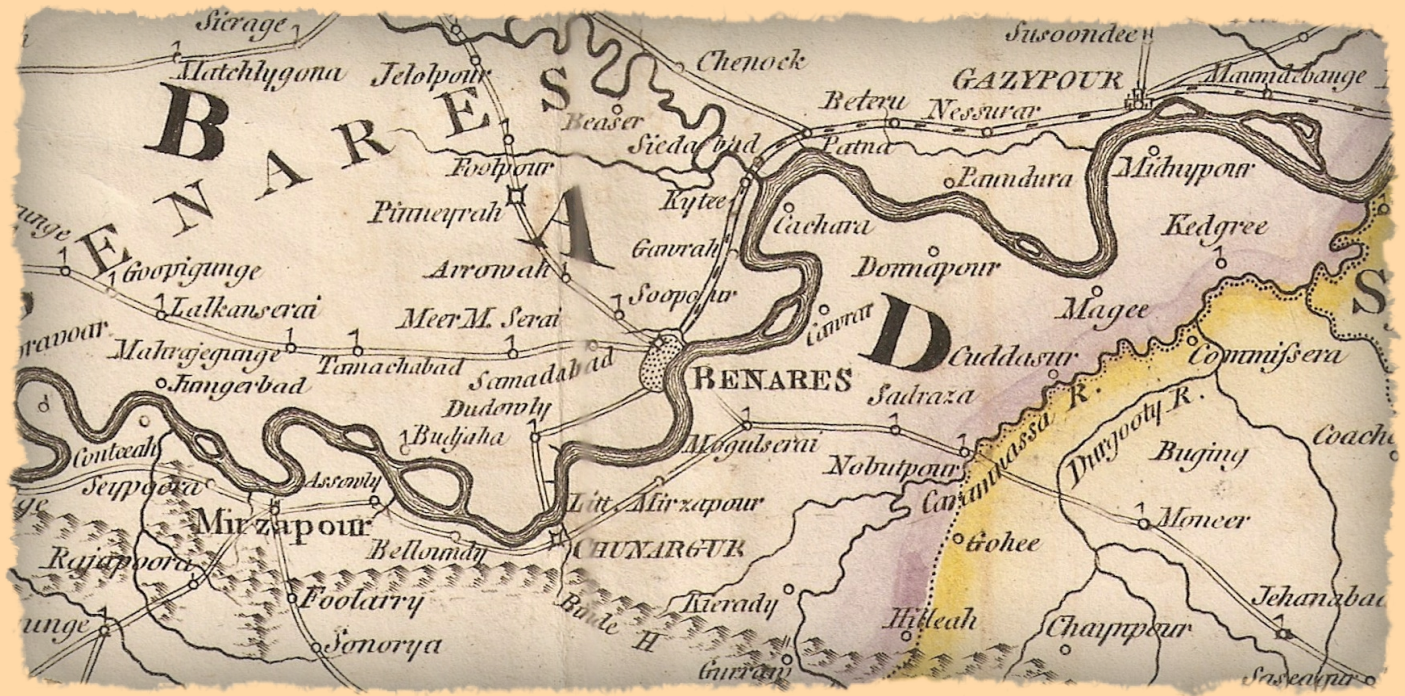


Benares



October 8, 1973, 1:30 am
third day of Dusshera

I entered the "Oldest City in the World" shortly after midnight in a third-class car directly behind the tender of a steam locomotive. I'd been on the train for about 9 hours and now my car was fairly empty and dark, allowing me to recline on an upper berth -- well, actually an unpadded solid wood shelf. Before I dozed off, the mechanics of the engine, so near, took over my mind, not to mention my ears: the symphony of the running gear with all its shafts, cranks, arms, and levers, the drive-wheels emphatically clicking the rail joints, the pistons hissing rhythmically, and above it all, the blastpipe - the lungs of the beast - chuffing away with *allegro tempo*. I was following the magnificent engine's efforts and moods.

And then a brief dream took me back to Khujarah, which I had left on a bus just yesterday morning. Visions of the profuse erotic sculpture had not found me, but the figure of one apsara had. It is so unique that it had been moved into the museum there.

You can walk right up to the celestial nymph, who is playing with a couple of bouncing balls. And you want to envision her alive, with all her body jewelry tinkling about and clothed, from the hips down, only in *mulmul*, "woven wind," the sheer transparent cotton muslin.

But I was traveling in and out of sleep, and the *apsara* remained rigid, perhaps requiring a longer stay in my subconscious to become animate.

The train having halted, I awoke, not knowing we had reached Benares until seconds later. New passengers flooded in through the doors and windows. Baggage was pushed through windows. It were as if my car was the object of a commando raid, the goal of which was to occupy every cubic foot of space with passengers, ticket-less, no doubt, and their luggage, probably heading back to Calcutta after the *Dussehra* festival. I quickly realized that the only way for me to disembark was to go out a window. So I dropped my suitcase out, and with camera bag over my shoulder, climbed through and dropped onto the platform, minus one sandal that I lost in the chaos. I looked up sympathetically at the engine that now was shrouded in steam and smoke - it was being tended to lovingly with giant oil cans. I turned to make my way through the station and the first inhabitant I encountered was a reclining cow chewing a bit of cud, rice paper, no doubt.



Outside the station the rickshaw wallas converged on me after, I think, they noticed my foreign suitcase. I selected one and directed him to take me to a "sasta aur accha hotel," cheap and good. That turned out to be the Hotel Ajaya, on Lahurabir Street.

