Experiencing Banāras in the 1950s: Colonial ghosts and village tradition

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Arrival

I was a naive American when I arrived in Banāras for the first time in July of 1957. The rickshaw driver who would take us on the long trip around the western side of the city had tried to warn us that we might not be allowed to enter the university. It was hard to understand what he meant so my friend and I urged him to allow us to try. The gate of the university was blocked by a hundred or so student protesters lying across the roadway. They were enthusiastic to meet us and urged us to join them. We agreed that we would join them later, and they instructed the rickshaw driver to speed us to the International House.

My background to that point starts from the fact that I was raised in a small Pennsylvania town called Mountain Top. Nobody in the town had ever gone to college before, but my father, who himself had left school to work after grade 6 but had become a self educated Presbyterian minister, insisted that all of his children would be going to college. During my second year in high school I was excited to be part of the high school basketball team. My father, however, had read about the Ford Foundation Pre-Induction college scholarships, and I soon found myself in Lafayette College at 15 years of age. I guess I was instinctively rebellious because I had always disliked the missionary literature scattered around our living room and could easily see how demeaning it was toward the cultures that were the object of the missionary endeavors. In college I would listen somewhat more carefully to the 'liberal' views of my professors, but once again was put off by their insistence that the American way was superior to the Soviet, and that Third World people like Nehru should understand that.

Imagining that I somehow had an invisible tie to this Third World, I enrolled at Princeton Theological Seminary where there were quite a few students from Third World countries. Before long I was working in a small church made up of a few 'white' families in the heart of the 'black' section of the city of Trenton. On my first Sunday in town I was invited to dine with an African-American family and ended up joining them for the evening service in their storefront church. Ladies from that church had been effectively breaking up riots in the city with a form of non-violent action they had learned by reading about Gandhi, and I soon joined them. As we became widely known in the city, I began to feel that I was part of a vibrant culture that was in its own way a kind of Third World.

In Princeton Seminary at the time a number of students were talking about the International Studies Program, which was the brainchild of a couple of graduates of Princeton Seminary who considered themselves liberal and wanted a scheme that would enable American youth to get a better perspective on the Third World. My classmate, Frank van Aalst, thought this was a great idea and pictured my interests as fitting into it. I was hesitant about the plan because I suspected an Americanizing ethos behind the whole idea, but the ladies from Trenton urged me to go and learn more about Gandhi's message. It was not long before Frank and I agreed to go to India together and we started to read everything we could about India.

The choice of Banāras as the place for our studies seemed intuitively right from very early in our discussions. In Banāras we would be diving into the heart of the culture and avoiding most of the impact of the British. We were aware that at the time 'Americans' were watched carefully wherever they went, but we had been advised by Indian friends in Princeton to wear Indian clothes and eat Indian food and the questions would soon cease.

By late afternoon on the day we arrived in Banāras, my friend and I were able to slip out of the front gate of the university in our Indian clothes, rent a bicycle and end up in Godaulia and the ghāṭs or steps down into the holy Ganges river. Down by the river, no one asked what we were doing. The line between dream and reality vanished, and the eternal city became my home.

The International House

The International House at the time was a kind of surreal island made up of visitors from every corner of the globe. Prominent were the three from China, two from (north) Viet Nam, three from Bali, and two from Turkey who were there learning the language of Prime Minister Nehru's Pancha Sila Third World initiative. My first fond memory of the House was sitting in the shadows of the garden at night while a Viet Nam friend played a haunting cry for home on his little two-string instrument. When a little later engineering students recruited me to play basketball for the university team, I brought along a Chinese friend. We eventually won the national championship and some excited headlines about India's role in bringing about American-Chinese friendship.

More surprising in some ways were the numerous pioneering European scholars who stayed for longer or shorter periods of time. Just an hour before we arrived Swami Agehananda Bharati had been asked to leave the House for having a European lady and a bottle of wine in his room. He was already the legendary look-alike of Subhas Chandra Bose and liked to tell the story of his teen-aged service in the Indian National Army in Germany. He proudly associated that early experience of India with the language skills he used so masterfully in wandering the Indian countryside as an initiated tantric monk. Tony Alston appeared to be someone left from the time of British rule. He described studying obscure Sanskrit texts all day, but then, in an Oxford accent few could understand, regaled all and sundry over dinner each evening with stories about the foibles of Indian civilization. Father (Raimundo)

Panikkar roared into the compound once a week on his huge motorcycle and stayed for hours while everyone in the House seemed to gather to listen in on his conversation about the Trinitarian characteristics of the Hindu mythical figures. Many in the group would also accept his invitation to go to his apartment in Lanka or the shopping area outside the university entrance where on Sunday and certain auspicious Hindu holy days eclectic services would be held blending Sanskrit prayers with elements of the Catholic liturgy. At the time, I enjoyed the idiosyncracy displayed by Bharati, Alston and Panikkar, but it was only years later when my own scholarly interests had developed that I would count them as friends and appreciate how brilliantly each of them was at the time probing the depths of Indian thinking.

