



# Burning Resentment

The discontented cremators of Pashupatinath  
/Labour

/ ATUL BHATTARAI

“We’ve worked here so fucking long, they should give us an award, send us off with flowers and five or seven lakhs,” Gyan Bahadur Acharya told me one morning last January. We were inside the premises of the Pashupatinath temple in Kathmandu, and Acharya, a slight, scowling man, was sitting cross-legged near the steps of the Bhasmeshwor ghat. On a row of raised stone platforms in front of us, bodies burned on wooden funeral pyres. Tending to them were cremators in white dhotis, many of them Acharya’s protégés. One lobbed packets of vegetable oil into a fire, followed by bundles of straw; another, using a long bamboo pole, gently reversed the course of a blackened foot that had drifted from the rest of the body.

Acharya, who is 68 years old, is the oldest cremator at Pashupatinath. While Hindu cremations are usually administered by a family member, the task falls here to professionals, all of whom are Brahmins, and work as contractors for the Pashupati Area Development Trust—a wealthy, politicised institution that manages the temple grounds. When Pashupatinath service staff were put on payroll several years ago, most of the ghat employees, including the 23 cremators, were overlooked. In recent years, the cremators have protested their low pay, and, more pointedly, their lack of a gratuity. In 2015, after several petitions that culminated in a strike, the PADT announced that cremators retiring after ten years of service would receive one lakh Nepali rupees, and those retiring after 15 years would receive a lakh and a half—a fraction of what is paid to permanent staff. Acharya, who has not been able to save enough money to afford retirement, had hoped the gratuity might act as his insurance against poverty. “We finally got one and a half fucking lakhs,” he said. “What do you do with one and a half lakhs? It’s a cigarette allowance.”

The amount seemed to throw into relief the indignities of the work, diminishing decades of “being heated up like metal at a blacksmith’s,” as one cremator put it, in return for an insufficient wage and ridicule from mourners—despite their ritual function as sons of the deceased. People seemed to forget, Acharya said, that he and his colleagues would be the eventual custodians of their remains. Recently, he had heard, a man had gone around the temple calling him a *ghatey*

Brahmin. “We know we’re ghatey Brahmins! Ghatey!” he said. He took a long drag from his cigarette. “If I recognised him, I would have roasted him alive.”

The cremators at Pashupatinath may have chosen their profession—unlike in Varanasi, where cremations are performed by a group of hereditary, oppressed-caste workers—but they are locked into it out of desperation. Deepak Adhikari, who is 34 years old, is one of the youngest cremators. “It’s danger here,” he told me when I first met him. His fingers were studded with burns, and the heat from the pyres had reduced the hair on his forearms to stubs.

Adhikari turned up at the ghat when he was five years old, having fled his abusive father, and soon began carrying straw and wood to the pyres, as a sort of apprentice to the cremators. In his teens, he began to cremate bodies; he recalled spending sleepless nights thinking about the faces of those he had burned. The older workers taught him the cremation rites, as well as techniques to handle unruly bodies, such as those pumped with saline in hospitals, or worse, riddled with carrion insects. Lacking formal education, like many of his colleagues, he has made few attempts to find other work.

Business in the ghat has been in decline for several years. In 2016, an electric crematorium opened on the temple grounds, stemming the flow of corpses to the ghat by more than a third. A former head of the PADT predicted that in 15 years, as more incinerators are added alongside the initial two, traditional cremations would become obsolete. By eliminating the need for ghee and wood—250 kilograms of wood are required for each body—the crematorium reduced the environmental footprint of cremations, and the cost of a funeral from 12,000 to 3,000 Nepali rupees. Kumar Thapa Magar, a PADT official, said this has helped poorer families, and spared family members from having to watch “heads falling, legs moving and the blood dripping out.” In the electric crematorium, Adhikari argued, “You put the body in, toss in some flowers, drink juice and go home. There’s no meaning in mourning.” In the warmer months, he said, with grim nonchalance, work is scarcer—“old people are healthier in the summer”—and what remained is swallowed by “that machine.” A third incinerator, which is currently being acquired, imperiled their jobs.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:**  
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The cremators make 1,200 Nepali rupees for each adult body and 630 rupees for each child. (When he talked about burning children, Adhikari's voice broke. "I wish we didn't have to do that," he said. "We remember our own children.") Between these fees and tips from mourners, Adhikari earns around twenty to twenty-five thousand rupees a month, so the gratuity he will become eligible for after he completes 15 years, in 2022, amounts to less than a year's pay. If the PADT increases the gratuity by

One morning, Acharya and Adhikari were sitting on the ghat steps, joined by Bidur Budhathoki, the head of the cremators' association. Nearby was a platform that had been cleared and washed, and the water was still bubbling from the intense heat. To its side was a heap of blackened, half-burned logs from the pyre, which would be transferred in the evening to a factory to fire bricks. Up the river, at the adjacent Arya ghat, is a "VIP platform," where, for a fee of 5,000 rupees, mourners host more elaborate funerals, complete with a carpet

secretary of the PADT, and his successor, Pradeep Dhakal. (Dhakal declined my request for an interview, and Magar told me the demands had not yet reached him.) PADT officials had assured him their demands would be met, Budhathoki said, but evaded him each time he had tried to follow up.

"Where are we with demanding five to seven lakhs?" Acharya asked Budhathoki.

"What can we do if they don't fucking give us money?" Budhathoki said. "If they have money and say they don't have it, what do I ask for, their balls?"



the time he retires, he might avoid Acharya's predicament. "It's time for many of these old men to retire and relax and they're still grinding away," he said. "If they got the money, why would they still be here? They are trapped." With a gratuity of ten or twelve lakhs—wishful thinking, he admitted—he would return to his village. "There is nothing for us here," he said. "We have burned ministers and royals. For three hours we saw the king's face, but for what?"

of marigolds and a structure resembling an orange canopy bed surrounding the body. The cremators are paid the usual rate for these funerals, and there was speculation as to where the rest of the money went. Acharya mused that he and his colleagues would have "houses the size of mansions" if they migrated to America: "The hole diggers there get as much money as they want."

Since their 2015 strike, Budhathoki had appealed for a higher gratuity with Govinda Tandon, the member



Organising another strike seemed futile. After the first strike, officials had blamed them for compelling mourners to burn their own dead, Adhikari said, and in any case, the cremators had grown uneasy about withholding their services. They had initially called for the PADT to increase the cremation fee, but relented as that would burden poorer families. "The ones who are able to give have to give," Budhathoki said. "People like us, old men over sixty, are carrying on this work. What happens when we aren't able to work anymore? The officials should be ashamed."

At the entrance of the ghat, a body covered in marigolds was being carried in on a bamboo bier. A bed of wood had already been laid out, and after the body was set down, another cremator's work would begin. Adhikari got up to leave. The officials "treated us like dogs," he said. "When their mothers and fathers die, we'll be the ones burning them. That's something they should understand. They've been saying they will give us the money, but nothing's happened for us." He chuckled. "Maybe it will happen when it's our turn to be on the pyre." ■