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AN ATOL FEATURE

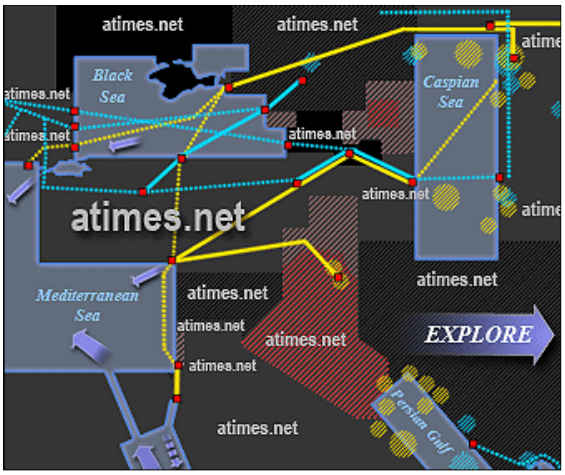
Death and life on the Ganges

By Bryan Pearson

Eyes ochre-red from acrid smoke and face awash with soot-blackened sweat, Santosh Kumar Mallick carefully maneuvers the already-charred corpse into the heart of the funeral pyre, piles on more logs and throws on a bucket of ghee.

"My body feels like it is burning. I always feel as if I am burning," he gasps, standing back as the flames crackle high into the Kolkata sky and the sickly-sweet smell of burning human flesh drifts with the tide up the Ganges.

The body, of an 82-year-old man who died of pneumonia, had earlier been placed by family members onto the pyre of



sandalwood logs which, after rituals performed by a Hindu priest, had been lit by the newly-tonsured eldest male relative.

Since then it has been up to Santosh - who gets paid 30 rupees (about half a dollar) for every body he burns - to tend to the fire and carry out the cremation in accordance with Hindu traditions.

After about two hours, it is time to perform the most sensitive operation of the long, demanding ritual.

"I dare not mess this up; the family would never forgive me," he says as he uses two wooden paddles to poke carefully through the heat and retrieve the remnants of the body - by now only the skull, rib case and part of the pelvis - and rebuild the fire around them.

At age 23 years having already cremated around 2,000 bodies, Santosh handles the grim and delicate task with ease and the grieving relatives murmur their approval.

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When he began this work, at age 15, he would occasionally lose control of the cadaver and it would sprawl sickeningly across the concrete in front of horrified relatives.

But these days it is no longer the fear of not doing the job properly that worries him. It is the state of his health.


Santosh Kumar Mallick at work on the banks of the Ganges in Kolkata. Photo by Bryan Pearson

"I have breathing problems and heart problems," says the slightly-built but surprisingly strong Santosh, dressed in long blue shirt, blackened shorts and slip-slops as he bustles from fire to fire at Nimtala, the main burning ghat (broad flight of steps) that leads down to the banks of the Ganges as it flows sluggishly through the teeming Indian city of Kolkata before entering the Bay of Bengal.

"I breathe in too much smoke. I feel troubled in my body. When I sneeze or cough the phlegm is black," he says.

Sometimes the emotion, too, gets to him.

"When I see the families crying I remember the day my own father died," he says softly before his words are drowned out by devotees in an adjoining red-bricked, flower-strewn temple who break into chanting and begin ringing bells as part of their praise of Lord Shiva.

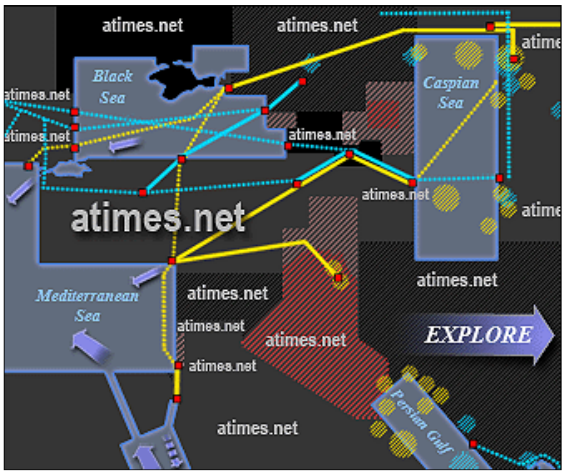
"It is as if those I see weeping are my brothers and sisters," explains Santosh above the sudden clamor.

While he is resigned to doing this arduous work for the rest of what is likely to be a rather short life, he vows his newborn son, Rissi, will have a brighter future. "I have no choice because I am not educated but Rissi will not do this job. That is certain," Santosh says with a sudden surge of determination.

A mere 12 days old, the tiny Rissi, lying cozily in his mother's arms under a makeshift tent erected on the roof of a nearby municipal building overpopulated with the families of those who stoke cremation fires, would not

know of course that his father burns bodies for a living.