Entrance to the Banaras Hindu University

At the time, the more serious intellectual and spiritual development for me occurred when a Romanian Orthodox monk named Andrei Scrima moved into an upstairs room of the House. Like others in this era, Andrei was a self taught Sanskritist who was serving as librarian to the Romanian Patriarch when Vice President Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan visited Bucharest. On behalf of the government of India, Dr. Radhakrishnan invited Andrei to India, and they decided on Banāras. Andrei seldom left his room, but decided early on that I could benefit from spiritual training and offered to teach me the discipline of saying the Jesus Prayer under my breath throughout the day. As I learned the Prayer from him, he picked my brain about my visits to temples and festival ceremonies, and later on about my involvement in the Chittapur Harijan village working with the Bhoodan (*bhūdān*) movement. Enriching my extended discipleship with Andrei were conversations he held during those years with other

pioneering scholars. Frits Staal, the Dutch scholar who had finished his thesis on Neo-Vedānta and had seen some of the Vedic sacrifices performed by the Nambood-iris in Kerala was there for a while. Patrick (Herb) Sullivan who was reflecting on his experience in the Aurobindo Ashram was there for most of a year. Karl Potter stayed for some time as he started on what would become his philosophical encyclopaedia. And Richard Robinson stayed for a while as he toured around the city and figured out how his Wisconsin students might learn from just being in this richly open place with such deep spiritual roots.

The British Legacy

Although we had hoped to plunge deep into India and avoid British influence by going to Banāras, that was not as easy as we had imagined. During the rickshaw ride on our first day we had seen a towering church steeple. When we decided to find our way back there the next Sunday, we discovered a community deeply buried in dusty layers of colonial missionary strategy. The service was intended to be in Hindi, but when we arrived both the Indian Padre and his missionary supervisor Alan Neech began to insert an equal amount of English for our benefit. After the service the Padre took me out into the walled compound and pointed out his modest new house and the long row of huts at the back of the compound where the rest of the congregation, who, he explained were of 'a low caste', lived. He suggested that we go to his house for tea, but Frank and Alan Neech soon came out of the church and enthusiastically announced that we were going to the missionary compound a few miles away for lunch. As I hesitated, Reverend Neech took the Padre aside and explained to him how this modified version of a colonial arrangement would work.

The compound in which the Neeches lived was about five acres of manicured flower gardens with a bungalow designed for four missionary families. Reverend and Mrs. Neech were the only ones living there at the time but they still needed a watchman, a gardener, a cook, a clothes washer, a house cleaner, as well as part-time drivers and nannies when the children were not in school. Mrs. Neech was a medical doctor, but had not found a way of using her training in Banāras and spent almost half the year in the hill station of Ootacamund in South India where they maintained a bungalow near their children's school. Over lunch they explained to us the missionary etiquette of the day which ranged from avoiding all temples and holy men, who, they said, were known to use drugs and black magic on foreigners, to keeping away from all food and water not specifically prepared for foreigners. They urged us to bike to the Cantonment area the next week because even though it was no longer restricted to British and Anglo-Indian residents, there was a proper Anglican service for the Anglo-Indians every other week there and Clarks' Hotel nearby still maintained the atmosphere of the 'old days' (meaning the recent colonial past). Our friendship with the Neeches was not destined to last, nor were the missionary arrangements they symbolized. A few weeks later the Indian Padre came out to the university to tell us he had quarrelled with the Neeches and was being transferred to a village setting, and a couple of years later the women from the back of the church

compound pulled their charpoys (*cārpāī*, cot) out onto the main road to protest the demeaning treatment of the missionaries, and I was able to sit with them and discuss their new sense of their legal rights and their future role as Indian Christians.

