

## Introduction

As a place to die, to dispose of the physical remains of the deceased and to perform the rites which ensure that the departed attains a 'good state' after death, the north Indian city of Banaras attracts pilgrims and mourners from all over the Hindu world. This book is primarily about the priests and other kinds of 'sacred specialist' who serve them; about the way in which they organise their business, and about their representations of death and understandings of the rituals over which they preside. For obvious reasons, intensive anthropological fieldwork amongst the huge numbers of transient and socially heterogeneous pilgrims who visit the city is not feasible. Though I spent a good deal of time talking to mourners who had come from outside, the only bereaved families with whom it was possible to have any sustained contact were of local origin.

The priests who are at the centre of this book are not only ritualists. They are also 'propagandists' who instruct their patrons on the meanings of the rituals in which they are engaged, on the fate of the soul and on the soteriological significance of Shiva's city. As this suggests, exegesis on matters of ritual blooms in Banaras with a luxuriance of which ethnographers of remote rural areas might sometimes be envious. In my own experience of such a setting at least (Parry 1979), enquiries about the purpose of this or that rite commonly meet with the terse response that it has been ordained by the scriptures and handed down by the ancestors. Beyond that only the Brahman priest can say – and he is likely to refer the question on to another more knowledgeable than himself. In Banaras, by contrast, even non-priests often volunteer interpretations of complex and seemingly opaque ritual sequences; and the priests themselves are well used to pilgrims and mourners asking questions which are almost as ignorant – if generally less persistent – than those of the anthropologist. For most of his questioners the priest is an 'authority', and like many authorities he would sometimes sooner extemporise than reveal the limits of his knowledge. When the matter lies outside conventional priestly wisdom, the views he expounds are possibly his own quite idiosyncratic – which is not to say ill-considered – solutions to questions

that have puzzled him also. The anthropologist's problem, then, is not a poverty of exegesis, but its profusion, improvisation and consequent diversity.

I have tried to avoid creating the impression that my informants inhabit a seamlessly systematic ideological universe by ironing out this diversity. To most people in most cultures much about death *is*, I assume, a mystery. Though priests have a professional stake in imparting the religious certainties, it is hardly surprising that the answers they offer are not without contradiction and inconsistency. But nor of course are these answers an amorphous hodge-podge of individual speculation. On many mortuary matters there is near unanimity, and where this is absent the variant interpretations tend to be patterned around a limited set of identifiable discourses. The challenge, then, is to make it possible to follow the melody without drowning out the discordant voices.

But this book is as much about death as a living as it is about the theological speculations that surround it. While other anthropological monographs which report on field research in one of the major centres of Hindu pilgrimage have tended to leave ritual largely aside in order to focus more sharply on the sociology of the sacred specialists (e.g. Vidyarthi 1961; Fuller 1984 and van der Veer 1988), I have chosen to write both about the social organisation of death and about matters of ritual and belief. A narrower coverage may well have resulted in a tidier and tighter account, but I believe that my choice is justified not only by the obvious fact that death in Banaras consists of both aspects, but also by the fact that the two kinds of data are often difficult to disentangle.

On the one hand, ideas about death and the dead are sometimes transparently moulded by experience of social life. For example, the reason why the malevolent ghosts of those who have died a 'bad death' are considered likely to pass from wife-givers to wife-takers, and to attach themselves to affinal prestations, is explained – I will argue (p. 235) – by tensions within the joint household which result from marriage, and by tensions between in-laws over the gifts which pass between them. Conversely, the social organisation of death may clearly reflect the ideas that people have about it. Different kinds of caste specialist are, for example, required to handle different aspects of the deceased. Death results in a polluting corpse on the one hand, and a marginal and malevolent ghost on the other. The first must be disposed of, and the second must be transformed into a benevolent ancestor. The Untouchable Dom funeral attendant superintends the cremation of the physical remains of the deceased; the impure and highly inauspicious Mahabrahman Funeral-priest accepts gifts in the name of the malign ghost whom he represents or even embodies, while a relatively pure Brahman performs this service for the relatively benign ancestor. In short, the division of labour only makes sense in the light of certain ideas about the state of the departed.

