Storming Citadels

Vasudha Dalmia

Of my first visit to Kāśī as a four-year-old in the early 1950s, I have dim memories. Of a house perched high on one of the many ghāṭs lining the river, white marble interiors, my parents talking to an ancient grandmother with a deeply lined face, and my baby sister Yashodhara, awaiting her first ritual tonsure on the banks of the Gaṅgā. A city of death and of new life. A 'classic' image, we could say, of a 'classic' city.

A few years later, it must have been in 1957, my grandmother died in that marble interior, constructed to house her in her last years. Two paternal aunts would follow the same route to the other world. When Yashodhara and I, accompanied by my partner and little daughter, visited the house in the mid-1970s, the younger of the two aunts still lived there. We had only known her in her joyless widow's white. Despite her apparent disapproval, she didn't scold us, as the other elderly women in the family did, for cutting our hair, for the way we dressed, the way we talked. She busied herself with *satsaṅg*, uplifting group activity, with the many other women in white who came to sing joyless *bhajan*s in the evenings.

The city fascinated us, even as its dirt repelled us. The wide riverside terraces of my grandmother's house were haunted by monkeys, boats-people lived in its lower, roofed terrace, we could hear them singing in the evenings. The marble courtyard of the house was filled with miniature Śiva temples, with lingams in their inner sanctums and Nandis posted outside. And there was that view of the ghāṭ, with a lone sadhu or two and the silent river, the sandy, unpeopled banks on the other side shoring up the timelessness we associated with the Gaṅgā. The spectacular evening āratī in the Viśvanāth Temple performed by shaven priests only reinforced the image – of death, solemnity, filth, and holy grandeur. In 1978, Yashodhara and I would carry the urn containing my father's ashes to the city and immerse it in the river.

By this time, in the late 1970s, I had lived in Germany for many years, and was writing a doctoral dissertation on Bertolt Brecht and the impact of his theatre in North India, particularly the Hindi-speaking belt, with Delhi at its centre. It was then, as part of the quest to understand the beginning of modern Hindi theatre, that I alighted upon Bharatendu Harishchandra, the young merchant prince of late nineteenth century Banāras, who had, so to speak, 'fathered' modern Hindi. Of the three thick volumes of his *Granthāvalī* or collected works, one was entirely devoted to drama – of many kinds, farces, comedies, history plays, translations from Sanskrit and English. Harishchandra had wished to see his plays performed; he had acted in

one or two of them on the amateur stage he himself had ushered into being; but the Hindi belt, which was just coming into its own, entirely lacked the kind of audiences the theatres in the Presidency port cities of Calcutta and Bombay could command. Performance culture in North India still existed in the salons of courtesans or in the streets. Harishchandra's plays lived on in print, even if the theatre he envisioned could not come into being. I wrote my dissertation and obtained my degree. His works formed one short chapter in a work focused on contemporary drama, which took me to theatres in Germany, to the Brecht Archives in East Berlin, in order to better understand Brecht, and to many different kinds of performances in Delhi and North India. Harishchandra's Banāras remained hazy, of little further interest.

What took me to Banāras again to look for completely different things, things that I could never have associated with that city? When I started working in Tübingen at the Institute for Indology and the Comparative Study of Religions in the mid-1980s, and turned to teaching Hindi and modern Hinduism, while looking for the modernist turn in traditionalist, rather than reformist, religious discourse of the nineteenth century, I once again alighted upon Harishchandra. This merchant prince, known as much for his extravagant life style as for his generosity, was not only writing sharp-tongued satirical plays, not only reading and translating Shakespeare and experimenting with a variety of genres, all of which I could relate to, given my undergraduate training in English literature, he was also offering an overarching scheme for a national religion rooted in Vaiṣṇava Bhakti. In our childhood, we had taken a series of exams on the works of Tulsīdās. This exercise was part of our Marwari legacy, of belonging to a family closely related to Hanuman Prasad Poddar and the Gita Press. There were ways, then, to relate to this modernizing bhakti culture even if years of westernized education had alienated us from this heritage.