The tail end of the missionary era in Banāras was a sad story but a rapidly disappearing one. The other aspect of the British legacy that remained was the scholarly style of the university, and it was much more difficult to discern if and when it would disappear. In the years to come many Western scholars who went to Banāras would simply by-pass the university and explore the rich religious life of the city directly on their own. In our case we had planned to take our studies in the university seriously, and, as we were to learn, that left us stranded on a bridge between two cultures. Fortunately for us, the students and faculty in our programme had begun to recognize that they were caught on the same bridge and were happy to have us to talk with about our common dilemma. 'Indology' was a hybrid discipline that a few faculty thought would take them away from the stodgy and massive departments of History, Literature and Philosophy that the British had established in all university Arts Faculties. In those older departments faculty read out notes designed for exams on political history and classical literary pieces, but by the 1950s the massive numbers in class insisted that this traditional content be offered to them in colloquial Hindi. By establishing a separate College of Indology for post-secondary instruction only, it was hoped that new styles of intellectual endeavor would be possible. By 1957 we all found ourselves half way across this bridge to a new scholarly style.

The faculty of the Indology College had all been trained in British-style scholarly methods but they had each hoped to use their training to discover an India the Orientalist biases of the British had systematically steered around. Raj Bali Pandey, the Principal of the College and a local Brahman trained in both traditional and British settings, took it upon himself to challenge the British arguments about the Aryan invasion, the marginal role of women and the lack of political institutions in Indian culture. His arguments predated the sophisticated analyses of the term 'orientalist' that would come later, but his interest in the thought of Friedrich Max Müller indicated an early interest in what motivated the orientalists. While in the class Dr. Pandey directed his attention to challenging the British reading of India, in his own widely read study of the *Hindu Samskaras* (a topic with no place in the curricula of that day) he showed how he hoped that the content of a more traditional education might eventually be placed before the scholarly world. There were two other traditionally educated scholars that had gone on to receive some training in the British mold and Dr. Pandey had recruited them to help him develop what he hoped would be a bridge into a new form of scholarship. V.S. Pathak was deeply immersed in the ritual life of Banāras temples when he underwent training in Epigraphy. When he learned that the epigraphy of the exams would continue to be limited to the inscriptions of Asoka and the Sanchi *stūpa*s, he turned his attention to the *purāṇa* texts long despised by British scholarship. Alas, he could never figure out what part of the Purāṇa Project might be of interest to Western scholars, or, indeed, how to get his translations of temple inscriptions included in courses on epigraphy. As a young scholar V.S. Agrawala

had been able to use his family's extensive connections to photograph temple art throughout India and develop an embryonic sense of how the worship of the many Indian deities spread from region to region. The Art and Architecture exams of the College of Indology were, however, rigidly restricted to the texts of Coomaraswamy and Rowland that British scholarship had long recognized, and they paid minimal attention to the regional and temple art that interested Agrawala. In the 1950s the British exam system, which still defined every aspect of the university's life, made it virtually impossible for traditionally trained scholars, even when they had made an effort to engage British scholarship, to introduce new scholarly interests to their students.

The two other faculty members in the Indology College at that time were less directly indebted to the Principal of the College for their positions, and when they pushed ahead with their intellectual interests they soon found themselves leaving the College and spending the latter part of their careers teaching in North America. A.K. Narain had already published his definitive work on Indo-Greek Coins, but he made no secret of his opposition to the British/Brahman ideology that still defined the academic atmosphere of India at the time. As a Bihar Kāyastha he was anything but a Brahman, and he and his uncle had been the most prominent of the converts to Buddhism getting headlines at the time. Within the anti-Brahman circles of the university he was often mentioned as a possible candidate for Vice Chancellor, but his greatest long term leverage came from the fact that he was recognized in North America as one of the outstanding examples of a new style of Indian scholarship, and he had a more or less open invitation to join the faculty of History in Madison, Wisconsin. In 1957 he was still pushing hard for change within the College in Banāras.

