

FOREIGNERS IN THEIR OWN LAND



FOR A LONG TIME, I had a recurring daydream of the ancient Indian city of Benares, superimposed onto the geography of New York. From my open window on West Eighty-Sixth Street, my mind's eye followed the westering sun over a roofscape cluttered with heat pumps and slim steel chimneys. In the distance, the curved blades of a turbine vent glinted in the late-afternoon light. A sign on the exposed flank of a building read **SOFIA STORAGE CENTER**.

Beyond, out of view, was the Hudson.

I imagined it, like the Ganges in Benares, taking a deep bend north and

flowing toward its source in the high Himalayas. The traffic on the Henry Hudson Parkway was stopped, and on the steep escarpment of Riverside Park were acres upon slanting acres of humanity. Bathers and pilgrims, Columbia University students, and old ladies with coiffured blond and copper hair watched the glittering river with vacant intensity. Ghats went down in two-hundred-yard flights, like stone bleachers, to the edge of the river, where long wooden boats rocked gently in the bilge water. Corpses, wrapped in their gold brocade, lay on bamboo biers, awaiting cremation.

The sky darkened, and silhouettes appeared in the yellow rectangles of the tall apartment buildings on Riverside Drive. The air was high with clouds of incense, the crashing of bells, and frantic chanting in Sanskrit. The people of two cities, and myriad systems of belief, poured out onto the riverside.

The liminal hour stretched out. A daytime darkness silvered the city. Thousands watched through special glasses; thousands more stood waist deep in water, their heads lowered, muttering prayers. Old men with knotty hands leaned on their wooden staffs; women carried babies on their hips. There were farmers and laborers, bank clerks and UPS deliverymen. A party of schoolchildren observed the changing shape of the sun through a steel colander. As its disk went dark, some cried, "Beautiful!" Others stood in solemn terror as Rahu, the eclipser—a demon riding a chariot drawn by eight black horses—swallowed the sun.

BENARES—VARANASI, as it is known officially; Kashi, as it has been known for millennia by the Hindus, who regard it as their holy city—is only eight hundred kilometers from Delhi, where I grew up.

In my midtwenties, after college in America and a couple of years spent working as a reporter for *Time* magazine in New York and London, I found myself living in Delhi again. I was working on my first book, *Stranger to History*, a memoir about my father, who lived in Pakistan, and from whom I had been estranged for most of my life.

My time in the West had given me an outside view of my world in Delhi, robbing my life there of its easy, unthinking quality. I thought I should do something, by way of traveling or learning, that would help me establish a connection with India at large, the country that lay beyond the seemingly impermeable confines of life in Delhi. I wondered if I should learn Sanskrit, the ancient language of India. In the early centuries of the Common Era, it had served as a lingua franca for the learned in a region that stretched from modern Afghanistan to Indonesia. Sanskrit was no longer spoken, but, like Latin or ancient Greek, it retained its liturgical function among India's Hindu majority. I would have had some notion of a vast body of literature in Sanskrit, but, as more an absence than a presence, it was further proof of an intellectual inheritance that had not come down to me. Absences can be suggestive, and I wondered if a voice from the past might serve as a beginning point in my quest to reconnect with India's history and language. That was why I went to see Mapu, an old friend of my mother's. He was among the few people I knew who had sought to regain what a colonial education had denied him: he had attempted a version of Frantz Fanon's "return to self."

We sat in Mapu's office in a lush enclave of New Delhi. The room was bright and bare, save for a painting of a blue dancing Shiva. Mapu was dressed in a white kurta, ribbed and starched. He had a classical face, prominent eyes and cheekbones. He was in his sixties but could still erupt into fits of childish laughter.

When I told him of my interest in Sanskrit, he began to speak of Kamlesh Dutt Tripathi, the former head of Sanskrit at Banaras Hindu University. Mapu described Tripathi as steeped in Indian myth. "He is someone who can pass a flowering tree, pick one, and say, 'Mapu, you know, this is the flower that Kalidasa'"—the great Sanskrit dramatist—"uses as an earring in such and such a play."

"What?" Mapu would say. "How do you know that?" Then Tripathi would show it to Mapu in a text.

