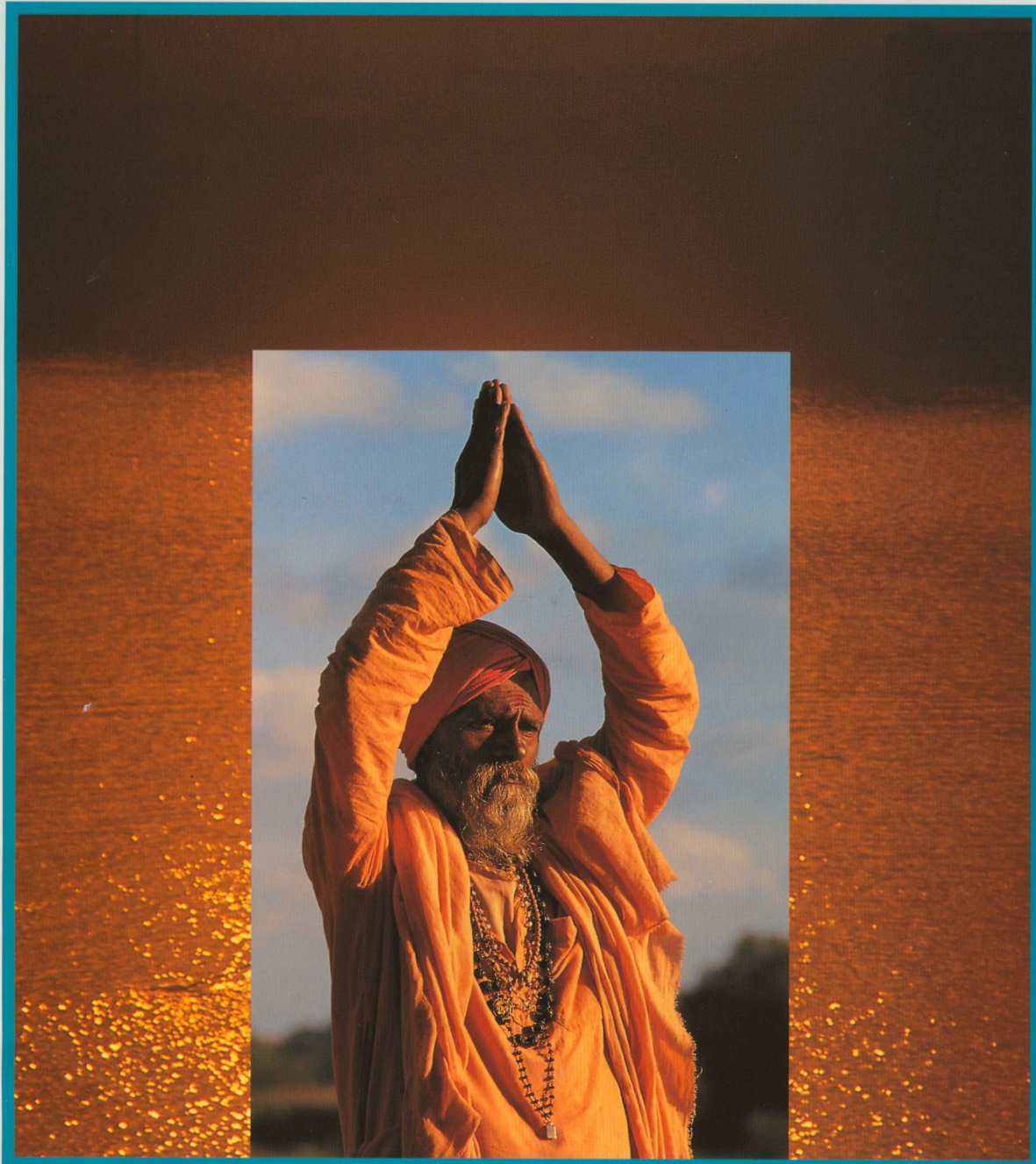


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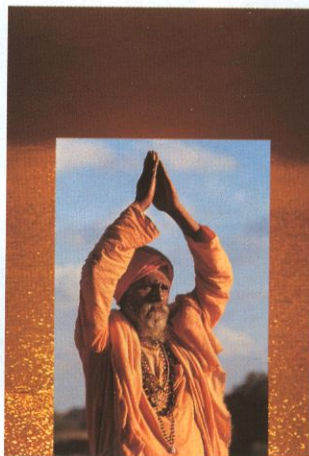
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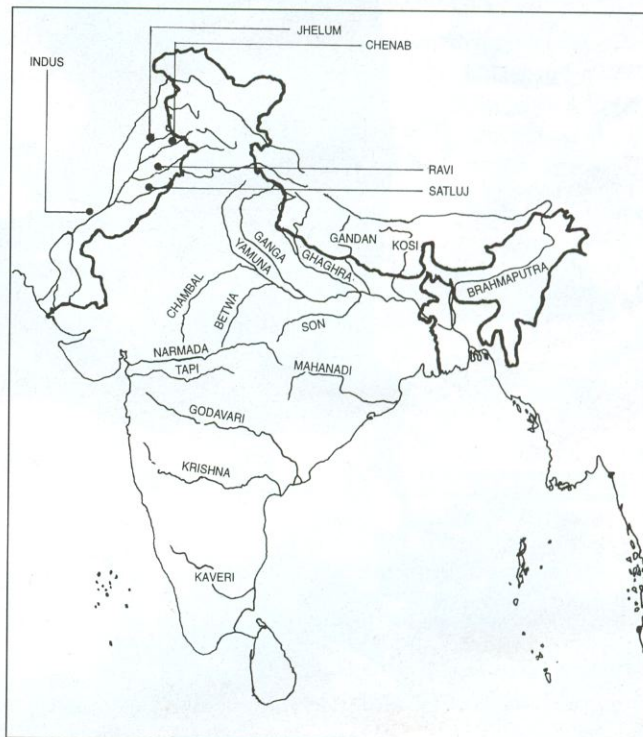
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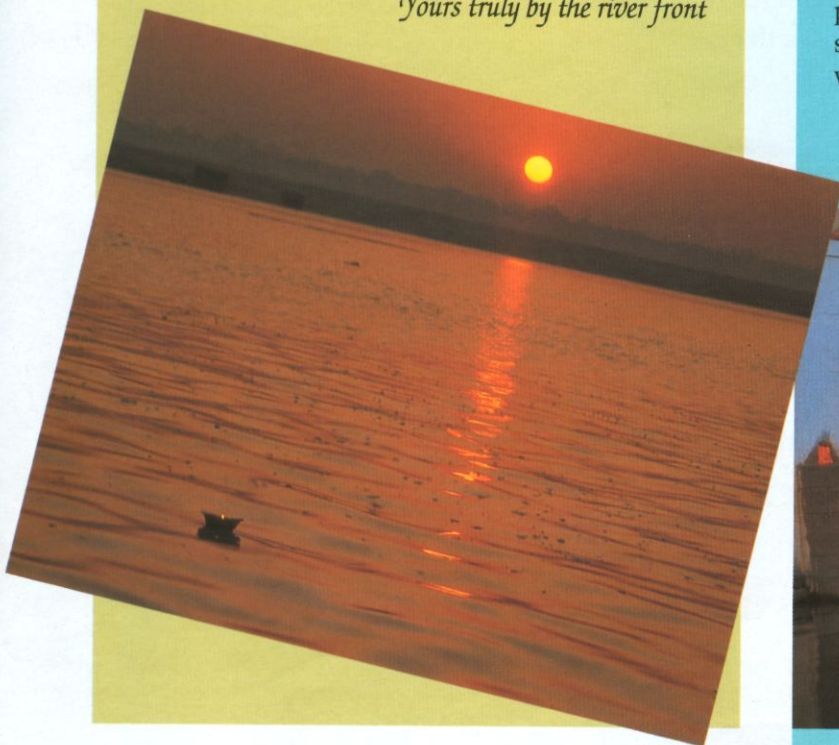
Postcards from the River Front

Text: Nihal Mathur
Photographs: Sukhmeet Channey

Dear Cous,

The Ganges flow across the Indian plains from west to east but when the river comes close to Varanasi, it makes a dramatic turn northward for a few miles before resuming its eastward journey once again. This bend in the river gives rise to the city and the ghats of Varanasi arranged on the western bank. It is this configuration that makes the river special at Varanasi since it is here that the devotees can come down to the ghats — the stoned paved river banks — and simultaneously offer their prayers to the flowing waters and the rising sun in the background.

