

EPK - DEATH IN THE CITY

A film in three movements.

Spiritual, metaphysical, experiential.



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SYNOPSIS

With legendary funeral pyres burning non-stop for over three millennia, situated on the holy Ganga, 'the river of life', the sacred city of Varanasi is, for Hindus, the dream destination for death. It has been the revered death destination for Hindus since time immemorial. Founded on the belief that dying in Varanasi breaks the repeated cycle of rebirth. The creator, whispers the *Tarak Mantra* into the ear of the departed soul taking them directly to heaven. The geography of this sacred Hindu seat is likened to that of Lord Shiva himself, outstretched along the Ganga, where only in Varanasi, the river flows northward. Shot across four years, 2018 - 2021, *Death in the City* is an intimate portrayal of 'The City of Life and Death', its myriad communities who live and work in its ancient streets; including those waiting to die or those working with the dead, along with rare access to the death worshipping Aghori Saints. *Death in the City* is a film in three movements: the spiritual, the metaphysical and the experiential. The most pressured crematorium in the world, Varanasi's relationship with death is at the same time auspicious, spiritual, and industrial.





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Balaka Ghosh
Maxine Williamson, Kumud Ranjan
Defrim Isai, Steve Jaggi
Suman Kumar
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David Napier
Trish Curtin
Chris Milne, Spoke Insure



ABOUT THE PRODUCTION:

Hindus come to the ancient city of Varanasi to die. It has been since time immemorial, Indian Hindu's dream destination of death. The belief is that dying in Varanasi breaks the repeated cycle of rebirth, with the creator taking the departed soul directly to heaven.

DEATH IN THE CITY was shot across four years between 2018 and 2021. A truly independent, low budget production by entrepreneurial documentary filmmakers, DEATH IN THE CITY is the sophomore feature by Balaka Ghosh who has made 33 documentary films. With a small crew and camera setup, the DOP Kumud Ranjan (Producer) was able to gain unique access to places and people involved in the death business, some, not witnessed on screen till now. Varanasi is a very busy, crowded, noisy, hot and magical place. It was very important to establish a strong deeply rooted sense of place in the shooting so that audiences could almost feel that they were there. The decision to shoot with small camera and low tech set-up ensured this personal aesthetic approach was achieved. Up close and intimate, raw and ethereal describes DEATH IN THE CITY.

Maxine Williamson (Producer/Australia) met Kolkata based Balaka Ghosh in late 2017 in Brisbane, Australia during the Asia Pacific Screen Awards and Asia Pacific Screen Laboratory. Balaka Ghosh was caring full time for her ailing Mother at the time of their meeting. Balaka's Father had passed years before. A discussion on loss, the important transition of death and how it completes the circle transpired at their first meeting. These discussions and friendship continued once Balaka returned to Kolkata. Whilst Balaka cared for her Mother until she passed, a 'desire for death' consumed Balaka as now, she was parentless and rudderless. Like all artists, her deep grief and loss was channeled into creative thinking and traveling to Varanasi, DEATH IN THE CITY was born.

LOGLINE

With funeral pyres burning non-stop for more than three millennia, the sacred city of Varanasi on the holy Ganga, India's river of life is, for Hindus, the dream destination for death and the most pressured crematorium in the world: its relationship with death at once auspicious, spiritual, and industrial.



The pyres in the ancient city of Varanasi are never extinguished. Legend says they have not gone out in over three millennia. More than 50 funerals are held in 24-hrs. One manager of a 'house of salvation', where people come and live to prepare to depart, has witnessed 12,000 deaths in his lifetime.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

After losing both parents, death seemed a desired respite, as life to her had become an illusion. I was soul tired and did not wish to be reborn. I chose to reach Varanasi to explore and understand the philosophy behind the desire to die there, to be free of the punishing cycle of rebirth. This search brought me to Mumukshu Bhavan – a house of salvation where one eats, sleeps, meditates and prepares to die. Mumukshu means – one who desires death or salvation.

This sprawling place housed people from all walks of life including Aghori saints “the messiah’s of death” and a housewife still dreaming at age 70 of becoming a documentary filmmaker but innocent enough to declare that an airplane will be brought by god to take her to heaven. I met a world-renowned physicist, trying to explain the phenomenon of Varanasi; god and salvation through the laws of physics. He has researched for 10-years while he waits for death. Their approaches to death were uniquely linked to their own particular philosophies of life. I became intrigued with this and wished to explore things more deeply.

