

Dawn dip in Ganges at Varanasi purifies the soul

By PATRICK JOHNSTON

"Come down to the river early," my boatman had told me. "That way we can see the sun rise over the Ganges." The thought of a 4:30 alarm made me wince. However, given the many thousands of kilometers traveled to reach the sacred river this was not a proposition I was prepared to turn down.

The setting was Varanasi, one of the holiest places in India, nestled on what is certainly the holiest river. Located in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, Varanasi has been a religious and cultural center for over 2,000 years. While Buddhists, Muslims and even Christians have established a presence in the city, over the years its focus remains on Hinduism — and the mighty Ganges.

Varanasi is a multifaceted city with a large and famous university and literally hundreds of temples. However, its premier claim to fame is its waterfront, a strip of grandeur that some say puts even Venice to shame.

The attraction here are the long flights of stairs that lead down to the river. Called *ghats*, these stairways stretch 5 km along the shore of the Ganges in Varanasi and are used by Hindus for their ritual bathing. Built mostly by rich landowners as a kind of philanthropic gesture, they are usually part of a larger building complex. Adjacent temples complete the ceremonial picture. Every morning they are flooded with pilgrims.

Ghats are not peculiar to Varanasi and can be found all



DEVOUT HINDUS by the thousand crowd the holy waters of the Ganges in dawn purification rituals, as they have for over 2,000 years. PHOTO BY PATRICK JOHNSTON

over India. A dip from these stairs, according to Hindu teachings, is said to purify the soul. If you have the good fortune to be cremated here (Varanasi has a number of crematoriums on its riverfront) Hindus believe the sprinkling of your ashes in the Ganges will help get you straight into heaven thus bypassing a troublesome reincarnation.

My boat launched at the south end of the river. Ahead lay an endless line of dimly lit structures with crowds of people beginning to appear on the steps. The sun had barely broken the horizon but the shoreline was already bustling with life.

An early British traveler once wrote of Varanasi, "It is

not the artistic excellence of the details but the grouping of the whole which contributes to make the complete picture . . . which possibly could not be passed in the whole world for picturesqueness." I would not call the area strikingly beautiful but the combination of old buildings, endless staircases and sari-clad bathers creates a magic that would be difficult to find elsewhere.

My boat moved slowly toward the central ghats. One of these, Manikarnika ghat, is the oldest structure on the river, dating back to the 14th century. On this site sits a well said to be filled with the sweat of Shiva, an important Hindu deity. He apparently was trying to retrieve an ear-

ring his wife had dropped and he overdid it slightly — digging a tank and perspiring enormously in the process.

As I drifted past, bodies were being carried from the shore onto a kind of floating crematorium. Later the entire flotilla was in flames.

Beyond this was Dasaswamedha ghat, probably the most popular set of steps, noted for the fact that vehicles can drive to the shore here. Nobility, including Queen Victoria's progeny, arrived here when they wanted to view the city by boat. Dasaswamedha means "10 horses sacrificed." Apparently here, according to Hindu folklore, the Hindu god Brahma did just that.

Everywhere the shore teemed with life. Sari-clad women modestly entered the water in full dress, Brahmin priests stood waist deep in prayer, pilgrims meditated on the steps.

Much to the chagrin of Hindu purists Varanasi is very much on the list of "hippy" haunts, and there is no shortage of cheap guest houses along the shore to attest to the popularity of the place. In some cases — most notably the Kumiko lodge, popular with Japanese tourists — buildings attached to the ghats have been converted into accommodations for budget travelers.

Tourism has become a major feature of life on the Varanasi waterfront. This includes not only the wandering freaks that frequent the place but also tourists on high-priced package tours who stay at expensive hotels on the city outskirts. I couldn't help feeling a little ashamed at the gawking, camera-wielding boatloads photographing Hindus on one of their most important pilgrimages. Then again, who was I to talk?

My boatman was visibly tired as we headed back to our starting point. A stronger sun saw the departure of some of the bathers and their replacement by what appeared to be Varanasi's mobile laundry unit. Draped on the holy steps were literally hundreds of drying garments of all sizes and colors. A purifying rinse? One can't be sure, but no doubt a T-shirt washed in the Ganges has a certain appeal to many Indians.