

The Benares That Was

By
G.V. Desani

G.V. Desani's The Benares That Was appeared on the front page of the Dec., 1970 edition of the literary broadsheet ANON. The magazine was a collaboration of Noble prize winner Saul Bellow and Boston University Professor Keith Botsford.

This account of Desani's years in Varanasi may have been based on a lecture by the same author.

I ran away from home thrice and for many years the major conflict with myself was concerned with a compelling wanderlust. I can, *ergo*, find my way about in Cairo or Jerusalem, Mombasa or London, Athens or Istanbul.

Growing up in places, some cities become your cornerstones. Varanasi – which is the new name for *Benares* – is such a cornerstone for me. The two men whose *vidyā* – secret craft – caused me the greatest (temporary) suffering and brought me the greatest (temporary) happiness, I met in Varanasi.

Here is a contrasting view of the city from an equally widely-traveled man: “Laughter! People laugh, don’t they? I used to laugh. But nobody in this holy hovel of Hindu hokum laughs unless he cackles like a maniac. Only death here, yapping monkeys, cows on your porch, and crazy people drinking sewer water, or praying to a concrete lad with an elephant’s head...” (*Sewer water*: water from the river. Sewage is discharged into the Ganges. *Concrete lad*: Varanasi’s exalted elephant-headed god Ganesha, the *siddha* Vinayaka.)

Gordon Sinclair, the author of the above impression (John Murray, London, ’33), arrived in India during *Holi*, “... on a day set aside to honor the feminine biological function called menstruation. A hundred thousand Hindu hooligans ran right through the streets and bazaars squirting red ink, purple dye and green acid on every moving thing, from Brahmani bull to ruling rajahs. That night of the menstrual holiday, eclipse stood over the moon of India and found a hundred million shrieking ignoramuses lining the sacred river, rhythmically clapping hands. I crowded among ascetics, yogis, sadhus and other smelly saints to the steps leading to water. The priests were moaning and groaning up and down the ghat, telling the wide-eyed hooligans that the moon was being eaten by the demon. This world would be eaten, too, they said, unless the mob kicked in with silver...”

Perhaps you have noticed, too, that mice don’t like drafts. Birds like drafts. Why? Rats hate light. Birds love it. Why? I am bothered by several such questions these days.

Human behavior is comparatively easy to explain. For instance, I know why Varanasi disagrees with the blasé traveler. But here is a mature judgment from the

psychologists: Desire – attraction, liking – and distaste – revulsion, dislike – are cultivated emotions. Adult humans teach such things to the young. Explaining, rationalizing, justifying, comes *after*. And the testing procedure for such group behavior is near enough scientific. A scientific hypothesis is tested on an accurate prediction test. Water would boil at so many degrees F. And one can – near enough – predict the emotional response of a group of adult non-Hindus and adult Hindus to Varanasi and the river. To wash off one’s sins, no more potent means than the Ganges exists. Incidentally, one cannot make accurate predictions about individuals.

I went to live in Varanasi for personal reasons. I was searching for a healer. *Please* – I don’t want to bore anyone, but I was terribly unhappy. (*Who isn’t?* Anyway, I did not know then that to be unhappy is rather necessary: as it is to die, if you would go to heaven.) I also wanted to know how miracles are performed. The position I have taken up today is that to skip, to doodle, or to laugh, are miracles.

A few days after arriving in Varanasi, I visited a pretty, private ghat. The two feet or so wide platform and the steps leading to the river were small because the good widow could not afford a larger ghat. It was a moonlit night and a heap of saffron flowers – offering to the river – on the resplendent marble, and the flickering lamps floating down the river, the utterly *noble* luster upon the swords of silver – so I fancied the waves – overwhelmed me. The throaty, strangely alliterative hymn of praises, the *arati*, offered at the Visvanatha temple, heard a day or two after, affected me deeply too: “ .. *Tan dhik tan dhik .. dhinaka dhinaka .. Hariharaho! .. Trisuladhariho! .. Halahalaho! .. Kailaseho, Kailase! .. Gangadhariho, Gandadhari!*” In spite of the warnings – of blindness, paralysis, permanent deformity – I spent a night alone inside the Visvanatha temple: a *most* generous and unprecedented gesture by the Chief Priest, the *mahanta* of the temple. Such emotional occurrences result in enthusiasms.

