

[Banaras: Eclipsed by a camera](#)

Category : [March 1997](#)

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PHOTOGRAPHY

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The timeless portraits of Marcus Leatherdale

Lavina Melwani, New York

A hundred chattering temple monkeys wake up New York photographer Marcus Leatherdale from sleep before dawn. Monkeys in New York, you wonder? Well, no. Leatherdale has the best of both worlds, living in the US for half the year and in the very heartbeat of India for the rest--the holy city of Banaras. Why Banaras? Says Leatherdale, "Since it's one of the holiest cities in India, eventually just about everyone comes there. So I just sit back, and all of India passes by."

Leatherdale lives in a four-story townhouse in the old city, which can only be accessed on narrow footpaths. The monkeys inhabit an ancient tree near his home and march single file to the temples of the city each day to feast on the offerings of pilgrims. "In Banaras you're confronted with Hinduism on a daily basis," he observes. "There are clanging bells, pujas and festivities. The devotion level is overwhelming." Leatherdale is not a Hindu, but, he says, "You'd have to be brain dead to live in India and not be affected by Hinduism. It's not like Christianity in America, where you feel it only on Sunday

mornings... if you go to church at all. Hinduism is an on-going daily procedure. You live it, you breathe it."

In New York, Leatherdale is known for his lavish and sophisticated work for trendy Big Apple magazines. He observes: "In my India pictures, for the first time it was straight portraiture--I didn't try to dramatize it visually or manipulate--except to remove watches and glasses." Shot against a black cloth, he let the personalities shine through. The result was timeless sepia-tone shots of real people--villagers, maharanis, actresses, dancers and circus performers. These were shown in "Bharat-India," a critically acclaimed exhibition held in 1996.

Leatherdale is learning Hindi and makes friends with everyone from Brahmins to the boatmen on the ghats. He says, "I'm becoming closer and closer to understanding India, but I'll never, never get it all. It's one of the most complicated and intriguing places that I know of. Nothing just happens, nothing just is. There is always some reason, some meaning behind everything."

What he particularly likes about Hinduism is that it's very emotional, colorful and joyful. He notes: "Hinduism has a playful aspect which I've not experienced in any other religion. It's not so righteous or sober as is Christianity, nor is it puritanical. That's one of the reasons I enjoy India. I wake up in the morning, and I'm very content." Leatherdale, a vegetarian, had nonviolent leanings even before he went to Bharat. Rather than use rat poison, for example, he brought humanitarian traps from the US and releases captured rodents on the ghats.

Hinduism has also made him enterprising: When local people continued to dump garbage on the streets outside his house, he commissioned a man who creates Bollywood posters to paint life-size images of Durga, Lakshmi, Siva and Ganesh on the house's exterior. Since no one wanted to desecrate his informal home shrine, all the garbage vanished--as if by a miracle!