

ON THE TRAIL OF THE AMERICAN MISSIONARY

By WILLIAM T. ELLIS

This Distinguished American Journalist is Traveling Around the World for the Purpose of Investigating the American Foreign Missionary from a Purely Disinterested, Secular and Non-Sectarian Standpoint. Illustrated with Drawings and from Photographs.

Hinduism's Holy Place Shocks an Occidental

Benares, India.—This is holy Hindu ground. Even if such an outcast as a European should quit earth on this most favored spot, he might hope to be born again as a Hindu. This is the best place in the world to die, according to the belief of 207,146,000 Hindus. That is why thousands of persons are yearly brought here for that express purpose, and wealthy rajahs build palaces along the river bank in which to spend their dying days. The simple fact of dwelling in this sacred city imparts sanctity to one. More than Mecca is to the Mohammedan, Benares is to the Hindu.

Obviously, this is the place to study Hinduism. Obviously, also, Hinduism here is not the Hinduism of the Chicago parliament of religions—or of Boston "parlor meetings." All the washing that is done in "Mother Ganges" can scarcely make Hinduism clean enough to be presentable in good Anglo-Saxon society.

Holiness and Dirt.

The "holiest" Hindu is the dirtiest. He has his face and body completely smeared with ashes, whereas the ordinary Hindu has only his arms and breast and forehead so marked. This holy man's hair hangs in matted ropes, uncombed, unwashed and ash-filled. Although his sanctity is so great that he is worshipped—I saw the act, more than once—he is not obliged to bother about the common moralities which go along with the western faiths.

One of the holiest, as well as one of the brainiest, was reclining on a couch of sharpened nails (a torture which probably looked more horrible than it felt, for this man underwent it with no sign of discomfort) when I interviewed him, through an interpreter. I asked him about the "holy woman" at his side, comely even through her ashes, on account of whom this celebrated "fakere" is considered outcast by certain of the

parts of the empire, come down by thousands to the western bank of the Ganges in order to bathe. From infants to decrepit old men they dip into the water and mutter their prayers, with an earnestness and sincerity which cannot be doubted. The great ghats, or steps down into the water, are thronged with devotees. Many carry away the water, for household use, or to be borne laboriously back home to the pilgrim's native village. Only the western bank of the Ganges is efficacious, to die on the eastern bank is to be reborn an ass. So the western bank is lined with temples, ghats, and palaces, in various stages of disrepair. There is merit in erecting one of these structures, but no merit in maintaining one after another man has built it. One huge brown stone palace especially, a wonder of workmanship, has "sat down" in disorderly ruin on the bank.

If ever modern science takes hold of India, the popularity of Benares is gone, for this worship of the Ganges is a thing to give a believer in germs the shudders. People bathe and drink the water, right from the spot where sewage is seeping through the ghats. They are not troubled by the proximity of bathers in all stages of disease. The fact that corpses are soaking in the stream just above them does not disturb the worshippers a particle.

The practice of burning the dead at Benares is famous. After the body, wrapped in a thin covering, has lain for a time in the Ganges, a rough funeral pyre, three or four feet high, is built of logs and sticks bought for the purpose, and it is consumed with more or less thoroughness. The parish dogs thrive by the fact that the job is not always well done; I saw one cur gnawing a burnt fragment of a human body.

I came to Benares prepared to find much to admire in Hinduism; but

tracted a mob anywhere in Christendom. A woman worshipper wanted to go into the inner shrine, but the priest contended that she had not paid enough money. She shrilly insisted that she had, and tried to force her way past the priest. The latter thereupon struck her a resounding blow in the face, but even this could not deter the intending worshipper, and when I left, after watching the muss for ten minutes, the noise of the wrangle still filled the temple; although the other worshippers seemed to mind it as little as did the well-fed cows that filled the temple court.

Being on the Safe Side.

Within the compass of one brief article it is impossible to give more than mere glimpses of the religious life of this sacred city and its myriad pilgrims, bent on making the 45-mile round of holy places. The objects of veneration are innumerable. Here are a dainty pair of feet, carved in high relief—not impressed into the white marble—which are worshipped as the foot-prints of Vishnu. Nearby are Sutee stones, marking the sites where widows immolated themselves upon their husband's funeral pyres. Images of countless sorts, are wreathed in flowers, showered with rice, covered with holy water, and made obeisance to. A Hindu is not going to take any chances; he worships whatever is likely to be sacred, from a Buddhist statue to a Christian church, to speak only within my own knowledge. As one said, "You never can tell, and it is best to be on the safe side." The tracts which I saw a missionary distributing among the pilgrims on the river bank were eagerly sought for and read.