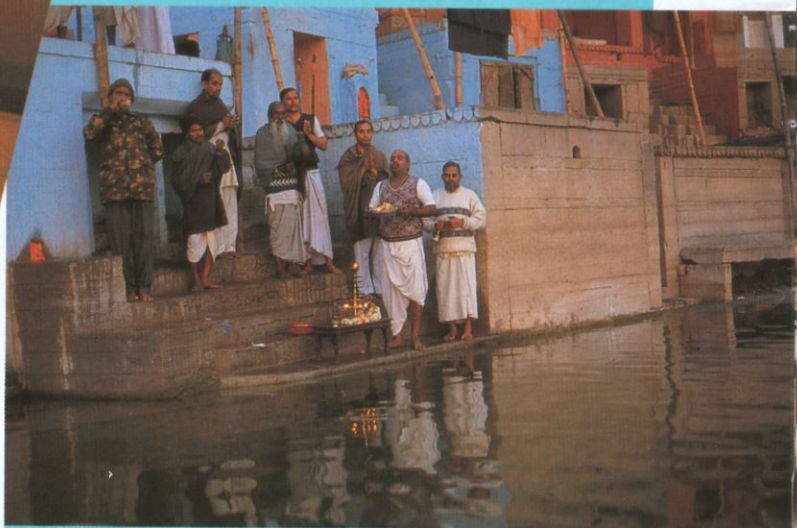
Yours truly by the river front



Dear Trina,

Did you know that from its home in the high Himalayas, the Ganges makes a journey of 2,500 km to the Bay of Bengal! In doing this, it truly becomes a lifeline — an umbilical cord to the people of the Gangetic plains. No wonder the river is considered to be a “Mother” — a “Goddess” worth worshipping. Yesterday, I caught the action at the Ganga temple on Dusashwamedha Ghat during evening prayers and this morning, I witnessed the spectacular day-break prayers offered to the river at the Panch Ganga ghat. Amidst chanting of Sanskrit verses, there was a deafening sound of brass bells and cymbals as long flames leapt and danced in oil lamps held by the priests. And then, as the sun broke over the horizon, sounds of conch shells reverberated on the waters...some day you should get to film the event.

Yours enthralled!



Hey Sis!

A stunning spectacle of the drama of human life on an epic scale — that's the ghats of Varanasi. But please don't miss out on the animals! There are cows and buffaloes, sheep and goat, dogs and monkeys, pigs and donkeys — all of whom are at peace — in a space of their own — and while human beings need to "bribe" the gods with "puja" and prayers and offerings etc — the animals it seems have no such problem! It was truly fascinating to watch this man do elaborate rituals to a stone shrine and no sooner was he done than a free ranging goat came along and grabbed the flower garland just offered a few moments ago! I think our cat would definitely feel at home here.

Yours at the Cow Ghat



Hi guys!

Here on the ghats at Varanasi, there are always a lot of people hustling for a living off the pilgrims and the tourists. It is indeed an incredible scene with flower and candle sellers; the ear cleaner and the massage man; the picture postcardwala; beggars, boatmen, sadhus and of course the pandit or the priest who is the most important person — for it is he who does the prayers and 'pujas' on your behalf, invoking the gods and goddesses, in Sanskrit verses from the ancient Vedic texts — all for a small fee of course! People come to the sacred waters of the Ganges at Varanasi to do all the rites of passages of life — almost from conception to cremation. Did I get a prayer done? Yes indeed! I asked the pandit to beseech the Gods to grant me my indulgences!

Yours truly indulgent self!

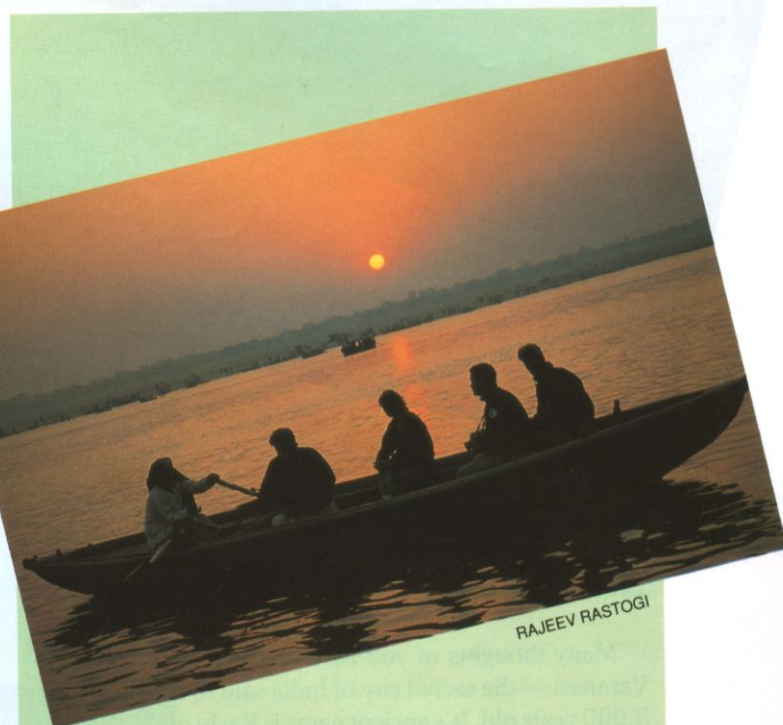


V.MUTHURAMAN

Hola Marcelo!