While Narain fought for a new style of academic life in the university's corridors of power, T.R.V. Murti found the struggles for power going on at the time distasteful. His book, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism,* had brought him worldwide renown, and the steady stream of scholars coming to visit and study with him made him curious about the intellectual worlds that lay beyond the College of Indology. It would be another decade before he would actually leave the College and begin to use a department of Religious Studies in far off Canada as his base, but it was already clear in the 1950s that he was eager to move beyond the culturally narrow questions British scholarship had focussed on when it controlled the academic institutions of India. In Murti's view philosophy should be dealing with universal questions, and in his understanding the classical texts of Vedanta were one of the best examples of philosophical questions being asked in the right way. Murti had been brought to Banāras during the period when Radhakrishnan had served as Vice Chancellor and had been authorized to take the most renowned scholars from all regions of the country and turn Banāras Hindu University into the intellectual center of the nation. That plan had worked well in Science and Engineering where South Indians, Bengalis and Maharashtrians would continue to be academic leaders, but in the Arts generally the local Brahman establishment had resisted the plan and a Smārta Brahman from

South India such as Murti was gradually forced to function as an isolated academic island. In his famous book on Mādhyamika, Murti had used the training he had received from British teachers in order to draw out relevant comparisons between Western philosophical figures and the Indian philosophical schools, but discerning readers could see, even there, that his real genius lay in being able to recognize the logical patterns in the arguments of the classical philosophical schools. This particular philosophical skill he had learned from the pandits of the Smārta schools of his youth, and the adaptation of it that characterized his famous book still depended heavily on his early training. Although by the 1950s his seminars were made up largely of scholars from all over the world, the scholarly style he had adopted owed a great deal to his early training and consisted in a transcribing of the language of the classical texts and an explanation of the philosophical argument involved. Although he seldom mentioned what he considered the disorienting questions raised by British philosophy, in the 1950s it was in Murti's seminars that one could find a scholarly initiative that took one deep into India and beyond the still pervasive structure of a colonial education system.

What was most difficult to understand about the Banāras Hindu University in the 1950s was how the student protests of the day were tied back into the British legacy. Let me try to explain our experience. When we arrived in New Delhi in 1957 and were preparing to take the train to Banāras we were invited to a garden party where Vice President Radhakrishnan and Prime Minister Nehru were to welcome a group of international students. In many ways this was quite an honour, but my most vivid memory of that afternoon is one of ornate table cloths and servers in turbans fashioned much like that of the *rājā* in the Air India ads. In spite of Nehru's high profile on the world stage, a line between colonial and post-colonial styles had not yet been drawn in the day-to-day work of Indian politics. If the ornate tea was the lingering colonial face of the government, the artificial student protest in Banāras was structured like a Gandhian fast. When I was asked to add my voice to the protest a few days after arrival, I nervously cried out '*zindābād*' to the thousands joined together in a torch-lit rally. The next day, while Frank and I sat on his cot as token foreign supporters, Dada (Satish Kumar) took a Gandhi-like vow to fast unto death. At that moment I hoped that the students were overthrowing the British legacy, but I was soon to learn that the student 'cause' was deeply entangled in the self-interest of the local Brahmans, and that they in turn were one of the groups the British had learned to use in order to ward off Gandhi's more revolutionary ideas. Chandrasekhar, who would briefly serve as Prime Minister twenty years later, explained to me at my first rally that he had been retained by the CIA, and in his role as PSP leader he was expected to disrupt Nehru's plans for the university. He explained that he had been chosen because through local Brahman ties he had connections to the Principals of the Arts and Indology Colleges and if the demand for the open admission of local students was realized one of them would become Vice Chancellor and the dream of creating an all-Indian university would be undone. The battle lines outlined quickly that night would still characterize the life of the university for decades to come.

Meeting Prime Minister Nehru

When the British took over the rule of India in the early nineteenth century they said they would use the Christian institutions for the good of the Indian people and would educate a class of 'brown Englishmen' to enlighten their fellow citizens. In 1957 skeletal remains of these two projects were still to be found in Banāras, and it took considerable effort to learn that they were not the best channels to use in discovering the India of one's dreams.

Chittapur Village

Soon after our arrival in Banāras Frank and I moved from the International House into a student residence and began the process of letting our student friends introduce us to the Banāras they knew. Their favorite trip was to the Saṅkaṭ Mocan temple of Hanumān where they prayed for help with their exams. Trips to the ghāṭs and the crowded temples of Viśvanāth were less comfortable for them because they sensed that there were ritual rules involved that they did not fully understand. The son of the Bengali widow who swept the house of the Neeches was an M.A. student and took a mischievous delight in irritating the Neeches by making himself my regular guide and taking me to semi-forbidden places such as the Bengali widow houses, the famous Banāras hospices nearby, and the hangouts of various male and female ascetics. He was comfortable in all these places because he had accompanied his mother there as a youth, but I saw only enough to realize that there was a profoundly

old institutional pattern here that I would only understand years later when some of my students would do extensive research work in Banāras. My own discovery of the real (pre-British) India began with my introduction to the Chamār (*camār*, traditional leather workers) section of Chittapur village.