I'm wide awake now, thinking that perhaps the details of my arrival are quite ordinary. In the bright light of my room I've noticed my clothes look a bit sooty, courtesy of my energetic friend, now chuffing his way to Calcutta. I could bathe in the Ganges tomorrow morning, or head down the hallway to the shower. I think I'll opt for the latter.

October 8, 1973, 8 p.m.

Outside the Ajaya this morning I readily found a rickshaw walla to take me down to the ghats on the Ganges. From my map I saw it was about 2 miles and we agreed on the fare. First, being still half barefoot, I had him take me to a shop to buy some sandals. The lost sandal - part of a pair I bought in Agra a year ago - were favorites, and I am upset over losing them.

At the Dasasvamedha Ghat I found several very friendly boat wallas - how to choose? Be wary of the cheapest, I thought. Hire the one who proclaims he will "take you across the ocean," if you ask. So my smiling boatman pushed us off between the bathers and began rowing his rugged round-bottomed dory out to the middle of the Ganges for the grand tour. Ours was the only boat out on this section, and with no other likely customers, we kept a leisurely pace as I pumped this pleasant fellow for information on the several famous ghats in this section. The river was high and the current strong, but so were my boatman's muscles and vocal chords.



Dasavamedha Ghat (upstream) - ghat of 10 sacrificed horses. Here King Divodasa, after being appointed by Brahma, was challenged to a test by Shiva, who Divodasa had exiled along with the other gods. With Brahma as judge, Divodasa flawlessly sacrificed 10 horses in a row, thus extending the banishment. Bathing here is nearly as meriting as making the sacrifice, making this ghat one of the five celebrated places of pilgrimage in Benares.



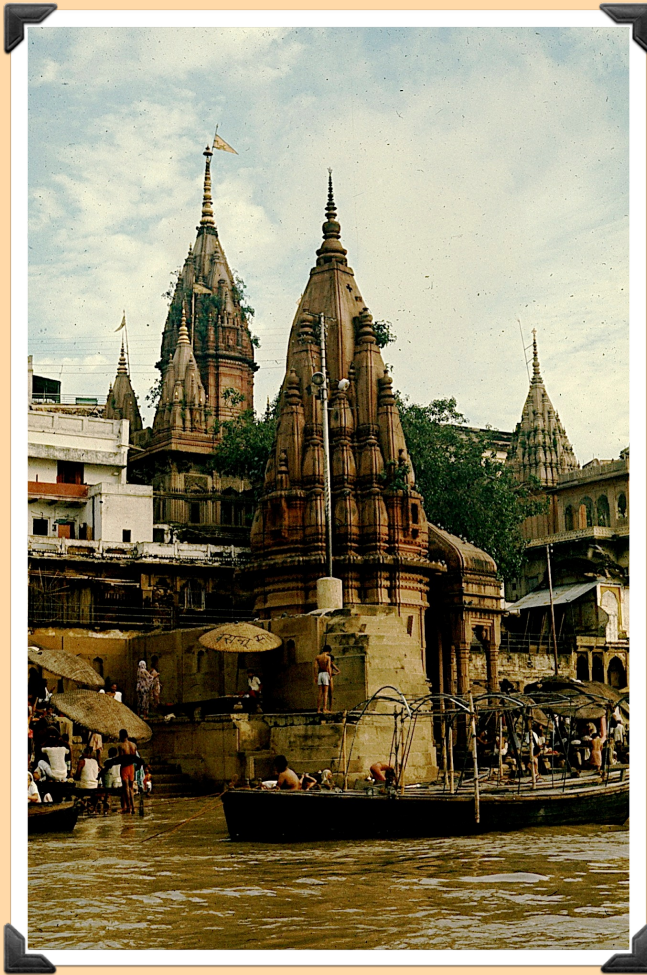
Dasavamedha Ghat (downstream)



L to R (going downstream): massive Dharabhanga Ghat, was a home for the Maharajas of Dharabhanga, Bihar; Munsii Ghat; Ahilyabai Ghat; Sitala Ghat; Dasavamedha Ghat; Prayag Ghat; and Rajendra Prasad Ghat, formerly called Ghoda (horse) Ghat, where there was a stone horse statue commemorating the sacrifices that took place there in the 2nd century.



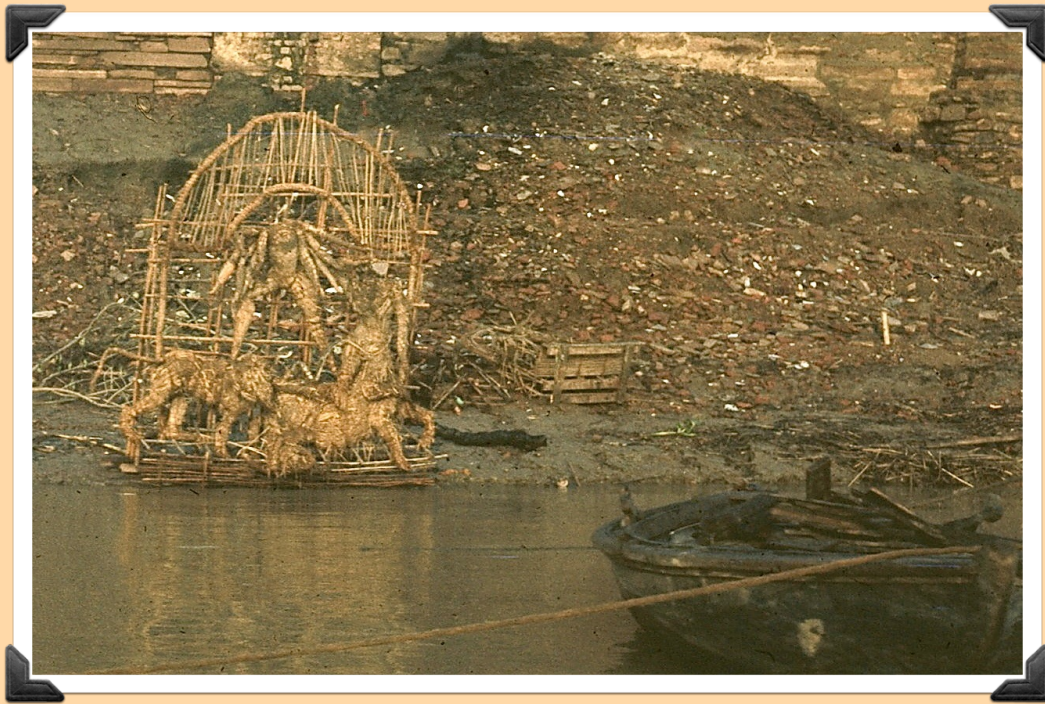
Sitla Ghat, where the festival of Sitla Ashtami is celebrated a few days after Holi. The goddess helps in curing smallpox, and motivates cleanliness. She is depicted with an urn of holy water, soap, and a broom, riding a donkey.



