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RESEARCH NOTE



Death in motion: walking and embodied encounters in Varanasi

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ABSTRACT

Walking in Varanasi, India, is conceptualised as both a method and an embodied practice, positioning movement as central to a researcher's situated encounter with death within an active deathscape. Drawing on walking-based autoethnographic fieldwork conducted at Harishchandra Ghat and Manikarnika Ghat, this study examines how understandings of death were shaped through embodied movement, sensory engagement, and proximity within active cremation landscapes. Findings illustrate how death was experienced not as a singular event, but as an unfolding process within cremation grounds, sustained through networks of labour, normalised within everyday social interactions, and extended beyond the physical boundaries of the ghats. The study contributes to tourism research by demonstrating how walking provides a situated means of interpreting and engaging with active deathscapes.

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Introduction

Deathscapes and mobilities in tourism

Death in tourism research has often been examined through sites associated with memorialisation, remembrance, and commemoration, including memorials, cemeteries, and other designated spaces of death (Dresler, 2025; Young & Light, 2013). While important work has examined movement, pilgrimage, memorial routes, and embodied encounters with death, less attention has been paid to how death is encountered through everyday movement within active deathscapes where death is continuously enacted rather than primarily being commemorated.

Death-related tourism research has traditionally examined how death is materialised and interpreted through places, objects, and commemorative practices, including bodies, memorial artefacts, cemeteries, crematoria, and other landscapes associated with remembrance and mourning (Hallam & Hockey, 2001; Young & Light, 2013). Such sites provide spatial anchors through which meanings of death are produced and communicated (Dresler, 2025; Young & Light, 2013). However, death is also encountered through everyday memorial practices, roadside shrines, ritual performances, and spontaneous acts of remembrance, showing that experiences of death emerge through movement, participation, and ongoing social practice (Pettersson, 2010; Wojtkowiak & Venbrux, 2010). Deathscapes are continually produced through interactions between bodies, rituals, materials, and spatial practices (Anderson & McFarlane, 2011; Maddrell & Sidaway, 2010). Attention therefore shifts from where death is located to how death is enacted, encountered, and sustained through practice.

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Mobilities theory provides a framework for understanding these processes by emphasising how meaning and experience are continuously made and remade through flows, transitions, and encounters in motion. Walking, in particular, has long been recognised as a practice through which space is perceived, negotiated, and made meaningful (Crang, 2001; Lefebvre, 2013). As a ubiquitous form of tourist mobility, it shapes how environments are encountered, interpreted, and inhabited (Dickinson & Lumsdon, 2010; Ram & Hall, 2017). Beyond its functional role, walking is an embodied and sensory practice through which experience unfolds across rhythm, duration, and immersion (Lefebvre, 2013; Rabbiosi, 2021). It is therefore not simply a means of accessing place, but a mode of inhabiting it through which meaning emerges from movement rather than detached observation (Middleton, 2010; Phillips, 2005). Within tourism, this embodied mobility mediates encounters between landscape and ritual, positioning the body as an active co-producer of meaning.

This study examines embodied encounters with death through an autoethnographic walking journey between Harishchandra Ghat and Manikarnika Ghat, the two principal cremation ghats along the Ganges in Varanasi, India. Within Hindu sacred geography, Varanasi holds particular significance because cremation there is believed to facilitate *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of rebirth) (Eck, 1983; Parry, 1994). These active cremation sites are central to this sacred landscape, where the dead are prepared and cremated according to established ritual practices. The research question is: How does walking as both a methodological and embodied practice shape understandings of death within an active deathscape? This study contributes to tourism research by advancing understandings of experience as produced through movement, proximity, and embodied encounter.

Methods

Context of the study

The Varanasi fieldwork was conducted as part of a broader walking-based autoethnographic inquiry examining how embodied movement shaped encounters with culturally significant tourism landscapes in India. The broader inquiry explored walking as both a methodological approach and embodied practice through which researchers encounter and interpret places associated with cultural, spiritual, and historical significance. Within this inquiry, this study focused on walking between Harishchandra Ghat and Manikarnika Ghat to examine how movement informed the researcher's understanding of death through ritual practice, material infrastructures, and everyday urban life.

This study adopted a reflexive, walking-based autoethnographic approach positioning the researcher's embodied presence as central to the interpretation and production of situated knowledge. Walking functioned as both method and mode of inquiry, with movement through space operating as data generation and analysis (Anderson, 2004). Knowledge was generated through the sensory, kinaesthetic, and affective experience of moving along the riverfront, the cremation ghats, and the streets of Varanasi, enabling attention to how death, ritual, and everyday life were encountered in situ (Rabbiosi, 2021). Rather than adopting a detached observational stance, the researcher's movements, perceptions, and responses formed part of the analytic material.