Pular accompanied the basketball team to the national championships and looked after the balls and did other errands. On the trip he and I talked late into the night about his village and when we got back he could not wait to take me there. Walking along the outer side of the ten-foot wall around the university we soon came to the brick houses of the upper caste villagers and then crossed through a deep gully made by the drains of the university and arrived within the tight cluster of mostly mud houses that made up the Chamār *bastī* or residential area. Pular pointed out his small hut near the entrance to the *bastī* but then insisted that we go directly to the central area where Raja supplied the men of the village with *bīḍī*s or local cigarettes from his little shop in front of which the leaders sat in a semi-square by pulling three cots around facing Raja and his shop. After introductions Raja ordered everyone off the cot to his left and offered me that honored seat. Pular, I was to learn later, was not a long-standing member of the *bastī* and was expected to go to the back of those now standing around the courtyard, and Boodai excitedly sat down beside me, only to get up almost immediately when his older brother Rajaram arrived. As Rajaram twisted his handlebar moustache the jokes started as I recognized how immaculately he was dressed and was told by him and by others that he was the head *caprāsī* or messenger of the Principal of Science College. During this explanation of Rajaram's status, Baij Nath arrived to sit on the other side of me and explain that he and some others he pointed out were rickshaw drivers and they were strong and made a lot more money than those who worked in the university at menial jobs. Making sure that the social analysis was complete, Raja quickly threw in that his wife cooked for one of the professors and both his sons had prestigious jobs in the university. Only when I asked did they explain that there were still present in the village older men who had once worked at the traditional Chamār occupation of leather working.

Boodai insisted that the group gathered in front of Raja's shop not waste this opportunity to get back to the topic they had been discussing in recent days. Should the *bastī* try to get a government grant and build a culvert along the deep gully that apparently flooded the area between the two halves of the village every rainy season? Boodai explained that he talked about this project almost every day with Cherion Thomas, the Bhoodan worker assigned to the university, but he had been frustrated by the lukewarm interest among his fellow Chamars. I told him I had met Cherion Thomas at the reception hosted by Nehru and Radhakrishnan the day we arrived in India and I had visited with him a few times at the university, but at that time I had no tie to Chittapur and this project had not come up. Suddenly Boodai's scheme seemed to have the connection it needed, and everyone sitting around assured Boodai that he should push on with his idea. A fortnight later the Bhoodan[1] leader, Jaya Prakash

1 In 1957 the Bhoodan (*bhūdān*) Movement was prominent in the news and recognized

Narayan, came to the university for a major speech. While he was there he arranged to re-introduce me to Chittapur village and to ask me to help them to move ahead with the Gramdan (*grāmdān*) plan, which he described as something the village had adopted some years back.

The next day I sat on a cot in front of Raja's store and listened to the story of the earlier Gramdan plan. In order to put a human face on his story Raja asked villagers to bring Chedi Lal, and in just minutes a twelve-year-old hobbled up on a bent stick fashioned into a crutch. Raja explained that a few years back he had fallen from a bicycle and broken his leg and it had never been set right. (Raja was eager to go on but agreed that I could take the boy to a hospital later and see if anything could be done.) The story Raja wanted to tell was of the father of the boy, also called Chedi Lal, who was described by Raja as a *mahātmā,* a *guru,* or an *avatār,* as others mocked his search for the right label. Raja wanted to focus on the Gramdan phase of the story, but Boodai insisted on going back to an earlier chapter in which the elder Chedi Lal is said to have been taught to read by the South Indian Christian lady in the Women's Hostel for whom he had worked as *caprāsī.* He was said to have read the Bible from cover to cover and also learned to read books in Hindi and Sanskrit. When Raja got the floor back he explained that Chedi had brought Bhoodan leaders to the village and after many meetings the entire 'Harijan Bastī' had given away everything they had and had become a Gramdan Village. In Raja's mind that led us back to the present and the fact that when they had become a Gramdan Village they had decided to do something about the floods that left them with only a precarious bamboo bridge to the rest of the world every rainy season.

