

## Burning Issues

### CREMATION STORIES

In March 1895 two cremations were held on the outskirts of Melbourne, Australia. The first was of an Indian Sikh named Charam Singh. Having left behind his wife and young child in Punjab, Charam Singh had traveled to Australia to seek a living as a hawker of small goods. While working in Victoria he caught a cold and developed pneumonia. Although admitted to hospital in Melbourne, he soon died. Despite being thousands of miles from home, Charam Singh was not entirely friendless or without compatriots. He had made the acquaintance of a fellow Sikh, Mett Singh, who ran an import business in Melbourne, and it was at Mett Singh's direction that Charam Singh was taken to hospital. Mett Singh approached the city's commissioner of police for permission to cremate his friend's remains. Somewhat surprisingly, permission was granted, and on the morning of March 15, 1895, Charam Singh's body, enclosed in a wooden coffin, was removed from the hospital and driven to the beach at Sandringham, ten miles from the city center.<sup>1</sup> Coffins were not used in Sikh and Hindu funerals in India because any kind of confinement was thought to inhibit the freeing of the soul from the body, but the authorities in Melbourne probably insisted on one being used on sanitary grounds or from a sense of "public decency." Charam Singh's corpse was accompanied by several other Sikhs, who as the van made its way to the coast "maintained a low discordant ululation, rising at times almost into a chant, but dying away after an interval into a wail."<sup>2</sup>

Upon arrival at the beach the body, swathed in colored cloth, was perfumed with attar of roses and adorned with tiny pieces of gold, silver, and copper, in

the belief that these would “assist the spirit in its passage to eternity.” It was then strewn with chips of sandalwood and anointed with myrrh, and the coffin lid was fastened down. The casket was laid on a pyre consisting of a ton and a half of wood, arranged in crossbar fashion, with each log smeared “in accordance with the Sikh rite,” though with butter replacing the customary ghee. The Sikh mourners crouched on their haunches “in Eastern fashion”; in the absence of any close relative, Mett Singh kindled the pyre (in a most un-Indian manner) using matches and paper. The mourners sat in silence for the two and a half hours it took for the coffin and body to be consumed by fire before returning to Melbourne. Mett Singh remained, however, to collect the ashes of his deceased friend. These were to be sent to Charam Singh’s parents in Punjab, “that they may cast them into the Ganges.” The other remains—the unburned fragments of teeth and bones—were cast into the sea.<sup>3</sup>

There was much that was culturally anomalous about Charam Singh’s cremation: the use of an enclosed coffin in place of an open bamboo bier to carry the dead to the burning-ground, as well as the substitution of butter for ghee and of paper and matches for the sacred fire brought from the home of the deceased. There were no relatives on hand to carry the corpse, no priests to chant the sacred verses, and no son or male heir to light the pyre. And yet enough remained—from the conduct of the mourners and the token chips of sandalwood to the blazing pyre and the disposal of the ashes and bones—for this to be recognizable thousands of miles from the subcontinent as an Indian cremation.

According to the newspaper in which this event was reported, Charam Singh’s cremation was “a scene, common enough in India, but strange and rare in Australia.”<sup>4</sup> However, as the same article disclosed, a few days later, on March 19, 1895, the body of an eighty-three-year-old widow, Elizabeth Inger Henniker, who had lived with her married son in nearby Richmond, Victoria, was taken in a coffin to the secluded beach at Half Moon Bay, Sandringham, where it was laid on an awaiting funeral pyre. Three tons of wood were placed around the coffin and, to the accompaniment of Christian hymns, kerosene was sprinkled on the wood to aid its combustion. At a signal from the undertaker, Mrs. Henniker’s son struck a match; almost immediately the logs were ablaze and the coffin was immersed in flames. In minutes the “whole pile was a mass of fire.”<sup>5</sup>

