



Worshipping the rising sun near Asi Ghat.

CHRISTOPHER JAMES

“City of Light”

*Photographs of the holy city of Benares by Christopher James
and Jane Tuckerman. Text by Robert Gardner.*

Looking at photographs often awakes a sense of privilege. They seem to give you, apart from other enjoyments, an assurance that you are in the presence of something with absolute authenticity. What you see, trapped in particles of silver, is, after all, the very light that illuminated the moment in question. No doubt almost everyone born in the last half of the twentieth century knows how to take a photograph and even the rudiments of its photochemistry, but only a few people have begun to inquire into what the photographic transaction really means. Stanley Cavell is one. About it he says, “A photograph emphasizes the existence of its subject, recording it, hence it is that it may be called a transcription.” Harvard’s Cabot professor of aesthetics and the general theory of value, Cavell is concerned with such questions as the nature of reality and experience, and so he is genuinely, promisingly distressed

with what it might mean to seem to be looking at reality (a photograph or even a film) and not actually confronting it.

About a year ago, Benares, India, was for three months the subject of ambitious transcription to both film and photography. I had returned to Benares to make *Forest of Bliss*, a film over which I had pondered at length since an initial unsettling visit ten years earlier. Jane Tuckerman, associate studio professor, and Christopher James, tutor in Harvard’s department of visual and environmental studies, accompanied me to do still photography. Ákos Östör, senior research fellow in the department, was our anthropological guide and conscience. These efforts were undertaken through the Film Study Center and are the most recent in a series that began 25 years ago in what was then known as Netherlands New Guinea. That year Eliot Elisofon, Michael Rockefeller, Peter Matthiessen, Samuel

Putnam, Karl Heider, and I produced, quite apart from a number of books and the nonfiction feature film *Dead Birds*, more than 25,000 color and black-and-white stills documenting an authentic Stone Age society. Those images are now the best available substitute for the reality of that time and space. As a matter of fact, they are almost the only surviving witnesses to an episode in history that time has now wholly transformed. Looking at them is to watch what Susan Sontag calls photography's testimony to "time's relentless melt." Every transcription in photography and film is a reminder of the continuousness of life, as long as life continues (and, if it doesn't, it is a reminder of its mortal nature).

Each of my journeys to Benares in the past ten years has been connected to the idea that religion, which always perplexed me by its seeming remoteness, can be understood as a way of dealing with certain elemental matters, in particular with death or with what my sister Isabella called in one of her poems "IT." "IT" is a prevailing presence in Benares and is sedulously, even crassly, cultivated. *Forest of Bliss* might be regarded as a ninety-minute compression of this most recent ten weeks in Benares. But I think it is more accurately a ninety-minute expansion on a split second of the panic dread I felt on turning an unfamiliar corner onto Manikarnika Ghat (The Great Cremation Ground) and finding my way blocked by "IT."

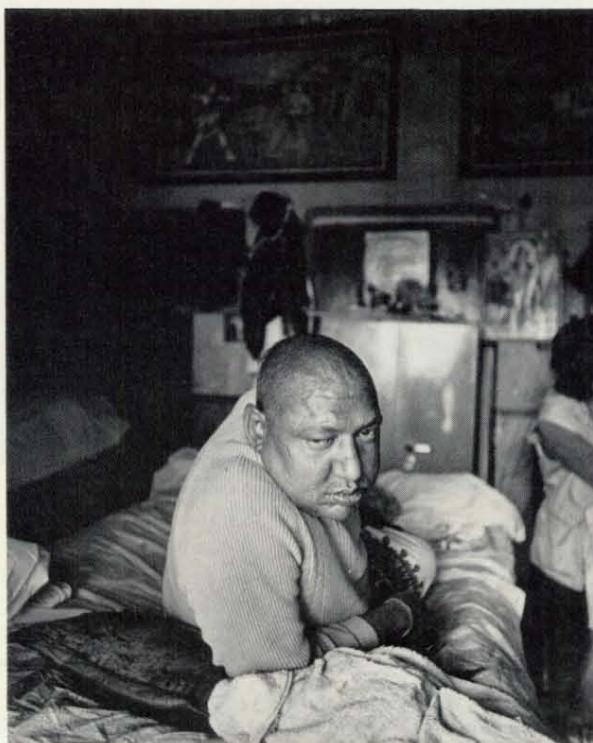
Forest of Bliss is about people being and dying. Of the multitude at work, at play, and at prayer, three individuals are seen in somewhat greater detail than others. They are, first, a healer of extraordinary geniality who attends pained and troubled people both in his modest home above Manikarnika and at the Durga temple late at night; second, an unusually conscientious priest who practices his calling in a small shrine near the Ganges; and, third, the untouchable king of the cremation grounds, the Dom Raja, who vigorously exercises his hereditary rights to sell sacred fire to mourners.

