

IN DREADFUL TOWERS OF SILENCE

Vultures Devour Bodies of Dead Parsees, First Flapping Wings in Faces of Mourners—Religious Belief Basis of Mode.

Hindustan, beautiful and pure in theory but all that is vile in practice and debasing in its effects, will be briefly reviewed by Mr. Haackin in his next article. He will describe the robust sikh, the fanatical Jain and the devil-fearing Ahimsist, descendants of the aboriginal race of Hindustan.

By Frederic J. Haackin.

Washington, July 17.—The Parsees are the most distinct and peculiar of the many races which have their home in India, and their religion is interesting as a survival of the early Aryan faith which held sway in Central Asia when the lamp of civilization burned brightest in Persia. They expose their dead to be devoured by vultures, and the sacred fire is the emblem of their highest devotion. These strikingly peculiar customs, together with the commercial supremacy of the race in Bombay invite the interest of every visitor to India. The Parsees are followers of Zoroaster and believers in the sacred writings of the Zend-Avesta, their religion was founded 12 or 14 centuries before Christ, and, with many changes, remained the prevailing faith of Persia and Central Asia until the Mohammedan missionaries of the sword overthrew their nation and persecuted their religion. In the year 1171 a small body of Persian refugees fled to India, and were welcomed by the Hindu chief of Baroda. It was like a horse's hoof in token of submission to the rulers of their adopted country. They led a precarious existence, however, and did not assume importance until after the English established Bombay, when they were given an opportunity to make use of their natural business shrewdness.

Parsees means simply "Persian," and is a racial name. The religion is correctly called "Mazdaism," and sometimes known as Zoroastrianism, from the name of its great prophet. The Zend-Avesta, the sacred books of Persia, was not completed until many centuries after the death of Zoroaster, and the Parsees look to the Hebrew prophet Daniel as one of their greatest teachers. Parsees stoutly deny that they are fire worshippers, despite the opinion of centuries, and the so-called "fire-worship" accord to the sacred flame. The original refugees from Persia brought the embers of the sacred fire from Central Asia, and the fires now alight in the Parsee temples of India are believed to have been kindled more than 3000 years ago. According to the tenets of the faith, there are two spirits, Ahura Mazda, of good, and Deva, or evil, which are constantly striving for mastery. Their hope and belief is that Soshios, son of Zoroaster, will be reincarnated and that he will destroy evil, purify the world, and make Mazdaism supreme. This belief is a heritage from the Jews through Daniel.

Lower Classes Are Pagan.

The Parsees believe in heaven and hell; that conduct in life determines the future state of reward or punishment. They deny the doctrine of reincarnation, except in the case of the expected second coming of Soshios, and they hold that duty performed religious rites by the living help the souls of their ancestors to happiness. The elements, fire, water and earth, are revered as gods, and the good, evil, sun, moon and stars are also held sacred. The more ignorant classes worship the elements and the celestial bodies as gods. The Parsees consider them the holy gifts of the supreme good God. Fire, water and earth are held most sacred, in the order named.

Purity of Faith Maintained.

The religion was corrupted by contact with Hinduism for many centuries, but about 300 years ago there was fresh immigration from Persia and the purity of faith was restored. In late years, under the influence of the occidental civilization, there has been a movement among the higher classes to differentiate the fire and other symbols from the highest worship, and this has resulted in a revival of study of the ancient Persian language and a closer organization of the religious body of the race.

Square Men in Business.

One thing must be said of the Parsees—their morals are high, and there is no blemish upon the conduct of their lives in their family relations—as father and son, mother and daughter, husband and wife. The Parsees have a high reputation as men of honor in business, they will fulfill a contract to the minute and the letter. But it is wise for the Parsee to be sharp at the time the contract is sealed.

In the "Towers of Silence."

The body, whence the soul has departed, is accounted impure and unclean. Therefore, it must not be defiled by burning it, water must not be defiled by casting it into the sea or river, and earth must not be defiled by burying it. So the practice began, ages ago, of exposing the corpses to be eaten by vultures and beasts. This practice has been refined and systematized, and is now invested with the strict ceremonial of ultra-puritanism.

The Towers of Silence in Bombay are the most interesting things to be seen in that interesting city. They stand at the top of Malabar hill, the highest point of ground on Bombay Island. There are five circular towers of from 70 to 200 feet in circumference and about 30 feet in height. Permission to visit the tower compound is easily obtained, but no one is allowed to go near the towers, which are surrounded by a high wall, and which surrounds the House of Prayer at the gate. Even the mourners in a funeral train may not approach nearer than this.

Undertakers Are Accused.

Men set apart for the purpose, despised by their coreligionists as unclean, take the body from the house near where the mourners stand with their clothes linked together in token of united grief. They bear the body on a stretcher, and the stretcher which leads to an iron door, a little more than half way up the side of the tower. Only these bearers are permitted to enter the towers. If any other person should see one of the bodies or skeletons inside, he would be considered unclean, and his descendants would share his woe.

Separation by Vultures.

Inside, the tower is wholly occupied by a circular gridiron, sloping toward a central well, and having three concentric rows of niches for bodies. The inside circle is for children, the next for women and the outer circle for men. The body carriers place their burden in one of the niches, remove the shroud, and leave the body quite dead. The vulture swoops down from the sides of the tower and from every neighboring tree. In less than an hour the vulture has done its dirty work, and the skeleton is left to remain for several days, when the body carriers again enter and throw the bones into the great well at the center, where they are left to await the slow operation of the transformation of "dust to dust."

The tower is roofless, of course, and for that reason receives the rain. The rain water is polluted by the waste and the decaying bones, and, being one of the sacred elements, it must be purified. The towers are drained of their contents, and from thence, conduits run out in four directions. Under the tower walls the water is filtered through several feet of charcoal, and again, at the end of the drain, through a filter of sand and gravel. Thus purified, the water is permitted to return again into the earth and the sea.

Perfection of Sanitary Burial.

Of the five towers of Silence at Bombay, one is reserved for the private and family use of the Parsee family, who built it, and another for the use of the bodies of those who have committed suicide or who have died unnatural deaths. Western opinion concerning this method of disposing of corpses is divided, some persons advocating it because of its undoubted sanitary perfection, but most foreign visitors look upon it with repugnance. Even the burning of the dead on open pyres, as is done by the Hindus, seems less revolting. The white towers of themselves suggest nothing half so gruesome as the serrated grave rows of a western cemetery. The Parsees, however, have the advantage of the tower, which is a living border of black to the pure white of the structures. The trees are alive with the great, ugly birds, and as far as the eye can see they are circling, circling.

When the familiar cortege is seen winding up the long road that leads to the top of the hill, the vultures circle closer and closer so that when the procession has arrived within the compound the whole tribe of greedy scavengers is present. The moment the body carriers deposit the corpse within and remove the shroud, there is a mighty rush of wings and the swift work of destruction is begun.

Can't See Into a Grave.

Strange and gruesome as it may seem, it is even more pronounced when one drives about the streets of the city and sees here and there a man in the dress of some Parsee benefactor whose body was eaten by those very vultures, when he sees at the bank of one of the rivers a wealthy and educated man, a knight of England, perhaps, who knows that his body will eventually be fed for those same vultures.

Western poets have gloomily dwelt on the horrors of the grave and the ravages of the worms, and an eastern poet has written those dread pictures. The living do not see the grave worm at his work, but the vulture swoops down upon his prey in the open light. What one may think of the towers of silence and its company of black feathered, sharp beaked scavengers, visit to the place is something never to be forgotten.

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