Although Raja was not pleased, another group of villagers who had been patiently waiting now took over the storytelling. They explained that Chedi had married an educated woman who had taught cleanliness and some literacy to the village women, but that she had died in childbirth. After that Chedi had changed and spent much of the day singing songs of Kṛṣṇa and Rāma. Although these songs were new to the Chamārs, some families had started to learn from him and they still carry on that ritual singing every Sunday afternoon. They described themselves as *bhagat*s or devotees and invited me to join them. After they finished their part of the story they left and Raja explained that these families had split the solidarity of the village. He said he was sure Chedi had never intended that these songs of the upper castes' religion would become the only ones sung and, more important, that these *bhagat*s would refuse the meat biryani and toddy served at weddings in the village. He insisted that every single person in the village had been present when Chedi died just three years after his wife and was buried in the shrine on the hill where they still went to worship

throughout the world as the continuation of Gandhi's work. In 1951 Vinoba Bhave had initiated the idea of people donating their landholdings for the use of the landless laborers. This idea had been extended to become a Gramdan (*grāmdān*) when whole villages were donated or a Shramdan (*śrāmdān*) when people donated their labor for a public project. By 1957 the leadership of this general movement had been handed on to Jaya Prakash Narayan who called it Sarvodaya or the Service of All.

him as a *Bīr* or eternal being. Later that evening almost half the village went to the shrine with us as I learned how to let Chedi's spirit seep into mine.

At Home

When my exams were finally over I moved into Chittapur and started to be fed and cared for by the wives of Pular, Boodai, Rajaram and Raja. We were able to get Chedi Lal's leg operated on, and started making plans for the sixty foot long culvert (*pul*) that would eliminate the flooding during the rainy season. The government paid a rupee and a half for a day's labor, so we could keep buying bricks, and in the end the government, the Bhoodan representatives and the upper caste villagers all figured out how to take some of the credit for this accomplishment.

What was most interesting to me was the way the Chamārs used so many traditional means of maintaining solidarity in order to keep the community focussed on this task. Raja would not let any work start until every single family had contributed five rupees and promised a certain number of days of labor. The last two hold-out families had to be harassed repeatedly before they joined in. He then insisted that the senior member of the five founding families of the *bastī* (the traditional *pañcāyat*) at least endorse the choice of the new *pañcāyat* of five that met every night to assess the progress of the project. From the beginning my role had been peculiar. Chamārs think of themselves as laborers and they dug out the foundation area and carried the bricks on their heads with relish, but when bricklaying started they would not touch a trowel. I, on the other hand, as a brash American, was willing to fall back on a few hours of childhood participation in that task and served at the beginning as the only *mistrī* or bricklayer. It was not long before real *mistrī*s coming and going from the grand temple being built just over the wall of the university began to stop for an hour or two and straighten out (especially on the arched top of the culvert) my work, and some of the Chamārs came to realize that they too could do a pretty good job of laying bricks.

A few days before we were to finish, a sign went up naming this structure 'Paul Babu's Pul' and we had to negotiate how to get rid of that. The argument was that if the sign did not stay the other idea was to put a picture beside that of Chedi in his mausoleum. That seemed a bit better in that only Chamars would see it and I certainly felt his spirit right beside us as we worked, but it was still a bit awkward to be in association with a *Bīr* while still alive. They were unclear if *Bīr* had any connection with the Muslim practice of showing reverence to *Pīr*s, or the Hindu practice of burying ascetics (sometimes called *Vīr*s), but everyone else in the village was cremated and being buried was certainly a practice with a lot of religious overtones. Fortunately, they did not own cameras in those days so I thought I had won my point until many years later I discovered a small photo of my South Indian wife and our first son Prakash that I had sent them tucked into a corner below that of Chedi.

Visiting Banāras since these early introductions has always felt like coming home. After I married in South India, my devout Cettiar co-brother wanted to visit the true home of Śiva and I learned with him as the priests on the ghāṭs and at the

Viśvanāth temple mustered up their best Tamilized Sanskrit in order to teach him the ritual rules. My students Lynn Teskey Denton and Anne Pearson outlined to me in detail how the ascetic community was organized and why women found so much meaning in their ascetic vows (or *vratas*), and in the process taught me about the Banāras that in my pioneering visit I had just been able to find a superficial comfort in. My colleague David Kinsley later watched exorcisms I had never seen, and my student Chris Justice took dozens of pictures of those who arrived in the fabled hospices determined to release their spirit within the sacred confines of Banāras. For all of us, Banāras turned out to be a golden opportunity to learn, but we never learned exactly what we thought we would. The city is a kind of universal mother, one who welcomes adopted children with as much warmth as if they were her own, but her river flows on past Harijan *bastīs*, quiet hospices, and burning ghāṭs and one has to be prepared to let her make a place for you where she will.