There is no indication in the newspaper report of why Mrs. Henniker, or her relatives, chose this (for white Australians in the 1890s) unconventional means of disposing of her body.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps it was a matter of personal conviction or family choice; possibly she came from a Protestant community in northern Europe (“Inger” suggests Scandinavian ancestry) that had adopted cremation in preference to a standard Christian burial.<sup>7</sup> Despite their superficial similarities—the open-air pyre, the singing of hymns, the body encased in a coffin—the Melbourne funerals of 1895 represent two distinct strands in the history of modern

cremation that temporarily coexisted in time and place—one originating in India and anciently grounded in the religious traditions of Hindus and Sikhs, the other dating only from the 1870s and emanating from modern Europe. The history of cremation in Australia conventionally begins not with a dead Sikh on a beach near Melbourne, but with the struggle of a small group of white Australians to establish cremation as a legitimate funerary practice.<sup>8</sup> Even where, as in South Australia, permissive legislation was passed as early as 1891, the prevailing view has been that it was only after World War I that cremation made significant progress in Australia.<sup>9</sup> Yet Charam Singh's cremation was not a solitary event. In Adelaide in October 1903 the body of another Sikh, Bishin Singh, was also burned, in this instance under the provisions of South Australia's recent cremation act and through the intercession of the local cremation society. Witnessed by two hundred onlookers and to the sound of Sikh prayers, his body, sealed in a coffin, was cremated in a specially erected enclosure. The ashes were collected by Bishin Singh's friends to be sent to India for "burial."<sup>10</sup>

As this book tries to show, there are many individual cremation stories that can be used to inform and nuance our understanding of the Indian practice of burning the dead in modern times. What these somewhat eclectic episodes in Australia in the 1890s and 1900s do is help to pose the question of how the bodies of Sikhs, Hindus, and others for whom cremation was said to be an obligatory rite were disposed of outside India. Australia was only one instance of a much wider phenomenon. During the imperial era the proper disposal of the dead was an issue of mounting social and political significance for the many countries of the British Empire—including Britain itself—in which Indians worked, traveled, or had come to settle by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Some of the most compelling images of Hindu cremation are those of the funeral of Mohandas Gandhi following his assassination in Delhi on January 30, 1948 (see figures 1 and 2). Photography made both explicit and universal the manner in which Hindu cremation was performed, rendering it a highly visual spectacle and a very public process. The global impact of the photographs, showing the destruction of Gandhi's body by fire and the emotional responses of mourners and onlookers, was supplemented by the many written accounts of the cremation; by contemporary newsreels (Britain's Pathé News); and by scenes painstakingly reconstructed for the cinema in the film version of Stanley Wolpert's *Nine Hours to Rama* in 1963 and, more famously, in Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* in 1982.<sup>11</sup> In presenting to the world a seemingly definitive image of what customary Hindu mortuary rites entailed, Gandhi's cremation was not the least instructive aspect of his "didactic death."<sup>12</sup> The scenes of the Mahatma's funeral—especially the iconic pyre—might seem to represent a paradigmatic statement of what constituted Hindu cremation. It must, however, be recognized that in form and function this "traditional" ceremony was in many respects the culmination of several decades



FIGURE 1. The iconic pyre: Gandhi's cremation, January 31, 1948. Fox Photos, Hulton Archive © gettyimages.

of evolution and transformation in the history of Indian cremation (chapter 7 considers this more fully). It should further be recognized that forty years earlier, when Gandhi lived in South Africa, one of the causes he identified himself with was the right of Hindus to be cremated. Around 1908 he began a long struggle to persuade the Johannesburg city council to allow resident Indians to cremate their dead. But still in thrall to Western sanitary notions, rather than demanding open-air cremation, Gandhi sought approval to erect a modern crematorium for the purpose. He enlisted the help of his friend, the Jewish architect Hermann Kallenbach, who designed a brick-built crematorium, complete with a wood-burning furnace and tall chimney, that looked and operated much like those recently erected in Britain, Germany, and the United States.<sup>13</sup>

Gandhi had left South Africa by the time the crematorium opened in 1918 and so never saw it himself. Now preserved as a national monument, a stopping-off point on the Johannesburg Gandhi tour, the "Hindoo Crematorium" survives as



FIGURE 2. Gandhi's cremation, January 31, 1948. Photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson © Magnum Photos.

a tribute to Gandhi's cultural eclecticism in South Africa and his simultaneous concern to uphold Indian rights overseas.<sup>14</sup> There is some evidence to suggest that even after his return to India in 1915, Gandhi remained committed to the idea of "scientific cremation," regarding modern crematoria, like the one in Johannesburg, as the most sanitarily efficient and culturally acceptable means of disposing of the Hindu dead.<sup>15</sup> If Gandhi's cremation in 1948, conducted in the open air on a blazing wood pyre, appears to present one image of "traditional" Hindu cremation, his earlier engagement with the Johannesburg crematorium suggests quite another, far more overtly "modern," means by which to burn the dead. As with so much else in Gandhi's life, but also in the history of Indian cremation, it is not always easy to discern what is "traditional" from what is "modern" and whether the former precedes or follows the latter.