As a visitor, the researcher did not claim insider cultural authority but recognised that interpretation was shaped by outsider positioning, prior understandings of death and tourism, and embodied engagement with the ritual landscape. Given the limited fieldwork duration, the study did not seek to capture the full complexity of cremation practices or local experiences of death, but examined how embodied walking shaped one situated encounter with an active deathscape. The empirical material therefore supported an exploration of embodied encounter, sensory engagement, and meaning-making through movement, rather than broader claims about the social, religious, or cultural meanings of cremation. Positionality was understood as co-producing knowledge through interactions between researcher, environment, and practice.

Fieldwork was conducted over five days (16–20 November 2025), involving walks between Harishchandra Ghat and Manikarnika Ghat, along the riverfront, and through surrounding streets. This

enabled sustained engagement with ritual practices, funeral processions, and cremation activities. Data were generated across morning, afternoon, and evening walks, allowing comparison of different sensory, affective, and social atmospheres. Observations were documented through fieldnotes, reflective journaling, and photographs. Fieldnotes captured embodied movement and in-situ observations; the reflective journal recorded bodily responses, emotions, sensory impressions, and emerging interpretations during and after each walk. Photography focused primarily on landscapes, architecture, material objects, spatial arrangements, and ritual environments. Photographing within active cremation spaces required attention to proximity, mourners, and workers and was limited to moments when it could be undertaken without intruding on ritual activity or individual privacy. Identifiable images of individuals were avoided, and incidental appearances were excluded from the dataset. Photography was therefore treated as an ethically negotiated component of the embodied fieldwork. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, involving iterative identification of patterns and meanings across fieldnotes, reflective journal entries, and photographs in relation to walking (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

Walking from Harishchandra Ghat to Manikarnika Ghat revealed three interrelated themes: encountering death, the labour of death, and the normalisation of death. Together, these themes illustrated how walking shifted death from an object of observation into an embodied encounter shaped by proximity, movement, and sensory engagement. They traced how movement through the ghats shaped encounters with death across sensory, material, and social dimensions.

1. Encountering death

The walk along the riverfront towards Harishchandra Ghat provided the first embodied encounter with cremation activity: 'Male relatives gathered around a wrapped body, carefully preparing it for cremation through coordinated ritual actions' (Fieldnotes, 16 November 2025). The absence of a clear transition between approaching the ghat and encountering cremation suggested that death was not experienced as a separate destination but as part of the riverfront itself: 'Walking became the means through which death was encountered as part of the everyday spatial and social life of the ghat' (Reflection journal, 16 November 2025). By contrast, walking towards Manikarnika Ghat produced a gradual intensification of sensory and spatial awareness. As I walked through narrowing *galis*, everyday commercial activity gave way to the material infrastructures of cremation. Wood sellers and dense timber stacks marked the preparation for death, while 'the lanes narrowed and a thickening smell of smoke and burning wood, with wood piles appearing more frequently' (Fieldnotes, 18 November 2025). Auditory cues also emerged, with 'the sound of funeral chants and ritual activity becoming increasingly audible' (Fieldnotes, 18 November 2025). This culminated in the circulation of 'wrapped bodies carried on bamboo stretchers through narrowing lanes' (Fieldnotes, 18 November 2025).

Entering both ghats, I encountered cremation spaces organised into zones where bodies were brought and prepared through coordinated ritual practice. At both ghats, the first sight of cremation pyres directed sensory engagement with an active *deathscape*: 'Smoke was visible across multiple pyres simultaneously, reducing visual clarity and enveloping movement in a shifting haze in which death appeared not as a singular event, but as continuous activity' (Fieldnotes, 18 November 2025; see [Figure 1](#)). The continuous burning of pyres contributed to my interpretation of the ghats as 'spaces where death was continuously enacted rather than contained within a single ritual moment' (Reflection journal, 18 November 2025). In this environment, walking created a condition of proximity, immersing my body within the material processes of death. Through repeated movement within these spaces, I experienced heat, smoke, smell, and visible labour as embodied encounters registered through sensory immersion within the unfolding *deathscape*.



Figure 1. Cremation pyres at Manikarnika Ghat (Photograph by author, November 2025).

2. Labour of death

Walking through both ghats, my attention shifted beyond the cremation pyres to the infrastructure of labour sustaining the ritual process, often overlooked in representations of death. Movement through the cremation grounds brought this continuous work into view. At the Manikarnika Ghat, 'large stacks of firewood dominated the landscape, where workers weighed, transported, sorted, and arranged



Figure 2. Timber storage at the Manikarnika Ghat (Photograph by author, November 2025).

different types and quantities of wood according to the economic differences of the cremations' (Fieldnotes, 18 November 2025; see [Figure 2](#)). Through repeated movement within these spaces, 'I came to understand death as a materially sustained process supported by labour, resources, and ritual practice rather than by ritual performance alone' (Reflective journal, 18 November 2025).