This was the kind of knowledge Mapu had seen disappear in India from one generation to the next. The lines of transmission had gone dead, not centuries ago, but in his own lifetime. He felt the loss more acutely than most because he had worked in conservation.

“And I did it all wrong!” he cried.

He recalled one project in which he laid stone over all the ghats. When it was done, he went up and down the Ganges in a boat, proudly inspecting his achievement. On the shore, an old man approached with a troubled expression. He said, “But where will I read my *Ramayana*?”—one of two great Indian epics, a Sanskrit *Iliad*.

“What do you mean?” Mapu said. “Here. There. Anywhere you like.”

“Have you ever walked on the stone in the heat? It becomes very hot. I won’t be able to sit on it.”

Mapu was so upset that he went back to Delhi and resigned his post. He hadn’t realized that that particular ghat had always been left unpaved. Trees grew there; it was a place of shade and cool, where people could come to read their scriptures and epics.

“Isn’t there anyone to tell me these things?” he cried, seeing in this one crisis many others. “No writers, no historians, no architects?”

Mapu belonged to an aristocratic family, the second son of the second son of the maharaja of Kapurthala, a princely state in Punjab. His family were renowned Francophiles, but his parents were of a generation of Indians who were still culturally and linguistically bilingual. I had childhood memories of Mapu’s mother, Aunty Sita, a tiny woman with a cap of woolly white hair. I had a passion for the Hindu gods as a child, and Aunty Sita would recite the Sanskrit hymn associated with the destructive dance of Shiva. Its dark dithyrambic beat gave me goose bumps. Aunty Sita, dressed forever in a widow’s white and so at home in Indian ritual and custom, had seemed to me the picture of a traditional Hindu woman. As an adult, I was surprised to learn that the same woman had been a celebrated beauty of Europe in the 1930s. She was the muse of Man Ray, was dressed by the American designer Mainbocher; Barbara Hut-

ton, Mapu's godmother, was a close personal friend. Mapu had inherited something of his mother's luminosity and grace, but by the time he grew up, the age of Indian bilingualism was over. Mapu's generation of upper-class Indians could barely complete a sentence in an Indian language, let alone move between cultures.

As a young man, Mapu paddled in the shallows of café society. He wore leather trousers and listened to the Eagles. He went abroad to meet the grand friends of his parents' and was spotted arriving at JFK in a peacock-feather cape. It was a pared-down version of the life his parents had led. Colonization overlaid by socialism had beggared the Indian aristocracy. They had lost their money, but they had also lost the style and confidence that comes to people who know their own culture before they know another.

That generation, educated in convents and English-style public schools, accepted cultural loss as inevitable. Mapu did not. He broke with his world, with its emptiness and ennui, and set himself on a course of restitution. He taught himself about Indian textiles and redesigned a jewel of a museum in Ahmedabad called the Calico Museum of Textiles. He was a founding member of INTACH, one of the country's first and most important conservation organizations. He went to Benares over and over, educating himself in Hindu tradition and ritual. He could explain what each element in a ceremony stood for, from the flowers that were used to the colors that were worn, and the Sanskrit verses that were associated with the different deities.

India ceased to be background for Mapu, ceased to be an interlude between foreign trips. The country his mother had so easily been part of, participating in all its ritual and customs, became his again. Mapu's quest earned him the scorn of his friends, who accused him of having gone native. "He used to be so glamorous," a friend of his once told me, "but Ahmedabad was the ruin of him."

It was nonsense; Mapu's time in Ahmedabad was his making. He could never fully regain what had been known when tradition was intact. Once that break occurs, it is final; it cannot be undone. But loss, like

absence, need not be inert; it can allow one to look with curiosity and feeling upon that which others, more culturally intact, have taken for granted.

When I mentioned Sanskrit, Mapu said, “You’re a very intense young man. And this is a language whose every nuance will come to intrigue you. It is important to know where to stop, important not to be sucked in by Sanskrit.”

In the same breath, he brought up Kamlesh Dutt Tripathi. Mapu said he hoped Tripathi would agree to be my teacher and spoke romantically about the relationship between master and student, guru and *shishya*.