Within a year, though I was deeply involved in the life of the city – I saw it a shade too close – and with the problems, conflicts and antagonisms, which must be, wherever human beings in such numbers have house and hearth and those things – speaking as an addict of the poetic, the beautiful and the strange – disenchanted me.

And before I learnt the learned trick of describing *all* propositions as equally valid, *all* views as *one* and the *same*, *all* doctrines as *one* and the *same*, *all* religions ... I happened to be on the plane of ignorance, *māyā*, duality – *dwaitam* – you see, and duly discriminated between *health* and *disease*, *beauty* and *deformity*, *boys* and *girls*, *poverty* and *plenty*, *hunger*, *thirst* and *satisfaction* and the stages *surfeit*, *glut*, *hogging*. I was also preoccupied, pardon, with the notions of the *useful* and the *non-* (to whom?).

With such dim ideas, the only thing to do was to study *evil* – some call it occultism – and the author whereof. No apology is needed as far as the enlightened – the sages, the *jnanis* – are concerned. *All* Good and Evil being *one* and the *same* apart, it was Milton – was it not? – who described Satan as the Prince of Intellectuals. Well, that is flattering to us sons of Satan, and Satan is *fun*.

I have hundreds of pages of notes on Varanasi. It wasn’t easy. To begin with, the environment.

My first summer at Varanasi’s suburb Sarnath – for a year I lived in a cottage generously conceded to me by the reverend *bhikhus* of the Mahabodhi Society – was memorable for an unforeseen reason: a sudden and violent advance of living things. It all started with the birds.

As the summer heat swelled upon us as a curse, a bad kind of madness came over them. The noise they made was – hundreds of alien, immigrant crows among them – *insufferable*. Then came the mango fleas. I did not know such creatures existed. These suck your blood. Everyone slept in the open and the noise made by jackals at night – prowling and toting around paltry *skikar* – made (uninterrupted) sleep impossible. White ants arrived soon after. These could – did – lick off the ground heavy and venerable books in a matter of hours. There were scorpions and cobras, too, and the magpies. These things – in hundreds and fifties – would settle down on grass for gossip and hops, and it all started with a chatter, in the morning (yes) and sometimes earlier, if they were fooled by a lighter sky and themselves lost sleep. Because of them, I broke down twice and cried. (“For God’s sake, shut up, will you!”)

At 115 F. in the shade – without ice, fans, humidifiers, air conditioners, no electricity was supplied to Sarnath those days – to say nothing of the dust storms, the fiery *loo* winds, the cholera epidemic, and water from open and infected wells, *and* the mosquitoes, it was a challenge. You needed faith of a fiend to remain alive and put.

In the month of June, one morning, the first thing, I found the floor of the cottage black and grey and *moving*. I happen to be used to horror – Edgar Poe and others apart, I happened to have seen freak accidents and people’s arms torn off from blast – and I do not frighten easily. And the stirring floor – the genial Postmaster of Sarnath, Kalida Chakravarti, who is learned in such matters, explained, answering an urgent summons – was hundred of thousand upon thousand of ants moving in: and the grey part, he explained patiently, was an optical illusion caused by the eggs. (“Can’t find my glasses. What eggs?” “Those that they carry in their mouths.”) *And* this sort of thing. You happen to be a guest at a feast and ceremoniously fed a rare and expensive fish: a man-eater. The genus feeds on the corpses floating down the river: of lepers, cholera cases, all kinds of casualties. This sort of tidings, passed on to you casually by your host during the meal, can bring on an attack of urticaria– even though the living black-and-grey pall on the floor merely shook you.

The next year, I quit. I moved over to Siga, to the Buddha Mandir – the alcove, pantry and the parlor generously conceded by the Ven. U. Kittima of the Burma Kuti.

In the Buddha’s day – citing the venerable *Ambattha Sutta* – there were about professional people, with pretensions to holiness, who used to practice fortune-telling, reading marks on hands and feet, divining omens and auguries: and they interpreted dreams, read the gnawings of mice, dealt in charms, laid ghosts, knew poisons, acted the marriage broker, predicted rain, specialized in secret medicine, and pursued similar other – thus the Buddha – “low arts”. They still do. And there are people who specialize in *fascinating*, *immobilizing*, *causing enmity* – between friends, husband and wife, lovers, partners – and *pulling* (*akarsana*, calling into submission persons from far and near). Both men and women adepts – *siddhas* – are involved professionally in these matters and such necessities as cotton carded by a virgin (a *kumarī*), vomit of the crow, droppings of the monkey, and *mahisa rudra* – buffalo blood – are available to order. It was in Varanasi that I learnt, among other unrevealed things, to identify by sign and smell genuine lard – human, not hog: and *not* the stuff that can be gathered from the oozing half-cremated bodies at the Manikarnika Ghat but – my friends taught me – got from the grocer. Human fat, needed for the ritual lamp in certain magical work, is procurable.