Nor again is it possible to understand the highly equivocal status of the Funeral-priests, the rather aggressive exactions to which they sometimes

subject the mourners, or the system by which they allocate rights to serve them, without reference to the notion that they embody the malevolent ghosts of the departed (pp. 75ff). Though the Funeral-priest is a Brahman, he is to all intents and purposes treated much like an Untouchable. Through his importunate demands on the mourners he serves, he reveals not only his own nature, but also the greed and malevolence of the ghost he embodies (pp. 139ff). What appears to be a supremely 'economic' activity (ruthless bargaining over 'fees') turns out to have other layers of significance when it is properly located in its idealogical context. A way of exploring the market in a situation of chronic uncertainty (as the economic model of bargaining supposes), the demands of the Funeral-priest are also a dramatic representation of the claims of the dead on the living.

Rights to accept the gifts of the mourners are assigned to the individual Funeral-priest on the basis of a complex rota system which maximises the anonymity and transience of their relationship. Though I will show that this system also answers to practical reason, it is at least partly a consequence of a cultural logic which precludes the development of long-term hereditary relationships between patrons and specialists of the sort familiar from the extensive literature on *jajmani* relations in rural India, and of the sort which obtain between the mourners and those who embody the incorporated ancestor. The choice of system, in other words, is closely constrained by the mourners' unwillingness to acknowledge lasting bonds with those who deal with the most polluting aspects of death (pp. 115ff). Once again, the social organisation of death reflects the way in which death is symbolically constructed.

Both the bargaining and the share system suggest a different point of rather more general sociological significance. In a devastating critique of the idea that culture is an epiphenomenon of 'practical reason' – that cultural forms are determined by utilitarian interest – Sahlins (1976) turns the tables by arguing for a symbolic determination of material life. This simple reversal is in my view unfortunate. In both of the instances I cite the social form appears over-determined. It is the product of a complex interplay between culture *and* practical reason.

The first part of the book – 'Death and the city' – deals with Banaras's association with death and its transcendence. The opening chapter looks at this association from a religious perspective. Lord Vishnu created the cosmos at the beginning of time by performing ascetic austerities at what is now the city's main cremation ground. My argument is that the cremation rituals which are continually staged there are a kind of re-enactment of his cosmogonic austerities, and that it is this which accounts for Banaras's immunity to the degeneration of time and for the notion that the rest of space is contained within it. Chapter 2 shifts the focus to examine the city's association with death through the eyes of the outside observer. It provides a brief sketch of what is known about its history as a pilgrimage centre, and as a

place to die and to dispose of the physical remains of the dead. The chapter concludes with an attempt to estimate the scale of these activities, and to trace the growth over the course of this century in the number of cremations staged there.

With regard to the city's most important cremation ground, we shall find that different accounts of its origins are invoked to justify the divergent positions taken in a dispute over whether corpses should continue to be burnt on the very spot at which Vishnu performed his austerities. What seems to me significant is that those who most forcefully championed one or other of these rival versions of its 'history' are widely assumed to have done so out of purely interested motives. Material acquisition is highly valued, and my informants often take an extremely down-to-earth – not to say cynical – view of human motivation, crediting others with the most far-sighted concern for egoistic advantage. Over the past two or three decades, the study of values has been a central preoccupation of the sociology of India. It seems to me surprising, however, that very little attention has been paid to the pervasive *idea* that material acquisition and self-interest are a mainspring of action.

Death in Banaras is very big business, and the second part of the book – 'Death as a living' – is concerned with the way this business is organised. Chapter 3 discusses the division of mortuary labour between, and the allocation of rights within, the various groups of sacred specialists who are in one way or another concerned with the disposal of the physical remains of the deceased, the posthumous fate of the soul and the purification of the mourners. Chapter 4 looks at the remuneration – ideologically construed as 'gifts' – which the priests receive, at the donors motivation for giving and their willingness to tolerate the importunate demands of the recipients; at the dangers – both physical and spiritual – which these transactions are held to entail for both parties and at the insistent haggling which accompanies them. How, in a more general sociological perspective, are we to understand the evils that these gifts embody? Given that the priest has often been represented as the epitome of Brahmanical purity, what are the implications of the position he is held to accept for our understanding of the caste order?

Chapter 3 makes the wider significance of ideas about material acquisition more apparent. However much they deplore the fact, most people seem to regard the chicanery and sharp-practice which surround the business of death as inevitable. But though the things of this world may be greatly desired, the single-minded pursuit of them is of course seen as antithetical to the highest values, and as subversive of the moral order of *dharma*. Left to run riot, acquisitiveness and self-seeking result in 'the law of the fishes', the Hindu equivalent of our 'law of the jungle'. Now what is particularly striking about the division of ritual labour I describe is the meticulous way in which shares are defined, and the endless elaboration of rules which are clearly intended to preclude competition both between and within the various communities of sacred specialists. The two phenomena are not unconnected. Regulation is

such an over-riding concern precisely because 'the law of the fishes' is seen as such an imminent threat.

