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An Indian Riverside Picture

(By the Rev. T. R. Edwards, of Soory, Beerbhoom, Bengal, in the 'Juvenile Missionary Record.')

This is a picture of the last sad scene in the life of many a Hindu. The locality is a ghat on the banks of the Ganges. The group consists of a dying person on a charpoy, or portable bed, of the family kobiraj, or physician, and of a relative or two of the sick person. The time is the early morning, with the cold winter breezes from the north sweeping across the wide stream. The object of the whole is to afford the dying a last look at the sacred and all-purifying river.

What a revelation this picture unfolds of the strong hold which superstition has upon the Hindus, and also of the last cruel rite which their religion enjoins upon them!



AN INDIAN RIVER-SIDE PICTURE.

Here superstition and inhumanity stand revealed; and here we see how inseparably these are associated together.

In order that the picture may become more intelligible to the general reader, it will be necessary for me to describe its significance somewhat more fully.

Such scenes as these are occasioned by the superstitious reverence which the Hindus entertain for Mother Ganges. In life, a Hindu considers it his greatest good fortune if he can live on the banks of the sacred stream, where he may perform his daily ablutions in its all-cleansing water. Should he live at a distance, he regards it a solemn duty to visit the river on great festival occasions, and by bathing at the holy places to acquire purification and merit.

But if these visits to the Ganges are necessary during life, it becomes a matter of paramount importance for every Hindu living within easy distance of the river to be carried there ere he cross the threshold of death, in order that he may breathe his last within sight of its sin-cleansing tide. Should any Hindu neglect this last sacred rite of his religion, and elect to expire in his own house, when he might have been taken to the riverside, he incurs unspeakable guilt, and will be regarded by all his co-religionists as a base and wicked person. And should his children fail to provide for his

timely removal to the river they will incur life-long reproach and shame. Under these circumstances it will be readily understood that the course of any severe sickness, especially in the case of the older members of the family, is carefully watched. And as soon as it is supposed the patient is sinking, he is hurried off on a portable bedstead to the river. In respect to the exact moment at which removal is incumbent, the Hindus place the most absolute reliance upon their family physicians, or kobirajes. These are doctors who have been educated on old-world principles, and, for the most part, are ignorant quacks.

When a kobiraj affirms the imminence of death, and that the patient cannot be kept any longer in the house, he is invited to go and see Mother Ganges. He is then placed upon a charpoy, and preparations are made

for carrying him to the river. The scene which then ensues in the Hindu household is, we are informed by Hindus, indescribable. The numerous women and children gather round to give their last caress to the dying; and then there breaks forth their sad, heart-rending wail. None who have ever heard this wail can forget it, it is so full of despair and misery. In the midst of all this wailing and noise the sick man bids farewell to his family, and sets out on his last journey, when he may not return. And thus, even while in the possession of full consciousness, and while suffering the agonies of death, he is hurried away to the riverside. What must be his feelings at such a moment it is terrible to conceive. To be given up as hopeless, to part for ever with all he held dear in the world, and to be exposed to the weather, all these must greatly increase the terrors of death. And apart from his feelings, we may safely say that great numbers of these people would recover if they were kept in their homes and carefully nursed. None but God knows how many have been hurried out of life by this cruel custom.

When all is ready, four men take hold of the bed and start for the riverside. Sometimes the distance of more than two or three miles has to be traversed. Very few persons form the procession; one or two of

the chief male relatives, and perhaps the kobiraj, are all. Arrived on the banks of the river, the sick man is commanded to look at its heaving bosom and to breathe its magic name. Mud and water are then put on his forehead and forced into his mouth. Happy is the sick man if his life now ebbs out, and there is no need to subject him to further torture. But if, as too frequently happens, the kobiraj has miscalculated the time of death, the sick man is kept waiting on the banks of the stream, and the end is hastened by immersions in the river. Occasionally the dying have to wait days and days before the vital spark will yield. There is no solicitude shown for the recovery of such persons. To recover after having been taken to see the Ganges for the last time would be regarded as infamous. There is an instance on record of a poor widow who recovered, but the shame and disgrace she had to bear was so intolerable that she went and drowned herself. The utmost that humanity does for these poor creatures who are forced to wait the approach of death is to erect a comfortless room for their shelter at the ghat. Here they are kept waiting and subjected to frequent immersions, until, starved with neglect or choked with mud and water, death comes to their relief.

In conclusion, let me say a word or two about the picture. It was taken at Serampore, at a ghat adjoining the college, towards the close of 1895. The tall figure standing on the lowest step of the ghat is the kobiraj. Before him, on a portable bed, is a sick Brahmini widow. She has been hurried to the river lest she should die before seeing it. Mud and water have been smeared over her face and forced into her mouth. The figure seated on the side of the ghat somewhat higher up, is a relative, probably her son. He has come in charge of her to the riverside. The other figures in the picture are the carriers, who have borne her hither. The kobiraj has been busily engaged in examining the pulse of the sick woman, and he is now standing up to pronounce verdict on her. The relative is looking intently into his face to hear what that will be.

We do not know all that happened to this poor woman afterwards. This we know, that as soon as the kobiraj declared she had not much longer to live, the carriers came and took her away, even while we were standing there, to the place of burning. Let a veil be drawn over what transpired, and let us hope that death mercifully put a speedy end to her sufferings.

A Base Action.

In the Isle of Man, as I was one day walking on the sea-shore, I remember contemplating with thrilling interest an old, grey, ruined tower, covered with ivy. There was a remarkable history connected with the spot. In that tower was formerly hanged one of the best governors the island ever possessed. He had been accused of treachery to the king, during the time of the civil wars, and received sentence of death. Intercession was made for him, and a pardon was sent; but that pardon fell into the hands of his bitter enemy, who