Manikarnika Ghat, "Jewel Earring Ghat." Above the ghat is the Cakra-Pushkarini Kunda, a sacred pond, which is believed to have been dug by Lord Vishnu and filled with his sweat. In this pond, the jewel fell from the ear of Shiva's wife, Parvati, while he was dancing in grief with her dead body after she committed suicide. The Brahmins found the jewel and returned it to Shiva who then blessed this place. According to legends, this pond predates the Ganges, which at some point began flowing from the locks of Shiva's hair. This is the great cremation ground. Here Shiva, in the Tarakesvara form, gives the Taraka mantra (prayer of crossing) in the ear of the dead.



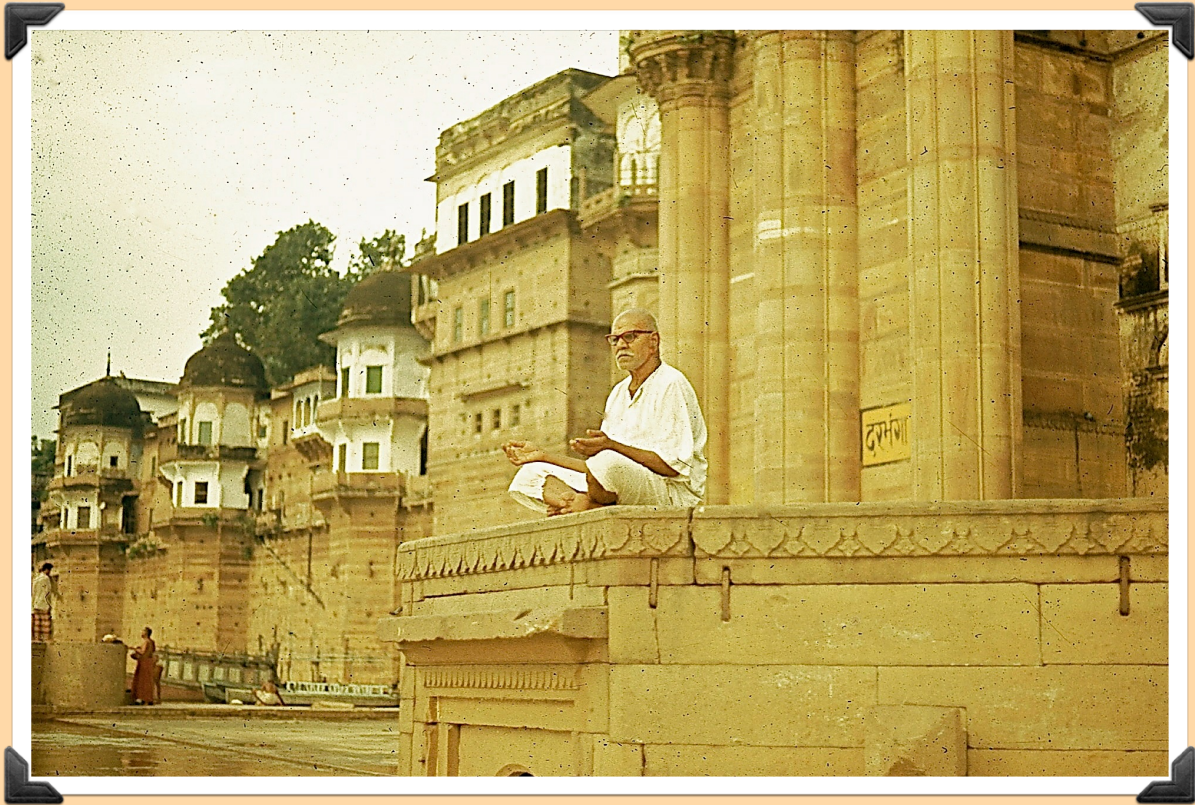
Cremations attended to by Harijans of the Dom family, who have a hereditary monopoly (my boatman in the foreground).



Bier decoration ?? Durga??



Upstream from Manikarnika Ghat. Boats bring in wood for cremation and Ganges sand for cement and concrete construction. A Shiva lingam shrine is in the foreground.