“Just as the guru chooses his *shishya*,” Mapu said, “so too must the *shishya* choose his guru.”

Mapu’s own search for a guru had brought him to Ram Shankar Tripathi (no relation to Kamlesh Dutt), the head priest of the Kashi Vishwanath Temple, which was the Vatican in the city that was like Rome, or Jerusalem, to the Hindus. The meeting Mapu described, between himself and his guru, was every bit the mystical union that Arthur Koestler likens to “a soul in search of his assigned body,” a search that ends in master and pupil instantly recognizing each other. When Ram Shankar Tripathi set eyes on Mapu, he simply said, “*Aa gaye ho, raja saab?*” (Ah, you’ve come, raja saab?) And that was that.

Mapu had first gone to Benares at the age of nineteen. “I fell in love with the city as a young man,” he said, “and it has always been my first love.” He stayed in a palace, and what he remembered above all else was the sound of bells. He would always think of it, he said, as the city of bells.

I was getting up to leave when Mapu’s expression darkened. His mouth grew small, his lips arched.

“But you have to be able to hate it as well. You have to be able to look at that river and say, ‘I hate you.’ And when it gets too much, you must flee.”

THAT WAS DECEMBER 2007. In February of the next year, I was aboard the Kashi Vishwanath Express from Delhi bound for Benares. The

carriages of the overnight train were striped in two shades of blue. I was traveling with an American friend, and we found our names on a passenger list glued to the outside. The platform was crowded with travelers, some asleep on their luggage, some sharing food from pink and white plastic bags. We traveled deep into the Indo-Gangetic Plain, which like the Nile or Indus Valley had been one of the basins of early civilization. The darkened landscape was dotted with redbrick buildings bathed in white fluorescent light. The train stopped along the way at medieval Muslim towns set on the banks of sluggish rivers. We passed brass-producing Moradabad, then Lucknow, the capital of the state of Uttar Pradesh. The stations, with their high-pointed arches and little canteens, were teeming despite the late hour, and anxious crowds awaited the arrival of the train.

In the morning, a sun of dull gold rose through tinted windows. The flat green fields smoked. The air in the sleeper grew close. The relative anonymity of the night before, with passengers boarding and disembarking into the early hours, gave way to the intimacy of waking up among strangers. Some stirred and stretched, others belched frankly. I felt the manners and indifference of the big city fall away, and the laws and customs of rural and small-town India come into effect. A few passengers took plastic vessels with them into the toilet; others brushed their teeth with sticks of neem out of the open door of the moving train. All this was a preparation of sorts. Delhi and Benares are only eight hundred kilometers apart, but the real distance, the sense of traveling across centuries, was not physical. Distances in India rarely are.

“Kashi,” writes the historian Diana Eck in *Banares: City of Light*, using the oldest name for the city, “is a place that gathers together the whole of India. Kashi is a cosmopolis—a city that is a world.”

In Benares, it was possible to see in miniature every major event that had etched itself onto India’s consciousness. The entire history of the sub-continent lay in bits and pieces on its river shore. When, twenty-five

centuries ago, the Buddha burst out of Bihar, with a sermon ready on his lips, he delivered it at a deer park in what is today Sarnath, thirteen kilometers from Benares. When Buddhism in India declined, and a resurgent Hindu faith arose, it was in Benares that a city of temples sprang up. When, in the twelfth century, the Muslim slave king Qutb ud-Din Aibak rode east from Delhi in a destructive fury, he laid waste to this ancient city of the Hindus, as would a succession of Muslim rulers who rose in Delhi over the next five centuries. In Benares, great mosques stood on the bones of old temples, and when Islam grew languid and overrefined, this city exerted such symbolic power over the Hindu imagination that a Hindu king took advantage of the decadence of the Muslim governor and made a dynasty. It was in Benares, too, that the descendant of that dynasty was outmaneuvered, in the eighteenth century, by the new European power on the horizon. Warren Hastings, the British governor-general, came himself to face down Chet Singh, the Hindu king of Benares, in 1781, and fifteen years later, the city came under British rule. Benares is the place that best embodies the India described by Jawaharlal Nehru, its first prime minister, as “an ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously.”