The first reading of Harishchandra's texts on religion – poems, essays, and tracts – offered a puzzle, they seemed to be going both ways, towards openness and closure. Could we hope to find a more generous vision of Hinduism at this early stage of nationalist thought? Or were these the first traces of the Hindu communalism that seemed all set to tear the country apart in the late 1980s and early 1990s? I went first to what was then the India Office Library in London, to catalogues, librarians, and archivists ready to help scholars. The material I found there opened up a whole new world. James Prinsep's *Benares Illustrated* (1831–1832) not only offered glimpses of fine architecture, of the roof terrace of Kaśmīrī Mal's grand merchant house, portraits of courtesans and courtiers, of Buṛhvā Maṅgal, the river-festival with its procession of decorated barges, of narrow city lanes lined with shops, it was also an illustration of the British presence in Banāras and of an encounter with two ways of thinking. I had visited those crowded lanes with no inkling of the layers of modern history embedded in them. Harishchandra emerged from this world, from the Anglicization of education which overtook the Benares Sanskrit College in the 1830s, from the lectures and discussions held in the newly founded Benares Institute, between city literati and British officers and missionaries. The stray issues of Harishchandra's pioneering Hindi journals of the 1870s and early 1880s provided

some sense of the wider network of his addressees, the Hindi enthusiasts scattered across the North West Provinces. What had come together in Banāras in the decades following the Uprising of 1857, so that it became the cultural capital of the new Hindi-Hindu world of North India, a position it was to retain till well into the 1930s when the scene shifted to Allahabad? It was becoming increasingly clear that I would have to go to Banāras, to work out the links between literature, performance, religion, politics, and modernity. For this conglomerate was connected to me, to us, late twentieth century moderns, looking for the roots of our modernity and all that lay beyond, in both directions, past and present. Yet, I must confess that I somewhat dreaded this encounter with the city. Would I find people who would scold as the aunts had scolded?

My sister Ila, so intimately connected to the Hindi cultural world, mediated access to Rai Anand Krishna, Professor Emeritus of Art History, who invited me to stay with him and his family. It took me only a few days in Sītā Nivās, their tree-shaded residence on the Benares Hindu University campus, to realize that I had found the kind of resource I was looking for – of knowledge, warmth, and hospitality. From Raja Bhaiya, as Anand Krishnaji was known to his family and friends, and from his family, I learnt most of what I know about Benares. He was not only an art historian, as at home in the world of Maurya sculpture as in Mughal and Rajput miniature painting, his deep love and knowledge of music, literature, culture at large, and his family history connected him to so many in the city. Rai Krishnadas, Raja Bhaiya's father, one of Harishchandra's nephews, had given his rich collection of art works to Bhārat Kalā Bhavan, the university art museum of which he was both founder and first director. He had been at the heart of a vibrant circle of writers, artists, intellectuals, and the stray visitor from Europe who could not tear herself away from the holy city, such as Alice Boner and Alain Daniélou.

Banāras grew on me, as I began to view it through Harishchandra's eyes. He had loved his city which he knew inside-out; he eulogized its learning, ancient and modern, the gleaming towers and palaces that adorned the ghāṭs in his play *Satya Harishchandra* (1875); though he had little illusion about its darker under-belly, its rogues and thieves, Brahmin and non-Brahmin, who pervaded temple, ghāṭ and the newly built railway station at Mughal Sarai. The city was holy, the city was unholy, and he showed as much in the skits he collected under the telling title, *Prem Joginī: Kāśī ke chāyācitra athāt Kāśī ke do bhale-buṛe fotograf,* written at the same time, from 1874 to 1875, and published in 1876. In the brief span of his life, Harishchandra literally called Hindi literature into being. He created lilting prose in a language just beginning to find its feet and gave it a body of work which would help find some kind of legitimacy for Hindi in the family of modern Indian languages, so that it could stake its claim as the national language in the not-yet-existent nation.