To speak of the "disposal of the dead," as did many nineteenth- and twentieth-century commentators, might seem to imply indifference, even casual disrespect, toward the body of the deceased, a perfunctory act of corporeal removal, concealment, and obliteration. Perhaps the phrase suggests a sanitary, rather than a social, act, requiring technical proficiency and a presumption of objectivity among those accustomed to deal dispassionately with the dying and the dead. An early American advocate for cremation in the modern Western manner remarked: "Although cremation may have been regarded by some people . . . as

a religious rite or superstitious custom, it is unquestionably—when pursued by the most enlightened nations—a sanitary measure.”<sup>16</sup> Possibly *disposal* does no more than gesture toward a universal preoccupation with what happens to the human body once life is extinguished.<sup>17</sup> But for many of those who followed the practice of cremation or argued, often fervently, for its retention or adoption, this was much more than a technical question of how most safely or expeditiously to remove the dead from the sight of the living.

Between its several faiths, India observed at least four means of disposing of the remains of the dead, encompassing between them earth, air, fire, and water.<sup>18</sup> Many Indians—Muslims, Christians, and Jews—followed the practice of earth-burial. The Zoroastrian Parsis, who originated in Iran and held fire sacred, exposed the bodies of their dead on the circular funerary “towers of silence” (*dokhma*), where the flesh was eaten by vultures and the bones left to decay into nothingness.<sup>19</sup> It was widely assumed in the West in the nineteenth century that cremation was “all but universal” among Hindus, but this was far from being the case.<sup>20</sup> Historically, many Hindus, especially of the lower castes, chose to bury their dead, could not afford such costly ceremonies, or were denied access to so prestigious a practice. Some Hindus committed the bodies of their dead to water, releasing them, perhaps from poverty and for want of affordable alternatives, into rivers like the sacred Ganges. But the most prestigious rite among high-caste Hindus, as well as among Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains, was cremation or “fire-burial,” *feuerbestattung* to use the expressive German term.<sup>21</sup> For many Indians in South Asia and across the diaspora, cremation in what is understood to be the traditional manner, lit by sacred fire, with the body on a wooden pyre, open to the air so as to allow the spirit (*atman*) to escape into the ether, was (and is) more than a rite. It was also a right, dictated by custom and enjoined by religion. Yet within the common compass of burning the dead, there was no single authoritative form of open-air cremation. Sometimes the upper half of the body was laid bare; at other times it was enclosed within a cotton winding-sheet. At Benares (Varanasi), but perhaps nowhere else, the feet were dipped in the waters of the Ganges before the corpse was laid on the pyre. Normally, but not always, the body was laid face up on the pyre and pointing north. In some instances the legs were bent under the body. The wood used varied greatly in quantity and type, from prized sandalwood to “common fuel,” sometimes supplemented with cow-dung cakes or doused in kerosene rather than ghee. The place of cremation might also vary, from the banks of a river or by the seashore to the desolate margins of a village or the walled enclosure of a municipal burning-ground.

Yet despite this diversity, cremation in the Indian manner still seemed to define a profound difference from cremation in the modern West. The growth of crematoria in Europe and North America since the 1870s, with the corpse doubly sequestered first within a wooden coffin and then inside a purpose-built crematorium



and with gas jets or an electric oven as the means of combustion, has left many Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains feeling deeply uncomfortable with, and emotionally and culturally estranged by, this seemingly peremptory, impersonal, and godless means of disposing of the dead.<sup>22</sup> While both modern and ancient modes of cremation used the common element of fire, the rapid, enclosed, industrial variant provided scant opportunity for the idealized fire of purity, respect, and reverence, for reverie and reflection quite as much as ritual and faith. Further, as Shirley Firth observed in her ethnography of death and bereavement in a Hindu community in England who were struggling to reconcile the requirements of their faith with the constraints of contemporary British funeral regulations, “arguably nowhere is the question of identity raised more acutely than in the face of death.”<sup>23</sup> Out of legal necessity British Hindus and Sikhs have been given no practical choice but to commit their dead to a modern crematorium, though in the new necropolitics of the diaspora, there have been sustained attempts to overturn statutory restrictions on open-air cremation and to argue for its compatibility with existing legislation.<sup>24</sup> While this demand revisits historic resistance to colonial attempts to regulate and restrict Indian cremation, it is ironic that it comes at a time when urban Indians have increasingly been obliged to accept the use of electric- or gas-fired crematoria.