I had been to Benares once before, as an eighteen-year-old, on my way to college in America. It was not my idea to go; I had wanted to spend the summer before college backpacking around Europe. But to this request of mine, my mother responded with surprising urgency: “You can do that anytime. Please go to Benares. Benares is the key to secret India.”

I have a picture of myself from that first trip. My hair is cut short, and I am sitting on the stone steps of the riverfront, dressed in a black long-sleeved shirt, patterned with white om's: ॐ. I'm wearing baggy pants and sandals, and what the picture makes clear to me is that I have understood my mother's wish for me to visit Benares as encouragement to don a kind of fancy dress. I am a Western traveler, a modern-day hippie in search of

“secret India.” Denied permission to go backpacking in Europe, I have gone backpacking in India instead, like a child camping out in his own backyard. It was easy then to brush off any discomfort I might have known in Benares. I was on my way to college in America. The glamour of a future in the West propelled me forward without any thought to the past.

Things were different now, in 2008. I had returned to India for good, I thought. My time in the West had not led to a life there, but it had grafted a layer of anxiety onto my way of looking at India. I saw everything as an Anglicized Indian watching an imaginary European or American visitor watch India, and I had my heart in my mouth as I tried to guess what he would make of it. It was an embarrassment twice removed. Anything that made India seem like a freak show filled me with a double horror: my own, and the vicarious horror I felt on behalf of the white man I carried on my shoulder at all times. I hated the presence of these intervening selves. I wished I had a more direct relationship with my country. But any attempt to do so only made the self-observing selves multiply.

We were staying—my American friend and I—at the Ganges View, a lovely riverside hotel run by an effete Benares grandee.

The weather was beautiful, but the trip had gone badly. The city was in a black mood. That blackness, to which Mapu had obliquely referred, had a name—*tamas*, etymologically related to *tenebrous*, was the term Benares gave to an underlying menace that was an accepted part of its character. “Those who are unfamiliar with Benares,” writes Richard Lannoy, the author of *The Speaking Tree*, “can feel almost overwhelmed by the *tamasic* darkness they see there . . . People shudder not only because of the physical decay and craftiness and trickery of those who prey on the pilgrim trade but, more insidiously, because that physical and moral decay contributes to a creeping fear of familiar structures breaking down, all safeguards and moral boundaries dissolved by an aberrant and subversive power.”

Tamas is inseparable from the chthonic energy of Shiva, the city's presiding deity, and the god of creative dissolution. Lannoy describes *tamas* as a downward pull as strong as gravity, "the dark ground" of Shiva's being. The city deals in equal measures of light and shade. There is dirt and squalor, death and disease; but there is also the transcendent spectacle of the river, and the utter beauty of people lost in meditation, waist-deep in water, as the sun comes up over the uninhabited opposite bank. So long as the balance holds, *tamas* is kept at bay. But when that darker element overwhelms the light, *tamas* can turn predatory. Then it is time, as Mapu said, to flee. It is to keep from becoming the victim of *tamas* that one is advised to seek the blessings of a fierce form of Shiva called Kala Bhairava—the Black Terror—before entering the city. Needless to say, we had not.

I wanted my American friend to see those eternal river scenes and the riveting life of the street, with its medieval artisans and workshops, the close air that had the cloying sweet smell of incense and linen in need of airing. But, despite my every effort, the city did not disclose its secrets. There was more shade than light. Benares was all surfaces. The river was flat and oily; beggars circled, more wretched than I remembered, their diseases more florid. Tumors ravaged one man's face, and flies covered the festering wound on a boy's lip. A darkling energy was abroad in the city. It was in search of a victim, and one morning it found him.

My friend and I stood on the riverfront, watching a group of Norwegians on a tour. A blond man in his forties, handsome, with a lined but youthful face, was dressed all in white. No sooner did our eyes settle on him than it was plain to see that something was terribly wrong. He looked stricken. He was trying to communicate something urgent to his guide. But his manners, his Scandinavian politeness, were too gentle for India. The guide smiled past the man's distress. Come on, I remember thinking, grab him, tell him that you need to go back to the hotel immediately. Instead, the guide prevailed and got the Norwegian to sit down on the steps of the river.

