

Burn Ghat

by Hyun Christopher

At the burn ghat in Varanasi, the priests perform ritual cremation. Travelers can get to the burn ghat by road through loud traffic and narrow gullies, but a smooth boat ride provides a wide angle view of the smoke and ash expanse from the middle of the Ganges River. It is unclear if tourists should be allowed to take photos of the burn ghat—for propriety's sake. In the darkness, however, photos play with light, as if the burning bodies light the black river with flames.

Yoon has his phone ready in his jean pocket, sitting on a boat, gliding down the Ganges. Since watching videos of the burn ghat in the comfort of his Seoul apartment, he has wanted to see their fires up close. The boat smells of earth and rot. Night has fallen, and the water churns black as the boatman claps his oars on its surface.

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Earlier upstream, Yoon's friend spoke in Hindi to the boatman. "Bhaiya does not speak Japanese, English, or Hindi. He is Korean. Take bhaiya to see the burn ghat. Drop him there as quickly as you can so he can go to the station. Bhaiya's train will depart soon."

Ready to push Yoon's boat completely into the dark Ganges water, Yoon's friend looked at him under the yellow lamps of the riverbank. The sound of evening river rituals began with bells, the low horn of a conch shell, and raspy chants of an elderly priest blaring from a stale sound system. A variety of insects buzzed around, on, and through his friend's black hair.

Yoon's friend spoke to him in Korean. "Hyung, the boat is the fastest way to get to the burn ghat from here. The street traffic is too heavy. As soon as you arrive there, get off the boat and find the main road. Do not stop and stare at the burning bodies. Keep going up. Do not get lost. The alleyways are like a maze. Ask local people around you for directions to the road. Do you remember what I taught you to say?"

"Baloo Lashi Shop gahan hai?"

“That’s not right. It’s kahan hai, not gahan hai. OK?”

“Baloo Lashi Shop kahan hai. OK!” Yoon gave him a thumbs up.

“Good. But keep asking and asking as you walk until you find the road. Then quickly take an autorickshaw to the train station.”

Yoon awkwardly reached over from the boat to give his friend a hug goodbye, but the boat tipped and Yoon fell backward into the hull. Yoon’s bags rolled into the river. The boatman swiftly scooped them up while the boat rocked itself off into the water and away from Yoon’s friend. Yoon quickly tended to his bags, now reeking of river must.

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Twenty minutes has passed and only now Yoon realizes he did not say goodbye to his friend. Yoon does not speak to the boatman. He’s too embarrassed of his broken English and too shy to use the few Hindi phrases he has practiced since arriving in India. The boatman rows with his back downstream, the burn ghat illuminated behind him. Yoon stares for a moment at him, thinking, *One day, his body may also burn on this river.*

The boat floats toward the burn ghat on which flames engulf six bodies on separate pyres of wood. Yoon expects to smell burnt flesh, but smoke and charred sandalwood hang midair, as if emanating from a burning temple.

“Come, come,” says the boatman, waving his hands for Yoon to get off the boat. Yoon fumbles with his bags, walking like a drunken man onto the ghat.

He climbs the stone steps. There are ashes and they cling to the bottom of Yoon’s shoes. He passes the heat of a fire and hears a loud pop. *Was that a plank of wood or someone’s skull?* thinks Yoon, as he rushes up the stairs of the riverbank, sweating.

He reaches a ledge with the view of a burning body five feet below him. He remembers his camera and points it downward toward the flames, his arms stretched for a closer shot. Orange-yellow light outlines the body, filling the camera screen.

Suddenly, Yoon's bag slips down to his elbow and he loses his grip on his phone. It tumbles onto the stomach of the burning body. A priest looks up and starts pointing and shouting at Yoon. Some men run up the stairs toward him.

Yoon bolts away from the burning bodies, away from the river, the boat, the men – toward what he thinks is the main road. Dark, narrow alleyways smell of animal sweat. Bulls, buildings, and bicycles block his way, turning and twisting him until he's unsure of his original direction. He slips on cow dung. His tailbone hits hard on the uneven cobblestone road.

A woman out of nowhere, says, "Oh my. Are you OK?"

Yoon looks up to see an Indian woman in a pink sari. "I am OK, but how do you know how to speak Korean?" he asks while getting himself up.

"My husband owns the Korean restaurant near burn ghat. Actually I own it, but he runs it. I learned Korean on YouTube."

"Your Korean is very good. But I'll be late for my train. Where should I go?"

She points to the gully behind him. "I'll go to your restaurant during my next visit. Bahut dhanyawad!" Yoon bows while backtracking.

He hears traffic in the distance and runs toward the sound of car horns.

Yoon finds himself on the main road and hops onto a parked rickshaw. "Suh-tay-shun," he says out of breath to the autorickshaw driver. The driver nods and starts the loud engine of the rickshaw, exhaust spewing behind them.

As they drive away, Yoon looks back and sees a group of men chanting while carrying a wrapped body toward the burn ghat. Unthinking, he reaches for his camera to take a video.

Yoon pauses and thinks to himself, *The burn ghat has taken my phone.*

The road is bumpy. Wind blows through the rickshaw, cooling Yoon's head and his chest. He looks forward as he heads toward the station, onto a train, and out of the city.