One of the things that pilgrims do is take the flowing waters of the Ganges back home in small containers. Symbol of purity, the water of the Ganges is considered holy and is used during rites and ceremonies. While filling my plastic can, I thought of you saying "You strange Indians. Everything is holy for you!" Believe me, I understand all waters on the planet are sacred. But what makes the Ganges water special is the fact that it never turns stale. Like distilled water, you can keep it forever. Scientists say that it is the chemical composition of the water that imparts this special character. In fact, it has been observed that bacteria, when introduced into the Ganga waters, dies quickly. So there you are.

Yours truly scientific self!



RAJEEV RASTOGI

My Dearest Mum.

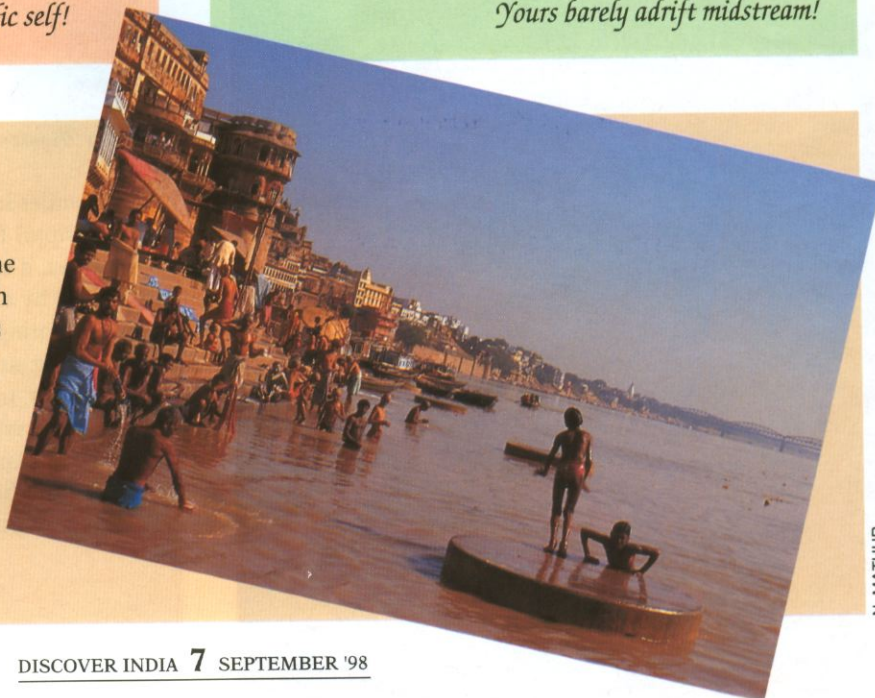
I've been here in Varanasi for the last two days, going up and down the river in a boat with Shambhu the boatman as my guide. Called "Majhi" by caste, these boatmen have a metaphorical meaning in Indian literature where they are likened to the Guru who takes one safely across the river of life to reach the other side — symbolic of salvation. But besides the art and skill of rowing in all kinds of currents, these boatmen are excellent swimmers and know all the life-saving techniques to come to emergency rescues. In that sense, they indeed prove to be the accidental pilgrim's saviour.

Yours barely adrift midstream!

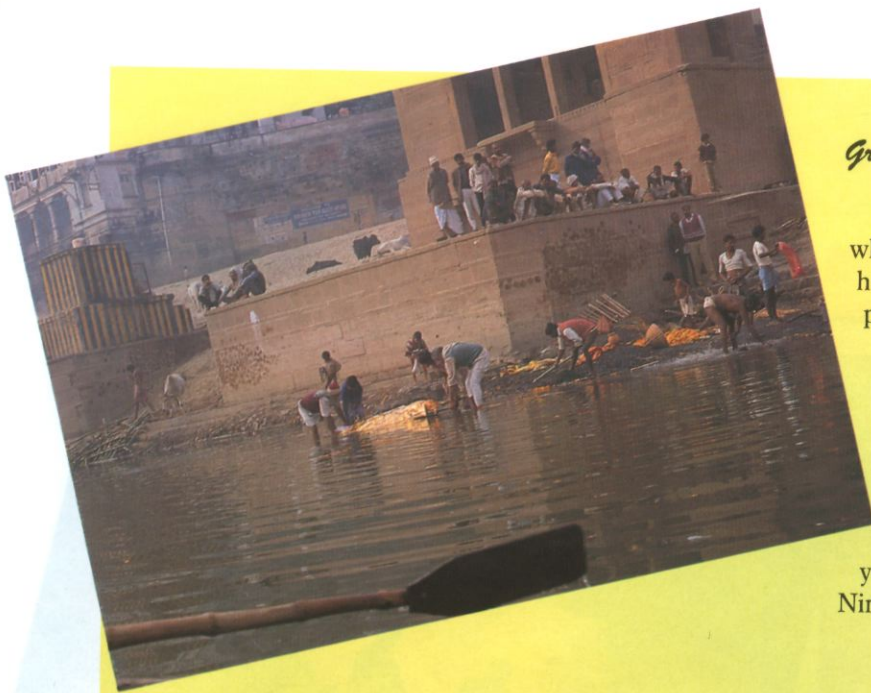
Dear Anissa.