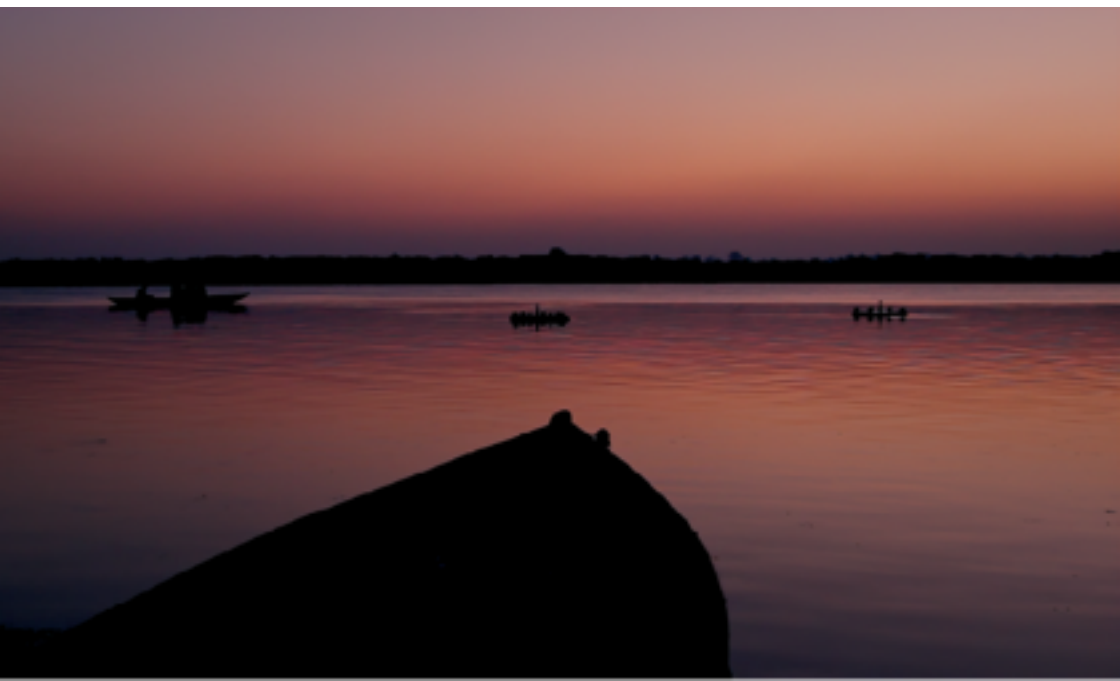
I tried to understand death through the mindset of the man who performs his last rites while alive, thus making him a living, non-existent person. Or understanding through the legendary nautch girls of the city, who perform passionate and sensual dances singing on make-shift stages, celebrating beside the burning pyres.

I do not understand the philosophies of these erotic nautch dancers. Is it blind faith or are they driven by some deep understanding of life that I have not yet understood?

Thick smoke rises when the Aghori saint, who deals with death and the afterlife, does his meditative practice on the ashes of a still burning pyre. He is unperturbed as he smokes pot or eats and drinks from a human skull. I feel that their stories of transcendence into a world where they survive on the flesh of dead bodies and where sex is the path to true salvation, rings true. Maybe it's their mysterious, unexplored world, coupled with my own intense desire for death, or simply the magic of Varanasi that pushes me to wanting to explore more.

They say that the Varanasi pyres burning corpses on the banks of the river Ganga never die. A continual haze and rise of smoke from the ashes of those departed souls who believe they have reached an eternal salvation; never to return to an earth-bound life cycle again. As the winter night darkens, the numerous immortals working at the burning pyres begin to blur with the ascending thick fog rising from the longest river of India, accompanied by the songs of nautch girls adding to the pain and imbalance between existing and not. Is it my desire for death that deepens from this scene or the yearning for a life yet lived? A life I do not fully understand yet.

For the first time I am exploring my deep raw emotions of pain and loss and my death desire. This is an intensely personal journey. A journey exploring universal emotions of struggle in a quirky, hilarious, and often poignant way. Viewed through my unique lens, brought about by my soul-tired predicament and my access to fellow soul travellers, this journey of finding myself by relinquishing the ego of I, me and myself has only just begun. Am I searching for my death transition or am I metamorphosing into a higher existence where one becomes God? I am yet to find out.



"Varanasi sits on the penis of Lord Shiva so that is from where the power of the city comes", sums up the old boatman. This journey within the city of Varanasi, sitting on the penis of Lord Shiva, will be an incredible one. A journey where I hope to make the most important decision of my life at its completion.

