

## **Rough ride to value death, life in Kashi**

**By Tulsi Badrinath**

To leave the city one resides in and to go anywhere else, is in itself to leave behind the everyday life and the routine. However in Varanasi, there is an added dimension. It is almost as though one passes through an intangible, shimmering curtain to enter the heightened atmosphere of Kashi and once there, notions of time, space, money and what is truly essential to life are re-arranged.

A rickshaw-puller will take a while making mental calculations before asking for a paltry amount to take one several miles away. Flowers and other offerings for the temples, in generous quantities, cost between ten to fifteen rupees, the prices beginning at rupees two. Delicious tea served in an equally delightful kulhad costs rupees two. One hundred rupees go a long way in this city. To ask the timeless question, ‘how much?’, is to hear a price disconcertingly less than one expects. On the other hand, should one somehow betray the fact of being an outsider, then prices can triple in seconds!

On a recent February morning in Varanasi, I took a rickshaw to the ghats—an experience at once scary and soothing. When the wheel hit a rut on the congested road and I tried to secure myself, my hands clutched at insubstantial air.

Used to city life, my car and the accelerator pedal that required only the lightest touch to cover distances, I found the pace of travel slow, laboured. A stream of dusty vehicles overwhelmed the one-lane, provincial road while Bablu, frayed, discoloured clothes barely covering his emaciated frame, strained to propel me over the long distance. I felt my body for the burden it was, felt the secret horror that the world found it acceptable that another human being should bear its weight.

Crossing a succession of small, unremarkable shops, the new-yet-familiar sights of the bazaar, cows, huge mounds of wet rubbish, shaded lanes or gali-s, we moved at a speed that induced serenity. There was all the time in the world to reach the Ganga, eternal presence in this sacred city.

But soon, Bablu picked up alarming speed. Perched precariously at a height, the breeze streaming past my face, the only option was to surrender, let go of fear, and absorb images of the crowded city while Bablu swerved this way and that in his ramshackle rickshaw, coasting instinctively towards disaster only to avoid it at the last minute. I learnt to wedge one foot on the

metal strip below his triangular seat to brace myself, even as I wondered if I would be catapulted out into the air and smashed to pulp by a passing vehicle.

Strangely, rather than fearing such an eventuality, it was possible to consider it dispassionately. I realized then that in Varanasi the thought of death itself is rendered benign. If it were to come that very moment, it would be a blessing, undeserved though it might be. The blessing of dying in Kashi.

But Bablu was too good a driver; such blessings were not to be granted to me that day. At Godhulia, he squeezed the hand brakes and brought the rickshaw to a sudden, disorienting halt. As I clambered down, trembling slightly with relief, I understood that to arrive safely at one's destination is to know the truth that life is a gift.