It is said that the flowing waters of the river not only clean the body but also wash all the sins away! That is one of the reasons why pilgrims come and take a holy dip in the waters of the Ganga. But if sins are to do with thoughts, then the river of my consciousness still flows polluted...much like the Ganga itself!

Yours awaiting purification...



N. MATHUR



Greetings Prof.

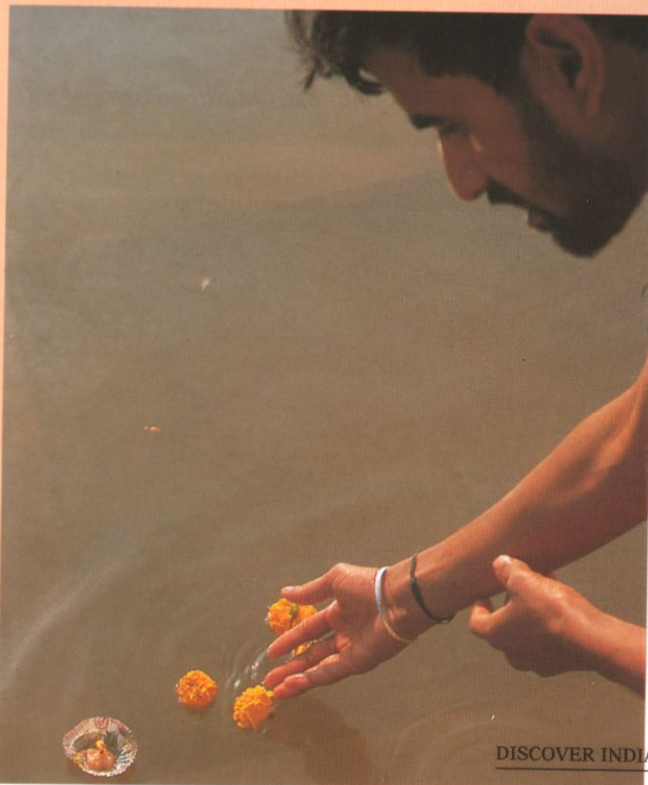
In the world of the Hindu, it is said that the one who dies in the holy city of Varanasi goes straight to heaven. Although the subject of death is a very personal and private affair of the family and friends — here at Varanasi by the water's edge, the departed are consigned to the flames in full public view on the Manikarnika Ghat. Perhaps it is to remind us that we mortals are merely "tourists" in this world, where we come to see places, meet people, eat, drink, and be merry, only to leave everything here, and vanish one day. You know, you must visit Varanasi some day, and experience Nirvana for yourself.

Yours liberated self!

Dearest Yanni,

Many thoughts of you here by the river front in Varanasi — the sacred city of India said to be at least 3,000 years old. It's ancient name is Kashi or the City of Light. You know, the 'inner' one that leads to Enlightenment. To seek my moments of truth, I wander the ghats along the river all day and I can tell you there is sheer magic in the play of light on the river early mornings and late evenings. To reach out and touch the divine, I bought a 'diya' — a small candle — for two rupees and set it flowing down the placid waters of the Ganga with a wish that I could see the "light".

Yours still in Darkness



N. MATHUR

Dear Monica,

Wonder how they manage the laundry along the Mississippi! Here, by the banks of the river Ganga in Varanasi, it is a well organized business traditionally handled by a caste of people called 'Dhobies'. They literally bring donkey loads of soiled clothes to the river front and pound the stone paved banks with dirty shirts, trousers, and what have you! Believe me, it is more effective than any detergent or washing machine! Anyway, sailing down the Ganges, the colorful clothes and sarees spread out to dry make for a very interesting sight.

Yours in starched whites!