Balaka Ghosh, Director





***"I wanted to die.
So, I visited Varanasi where
Hindus come to die.
I embarked on an hilarious
and quirky, often intense,
risqué journey to explore
death before I made my
ultimate plan for my final
departure. Often comical, I
learnt to come to terms with
my pain, and to understand
all that is death."***

Balaka Ghosh
Director



THEMES

- Death
- Salvation
- Religion
- God
- Industry
- Transition
- Tradition
- Geography
- History
- Fable
- Mythology
- Exploration
- Spirituality
- Acceptance
- Relinquish
- Identity
- Path and purpose
- Separation
- Ritual
- Life after death
- Coming to terms with grief
- Culture
- Life
- Symbolism
- Mysticism
- Belief systems

ABOUT VARANASI

Varanasi (*Vārāṇasī*; [ʋaː'raːɳəsi]) is a city on the Ganges river in northern India that has a central place in pilgrimage, death, and mourning in the Hindu world. The name Varanasi was officially so revived after 1947, but the city is still widely known as **Banaras** or **Benares** (*Banāras*; [bə'naɪrəs] and since ancient times also as **Kashi**. The city has a syncretic tradition of Muslim artisanship that underpins its tourism. Located in the middle-Ganges valley in the southeastern part of the state of Uttar Pradesh, Varanasi lies on the left bank of the river. It is 692 kilometres (430 mi) to the southeast of India's capital New Delhi, 320 kilometres (200 mi) south-east of the state capital, Lucknow, and 121 kilometres (75 mi) east of Allahabad, another Hindu pilgrimage site.

Varanasi is one of the world's oldest continually inhabited cities. Kashi, its ancient name, was associated with a kingdom of the same name of 2,500 years ago. The Buddha is recorded in the Pali canon to have given his first sermon, "The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Dharma", at nearby Sarnath in 528 BCE. In the 8th century, Adi Shankara established the worship of Shiva as an official sect of Varanasi. During the Muslim rule during the Middle Ages, the city became an important centre of Hindu devotion, pilgrimage, mysticism and poetry contributing to its cultural importance. Tulsidas wrote his Awadhi language epic, the *Ramcharitmanas*, a Bhakti movement reworking of the Sanskrit Ramayana, in Varanasi. Several other major figures of the Bhakti movement were born in Varanasi, including Kabir and Ravidas. In the 16th century, the Mughal emperor Akbar built two large temples dedicated to Shiva and Vishnu in the city.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Varanasi>

QUOTE BANK

"An amazing film! It was like a spiritual walk together with the people talking about Shiva's teachings, those "saints" philosophising, and the people attending the cremation ceremonies. There is so much to say about the beautiful subject, good directing, editing, photography and awesome song and music." **Selim Atakan, Turkish musician, composer.**

"Fascinating. It gave a complete picture of what Varanasi is with all its religious fervour, philosophical arguments bordering on the absurd, hypocrisy or rather twisted ideas, noise, and peacefulness. Some beautiful images such as the opening scene which is reminiscent of the classical concept of the river of death, the dog that guards it and the boatman. Others are about life itself like the floating kite showing that life goes on regardless of whatever philosophy."

Guy Dantes, English Professor, Christian College, Kolkata

"The images are powerful & beautiful. Tough & strong stuff. Was always curious about those Aghori's ways of livings. Must be a trip talking with them & just being in that burning Man City and knowing "this ain't Nevada no more". Tell me more, tell me more."

U-Wei Bin Haji Sari - Malaysian filmmaker, art curator, collector.

"It's a beautifully crafted film of ideas and experiences." **Andrew Pike, owner Ronin Film, Australia.**

"This beautiful, spellbinding film, a weaving of cultural anthropology and visual poetry, explores sacred traditions and rituals as deep and complex as the mystery of death itself and the human need to understand and accept this final mystery that awaits us all. A wonderful film altogether! Congratulations, an amazing film!"

Elizabeth Frank, American Author, Winner of the Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

"Your movie is amazing. The colours and sounds. I love the bird song when the old lady is talking. The cremation pyres OMG!! The way the animals just walk around in amongst it all." **Sharon Rankine**

"The film paints a chiaroscuro of death and life, hope and despair, belief and reality, philosophy and natural process with broad brush strokes and painstaking filigree of cinematic narrative and unforgettable visual nuances. The background is the oldest living City, Benaras, which throbs in modern times with the ethos of eons. A rich tapestry of old and new artefacts and lifestyle is woven with ease and artistic panache. The narrative takes you across millennium of culture in an effortless sweep. It seamlessly fits with the present making us aware of the interesting aspect of our culture that flows as quietly and as majestically as the river Ganga. The musical scores add pensive soundscape. The rich pallet of colours enhances the texture of intriguing and compelling narrative. It's a lifetime experience and life changing too for all who would watch the film and absorb the message. Kudos to the director, script writer and cinematographer. I am enthralled.