The archives of Bhārat Kalā Bhavan proved to be an enormous resource for me. Anand Krishnaji also mediated access to Rāmnagar palace and fort. The Mahārājā, deeply engaged with tradition, welcomed my work, as also Harishchandra's heirs in Bhāratendu Bhavan, who provided much information and photocopies of older

material. However, it was in Dr. Dhirendranath Singh, who lived, oh wonder of wonders, in a little house right opposite my grandmother's on Gāyghāṭ, that I found my comrade-in-arms. No one lived in my grandmother's house where the portraits of various family members hung gloomily in various deserted rooms; though the courtyard still gleamed with the Śiva temples. The contrast with Dhirenji's tiny house with its miniature courtyard could not have been greater; it was crammed, not only with his family members, but also his many 19th-century books, which threatened to crowd out the family. Dhirenji worked as a senior journalist for the *Aaj* Press in Benares, but in his spare time he edited and annotated books – *Jānakī Maṅgal*, the first play that was performed in the city, *Sundarī Ṭilak,* an anthology of poems collected by Harishchandra, but actually, as Dhirenji showed, by one of his many poet friends, and so on. Dhirenji was deeply steeped in this world, as I could never be. He showed me his Benares and took me to his many haunts, to second-hand book sellers, to Carmichael Library in the heart of the city – the first public library, founded by the educated natives of Banāras in the late nineteenth century – to the library of the Nagarī Pracārinī Sabhā, with its invaluable collection of books and manuscripts, to Benares Sanskrit College (founded in 1791), later Queen's College and today the Sampurṇānand Sanskrit University,) but most of all to his friend Purushottam Modi, proprietor-manager-publisher, to be found always in Viśvavidyālaya Prakashan, his book store on Chauk. Modiji lived not far from Dhirenji; his interest in publishing and supplying books connected to the art, culture, and history of Banāras and his openness to new ideas provided moral support in moments of despair – the overwhelming amount of material, which needed to be sorted, sifted, understood and finally pressed into book form.

What did I find in the vast corpus of work Harishchandra managed to conjure up in the thirty-five years of his existence, and what was the Hinduism that emerged from this brave new world, launching itself, as much being launched, through force of colonial circumstance, into the modern? The answer had begun to stare me in the face; there was no ignoring it. The Hindu-Muslim polarization had unmistakably set in. Not only had Hindi and Urdu forked sharply, all but denying their linguistic origins in the same fount, Hinduism was increasingly consolidating itself into a whole that seemed to need the 'other' in order to project its own identity all the more clearly. Harishchandra's vision of a bhakti-rooted Hinduism was no doubt expansive, seeking to integrate the diverse streams that the forces of modernity were also pushing into some kind of unity, but it was also exclusive. It differentiated itself sharply on many fronts, drawing lines of demarcation from folk belief – from *pīr*s, village and tribal deities – as much as from Islam. The story of the divisive colonial politics that exacerbated and cemented this division is too well known to be rehearsed here again – the 1905 partition of Bengal, Morley-Minto Reforms, a Muslim electorate, climaxing in the communalism of the 1920s. However, this communal Hinduism could not be read back wholesale into the late nineteenth century, a period which still carried traces of the old porous borders of the Mughal era bhakti traditions of the North.

Once I had written my book on Harishchandra, I thought my work in Vārāṇasī was over. In the meantime – we are speaking now of the late 1990s – I found myself at the University of California Berkeley as a Professor of Hindi, looking now to focus on the very Hindi literature of which Harishchandra had laid the foundation. The study of Hindi literature had flourished in Berkeley since the early 1960s. Agyeya had helped to found the fledgling Hindi program there, which flowered all the way to the mid-1980s, when, for a variety of reasons, it trailed off. I have written about this elsewhere. By the time I came to Berkeley, only faint traces of a once vital program survived. Propelled by my work with Harishchandra's periodicals, I resolved that the way forward was to look to contextualize the canonical authors of the twentieth century, and in order to this, my students – three successive generations of them – and I turned to the literary journals of the first half of the twentieth century.

