

Two Indian Saints

by

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Most Englishmen would probably have three associations with the word “Benares”. They would know it was a sacred city of the Hindus on the banks of the Ganges; they would think of the “Benares” trays and other brasswork once so common in English homes; they would remember its silk brocades and kincobs.

It is true that about a million Hindu pilgrims come every year to Benares, bathe in the sacred river and

in many cases make the six-day tour round the city on foot. But it is widely believed that anyone dying at Benares, whatever his religion, goes straight to heaven, and Buddhists also come to visit the Sarnath deer park just outside the city where the Buddha preached his first sermon. Even for Jains the city has sacred associations. Moreover the minarets of the great mosque of Aurungzeb tower up on the former site of the most sacred of the Shiva temples to remind the visitor that from the twelfth century till the British took over in 1775 the city was under the rule of Muslims and was indeed called Muhammadabad in the eighteenth century.

There are indeed some Hindus who have recently called for the mosque to be pulled down as Aurungzeb had pulled down the old temple in his fanatical and puritanical persecutions, but what is more characteristic is the generally peaceful and understanding coexistence of the two communities.

Some have held that it was the Muslims who introduced both brasswork and silk weaving. Certainly the Emperor Akbar greatly encouraged the weaving

of kincobs, which he sent as gifts to the rulers and princes with whom he made contact, and in modern times much of this work has been controlled by members of a Sufi brotherhood. There is moreover the evidence of the aged Muslim silk weaver who, a century before Akbar, is said to have seen one day when walking beside an old, neglected water tank an infant lying on a lotus leaf on the water and smiling at him. He took the foundling home to his wife who received it gladly since the old couple were childless. They adopted him, had him circumcised and named Kabir and brought him up to be a Muslim and a weaver.

When Kabir grew up there was in Benares a famous Hindu guru called Ramananda of the spiritual lineage of Ramanujacharya. He would only accept brahmans as disciples and, though Benares is sacred to Shiva, taught a way to Liberation through devotion to Vishnu envisaged as the Supreme, as the supporting principle dwelling deep in the soul of man and also as incarnate in the form of Rama. Now Kabir was a Muslim and his parentage was unknown and though Kabir sought to be accepted as

a pupil Ramananda very understandably turned him away. But Ramananda was known always to go down to the Ganges for his dawn bath by the same long steep stairway and on one of the steps Kabir hid in the dark so that he would be in the way. When Ramananda felt his foot in the dark resting on some kind of body and then seized he cried out “Rama!!” and Kabir claimed that he had thus been accepted and initiated into the Rama mantram. His claim was accepted and for years he was Ramananda’s disciple though he remained a weaver and a married householder.

Miniatures depict him at a later stage seated at a loom surrounded by Hindu and Muslim disciples and singing to them. Though he was towards the end of his life banished by Sikander, the Muslim Governor, he is today venerated by both communities.

In Hindu scriptures such as the Maitriupanishad, the Vishnu Purana and the Bhagavadgita we find the idea of the possibility of passing beyond the *shabdabrahma*, a term taken by almost all the classical commentators as meaning the Vedic rule. Now Kabir speaks of the illusion of ego not having been effaced,

although he had joined many orders, until he had found the Teacher within, and it has been suggested that this means that before being accepted by Ramananda he had tried in Sufi brotherhoods to follow the equivalent of the Vedic rule and efface illusion through that discipline. Be that as it may his poems emphasise the spirit and not the form.

“None,” he says, “shall inquire into thy caste; the Lord will claim him who recites God’s Name.” “The world passed away in reading books, but none found in them enlightenment. He who understood the two and a half letters (i.e. the name Rama) gained Liberation.” “Where there is love there are neither rules, nor reason, nor formalities. Who in the ecstasy of love ever reckons dates or days?” “Many don the garb of a recluse but rare is one whose mind is a recluse. If the mind does become a recluse enlightenment is quickly attained.” And again:—“Hard the path to the Beloved; it is like a sword’s edge. Easy the path to the Beloved; but ye follow it crookedly, wretched ones. Ye know not how to dance but complain that the dance-floor is uneven.”

The case of Kabir was not unique in India under Muslim rule but not all such ended by being venerated both as a Hindu and as a Muslim saint. The story of Nanak, born near Lahore in 1469 as a caste Hindu ends somewhat differently.

It is related that at the age of seven he told his teacher, who reproved him for sitting in silence wasting his time, that he did not want such learning as the teacher could give but only knowledge of God. Certainly he seems to have spent the next seven years or so mainly in the forest frequenting holy men there and chanting "Rama!" In the hope of settling him into more ordinary ways his parents got him married and, through influence, appointed to a post under the Muslim Governor. The plan was not a success for he soon met a like-minded Muslim wandering minstrel who sang and played the rebeck. Together they wandered off to Delhi, to Benares, to Buddhgaya, to Puri and, despite war, to Ceylon singing Nanak's songs of the oneness of man's essence with God and of the chanting of God's name as a way to stilling of the mind.

Twelve years later Nanak came North again and retired in deepest perplexity of spirit to the Himalaya. What passed there we do not know but on his return Shaykh Bahram said of him that he had assuredly seen God and sent him off on pilgrimage to Mecca—presumably as a Muslim.

There are some who deny that he ever went, but others tell how he fell asleep there with feet pointing to the Kaaba, how he was beaten for this and asked to be put turned to where God was not and how each time the Kaaba was found to have moved to be opposite his feet. The tale is anyhow true in spirit as his poems show, and, if he went, it would be surprising if he did not meet difficulties. “I have appeared in the world,” he said, “to point the Way. I have rejected all sects and only know one God whom I recognise on earth, in the heavens and in every direction,” “Merely to recite the scriptures does not free the mind; only he is a Muslim whose ego is utterly effaced.”

He settled down as a householder and teacher some 35 miles from Lahore surrounded, like Kabir, by Hindu and Muslim disciples. He sang of the need

for great determination and persistence in the path, for ceaseless remembering of God and for the Guru as a channel for the divine grace leading to enlightenment here and now.

The legend tells of how, as he lay dying, the disciples argued whether the body should be burned or buried. Nanak ruled that the Hindu disciples should lay flowers on one side of him and the Muslims on the other a cloth covering him and the flowers till the morrow. Then the party whose flowers were still fresh could have their way with the body. As it came about both lots of flowers were fresh but the body was no more to be seen.

Nanak's poems are enshrined in the Granth Sahib, the sacred book of the Sikhs, compiled in 1604. Though it was only in 1675 after fierce Muslim persecution that the original brotherhood, drawn from Muslims and Hindus of different castes —and the word “Sikh” means “seeker”— became organised as a separate religion and a militant political body, Nanak is regarded by them as their founder. Since Muslims believe that there can be no divine revelation, no true

Prophet, after Muhammad they cannot but be hostile to the Sikh religion and, since the partition of India, Sikhism may be said to have been exterminated in Pakistan, nor has Hinduism been able to absorb and integrate it as it has so many other cults.

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