Christopher James's Dom Raja, one Kailash Choudhury, looks balefully at his spectators, who look back knowing that if this is the way he looked on January 24, 1985 (the day this photograph was made), it is not the way he will ever look again. As a matter of fact, the Dom Raja died not very long after we all came home. Time melts not only people but everything under and beyond the sun, what people think as well as what they make. Styles and customs appear and disappear, buildings rise and fall, whole landscapes are obliterated in the blink of an eye, the click of a shutter. The next Dom Raja to rule the cremation grounds of Benares may, in the coming year, find competition in electric crematoria furnished

by a municipality concerned with the pollutedness of the sacred Ganges.

Cavell has said, "One may also think about photography as transfiguration." I have tried on occasion to do this and find it is no easier than thinking about it as transcription. I sometimes wonder, though, if images like James's and Tuckerman's don't go a long way to making the point on their own. It seems to me that what these photographers may have done (without, it's been speculated, even knowing it) is to grasp certain fragments of experience which they see as speaking for something

larger than the fragments themselves, perhaps during what Cartier-Bresson calls "decisive moments." I think Tuckerman's dogs do this and so do James's funeral litters. The dogs and the litters have been "transfigured" by photography exactly because they are not and cannot be reality (or even particularly or necessarily realistic) but can and do suggest or stand for more and other than the reality they once were.



The Dom Raja, untouchable king of the cremation grounds at Manikarnika and Harishchandra ghats.