Brahmin priest on dais in front of Darbhanga Ghat

Back at Dasavamedha Ghat, I tipped my boatman generously and then made my way up to Visvanath Temple -- the Golden Temple. Varanasi is now the official name of Benares, which is an old corruption. But Hindu inhabitants prefer the name Kashi, "The City of Light," and the reflections off the gold finials of the temple towers remind one of that designation. The Golden Temple, a Shiva Temple, has all its spires plated with gold, with the 50-foot tall Shikhara, representing Mt. Meru, being the most spectacular. According to legend, it dates from the time of the Hindu epics. Destroyed several times, it was last rebuilt in 1776. The gold was put on in 1835, the Shikhara alone consuming a ton. This temple is one of only 12 in the world that enshrines the Jyotirlinga of Shiva, a black stone lingam on a square silver altar. As an unaccompanied non-Hindu, I knew I would not be allowed to enter this very special temple.

So I decided to wander through the maze of narrow lanes called galis, some only 6 feet wide, and ended up at a silk merchant on Lahori Tola -- Dwarka Prasad Balmakund.

Behind the 30-foot long counter was a distinguished-looking middle-aged man with a very pleasant countenance, Kishan Chand Chopra. The wall behind him consisted of nothing but shelves that rose up to the 10-foot ceiling and were totally full of precisely folded silk saris and shawls, presenting a vibrant spectrum. It is a 30-foot long psychedelic wall, and Mr. Chopra allowed me a few moments of gaping wonder before he asked if he could assist me. I asked him to show me some zari silk shawls (gold thread brocade). Instantly he summoned a servant who returned to a back room to make chai, and then an assistant made several trips up and down a ladder to supply Mr. Chopra with about 20 shawls for my inspection. Each one was lovingly unfolded and displayed and its attributes described. As I sipped my chai, I thought he would have shown me every zari silk shawl in his shop, but a gleaming red one, with tigers, elephants, and peacocks, caught my eye. My obvious admiration did not help my attempt at negotiating a price, and we agreed on 220 rupees. I next proposed to buy a second shawl, a elegant blue one, at a substantial discount. I won it at 150 rupees. Together, the amount was about half my final monthly living allowance as a Peace Corps Volunteer. The shawls would be presents for Mom and Boo.





Mr. Chopra kindly offered to show me a loom that was presently being operated in a room above. I was surprised and fascinated to see that a belt of punch-cards controlled the pattern by prescribing various combinations of raising the hooks/ mails that guide the warp threads. He said it could take days to set up a loom to produce an intricate pattern like the one on my tigers-elephants-peacocks shawl. A skinny young man was perched at the loom, speedily flinging the shuttles back and forth, retracting the beater, and activating the punch-card head.

Back on the street, I decided to re-enter the maze of galis winding between conglomerates of residences and shops. Here and there the narrow canyons are overshadowed by upper floors or balconies cantilevering out slightly. Approaching a dead-end, one discovers it is not, and another part of the maze draws you on. When I paused to take a picture, a man appeared at a doorway and admonished me, pointing out that I had not asked permission. I then remembered the ancient concept of buri nazar, the evil eye, and put my camera away, a little ashamed of my touristy demeanor. Eventually I found a wider thoroughfare and a dozing rickshaw walla. He threaded me back to the Ajaya where sleep found me amidst thoughts of centuries past.

October 9, 1973, 9 p.m.

This morning I decided to go to Sarnath where Siddhartha first preached about the Dharmachakra, the wheel of dharma, or law, thereby giving birth to Buddhism. India forsook Buddhism centuries ago, but I became interested in it last year during my Himalayan trek in Nepal. I will always remember the nights spent at the Takshindu Gompa (Monastery) and with the old Sherpa couple at Dingboche.

In front of the hotel I readily found a rickshaw walla for the 4 - 5 mile trip north to Sarnath. My fellow proposed a fare for the round trip, which would include a snooze for him while I explored, and we both were quite happy with the arrangement. So we set off, threading our way through the galis and finally entering the thoroughfare along the rail line. Thus far, my walla had little opportunity to use his bell, or I should say BELLS, because his rickshaw was equipped in

the quirky and ingenious manner adopted exclusively by all Benares rickshaw wallas : one or two bells are mounted on each side of the front wheel fork with clangers that can be activated by the passing of EACH AND EVERY SPOKE. As long as a lever is pinched on the handlebars, the bells sing constantly, communicating to all, far and near, that this particular rickshaw can be a force to be reckoned with. The arrangement reminds me of the playing cards we would affix with clothes-pins to the front fork of our bikes when we were kids -- only this invention is a loud and effective warning device. My rickshaw had the double arrangement - 4 bells - and my fellow made them sing as we merged into a dense traffic of other rickshaws, all trilling away, and began weaving and passing or impatiently attempting to do so. I had faintly heard this symphony while we were still deep in the galis, and now we were part of it. From the first it was crazily stimulating -- it seemed like a mega-race, fueled by mega-joules of human energy, but the drivers were competing in a seasoned, nonchalant manner. We turned onto the Madan Mohan Malviya Road and after about a mile we crossed the Varuna River on the Puranapul Bridge (the "Old Bridge," but not the actual old bridge, gone many years ago.) It doubles as a dam. The traffic was entirely rickshaws, and now the road was lined with trees and had the aspect of a parkway. There were bell-trilling crescendos and diminuendos as the positions of fellow rickshaw wallas re-configured around us, and surges of oncoming traffic repeatedly demonstrated the Doppler effect. My guy was as assertive and adept as any of them, and periodically he'd make a move, advertised slightly in advance with his own euphonious contribution to the chorus, my ears in line with its full force. I settled back in the seat and closed my eyes now and then. This rickshaw ride was astonishingly wondrous. Should I expect anything less from Benares?

