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Listening to the River

"I should have listened," I thought, rolling over on my thin mattress. "I should have listened to my mother when she told me to take my Hindi studies seriously." Now here I was, sleeping on the floor of my aunt's tiny house in Varanasi, desperately trying to understand as my relatives chattered away at me. Someone outside was yelling, and my aunt was responding in a shrill voice while running in and out of the main room where I attempted to sleep. I sat up and tried to gauge what the source of all the distress was. My cousins were already awake and busy in the kitchen, and another of my aunts was rearranging the furniture and sweeping the cement floor. My mother came in from outside and hurried to the kitchen with an armful of groceries, looking frazzled but completely at home. I watched her face as she talked with my cousins, noticing that though she wore a huge smile as she spoke, there was sadness in her eyes. That's when I remembered. Today was the funeral.

My mother had always talked about returning to India, but she always spoke of it in such a dreamlike voice, as though she planned to return there in the afterlife. I, on the other hand, had no intention of ever returning to the dirty, crowded place of my birth. Our modest home in Woodridge, Illinois, where we had lived since immigrating to the U.S. seventeen years ago, suited me just fine. Yet here I was, finally experiencing every aspect of a culture my parents had always described with such reverence and nostalgia. While I reeled with culture shock, my parents were clearly overjoyed at their long-awaited reunion with our estranged family.

The circumstances of our visit, however, were quite somber. My Dadi, or grandmother, a woman I knew only from photographs, had died several days ago. The doctors said it was kidney failure. When they heard she was ill, my parents had immediately sent money so Dadi could seek medical care. However, my grandmother was a stubborn woman of unshakeable faith and refused all treatment besides frequent baths on the holy banks of the Mother Ganga, the miraculous Ganges River that flows through the sacred city of Varanasi.

Like all pilgrims to Varanasi, my grandmother believed that the river, which Hindus worship as a goddess, possesses sacred healing powers. She lived for 67 years on the banks of this holy river and went daily to drink or bathe in its waters. Unfortunately, the river was transformed during Dadi's lifetime from a flow of cleansing water to a slurry of toxic waste. As the population of India exploded and globalization caused the country's industry to grow exponentially, the river's life-giving abilities were stretched to the extreme. Each day, more industrial and domestic runoff is dumped from an increasing number of sites, often very close to other sites where people obtain their drinking water. As the population has grown, agricultural demand has also increased. This means that more water is being diverted from the river in irrigation channels, leaving water levels increasingly lower during the dry season. With less water to dilute the contaminants being dumped into the river, the drinking water of the surrounding communities has become increasingly toxic. One of the most dangerous contaminants is coliform, a bacteria commonly found in fecal matter, and astoundingly high levels of coliform have been found in river water samples.

It was this coliform that killed Dadi. *Escherichia coli*, known as *E. coli*, contaminates the waters of the Ganges due to the presence of feces from wading cattle and domestic sewage. After my grandmother had been drinking water contaminated with *E. coli* for years, the bacteria moved into her kidneys, causing an infection that she treated by drinking more of the holy, yet contaminated water.

Once she noticed that I was awake, my aunt Eila hurried over and began to speak in rapid Hindi. I only caught about every fifth word, but I got the gist. It was time to get to work. I rolled up the mat I had been sleeping on and stuffed it behind the couch, then went to change into the sari my cousin had carefully laid out for me to borrow. When my mother was finally satisfied with my appearance, she directed me to follow Eila and her sisters to the open area near the river, where the funeral would take place.

I followed the women through the busy streets, trying not to trip over my sari as I stared at my new, strange surroundings. As we headed down a particularly crowded street, the buildings suddenly gave way to open riverbank. I had seen photographs of my mother's childhood home, and I had read news stories about India's rapid expansion, crowded cities and excessive pollution. Yet nothing I had seen or read could have prepared me for the sight of the Ganges River. I gasped in horror. I knew I was viewing one of the most sacred places for Hindus, but the river looked like a giant sewer, open to the air. The water was a thick yellowish-brown, filled with floating islands of trash. A plastic trash bag leaking a dark brown sludge floated past a man who was bathing on the edge of the river. On the opposite bank, several cows were standing in the water next to a woman washing her clothes. I

stumbled forward, unable to take my eyes off the river. There was something else floating in the river that I couldn't quite identify, and as the strangely-shaped object moved closer to the bank of the river, I noticed that people seemed to be looking away or walking slightly upstream. As I watched, the object ran into a pile of trash and rotated slightly, and I suddenly had the urge to vomit. It was a human corpse, partially rotted and floating serenely past the devout bathers, who were determined to ignore its presence.