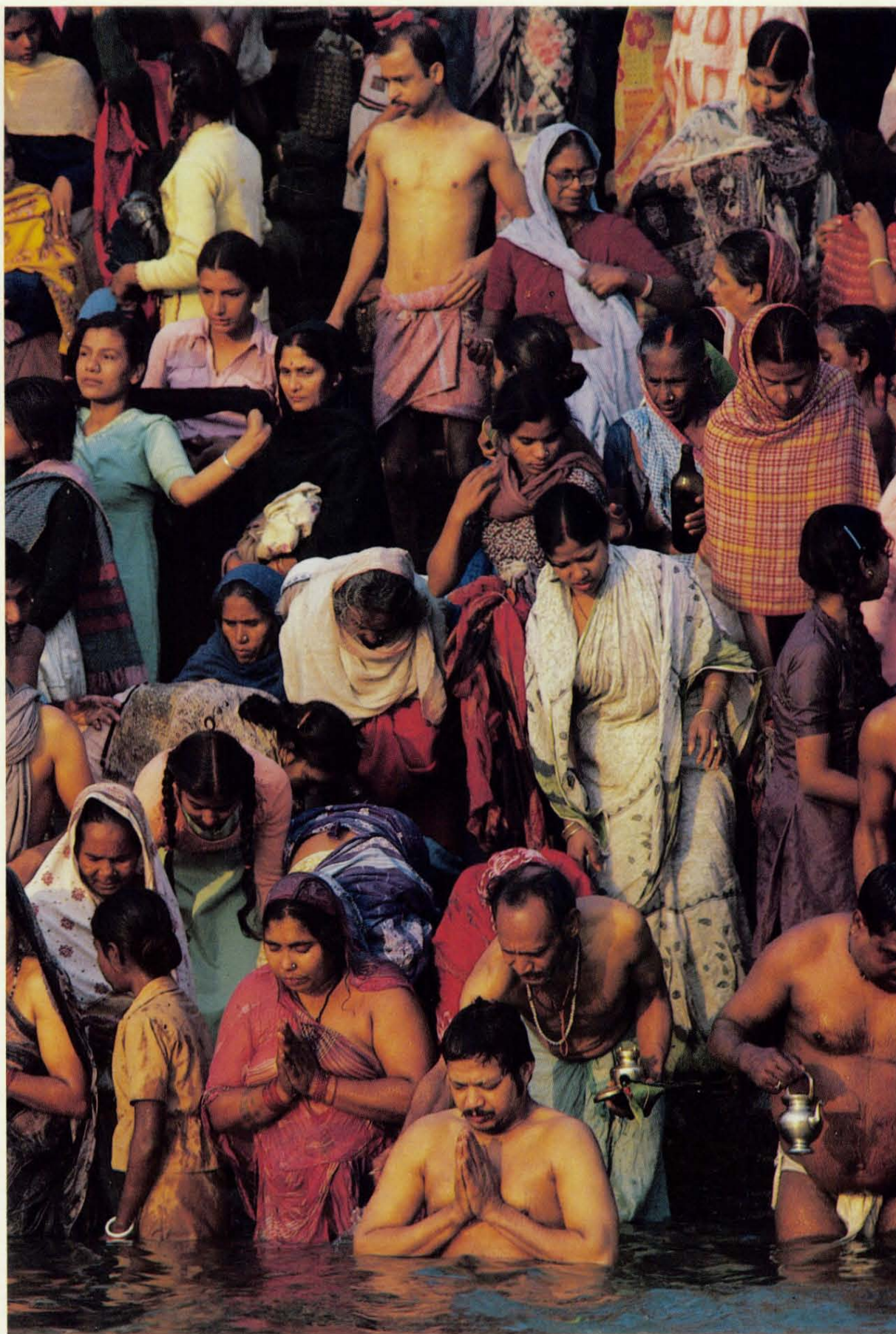
CHRISTOPHER JAMES

Editors' note: A selection of photographs by Christopher James, Jane Tuckerman, Ned Johnston, and Robert Gardner will be shown in an exhibit, "City of Light," at Harvard's Carpenter Center from March 13 through April 13. It will then travel to New York City and open May 7 at the American Museum of Natural History. All the photographs made in Benares are collected in Harvard's Film Study Center, where, with similar groups of photographs such as those made in Netherlands

New Guinea, or Ethiopia (by Clark Worswick and Michael Mathers), or Nepal (by Kevin Bubrickie), they are available for study, reflection, or simple admiration.

Forest of Bliss by Robert Gardner, senior lecturer on visual studies at Harvard, premiered at the British Academy of Film Arts on September 26, 1985. Its American debut was at the Carpenter Center benefit for the Harvard Film Archive and the Erikson Center on November 7. On December 6 it won first prize at the Florence (Italy) Film Festival. *Forest of Bliss* will be shown at 5 p.m. and 8 p.m. on March 13 at the Carpenter Center and begins a theatrical run at the Film Forum in New York City on May 14.

Stanley Cavell has said of Gardner's film, "I see *Forest of Bliss* as staking itself on its strength to participate in the fact and the idea of life and death as cycles of metamorphosis, hence in the human effort (threatened at every turn) to redeem the violence of death and the violence by which life sustains itself—that they may not be stupid and inconsequential separations, but fruitful, faithful, memorable, as in the perpetuations of a cremation ritual, and as in the transfiguring proposals and provocations of such a film as this."



Masses bathing on Makara Sankranti, the day the sun starts its northward course.

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A shrine on Kedar Ghat.