Nor for that matter that he has had the misfortune of being born into India's lowest and most despised caste, the Doms.



It is due to this twist of fate that he too, despite his dad's determined vow amid the fire and smoke on this humid Kolkata day, will very likely end up stoking white-hot fires and inhaling throat-searing smoke while reducing the newly dead to little more than a few shovel-fulls of ashes to be heaved into the Ganges by teary family members.

"I want my son to go to school, to learn, to get to university. I want him to be an engineer or a doctor," says Santosh, pausing from his toils for a cigarette - as if his parchment-brittle lungs haven't already this day breathed in more than their fair quota of smoke.

"I want him to lead a respectable life," he insists.

The odds however are overwhelmingly stacked, like the pricey sandalwood logs on the funeral pyre, against little Rissi.

For now he spends his little life mostly sleeping and from time to time, stretching his tiny arms and bawling for food while his 21-year-old mother Rina clucks and caresses and cradles her firstborn.

Inevitably, however, he too will one day stand amid the fires of Nimatala vowing a better future for his own children. Just as Santosh did, just as Santosh's father Mohinda did before him, and just as Santosh's grandfather "Baba" did even before him.

Like all those trapped at the lower ends of India's social stratification system and who are inevitably shunned by society despite caste-based discrimination being outlawed by the Indian constitution of 1950, the overriding desire, naturally, is to be upwardly mobile.

For Doms in particular, however, the chances of climbing up the rickety social ladder are remote.

For one thing, Doms touch human corpses and are therefore regarded as "unclean" by other Hindus. Even though the term is banned and those once-called "untouchables" are now known as Dalits, the sentiment among many Hindus remains unchanged.

"I admire what they do and am pleased they are there to do this job but I would never shake hands with a Dom," says 24-year-old Deshik Dutta, down at Nimtala for the cremation of his grandmother. "The work they do is noble. If I was asked to do it I could not. They are India's real untouchables."

Also counting against the Doms at Nimatala is the fact that

the work they do on sweltering days in ultra-humid Kolkata is so demanding that they have little energy or time left for pursuing much more than sleeping and eating and raising too-large families.

Inevitably, many turn to drink and, due to the daily heat of the fires, the relentless reality of death, the choking smoke and their hard living conditions, suffer poor health. Equally inevitably many die young - some, like Santosh's grandfather, even in their early thirties.

Santosh's father lived a little longer than his own father did and despite drinking heavily managed to send his son to school.

The adventure was only brief, however, and when Mohinda died suddenly at age 45, Santosh, then just 15, left his studies and joined the ragtag band of about 50 men and boys at Nimtala whose job it is to light the fires and perform the elaborate Hindu funeral pyre rituals.

Most of those tending the fires and adjoining electric ovens - funeral pyres due to the exorbitant cost of the wood are mainly the preserve of the rich - suffer some ailment or other, usually of the lungs.

They live roughly, crammed with other families, ducks, chickens, dogs and cats in the municipal building or on its roof.

"We are VIPs - Very Ignored People," laments Sunil Kumar Mallick, who, backed by a father who between tending the fires has set himself up as something of a Hindu guru at Nimtala, has made a courageous bid to escape the Dom never-go-round.

Unlike many children who grow up amid the smoke of the burning ghat, Sunil now aged 29, managed to complete his high school education and even more unlikely, land a job as a journalist on a Kolkata weekly.

He also joined a local drama group and is doing his best to shed the "untouchable" image that has cloaked him from birth.

But, he acknowledges, he is forced to return from time to time to the ghat to shoulder his burden of burning bodies - not only to make extra money but because, he says, this has been the tradition of his caste for centuries.

"It is the sacred duty of the Doms to burn bodies," says the dapper bachelor with ready smile and neatly clipped moustache he hopes will attract a woman from outside his caste as his wife - a rarity for those whose constant reality is endless processions of men clad in white arriving with bodies laid out on ceremonial stretchers and bedecked with flowers.

Santosh, Sunil's cousin, also sees the job as being mainly

spiritual.

"The Hindu scriptures say that when the body is burnt the soul gets freedom and salvation. I give men salvation every time I light the fire," says Santosh.

His working environment is grim - surrounded by soot-blackened buildings and a series of small towers, the ghat with its almost constantly burning fires conjures up images of Dante's inferno.

The site is always busy if not crowded by relatives dressed in the white of mourning then due to the constant visits by holy men, Tantrics who come to consume human flesh during elaborate rituals around fires at night, and Hindu devotees who wander down to the ghat after offering prayers at the nearby temples, or after taking a ritual bath in the Ganges.