Dr. Kausik Chatterjee is an expert in Nuclear Medicine

"To represent the contradictions and interfacing of both sides of life -- light and dark, and to conceive and convert dark into life, this distinct film is unique in this sense. The film approves that all such pitfalls and glories of life make it wonderful, if you open your mind, and have deep quest to be part of sublime bless through your lifeworld " **Prof. Rana P.B. Singh**

"This intoxicating, visceral film is so much more than a documentary. It is a piece of art that embeds itself and stays with you, no matter how hard you try to outrun it. To say it's just about a city, religion or death is to grossly underestimate it. All three are so tightly entwined that it's impossible to find where one leaves off and the another begins. This film clearly shows the entanglement that thousands of years of deeply rooted beliefs have created, while cleverly, yet respectfully, delving into the disentanglement. Among the lives and deaths that this city thrives on are beautifully shot, deeply imagined symbolisms that bring momentary relief from the assault on the senses that leave you reeling but running back for more." **Sue Gilbert, End of Life Doula**

Balaka Ghosh | Director



International award-winning Kolkata based documentarian, Balaka Ghosh, has made 33 films in a career spanning over two decades. They have screened at over 100 international film festivals and been acquired by many international broadcasters. She has won the highest award bestowed nationally for Indian documentary four times. *DEATH in the CITY* is her sophomore documentary feature-length film. *CALF* is her first fiction feature film in pre-production with several other fictions & documentaries in development.

Kumud Ranjan | Producer/DOP

Born and raised in Bihar, Kumud has worked extensively in remote difficult terrains, covering unsympathetic grounds and discovering new ways to reach people. Armed with a master's degree in Journalism and Mass Communication he had worked as a video journalist with the prestigious TV channel Star News for a



decade. He has covered the bloody caste struggles to violent elections in the state; skilled with accessing inaccessible pockets of influence. This ability has given him rare access to remote marginal communities. A clear understanding of the socio--political situation and a sensitive gaze, Kumud is a unique producer. He is a poet, a sensibility which brings to his gaze, a lyrical and empathetic quality. He has produced eight films including a feature documentary. As a DOP he was a video journalist for many years working on a wide range of intense humanist subjects. Sometimes five years was spent on a single subject exploring it in-depth, and bringing out small nuances, intonations and inflections. This is his subject approach and the relation of the intrusion of the camera to it. He been DOP of 17 film projects.

Maxine Williamson | Producer

28yrs in the film industry. For 23 years, worked



as an international film professional across cinema exhibition/distribution; international award platforms & festival directorship career sectors, conversing & collaborating with world cinema greats; engaging with international film professional peers of high excellence; & travelling to international festivals as jury

member or special guest. She has peer reviewed thousands of cinematic works across her career and is an advocate for diversity on screen. She holds a cinema speciality of Asia Pacific. In 2007 was instrumental in establishing the Asia Pacific Screen Awards (APSA), its brand, Academy & filmmaker networks. Across her career she established & worked in platforms that support new filmmakers via script funds & international film incubator forums. Established the Young Cinema Award for APSA to honour emerging talent. Artistic Director of two international film festivals. *DEATH in the CITY* and *CALF* will be her first international feature films, during a mid-career transition to producer, under the mentorship tutelage of world-renowned Turkish producer Zeynep Atakan (producer of master filmmaker Nuri Bilge Ceylan's films including the Palme d'Or winning *Winter Sleep* and Elia Suleiman's Cannes 2019 double-winner *It Must Be Heaven*). Previously she was Associate Producer on documentary series aired on CNN International for three years, *Scene by Scene: Films and Filmmakers of Asia Pacific*.

Defrim Isai | Executive Producer

Defrim Isai is an independent film and digital media producer with over 25 years within the film and TV industry. He has an extensive resume and major accomplishments within both the government and private sectors of the film industry across four States including holding key positions of Director Production Investment and Business Development at ScreenWest, General Manager Development and Investment at the South Australian Film Corporation (SAFC) as well as Production Program Manager at both the PFTC and Film Queensland. He is currently working in NSW where along with his film production slate he is also engaged in producing and developing a



number of theatrical productions some of which are being developed for film and new media. As a film agency developer he has negotiated and implemented high level financing and production deals resulted in the re-invigoration of both the production and creative sectors in the States he has worked. Whilst at the SAFC and ScreenWest he was key in supporting and facilitating a number of notable independent feature films including *Red Dog*, *Snowtown*, and was the creator of the FilmLab creative program that developed and financed award winning festival features including *52 Tuesdays* (Sundance) and *The Infinite Man* (SXSW) and the feature documentary *Shut Up Little Man* (Sundance). Queensland represents the genesis of his career and includes Co-producer of the feature films *Blurred* and *Under the Radar* as well as the award winning and theatrically screened short film *Bloody Footy* (Chicago, Tribeca). Prior to his time as Project Manager at Film Qld and The PFTC (precursors of ScreenQueensland) Defrim worked in theatrical exhibition as Manger of the Metro and Dendy Cinemas and Manager of Brisbane Independent Filmmakers a Government funded screen support agency. Defrim has significant hands-on producing, financing and development experience within the Australian industry as well as developing key relationships with internationally especially with China, UK and US.