If the social order must be endlessly shored up against impending chaos, the same kind of problem confronts the person. In South Asian thinking – as the Chicago ethnologists have taught us (e.g. Marriott 1976) – a person's bio-genetic substance and his moral code of conduct are two aspects of the same thing. To a greater or lesser extent, all transactions involve an exchange of bio-moral qualities, and consequently transform the substance-code of the parties to them. By continually giving out and taking in particles of themselves, transactors are endlessly modifying their physical-cum-moral natures. By contrast with the Western concept of the individual as an independent and autonomous actor with a unique and unchangeable bio-genetic makeup, the South Asian construct of the person postulates a far more malleable and protean entity.

The obvious problem with this picture, however, is that it is not at first sight clear how it squares with our received wisdom that each person has a more or less unalterable caste identity, or how all members of the same caste can be assumed to have the same kind of bio-moral nature. But there is, I argue (pp. 112ff), a crucial sense in which these apparently contradictory ideas fit together. The construct of the person as a constitutionally fluid and volatile being provides powerful ideological support to the ordained order of caste interactions. Those who infringe these rules disrupt the precarious equilibrium in which their own personhood is as it were suspended, bringing upon themselves a degradation, debasement and even disintegration of the self. Once more, it is the chaos which lies round the corner that proves the necessity for the most disciplined regulation.

I argue, then, that both at the level of the social order and at the level of the person a central concern is to batten down the hatches against incipient chaos, and to impose some semblance of control on the contingency of events. But perhaps the most worryingly contingent event of all is death itself, and much of the ethnography presented in Part III – 'Death into birth' – relates to the attempt to deny its aleatory character.

Chapter 5 centres around the idea of the 'good' death as a voluntary renunciation of life, and of cremation as a sacrificial offering of the self to the gods. Sacrifice is a ritual wrenching life out of death. Through it both the world and the sacrificer are reborn. Cremation is consequently an act of creation, and the mortuary rites are shot through with the symbolism of birth and parturition. Liberated from its 'gross' body, the tortured ghost now wanders the earth in search of a new 'house' to inhabit. Chapter 6 describes how the chief mourner builds for it limb by limb a new body through the ritual offerings of rice-balls over the ten following days, and how this 'ghost-body' is subsequently dissected and merged with the bodies of the deceased's three immediate lineal ascendants. The marginal and malevolent ghost becomes a benevolent and incorporated ancestor, a source of future fecundity and

prosperity for his descent line. But if 'good' death results in the biological and material reproduction of the deceased's descendants, 'bad' deaths result in barrenness and poverty. The afflictions caused by such spirits, and the way in which such afflictions might be cured, are the central focus of chapter 7.

To return to the matter of contingency, at the most general level the overall thrust of the whole sequence is to make death appear subject to human control, by – for example – representing it as an orderly evacuation of the body and an act of willing abandonment (pp. 158ff), and by denying that the uncontrollable moment of physiological arrest is the 'real' point of death. That point is rather re-defined as the instant at which the chief mourner releases the 'vital breath' of the deceased by breaking open his skull as his corpse lies burning on the pyre. The deceased 'dies' on the pyre through the deliberate actions of the survivors in a cremation ritual which is symbolically constructed as a sacrifice (pp. 178ff). Since every sacrifice is a kind of re-enactment of the original sacrifice which created the cosmos, cremation deprives individual death of its specificity by assimilating it to a timeless prototypical model. Consistent with this de-personalisation of the deceased is a striking absence from the entire mortuary sequence of any formalised recognition of his unique biography, or any celebration of his personal achievements. No memorials are normally erected in his name, and as an ancestor almost all traces of his individual personality are effaced (pp. 207ff).

In some cases, of course, the contingency of death is harder to suppress than in others – as for example when it has resulted from sudden accident, violence or epidemic disease. But following the logic of the previous paragraph, this must also be the case when the deceased does not constitute a worthy sacrificial offering to the gods – because, for example, his body has been corrupted by leprosy. Unfit for the cremation pyre, the deaths of such people do not readily lend themselves to being represented as a replication of some perfect primordial model. Other ritual measures are therefore required, and these include the construction of an effigy of the deceased into which his soul is then summoned. This surrogate body is then made to die. An 'untimely' and uncontrolled death is thus restaged as a controlled release of life; a body that was unfit to serve as a sacrificial victim is replaced by a worthier substitute that can now be cremated like any ordinary corpse (pp. 184ff).

