Gateway to my Heaven
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TESTIMONY

Gateway to my Heaven

Acceptance by Kasi's priests transformed me

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I've just returned to San Francisco, California, after another wonderful winter in India, and once again I must endure the intense culture shock of encountering America. Funny, one would assume the adjustment gets easier, but it's not true. I've been an "India-wallah" for 24 years now, and each time I return to the West I wonder more and more why I have come back here.

There are the obvious aspects of India which I miss so dearly: cows on the streets, interaction between all ages, the captivating contrasts on every corner between beauty and despair. I miss the sense of pure timelessness in a temple and the serenity of the simple life in a typical village. I even find myself craving the chaos, the crowds and my constant confusion.

My home in America may be equipped with modern amenities such as running water, but oh how I long to pull water from my

well! And while most Indians visualize the abundance of America as a blessing, I am overwhelmed by the excessive choices at the market and the shameful waste.

Upon reflection, I think what really makes my return to the West more difficult with each passing year is that I am simply becoming more Indian. This past winter may have in fact put me over the top--I now feel 45% American, 55% Indian and 100% Hindu.

What really has me still reeling is my experience last December in Banaras. I have visited several times over the years, but this time was unique. I was playing tour guide to my friend Phillip, and it was his first trip to India--naturally a visit to Siva's sacred city on the Ganga was imperative.

I've always been enthralled by the winding maze of narrow streets that weaves through the city's main bazaar and thought we would take a stroll there, highlighted of course by a glimpse of the exterior of the famed Kasi Vishwanath temple of Lord Siva. We took a taxi to the bazaar entrance, and our driver insisted on walking with us, but at a fair distance ahead, separately. He then explained his hesitation to us: the day was December 6, Ayodhya Anniversary day, and Varanasi was targeted as the next place for unrest, if it were to happen anywhere. Like the Lord Rama temple in Ayodhya, the original Kasi Vishwanath temple was razed by invading Muslims in centuries past, and the existing mosque incorporated the temple's foundation and some walls. The mosque stands directly next to the subsequently reconstructed Kasi Vishwanath temple.

As we entered the Muslim bazaar that leads to the temple, I felt an odd sensation around me. Then I realized all the shops were shuttered and only a very few Muslims dared to be on the deserted street. Fear filled the air as cautious eyes stared from window cracks at the foreigners who so boldly walked through this tense part of town. We continued into what now became the Hindu section of the bazaar. At least the streets here were familiarly congested, but the tension also grew more dense.

Phillip and I shuffled through the hectic bazaar until I finally spotted the temple in the distance. As we passed the crowded doorway, I pointed out to him the entry to Kasi Vishwanath, the only part open to non-Hindus. Every previous time I had visited Banaras I had longed to fully enter, but of course, out of respect, never pressed the point.

In the entry sat four plainclothes policemen and a temple priest, all keeping their watchful eyes on just who entered the temple. They motioned for us to come to them, which we obeyed. I was wearing a demure salwar kameez while Phillip was in full Western wear, looking like a first-time India traveler. Each of us had "foreigner" all over our face.

The officers began to ask me some basic questions, oddly all in Hindi. How did they know I would understand? They asked my name, and I offered my Hindu name: Nirmala Devi. They asked my native place, how many years had I been coming to India--all the regular inquiries. I guess I again gave the correct answers, because then the magic began.

The old priest squatting there looked me in the eyes and said I could go inside the temple with him, but my friend (obviously a non-Hindu newcomer) would have to wait outside. I thought I must have been misunderstanding his Hindi, but he stood up to personally be my guide.

As I followed the priest into the temple, I felt as if I were entering a truly heavenly realm. Floating behind him in a wondrous daze of devotion, I was unable to fathom this rare blessing. I covered my head discreetly with my dupatta, or scarf, aware of my pale skin and Western physique, and tried to blend in as much as possible. Yet I must have become invisible--all the ardent devotees around me were so enraptured with the power of the place that not one even noticed me. I had simply become another one of the faithful.

While being pushed from all sides by the anxious crowd, I crouched down carefully before the sacred Siva Linga and paid homage to Lord Siva. It's like a dream to me now, the fact that I was really there expressing my adoration, that I gave and received blessed food in Kasi Viswanath. I recall feeling both lost in a magical trance and fully aware of my surroundings at the same time. I was completely comfortable in the chaotic frenzy of devotion that surrounded me.

It was only when we emerged back onto the street through the gateway that I realized tears were streaming down my face, softly washing my ecstatic smile. Phillip took one look at me and observed the importance of what I had just encountered.

My Hindu initiation is what I call it. How else can I explain my incredible good fortune at being escorted into that extremely sacred and secure temple? In retrospect, I believe that old priest saw beyond my pale skin and recognized only my faith.

So when I say my readjustment to America isn't getting any easier over the decades, maybe now you understand. No cows, no wells and no mystical encounters with the Supreme!

Nikki Lastreto, is a writer currently working on a book about her personal tales as an American woman who has spent much of the past 24 years living in Indian villages. Nikki is also an altar designer for homes, offices, events and private temples.