On those rare occasions when there are no bodies and no fires and no people around, Santosh and his friends hang about the ghat to socialize, play cricket and, under the direction of Sunil's father the guru, learn the art of meditation and the lessons of the sacred Hindu scriptures.

With a baking hot Bedouin-style rooftop tent his only respite, Santosh also spends his "down time" either inside the cooler temples dotted along the riverside or simply walking next to the Ganges with Rina and little Rissi.


Rina Mallick with baby Rissi
Photo by Bryan Pearson

He also likes to sing and he and Sunil from time to time join voices at one of the nearby bathing ghats, filling the smoky sunset with tremulous voices that alas are slowly being basted by the extreme heats of their daily existences.

Santosh admits that like his father and grandfather, he turns to the bottle from time to time. "But only occasionally. I don't want to be like other Doms and drink too much and die too young," he says, slicking back his long black hair.

Party time! Santosh and Rina a few nights later are to celebrate the birth of Rissi. Drummers arrive and begin making music. Women clad in bright saris swirl around and around in a darkened hall which boasts more soot than paint on the walls.

Rice and dhal are being prepared on a fire in one corner of the hall by a jovial chef named Rajan who explains that he caters for all functions and celebrations at Nimatala.

Men and young boys arrive. The women sit down and the males begin their own dancing - jagged and haphazard compared to the smooth, rhythmic colorful efforts of the women.

Rissi and Rina, the stars of the show, however, never arrive. No explanation is given. Arguments break out. Guests hurry upstairs to eat. The drummers play on and themselves begin dancing in a bid to get the guests back on to the dance floor.

Santosh looks troubled and spends time arguing with others. No one explains what the problem is. People start leaving. The expected time of joy and celebration has become a sad and hollow gathering of teenage boys trying to outperform each other with outrageous dance steps.

The drum troupe goes home. Santosh apologizes and he too goes home. Another cousin, Mukesh, just 15, sits dejected and silent in a corner.

Mukesh like other Doms had been looking forward to this celebration - an occasion to drown the harshness of daily life beneath a wild pounding river of dancing, feasting, flirting and loving. For a while.

Mukesh clearly has long grown used to disillusionment. Selected by his brothers as the potential savior, he was sent to school from a young age while they paid his fees from their work at the fires.

It was he who would become literate, become educated, find a good job and help the family rise out of the swamp. Mukesh was to be the one they would boast about. Someone who would give them a smidgeon of hope.

But an under-average student, he has cast off the unwanted role of saviour and now spends his days pretending to go to school but in fact hanging out with friends, watching Bollywood movies on crackly black and white television sets or listening to latest Hindi hits on CD players.

He admits out of earshot of his brothers that he is unlikely to graduate from school and will inevitably end up stoking the fires alongside Santosh.

Sunil, the journalist and actor, had for a while offered some hope. Talk was that he would emerge as Nimtala's Dr

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar - the Dalit lawyer who rose through the ranks to help pen the Indian constitution.


A body prepared for cremation
Photo by Bryan Pearson

But he freely acknowledges that he was never ever going to attain those sorts of giddy heights, nor even outwit the burning ghat once and for all.

Right now his journalism job is rather tentative and his involvement in theatre, although enthusiastic, is confined to bit parts. He has risen but nowhere near high enough.

He admits too that he is unlikely to find a wife outside of the Doms - "who wants to marry someone who burns bodies?" - and that at most he can hope is to follow the path of his father, known as Guruji, and become a teacher of scriptures.

"I admit I don't know where it will lead to," he says of his attempt to escape the burning fires along with the haunting memories of being taunted as an "untouchable" by his classmates.

"I am after all a Dom and there is discrimination against the Doms."

But every birth in this fractious community - it is riven with political divisions - offers new hope, no matter how teeny.

Rina, sitting amid a group of women weaving the bamboo baskets for which the Doms are well known, cradles her son. She, like her husband, harbors high ambitions for the little boy.

Rina, with her orange-and-white dotted headscarf, her bright-yellow sari, her high cheekbones, soft round face, light skin and understated beauty, her long fingers and her disarming smile could easily have made it big in the world of glamour or in Bollywood - had she been born into a different caste, a different world, a different reality.

But she is a Dom and can't hope to escape the crass judgments of her compatriots.

For now she seems quite content to murmur lovingly to Rissi - the boy with the high forehead and button nose on whose still miniscule shoulders rest the heady ambitions of his downtrodden family.

Bryan Pearson *is a veteran journalist who has worked extensively in Africa, India, Afghanistan, Pakistan as well as throughout the Middle East, including long stretches in Iraq. He is currently Chief Editor, Middle East English Service, Agence France-Presse.*