

DEATH HOSPITALS IN KASHI

The people of the Hindu tradition travel from near and far on the brink of death to inhale their final breath in their sacred City of Banaras. Banaras' city circumference is marked by the *panch-kroshi* (also spelled, *panch-kosi*), a pilgrimage route that, at times, has approximately tens of thousands of pilgrims walking along its paths. The entire route of the *panch-kroshi* is about 50 miles long and generally takes five days to complete (Parry 15). The pilgrimage route of *panch-kroshi* is deemed so extraordinary due to the belief of the Hindu's that all who die within this boundary will attain *moksa*, a Hindu's lifelong quest for liberation (Justice 20). Hindu's refer to the sacred city of Banaras as Kashi and speak of the attainment of *moksa* as ending the unwanted cycle of birth, death and rebirth. This continuous cycle, known as *mukti*, exists for each Hindu until *moksa* is accomplished (Justice 49). *Kashyam marnam mukti* means 'death in Kashi is liberation'; this often quoted Sanskrit tag beautifully sums up the almost universal belief of a Hindu (Parry 21). Once this liberation has been attained, *mukti* ceases and the ghost of the dead is able to rise up past hell and rebirth, into heaven where it stays unchanging forever. Exceptions and regulations exist for proper attainment of *moksa*; a few exceptions to reaching *moksa* may be ones final thoughts, and which riverbank in Banaras one dies. The city of Banaras is located between Delhi and Calcutta in the middle of the Ganges valley (Parry 33). The Ganges River separates Banaras into two riverbanks, the west and the east. The west bank is where one will find the Manikarnika Ghat, which is the center of Kashi where it is often believed that on the west bank of Banaras, "[the] universe is created at the beginning of time and the universe burns at the end of time" (Justice 20). It is on the west bank that *moksa* is granted (provided the right frame of mind and other requirements have been met). The east bank is usually vacant due to

people's fear of dying on that side of the bank because of the belief that those who expire on the east bank will not attain *moksa*; instead, rebirth as a jackass will occur (Justice16).

As previously mentioned, there are regulations to the attainment of *moksa* for a Hindu. It is sometimes said that the physical act of dying in Kashi is, in fact, not a direct guarantee to *mukti*. Also, it is not guaranteed that one will attain *mukti* immediately after death. The mindset at the moment of death is what determines the speed and level of *mukti* that the dying will achieve. If one dies in Kashi but does not have the proper mindset at the moment of passing to achieve immediate *mukti*, then they will be reborn again a specified number of times before the process is ended, finally allowing them to proceed to heaven (Justice 172). There are four levels of *mukti* that one can arrive at, which level is attained is based on the dying thoughts one produces. *Salokya* is when one resides in the same world as god; *samipya*, the dead remain near to god; *sarupya*, one will take the same form of god and in *sayuja*, the highest level, one actually becomes merged with god (Justice173).

Within the City of Banaras there are places set up where people and a few of their loved ones are welcome to stay while they await the final breath of a family member. These places are similar to a hospital but instead of the goal of saving the dying, their purpose is to let people die in a way that allows them to attain immediate, and the highest-level of, *mukti* while in Kashi. Two of the hospitals that will be discussed still exist in Kashi today, although unfortunately with declining popularity. The Ganga-labh Bhavan, the first of these death hospitals, is located in the most populous area of Manikarnika and is unfortunately difficult to travel to, especially when attempted by those who are weakened by encroaching death. The three-story Ganga-labh Bhavan was once used as a Manikarnika police station; it began by two rich capitalist families, one of which traveled to Kashi bringing their grandmother for *kashi-labh* (promise of salvation). They