The sun was strong. The fear in the Norwegian's face was one I had known all my life in India: it was the fear of losing an individuated sense of self, which the West fosters, and India systematically undoes.

The group of tourists stood in front of a high rampart of rich honeyed stone. Its recessed arch was blind and frilled, the base festooned with red *paan* spittle. The Norwegian rose suddenly and lurched. He made one last flailing attempt to tell his guide that he was in bad shape. Then, before another word could be said, he crumpled into the arch. His face was deathly pale, his eyes rheumy. They fastened with blank intensity on the diamond-strewn surface of the river.

There was no way to shield him from the gaze of those on the riverfront. A crowd of twenty or so gathered around. For many moments, the man just sat there, in the arch, his internal discomfort gone, even as his external shame was amplified. Some moments later, he was led away to the bus, the seat of his white trousers hideously stained.

I HAD COME BACK to Benares in a cautious, noncommittal way. My wish to learn Sanskrit was an attempt to deal intellectually with a country whose reality perturbed me. I had not come to Benares prepared to do whatever it took to embrace that reality. I came hedging my bets. This second trip to Benares seemed destined to end like my first: in flight and oblivion. But then, on my last day, as if to deny me so easy an out, the city gave me a glimpse of its inner life. That was the day I met the twice-born.

My American friend was resting in the hotel. I had tried to meet Kamlesh Dutt Tripathi, but he was a hard man to track down. One of Mapu's contacts suggested I try the Abhinavagupta Research Library, where he was meant to be addressing a gathering of scholars. It was late afternoon when I arrived at the library, a pretty building with a façade of jalousie windows and sleeping columns, all in different shades of yellow, cream, and brown.

Inside, the Brahmins filed into the room, some bare chested, some with foreheads emblazoned with caste marks. I had known Brahmins all my life, but I had not known Brahmins like these. The Brahmin, who sits at the top of the Hindu caste system, is “twice-born,” or *dvija* in Sanskrit, for he is born once at the time of his actual birth, and then again when he is initiated by rite into his ancient vocation of the mind. The Brahmins I knew had not undergone this second birth; they were Brahmins in name only, and the life of tradition in a place such as Benares was as closed to them as it was to me.

Kamlesh Dutt Tripathi was among the twice-born. One of the younger Brahmins, seated on the floor next to me, pointed him out: a tall, thin-lipped man in his seventies, with a margin of fine white hair running along the shiny dome of his head. He was dressed that afternoon in a wrinkly off-white kurta, with a discreet dot of dark vermilion on his forehead. He addressed the others in Hindi, then switched to Sanskrit. For the next ninety minutes, I sat there in stupefaction listening to the Brahmins of Benares have a heated argument in Sanskrit. Someone explained that they were discussing *sphota*, an esoteric branch of Indian linguistics that dealt with the relationship between sound and meaning. *Sphota*, or “word seeds,” as the French mystic and poet René Daumal translates it, “evokes the blossoming of a flower, the development of a bud—thus a constant germinative power hidden beneath the appearances which manifest it.”

I had never heard of the concept. I knew no Sanskrit. I did not know that ancient India had made a study of these things. I was ignorant of the Indian passion for grammar, linguistics, and hermeneutics, the obsession with literary theory and figures of speech. But I had studied Wittgenstein at Amherst; I knew of Hellenistic philosophy and the different Platonic schools. I had lived in two or three societies other than my own; I had traveled extensively in half a dozen more and written books about them; I had learned foreign languages; yet here I was, a few hundred miles from where I grew up, overtaken by an experience of the uncanny as powerful as any I had ever known.

Brahmins are sometimes described as members of a priesthood, but this is not quite right. Historically Brahmins were grammarians, logicians, writers, poets, astrologers, and scientists. They were men of the mind, as these men still were. I had seen Brahmins performing religious ceremonies and reading their scriptures. That interested me less. But I found the sight of these men engaged in an ancient form of scholarship utterly compelling. How strange that it had been right here all this while. Strange, too, that no connection should exist between their world and mine—that India’s intellectual past should play no role in engendering its present and future. A link had been severed, but I knew too little about what had been lost to feel the pain of it. What struck me hard that afternoon was how automatic my incuriosity about old India had been.

