

A HAND-BOOK OF BENARES

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ARTHUR PARKER

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OF BENARES**

PREFACE.

In this second edition of the 'Handbook to Benares' there are several important alterations. The Historical sketch has been to a great extent re-written and a number of corrections made here and there in other parts of the book, while the itineraries have been revised and, it is hoped, improved.

It is grievous to a lover of the grey old city to hear of so many visitors whose anticipations have been greater far than their realization. These are not usually people of an artistic temperament, for to such Benares, with its wonderful river front, is a mine of wealth. But to those who come from Agra, Delhi and Lucknow with their gorgeous and massive specimens of Muhammadan architecture, expecting to find here similar evidences of Hindu art, a great disappointment is inevitable. In truth the distinguishing feature of Benares is neither architectural magnificence nor artistic beauty in any form, and what it possesses of either of these is purely accidental, but as the home and shrine of the religious faith which sways the Hindu nations it is unique and unrivalled. Wonderful and fascinating, nay even awe-inspiring, Benares truly is, but she does not yield her secret easily. A guide-book can do little more than point out the beaten tracks and indicate where the treasures lie hid. Happy is the traveller who brings with him the wise and discerning eye and the sympathetic mind. Happier still if, in addition, he have the aid of a living guide—be he Indian or European—who will gently draw aside the veil which hides from the vulgar and hasty the secrets of the city's past glory and present power. Should the visitor be fortunate enough to meet such an one then this little book must be content to drop into a secondary place, and serve in after days to recall the out-line and retain the main features of a city of wonders.

ARTHUR PARKER.

*Tricandrum, Travancore,
March, 1901.*

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CHAPTER I.

Introduction.

The traveller who approaches Benares by railway from Calcutta may obtain from the carriage window one of the finest views of the city possible. As the train nears the great bridge which spans the broad bosom of the Ganges, the buildings on the northern side come slowly into view, and gradually grow on the sight till, stretched along the top of the lofty bank and looking down into the rippling waters, the city is seen sitting like a queen on her throne, with her spires and minarets standing clear out against the brilliant blue of the eastern sky, and the stone stairways of the ghats running out below into the sacred stream, surely one of the most imposing and impressive sights in all India.

The Dufferin Bridge which carries the Oude and Rohilkhand railway over the Ganges is a very fine structure, and a triumph of engineering skill. It is constructed of steel girders, rivetted together under hydraulic pressure, and rests on fifteen massive piers of masonry. The total length of the bridge is 3,568 feet, and it cost Rs. 1,727 per foot or over 75 lacs of rupees in all. Vehicles are allowed to pass over the bridge during the intervals of railway traffic and a path is provided on each side for foot passengers. It is strongly fortified at either end by massive towers, loop-holed and turretted and fitted with iron doors, so that a very small force would be able to defend it. It took over seven years in building, having been commenced in June 1880 and being formally opened by Lord Dufferin in October 1887.

Benares is the capital of a province which bears the same name and which includes the districts of Benares, Mirzapur, Jaunpur, Ghazipur and Ballia and contains a population of nearly five million souls. The city is the seat of the local Government and has a garrison made up of a wing of a British infantry regiment and a regiment of native infantry, all of whom are accommodated on the extensive plain which skirts the railway, north of the Cantonment Station.

The Cantonment, or European quarter, lies to the west of the city where the whitewashed bungalows of the foreign residents may be seen embowered in trees, and each set in its own compound.

There are two good hotels in the same quarter, Clarke's and the Hotel de Paris, the former being the oldest established. It is advisable to engage rooms before arrival, especially during the cool season from November to March.

The city, conservative though it is, has not been able to escape altogether the tide of change which has set in with British rule and the fine metalled roads which run from the Cantonment to the very heart of the city, are evidence of the presence of a practical and energetic race. The water-works which now supply the city with filtered water pumped up from the river, have conferred a boon much appreciated by the native population, though the smoke-stack of the pumping station, which rears its head among the spires at the southern end of the ghats, hardly adds to the beauty of the scene. The city is a great emporium of trade, especially in grain and native food stuffs generally. From the rich plains which surround the city vast quantities of wheat and rice, millet and lentils, as well as unrefined sugar pour into the bazaars for sale.

