

# Banaras

A Hindu is not born; a Hindu is reborn. It might seem preposterous to begin a narrative of my religious life, which began in India, with a reference to Johnny Carson, the king of American TV. In a globalized world, however, anything is possible. As I watched the show one night, Carson narrated how on his show someone had actually claimed that he remembered being born. That was when I realized once again that I was a Hindu because I wondered: wouldn't it be neat if I remembered not only being *born* but being *reborn*. We do not know whether this is a case of culture imposing itself on nature, as sceptical students of religion might claim—or a case of culture merely recognizing a fact of nature, which has eluded the grasp of other cultures, as the rebirthing Hindu might claim. Nevertheless, right here I possessed a key ingredient of not just the Hindu but the Indic world view. An amazing idea—coming to think of it—that we have been here before, that this life is merely a link in an endless chain stretching so far back into the past that the Buddha had to exclaim, “As far as I can see, O Monks, I see no beginning.”<sup>1</sup> And this coming from one who had been capable of looking further into the rearview mirror of life than anyone else. I might say that belief in rebirth is as self-evident to many in India as belief in God is to those who believe in one. It is too self-evident to be in need of proof. It is not a thesis to be proved but a fact to be elaborated.

The Buddha himself once did so famously when he was sitting in a gathering of monks and nuns and suddenly one of the nuns burst into tears. If this happened to someone in an audience as I was lecturing, I don't know what I would do, but the Buddha smiled. And when the brethren asked him why he smiled, he told this story:

## The Six-tusked Elephant

Once upon a time the Buddha-elect was born as the son of the elephant chief of a herd of eight thousand royal elephants, who lived near to a great lake in the Himalayas. In the middle of this lake was clear water, and round this grew sheets of white and coloured water-lilies, and fields of rice and gourds and sugar-cane and plantains; it was surrounded by a bamboo grove and a ring of great mountains. In the north-east corner of the lake grew a huge banyan-tree, and on the west side there was an enormous golden cave. In the rainy season the elephants lived in the cave, and in the hot weather they gathered under the branches of the banyan to enjoy the cool shade. One day the Buddha-elect with his two wives went to a grove of sal-trees, and while there he struck one of the trees with his head so that a shower of dry leaves, twigs, and red ants fell on the windward side, where his wife Chullasubhadda happened to be standing, and shower of green leaves and flowers on the other side, where his other wife, Mahasubhadda, was. On another occasion one of the elephants brought a beautiful seven-sprayed lotus to the Buddha-elect, and he received it and gave it to Mahasubhadda. Because of these things Chullasubhadda was offended and conceived a grudge against the Great Being. So one day when he had prepared an offering of fruits and flowers, and was entertaining five hundred private buddhas, Chullasubhadda also made offering to them, and made a prayer that she might be reborn as the daughter of a king and become the queen-consort of the king of Benares, and so have power to move the king to send a hunter with a poisoned arrow to wound and slay this elephant. Then she pined away and died. In due course her wicked wishes were fulfilled, and she became the favourite wife of the king of Benares, dear and pleasing in his eyes. She remembered her past lives, and said to herself that now she would have the elephant's tusks brought to her. So she went to bed and pretended to be very ill. When the king heard of this he went to her room and sat on the bed and asked her: "why are you pining away, like a wreath of withered flowers trampled under foot?" She answered: "It is because of an unattained wish;" whereupon he promised whatever she desired. So she had

all the hunters of the kingdom called together, amounting to sixty thousand, and told them that she had had a dream of a magnificent six-tusked white elephant, and that if her longing for the tusks could not be satisfied she would die. She chose one of the hunters, who was a coarse, ill-favoured man, to do her work, and showed him the way to the lake where the Great Being lived, and promised him a reward of five villages when she received the tusks. He was very much afraid of the task, but finally consented when she told him that she had also dreamt that her desire would be fulfilled. She fitted him out with weapons and necessaries for the journey, giving him a leather parachute to descend from the hills to the lake.

Deeper and deeper he penetrated into the Himalayan jungle, far beyond the haunts of men, overcoming incredible difficulties, until after seven years, seven months, and seven days' weary travelling he stood by the great banyan-tree where the Buddha-elect and the other elephants lived so peacefully and unsuspectingly. He dug a hole in the ground and, putting on the yellow robe of a hermit, hid in it, covering it over except a little space for his arrow. When the Great Being passed by he shot him with a poisoned arrow, which drove him nearly mad with anger and pain. Just when he would have killed the wicked hunter he noticed his yellow robe—

*Emblem of sainthood, priestly guise, And deemed inviolate by the wise.*

Seeing this robe, the wounded elephant recovered his self-control and asked the hunter what reason he had for slaying him. The hunter told him his story of the dream of the queen of Benares. The Great Being understood the whole matter very well and suffered the hunter to take his tusks. But so great was he, and the hunter so clumsy, that he could not cut them away; he only gave the Great Being unbearable pain and filled his mouth with blood. Then he took the saw in his own trunk, and cut them off and gave them to the hunter, saying: "The tusks of wisdom are a hundred times dearer to me than these, and may this good act be the reason of my attaining omniscience." He also gave the hunter magic power to return to Benares in seven days, and soon died and was burned on a pyre by the other elephants. The hunter took back the tusks to

the queen and, evidently disapproving of her wickedness now that he knew its full significance, announced that the elephant against whom she had felt a grudge for a trifling offence had been slain by him. "Is he dead?" she cried; and, giving her the tusks, "Rest assure he is dead," the hunter replied. Taking the beautiful tusks on her lap, she gazed at these tokens of one that had been her dear lord in another life, and as she gazed she was filled with inconsolable grief, and her heart broke and she died the same day.

