

## **Narayan Pandey's Cremation, Katmandu 30 May 2013**

It was a sweltering morning in the Temple of Pashupatinath, one of the seven World Heritage Sites that UNESCO has declared in the capital of Nepal, Katmandu. As I entered the temple, I observed a Hindu ceremony called Bratabandha, through which 6-7 years old children become Brahmins, the highest hierarchy in the caste system, still prevailing in Nepal. The date of the ceremony depends on each individual person and on astral forecasts. After completing the ceremony, that person will always wear a white piece of string diagonally crossing his chest, as a symbol of their Brahmin status.

Walking a bit further, I came across the Bagmati River, which is a sacred place for the Nepalese, where the Hindu ceremonies of cremation take place nowadays. Katmandu is a city with 1.740.977 inhabitants, according to the 2011 census, although if we include the neighborhoods of Lalipur and Bhaktapur -in the suburbs of Katmandu- the metropolitan area exceeds 2,5 million people. The major religions are Hinduism and Buddhism, although you may find them mixed up many times; it is very common to find both in the same temple, since many of the Gods and Saints can be found in both religions, sometimes with different names but maintaining the same attributes. It is a tradition in Hinduism that when a person dies, their body is completely burned and the ashes are returned to the river, named after the mother, from which all life comes from. The body is considered as the place where the soul dwells and its cremation facilitates the soul's detachment from this life and eases the transition to its subsequent destiny. Open-air cremations are commonplace in Katmandu, and every cremation involves the burning of many pounds of firewood, which increases air pollution. Throwing the ashes to the Bagmati River also contributes to water degradation, which is quite polluted already. For these reasons, the Nepalese government is building a gas crematorium, where all cremations will take place in the near future. Open-air cremations will become something of the past...

On both sides of the Bagmati River, one can admire the beautiful staircases, which give access to the riverbank. The upper part of the staircase is where cremations take place. There lay the corpse of Narayan Pandey, a 42- year-old man, surrounded by his family and friends. His body was on a bamboo-ladder-shaped stretcher and was covered by an orange cloth. His wife -

Kanshimaya Tamang- stood out dressed in an intense red, crying bitterly while looking to the sky, as if trying to find an answer to her sorrow.



From that day on she will not dress in red anymore, since that color is not allowed for widows. Down in the river a bunch of naked kids were playing in the water, jumping around in the river as if the cremations taking place next to them had nothing to do with them. Their laughter blended with the cries of the family members. Life and death together in just a few square feet. That was one of the lessons of the day: life and death go together side by side, as both are the sides of a same coin and need to be accepted.



After a while, Narayan's corpse was moved to another part of the river, where 5 or 6 promontories were prepared for the cremations. On one of them, the firewood for Narayan's cremation was already placed. Ashesh Pandey -Narayan's nephew- told me that Narayan death had been due to drinking.





Another two cremations were taking place at that time: A 6-year-old boy who had fallen down the school stairs and another very old man. There were only men around the cremation area, as women were not allowed to participate. They have to watch from a terrace above. The main character in the cremation is the closest male relative to the deceased, but only if he belongs to the same caste. In this case, Raskumar, Narayan's 23-year-old son, also belonged to the Brahmin caste, so he was the one to start the fire. If the deceased only had daughters, or his sons did not belong to the same caste, it would have been the responsibility of his brother or nephew. Raskumar was not familiar with the procedures of the ritual. He was guided by his family, especially his uncle, whose father had also recently died and probably had the ritual fresh in his memory. First, Raskumar had to be purified, thus he went down to the riverbank and washed his hands and feet.



Afterwards, he came back up and stood at the side of his father's corpse and started praying.





Meanwhile, his cousin Ashesh ignited the little bunch of firewood to start the cremation. Raskumar bent down and picked it up. He then went to the front of the uncovered corpse, which had a white cloth inside the mouth and lit the fire. Raskumar prayed as he circled around the corpse stopping at the feet to kiss them, as a gesture of respect.



Raskumar could not hold it anymore and started crying. On the other side of the river some tourists observed the ceremony.



The body was covered with straw so that the fire would spread as soon as possible. For the cremation to be completed every bone has to be burned to ashes and nothing of the body must remain. A person who worked for the temple is in charged of the fire and of ensuring that the body is completely consumed.



He told me that it could take more than 3 hours for the body to be burned completely. The fatter the body the better, and the faster it will burn, as fat accelerates the process. Narayan was quite thin, probably due to alcoholism. Raskumar went inside a room behind the fire. It was much cooler inside than the unbearable heat outside. Raskumar fell sleep in a few minutes, exhausted.





