

## Death is at home on the Ganges

By Ruth Ostrow

"I DON'T believe in exposing myself to bad things. I never go to funerals," says Marty, a Bollywood film producer, as we sit by the pool of an exotic hotel in Jaisalmer on the border of Pakistan overlooking the Thar Desert -- reputed site of the recent Indian nuclear testing.

Marty is here filming a B-grade, schlock Indian movie about love. "I just want to fill my life with joy, happiness, and beautiful things," he says, standing to straighten the sari on one of his new starlets, whose false eyelashes keep catching on her cheek.

He is reacting to our comment that we're next going to Varanasi, the heart of India, to witness life at its rawest.

Varanasi is one of the holiest and oldest cities in the world -- the Jerusalem of the east. But it is also home to the infamous burning ghats. Each day hundreds of bodies are set alight on these funeral pyres along the banks of the sacred Ganges river, under the watchful eye of holy men, locals and tourists.

People who visit the city come back changed. They say you can never be the same again once you've witnessed the spectre of death at such intimate and close quarters.

But Marty is not amused. "Why would you want to go to such a hell-hole, such a horrible, morbid place?"

He explains that because it is very auspicious to die in Varanasi, millions of diseased or dying pilgrims descend on the city each year. "Why do you want to see such suffering? You should change your ticket and come to Bombay instead. I'll meet you there. I'll introduce you to all my film friends and actors. You'll have a fantastic time. Life should be fun," he says, holding my gaze.

A self-confessed hedonist, I'd normally jump at the chance of fun. But already India has made me realise the degree to which most of us spend our lives running ahead of an ominous wave that we know is about to crash down on our heads.

Great sage of the 1970s and author of international best-seller *Be Here Now*, Ram Dass, in his new book *Still Here*, describes it as fear of mortality.

"In a materialistic culture, the body and its longevity take on paramount importance," he says. The "urgency to keep our bodies alive for as long as possible" becomes the prime motivation as we pursue "thin thighs, fabulous pensions, and geriatric erections".

He argues that unlike Indians, westerners lack the spiritual fortitude to look ageing and death in the face.

And he is right. In our culture the truth is hidden. Ageing people are either coerced into plastic surgery or forced behind closed doors. Dead bodies are either put in the ground too quickly or adulterated with make-up and formaldehyde so

mourners can make believe Uncle Ben is just having a little nap. Mortality remains our greatest taboo. Meanwhile the wave rumbles overhead.

"I'm ready to face reality," I tell Marty, who twists his face in genuine disapproval.

But it's with trepidation that my husband and I make our way across Rajasthan towards the belly of this mystical continent.

Varanasi bares her teeth immediately. On getting out of an airconditioned car we are swamped by locusts that invade our hair, our eyes, our mouths. The devouring of human flesh has begun.

Driving through the streets that afternoon, the traffic stops as coloured floats go by. "Dead bodies," the driver informs us matter-of-factly as we stare out in shock.

"To appreciate beauty you need to know ugliness. Light isn't radiant without shadow," I had told Marty during our discussion. But perhaps he has a point. How much does one need to see?

Finally at night, under the cover of darkness, we find the courage to go down to the sacred ghats.

We find a place to sit, and there under the night sky, which is red from fire, we watch the spectacle. I make sure we are high enough up on the endless steps, and far enough away, not to have to endure the smell of roasting flesh.

In the amphitheatre below, the sacred and profane collide. People eat at the funky restaurants lining the river banks, musicians play ragas and kids play ball while the pyres burn. At this safe distance, the pantomime of life and death takes on an eerie, yet romantic, ambience.

Indian men stand about with a casual air, chatting and stoking their flames. It looks like an Aussie barbie. Too hard to believe that it's human remains that are being pushed into the flames. But death is an informal affair in Mother India -- just a gateway to rebirth or another world.

With great relief I let go of fear, feeling deeply moved by the power and beauty of Indian rituals, and determined to pursue a more spiritual life -- to find meaning beyond the body.

I am also secretly relieved that the dark and smoke have sheathed the scene in a surreal haze, like petroleum jelly on a camera lens. Not so lucky the next morning when we catch a 5am sunrise cruise down the Ganges to watch the Hindus do their pujas, or religious ceremonies, on the river banks.

It begins as pure magic, a scene from *A Passage to India*, as thousands of candles in lotus petals are floated downstream. Happily snapping life from the protection of my camera, I hear a thud. I look down. A decomposed corpse has bashed into our rowboat. It is bloated, bleached an unnatural colour from the water, hideous. A crow is perched on its head.

My eyes jam shut. I turn away, almost sick. No one told me that not all bodies are burnt. People too poor, too diseased, or too holy get tossed overboard to drift among the locals washing their clothes, cleaning their teeth or having a bath in the river.

The tourists keep clicking, the boat rower rowing, the Indian bathers push the rotting body away with a stick and go about their daily business with indifference. In the clarity of first light, I force my face back to where Marty has refused to look, and witness mortality.

Suddenly so alone, I feel panic, fear, real shock. And then a strange sense of calmness. The wave of truth has finally crashed down.

No Hollywood "Happy ever after" out here on the sacred Ganges. Just a spectacular, radiant dawn, pushing night's veil gently from the sky.

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