Magic is practiced for all sorts of reasons: to banish an enemy, to exile a client’s creditor, landlord, or moneylender, to cause blindness, to set fire to a man’s house, to starve his cattle (the animals would refuse fodder and die of starvation), to hold a man or woman in subjection (*vaśikarana*), to make anyone *nirlaja* (without a sense of shame), to astound (to make *chakita*), to make flavorless (*gandhahina*) a man’s meat and drink (to

spoil it for him), to break a man's pots and pans, to kill his horse, to make him sleepless, to madden him, to make him impotent.

A number of Varanasi *siddhas* specialize in finding buried treasure. I did not see any alchemists although I had heard of them. I met some exponents of *kaya-kalpa* (rejuvenation). I learnt in Varanasi to be buried underground for half an hour. It is a trick. There is ample air inside the pit but your breathing must be shallow to the point of no-breathing. This is achieved by concentration upon a fixed image. (I found it easy to concentrate on the image of a former girl friend. The *guru*, in the next pit, was concentrating on "God", he said.) The fear of darkness, suffocation, cramps, of snakes drilling through to you, of rats gnawing their way to you, and losing confidence in the hirelings up the pit to lift the lid on time, and the potent anxiety of being bounded, in duress and landlocked, can only be overcome by watching a man go through with it and doing it yourself. The same *guru*, incidentally, offered to teach me to eat with antidotal impunity a snake – a cobra, hood and all.

There are masters whose crafts – to meet face to face your *chhaya purusha*, the *hamzat*, your *etheric Double* – demand such exclusive disciplines as vowing never to look at your privy parts. Such a vow, as soon as breathed – this is a law – would lead to a terrific struggle to keep it. Try this known test: say to yourself, "I vow not to think of a horse for two minutes." See what I mean?

There are experts living in this city who can guarantee to murder anyone unseen, and within the stipulated period, for so much down payment and the balance on conclusion. They would offer you a darling, a trusting month-old kid for a trial. Those who can kill instantaneously – the *siddhas* of *tatkala mārana* – are rare. If anybody has trouble with his conscience, thus the *Maheswari Tantra*: "He who aspires to supremacy (*aisvariya*, power) should practice *mārana* (killing). He must practice *mārana* with this view, 'All is *Brahman*'. Otherwise sin adheres to one." In Varanasi, moreover, both the victim and the transgressor are recompensed: the victim has the satisfaction of having repaid a debt – of a murder committed in a past existence – and the *thug*, the remission of his sin by *Ganga snana* – bathing in the Ganges.

Mārana – murdering by psychic means – is the greatest and most feared *siddhi*. Incidentally – speaking as someone interested in techniques and crafts – it is not possible to kill anyone by these means. The victim kills himself. The method used is – it is a most guarded secret – to visualize the victim as bleeding from every pore, as horribly mutilated, as wounded in the head and his vitals. If this is done for an hour or so a day, for two or three days, a person – or the proxy, the trial animal – so imagined kills himself or manages to get run over. People can be made to have terrible dreams, given fixed images of fearful disease, by similar devices, and a *tar* – a telegram, a message – is another form of unspoken suggestion and it is effective at any distance. A message is sent to the victim, while he sleeps, and suggestions of illness, disaster, given. "You have sinned. Your arm will be broken." "Your limbs are paralyzed." For these practices, it is necessary to have a highly developed concentration. It is a mistake to believe – most people do – that a concentrated mind is a prerogative of saints. The suffering caused by such means can be "healed" by a *sadhu* for a consideration (*seva*) and, of course, caused again. I am won by St. Paul's insight: "... *The love of money is the root of all evil.*"

My access to these people, who practice in secret, was assured from the fact that I accepted several as subjects for hypnosis, and treated them for such habits as tobacco-chewing and certain functional disorders, and was in turn accepted as a brother magician.