After 10 or 15 minutes of symphonic cycling we angled off Malviya Road onto Ashoka Marg and into Sarnath where I disembarked at the east gateway. My rickshaw walla found a shady place to curl up on the passenger seat. It was quiet here - the only bell heard seemed to come from a temple - and very few people were about.

A little way up the path I could see the impressive Mulaganddhakuti Vihara Temple. On approach, I could see the Bodhi Tree, a pipal fig tree, on its right and made straight for it. When the temple was finished in 1931, the tree was planted as a cutting brought from the famous Bodhi Tree in Sri Lanka, which had been grown from a cutting taken circa 236 BC from the original Bodhi tree at Bodhgaya, 120 miles southeast of Benares.

"Bodhi" means wisdom, or awareness. It was under the tree at Bodhgaya, that Siddhartha attained enlightenment before reuniting at Sarnath with his former attendants, who had forsaken him because he had abandoned self-mortification. The shrine in front of the Sarnath tree reminds everyone that this is the Deer Park of old, one of Buddhism's most revered sites. Here Siddhartha revealed to his attendants that he was a Supreme Buddha and then preached



the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eight-fold Path, the Twelve Laws of Dependent Origination, and the Twelve Laws of Dependent Termination. The Four Noble Truths relate to the possibility of ending suffering through Nirvana, and the Noble Eight-fold Path relates to attaining Nirvana.

I saw that the shrine in front of the the Sarnath Bodhi Tree depicts, between the two beautiful stylized deer, the eight-spoked Dharmachakra (wheel of law), symbolizing the Eight-fold Path -- the eight RIGHTS :

right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. The carved stone Dharmachakra at the top of the shrine has 16 spokes. I assume this represents the 16 characteristics of the Four Noble Truths.

I left the Bodhi tree and was drawn to the immense stupa about 200 yards behind me. It is the Dhamek Stupa, previously called the Dharmachakra because, I suppose, it was built and then enlarged on the spot where Buddha gave his first sermon to his former attendants. Re-built in the 5 - 6th century A.D., its about 140 feet tall. The lower portion is encased in stone, incised with exquisite geometric and floral patterns, and relieved by eight projecting faces, each containing an empty niche. The upper portion appears unfinished with exposed brickwork. Hidden somewhere in the center is the original stupa, and inside that its treasury, containing sacred relics.

As I approached this stupa, perhaps the oldest in existence, I had the feeling that its unfinished status could symbolize the fate of Buddhism in India. I have learned that in its pure state, Buddha was viewed as a supreme teacher emphasizing Dharma, compassion, and non-violence while eschewing magic and ritual. As such, Buddhism rivaled Brahminism for centuries. The great emperor Ashoka was instrumental in its promotion. But the Mahayana sect turned

Buddha into the incarnation of the Deity and a savior, while assimilating local cults, developing ritual, and formalizing art. It was this Buddhism that flourished in the Himalayas and beyond, while in India, Brahminism assimilated the moral concept of Dharma and recognized Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu. The concept of non-violence didn't serve the ambitions of the aristocracy, but by transforming Hinduism otherwise, Buddhism left its mark while losing its appeal. And so, the Dhamek Stupa has remained unfinished for 14 centuries.



Up close, facing the base of this massive stupa, I tried to imagine what relics its treasury contains. A few of Buddha's bones? Or just a few strands of his hair? I think unsolved mysteries may be more precious because they are just that.

I back-tracked to the temple and entered through the massive portico, walking under a huge bronze bell. Inside, the walls are adorned with frescoes depicting scenes from Buddha's life. These were done by Japanese artist Konetsu Nosu. He had studied the famous frescoes in the Ajanta Caves years before and even made copies of them. Here at Sarnath he had worked three years to create his masterpieces.



A portion of Konetsu Nosu's fresco depicting Buddha upon achieving enlightenment under the Bodhi tree and displaying the Bhumisparsha mudra (earth touching gesture). It is believed that Buddha assumed this mudra in order to summon the Earth Goddess to witness the event. Although fingers of the right hand touch the earth, the left hand is in the Dhyana mudra (meditation gesture). This combination of mudras symbolizes the union of wisdom and method, Nirvana and Samsara. In this fresco Buddha is surrounded by Mara and other demons, symbols of temptation seeking to lure him from his spiritual life. Pictured below Buddha are the beautiful temptresses summoned by Mara.

But these wonderful frescoes seem to be a counterpoint to the superb gilded statue of Buddha in the center of the temple. He is depicted in the Dharmachakra Mudra, preaching to his five attendants who are situated beneath him along with two deer and a Dharmachakra wheel. Out front on a step before the marble platform is a heavy locked safe containing a silver casket. This contains sacred relics unearthed at the ruins of the main shrine at Sarnath

and others found at the ancient ruins at Taxila in the Punjab.

Leaving the temple, I explored beyond the Dhamek Stupa and came across the ruins of the "Main Shrine," first built by Ashoka in the 3rd century BC to mark the place of Buddha's meditation. Just beyond, covered by a small pavilion, is the broken lower portion of the most celebrated of all of Ashoka's columns.



I could see the chiseled inscriptions of Ashoka's edicts on the column pieces. I had learned that these proclaimed his belief in the Buddhist concepts of Dharma and included directives to promote them throughout his kingdom. But rather than specifying religious practices, the edicts focused on social and moral precepts.