For theoretical Hinduism the reader must be referred to the encyclopedias; this is not the place to attempt even an outline of its main features, much less a description of the principal members of its gallery of innumerable gods. Woven into the religion is the caste system, which hopelessly shuts off one for life in the caste into which he was born, so that a Brahman is contaminated by the very shadow of a sweeper. Theoretically, there are four grand divisions of caste, actually, there are thousands of castes, and I never heard of a European who attempted to understand all the caste marks which Hindus paint upon their faces, heads, arms and chests.

One advantage of caste has been mentioned to me by British army officers: "If it were not for the caste system, which breaks the people up into irreconcilable sections, England would not be able to hold India for six months."

Theosophy's Flourishing College.

Theosophy, which here claims to be, practically, pure Hinduism, has established a great college at Benares, the "Central Hindu College," with 700 students and a fine equipment of buildings. Mrs. Annie Besant, herself, whom the late Col. Olcott nominated at the direction of the "Mahatmas" as president of the Theosophists (although not all of the Theosophists seem inclined to ratify this choice), resides here and is the head of the college. The day of my visit to the college she was in Madras, the world headquarters of theosophy, so my interview was with her assistant, an Englishwoman dressed in a salmon-colored kimono, with a white philosopher's robe draped over it. She wore the sacred Brahman cord about her neck and her bare feet were thrust into sandals. Mrs. Besant claims to have been a Brahman in a previous incarnation.

A revival of pure Hinduism is one of the objects, if not the chief object, of the college; which also gives instruction in the western sciences. It was as surprising as it was disgusting to find that this institution, with a staff of European theosophists among its teachers, and supported in good part by funds from Europe and America should have as the one conspicuous figure on its campus, in heroic size, the unmentionable Shive symbol. If Boston only knew!

Digging Up a Buried City.

Although there are now only a few hundred Buddhists in all India proper, it was at Benares that Buddhism really began. Buddha, after his enlightenment, began to teach at a spot a few miles from here, known as Sarnath, the original site of Benares. At the present moment archeological explorations of great importance are under way at Sarnath. The ruins which have just been unearthed are probably those of the very monastery to which Buddha retired, in the fifth century B. C. The images dug up are in excellent condition, and quite as well carved as those in modern temples. One of the "finds" is a huge polished granite pillar, erected by King Asoka, "the Constantine of Buddhism," 200 years before the Christian era. The week of my visit, a finely built well, in perfect condition, though now dry, had been uncovered. These excavations at Sarnath are probably the most important now under way anywhere in the world.

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Drink Water.

The Japanese know what is good for them when they insist on their women drinking quantities of water each day. We would hear fewer complaints of utter fatigue, and needless assistance from beauty hints if our women, one and all, would follow the example of their almond-eyed sisters.

No day should pass without at least a quart of pure water being drunk—better yet two quarts. It is wiser, however, to begin with the smaller quantity or you may feel yourself water-logged, and depart from the good habit altogether.

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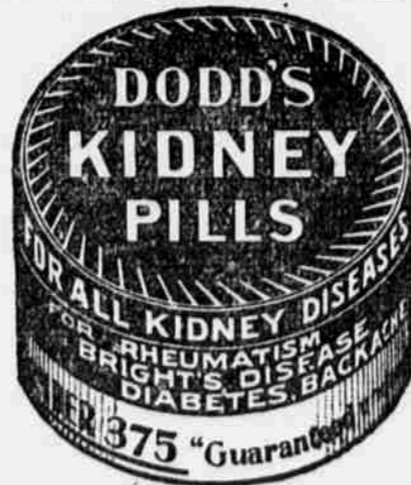
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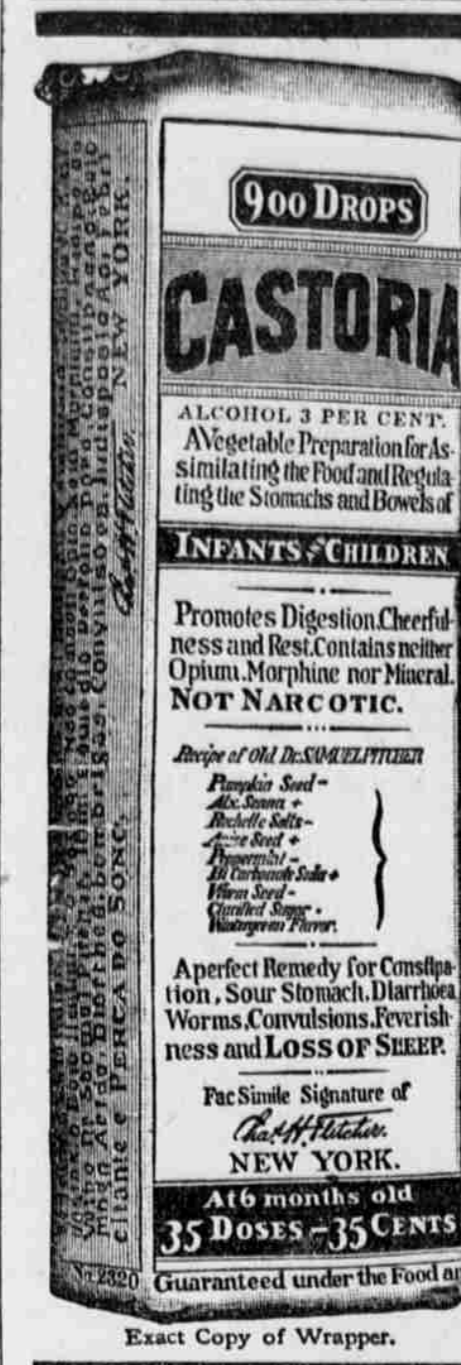
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A Hindu Holy Man Sitting on Spikes.