#### SITUATING THE DEAD

Global history has neglected the dead.<sup>25</sup> It is not so much the cause of their dying and the reasons for their passing that have been ignored, for mortality from war, famine, disease, and disaster has been one of the mainstays of global history and of world history before it.<sup>26</sup> But until recently, remarkably little has been written about what happens to the dead once they die; the manner of their disposal; and the celebration, memorialization, and on occasion the deliberate desecration, that accompany the burial or the burning of an individual’s earthly remains. If the movement of people, ideas, and objects around the world is a hallmark of the global in history, if global history is intended to embrace a transformed sense of mobility, spatiality, and identity in the modern age and to explore afresh the multiple processes of exchange and interconnectedness that link places and cultures, then cremation, and not least the Indian practice of cremation, must be deemed a highly eligible subject.<sup>27</sup> Yet this possibility has barely been recognized.

There are, though, precedents. Thomas Laqueur’s landmark study, *The Work of the Dead*, provides one of the most comprehensive historical accounts yet published of the way in which the physical disposal and memorialization of the dead has changed since the early eighteenth century.<sup>28</sup> His resonant phrase—“the work of the dead”—is invaluable in directing attention to the ways in which the dead served the cultural needs of the living. In his words, the work of the dead is

a history of “how they [the dead] give meaning to our lives, how they structure public places, politics, and time.” Such a history is “a history of the imagination, a history of how we invest the dead . . . with meaning.”<sup>29</sup> In Laqueur’s view “bodies matter; they are always much more than they seem.” Among the living they “create a community of memory,” to the extent that the dead (or how the living respect and memorialize the dead) become a foundation for civilization itself.<sup>30</sup> In a similar manner, in describing recent acts of memorialization in eastern Europe, Katherine Verdery has observed: “A dead body is meaningful not in itself but through culturally established relations to death and through the way a specific dead person’s importance is (variously) construed.” She further adds, “A body’s symbolic effectiveness does not depend on its standing for one particular thing[,] . . . for among the most important properties of bodies, especially dead ones, is their ambiguity, multivocality, or polysemy.” It is that ambiguous, multivocal, polysemic quality of the dead that this study seeks to capture with respect to Indian cremation.<sup>31</sup>

At its most ambitious, Laqueur’s book is about how the dead make the modern world, and yet in actuality it concentrates almost entirely on only two Western societies, France and Britain, recognizing that “the meaning of any necrogeography can only be grasped locally” in relation to the literature, history, politics, and even botany of a given location.<sup>32</sup> When Laqueur turns from burials and graveyards to the subject of cremation, it is treated as an abrupt intrusion into a hallowed and mellowed funerary scene, an intervention characterized by the harshly incongruous use of the industrial technology of steelmaking and blast furnaces to effect the speedy destruction of the dead.<sup>33</sup> In a history so grounded in Europe, it is perhaps not surprising that India receives barely a mention and that, when it is cited, it is in terms of the European dead of Park Street cemetery in Calcutta (Kolkata).<sup>34</sup> There is no evidence in Laqueur’s book that India, too, had a civilization in which the dead were set to work for the living, no indication that India possessed an alternative, ancient, and distinctive mode of nonindustrial cremation. Absent, too, is any suggestion that India might have served as a global exemplar and epicenter from which flowed a form of funerary practice very different from that of Europe, but which was also, after its own fashion, distinctly modern.

In common with other death rites, cremation has long attracted the notice of anthropologists. As discussed in chapter 2, cremation was an exemplifying feature of colonial ethnographies and of some of the village-based studies that followed thereafter.<sup>35</sup> Anthropological accounts of Indian communities abroad, in the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, and the South Pacific, especially those based on 1950s and 1960s fieldwork, provide further, if tantalizingly brief, insights into funeral rites and observances, usually within the context of immigrants’ ritual activities, their life cycles, and rites of passage.<sup>36</sup> More recent anthropologists like Shirley Firth have turned to considering cremation among Britons of South Asian descent or among diasporic communities elsewhere in the world.<sup>37</sup> For South Asia