I had felt a discomfort since my return, a melancholy, an odd feeling of being abstracted. Nehru had written of the “spiritual loneliness” he put down to having become “a queer mixture of the East and the West, out of place everywhere, at home nowhere.” He wrote, “I am a stranger and alien in the West. I cannot be of it. But in my own country also, sometimes, I have an exile’s feeling.” Nehru no doubt felt a version of what the French intellectual Didier Eribon experienced in relation to class—“the discomfort that results from belonging to two different worlds, worlds so far separated from each other that they seem irreconcilable, and yet which coexist in everything that you are.” That afternoon among the Brahmins of Benares, I knew an odd feeling of being impoverished by my exposure to other places. The legacy of British rule in India meant that I belonged to a zone of overlap that lay between East and West. It was what made it easy for me to go to college in America. The linguistic and cultural familiarity with multiple societies should have brought forth a rich cosmopolitanism; but instead it had been sterile, and it had left me feeling somehow poorer for my experiences.

Like so much of the old non-West, India was an ancient civilization reborn as a modern nation, twice-born in another sense. But it was amazing to consider how long it had been trying to cure itself of the trauma of

its second birth. A hundred years ago, in this very town, the Banaras Hindu University had been founded with the stated intention of closing the gap between East and West. At its inauguration, in 1916, a little-known leader, freshly arrived from his activities in South Africa, had caused “a beautiful scandal.”

“It is a matter of deep humiliation and shame for us,” began Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi—addressing an audience comprising the viceroy, a pride of Indian princes, and Annie Besant, the leading theosophist and champion of self-rule for India—“that I am compelled this evening under the shadow of this great college, in this sacred city, to address my countrymen in a language that is foreign to me.

“But suppose that we had been receiving during the past fifty years education through our vernaculars, what should we have today? We should have today a free India, we should have our educated men not as if they were foreigners in their own land, but speaking to the heart of the nation . . .”

Gandhi was responding to a process that had been set in motion a century before. The British administrator Lord Macaulay was roughly my age—in his midthirties—when, in 1834, he was appointed to the Committee of Public Instruction. Macaulay had felt duty bound to create a “class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.” He envisaged an Indian elite that would gradually extend modern knowledge to the great mass of the population. But this is not what happened. Instead, the class of interpreters grew more isolated with every generation, and by the time Gandhi gave his speech, the distance between the two Indias had become the cause of pain and anxiety, both for those who felt talked down to and for those who had been colonized and now lived at a great remove from their country.

In Mapu’s generation, the sense of loss must have been painful enough to warrant a desire for return. In my generation, the memory of loss had been erased. It had been sublimated into a quiet, passionless aversion to

one's own culture. A dullness of mind, an almost willful ignorance. Until that day in Benares, *colonization* had felt like an abstraction, one of those overused words, such as *poverty* or *global warming*, that seem to obscure meaning. But that afternoon in the Abhinavagupta Library, my colonization felt as real to me as a law of nature. It was as if my upbringing in India, innocent and unthinking on the surface, had been acted upon by a quietly coercive force that had the power to bend space and time. It could make New York feel culturally nearer to my Delhi than to Benares, and it could put centuries between those living next to one another, making foreigners of people in places they had never left.

The image of the Brahmins of Benares seared itself into my mind. But I now also found it impossible to approach Tripathi with my original intention of learning Sanskrit. Mapu had spoken romantically of the relationship between guru and *shishya*. Perhaps he was nearer the life of tradition and could imagine himself immersed in it again. I, for my part, could not. Incredible as it was to glimpse the antiquity of a sacralized form of learning, to witness was not to participate. The induction into the ancient language was a ritual part of a traditional Brahmin boy's passage into manhood.

The world of ritual was closed to me. To insinuate myself into it now would have felt like an unspeakable act of fraudulence. A break had occurred, and I was on the other side of it.