found it difficult to locate a place to settle while they stayed in Manikarnika and began to wonder how anyone lower than their financial situation would find accommodation either. This capitalist family joined with another, together, they chose to lease this former police station and begin running it as a hostel where people are welcome to stay while they, or a loved one dies (Justice 59). It is thought that since the beginning of the Ganga-labh Bhavan approximately 10 000 people have died and 12 000 have registered between the walls of this three-story building (Justice 58). Since the introduction of the Ganga-labh Bhavan there are a number of rules to be followed to maintain order and allow the *ghat* (river frontage) to function the way it was intended to. Some of these rules include: a dying pilgrim can stay at most fifteen days; untouchables and those with infectious diseases are not permitted to stay; do not associate with the noble people staying at the rest house next door; pay special attention that you do not do things which may trouble or inconvenience others; within twenty-four hours of the pilgrim becoming Kashi-labh ('the profit of Kashi', attainment of salvation), the accompanying people must free up the Bhavan (Justice 60-61). It is evident through these rules that a caste system exists up until the moment of death and that the *ghat* is there for a purpose. Even the dying are not equal, although their bodies are deteriorating in the same fashion, some Hindu's are still seen as more prestigious and noble than others; the act of dying itself does not even change the rules and roles of a caste system.

The second, and currently the most favoured of these hospitals of death is the Kashi-labh Muktibhavan. A man named Jaydal Dalmia, whose mother happily passed away within the boundary of Kashi, founded the Muktibhavan. After their mother's death and death ceremonies were completed, Dalmia and his brother used the left over rupees for religious purposes and purchased a building with the intention to provide a *satsang* where music, religious chanting and

recitation of the *Bhagavad-Gita* would take place. Dalmia and his brother had no intention of producing a home for the dying, but they did invite those who were fading from life to join them in their *satsang*. After a year or more, people started to travel to the Muktibhavan for the purpose of dying, and thus, the death hospital that it is today began (Justice 63-65). Muktibhavan is not in the center of Manikarnika as the Ganga-labh Bhavan is, yet it is the more used of the two; this is because Muktibhavan is in a less crowded area and has easier access from the railway station (Justice 126). Although Muktibhavan is further from the “center of the universe” it is said to have a more religious feel due to the constant spiritual chants, music, and the reading of the *Bhagavad-Gita* (Justice 126). A major objective of the Muktibhavan is to yield the maximum spiritual benefit of each guest by providing amenities that capitalize on the spiritual atmosphere for the dying. The services offered by the Muktibhavan include specific rituals and a list of rules and restrictions designed to create a religious environment. A number of these regulations include: only those faithful believers and sick on the brink of death are allowed to stay; a place to stay will be available for fifteen days, if there is a special need, with the permission from the manager, one will be able to stay; the making of food must be done on a closed stove using charcoal, there should not be any type of smoke in the rooms or verandas; those infected with infectious diseases cannot stay; incompatible, indecent or reprehensible behaviour will not be tolerated (Justice 174). The underlying rules of each of the hospitals of death within Kashi are quite similar which makes sense since they each are vying for the same purpose.

The Holy City of Banaras has been around in the eyes of believers since existence itself began. The tradition of dying within the *panch-kroshi* will continue for as long as the belief of dying within the boundaries of *panch-kroshi* attains that moksa. As travel to Kashi continues the sacredness of each of the death hospitals, Ganga-labh Bhavan and Kashi Labh Muktibhavan, will

persist. They will continue aiding the dying on their journey to their sacred space in heaven through achieving the highest level of *mukti*. As the tradition of dying in Kashi continues, so will it also draw in new believers through the popularity that it has attained, and so on the cycle will continue.

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Further Recommended Readings

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Oestigaard, Terje (2005) *Death and Life – giving waters: cremation, caste and cosmogony in karmic traditions*. Oxford: Archaeopress.

Prakash, Satya (1985) *Hindu Religion and Mortality*. New Delhi: Asian Publication Services

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Notable Websites

<http://www.globalideasbank.org/soonlat/SL-5.HTML>

<http://www.angelfire.com/ok2/Moo/death.html>

<http://www.sacredsites.com/asia/india/banaras.html>

<http://www.fsmitha.com/h1/ch05.htm>

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