I had taught Premchand and Gandhi in Tübingen, working largely on the plight of the peasants in colonial India. Now I turned to Dalit novels, to the new women writers, to the powerful work of Krishna Sobti, which has emerged in the early 1950s, and discovered the newborn tradition of urban novels in Hindi, which told a story still waiting to be pieced together. Somewhat to my surprise, I found that Premchand's urban literature led straight back to Banāras, another Banāras this time – we were entering the first three decades of the twentieth century – closer in time to Anand Krishnaji and his generation. Though he is himself a *rasika*, a connoisseur, who always had trouble relating to Premchand's at times acerbic prose, to his dry insight into the frailty of social and familial relations, be it between woman and man, between parent and child, or with neighbors and community, Raja Bhaiya was well versed in the period Premchand and his famous contemporary Jayshankar Prasad lived and worked in, and he kept me from making many a slip, often making me revise hasty judgments made on the basis of what was, after all, fictional reality, literary reality.

I needed to understand another cityscape, to go beyond the havelis, garden retreats, and the riverside panorama of the temples and mansions built by the wealthy and the powerful, to those parts of the town foreseen for the less affluent – the emerging middle class. By this time, Raja Bhaiya had moved from his campus abode to his house in Nagwa, and I had started staying in the hotels lining Assī Ghāṭ. Now I was roaming the inner lanes of Banāras, either on my own or with Madhuri Desai, who was writing her dissertation on the architectural history of Banāras.

The author with Ray Anand Krishna

For all his vivacity and irreverence, Harishchandra had circumvented 'tradition' even while questioning it. But Premchand occupied another social and political location, and he lived in another time. *Sevāsadan* (1918) and *Karmabhūmi* (1932), Premchand's two Banāras novels, by taking venerable institutions head on, literally stormed the citadel that was the holy city of Kāśī. By the early decades of the twentieth century, the choice of a bridegroom for a high caste girl was more than ever fixated on matching caste status and on dowry. More than ever, women were on sale. *Sevāsadan* questioned the very foundation of modern upper-caste marriage. The narrative skillfully counter-posed to the rigid world of caste-regulated unions the relative freedom a successful *tawa'if*, courtesan, enjoyed; she had money, social power, and some control of her life. As Suman, the young Brahman girl at the centre of the novel, observed bitterly, the only difference between her situation and that of the *tawa'if*, consisted in her being confined to a single client – the elderly, poverty-stricken husband who had 'bought' her by virtue of the power endowed him by his caste and gender.

I looked for Benia Bagh, the colonial park which then had its zoo and aviary, its stone benches, reserved for the elite, and shaded avenues, I wandered down Dalmandi, a narrow street, located in the heart of the city, to get some sense of what had once been the courtesan quarters. I went in the early morning, before the shops opened and the place filled with clamour, to look for other sights and other sounds, echoes from another past: graceful *jharokhā*s set in tall, slender buildings, from which poured music and the sound of dancing anklets in the evening and dandies on horse-back paraded the stone paved street. Premchand's vivid descriptions re-

corded that past, with more fascination than disapproval. Perhaps he had embarked on *Sevāsadan*, with an indictment of marriage as market transaction in mind, but he ended up by portraying, with great empathy, both the world of the courtesan, the many talented, beautiful, and sometimes strong women embedded in it, and the wretched universe of latter day marital unions, where neither man nor woman found mental stability or satisfaction; the narrative had not a single couple it could prop up as possible model of a happy union. At the centre of the novel were set scenes in the increasingly communalized municipality of the city, where the 'Hindu' council members portrayed courtesans as representatives of Muslim depravity, looking to remove them from the heart of town, backed by bull-headed social reformists, who looked neither left or right, as they set out to accomplish their goals.

