

## The World Field.

### THE HOLY CITY OF THE HINDUS.

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**B**ENARES is the most holy city of India. It contains not less than 15,000 temples, besides thousands of shrines, and many, many thousands of idols set up everywhere; it has holy wells and sacred spots innumerable; it has nearly three hundred mosques, and scores of ghats or sacred bathing or burning places along the river.

In age Benares is one of the oldest cities in the world. It certainly was the sacred city of the Hindus during the time of Solomon, and was flourishing and being visited by the devotees of Hinduism when Nineveh and Babylon were in their glory. Long before the city of Greece arose, or Rome was thought of, Benares had its temples, its palaces, its gardens and monasteries and sacred colleges. It has, of course in the meantime been built and rebuilt, shifting its centre from one side of the sacred river (Ganges) to the other, and up and down its bank over a space of several miles, but it has always been a living city, and never in ruins. This fact of its living antiquity gives it extraordinary interest.

Situated on the south bank of the Ganges on a bluff rising at least sixty feet above the level of the river, the stately massive palaces of Rajas, monasteries and the public buildings, present a very imposing appearance to the eye from the river, crescent shaped at a point where the chief part of the city is. At 6 o'clock in the morning we took a boat rowed by six coolies, and moved slowly up and down stream, looking at the city from this point of view.

The whole city front is built up by massive palaces of stone from five to eight stories in height. These houses mostly belong to the great Rajas or native princes and kings, who consider it a sacred privilege and a divine right to have a house in Benares. To these houses there are wont to come now and again to worship and bathe in the river and visit other sacred places, for the cleansing away of their sins.

Even to visit the city is almost certain to secure salvation; hence the hundreds of thousands of pilgrims that come to the city annually from all parts of India by rail, by ox gari, on foot, and some peculiarly devoted and holy people reaching the city from distant homes literally measure every yard of their way by prostrating their bodies on the ground and drawing up their feet to the place where their head last touched the earth, as the little measuring worm does.

To die in the city and have one's body burnt at one of the ghats and the ashes thrown into the sacred river, is certain to secure salvation.

The river bank for miles is lined with "ghats" or stone stairways, or planes going down to the water's edge, from which the bathers enter the

river and worship and wash themselves. Thousands of these bathers were seen on the morning I visited the ghats. This goes on all day long, and year in and year out.

A little further up the river there is a spot where the bodies of the dead are brought to be burned. The friends of the dead bring down the body on a slight litter and halt for a few moments while the wood is being paid for or the pyre built, which is quickly done. It is annointed with oil, covered with some kind of pitch, sprinkled with holy water from the river, and burnt. An hour or two does the sad and disgusting business. The friends squat around like great birds of prey wrapped in their white cloths till the body is consumed, and then the bones, or whatever is left after the wood has all been burned, is thrown into the water, and the soul is started on its weary way toward absorption into the deity. It may require millions of years, and many thousand re-births before that stage is reached, but the journey is begun, and this particular journey may only be a hundredth one.

After spending an hour or more on the river looking at the bathers and admiring the magnificent old buildings we left our boat and mounted a flight of steps, coming to a very ancient and very curious old temple, built by and preserved for the especial worship of the Napalis. It is all of wood, beautifully and wonderfully carved, and in the general style that you will recognize as that of the Pagoda. This temple, as most of the temples of Benares, is dedicated to Siva, the peculiar and most sacred god of the Hindus, especially the patron god of this city. I cannot tell you all the abominations suggested by this temple. It is covered with the most obscene carvings, representing every attitude of lust and sensuality. These are all acts of worship, and peculiarly gratifying to this vile god.

From this temple we went a space further on till we came to the "Holy Well." This is the most holy place in Benares and in all India. To this well, first, every pilgrim comes to bathe and drink. The well is about twenty feet down from the surface of the bluff, and not far from the bank of the river. It is about twenty wide by thirty feet long, and has a depth of water of not more than three feet. It is approached by flights of stone steps leading down from either end and side. These steps are always crowded with pilgrims, who having satisfied the grasping greed of the Brahmins who have charge of it, pass down to the holy waters, plunge themselves underneath them, make prayers, cast a handful up towards heaven, and drink a few drops of it. The water is inconceivably filthy, reeking and stinking with the foulest effluvia.

To this well, it is said, and implicitly believed,