World Premiere Adelaide Film Festival October 2022

<https://adelaidefilmfestival.org/event/death-in-the-city/>

Program notes:

To die in Varanesi is to attain salvation.

Anyone with an interest in India and its spirituality will find rich material in this documentary about Varanesi, holy city on the Ganges. Many believe that if one dies here and is given the rites of cremation in its waters, Lord Shiva will release you from the karmic wheel of reincarnation. This has generated a local industry based on death, with wood bearers, death photographers, prostitutes, and an assortment of holy men well supplied with gunja. The fascinating aspect of this Indian-Australian co-production is the acceptance of death, stripped of the fear that all too often attends it.

Festivals and Awards

Adelaide Film Festival 2022 World Premiere

Depth of Field International Film Festival, USA 2022

Asian River Film Festival, Indonesia 2022

Life Beyond Life International Film Festival, Italy, 2023

Awards

Excellence Award - Depth of Field International Film Festival, USA 2022

Best Afterlife Research Award - Life Beyond Life International Film Festival, Italy, 2023

Media



https://www.getbengal.com/details/balaka-ghoshs-documentary-on-death-in-the-city-wins-an-international-award-an-exclusive-gb-chat-with-the-filmmaker?fbclid=IwAR1R6lBri5NDK6S-QOpe6ul-skojCPZAvzj_IWx0idAT1oJtpXZyIIIMornU

Kol girl's docu on life & death in Varanasi wins Italy honours

Priyanka Dasgupta
@timesgroup.com

Kolkata: A Kolkata girl's documentary on Varanasi's obsession with death has won big at the recently concluded Life Beyond Life Film Festival (LBLFF) in Italy's Torino. This festival is a one-of-its-kind event in the world focusing on eschatological themes.

Participating films dealt with the themes of terminal care, grief, transition, visions of afterlife and multi-verse. Balaka Ghosh's 'Death in the City' focuses on Varanasi's obsession with death.

Organizers of LBLFF believe that cinema is a perfect channel to talk about issues related to the afterlife because of the medium's immersive capacity and the power of moving images. Ghosh's documentary was declared the winner in the Best Afterlife Research on Wednesday.

Talking about the festival, Ghosh said, "Most film festivals do not have space for a subject like this. It requires a different kind of mindset to even program it for festival audiences. We chanced upon this festival while searching online. I feel it is brave of the organizers to run a festival dealing exclusively with such deep, serious and usually unexplored themes."

FILM SHOT OVER 4 YEARS



Name | Death in the City

Director | Balaka Ghosh

Cinematographer | Kumud Ranjan

Duration | 72 minutes

Film shot over | 4 years

We chanced upon this festival online. It's brave of the organizers to run a festival dealing exclusively with such deep, serious and usually unexplored themes — Balaka Ghosh

Since this is the only such festival in the world, competition is also not easy. "To get selected in such a festival was great news for me. To receive validation was amazing. I got the news when I was travelling by train to Delhi. In many ways, it was the best time for me to get the news since this documentary is a journey for me at various levels," Ghosh said.

Ghosh shot the documentary across four years from 2018 to 2021. Her documentary is an intimate portrayal of the city of 'Life and Death', as Varanasi is also known as, its myriad communities who live and work in its ancient streets, including those wait-

ting to die or those working with the dead. Among many other things, Ghosh's lens focuses on Varanasi's houses of the dying, its death photographers and sex workers who dance close to the pyres. She also interviewed members of the Aghori sect, who spoke about their rites, such as necrophilia and meditation around bodies at crematoriums and heavy use of alcohol and drugs. "Many have told me that it is not easy for a woman to convince them to speak on such issues in front of the camera. I am glad that the jury appreciated the spiritual intensity and the research that went into the making of this film," Ghosh concluded.

THE TIMES OF INDIA

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Kolkata girl's film on Varanasi to premiere in Adelaide Film Festival

PRINMEKA DASGUPTA / TNA / Updated Oct 22, 2021, 09:58:57

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