To rescue the 'Hindu' woman from the life of the bazaar, Premchand showed, could only lead to her confinement in puritanical reform institutions which could neither erase the stigma of her former life, nor find a way to deal with her social isolation, her only fault having been that she had looked for a measure of power and happiness, however ephemeral its duration. This was a radical feminist stance, far ahead of its times.

When I visited Banāras now – we are speaking of the first decade of the twenty-first century – I stayed in 'Ganges View', the riverside hotel on Assī Ghāṭ run with such fine aesthetic sense and such personal warmth and care by its proprietor and director, Shashank Singh. Scholars and artists met here in search of one kind of Banāras or another, and one could house in the rooms on its topmost storey, observe the river, and write in peace. Rakeshji of 'Harmony', which I have come to regard as one of the best bookstores in the country, also created meeting grounds, not only with the latest publications, art books, translations, and scholarly studies, but also with the particular set of scholars visiting the city at a given time. I was writing on *Karmabhūmi* at this time, Premchand's second last novel set in the early 1930s, and once again, I had luck. Shashankji's father had grown up in these decades, his old books on the city and its culture were strewn in the hotel.

Karmabhūmi is worlds removed from *Sevāsadan*. An educated middle class has come into being, providing resistance, however subdued at times, though always simmering under the surface and ready to burst into boisterous street protest, to colonial rule. Professors, lawyers, judges, even the Indian members of the Civil Service and the police force, are succumbing to the strong nationalist wave. It is a world almost entirely coloured by Gandhian principles. The Mahatma's famous salt *satyāgraha* has just taken place, and he has concluded his epic fast to counter the move to establish a separate electorate for Dalits. Though he is not mentioned once in the novel, censorship laws were draconian and a nervous colonial government proscribed readily, his presence is all pervasive, whether in non-violent peasant protest and village uplift work, or in the cause of Dalit temple entry. The novel's whole tenor, however, its support for the working poor of the city, its projection of women as leaders of political protest and beyond their public role, into their rights in the private sphere, goes further than Gandhi.

Yet more radical are the insights the novel provides into lives closely interwoven and shaped by politics. There is a new interiority, a new sense of seeking comradeship in marriage; women are going to college, reading novels, and projecting companionship rather than servitude as the goal of marital union. But once again, it is the frailty of these relationships rather than any belief in the inherent stability of marriage as an institution that seems to preoccupy the characters in the novel.

The utopian cast of the novel, however, allows for the storming of many citadels. Under Gandhian leadership and the support of youthful activists, Dalits manage to enter a key temple of the city. The civil servants are moved to concede that some negotiation be made with the starving peasants about unfairly leveled revenue dues, and the municipality gives in on a major land scam so that the poor get housing within the city. These are fictional moves, in no way reflecting the reality of city politics, but they do take place, marking the long way the city has come since the first stirrings of social reform in the teens of the century.

In looking back on my work in Banāras, it becomes clear to me how far I myself have come from my childhood impressions of the holy city. In my early Banāras-based work, I recognize the seeds of my own rebellion against what had come to mean 'tradition' for me. Though the image of the 'classic' city has never quite gone away, the accretions of the many layers which went into the construction even of that, have become clearer to me and I have better understood what went into the making of my world. However, despite all that the city evokes in me, despite all remembrance of things past, I have remained an outsider, eager to understand, though not always able to do so. This combination, of being an insider as well as an outsider, of understanding and not understanding, has taken me back to the city again and again.

I am now moving to a Religious Studies Department on the East Coast of the United States. As if in anticipation of this move, in the last years I have begun work on the major theosophical reformulation of modern Hinduism in the early twentieth century, a process set in motion in Banāras, in the beautiful campus of the Theosophical Society in the city, now in a state of picturesque decay. Of particular interest to me is the key role played by another Vaiṣṇava merchant of Banāras in this venture. Clearly, there is more than sufficient work in the city to keep me occupied for the rest of my life.