My last stop at Sarnath was at the museum where I got to admire the famous lion capital that had topped

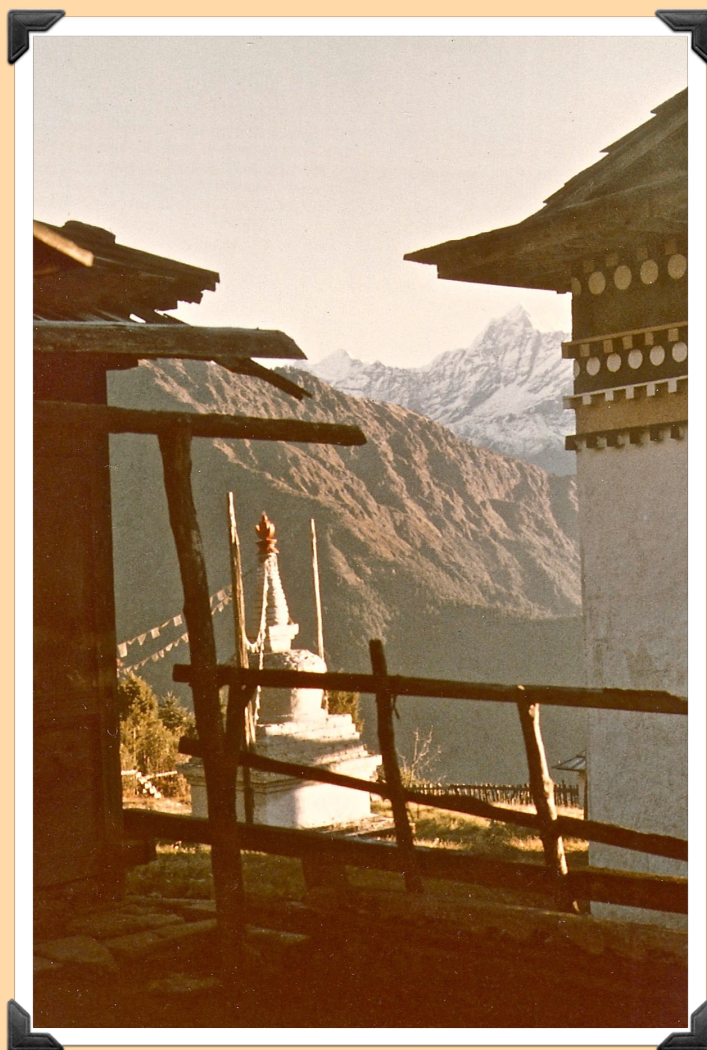


Ashoka's column when it stood undamaged at about 50 feet. Of highly polished sandstone, the four back-to-back roaring lions are its most prominent feature, and proclaim the edicts to the four compass directions. They stand on a circular abacus adorned with figures of a lion, elephant, bull, and horse, separated by 24-spoke Dharmachakra wheels. The abacus stands on a base in the form of an inverted lotus. Behind, against the wall, is the remains of the parasol, another 24-spoke Dharmachakra wheel that had been positioned over the lions on an octagonal stone shaft.

This beautifully sculptured column capital from the third century BC became India's national emblem in 1950. Ashoka's 24-spoke Dharmachakra wheel became the symbol featured on the Indian flag. It replaced the original spinning wheel, the Congress Party symbol, which would have

been overtly political. It seems so appropriate that the emblems of modern day India are derived from the symbols of India's greatest emperor. He united most of the subcontinent but, regretting the carnage of war, converted to Buddhism and also promoted religious tolerance. But the emblems' meanings appear so difficult to live up to. And, alas, the Asiatic lion is almost extinct.

I found my rickshaw walla still snoozing in the shade. Leisurely we made our way back down Malviya Road, the cycle-bell symphony now in a slower adagio movement. With eyes closed, I found myself drifting back to a night I experienced at the Takshindu Monastery in the Himalayas. I could hear the random mixtures of cymbals, horns, drums, and chanting. I could smell the burning yak-butter lamps. And yet through the haze, the colorful thangkas shone, their silk borders gleaming around the Tantric deities. The spinning silver cylinders of the monks' prayer wheels shone the brightest. Again I began to feel, if not understand, Tantra: the connective principal underlying all existence.



Now I realize it is the MYSTIC that had infiltrated my scientific defenses, the MYSTIC I was ready to find at Sarnath. The ancient truths and wisdoms and Buddha's life story are appealing. But the mathematical truths and paths - the spokes of the wheel that formulate Dharma, compassion, and attaining Nirvana - seem like desperate attempts to coerce the human species to behave, as a whole, more like those species that have evolved altruistic behavior. Will we remain a species forever embroiled in tribalism? Or will we evolve?

The most powerful mystical force I have felt so far in Benares is, oddly enough, the cycle-bell symphony. It seems to be a perfect and lovely form of communication, as perfect as something devised by insects. For now, the biologist in me has won out. Buddha had meditated in Sarnath's Deer Park. Maybe he would have, at some point, sympathized with my thinking.

October 11, 1973, 8 am.
on train to Calcutta

I'm in a first class compartment that, lacking a reservation, I acquired by a tactful inquiry to the conductor followed by a baksheesh of 10 rupees (a bribe). As the train was about to leave Benares at around midnight, I thought I was having the compartment to myself. But the conductor returned and installed a very pretty young woman opposite me. As he was rushing out he flashed me a mischievous grin coupled with a wink!! I'm leaving Benares in quite a different style than when I entered it.

Usha, I am sure, is the only Indian woman on this train in a pantsuit with a short hair cut. She has lived all of her 20 years or so in London and is in India the first time, about to visit relatives in Calcutta. She had boarded this train in Delhi.