Walking through the ghats gradually redirected my attention towards these interconnected practices. Passing between wood stacks, pyres, workers, mourners, and ritual specialists revealed how 'cremation depended upon a coordinated network of ritual expertise, physical labour, and material resources operating continuously throughout the day and night' (Fieldnotes, 18 November 2025). Moving through these spaces shifted my understanding of cremation from an individual ritual event to a broader process shaped by the interaction between labour, material arrangements, and ongoing ritual practice (Reflection journal, 19 November 2025).

3. Normalisation of death in everyday space

Prolonged movement through the ghats gradually shifted my attention towards the coexistence between the intensity of cremation and the ordinariness of surrounding social life. Despite the continuous presence of burning pyres, 'death no longer appeared separate from everyday life but became embedded within the everyday rhythms of the ghat' (Reflection journal, 19 November 2025). Workers carried wood and tended fires, while pilgrims, residents, and visitors moved through the ghat with familiarity and purpose: 'Commerce, labour, and ritual unfolded within the same spatial field, producing a setting in which death was embedded within routine urban practice rather than separated from it' (Fieldnotes, 19 November 2025). These observations led me to interpret the ghat as a shared spatial field in which workers, mourners, visitors, and pilgrims occupied the same space around bodies at different stages of cremation, while funeral processions generated a circulation of living and dead bodies within a shared environment.

This continuity extended beyond the cremation grounds. Walking into surrounding galis, the transition from deathscape to everyday city life was immediate: 'shops reappeared, cows moved through narrow lanes, scooters and pedestrians negotiated shared space, and the rhythms of urban commerce resumed' (Fieldnotes, 20 November 2025). As the sensory intensity of cremation receded, 'death became absorbed into a broader field of urban activity, sustained through ongoing practices of labour, exchange, and mobility' (Fieldnotes, 20 November 2025). Movement between the cremation grounds and surrounding streets contributed to my interpretation that 'the deathscape in Varanasi was produced through the intersection of ritual, labour, commerce, and mobility rather than confined to a bounded cremation space. This interpretation was shaped through walking and sensory engagement as a visiting researcher, recognising that it reflected a situated encounter rather than the totality of meanings attached to death in Varanasi' (Reflection journal, 20 November 2025).

Implications of the study

This study contributes to tourism research by extending understandings of how death is encountered within active death-related environments rather than through symbolic, representational, or memorialised forms. While death-related tourism research has often focused on the representation, interpretation, and consumption of death (Dresler, 2025; Hallam & Hockey, 2001), this autoethnographic account highlights how a visiting researcher experienced death through movement, sensory engagement, and proximity within active cremation landscapes (Eck, 1983; Parry, 1994). At Harishchandra Ghat and Manikarnika Ghat, death was interpreted not as a bounded event but as an unfolding process encountered through ritual practice, material infrastructures, labour, and everyday urban interactions. This perspective contributes to understanding deathscapes as dynamic environments produced through intersections between movement, materiality, and social practices.

The study also contributes to mobilities and walking scholarship by demonstrating that walking is not simply a means of accessing place, but a practice through which interpretations of death are produced (Küpers & Wee, 2018). Through the researcher's movement between Harishchandra Ghat and Manikarnika Ghat, walking brought attention to how proximity, sensory engagement, and changing spatial rhythms shaped encounters with death. This situated walking encounter revealed how active deathscapes were continuously shaped through overlapping temporalities of cremation, labour, pilgrimage, and urban life (Lefebvre, 2013). This extends mobilities scholarship by illustrating how death-related experiences may emerge through movement rather than solely through visual observation or the consumption of represented death (Cresswell, 2013; Sheller & Urry, 2006). The study further suggests that that active deathscapes are shaped by socially differentiated forms of movement. During the walking journey, pilgrims, ritual workers, residents, and visitors were observed moving through the deathscape with different temporal rhythms, embodied orientations, and degrees of proximity to death. These differentiated mobilities shaped the researcher's interpretation of how death was sensed, interpreted, and materially organised across bodies in motion.

This reflexive autoethnographic study reflects a situated, embodied perspective shaped by the researcher's movement, sensory engagement, and positionality. While the analysis highlights embodied immersion and continuity, it recognises that such encounters are not emotionally homogeneous; for many visitors, cremation spaces may evoke discomfort, disorientation, or affective and sensory tension, which lie outside the primary focus of this autoethnographic account. The findings offer insight into the relational and experiential dynamics of Varanasi as a lived environment. Future research could incorporate multiple walkers and comparative sites to examine how movement shapes encounters with death, ritual, and sacred space across diverse settings.

Conclusions

Walking through Harishchandra Ghat and Manikarnika Ghat demonstrated how an active deathscape was encountered through movement, proximity, and sensory engagement. Approaching, entering, and departing the cremation grounds transformed death from an abstract representation into a situated, embodied experience shaped by ritual practice, material infrastructures, and everyday urban rhythms. This walking-based autoethnography contributes to tourism research by conceptualising deathscapes as dynamic spaces where death is continuously enacted, while highlighting walking as an embodied practice through which meanings of death are produced and interpreted.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Emma Dresler**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

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