"Eila!" I shouted, hurrying after my aunt. "There's a body in the river!" I caught up with the women, who simply stared at me. I explained, in my best attempt at Hindi, what I had seen. Eila looked sad and very uncomfortable. She explained that it was a sacred Hindu ritual to wrap the bodies of the dead and lay them in the river, since the Mother Ganga offered a direct route to the afterlife. Her eyes brimmed with tears as she went on to say that this is what we too would be doing with Dadi after she was cremated. Eila told me not to look at the bodies, since it was disrespectful and would upset me. We moved on down the banks of the river, passing countless funeral pyres lined up along the banks. As a sacred city, many people make a pilgrimage to Varanasi to die along the banks of the holy river and make their passing here. Everywhere I looked, there was death.

I did not expect to feel any surge of emotions in saying goodbye to a woman I have never met, but I found that I simply couldn't hold back tears while watching my mother and her siblings perform their various duties in the ceremony. Eventually, the smell of the smoke and flesh from the many pyres became too much for me, the sounds of crying relatives too heart-wrenching. I turned and walked away from the

banks, hurrying to find air that didn't reek of death. I found a low rock wall where I sat, watching the passersby and reflecting on all I had seen since arriving in my family's Varanasi home. I had met so many people in the last few days who I somehow felt so close to, though I had spent my life so far away. The faith of these people was deeply moving. They believed so strongly in the power of their river, in the benevolence of the goddess Ganga, that they simply could not conceive of her waters as a danger to their health. Their faith was so deeply rooted that though they saw the river filling with toxins and pollutants, they never stopped turning to the river in their times of need.

These faithful people deserve a place to carry out their sacred rituals. They deserve a river as pristine as the one that gave life to their ancestors. They deserve to know that the companies that industrialized the nation and promoted its economic growth have also transformed their river into a toxic sludge. They need to know that their rituals, though sacred, are unsanitary and are causing more disease and death. It was so easy for me to watch the many ceremonies and cleansing baths being performed along the riverbank and think, "*You have to stop this, you're destroying yourselves!*" Yet how would I have explained this concept to my grandmother, who had spent 67 years relying on the Ganges for her spiritual and material needs?

I got up from the wall and began to wander back in the direction of my aunt's home, losing myself in the busy streets and market squares of the city. By the time I reached their doorstep, I had determined my course of action. I dug through my duffle bag and pulled out the old Hindi textbook I had packed solely to appease my

mother, and set to work reviewing lessons. It was time to take my Hindi studies seriously.

I knew I could not return to Illinois and forget about everything I had seen here. I couldn't go back to studying art at the private liberal arts college where I was just finishing my freshman year, while I felt such a nagging responsibility to help my family and their people out of their cycle of disease and pollution. However passionate I was about studying art, it seemed suddenly trivial after I had seen how much work was to be done to help my family and their people. It was clear to me that if I wanted to help these people, my first step had to be learning their language and understanding their culture.

I spent the rest of our trip immersing myself in the lives of my family members as much as possible. Eila taught me to cook, and I taught her how to purify her drinking water by boiling it first. My young cousins excitedly helped me improve my accent and vocabulary as I struggled with their language. When it came time to leave, I exchanged tearful goodbyes and hugged each of my family members, promising that I would return soon.

When I arrived home, I made an appointment with my academic advisor who, after hearing my story, helped me switch to a major in global public health. My mother, though thrilled about my newfound enthusiasm for the well-being of her people, questioned my sudden and drastic actions to shift the course of my career. I understood her concern, but though nervous about the difficulty of my new coursework, I felt completely confident that this was what I wanted and needed to do with my life.

My trip to India prompted a significant change in my perspective. Until visiting my family, I had been happily ignorant of all world issues. I had heard other students on campus talking about environmental destruction, but I never considered it a serious problem until I had experienced it firsthand. My attitude represented a typical human approach to addressing difficult issues; it is hard to appreciate the gravity of a situation until it affects one's daily life.

However, I truly believe that if everyone could see what I have seen, they would quickly join me in stopping the destruction of a resource as precious as our rivers. If others could feel the pain of knowing that a loved one had suffered a death that could have been so easily prevented by higher standards of environmental health, they would join the fight to restore the Ganges to her former glory. If we want to adequately respond to environmental destruction, the world must undergo a shift in perspective as dramatic as the shift that occurred in my own life. Failure to do so will leave us in a world of silent riverbeds, left to say to ourselves, "*We should have listened.*"

References

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