



Sunrise on the Ganga

Sunrise on the Ganga. The romance of the idea, to see Hinduism's holiest river, to bathe in it, at the crack of a mist-shrouded dawn. I last saw Ganga twenty years ago when I first visited India. I had then bathed in the river and done puja for my girmitiya, indentured, grandfather. That had been my father's wish. I had brought back a bottle of Ganga water for him, which became one of his most precious possessions. He put it carefully alongside the green tin trunk which contained important family papers: lease for the family's land, birth certificates, a few religious texts wrapped in red cloth, old imperial coins and other relics of the past. My father, like many devout Hindus, believed that a drop of the Ganga on the lips of a deceased person would ensure a safe passage for the departed soul on its journey to the next world. Since my last trip, my father and mother and my two older brothers have died. I feel I need to do the pilgrimage for them as well. It is the right thing to do as the eldest male in the family now, whatever my own personal doubts and reservations.

This time, we are travelling with our children. At twenty one and fifteen,

Yogi and Niraj would be making their own journeys of discovery. At first they are awkward and tentative, not knowing quite what to expect or what to say. But they are determined to be open minded. Their mature reaction catches me by surprise. They are enthralled by what they see. They look – or try to look – beyond the poverty and the squalor, the dust and the noise, and accept India for what it is, or appears to be: a confusing collage of contradictions and contrasts. Some things clearly offend their values. The widely accepted subordinate status of women is one. There are others: the institutionalised hierarchy and difference of the caste system, rampant religious fanaticism, disregard for the damage to the environment caused by rapid industrialisation, lack of civic consciousness, pollution of public places, the enormous gulf between the private fetish for personal cleanliness and total indifference to public squalor. They are astonished by all this, sometimes even outraged, but never judgmental. 'This is India', they say, only half in jest. It is their way of coming to terms with the realities of another culture whose contours they vaguely recognise, but of which they are not a part, and, what is more, do not acknowledge themselves to be a part.

For me, twenty years after my first encounter, some things remain the same, or have changed for the worse: the clogged roads have become impossible; greasing the palm is now an established way of life; the obtuseness and insolence of public servants has not changed; the pollution of urban areas has become a health hazard; and India, on the whole, has become less a cohesive nation committed to an overarching vision than a coalition of caste, communal and class interests, locked in various combinations of convenience, all devoted more to ensuring their own survival than to promoting national development. This fragmentation is, of course, not peculiar to India; it reflects the condition of many developing countries witnessing the resurgence of primordialism. These things do not perturb me as much as they did on my first encounter. I lack passion, my children chide me, and in a sense they are right: I am not as easily disturbed by India's poverty and pollution and corruption now as I was two decades ago. They are someone else's problem, in someone else's country. Resignation increases with age, you might say.

But some things are new, among them the resurgence of aggressive Hinduism. The ideological commitment to secularism, once invoked proudly as a mantra for India's future, has weakened unmistakably. Bal Thackeray, the head of the fundamentalist Shiv Sena, is a household name in India. He is committed to making India a Hindu nation. His 'sevaks', workers, as members of the Bajrang Dal, the Sangh Parivar, the Hindu

Vishwa Parishad and other such organisations, disrupt meetings, terrorise members of other faiths, burn Christian churches, murder European missionaries, dig up cricket pitches to prevent Pakistanis playing on Indian (Hindu) soil. They try to impose upon the populace a moral code of conduct based upon a dogmatic reading of Hinduism.

This public, fanatical demonstration of faith in posters plastered on concrete walls, idols of numerous gods and goddesses displayed in cars, buses, shops, even government offices, is unsettling to one who is essentially non-religious. Perfectly reasonable people, western-educated, well-travelled and thoughtful, quietly endorse a Hindu identity for India. Hinduism will not solve India's problems, people say, but then, they continue, man does not live by bread alone. Peoples' minds are made up; it is useless trying to change them with facts. The alleged Chinese threat ever-present in the northeast and a nuclear Pakistan flexing its muscle in Kashmir, make it easy for the fundamentalists to enlist popular support for their causes.