Yesterday I took a 3-4 mile rickshaw ride down to Benares Hindu University to visit the new Visvanath Temple. One of the several new temples in India financed by the Birla family of industrialists, it's one of the tallest and open to all. On the way I couldn't resist stopping at a sculpture shop where duplicate statues of a Hindu guru were being chiseled from white marble.

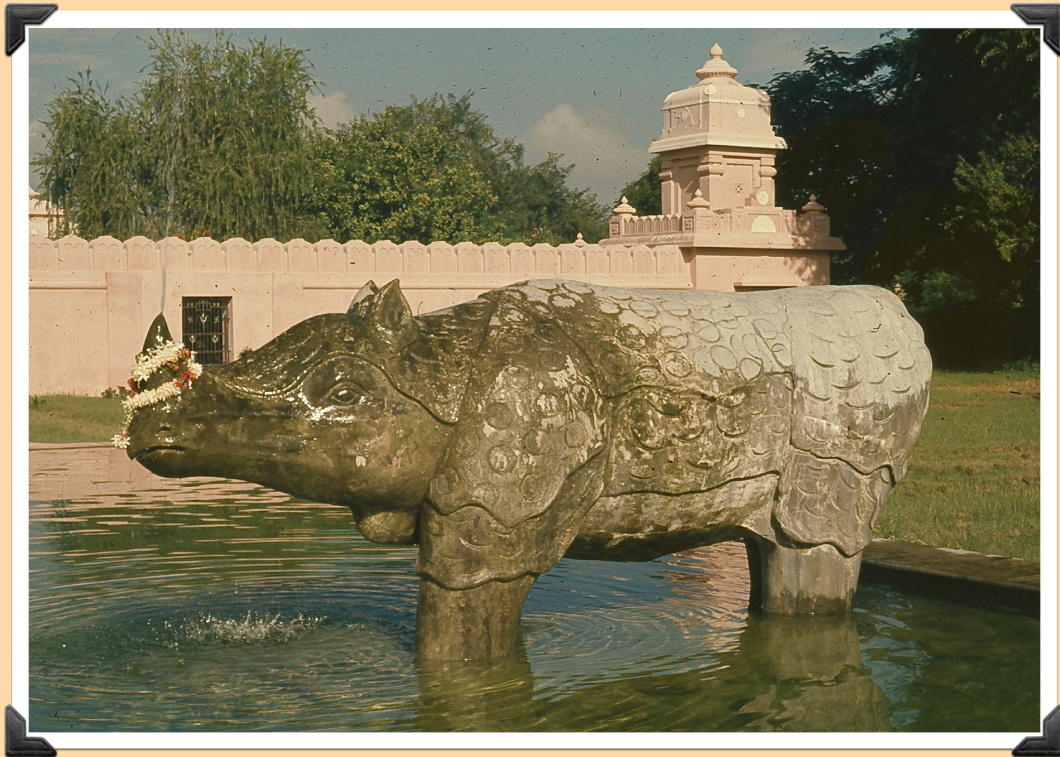


The new Visvanath is a beautiful white marble Shiva temple, surrounded by pink walls, gates, porticos, and cupolas. The inside finish is fairly simple, with stately columns and painted bull and trident motifs on the friezes. In the sanctum, surrounded by a brass railing, is what appears to be a typical black stone lingam of modest size rising from a solid silver yoni. The lavish sculpture and gold plating typical of bygone eras are not to be found.



With me were what appeared to be Indian tourists, which somehow diminished any expectations I had that I might pick up some vibes of Shiva worship. The priests appeared to be on break and nobody seemed inclined to perform a puja.

In the lovely grounds outside I spotted a pool with a surprising rhino fountain. Someone had waded in and adorned his horn with garlands as if it were a Shiva lingam. Perhaps it was a puja performed by a lower caste person who felt too shy and uncertain to enter the temple, perhaps one of the groundskeepers. The rhino with his puja made the day's trip more worthwhile, and when I found my rickshaw walla, he asked me what I was smiling about.



The train has just pulled out of a stop at Rajinagar. In usual fashion, chai and fruit vendors had besieged the coach windows and Usha tried to buy "tea" and a "banana." Several vendors were obviously confused by her polite requests or totally ignored them. I suddenly realized that she speaks absolutely no Hindi so I moved beside her at the window and instructed the vendors to provide us chai and kala and paid for the lot. Usha expressed appreciation and a little embarrassment. I'm sitting here in my native dress of kurta and pajamas, reflecting on the very odd situation I find myself in. I would like to know her better. Maybe offer to assist in Calcutta sight-seeing. But to take advantage of that little gentlemanly act with the vendors would be..... ungentlemanly, I think. And maybe she is traveling to Calcutta to meet, for the first time, a man who has been arranged to be her husband. I wonder what might be proper to talk about for the next couple of hours.