The manufactures of Benares have been famous for centuries not only in India, but throughout the

world. Macaulay in his essay on Warren Hastings recalls the glories, now alas, in a great degree departed, of the city's fame in this respect. "Commerce," says he, "had as many pilgrims as religion. All along the shores of the venerable stream lay great fleets of vessels, laden with rich merchandise. From the looms of Benares went forth the most delicate silks that adorned the halls of St. James and of Versailles, and in the bazaars the muslins of Bengal and the sabres of Oude were mingled with the jewels of Golconda and the shawls of Cashmere."

The special productions for which Benares is now famous are embroidered cloth called kamkhwáh (kincob) work and engraved brass ware. The former is produced in considerable quantities and of a very fine quality, though it too often happens that the most sumptuous designs of gold and silver thread are worked upon very inferior velvet and satin. Very great manual skill is exhibited in the manufacture of the exceedingly fine gold and silver wire employed, and the designs are often very beautiful. Native workmen lament the gradual adoption of European dress by enlightened Indian noblemen and declare that on this account their trade has suffered very largely. Large quantities, however, must still be produced to decorate the beauties of the zanana, and also for use as ceremonial robes, and every great durbar or levee in India glitters with the rich brocaded silks and satins of Benares. Babu Debi Prasád, whose shop overlooks the Chauk is the best known dealer in these goods. Benares brass ware is a marketable commodity all over Europe. Most people are familiar—too familiar perhaps—with specimens of it, yet a walk through the Thatera Bazaar, as the brass workers' street is called, will well repay the visitor, for there he will see the ware being produced by the same primitive means as no

doubt were employed centuries ago. The worker, often a mere child, sits cross-legged on the ground, and, using feet and toes as well as hands, by means of a tiny punch or chisel and a light hammer, unaided by tracings or models, works out on the surface of the metal the intricate and grotesque devices handed down through generations of workmen.

Wooden toys are also made in large quantities in the city. They are turned on very primitive lathes from a hard white wood and covered with lac varnish of the most brilliant colours, which are fortunately quite non-poisonous in character.

But the visitor will be chiefly interested in Benares as a religious centre. It has been fitly called "The sacred city of the Hindus," for no other can compare with it in the amount of religious merit it can confer on the devotee that enters its gates. Benares may well be considered to represent the very heart of Hinduism. Along the many roads that converge on the city, by the river, and by the railway, she draws to herself from all over the vast continent, continuous streams of devout and affectionate pilgrims. They come to her brimful of love and piety, and after a season spent in her temples and shrines and by her sacred stream, she sends them forth again, overflowing with zeal and enthusiasm, to carry her fame to the farthest borders of the land. There is not in all India a more fascinating or impressive sight than is presented on the ghats that line the river bank. There, day by day, thousands and thousands of devout Hindus, from all the tribes and nations of many peopled India, both men and women, meet to bathe in the sacred stream, and, under the direction of hundreds of Brahmin priests, to perform the thousand and one ceremonies of purification and prayer which their elaborate and exacting ritual prescribes. Any attempt to depict in words this wonderful scene must fall far short of the truth. Viewed from

the river, the vast array of picturesque temples, monasteries and shrines, rich in carving and fretwork, which line the top of the bank stands out sharply defined against the blue sky, and forms a background to the animated scene beneath them. Up and down the immense stairways below passes an ever moving multitude of worshippers, arrayed in brilliantly coloured or dazzlingly white garments. Lower still, the eye falls on a dense mass of figures crowding the lowest steps of the ghats, some seated in meditation on the steps themselves, others lining the wooden piers thrust out into the water, but all, with intent gaze and muttering lips, engaged in ceaseless prayer. Among and around these again is a great multitude, breast high in the sacred stream, with a fixed ecstatic look engaged in washing away the impurities of soul and body alike. And from all goes up one continuous murmur of prayer and adoration, like the sound of a moaning wind over a distant forest. Eye and ear alike are filled and flooded with an indescribable and overwhelming multitude of sensations, and the heart is oppressed with the august meanings which lie behind this awe-inspiring sight. This is Benares! Here is laid bare the secret which for thousands of years, through vicissitudes the most terrible and changes the most radical, this wonderful city has held to itself and which now in these more peaceful times has given it a new lease of life! Here, if anywhere, is portrayed the very spirit of Brahmanism!