Long ages afterward she was born at Savatthi, and became a nun. She went one day with other sisters to hear the Buddha's doctrine. Gazing upon him, so peaceful and radiant, it came into her heart that she had once been his wife, when he had been lord of a herd of elephants, and she was glad. But then there came to her also the remembrance of her wickedness—how she had been the cause of his death only because of a fancied slight—and her heart grew hot within her, and she burst into tears and sobbed aloud. Then the master smiled, and when the brethren asked him why he smiled, he told this story, which hearing, many men entered on the Path, and the Sister herself afterward attained to sainthood.<sup>2</sup>

But most Hindus are not like the Buddha—they don't know their past lives. The texts do tell us how one might refresh one's memory in this respect, but it's a hard sell. The fact, however, that most Hindus do not recall their past lives does not prevent them, or others for that matter, from guessing. Imagining one's past life sometimes even becomes a parlor game in India.

My sister and I were meeting up after many years in Philadelphia. As we sat together catching up with our lives, in the course of which I had gotten divorced, she said simply, "You should never have married. You were a Buddhist monk in your past life, and you have resumed living like one again." That is how she psychoanalyzed my reversion to a single life. And she had studied in a convent all her life! My jaw dropped.

"Yes," I said, "but a monk who took his vows lightly, I am sure," I added with a wink. So wake up Dr. Freud—smell the coffee. You went as far as childhood. Some even go as far as the womb. And they don't go far enough.

But I have gone far enough, and I now go on to say that I was born in the city of India, once popularly known as Banaras, until

that name was restored to its earlier form of Varanasi after India's independence. My memories even of this life are too confusing for me to even attempt any further retrieval.

My earliest memory of an ecstatic experience is also not spiritual. Far from it. It is literally infantile. I remember lying in a cot when I heard a kind of commotion all around me and inquired as to its cause. I was told that my cousins had come. Oh—the very cousins I remembered meeting a few months previously so fondly. I felt being buoyed up like a cork on a tide of joy.

“They have come to stay with us? For how long?”

“Forever.”

I thought my heart had literally burst with joy. My chest—or whatever of it I had—I felt had exploded into bits. Then I felt reassured to discover that I was still alive.

My unbounded joy—my first remembered moment of ecstasy—had its roots in a family tragedy. I was able to piece together the entire story only when well past my teens, for we were all brought up on the filial fiction that all four of us—the three new ones and I (and then my brother and sister who succeeded me)—were all brothers and sisters born of the same parents. By the time the facts of this fiction became known to us, the fiction had become the fact.

The British were in India at the time. My paternal grandfather, a state official at the county level, was then being treated for a heart ailment. One day he was heard to say, “It seems as if everything is growing dark around me.” These were his last words. My grandmother then took charge of the family.

“It must have been quite a shock,” I said. At the time, she was staying in a temple she had built, and I was visiting her during my first year at the university. We got on famously.

“I will tell you a secret, my son,” she said quietly, almost conspirationally. “Before I got married my father took me aside and said, ‘O dear one, I have looked at the horoscopes. Be prepared. You will become widowed by your forties.’ So you can say that in a sense I was expecting it.”

Her two sons did well at school and rose in the ranks of the British administration. The eldest became a survey officer at Ajmer and in due course got married. It was a custom in our part of the Hindu world that, when the bride entered the house, the younger brother—in this case my father-to-be—took a peek at her. “You know,” my father was to tell us in later life, “I was just a kid at the time, and yet my impression even today is one of seeing someone overwhelmingly beautiful.”

Within a few years, however, my aunt lay dying of cancer of the breast. When people would ask her what would become of the three children, she would point to my mother—who had by now also become part of the household.

The end came suddenly. “Give me a picture of Shri Krishna,” she had said, asking the picture of some film actress to be removed from the wall in front of her. In the meantime, my grandmother had mobilized a hymn-singing clutch of women. In the midst of the holy hymns, clutching the picture of Lord Krishna, my aunt had breathed her last.

My uncle began to plan a second marriage but sought the opinion of my father, who told him in a “brutally frank letter” (his words, I am told) that it is better not to marry but better to marry than to burn. Along with familial advice, he also sought celestial advice and consulted a famous astrologer. No one knew of these facts until after he had passed away—the account was contained in the notes found in the drawer of his table when it was cleared out after his death. The astrologer had forewarned against the danger of imminent death, and as for my uncle’s designs of remarrying, the astrologer had said, “Only one wife in *dharma* (i.e. only one lawfully wedded wife) is ordained.” My uncle had gone on a trip and returned with a fever. It developed into blood poisoning. My father could hear his brother’s heart beat as he entered the hospital room. One shot of penicillin would have cured him, but penicillin was reserved for use by the army alone. The Second World War was on.

This was the chain of events, which had brought my new brothers and sisters to live with us, which had made my heart leap with such joy.

When the servant would carry me out for an outing on his shoulders, I can even now remember the funeral *ghats* burning on the banks of the Ganges in Banaras. If I knew then what I know now, I would have repeated the lines of the Nepali poet:

Despise not the dead.  
They keep Banaras aflame.

It is said that one who dies in Benaras goes to Shiva’s paradise. The more relevant question from my point of view of course was: what happens to those who are born in Banaras?

Read on.