Unless a complex sequence of supplementary rituals is properly performed, the spirits of those who have died a 'bad' or 'untimely' death are liable to afflict the living, whose pollution makes them particularly prone to possession (p. 232). In other contexts, disease and death itself are commonly attributed to impurity (and especially to an impure diet). Purity, then, does not appear to be the irreducible value that it is in Dumont's (1970a) picture of Hindu ideology. It is rather a means to an end, a crucial bulwark against death, decay and the disintegration of the self. As for the disorderly ghosts, the procedure for exorcising them essentially consists in placing them under the control of superior supernatural beings, and 'causing them to sit down' at some sacred

site through the performance of a ritual over which a Brahman priest should preside. Order, it would seem, is a proper subordination to *hierarchical* authority.

The concluding chapter of the book concerns the ascetic's endeavour, not merely to control the contingency of death and to convert it into a source of future life, but to conquer death entirely by escaping from the endless cycle of rebirths. The ethnographic description relates to a small group of renouncers known as Aghoris whose ascetic regime involves intimate contact with death, corpses and the cremation ground. Though by the standards of most Hindu ascetics, Aghori practices are peculiarly extreme, I aim to show that the ideas which inform them are in fact quite conventional. The creation of the cosmos at the beginning of time is represented as a process of progressive differentiation out of an undifferentiated Absolute Being (*Brahman*) that contains all opposites within itself. What the Aghori aims at, I argue, is systematically to recombine these opposites and thus to recapture this primordial state of non-differentiation. By so doing he escapes from time and hence from the endless cycle of death and rebirth.

The values of the renouncer return me in my concluding remarks (pp. 264ff) to a theme that runs throughout Part III and that relates to the values of hierarchy. In Dumont's (1970a) model of the caste order, hierarchy is held to be inseparable from holism (the valorisation of the social whole), and thus from the idea of an indissoluble interdependence between the high and the low. Following Fuller (1988), I argue by contrast that there is a significant strand in the ideology which radically compromises the idea of a complementarity between them. The acknowledgement of interdependence is markedly one-sided. The inferior depends on the superior but the converse does not apply. Relative superiority is a matter of relative autonomy – a principle we shall discover in the way in which the expression of grief is structured by gender (pp. 152ff), in the logic of the mourning regulations laid down in the Shastric texts (pp. 215ff), and in the rituals concerned with the pacification of malevolent ghosts (pp. 245ff). Its apogee is clearly the autonomous ascetic, and my argument is that when his values are brought back into the world they spawn a discourse which de-couples the notion of hierarchy from the notions of holism and complementarity, a discourse in which the inequalities of the social order are by a strange irony legitimated by reference to the example of one who has renounced it. As all this goes to confirm, in writing about death the best the anthropologist can probably aspire to is the discovery of something about the world of the living.

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PART I  
**Death and the city**