JANE TUCKERMAN



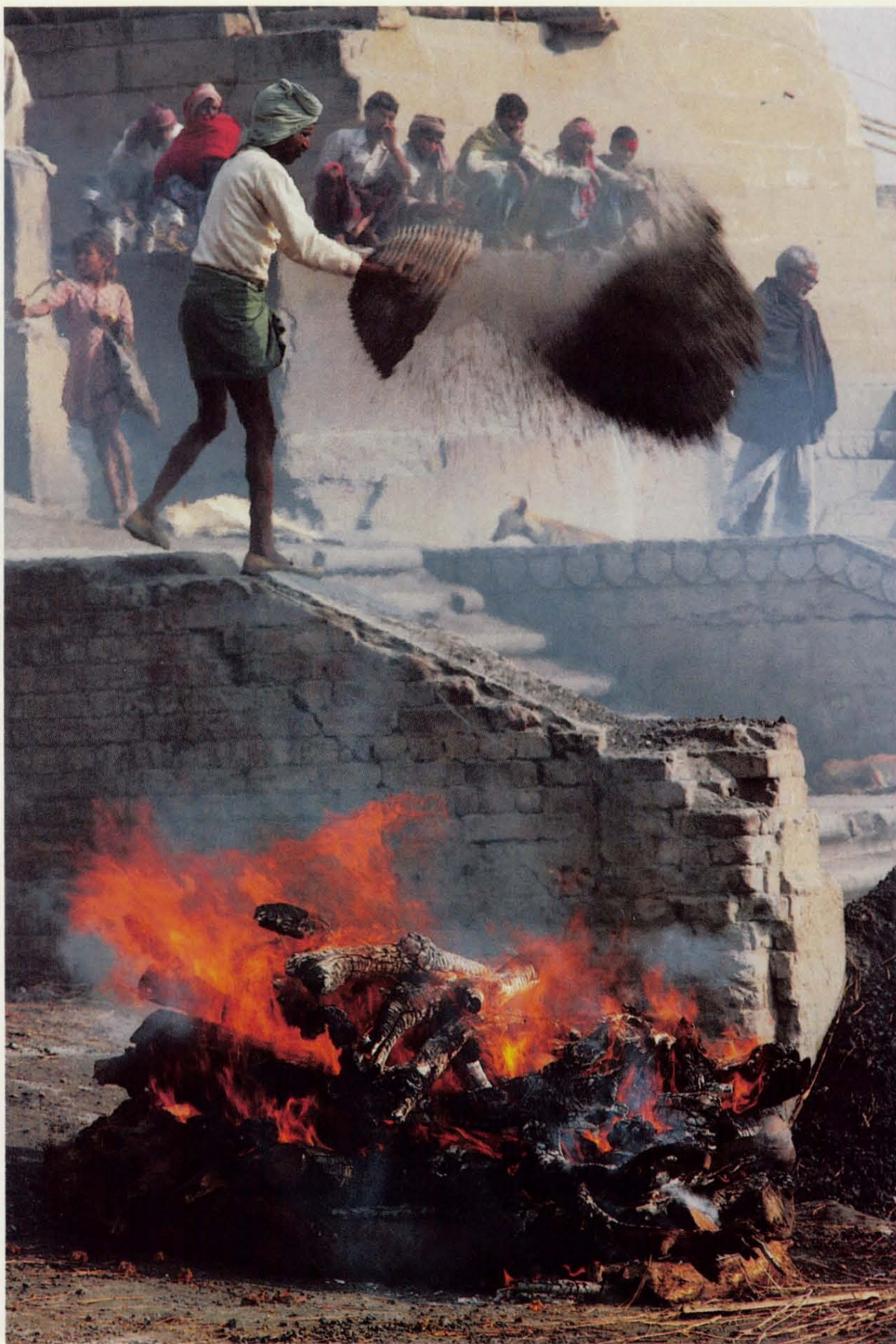
A hospice for the dying poor.

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A corpse on its way to the cremation ground.

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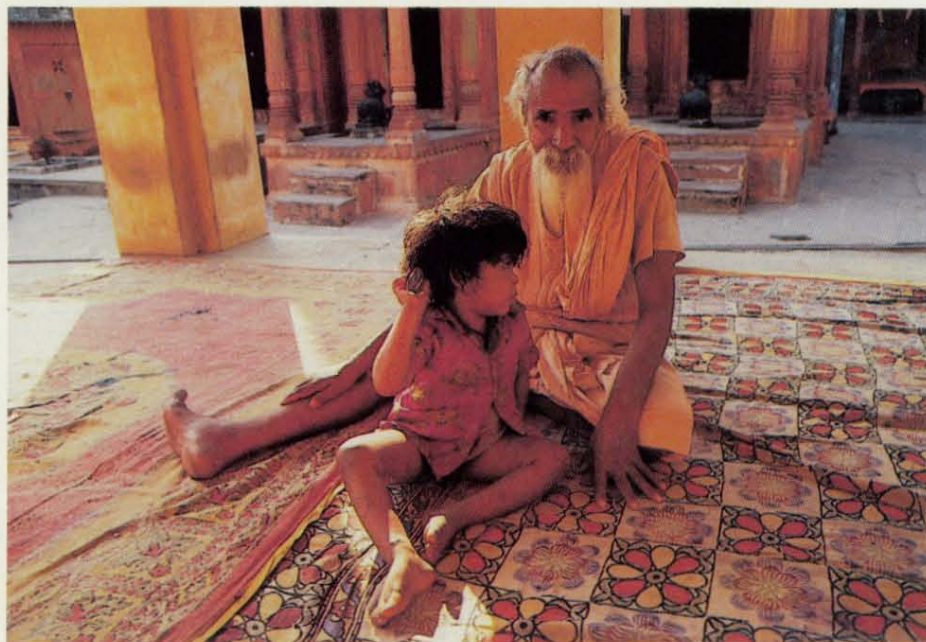
Manikarnika, the main cremation ground, where more than a hundred bodies are burned each day.