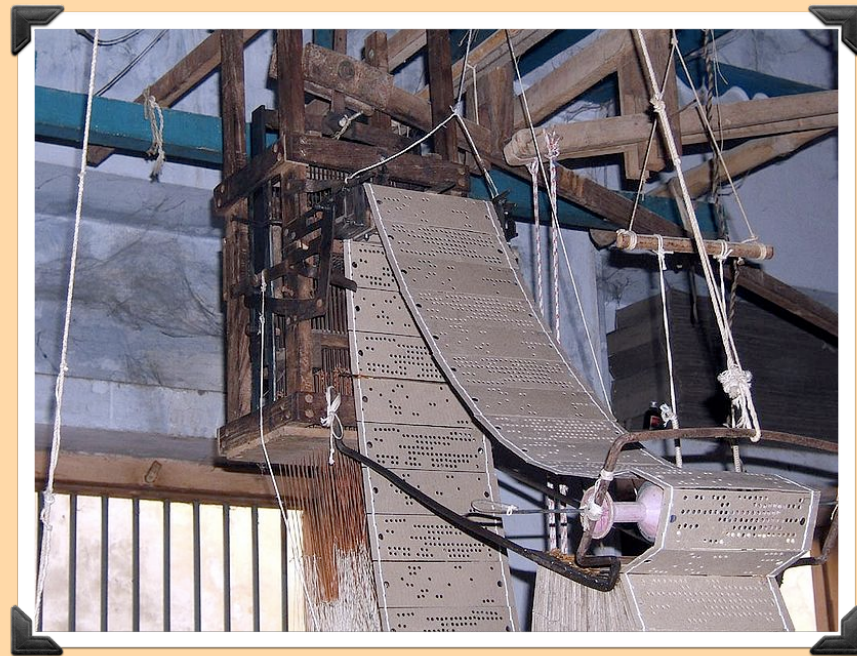
NOTES



Indian class WP locomotive like the one that brought me to Benares. The WP, first built by the Baldwin Works in Philadelphia, was first exported to India in 1947. It became the beloved workhorse of Indian Railways. India manufactured it from 1963 to 1966 and some remained in service until the 1990s. Photo courtesy of The Indian Railways Fan Club.



*Benares Jacquard or Punch-card loom
Photo courtesy of Wikipedia*



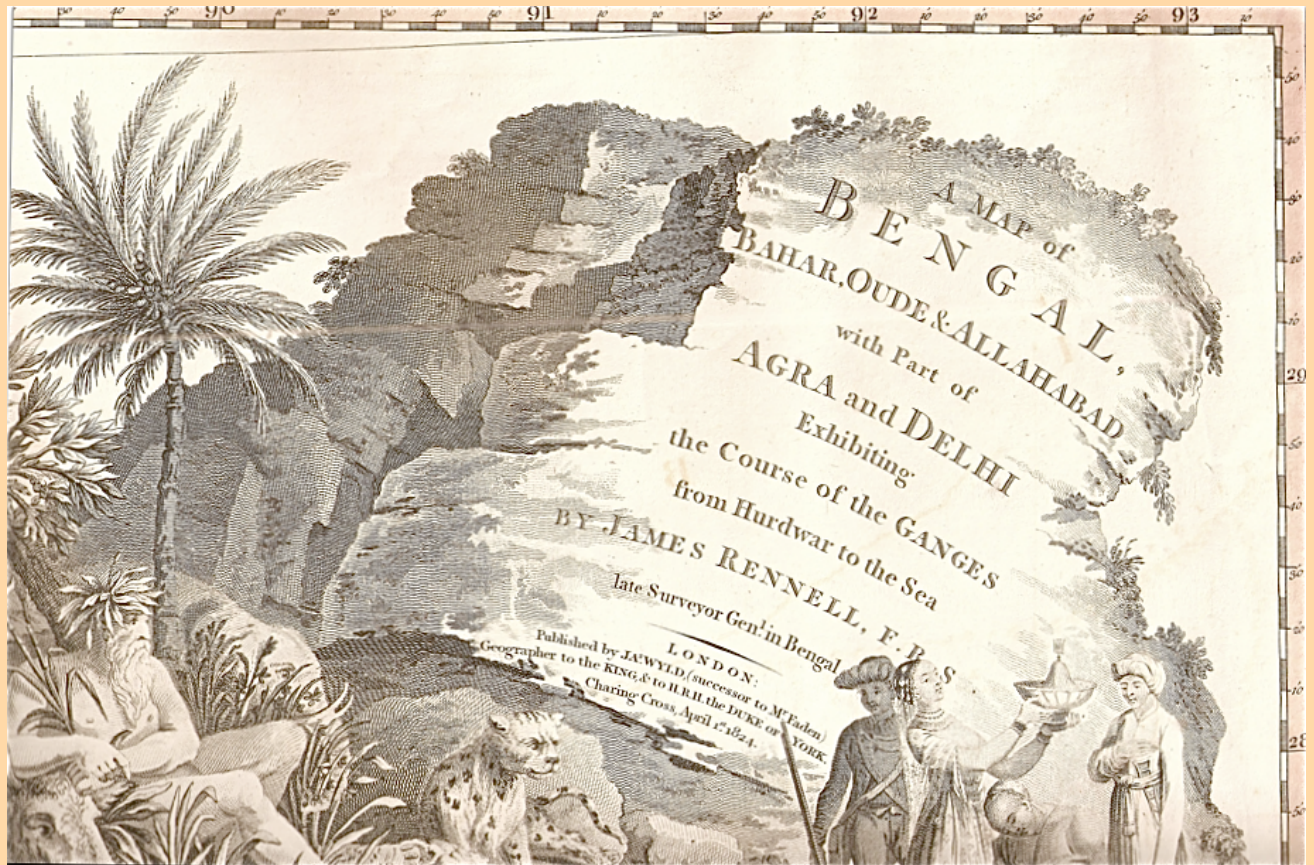
*Close-up of loom
punch-cards
Photo courtesy of
Wikipedia*



Benares Rickshaw



*Close-up of the
famous Benares
bicycle bells*



Corner of map that provided the detailed portion of the Ganges at Benares on page 1. Published in 1824, it is a gift from my brother, Brian.