## 1

## Through 'divine eyes'

## 1.1 The scene of cosmogony

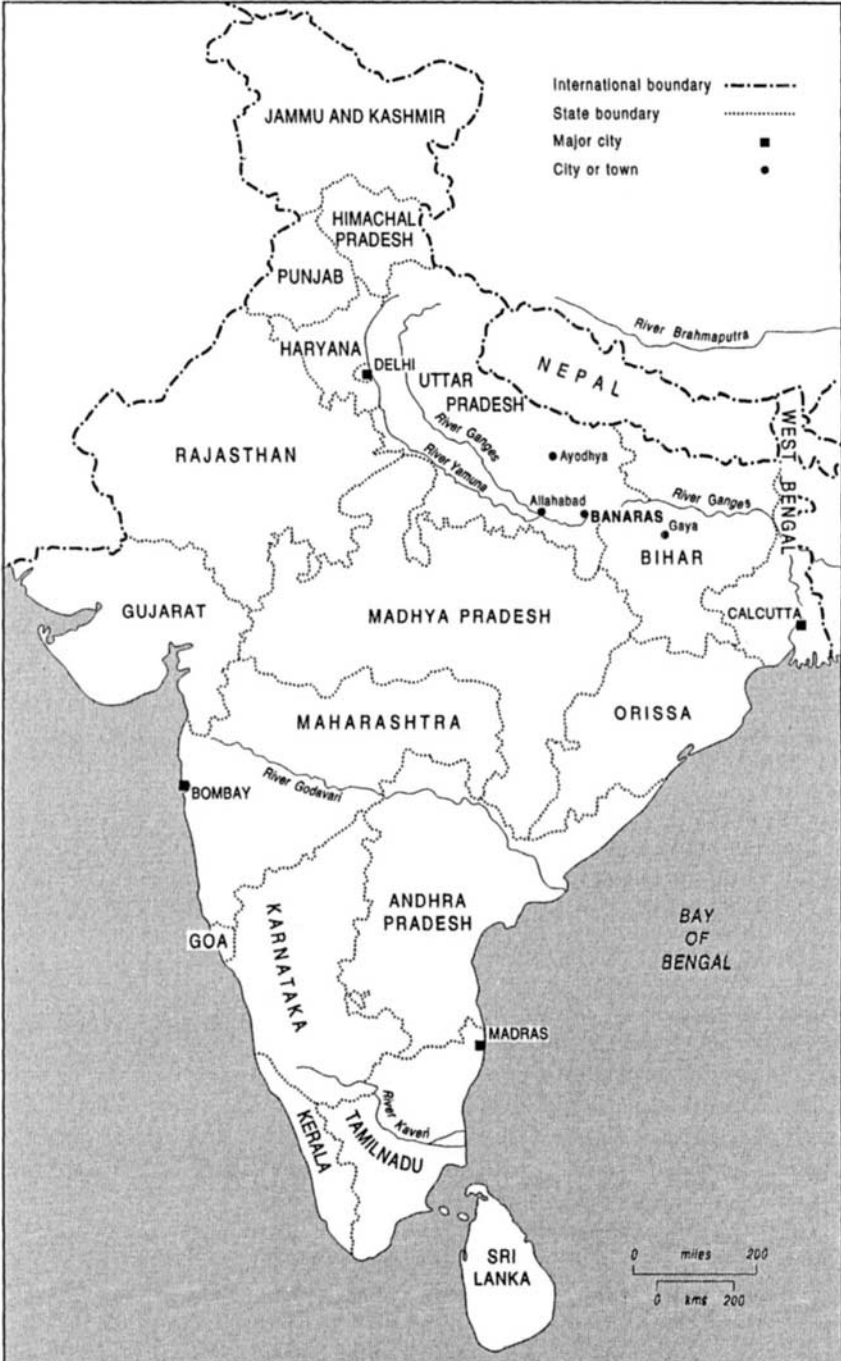
Kashi – the 'Luminous', the City of Light – is the pious Hindu's name for the sacred city of Banaras, now officially known as Varanasi.

When Babylon was struggling with Nineveh for supremacy, when Tyre was planting her colonies, when Athens was growing in strength, before Rome had become known, or Greece had contended with Persia, or Cyrus had added lustre to the Persian monarchy, or Nebuchadnezzar had captured Jerusalem, and the inhabitants of Judaea had been carried into captivity, she had already risen to greatness, if not to glory . . . While many cities and nations have fallen into decay and perished, her sun has never gone down; on the contrary, for long ages past it has shone with almost meridian splendour. (Sherring 1975: 7-8; originally 1868)

[The city's] present life reaches back to the sixth century B.C. in a continuous tradition. If we could imagine the silent Acropolis and the Agora of Athens still alive with the intellectual, cultural, and ritual traditions of classical Greece, we might glimpse the remarkable tenacity of the life of Kashi. Today Peking, Athens, and Jerusalem are moved by a very different ethos from that which moved them in ancient times, but Kashi is not. (Eck 1983:5)

Whatever their historical justification, from the perspective of the extensive eulogistic literature on the city which its priests and other sacred specialists invoke for the instruction of the pilgrims and mourners they serve,<sup>1</sup> such statements are but a bland understatement of a far more venerable religious truth. Kashi is as old as time itself. As the site of cosmic creation, it is the place where time itself began. As cosmogony is here a ceaselessly repeated event, its present time is also the primordial time of origins.

In this opening chapter I focus on the place of death in this 'divine vision' of the city. Those with the eyes to see know that Kashi is both the origin-point and a microcosm of the universe; that it stands outside space and time yet all space is contained within it; and that it provides for the attainment of all the four conventionally enumerated goals of human existence (the *purusharthas*): in life for the fulfilment of moral and religious duty (*dharma*), material and



Map 1 Location of Banaras