The saints of Varanasi – not counting the genuine, the unknown and the anonymous – are legion. Among them are the men and women who claim to be

incarnations of God, the *tatwa jnanis* – the knowers of Essence who do not discriminate (“*Sivoham! Bhairavoham!*” “I am Siva! I am Bhairava!” and “all is *one* and the *same*”), the *katha* reciters (minstrels who claim deference due to holiness, by retailing stories written by others), the verbal specialists – the people who can explain *Brahman*, *Atman*, the *Kundalinī*, the *Gīta*, Yoga, the highest *samādhi*, Gurdieff, the *yang* and the *yin*, the Sufi view, the Subud, Zen, the *I Ching*, E.S.P., the dark night of the soul, the lot, without themselves feeling obliged to attain, or to practice: *talking* being their *sādhana*, and the worshipped irresponsibles who break your heart because they go about blessing, granting boons, and gleefully promising wealth, cures of diseases, husbands and male progeny to the needy, success in litigation, *abhaya* (freedom from fear) everything. And there are those who have realized the Ultimate Truth. A sane question asked by a distinguished professor of a famous European university was promptly answered by a female adept with, “Sit near the tree!” (Wrong! This is not a Zen quick-fire question and answer, the *mondo*.) The ardent devotee, the head of a department of the nearest university, interpreted it. “The Holy Mother wants you to keep company with good people – that is what is meant by ‘sitting near the tree’!”

One or two incarnations, with charming ways, whose company I have kept, were addicted to *bhāng* – *Cannabis i.*, hemp, which is the ritual drink offered to the presiding deity of Varanasi. It used to be sold at the cold drink shops, round about Godaulia and the Chowk. Eight other ingredients added to it – including traces of arsenic and copper, you rub these two on the curry stone and add the wash to the drink – makes a nail-in-your coffin called *Nava ratna* – the nine gems. Unconsciousness is attained within ten minutes. If still conscious after the draught, it is not difficult to declare oneself the Ruler of the world (a *chakravarti rajan*), on Siva (“*Sivoham!*”), or *Sa* (She, the Creatrix, hence “*Saham!*” “She, I am!”) without assuming the burden of proof. It is a form of *licking the world*. To reach yet greater heights – to identify oneself with the inconceivable Absolute – might take a bolus or two of opium, downed with sugared milk.

During the winter – when the grass poacher and the petty thief were not abroad – I have sat out in the afternoons, in the mango grove, at Isipatana, where the Buddha first preached the *dhamma*, and found stillness blended perfectly with the deep sound of the Vihara gong – and now and then heard, as if for love – a bird singing. It must have been so in the Bhagava’s day, so I have fancied. One day, J. Krishnamurti came to see us, I remember. (The magpies taught me to chatter.) Asked by a skeptical *samanera*, a novice, about what did he teach, a member of his party, with a movie camera, subdued him [the novice] with, “Reality”. At lunch, a day or two after, I told him [Krishnamurti] about it. When you are up against “Reality”, I suppose, there is nothing more to be said.

After my return from Australia, not quite a year ago, I visited Varanasi again. It was no longer my kind of place. Particularly saddening was the change at Sarnath. There were about hawkers, beggars, stall-keepers selling snacks, and noisy crowds, picnic-makers – all sorts – people who obviously had no respect for the sanctity of the earth, the Jain temple included.

Although one can truthfully describe the Varanasi town center as about the most insanitary in the country and visiting it a health hazard, this city surprises. Mr. Sinclair – whom I have quoted at the beginning – has noted that although he was literally eating dirt, and quenching his thirst with – as he said – sewer water, he had never enjoyed better health. I would cite a similar experience. (Reacting rather sharply, on my third visit, a municipal officer took me on a tour of inspection of the hospitals and charitable dispensaries. Full. Overcrowded.)

Yet, in spite of everything, Varanasi is my *guru sthana*, the place where two of my most compassionate and revered teachers lived – the aforementioned dispensers of the

greatest (temporary) suffering and the greatest (temporary) happiness. A traditional obligation accruing from this fact is that I must always regard not only the *puri* – the city proper – but several *yojanas* nigh and beyond, as *sacred* ground. That I do. That I try to do.

(Note: In addition to minor editing, the text has been made consistent with American English spelling and punctuation.)

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