stricter sort of new Hindus. He assured me that the woman merely lived with him to take care of his house; and that he is not married to her. India is full of stories of the immoralities of these "holy men," who, as they march in procession stark naked through the streets, are truer to type than when on their visits over seas they sit, picturesquely clad, the adored center of groups of American women faddists.

One More Disillusionment.

At Benares I discovered a grievance against the stories I used to hear and read, when a youngster in Sunday school, about these "fakere," and the other Hindu pilgrims to the Ganges' cleansing flood. I saw thousands of the latter in a single day. It used to be represented that these men and women were all so smitten with a sense of their sins, so burdened with their consciousness of unholiness, that they performed all their exacting vows in order to secure spiritual release. But missionaries on the spot tell me that the Hindu is as lacking in a sense of sin as I found the Japanese and the Chinese to be. They know little or nothing about what the Anglo-Saxon experiences as a consciousness of personal sin. What these people are trying to expiate is the dread burden of life itself, and to secure, by the favor of the innumerable gods in their pantheon, a mitigation of life's ills in the next birth, in the long order of reincarnations.

Every Hindu's dread is that he may at death be transmigrated into a lower caste man, or even into a woman, or into an ass, a snake, a toad, or some other loathsome creature. His hope is that he may be reborn into a higher caste, possibly a Brahman; and eventually, in the dreary procession of ages, into Nirvana; which, while mystically explained in various ways, amounts really to the extinction of personal identity. Some of the holy men even expect to proceed from this present life into Nirvana.

Wash Day on the Ganges.

Therefore all these washings. Early in the morning the people of this old city—Benares far antedates the Christian era—and the pilgrims from all

somehow I cannot get past the dirt and filthiness of it all. There, for another example, is one well, the most sacred bit of water in India. This is a pool, the size of the swimming tank in an ordinary gymnasium, without inlet or outlet, filled from the Ganges, and cleaned out only once a year. To bathe in it one must pay a high fee, as well as buy the flowers, milk, confectionary, sandalwood and other votive offerings that are poured into the pool by the bathers. As a result of all these accumulations, the contents, instead of being merely dirty water, are a viscous mass, nauseating even to look upon or to smell. Yet tottering old women, strong men, and blooming youth ducked in this place. I was impressed by a touch of human sentiment here; a man and woman went into the pool tied together, thus hoping to insure that when they should be born again they would once more become man and wife.

Religion that is Not "Fit to Print."

The endeavor to give a fair representation of the conditions in India amidst which missionaries work, and against which they must strive, is hindered by the simple fact that were I to write plainly what I saw as the prominent feature of Hindu worship in Benares this paper would not be permitted transmission through the mails. The commonest object of worship may not even be hinted at; while, so far from writing a description of the sculptures on the walls of one temple, they may not even be recalled without disgust. It is a distinct ascent to contemplate the sacred monkeys that fill one temple—more than 200 of them scampering about the trees and the courts—or the sacred cows and bulls that abound throughout the city. When a wealthy Brahman dies, a bull is turned loose in the city to wander through the narrow streets and to pillage, undisturbed, from the bazaars. The molten calf which the backslidden Israelites worshipped is also here, to be purchased as a household god.

The Quarrel in the Temple. At the famous "Cow Temple" I saw and heard a row that would have at-

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