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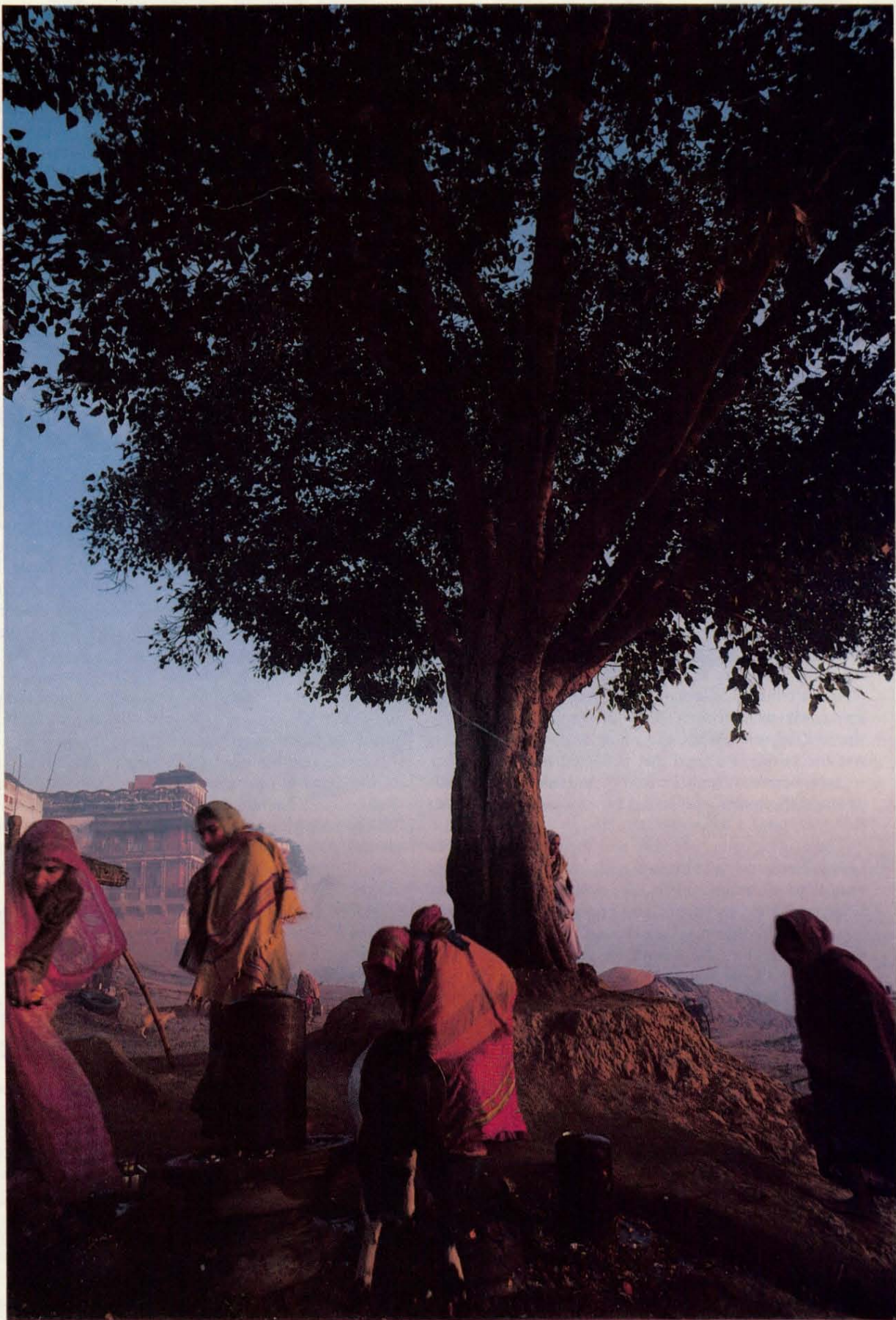
Boatman on the Ganges.

JANE TUCKERMAN



Interior of the Nirvani Akhara, a dwelling for ascetics.