Another noticeable change in the last two decades has been the impact of technology. Now, India's remotest villages have international telephone booths. The cultural revolution caused by the multi-channelled television has been enormous. Western news channels and soap operas of westernised Indian popular culture reach remote villages in unprecedented ways. A sad casualty of this has been the radio, in the past rural India's contact with the outside world and among the very best broadcast services in the world. The effervescence of popular culture has pushed India's classical culture and heritage further into the background. Tradition is for tourists, a vendor tells me.

The opening up of the Indian economy has brought changes and introduced goods, unthinkable two decades ago, into middle class homes. The ubiquitous Ambassador cars now jostle on the roads with a dozen other models with Korean and Japanese names. The craze for things 'phoren', so striking twenty years ago, has subsided, as modern electronic gadgets once found only in the west are no longer a novelty. Internal tourism has increased by leaps and bounds, with 'luxury' and 'deluxe' hotels sprouting everywhere. These labels should not be taken literally though. Often deluxe means nothing more than that the rooms have western-style toilets, as opposed to the squatting Indian style with water but without toilet paper. The provincial hotels, pricey, leave much to be desired in the quality of service and the standard of comfort they offer, but at least they are there.

Yogi and Niraj are fascinated by the relics of the past they see all around them, in caves, monuments, paintings, forts, castles and temples. Children of

the modern electronic age, they are visibly moved by the sight of *maqbaras*, mausoleums. They are particularly taken with the 'Chand Bibi ka Mahal' in Ahmednagar in Maharashtra. It stands high on a hill, silent, forlorn, unregarded, containing the remains of an emperor's wife and their young children, their ancient grave covered with green and red cloth. What romance, what chivalry. They visit Fatehpur Sikri, a haunting city of buildings, empty but for nesting pigeons, deserted after a few years when water ran out. And the Taj Mahal. Why didn't they learn about these monumental achievements of this ancient civilisation in school? What legacy will our contemporary civilization bequeath to future generations, they ask.

We travel to Bahraich, the district from which my indentured grandfather went to Fiji at the turn of this century. It is still at the back of beyond in a state still notorious for its economic backwardness and social stagnation, a symbol of everything that is holding India back. Caste politics is rampant. The local roads are lined with billboards announcing the dates of 'sammelans', conventions, of this or that caste or sub-caste. The Brahmins and Kshatriyas and other higher castes accuse the state government of pandering to the whims of the numerically dominant, block-voting lower castes. They want monuments erected to their cultural heroes as well. UP is bad, people say, but Bihar is worse, the name synonymous with lawlessness and criminality. People in UP get some satisfaction from not being at the absolute bottom of the Indian social and political pit.

We drive through the eastern parts of the state in a hired car in a comfort I could not afford twenty years ago. The alluvial plains, partly obscured by a thick fog, yellow with sarso flowers, stretch into the distance. The mango orchards are still there. There is still much idleness, people standing around, drinking tea, lighting small fires to keep themselves warm; the energy and purpose, the sense of things being on the move so evident in Maharashtra or Haryana, are absent here. But there is some development, signs of small industries, especially brick works along the highway.

Our village in Bahraich hasn't changed much, with the exception of a few television antennas protruding from thatched roofs. The unpaved road leading to the village is still covered with raw cow dung and straw. Children are still running around half naked and barefoot. People still cover themselves in filthy rags against the cold. Some have found seasonal employment in far-away places like the Punjab. They have returned with new attitudes and styles, but they will leave permanently if they can. The older people who had welcomed me so generously have all gone, including Chotu kaka. Their absence is saddening, reminding me of so many others who have died in the last two decades, including members of my own family. I have difficulty establishing

a rapport with the younger generation. I am a stranger among them. We have nothing to talk about except the weather and the crops. I feel slightly embarrassed at the dilapidated scene around me, and upset that the people feel sorry for themselves, hoping for handouts and for miracles to happen. We, the descendants of girmitiyas, of the same ancestral stock, have moved on, but these people are left behind, caught in the quagmire of destitution and desolation. There is so much opportunity, so much potential, so little of it realised.