Waiting for the hours of the cremation to pass, I decided to see something Ashesh had told me about: “The last hospital”, a small building with two rooms and some iron beds. People about to die are brought there by their relatives in order to prepare them for the cremation. Only one bed was occupied: an 80-year-old man. He had a IV next to him, nothing else. His hands and feet were swollen and he could hardly breathe. With him in the room was his grandson, who allowed me to take pictures of the experience.



A bit later, two of the daughters came to the room and arranged his hands inside the sheet. One of them touched his hand in an affectionate way, as if being aware that those were the last moments in her father's life.





At that moment I thought about how different death is seen in the West, where it is difficult to see how people fade away or to see the corpse exposed in the open. Much less consumed by the fire. Here, however, I was observing the whole process just like another member of the family. Although I had asked Raskumar's permission to photograph the cremation, I felt a bit concerned at the beginning, as if I was an intruder in a private ceremony, but in the end I felt completely welcomed, especially when a couple of relatives asked me to send them copies of the pictures.

When I went back to Narayan's cremation, another ritual was about to start: Raskumar was going to have his head completely shaved, as start of a purification ritual called "Kriva". Later I found out that all the male relatives must have their heads shaved 10 days after the cremation.



Once the body is totally consumed by the fire, the ashes and the rest of the firewood are pushed into the sacred river Bagmati.





Water is taken from the river in a bucket and thrown on the rest of the ashes so that everything goes into the river. Raskumar started with the first bucket and afterwards family and friends continued until the floor was completely clean. Down by the river a man was searching in the water for gold: rings, necklaces and especially teeth.



The purification ceremony, or Kriva, took place in the temple of Gorgabu, in the northern Katmandu. Raskumar and his mother –Kanshimaya- had to remain inside the temple for 13 days. During the first 10 days, they could not go out. They could not touch or be touched by anyone. Even physical contact between mother and son was forbidden. They slept and ate inside a room, which was divided in three sections by a 25-inch wall. The one at the back was occupied by Raskumar, the middle one by his mother and the closest to the entrance by the people who came to visit and keep company. There was a little bathroom at the back of the room.



During those 13 days, they could only wear white clothes without seams and they could not eat anything with salt, tomatoes, garlic, or lentils (except for the yellow ones). They had to prepare their own food. Eating anything prepared by another person was not allowed. Each of them had a gas bottle and a portable stove for that purpose.





They were not allowed to eat meat for one year. Furthermore, they were not allowed to use soap, shampoo or perfume during those 13 days. They cleaned the floor of the room with dung from a sacred cow. Also,

visitors were welcomed with a bottle of urine from a sacred cow. They drank a little bit and moistened their forehead with it.



Raskumar accompanied me to the outside of the temple, where a taxi was waiting to take me to the airport.



10 days later he could leave the room and touch other people. It was then that Raskumar told me the real reason for the death of his father: His parents were never formally married. His father belonged to the Brahmins chaste, whereas his mother belonged to an inferior caste. Narayan's family did not approve of their marriage due to the difference in caste and, in the end, Narayan and Kanshimaya fled from their village and came to live in Katmandu. According to Raskumar, the real reason for his father's drinking was that his family had never accepted nor helped him. Raskumar confessed that he had a girlfriend who belonged to an inferior caste and that he was determined to get married for love.

On the way to the airport, I was thinking about the discrimination in the caste system, formally abolished in Nepal since 1962, but still in practice and very present in the daily life of Hindu people. A couple of months later, I found these words by Mahatma Gandhi about 'Untouchability and Caste': "It is as wrong to destroy caste because of the outcaste, as it would be to destroy a body because of an ugly growth in it or of a crop because of the weeds. The outcasteness, in the sense we understand it, has therefore to be destroyed altogether. It is an excess to be removed, if the whole system is not to perish. Untouchability is the product, therefore, not of the caste system, but of the distinction of high and low that has crept into Hinduism and is corroding it. The attack on untouchability is thus an attack upon this



‘high-and-los’-ness. The moment untouchability goes, the caste system itself will be purified, that is to say, according to my dream, it will resolve itself into the true *varnadharma*, the four divisions of society, each complementary of the other and none inferior or superior to any other, each as necessary for the whole body of Hinduism as any other.”

On the day 13, Raskumar and his mother would go back to the Bagmati River. They would throw the white garments to the river, as a ritual to end the Kriva. Raskumar will then go back to his everyday life and try to make a living with his girlfriend inside the caste system, as his father had tried before him...

