In Varanasi We Trust

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Keval aap kaa vishwaas chahiyee. That's the sign that meets you when you enter Raj Bandhu, one of Varanasi's premier sweetshops, located in the heart of the city's main bazaar. Actually, the sign is posted twice, with no other written words greeting the customer—only images of various divinities and photographs of assorted VIPs, which testify to the shop's elite status, where divinity and royalty meet. The sign, which literally means something like "Only Your Trust Is Necessary," might better be translated, "Your Trust Is All That Matters." But why does trust matter so much? As one of the city's most renowned sweetshops, Raj Bandhu could promote itself in other ways, proclaiming its commitment to quality, its pre-independence pedigree, or the fact that it has provided sweets to prime ministers and film stars. But no. Within the logic of the bazaar and throughout much of the city, trust—in Hindi, *vishwaas*—is the most crucial commodity; it is the moral substratum that allows for much of the business in the city to take place. Trust, in fact, is even more than this: it is an active element, crucial for cultivating and maintaining networks that tie the city and its inhabitants together.

This notion that trust is the basis for much of what happens in the bazaar, and that trust is an idea and practice that then infiltrates and undergirds society at large, may seem bizarre at first, for the city is also riddled with doubt. There is, to be sure, a kind of trust deficit that manifests itself in doubt in just about everything. For example, I've frequently been told that Varanasi is overrun by two kinds of crooks, *khaki* and *khadi*—police and politicians, signaled here by their clothing—for both are deemed to be corrupt. As one merchant in the bazaar told me, "No one trusts the police. This is fact." And few trust the political process or their elected officials. "I've never seen an honest election in

Varanasi," said one lifetime resident. He then regaled me with stories of how various family members would invariably be removed from the polling lists because of their political allegiances, and how other family members would be shown to have cast their votes, although they had long been deceased. But even greater disdain is reserved for politicians themselves, particularly for their promises to improve the city's crumbling infrastructure—promises, to be sure, that have rarely been kept. To this day the electricity supply is erratic, with massive and irregular power cuts; the water supply is fitful; and the roads are in a perpetual state of disrepair. As one exasperated allergy sufferer proclaimed, "There's more dirt and dust in Varanasi than in the desert!"

Absolutely every adult in Varanasi has stories of corruption within the domain of governance. I once likened politicians in Varanasi to Mafia dons only to be corrected: Mafia dons are more like *junior* politicians, working their way up the extortion hierarchy, from illegal to quasi-legal. Politicians themselves drain the city's coffers for the benefit of family, friends, and political allies, while the police pay for choice posts and then recoup the cost through various forms of extortion, both small and large. For those beneath these overlords, bribes are the grease necessary to lubricate one's activities in the city, and police and politicians are at the top of this greasy—if not slimy—mechanism, extracting the money of those beneath them in exchange for various forms of permission or compliance. Anticorruption crusaders are thus popular in the city, although most citizens complain that corruption is so deeply embedded within the domains of politics and law enforcement that change won't come anytime soon. In response to my questions about when the city's pernicious corruption might end, the phrase I most often met with was "not in my lifetime."

Though trust in government institutions is lacking, there is a robust form of trust to be found within the bazaar, beginning with the relationship that merchants and shopkeepers have with each other. Since the colonial period, commercial transactions in the bazaar have primarily been regulated by systems of trust and reputation, not commercial law, courts, or police. Within this matrix, one's creditworthiness is closely connected with one's meritoriousness, such that merchant credit and religious merit are easily convertible currencies, and a supply of both are necessary to facilitate financial and social engagements. In the colonial period, this led many wealthy merchants to build temples, and as businesses prospered and temples proliferated, many temple complexes themselves turned into businesses, with both merchant families and religious institutions running successful commercial and banking houses.

This matrix of market and religion helped the city thrive, but it also kept the state marginalized, an outsider to much of the city's development. Residents of the city prized their independence, to the extent that one's commercial credit was likely to suffer if one was too openly involved with the government. This independence helped ensure that the economy developed in an insular fashion, with the financial and the religious as two sides of the same coin, and the state anathema to both. And that meant that Varanasi was to a large degree self-contained and self-governed, with townsmen, merchants, and religious specialists functioning and thriving together, and in the process creating a new kind of moral economy. And it flourished. During the rise of the East India Company and then the rise (and fall) of the British Empire, Varanasi was the subcontinent's inland commercial capital and its religious center. But the state never flourished—it did little to develop the city's infrastructure, and it never earned the trust of the city's inhabitants.

In May 2014, Narendra Modi became India's newest prime minister, choosing Varanasi as his constituency although he had been chief minister of Gujarat for more than a dozen years. Immediately after his inauguration, while standing on the banks of the Ganges, he promised to clean up the river and develop the city's infrastructure, but as he explained, it could not be done by the government alone; the people must do their part. The people of the city are generally excited that the prime minister has chosen Varanasi as a kind of test case for his model of development, but after centuries of distrusting the state and its politicians, will they now change their ways? And will the city's merchants, so used to functioning independently, work with Modi's government, which plans to transform Varanasi as part of a multi-crore development of heritage cities? Prime Minister Modi is asking the city of Varanasi for its trust. The city happily extends its trust in its sweetshops, but will it trust its government?