My children are moved by the kaleidoscope of sounds, smells and sights they encounter, but for them this is essentially a strange place full of strange people. Their family genealogy, they tell me emphatically, begins in Fiji, not in this village. Still, they are happy to have made the journey, but enormously thankful for the fate which led their great grandfather to leave. I share their feeling. I embrace people in the village as we take leave after sipping syrupy red tea from a tin cup, knowing that this is my final farewell. It is too painful to tell the people gathered around me, but I know that I will not return to my grandfather's village again. The break is final.

Bahraich had been the highlight of my trip to India twenty years ago. This time around, it is our visit to the Ganga. Benares is cold in winter, this year wrapped in a heavy blanket of fog, *kohra*, disrupting traffic schedules and delaying air plane departures. Benares is the oldest continuous city on earth, our taxi driver tells us proudly, eternal, indestructible. Its narrow, crowded gullies are plastered with election posters and advertisements for everything from modern drugs to herbal cures for impotence, and crammed with tiny temples and small coves selling holy trinkets. The sacred and the profane, the profound and the mundane, hope and despair mingle in this sacred cradle of Hinduism.

The temples are disappointing. They are not really places of silent prayer and solitude and spiritual communion. They are more like busy fish markets. Religion is the main business here, and touts are everywhere. The way we dress and walk, our expensive-looking shoes, the backpacks we carry, seeking directions in accented Hindi, gives our foreign identity away. Worse than the touts are the pandyas, professional priests, who find easy victims among the credulous, the gullible and the innocent. They hassle and harass, pull you to their own temples for special divine benediction 'especially for you'.

We are up early, and take the waiting taxi to Dasashvameath Ghat, the main ghat, place of prayer and bathing, of Benares. The taxi squeezes through a maze of narrow, foggy streets, honking, overtaking cattle, rickshaws and people making their way to the river. Govind, our driver who doubles as our guide, has already made arrangements with a boat owner to take us on the

water. Touting starts as soon as we get out of the car, but we are guided through a thickening crowd of people to the edge of the river. The water looks muddy grey in the misty early light, the soil slushy and full of rotting marigold flowers. Already people, devoted Hindus as well as tourists, are heading out in hired boats, cameras and candles in hand. There is much confusion and commotion. The boat man, an elderly man wearing dhoti and loose kurta and wrapped in a dirty white-brown shawl, buys the material needed for puja as we wait. Then we head out into the river.

Before too long, he stops the boat to pick up a pandya. This was not planned for, nor were we informed about it beforehand. I enquire, but the boatman is insistent: there can be no puja without a pandya; and he was getting us the best pandya there was, all especially for us. We have heard that before. There is no point arguing: what will be done will be done. The pandya is an elderly man, his forehead covered with holy sandalwood paste. He, too, is covered in clothes reeking of sweat and unwashed for days, perhaps weeks. His mouth, surrounded by yellow-white unkempt beard and stringy moustache, is red with betel nut juice, and his teeth black from years of chewing rough tobacco. I regard the man as an intruder on a private moment of special emotional and spiritual significance for me, and so say nothing to him. The pandya looks at me from the corner of his eyes, assessing, establishing my identity in his mind. He is eager to strike up a conversation. As we make our way to another ghat where we will have our dip in the water, he asks me in Hindi where I am from. The South? He guesses South India because of my darker skin. I nod in agreement, to the amusement of my children who have seen me play this game so many times. But like other touts, he senses I am also from overseas. Unable to contain his curiosity, he asks whether I have been living abroad for a while. Yes, in Europe, in Liverpool, I say. He nods appreciatively. He tells me he had suspected from the very beginning that I was from England, in fact from Liverpool. I didn't ask him how or why. I wonder what he would have said if I had told him I came from Australia.