JANE TUCKERMAN



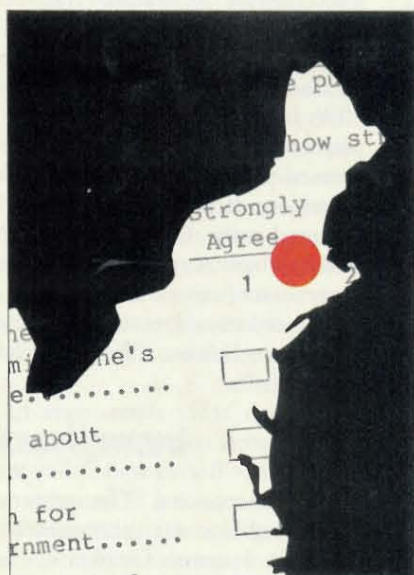
Women, frequently the widowed, worship in the early morning at Asi Ghat.

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NEW INITIATIVES

Alumni of Stanford and Harvard are reckoned among our society's most privileged members. Are they pleased with their lives? What are their hopes, fears, and dreams? The Stanford/Harvard Survey sought to find out. Jointly sponsored by *The Stanford Magazine* and *Harvard Magazine*, in collaboration with the New York firm of Yankelovich, Skelly and White, it is the first research project of its kind. Florence Skelly, president of YSW, presents the findings in an article beginning on page 21.

This issue of *Harvard Magazine* incorporates new graphic styling. Our intent is to enhance readability and refresh the magazine's format, unchanged for almost a decade. Designer Ronald N. Campbell, former art director of *Fortune*, conceived and guided our visual renewal. This makes him a Harvard parent twice over: his son Bruce graduated from the College in 1982. Bruce is now a third-year law student at—you guessed it—Stanford.

Cover design by Ronald N. Campbell.

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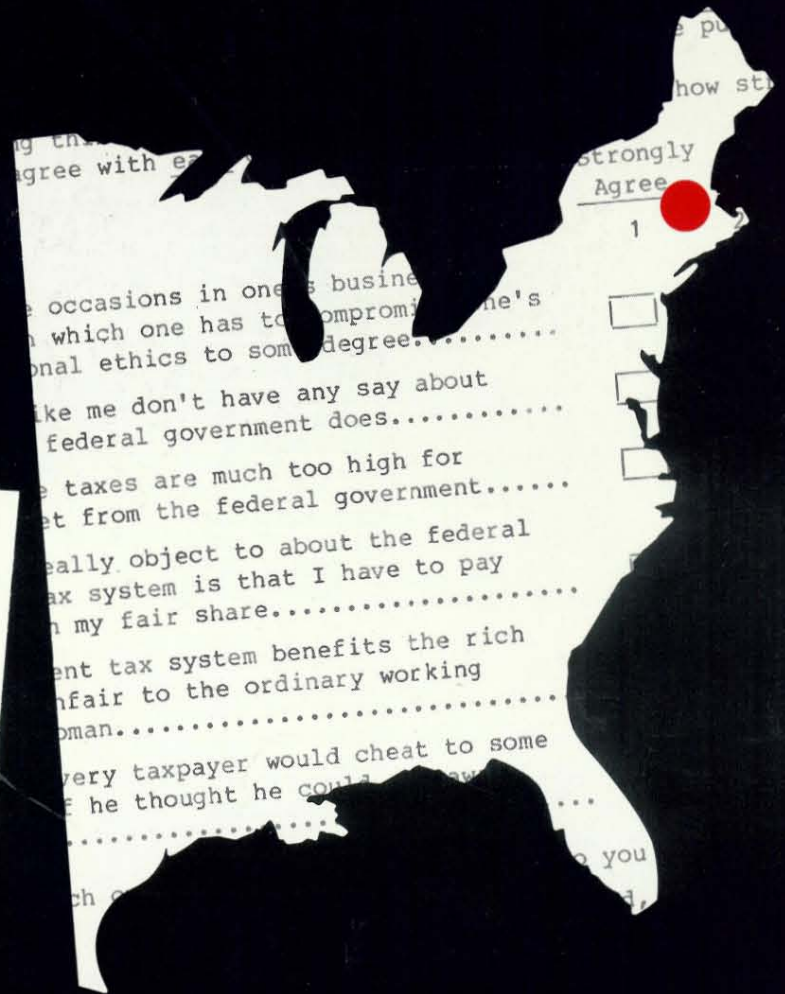
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THE STANFORD/HARVARD SURVEY

**First research on the personal
views, values, and visions of alumni
of two leading American universities**