

Emerging from the “warehouse”, scores of *Doms* were gathered in front of a small temple to Hanuman. The *Doms* are traditionally the undertakers for Hindu society – the only caste sanctioned to prepare the funeral pyre and then gather the ash and dispose of the bones. In a peculiarly Hindu paradox, the highest castes – who in life would recoil at the touch of the lowest castes – can be ministered to in death only by the lowest.

Beside the temple was a large platform on which we could see 8 pyres in different stages of their fiery life. A number of people were gathered on the platform – *Doms*, of course, relatives and several young foreign on-lookers like us. A body wrapped in red silk was placed on the pyre nearest us and the mango wood set alight. Rapidly, the flames engulfed the pyre. As we stood transfixed by the raging fire, I could see beyond the flames the Ganges flowing serenely on. In less than half-an-hour, the body had been reduced to “shuniya” – nothing. Beside the platform, we saw other bodies, wrapped in red silk, lying on the ground waiting their turn on one of the pyres. You cannot help look at the bodies lying in wait, just as much as we could not help but look at the bodies engulfed by the raging mango wood pyres.

I was simply not prepared for the humdrum nature of the scene: bodies were being moved about with as much care as the mango wood, men were bustling along the pyres intent on ensuring they blazed properly without sparking off another pyre that had not yet received its body, while other *Doms* were sifting the bones from the ash on the banks of the Ganges. Upto 300 bodies a day are cremated here. Perhaps it was the industriousness of the scene that made it so unsettling.

As I kept looking at the burning pyres and the ever-flowing Ganges beyond, it struck me powerfully how little difference a single life makes – the river moved on, not

registering for a nano-second the passing of a life. I was reminded of meeting Acharya Vidyananda, head of the Digamber Jain sect in Delhi before we arrived in Benares. The Digambers are one of the two main sects of the Jain religion – a religion that invented the concept and symbol of zero, which it calls “shuniya” – nothing, emptiness, the void.

Jainism is one of the oldest religions of India, emerging sometime around the 6th C B.C. Non-violence is the root credo of the religion – a creed popularised in modern times by Mahatma Gandhi, who was heavily influenced by Jain ideas. Amongst Jains, non-violence towards all living beings takes forms many would consider extreme – from sweeping the floor before them as they walk, to covering their mouths to avoid accidentally ingesting germs to refraining from cutting hair, as this means wilfully killing living cells. The Digamber sect takes non-violence to another level. They vow to continue through life as they arrived – entirely naked.

And so I had sat with the naked guru Acharya Vidyanathan and his two young acolytes, also naked, and talked of mathematics. An ancient Jain text of the 5th C A.D., the *Lokavibhaga*, bears the first known use in the world of the decimal place-value system, including the zero. It is here that we first come across what are popularly known as “Arabic” numerals – the digits that power the modern world. According to Jain beliefs, the first *Tirthankara* (enlightened soul), Rishabha-dev introduced two forms of script to the world, which he first taught to his two daughters, Brahmi and Saundri. To Brahmi he taught script in the form of alphabets, while Saundri was taught numerals. “Saundri” means beautiful and I particularly like the connotation of numerals with beauty!

As the naked Acharya and I talked of the concept of “shuniya”, from which all other numerals flow and to which they all converge, he leaned over to make a simple statement – “1 is the individual self and 0 the world”. Standing before the burning pyres in Benares with the Ganges in full flow, this statement struck me that life is like mathematics, a simple binary with an on-off switch. And given that the off-switch is ever present, what we make of the on-switch – the number 1 – is all that matters. Which perhaps explains why so many millions of men and women in India renounce the lives they are born into in search of another way of being.

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October 2012