The fog is still thick as our boat weaves its way through the water, past other boats and people on the bank having a dip. Niraj sights partially submerged carcasses of a couple of rotting cows on the way. He points them out to Yogi who quickly covers her face with a shawl and looks away. The thought of having a dip in the same water a couple of hundred metres downstream fills both of them with horror. The smell of incense wafts through the air. We see people on the banks sitting cross-legged, motionless in meditation. The pandya leans forward and in a voice barely above a whisper, talks to me about the importance of the ceremony we are about to perform. It

has to be done right, he says; otherwise the souls of all the departed ones will not rest in peace. And particularly since I had come all the way from Liverpool, I should observe all the rituals and perform all the ceremonies. One must do it with a clean and compassionate heart, he says gently. I say nothing.

As we reach our bathing ghat, the pandya and the boat man disembark and head to the top of a flight of stairs. A couple of people have lit a small fire to keep themselves warm, and there is a chai wallah (tea stall) nearby. By now, Yogi and Niraj have decided to have a dip as well, completely of their own accord. They are adamant; having come this far, they will do what they think is the right thing to do. Yogi laughs out aloud as she sees the words on my bathers 'I am the boss'. How typical of dad, she says, always wanting to be the boss wherever he goes. Niraj and I go in first, making our way into the river through sinking, slushy mud. A couple of metres in, and we hold our noses with thumb and forefinger and take a dive. My body is almost numb with cold, mind completely preoccupied with the act of the moment. A few minutes and several dips later, we return to the boat, and Padma and Yogi take their turn. We change back into our dry clothes and head to the small fire at the top of the stairs. About fifteen minutes later, Padma and Yogi join us, as we head back to the boat with the pandya and the boatman.

The pandya performs the puja. After the preliminary invocations in Sanskrit which I don't understand, he asks me the names of our deceased parents. He repeats them and asks us to place small amounts of puja material into the fire after he calls out each name. We follow the instructions, as people do on occasions such as this without fully understanding the deeper meaning of what they are doing. At the beginning, I am self conscious, as other boats full of tourists pass us, gawking, clicking their cameras. But soon I am engrossed in the act, completely oblivious of external intrusions. The tiny yellow flame in the windless mist is strangely mesmerising. A once familiar but now vanished world flashes across my mind. I see the pictures of numerous gods and goddesses plastered on bamboo walls of our main house in Tabia, alongside the portraits of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and famous film stars of my childhood years. I recall the tiresome regularity of pujas (*katha*) we used to perform at home. Our parents had their reasons, but we children used to look forward greedily to the end of what appeared an endless ceremony so that we could grab the fruits and other delicacies offered. We paid scant attention to all the wisdom and sage advice of the scriptures. The Sanskrit mantras, recited by the priest with such holy, practised fervour, meant nothing to us.

The flame reminded me of other, terrible, flames I had seen before: flames from funeral pyres of my own family: my parents and my two older brothers,

one of whom had died just a few months before this trip. Each of the four cremations was vivid in my mind, and the way in which I had received news of the death, the rituals we had followed on each occasion, the anguish and pain the deaths had caused, how each funeral pyre was lit. I experienced each loss anew, and felt privileged and honoured to perform ceremonies for people who had meant so much to me.

After about twenty minutes, the pandya stopped, and asked me to make a gift (daan) to him. Giving gifts on occasions such as this is customary, but usually it is done at the end of the ceremony. I was perplexed. What sort of gift and how much? Oh, it depends, he said. People had given him fifty thousand rupees and more. Some had made donations of houses and other property. That I did not believe: this foul smelling man in dirty clothes could not be a millionaire, as he seemed to suggest. There was no way I could make that sort of donation. He looked at me and we haggled; twenty five thousand, fifteen thousand, ten. I looked at Padma who was visibly angry at being put in a situation like this. She felt it was an elaborate trap set up by the pandya and the boat man. She volunteered one hundred and one rupees. The pandya gave a little derisive laugh. 'Bahenji', sister, he said, 'you must be joking: what would that small amount fetch these days?' But why hadn't the amount been mentioned earlier? It was not good form to talk about these things at the beginning of a sacred journey, the pandya said. Unpropitious may be, but he had a greater hold on me now in the middle of a ceremony than he would have had at the beginning. Learned pandyas like him were rare and very expensive, he said, but he was being reasonable. When Padma refused, the pandya asked her to keep quiet; I was the one to decide, I was the head of the household, and I was performing puja for my parents, not hers. That was not true, but he had seen me hesitate, and pounced upon it.

I was most uncomfortable arguing like this in the middle of a ceremony which I had travelled this far to complete. I offered one thousand and one rupees. There was a certain symmetry about the sum, if nothing else. The pandya nodded his head and accepted immediately; from the look on his face, I knew that he recognised he had done very well: a thousand rupees for half an hour's work; and it was still just daybreak. I offered him five hundred rupees straight away, but he said that he would collect the full sum from the hotel later, fearing that five hundred was all that he might get. He then continued with the ceremony, but I was distracted and unable to pay attention. I knew my family was unhappy, even angry; they had been ambushed many times in the past few weeks, and their patience was running thin. But there was little else I could do.

As we headed back to the bank of the river, the pandya became all soft and

solicitous. He talked gently about the importance of gifts. For gifts to have any meaning at all, they had to be given with a good, clean heart; gifts given grudgingly were not good, he said, as he cast a sideways glance at Padma. Yogi, still angry at the whole affair, pointedly looked away. *Gupt-daan*, gifts given in strict secrecy, should not be talked about. Specifically, I should not tell anyone how much I had promised to give him. I said nothing, which he took as consent.

On our way back to the car, I exploded at Govind, accusing him of being a part of the ploy to defraud us, but he said he knew nothing about it. We believed him. In fact, he had asked the boatman to take us straight to the ghat; there had been no talk of a pandya. These people had given Benares a bad name, he said with disgust. Our reaction had unleashed something deep in Govind. The pandya who had accompanied us, he said, was a useless man, a drug addict, a rat. Doped all day, he would bathe in the Ganga at dawn every day, wash off his daily sins, and then prey on some unsuspecting person to indulge his habits. That was the way it was around here, with these people, he said. I said nothing.

At the hotel, I reported our misadventure to the manager, holding him partly responsible for what had happened; Govind was the hotel's driver. The Manager, OP Khanna, listened to our angry complaints. I felt used, ambushed, terrorised. I was adamant: I will pay the pandya nothing more than what Padma had offered: one hundred and one rupees. Khanna nodded, and asked the door boy to call the pandya in. He walked through the glass door hesitantly, suspecting that his ploy had gone awry.

'How much do you want, pandya ji?' Khanna, asked in a sharp, prosecutorial voice. 'Fifty thousand rupees?' 'Saheb ki marzi', he said, it was entirely up to me. I could give fifty thousand, or five hundred thousand. He looked at me. I felt disgust: I did not expect to find fraudulence in men of cloth. 'I see', Khanna said, his face reddening visibly with rage. 'Here, take one hundred and one rupees and get out. Fast'. Pointing at the door with his finger shaking with anger, he said 'Get out, or I will have you put in'. He meant the gaol. These vultures, they give us all a bad a name, he said to no one in particular as he returned to his paper work. Govind, who had been watching all this from a safe distance, laughed heartily later when we went out. 'Sahib, aap ne unko khoob chutia banaya'. Sir, what a fool you made of the fellow. He was happy that for once, someone else other than the pandyas had got the upper hand.

Contemporary India is full of people like the pandya, the taxi drivers, the rickshaw pullers, the guides at tourist spots, the sellers of trinkets, people cutting corners, fleecing people, on the make in the quickest possible time. The

froth and fluff of popular culture, cheap imitations of American television dramas, invade the screen. Another, perhaps idealised India of my youth and imagination is languishing in the background. I feel a stranger now, more so than twenty years ago.

My most enduring memory of this trip is my visit to the Ganga. That image of a small, flickering flame in a tiny earthen vessel, drifting away from us into the distance, gradually devoured by the mist, until it disappears from sight altogether, mingling with others as it makes its journey down the river out into the vast, open ocean. It is a metaphor for life itself, I suppose. But it also sums up the way I feel about my grandfather's land. There was no sunrise on the Ganga.